

Kent Aldrich
Narrator

Betty Bright
Minnesota Center for Book Arts
Interviewer

July 7, 2015
At The Nomadic Press
Saint Paul, Minnesota

BB: My name is Betty Bright, and today, July 7, 2015 I am interviewing Kent Aldrich at his custom letterpress studio, The Nomadic Press, in St. Paul. This interview is being conducted on behalf of Minnesota Center for Book Arts' 30th Anniversary Oral History Project, which has been financed in part with funds provided by the State of Minnesota, through the Minnesota Historical Society, from the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund.

Kent, thank you so much for visiting with me. We are going to be talking about MCBA in the early years, but I do want to mention that you are the proprietor of The Nomadic Press, which you founded in 1989.

KA: About then, yes.

BB: To set our context, let's begin with a few words about your work. Could you describe the work you do at The Nomadic Press?

KA: Sure. The Nomadic Press is a small letterpress jobbing shop, and by jobbing I mean, simply, I take on different print jobs that involve letterpress printing, which is a much older style of printing than the digital output or offset printing that's used frequently today.

BB: How do you feel your artistic practice relates to the materials and processes of book art?

KA: There is always a problem, and the art of craft is being able to come up with a creative solution to the problems that arise. There is always a difficulty in getting different materials to work together, the colors to work together, the inks to sit on different substrates, the order in which different parts of a project are produced, and the art of sourcing different materials and dealing with the people involved in that.

BB: Let's turn to the beginning of your involvement with MCBA, in the Center's earliest days. As you know, MCBA was incorporated as a non-profit in 1983, and opened its

doors to the public in 1985. Your participation began shortly thereafter. Why don't you tell me how you first heard about MCBA?

KA: Yes, actually, I first heard about MCBA just walking past MCBA. I was in northeast Minneapolis applying for a sign painting job, having never painted a sign before but already having a love of letterforms, and walking back to the bus stop on Hennepin Avenue, I passed MCBA, and thought I would just stop in and see what was going on. I think at that time MCBA had been open maybe two or three months in its physical location. I walked in the door, talked to Jim Sitter, then the Executive Director of MCBA, and he handed me over to Allan Kornblum, who was Printer-in-Residence and running Coffee House Press, and Allan took me on as an intern.

BB: Did you have any understanding or awareness of the book arts at that time, or had you heard of it before?

KA: Not of book arts as its own art form. I did have a good printing class in high school where we covered handset metal type and relief printing as well as other forms of printing, and I had been working out at the Renaissance Festival at the paper mill, on a solid oak letterpress that was made actually by a man named Richard Hicks, who had been a tool and die maker at Los Alamos, quit that job to start making replica presses, which was a career change that I always admired, so I had some knowledge of the process, anyway. And then under Allan's tutelage that knowledge grew.

BB: It sounds like you were positioned to respond to the idea of a book arts center; that you had had those interests already.

KA: I did, yes, I just wasn't aware of the myriad ways that people would then take those areas of craft to create different pieces.

BB: So, why did you choose to get involved? What led you, beyond curiosity, to so quickly move into a very focused obsession? [Laughter]

KA: Well, I didn't get the sign painting job! And, people would take me at MCBA! I went very quickly from an internship, which lasted maybe two or three weeks, and then the woman who was Allan's production manager quit, so Allan put me in the position of production manager, doing something I really didn't know how to do, which was a nice way to go about it. Because if things needed to be delivered sometime Thursday, by midday Tuesday I had better have a good idea of what I was doing. It was a nice way to learn. I think as you may discover as you're talking with different craftspeople throughout this interview process, it is really easy to become very quickly obsessed with the processes involved in the arts of the book.

BB: Well, I think you may have had one of the shortest internships on record at MCBA. [Laughter]

KA: Well, I moved right up to making about \$2.00 an hour!

BB: Ok! [Laughter] So, when you think about that early period, and you picture yourself in that space, you got to know Jim Sitter, and Allan of course. What other artists or people around the Center were you interacting with around that time?

