

Peggy Korsmo-Kennon
Narrator

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Interviewer

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BB: My name is Betty Bright, and today, July 31, 2015 I am interviewing Peggy Korsmo-Kennon at Open Book in Minneapolis. 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 & Cultural Heritage Fund.

Peggy, your involvement at MCBA is extensive. You took the helm as MCBA's Executive Director in 1997. Soon thereafter, you led MCBA in its successful campaign to join with The Loft Literary Center and Milkweed Editions in founding Open Book, where we are today, which opened to the public in 2000. You left MCBA in 2003 for other leadership roles, but you have continued to follow your passion for books and the book arts through involvements including a longstanding leadership of the local Ampersand Club, and also, serving on MCBA's board of directors, of which you are currently its Chair. Thank you very much for sharing your stories and reflections with us today. Let's start, if you could give us a brief history of how you came to MCBA through your different interests.

PKK: I started my academic career as a Studio Arts major in printmaking, so the familiarity with presses and making things and an interest in the arts has stayed with me forever. I would like to think that I will go back and dabble as an artist again. I was interested in the work of MCBA and I think it was that aesthetic and the arts, but also, my husband Michael and I began collecting books as soon as we could afford it. It was going to estate sales and garage sales, and finding books and loving history books, and gradually really appreciating the art of the book. So I think it was through both of those channels that MCBA came on my radar screen. And I remember visiting MCBA at some open house in the 1980s after it opened its doors.

I was living in southern Minnesota and would come up to the Cities for some culture. Eventually I moved here, but [I was] not used to seeing an art center like that. I saw all the studios at the University of Minnesota where I was a student, but it was pretty amazing to see people working [at MCBA], and a little intimidating. So, I think we

probably made the rounds of the studios, but really became more aware of what MCBA was producing with a Winter Book that I acquired in 1990 or 1992. So, fast-forward, and I am working in historical societies mostly, and this opportunity came up of applying for the Executive Director. Do you want me to fast-forward to that story?

BB: Yes, well, let's walk forward to that story. So you decided to apply for the position. Who did you get to know first, and second? How did you enter into MCBA's community?

PKK: I was happily employed at Minnesota Historical Society when [a colleague] got a call from a recruiter asking if there was anyone that she knew that might be a candidate for the Executive Director. She said, Peggy, are you interested? I thought, well, gee. My contact with MCBA was more as a curious exercise at first. Then I progressed and got to know Jay Cowles, and it was really Jay and members of the Executive Committee that I interviewed with. I was eventually offered the position with Jay taking me in to what MCBA was at that time, a time when MCBA was going through change. It was 1997, twelve years into being open. I think about it as a kind of adolescent or pre-teen time, where there could be some angst about, who am I, and who will I become. I joined the staff at a time when maybe it needed some steadying, and I had been working in smaller organizations where there were always a lot of resources. Sometimes 90% of the work is being there, being attentive, listening, and trying to do the best thing. It may not be the thing that people want, but it may be the best thing at this point in time.

So, there was a kind of internal steadying. It was a time when the Artists' Co-op [Cooperative] had just started, with the importance of having the artists' voices in the organization; there was some concern that [their voices] were not always heard by the board of directors or the administration. So [my job was] being able to support that, understand what the artists might need, and be someone who listened and did not make snap or quick changes.

But, there was a change on the horizon—there was an opportunity, I should say. Before I even saw my desk at MCBA I was in a meeting about the possibilities of co-locating with a group of other non-profits interested in the book: Sid Farrar from Milkweed Editions and Nancy Gaschott from The Loft. We met at Keys in the Midway, and they said, we want to tell you about this project. And I am thinking, oh, I haven't even seen my desk! Ok! I think I had oatmeal and raisins so it is definitely a snapshot. [Laughing]

BB: It's a memory!

PKK: That was the first I had heard about this, and there were many, many, many more meetings, and vetting for MCBA: what were the pluses and minuses of doing this? In the end, the advantage was great, and if we were looking at where did we want MCBA to go, and the financial stability as well as the structural stability of the organization, the move was going to be important. [It would be possible] with the support of the board, and all the hard work from what became the three member organizations to create Open Book board. It was really fun; I did equate it to whitewater rafting at times. It was an adrenaline rush, like, really, we are going to do that for how much money? But, always having your colleagues in the raft with you that might pull you back if you started to bounce overboard. So it was a pretty rapid turn of events from 1997 to 2000.

