

John (Jay) Cowles
Narrator

Betty Bright
Minnesota Center for Book Arts
Interviewer

August 14, 2015
At the Cowles Home
Saint Paul, Minnesota

BB: My name is Betty Bright, and today, August 14, 2015, I am interviewing Jay Cowles at his home in Saint 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.

Jay, thank you for visiting with us today. You are currently President of Unity Avenue Associates, but your involvement at MCBA has spanned a lengthy and critical time throughout the life of the organization. You served as a board member in a variety of roles from 1986 to 1998—including a break when you were living in Colorado—but you were still listed on the board register, so you are probably the longest serving board member in the history of the organization. And certainly, when you returned to Minnesota in 1991 you immediately made a profound impact on MCBA and on the life of the organization. So, I look forward to visiting with you. We have a lot to talk about.

JC: Thank you, Betty. It is good to see you.

BB: Let's begin before the beginning. Could you share any background or early interests that may have positioned you to respond to the idea of a book arts center?

JC: I grew up in a family that had a strong streak of artist members, particularly on my mother's side; she was a modern dancer. And my parents were both involved in modern art and supporting arts organizations in town, so I was exposed and intrigued by art, particularly contemporary art from a family setting. Then, as a young man, as I worked through my college years in my twenties, I managed to find myself owning and running a small commercial printing company as a way to learn about the work world. I thought, my parents could be successful in business, and I could be successful running a printing company. It was a baptism of fire, but it gave me a great love and appreciation for the graphic arts, for printing, for the smell of ink, for the manufacture and qualities of paper and binding techniques. It was all in a commercial setting, but I think an appropriate window on what the book arts had to offer.

BB: Let's transition to the Center's early days. MCBA was incorporated as a non-profit in 1983, and opened its doors to the public in 1985. You joined the board of directors in 1986, but I do want to mention that the involvement of the Cowles Media Company extends back to the earliest period, when MCBA's founding Board of Directors met in the Cowles Media boardroom due to the fact that MCBA's founding Board President, James Alcott, was Vice President for Administration for the Cowles Media Company at that time. And so that helps me to segue to the fact that I believe that you first heard about MCBA through James Alcott, after your return to the Twin Cities from New York.

JC: Absolutely. I returned to Minneapolis in 1985. Jim [Alcott] was a senior executive in the company and I was going to work at Cowles Media as well. Jim's an absolutely central figure, so I am delighted that you prefaced my involvement with him. My recollection is almost that he picked me up at the airport, and on the way into town, told me about Minnesota Center for Book Arts and what a perfect opportunity for me to get involved in the community. So, he was obviously an early advocate and had a vision of my participation, but it was easy, again, because of my family background and being involved in supporting arts organizations, and some familiarity with the arts that were encompassed in the book arts, and also being a personal admirer of Jim and this extraordinary board of directors. It was a really spectacular line-up of civic leaders that said, this is an opportunity for our community; let us create the space for it.

BB: When you joined the board in 1986, Jim Sitter, MCBA's founding Executive Director, was still involved, and most of the founding board members were still serving, including Gail See, Kay Sexton, Joanne Von Blon, among other leaders, and along with Mr. Alcott were former Governor Elmer Andersen, Peggy Dixon, Mickey Friedman, Irv Kreidberg, Larry Mitchell from the University of Minnesota, Jack Parker, and David Speer. Are there any recollections of those early board meetings, which probably by 1986 were happening in MCBA's new space?

JC: Oh yes, they were in the space at First Avenue and Third Street on the corner, but I was a somewhat in awe young man with icons, so I largely just observed, and of course they were all terrific role models. They were constructive, they were respectful and full of praise; it was an experience of a very constructive board supporting Jim Sitter, and of course Jim Sitter was a terrific founding Executive Director. He exuded possibilities, he was passionate, and he had a great history leading into this. And it was very exciting in those first few years, developing ideas and initial programs for the Center. It was not a time of particular crisis, it was a time of abundance and hope and excitement, and that was what I recall from those very earliest years. And a beautiful space. The sheer excitement of meeting in that space. At each meeting, seeing how the programs and the space were evolving and artists were arriving, it was very cool.

BB: Do you have any particular recollections of the neighborhood around the McKesson Building where MCBA was housed, or the experience of walking into the space?