KA: Well, there was Betty Bright, who was always impressive at the number of jobs and tasks that she took on! [Laughter] Amanda Degener was there early on. Allan Kornblum was there. Some of the men from the Carter family [Will and Sebastian Carter of Rampant Lions Press in England], typographers, type designers and stonecutters, [and] Michael Norman was a bookbinder who was doing some interesting work there at the time. And there were always different craftspeople coming through and practicing their art at some nearby table. So, whatever I was doing, even the most menial tasks, within MCBA's space, those things were always punctuated by the sound of other people practicing their craft.

BB: Do any stories come to mind if you think about the kind of work you were doing with Allan? Any production stories or adventures that occurred in the very early days that you could share?

KA: Well, at one point Allan had the head of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) come to do a final interview before perhaps giving him a sum of money for a grant proposal.

BB: This was Jim Sitter?

KA: No, this was [for] Allan Kornblum. And while he was giving me the final instructions in the room that held the printing presses, I was cleaning a press and somehow managed to splatter the whole front of his shirt and tie with ink, just minutes before the head of the NEA showed up. So, that was exciting. Allan was not really happy with me! [Laughter]

BB: He wasn't? And yet he was wearing his art!

KA: Who knows! It might have helped him get the money.

BB: Please, help this artist!

KA: Well, you were probably there, you probably heard it happening. [Laughter]

BB: Oh, that is what I heard! Ok, let's see, were you around when any of the Jerome artists were working? I know that Gaylord Schanilec printed his first two books at MCBA, early on.

KA: Yes, Gaylord Schanilec. I have often said that when they write the book about this era in the book arts, and this area in the book arts, in the Twin Cities, then Gaylord Schanilec is going to have at least one chapter all to himself, because of his greatness. And the rest of us, if we are lucky, will be footnotes in that chapter, because Gaylord is just so good at what he does, and he was so good right out of the gate. There was one point when he was working on his farm book.

BB: *Farmers.*

KA: *Farmers.* And I was working on a book for Tunheim Santrizos [a public relations agency in Minneapolis], and there was very little opaque white [ink] left in the one-pound can, and we both needed some opaque white. And so, while he was printing in one of the printing bays, I climbed the eight-foot wall off to the side and leapt down to take the can of opaque white. Gaylord was surprised, and so we ended up just dividing what was left. Neither of us really had enough to play with and get the color exactly the way we wanted, but there was a compromise reached.

BB: A compromise in the true spirit of the community of MCBA? Even though you were climbing the wall?

KA: Even though I was climbing over walls trying to steal it for myself, right.

BB: Yes, MCBA has always been a welcoming community. Maybe there was a little different atmosphere to it in the first site, I don't know. Can you capture for us what it was like to be there and work there?

KA: It was a lot of fun. The space in the original location at MCBA was very open. It was not very big, but it was open. So there were plenty of big places where people could do the thing that they were trying to do. But you were always aware of the other people in the space doing what they were trying to do. And that was always very interesting, and I don't remember a whole lot of conflict about the space or the noise in the space. I remember a couple times I was asked to turn down the music, and that was fair enough, but as far as the space went, it was a very open and welcoming space, and it was always interesting to walk around during a break from whatever task I was doing, and see all the things going on: from people incising letters in stone, to master papermakers from Japan beating pulp, to bookbinders from Italy doing finishing work on leather pieces—or to stop into the administrative offices and learn a little bit about what it was like to deal with the running of an arts organization, the funding of it, and dealing with all the artists out there who were doing their thing.

BB: Maybe we will step back for a second. Allan Kornblum's Coffee House Press, where you were involved, was the first press in resident at MCBA. Kornblum had moved what was then called Toothpaste Press from Iowa City to Minneapolis, and with the move he

rechristened the press, Coffee House Press. I realize that Allan's legacy is extensive, and we lost him, not too long ago, so unfortunately we will not be able to interview him. Although we will not be able to do his legacy justice, at the same time I appreciate the fact that you have a sense of what it was like to work for Allan. He was a true individualist, a brilliant man, and quite a personality, and he made a big impact in many ways. Are there any stories about your experience working with Coffee House that might give us one point of view about Allan and part of who he was?