BB: So, as you were starting to settle in, who in the artists community were you getting to know?

PKK: Many, many people. Amanda Degener was there, and she was, I think, the first Artistic Director, so the structure went to an Executive Director with the Artistic Director (the organization had had that structure and others). Then Mary Jo Pauly followed Amanda [as Artistic Director]. Richard Stevens was early on the presses, and Regula Russelle, I met Gaylord Schanilec during that periods, and Erica Spitzer Rasmussen, so many people teaching classes, Denny Ruud, as I think of the classes as well as the people who would use the studios in the old McKesson Building. And Harry Lerner [the landlord]—the space was going through renovations at the same time, so starting to settle the organization, but also there was almost a year of renovations in the building at the same time.

BB: Around you, or in MCBA's space?

PKK: In MCBA's space as well, mostly around us. Where the restrooms were in the lower level, there used to be a drug manufacturing company in that building, and so there were restrooms that had been shut off for many years. But we kept open. I think it was Harry Lerner's interest and longtime support of MCBA that allowed us to stay open while most places would have closed, but that would have been devastating to the organization.

BB: So, talking still about the McKesson building, why don't you share with us, back when you and your husband were there, or when you were first visiting: if you were walking up to the building in that neighborhood, what [were] your impressions on the outside and then as you walked in?

PKK: Well, it definitely had an urban feel. There were many art galleries at the time. This was before the stadiums and the sports bar era. But there was a combination of the galleries and also the warehouses. You did feel a little bit like you were stepping back in time; there were still those remnants of the post-war, early-1950s, and I think probably the building that is still across from the old MCBA was a floral warehouse and had just

gone out of business, but the signs were still up. Going down the street to Runyon's Bar, there were some hangouts there. So, it felt urban, a bus stop right outside the door, and people who were curious about, what is this? MCBA was certainly a different type of business on the street. But it felt good to be in that area; it felt like I was working in an urban location. I think especially for me coming from a small town it was a good adventure.

BB: And then when you walked up those steps and into the front door, what was it like to be in that first space?

PKK: Well, it just opened up because it had very high ceilings with pillars bringing your eye up to the ceiling, and very open. There was a little pod for some admin to the left, and to the right there was a little pod for the library, and then within the library there was this tiny little office—it reminded me of a trailer office, very long and small, and right next to my desk was a pillar, so that if you were not careful you could spin your desk chair into it, and I can still find that pillar in the restaurant that's now in the space.

BB: Oh, gosh. You like the sit by it? [Laughter]

PKK: Yes! But outside of those little pods it was open studio. I think this idea of walking in and having a fairly transparent exhibition space, and then seeing where the work was being done, and oftentimes seeing artists at work; we tried to maintain some of that openness in the space that we have here in Open Book.

BB: You mentioned that the Artists' Cooperative was starting up around that time. Did you have interactions with that group of artists, or were they pretty well set with what they had organized?

PKK: They were meeting regularly, and during those first few months I met with them. I just wanted to hear what they needed from me for support. I think they were looking for members, and we would pull the chairs in a circle and have a discussion about the Co-op. Mary Jo Pauly was also a liaison for that, and I thought it was really important for me as a new administrator to be present and make sure that everyone understood that I was accessible. I remember meeting Jana Pullman at that time, too, and having long conversations with the new artists. I just was interested, and it was certainly not like, I have to go meet, it was, oh, they are meeting tonight! So, do you mind if I join you? I think at the core of MCBA is this artist community, and I don't think we could have accomplished what we have now at thirty years without really supporting that. I think that the school children are important, as we look at who is coming in the next generation of artists and having broad community support for what we do. But I [also] think making sure that we care for and nurture the artists' community in an art center—I don't think that anyone would argue that is going to be important. But I think [that] MCBA [must also] make sure that the doors are wide open for artist participation, not only for book

artists [but also for] artists who are exploring the book arts but may have another medium that they are practicing in.

BB: So, here we are in the late 1990s and much is afoot. Did you get a sense in MCBA's community about discussions going on about the move? Were there groups discussing options, or were they just, waiting?