JC: In those days, that area was somewhat of the sophisticated arts quarter for Minneapolis. The New French Café was just down the street, the Wyman building was home to many galleries, there were other galleries peopled around. While as a working artists' center there were not many examples, it was a lovely setting to be in. That said, the McKesson Building was somewhat fortress-like in its edifice, no retail storefront windows for that building. Therefore, you had to know that you were going in to see MCBA; there were no neon signs, and it wasn't a powerful retail presence, but it felt like a good home. Certainly, there was a very helpful landlord, Harry Lerner, who owned the building, and the space I thought was spectacular, multi-function.

BB: You know, that is true. When I think about the Wyman building back in those days, the profiles were modest in a way, and MCBA anchored the far end of First Avenue North, but even the WARM gallery [Women's Art Registry of Minnesota]—you would have to know where you were going to find your way into those spaces.

JC: There were certain architecture firms. I think Meyer Scherer and Rockcastle were just around the corner

BB: By the New French Café.

JC: Yes. So it was an interesting part of town that people were beginning to discover, and find ways to create homes. It was a kind of artist-led, creative arts-led area. Yes, it was fun.

BB: Before you moved to Colorado, back in that time when you were serving as a board member, did you have a sense of the cultural scene in Minnesota in general and how MCBA fit or didn't fit within what was happening in the Cities?

JC: Well, I was returning to Minneapolis after having been away for a number of years, really since high school. So, in many respects I was picking up a lot of narratives as an adult for the first time. I think it is fair to say that Mickey Friedman and her attention, at the Walker Art Center, to the importance of the graphic arts and design as an element of contemporary art that needed attention and curating was a very important infusion. I would say that Governor Andersen's deep passion for the role of a high quality book and the importance of books as cultural icons and conveyors of the most important thinking and new ideas and perspectives—he really infused the notion of books as, in and of themselves, worthy of an art form, and appreciation as an art form. Those were two elements that I thought were being broadened.

At some point it has to be noted that what I think Minnesota is really extraordinary about is in allowing artists to be artists. There was a willingness to allow MCBA to emerge as itself, rather than borrowed as a template from someplace else, so it was a very creative process, too. I think the cultural norm here in many respects is for trustees to allow the

leaders of the arts organizations to be leaders truly. Therefore, I think Jim Sitter was able to really express some exciting ideas and initiatives that I think we can see have carried MCBA well, not just his ideas, but created a kind of authenticity about it that allowed it to develop deep roots.

BB: Each board member of course contributed special gifts, but to mention Governor Andersen with books and Mickey Friedman with the arts, and how they were on that same board, that is a fascinating point.

JC: It was a wonderful set of perspectives on the board.

BB: After you pursued other involvements in Colorado and returned, still on the board, you served as Board Chair from 1994 through 1997. Every start-up goes through points of challenge. We were fortunate that you happened to be at the helm [when] during your tenure, MCBA underwent a difficult period, which led to your taking the helm as Acting Executive Director for about a year's time. After a second Acting Executive Director's service [from Linda Johnson], Peggy Korsmo-Kennon was hired as Executive Director in 1997. I know that this was a challenging time. I appreciate any memories you might have of that period.

JC: [Laughter] What happened?

BB: A lot happened! You were given challenges with the organization, other board members, and the artist community. Can you share how you characterized those challenges, and how they were met? How did the board respond?

JC: I think it is appropriate as we now have thirty years of history to look back on, that we recognize, like virtually any organization with a history that long, you can recognize certain periods of time where certain things simply had to get worked out. And often with a new, artistic organization, there is the blush of the founding vision and leadership gathered around the table. That carried us well from the mid-1980s into the early 1990s, but by that time most if not all of our founding board had rotated off. It was a relatively senior and elderly board, so it did not necessarily have the kind of youth and longevity built into it, so we had an issue of finding or attempting to find a comparable level of board leadership. Jim Sitter, after creating the organization and leading it for eight years, decided it was time to move on, and that meant filling his rather remarkable, unique shoes.

I would say too that, as I mentioned earlier, this was an organization born of a certain mix of perspectives, speaking of the Governor and Mickey in particular, but the point is, the book as a contemporary art form, the book as a historical relic, the book as a number of fine craft skills, and the book as an art form interacting in a larger social context: what was its role? What was its meaning? Why the book? All of those interests, and the name of course, Minnesota Center of Book Arts, suggests that this is a space that holds it all.

We debated: what does a center do? Are we being too ambitious? It was an ambitious mission: to attempt to hold it all, and the book arts, as you know, were not well defined as a cultural identity. It is not like painting, printmaking, pottery, ceramics, or other kinds of high art categories that had developed followings, institutions, and clear role models. This really was an emergent form in many respects or one that simply hadn't been illuminated before.