KA: Yes, Allan was a great man, and I hold him responsible for the life that I am able to live now. He was one of the men who early in my life who said, you know, you should do this, because it is a good thing to do. And I took him at his word and I took him at his example, and he was very patient with me over the years. I was a young man and I was at times hot-headed, perhaps erratic at other times. And he was very patient with me. He would spend days having me re-set lines of type to get the letter spacing just right. So, to this day, whether I am setting lines of metal type or lines on the computer, I am aware of Allan Kornblum standing over my shoulder, helping me move those letterforms around so that they look just so.

BB: As you have said, you joined MCBA's community—it was so tiny then, but I guess we'll call it a community—early on, and you had been at Minneapolis College of Art and Design as a student. Were you able at that point in your life to have a sense of the arts and cultural scene in Minneapolis or in Minnesota, and where MCBA fit there?

KA: Not really. I never was really aware of art as a scene, and I'm still not really aware of art as a scene, I am more aware of art as individual works and individual people, maybe groups of people who do similar sorts of art, but as far as a scene goes, I've never really thought of art as a scene.

BB: Let's imagine, then, that you are pulling up on your bike, coming to MCBA, coming to work. Can you describe the neighborhood in the mid-1980s, and what it was like walking into the Center, entering the McKesson Building?

KA: Yes, in the first incarnation the location of MCBA was on the edge of the vibrant part of downtown. It was the Warehouse District, and a lot of the buildings were fairly run down, occupied largely by artists, people who were paying low rent for studios that they were then living in. Things that were happening on the street were interesting, to say the least, and there were not a lot of viable businesses in the neighborhood. And I think MCBA helped turn that area of town around. As you know, since then, that revitalization has stretched all the way down Washington Avenue; it is included things like the Target Center, and now Target Field, and the light rail line that comes into that area of town, very close to MCBA, just a few blocks away. So I think MCBA was important in that urban renewal, in that transition.

BB: And as you mentioned, MCBA was all one space. I guess we can say this for people who are only familiar with the second space in Open Book: imagine you have walked into the McKesson Building. Are there thoughts that come to mind as you walked in? I know you walked into the building and, bam, you were in the gallery, there was no transition, you were literally in it. Are there any other things that come to mind?

KA: Well, thinking back to you mentioning me riding my bike in, it was a Schwinn—no, it was a Raleigh 3-speed, and that is what I used to get anywhere I needed to get in town. And one of the great things about MCBA is that, early on, people at MCBA decided that it was ok to give me a key, a key to the building and the code to the alarm. So, I would ride up, I would throw my bike on my shoulder, I would open the door, walk in with my bike, turn off the alarm, and get to work. As you say, you were in the gallery right away, and there was always something interesting to look at, and then it was easy to just get to work it was an easy place to get to work. There were big windows; it was a very welcoming space

BB: You know, it is interesting that you say that, because it reminds me, or anticipates, the Co-op [Artists' Cooperative]. Because you were interning and working so closely with and for Allan, you had that 24/7 access if you wanted it. That's what happened later on with the Artists' Cooperative.

KA: Yes, and as I mentioned, I was making about \$2.00 an hour working for Allan, which I think was even below minimum wage at that time.

BB: Oh, I think it was, yes. [Laughter]

KA: But there was no other place that I knew of, where I could learn the craft to that depth and make any money at all. I am not even sure there was a place where I could learn the craft to that depth and pay to do it. So, two dollars seemed a good exchange. I was learning something, I was getting a little bit of money; I was able to feed myself. I was also working, washing dishes across town, and for a time I was the janitor at MCBA as well. Which put me in a fun position of being one to stay after any opening event that we would have, so there would be an opening for a show, there would be wine, there would be cheese, there would be people filling the space, and then they would all leave slowly, and I was left there with the wine and cheese that were left over, and music. I would do printing late into the evening and clean up afterwards, and it was a pleasure to be part of that, and, frankly, to be trusted with that.