PKK: I think [discussions began] when we realized it was a financial possibility that we could actually do this. There were many meetings about what we would want, and I think we started to feel the space crunch in the old space. We really wanted to preserve much of what we had: studio space, but more of that, greater exhibition space, a real shop because we [had] sold things out of a counter and a few drawers, and being able to have the opportunity to sell artists' work and commissioned work. We started to piece together all of that [together] and [since] I think spatially, it was fun for me to take those interests and desires and work with the architects. Garth Rockcastle was a brilliant architect, to look at a space and the footprint of having two levels and lots of heavy stuff.

We had riggers move the presses, tons and tons of presses and type. Getting that just right was important; we went at it a number of times. But then also showing people what it was going to be like, touring the space with people, I think that we went from, really, we are going to move?—we love this space! to—oh, that could be cool, there would be parking and being able to co-locate! So, I think that it did shift into excitement. And it went really fast, from the time that we signed the papers to being able to move in. I am thinking it was early in 1999 that we were looking at the final drawings, and then moving in, in April of 2000. And, I think that we closed the old space on April Fool's Day 2000, and we opened up here three weeks later with a school tour, reminding the construction workers who were still in the building that they shouldn't swear, no matter what! We did not want to be closed down for too long for a variety of reasons.

BB: What was it like, determining which organization got where in the building? Because it was three buildings opened up, right? That is the fascinating part, thinking spatially. Was it a round robin as far as needs and usage?

PKK: Doing a program session with the architects: how much space, what are the adjacencies of these different spaces? I remember the suggestion of having the type on one floor and the presses on another, and a dumbwaiter going back and forth, and saying, no, that will not work. No, this is how it would work! No, it will not work! Being pretty attentive to that. The other piece was having a gathering space within Open Book, the lobby, and how important it was not to just walk into the building and have a hallway that leads you to MCBA or the Loft. MCBA has a little more eye candy than possibly a publisher or the Loft with writers, so I think it made sense to have that and an exhibition space on the main floor.

BB: I am wondering what moving day was like. Do you have any stories or is it a blur? Did you move in one day?

PKK: We did most of it, except for the presses, because...you are bringing me back. We did a walk through before we moved in, and I realized that the lower level was still kind of gravelly. You know, like some basements with compacted soil, and just a little bit of cement, and that was where we were going to have our presses, and I said, that was not going to work! So, there was a need to pour the whole floor in the lower level, so we couldn't move our presses until maybe a month later. That is when the rigging company came, and we could only move them once; we did not want to put them into storage.

And then there was Allan Kornblum at Coffee House Press, who was someone I met early on, and I also knew Coffee House Press prior to coming to MCBA as the Director. He had a press that he was going to give us; he was in a building a couple blocks away, over Nate's.

BB: Nate's Men's Fashion.

PPK: Men's Fashion. It was the fourth floor, and we used the rigger to get the press out the window and then bring it over to Open Book. So yes, getting the space right, working through that and the final details. And I have to say that they were very tolerant of us, of me, saying, no, that will not work, having to be fussy from our side, but also knowing how generous of an opportunity it was for us, from those who were funding the project.

BB: Absolutely. So, what was the rough site like? What was the first walk through like for you?

PKK: It was an electrical supply warehouse and had really been abused. So all the windows were blocked except for a couple in the back of the building. But it was pretty open. They had done a lot of the wall removal so they could use it as warehousing for conduit and other electrical supplies. But it was dirty, and I remember Hank See—Gail See's husband, doing a walk through, and then visiting with the architects who had these models. And he said you have to have a pretty good imagination to go from this, to that. And they did, and we did. It was a great location. We looked at many other spaces, but to be on a main street—and folks at the city level and the chamber of commerce knew of development ideas in this area, so we were able to get in early and afford this building. You have to have a pretty good imagination.

BB: Understatement of the year! [Laughter] What was the neighborhood like around Open Book back then?