So, we also had an identity issue, an identity of a very, in a sense of how to communicate, but also having an ambitious mission that demanded a lot of resources, or perhaps a very delicate act of balancing the resources that we did have. All of those issues hit in the early 1990s. We had a tremendous effort and contributions from Hollis Stauber as the follow-on Executive Director to Jim Sitter, we had a terrific board step in to replace that founding board, but as you may recall, there was a recession that hit about that time, which put pressure on funding in general. All of that led to more questions than answers, frankly, for a period of time.

The funding pressure as we moved into the mid-1990s became such that we had to really look at fundamental relationships with our clients, and we had different kinds of clients. We had people coming in to take Dirty Works, introductory book arts classes, but we also had a budding community of serious artists who were pursuing their individual or collective crafts. They were using MCBA in some fashion as a home, a learning environment, a teaching environment, and there was a very important symbiotic relationship there that needed to be further discussed and understood. And out of that also arose some terrific artists and leaders. Amanda Degener immediately comes to mind, Mary Jo Pauly later in the 1990s. More importantly, it was the body of those artists who made it clear that MCBA was very important and they wanted to be part of the solution; they wanted to have a role that would be nurturing to both the institution as well as to them.

Then we attempted in the hiring of Charles Alexander, to meet a need for administrative leadership as well as the artistic leadership, which was increasingly a demand. We needed to create and define the field, as it were, and therefore we needed that expertise as well as an administrative leader. We attempted in Charles to do that with one person—hard to do, we've watched the Guthrie Theatre try it in its first twenty-five years a number of times, which is a struggle, and it did not as it work very successfully with Charles. But it was very informative as another effort on our part to think about how we might organize. It was during that period that I stepped in for a while as Acting Executive Director.

As we began to really have more questions than answers, we also discovered that our lease on our property—this wonderful, spectacular home that in a time of uncertainty, was as much certainty and stability as any of us had—that lease was expiring, and it was not clear that we were going to be able to renew the lease on terms that were as supportive to MCBA as they had been historically. And, it was clear that the

neighborhood was changing. The artists were leaving the area; it was clear that gentrification was really taking over, and so we began to have more visible discussions as a board and with our artists about what might our future look like.

One of those discussions was with MCAD [Minneapolis College of Art and Design]—the possibility of having Minnesota Center for Book Arts migrate to their campus and become part of their curricular resources, in addition to remaining as an independent book center. That particular scenario made it into the newspapers at one point, and there was a heightened sense on everyone's part of uncertainty as to how MCBA might settle.

In the end, and I can't tie it up in a bow, because you can always tell the story afterwards about how it went, but at the time it was just a process of many parallel muddling conversations, and a couple of things helped. First, the economy got better, and second, our funding pressure was relieved to the point where we were able to attract a really wonderful Executive Director in Peggy Korsmo-Kennon. The Loft Literary Center and Linda Myers, and ultimately Milkweed Editions with Emily Buchwald and her staff, were also looking for homes, and we began to talk about establishing a center for the literary arts. McKnight Foundation funded a yearlong broad conversation. We spoke to dozens of organizations about possibly joining in this effort. In the end it was the Loft and Milkweed and MCBA for whom there was the most institutional capacity and synergy to do something like that.

That began to unite and excite a broader collective set of champions, leaders and advocates for the literary arts. They came to take on MCBA as part of their agenda, and began to see MCBA as an important part of a constellation of arts organizations related to the book in the literary form that they loved and appreciated. I think it also excited donors more broadly, institutional donors, funders and foundations, who began to see that the opportunity to establish a place that represented an often under-illuminated art form with a set of interests in the reading and writing community, could now be identified with a place, expressed in a form like Open Book.

Those discussions began to develop momentum, and Peggy Korsmo-Kennon turned out to be very skillful. And the artist [community] that formed a Co-op [Artists' Cooperative] in the mid-1990s created an identity and a relationship with MCBA that was very productive, very constructive. Not always easy but very respectful, and very much in alignment ultimately. That led to a renewal of activity. The education programs, publishing programs, the teaching at MCBA, and the exhibits established MCBA as an organization that could be looking forward again.

BB: You mentioned the Artists' Co-op. From the conversations we have had, that seems to be a turning point in this organization's life. How fortunate that it seemed to occur through this period of questioning along with the move, because it almost seems as though MCBA emerged a very different organization from the move and from the artists' community coming together with a shared commitment and identity.