BB: I remember one of Jim Sitter's earliest strategies for openings was to feed the neighborhood, and then people became so aware of it that eventually he said, well, maybe we have to cut back a little! [Laughter] We always had a good turnout!

You've already commented on how MCBA helped to shape you. What is that sense of that community, then? You said you met Gaylord. In your free time were you focusing on

your work as you were trying to master the rudiments of letterpress printing, or did you have the opportunity to work alongside or with some other folks?

KA: I think to a large extent there was a fair degree of isolation for all of us within that community, because the things that we were doing were things that required a very intense focus. It is not that it could be done in a gymnasium while there was a basketball game on. You needed to have that focus. At the same time, within that focus, there were often things that certainly myself and other members of that community, didn't know how to do, so there was a lot of sharing of information and knowledge, and just the value of watching other people struggle to accomplish something, and noting the pitfalls and the solutions.

BB: As you know, in 2000 MCBA partnered with the Loft Literary Center and Milkweed Editions to move to Open Book in Minneapolis' Downtown East neighborhood; that is where MCBA exists today. When did you become aware of the plans, or of MCBA's actual move to the Open Book site?

KA: I couldn't say the exact time that I knew about the plans to move. That was a period that, I think, in 2000, I had two children under three, so my focus had really turned that direction. I had already, with the help of my friend and wife Emily, set up the Nomadic Press here on the west side in Saint Paul, and so I was focused on building my business and building my family. But when I did first visit MCBA it was clear it was an amazing space. At that point there were writers, so there were the people who were creating the content, of books, at least traditionally, and there were people who were printing books, there were people who were binding books, they had everything there. It was all happening.

And the space that MCBA took over was in an area of town that I think was even more run down than their first location. That stretch of Washington Avenue was not in good shape, and I think, right now it is jumping along there, and I think again MCBA is largely responsible for bringing that vibrant activity. The Guthrie is over there now. Once again, MCBA was cutting edge on urban renewal. There is a lot going on there and I don't think that it would have happened in the same way without MCBA taking up residence in the neighborhood first.

BB: Explain your involvement now with MCBA. Has it ebbed and flowed over time? Those of us who go to MCBA—I know I have run into you often there, so I know you are a part of that community. What kind of involvements have you been doing since 2000, in the last fifteen years?

KA: At the beginning I was there all the time because that was my job and that was my joy. Then, I moved away a little bit, but still taught some classes for a while. Then moved to the west side [of Saint Paul] and worked on my own business and my own family, and then when the responsibilities at least of child rearing lined up a little bit, I was able to

spend more time at MCBA and just go to some of the openings, just pop in and see what was going on.

And I have always had a love of the equipment at MCBA, and because of my experiences in my early years, I know a lot about that equipment, so I feel somewhat responsible for its maintenance and upkeep, even though there are people who have that as an official job title. I feel like I am always on call to solve a problem and am glad to do it. It is a phone call I love to get, to be able to work out a problem with one of the pieces of equipment. Or, to throw a bunch of tools in a tool box and to head down on an afternoon and do some wrenching on some presses that were built in the 1950s. It's a pleasant way to spend time.

BB: I have heard that the staff has been thrilled when you have brought your expertise in, because sometimes you need, not only your great nature and your open heartedness, but also to have that history with a particular piece of equipment.

KA: Well, I am glad that there are at least some people in the world that are thrilled when I walk in!

BB: [Laughter] Oh, always! I have a few more questions here, but I did want to take time and have you show us some of your work. Maybe we'll do a transition now and walk over to an adjacent table and you can show us.