PKK: Some people may remember the Liquor Depot, which was right across the street. So, as we would describe the location, we would say, oh, it is between 11th and 10th Avenues, and they would go, oh, I can't quite picture that. Well, it is by Frank's

Plumbing Supply, which was right on the corner. No, I don't quite remember seeing that. And then you would say, Liquor Depot, and they would go, oh yes! [Laughter]

And there were many vacant parking lots; we parked in a gravel lot for many years, the whole time that I worked here. One fun story about the Liquor Depot was, on a New Year's Eve, probably 2002, 2003 possibly, and I went over to buy some champagne, for, maybe a New Year's Eve party, and I overheard someone on the phone at the Liquor Depot giving directions. They were talking about, we are on Washington Avenue between 10th and 11th, and, we are across from that Open Book building. And so it had flipped, and that was great.

BB: Do you have any memories—I bet you have a few—about the grand opening evening at Open Book? That was quite an event.

PKK: Yes. You know, we were so giddy that it was here, showing off the space to everyone, for MCBA to have that recognition, because as we say, you need to show people what it is. To be able to have this new space and partners like Milkweed and the Loft [could] broaden the audience. It was a fun gala. I remember Sharon Sayles Belton was Mayor of Minneapolis, and we did a—I don't know if it was a ribbon cutting, but Denny Ruud had created this huge book, and we opened it and it said Open Book. [It was wonderful to] introduce the space to the broader community, and thank all the funders that made it possible.

BB: Do you remember who came up with the name, Open Book?

PKK: It was through Little and Company, Monica Little's company.

BB: Oh, was she on the board?

PKK: She was. It was just testing it. It fits in many different ways, and Ruminator Books was one of the early tenants as well, formerly Hungry Mind bookstore. So, it really felt complete.

BB: Since you were in the old site and moved to the new site, what was your sense of where MCBA fit within the larger cultural community of the Twin Cities or Minnesota? What was MCBA providing Minnesota at that time, as you reestablished an identity in Open Book?

PKK: I do think this opportunity to move and to grow was a pivot point, a point of leverage, every time you have a grand opening or you're shifting. You can see it in other cultural organizations. You have this one opportunity when the spotlight is on you, and I think that we understood that and we wanted to introduce the book arts to this broader community and to some of the funders. And I think we had great support from many of the arts foundations and Minnesota State Arts Board, [and] I think we were able to show

what we could do with this greater space. And I feel like we matured, from pre-teen to high school and adolescence, to be able to see that vision of what we could become. So I think MCBA definitely had a more prominent profile in the arts scene. And I think not only for funders, but for the artists, as well. Not only having people teach book arts here at MCBA, but [also], as you look at the colleges and universities around the state that have really embraced a book arts, and have relationships with us. I think that's very important for the longevity and evolution of the art form.

BB: How would you compare being in the new space to the McKesson Building, the older space?

PKK: It was so much more populated. [At McKesson] we might have two or three people drop by during a day if there wasn't a class or a special event or an exhibit opening. Not many people just stopped by the old space, and it was quiet—which was good for some artists, you don't have people gawking at you. But here [at Open Book] it really felt like we were at the center of something, this idea of a center people come to and you grow out of or move out of; there were just a lot more people. I think our visitation quadrupled or more, and we had counters on the door, so we knew how many people came in and out. That increased audience was really important. And people were curious about MCBA, but there was a bookstore here, and a coffee shop, and the Loft classes, people [who] came to a writing class might pop in and see an exhibition.

BB: How was the physical environment different at Open Book? What was that shift like? Did you get a sense that the artists were behaving or working differently in a very different kind of studio space?

PKK: MCBA could now accommodate more people, and projects could be continued. We had more space for drying racks, and even spaces for visiting artists or artists-in-residence. I think we were able to upgrade the equipment, and we had a darkroom; we could [produce] polymer plates. We had two paper studios so you could have a space where we could hold a class for grade school children, and an artist could be working below and not be disturbed. In the old space we had to either have school groups or an artist's class or adult class. So we had more space and more users, with more diverse use. And more light, at least in the front of the space; I think that was appreciated. There was certainly light at McKesson but they were little windows on Third and First Avenues.

BB: I have a few additional questions, but it looks like you have brought a few favorite books. I'd love to look at them and hear any thoughts or reflections on them.