JC: Well, you are going to know more than anyone about that as you interview everybody, and I say that in part because everybody, they are touching the elephant in a different place. My sense of the Artists' Co-op [is that] in some respects it emerged in the mid-1990s, however functional or dysfunctional, around certain leaders. Amanda is a great example [of someone] who would not let the book arts artist community dissipate or be unengaged. Ultimately, all this comes down to the acts of individuals. We organize things as Co-ops and boards and so forth, but you need leaders and you need constructive followers, and we managed to get a group of relationships going in the mid-1990s that I think gelled over time and led to a very successful Co-op and book artist body, in this new form, as you say, that was expressed in the new space.

BB: To talk about that new Open Book site, what was the site search like? Were there countless sites that the search committee was looking at? It's such a perfect site now...

JC: Who knew?

BB: Who knew? What were you looking at? Were you looking at sites that had to have a certain square footage, so it was pretty selective that way?

JC: Well, we had a relationship with Meyer Scherer and Rockcastle, the architecture firm, which allowed us to engage them at an early level to give us some scope that we could use as criteria. We also attracted the passion and interest and commitment of Chuck Leer, a real estate developer, and whose wife, Mary, and he ran Ruby's Cabaret for many years, in that part of town [but] a little bit further away. Chuck was terrific at searching through the inventory. We looked at Minneapolis and we looked at St. Paul, and we debated where we should be located, and I think we looked at twenty-eight sites—my memory has the number twenty-eight. It needed to be befitting a charitable arts organization's pocketbook, so it was likely going to be a reuse of an older building. We wanted it to have some visibility and some access from traffic because, particularly with the Loft as well as MCBA, there are a lot of classes, there are students coming and going, and we needed to have that dimension which historically hadn't been so important really at the founding of MCBA, and the price had to be right.

In the end, it was a funny thing for me personally, where we are located. I had confidence in that area because my parents had been living in that area as literally about the sole residents for fifteen years, as they waited for the old buildings along the Mississippi riverfront to finally get rehabbed and redeveloped as residential areas. My parents, who originally wanted to move into them in 1980, had been living in a two-story warehouse, just half a block from Open Book at the time that we were looking at the building where Open Book is now. So, I knew that neighborhood intimately: Valspar was there, and Liquor Warehouse—these fine neighbors, and I knew that my parents had been living there safely. I [also] knew, because I had been watching this neighborhood for twenty years, that it was about to come alive; I knew the residential community was going to

move in. We didn't know about the Guthrie [Theatre relocating nearby]; frankly, the Guthrie followed Open Book's decision.

And then we found just a wonderful developer, the Tankenoff family, Hillcrest Development, of North Minneapolis. They are a spectacular local, family-owned developer that really knows the community and knows it in a way that respected what we were trying to do, and they were very helpful in getting us a deal that we could take to the bank. And we had a wonderful banker, Dave Cleveland at Riverside Bank, and so in the end it is always a group that brings something like this together.

BB: It seems like it could have gone off the rails at any time, but it all just kept slowly fitting together.

JC: I will tell you that I think for most of us who were involved in that fundraising campaign and the process [that] it was not easy making the commitment between the three organizations, because each of the boards were in some respects committing to something that was bigger than what they could control individually. It required that the Executive Directors really have good communication and be able to convey to each of their boards and to the other boards that they were not responsible to, that they had a practical working vision that made sense, and that they could translate it into their individual organizations. So, that was hard; it was good, hard work. But once that was developed, I think most everyone who was involved in the fundraising campaign will tell you that it was a time of almost unbelievably helpful magic. The chemistry of that moment in time of what we were selling, of the fact that there were no other capital campaigns going on for about an eighteen-month period in the arts world; it was a time when frankly everybody's donor base got excited about this.

McKnight Foundation made the largest capital gift it had ever made, and Neal Cuthbert [McKnight's Vice President of Program] really stuck his neck out in a way that we were all thrilled with, obviously. But it felt like this was an idea whose time had come, and we had to reset; I think originally we were going to raise five million dollars and that was not enough. I think eventually we raised seven million. All private dollars, no public funding, no debt, no mortgage for the building, and in fact that included an operating reserve of \$600,000 or \$700,000 to help pay the ongoing maintenance costs in addition to the rents. It was just so well conceived; it really was one of the great, not just non-profit, but great team collaborations that I suspect all of us have ever been on. It was wonderful.

B. It certainly continued to reap great rewards for those organizations in Minnesota; there is no question today that it is a vital place. As far as the design process, were you involved in those discussions, especially with MCBA having such substantial studio needs?