KA: [Showing books and printed matter at an adjoining table] Coming out of MCBA and spending time at MCBA in the early years gave me a very strong background in all of the arts of the book. There are a lot of crafts involved in the production of a book: the typesetting, the design, the illustration, the binding, so all those different elements are things that I can promote to potential clients. I do some design, some typography. I do linoleum cut, and wood engraved illustration. I do the printing, of course, and also binding and box construction using paper, cloth and leather.

BB: Wonderful! I'd love to see some of your work.

KA: Here is a piece I did for the University of Minnesota when they were opening their new Biomedical Engineering Building. This is a piece that was illustrated by Lynn Tanaka. She used pen and ink, and then I took her illustration and cut linoleum blocks for the entire piece. This is about a weeklong project. I cut the first block the first day, and set it up on press, because I could only put one block on press at a time. The next morning I had a press check, ran that block in the afternoon, had dinner in the evening, cut the next block until two in the morning, got up at seven, set up the press for the ten o'clock press check, ran that block, and then started cutting the next block that evening.

BB: That is interesting, the way you worked from that, because I am sure the character completely changed when you made the linoleum cut.

KA: Actually it didn't, because she had done the work using brush and ink, so that the line quality was very much the same from the beginning to the end. In fact, that's one of the things that is important, since it is commercial work, I can't give my client a finished piece that looks different than they intended it to.

This is another piece I did for a client. This is one in a series of eleven books I produced over eleven years. These were the holiday cards for the company. This book was done using handset metal type. Each book has three wood-engraved illustrations in it, and is hand bound using marbled paper and cloth. In the first year that they had me do this book, the edition was 200; in the last year that they had me do this work, the edition was 800, so November [and] December around here was very busy getting this out the door, there were a lot of piles of things in various stages of completion.

BB: Was this a solo person operation at that time?

KA: It was. Early on, I hired people to do the marbling, but as we got to the higher edition numbers, it became difficult to find people who would marble that many sheets of paper. And so, I did the marbling as well. So, in the later years it was all me: I did the design, the illustration, the cutting of the blocks, the marbling of the paper and the binding of the books as well as, of course, the printing.

This is a piece [titled, Quarter Horse Towns] that I did recently for my father [Brian Aldrich]. He wrote some poems back in the 1980s, and I have had those on the shelf for quite a while waiting to do something with them. He is just recently retired, and so we spent a little time coming up with some ways to have some fun together. Part of this is handset metal type and part of this is computer-generated type, and the illustration is linoleum block that I cut.

BB: Is the illustration evocative of a particular area of your family or where you grew up?

KA: It is. He spent a summer in Montana, wrote a number of poems and took some pictures, so this illustration is loosely based on some of the photographs that he took.

BB: Is this in edition?

KA: This is. This is in an edition of fifty.

This is a broadside that I have done for the world's smallest museum [titled Little Birds]. It measures 1/2-inch by 7/8-inch; the point size for the type is about 1.6 points, and it's going to go in a little frame at a rail station on the Green line in Saint Paul along with a number of other very small broadsides. I'm hoping none of them will be as small as this one.

BB: And will there be some device there for those of us who cannot read it?

KA: The curator said there will be a magnifying glass hanging from the frame itself, but when I delivered these, she said she was also going to mount a second magnifier above this piece because she anticipates it is going to be the smallest piece in there.

BB: You know, you have done this before. This is an interest of yours, isn't it?

KA: It is, yes. It is becoming more of an interest. A painter friend of mine, David Rich, said at one time that art is essentially a storage problem, so if I moved to smaller broadsides I could eliminate that.

BB: [Laughter] Yes, and we are going to be interviewing Paulette Myers-Rich as well, so we will see if she brings that one up. Wonderful.

KA: This was a piece that I was hired to do for an organization of businesses in the Twin Cities that had gathered about a half million dollars to donate to the conversion of the Robben Island Prison in South Africa into a museum. That was the prison that Nelson Mandela was held prisoner in. So, this is basically a gift card that was given with that gift to Nelson Mandela. So this is all handset metal type. The paper in here was made by Cave Paper.