PKK: I brought two. This is *Winter Prairie Woman*, and it's really the first Winter Book that I purchased, or purchased might not be the right term. I should probably tell the story. I was working at the Minnesota Historical Society, and they had a staff competition for memberships, like, how many memberships could you sell. So, I was pretty active in that, and I think they put your name in a hat and periodically pulled a name. There were

prizes, and this was one of the prizes. This was just what I wanted—I don't know what else there was.

This book has a portfolio of prints and a more traditionally bound story by Meridel Le Sueur. [The illustrations are by] Sandy Spieler, who was at the Heart of the Beast Puppet Theatre, and you can actually see some of those characteristics in her drawings. It is a beautiful story, with this idea of holding this art in your hand and enjoying it, from the typography to the feel of the paper to the illustrations in the book. I think this got me hooked! I went back and tried to fill in my [Winter Book] collection; I don't think I have the earliest one. Instead, I can come to the wonderful library at MCBA and use them!

The other book that has special meaning to me is the Winter Book of 1997, which is *Playing Haydn for the Angel of Death*, a poem by Bill Holm. It was the first Winter Book after a hiatus of some hard times at MCBA. To make the budget work [during that period] the Winter Book went on a break. The board of directors and the artist community really wanted to bring it back, and it was well in production by the time I started in fall 1997.

Haydn here is a piano concerto, so we have this echo of a grand piano, and, flipping it open to a chair, and there's more, it's like this little treasure box. This is handmade paper by Amanda Degener of Cave Paper, and then you lift up this portfolio, and we'll save that for a little bit. This is the chapbook, and the book is quite simple; in some ways, it is a multi-stanza by Bill Holm. Very playful. I think he was reflecting on mortality, "if you play Haydn loud enough and long enough that angel of death gets enchanted and leaves you alone for awhile." That is the story in a nutshell. There is the chapbook, and then the story is told again by the artists who created a work of art for each of the stanzas.

This is the introduction, with a pop-up of the angel of death, and the dedication, and then each stanza is an individual work of art, which is just a delicious way to go through the poem. Each artist was not seeing what the other artists were doing. Each is very different and could stand alone, but together it is a wonderful, full portfolio. It was a very fun project, assembling it, making sure you've got one of each print in each book. The deluxe version was lettered, so there are twenty-six, and there is a standard edition as well. The chapbooks sold individually. There were different printing techniques used, some letterpress, some not. I would like to tell a story about Bill Holm.

Winter Book premiered, of course, in the winter, in December. Bill Holm lived in Minneota, Minnesota and taught at Southwest Minnesota State University, so he was coming up for the Winter Book celebration. He arrived early because of a threat of snow, in order to be sure he would be here. And so he came and signed the book, probably at three or four o'clock in the afternoon. We are running around like crazy to get all the food, because this is like a potluck affair. And so we are running, and people said, where is Bill? Where is Bill? Mary Jo Pauly goes into one of the studio spaces, and there on one of those huge tables, was Bill Holm, stretched out, napping on top of the table, getting

ready for his reading. So he took a little nap and was ready for the seven o'clock reading, and we had a good time.

BB: What was it like being around and seeing [the Winter Book] birthed in the studios? It's always an electric experience, or maybe a kind of crazy.

PKK: It is hard, with a deadline, but there was a real passion to do this particular Winter Book. I think people really understood the importance of bringing this back. It's a tradition, but it's also this important way that we share what the book arts are with the broader community. It really was up to the last day, pulling it together, and having the deluxe, chapbook and standard editions. It might be crazy [to produce three editions], but we always wanted to have something that was a beautiful work of art, and a deluxe edition, and also something that was affordable in a chapbook form. There were many, many late hours when I could hear the rhythm of the presses, of the old Vandercooks.

BB: I have just a few more questions. If you look back to your tenure as Executive Director, how would you describe MCBA's role during that period within the national book art field? What was the sense of where we stood, before you moved on?

PKK: When we moved to Open Book, not only was there greater local attention, but nationally too. There was an interest in San Francisco where there was a book arts center: they were interested in growing, and looking at a successful model from the artists' perspective, the art perspective, and also financially—how could you sustain this type of Center? There were lots of visits and people coming in to visit and speak to us about this unique collaboration within Open Book. There were not only book or arts organizations, but other non-profits that were looking at what co-location means. I think we started ascending to a greater profile nationally, and I think this strategic planning process, this goal of being recognized not only nationally but internationally. I think that the Biennial and the MCBA Prize really helps to fulfill that dream.