BB: Amanda Degener.

KA: Amanda Degener and Bridget [O'Malley]. This is essentially a one-of-a-kind piece, although strictly speaking there are two of them. The reason for that is, when I'm hired to do an important one-of-a-kind piece, I usually start by building at least two in tandem, so if something goes wrong along the way, if glue gets to where it shouldn't go, or something goes awry, I'm able to shift to the other piece and make sure the client gets a pristine piece. Then after they take delivery, I go back and finish the other one so that I have something for my archive.

This is a piece that I was hired to do for the Palace at Versailles. They had a fundraising campaign for refurbishing some of their gardens that had fallen into—I don't know what a garden falls into, disrepair?

BB: Disrepair, I guess.

KA: So, they were doing some fundraising and they wanted something to give as a premium. I don't know what the donation was, but at a certain point of donation you would get one of these, which is a leather-bound portfolio with gold leaf on the cover, and inside were a number of sheets of paper, a lot of front matter explaining the project, and then in the final copies, there would be sheets of paper with photographs of the

gardens tipped in. My copy doesn't have the photographs because I didn't donate the money I needed to donate.

BB: [Laughter]. It is beautiful.

KA: I think this was in an edition of ten. And it was made to look old. In fact the final copies that were delivered were even more distressed than this. I was playing with files and sandpaper and different kinds of abrasives, as well as sloppy dying techniques to make it look like it had been around for a while.

BB: So, this gives us a sense of the kind of work that you have been doing. Thank you so much for showing us your work, Kent. It's beautiful, and it's a great expression of the range of the kind of work that you do here, [showing] how vital the press is today.

KA: Thank you. It is a pleasure.

BB: I just have a few more questions. From the perspective of the last thirty years, since you've been a part of MCBA during that time....

KA: Couple months shy, but nearly.

BB: Yes, nearly. How would you characterize MCBA today as compared to MCBA of thirty years ago? Do you feel that the vision or the mission has evolved or changed over time?

KA: I don't think that the vision or the mission has changed. I think that the scale has changed. Now MCBA has a worldwide reputation, and with that reputation they're able to attract a higher caliber of established artists. But at the same time, you're still moving—what—30,000 kids through that space to teach them about the book arts. So, not only is MCBA serving the people who are really good at it, they are exposing people to it on a very basic level.

BB: Speaking more broadly, do you think that there is something characteristically Minnesotan in the founding and sustained growth of MCBA? I know that you have traveled, and most folks here are very aware that it's a global field, but do you feel that there is something Minnesotan in the success and the fact that we're still here thirty years later? Any elements of the community or of this place called Minnesota?

KA: As I found when I first walked in the door, I think MCBA was and still is very welcoming. As long as somebody had an interest, there was something that you could do at MCBA. And I think that still holds true. I think you can walk in with any level of experience and be welcomed just because of your interest. All you really have to do is show up with a hot dish and you're part of the community.

BB: [Laughter] I think that is probably true, and that is so Minnesotan! Thank you for the hot dish piece! Let's end with a broad-based piece, a legacy piece, a question that comes up when you think about where we are today, and all that's taken place, for our local book arts community, or beyond. How do you view that legacy? What has MCBA given back?

KA: Yes, well, not to understate it, but I think the legacy of MCBA is really the existence of book arts as a form of art. People have been doing book art things for decades, but I think since MCBA's been established, that is really now its own form of art. People can point to examples, they can point to an evolution, they can point to different styles, and they can point to different pieces done by different artists. I think that MCBA has really made the art of the book its own art form.

BB: Well, thank you!

KA: Well, thank you Betty Bright, and MCBA!

BB: But I do want to say, on behalf of MCBA, the board, staff, and those youths and artists that you mentioned, that we really want to thank you for your time and your involvement over the years at MCBA.

KA: Oh it is my pleasure and my benefit, I am sure.