BB: And now you are back, serving on the board of directors. This has just been so special having you here in another way, with your tremendously valuable perspective. From that perspective (and you have already touched on this a bit), how would you talk about how an organization sustains itself? MCBA has existed for thirty years and is thriving today. Are there any longevity secrets?

PKK: I think it is probably two-fold. I think you have to be true to the art and artists, really understand what that means. I really admire Jeff Rathermel being able to articulate, this is book art, and being able to explain it. People understand what a book is, but being able to explain it in this realm of art, and having a great spokesperson to describe that, and at the same time supporting the artists and understanding it is a dynamic art form. So I think that is really important, and I think that we are doing well in that area.

But it is also [important to] keep an eye on the financial and organizational stability. Because if you don't, your attention will shift, and you have to take care of the money story. And you always do, non-profits are always looking at that. If you are not balancing that you have to spend too much energy just staying alive, and you don't have the nerve for the risk-taking that needs to happen when you are looking at evolving any organization. You have to be able to have that balance. And I think MCBA, as all organizations do, will go through those periods, rocky periods when you say, can you go on? I think the answer was yes in the 1990s. It is that balance of keeping an eye on the financial stability of an organization and on the vision and the art.

BB: Another question when we are looking at perspective and an anniversary, is what has MCBA brought to Minnesota? Imagine MCBA had never existed, and now it has. What comes to mind regarding a difference it has made for the state of Minnesota?

PKK: I think it is incredible, when you think about the state of Minnesota, how former governor Elmer Andersen was critical to MCBA when Jim Sitter spoke to him, and Jim getting [Andersen's] support and interest—his sincere interest, his long-term interest, long after he left the board, [recognizing] that not only are books an important way to document the legacy of a state, but an artistic way, as well. And I think about this idea of community. I think that Minnesotans are good community builders. I don't know if it is the DFL, or the farmers, or the old politics of the state [that promotes] working together, but we are good at building community. I think that Minnesota Center for Book Arts is a great example of how it grew from many different perspectives and individuals who helped to build it and broadened the community. Now we are thinking about how we build the board as well as our artist community. It is just opening that door wider, inviting more people in, seeing what they have to offer, and how that grows the organization. I do think that truly has its roots in Minnesota.

BB: That somewhat answers another question. Is there something characteristically Minnesotan about MCBA's continued growth and vitality? Its longevity in getting through those bumps? Perhaps part of it is that sense of community that is at the heart of Minnesota.

PKK: I think that Minnesota supports the arts and that there is a community here that is interested and curious about it. And I think that we are a stronger with that diversity. It is not just large organizations and schools, but also the smaller centers, like Minnesota Center for Book Arts, and the Textile Center, and the Northern Clay Center. All of these organizations create this rich fabric, with relationships among these groups and the artists. So I do think it goes back to supporting the artist community and valuing it.

BB: If I have a last question, it has to do with the word, legacy. It is bandied about a lot, but it really is essential when you are at a point like this and you are looking back and honoring all of these people who have been involved. What is MCBA's legacy to Minnesota or to a larger book arts world at this point in its history?

PKK: I think about this combination of a place that supports artists to create their work, but also a place that is exposing the art to new people, especially a younger audience. I was thrilled when a student from Macalester who was coming to take classes at MCBA was hoping to be an artist-in-residence, or be involved somehow at MCBA creating art, said that her first exposure was in a class at her grade school. So, [legacy] is that there are children out there that think about book art, and know how to make books, and know about the accordion book; they know about telling stories in many ways through the book. I think that's an important legacy, and it [nurtures] an appreciation for the art form and people with books on their shelves that can be pulled off and shared in this very unique way of sharing art. That legacy is: one by one by one by one—there are more and more people who are practicing and appreciating the book arts.

BB: That is a perfect way to end. I want to thank you on behalf of your other board members, MCBA's boards present and past, artists and staff, and all those kids that you think about who are walking through the doors every day. Thank you for your participation and your memories today, Peggy.

PKK: Thank you, Betty. It's been a pleasure.