JC: Well, I was the first Chair of the Open Book board, and I believe those discussions came to our board before the building opened. I am trying to remember the exact

committee makeup. I was certainly there, Nancy Gaschott, who was the number two executive at the Loft was appointed as our project manager, so she bore the brunt of all the daily issues of reconciling plans and needs between the different organizations. And there was dissonance, because the building was a certain way and the organizations were a certain way. MCBA had to a certain extent really reorganize its thinking about spatial relationships because it was located on two floors and because one floor had no windows; although MCBA had no windows it was a very large, airy space.

And so it was a very different configuration, and it took time, I think, to make peace with that, although I thought Garth Rockcastle designed a wonderful entry into MCBA that had the kind of expansiveness that MCBA had grown up with in its former space. And being just off the lobby, it also was able to have the feel of [its door having a direct relationship to Open Book's] front door. It was not easy, but everybody was so excited about having these three organizations co-located. I will tell you, too, that the name, Open Book, was done through a process. We brought in a consultant, and they went around and talked to a lot of stakeholders and consultants, thinking about it. The name Open Book, when it first was revealed, sent goose bumps up people's spines. They said that this is so expressive in so many ways of what we want to be and represent in our community. I think [the name] also was remarkably successful; I hope it still is, but it was galvanizing at the time.

BB: And the staircase, the spiral staircase up the center, it was Karen Wirth and Garth Rockcastle who collaborated on that. That seems to have been a key element for the building.

JC: Brilliant. Absolutely, and I admire it and I am still inspired by it every time I go there. It is wonderful.

BB: So, Open Book opens in the year 2000. Of course you were present for the Grand Opening!

JC: I stepped off the MCBA board in 1998, because I was assuming these jobs as Chair of Open Book and Co-Chair of the fundraising committee with Chris Mahai, who is another terrific example of crucial leadership as a former board chair of the Loft and a very skilled leader. She and I co-chaired the campaign and I chaired the initial board, which had representatives from the three organizations. I was very engaged all the way through, you bet, to the opening and in the initial two or three years. I stepped down in 2003, something like that, and Tom Hoch of Hennepin Theatre Trust today, took over as board Chair at that time. So, I have not had a formal relationship, [but] I continue to be involved with MCBA to this day as a donor, and being helpful with their banking relationships, which continued for a period of time into the 2000s.

BB: So around the year 2000 when MCBA reopened, it is a different arts scene, a different political climate. I am trying to think back to what the larger environment was when Open Book happened. Does anything come to mind around that time?

JC: You can imagine. It was 2000; we were about to go through a little dot.com crash, and we had just had a contentious national presidential election, and we were probably setting up with more political dissonance and maybe ideological dissonance. I think for our, for these three organizations, they were just all about putting the peddle to the metal. It was: we are in this space; we need to establish ourselves in this space. I think of it as a time of very high communication and activity. There were a lot of curious people who wanted to see and understand nationally but also locally, [as we settled] into the building, and the good news is that there was nothing glaringly wrong about how we had designed things. It worked very well for the organizations, and their funders stayed with them. So I think of it in the initial years in helpful terms as a time of settling, two, three, four years. Thereafter I think it has been a period in some respects of reinvention for all of them. Emilie Buchwald moved on, and there is new leadership at Milkweed. Linda Myers moved on and Jocelyn Hale joined and did a spectacular job, but every leader brings new imagination. Dorothy Goldie took over for Peggy Korsmo-Kennon, and then Jeff Rathermel from there, and from my perspective I think Dorothy maintained the organization through a more difficult time in the 2004 to 2008 period, maybe 2010, some of that financial obviously. There was a lot going on in the world with 9/11 and the wars.

So that was not as easy for MCBA, but there is this Artistic Director, Jeff, that comes in and begins to sprinkle pixie dust around, and he has got vision. Part of it, particularly with an arts organization, [is] how do you see it, and can you paint it and inspire a way that brings other people [in] who say, I can see myself in that picture. And Jeff I think has done that, and Dorothy began this as well, and Peggy before, to establish MCBA as truly a national and even international center for book arts in a way that we talked about and hoped for back in the early 1990s when we were going through our adolescent confusion. It has taken all of these pieces, and time, and leaders, to now get to a place where MCBA feels much more firmly defined and celebrated and supported.

BB: That is a great characterization of MCBA now, that arc of how each leader has shaped it and moved it forward. Does anything else come to mind if you are looking at MCBA today and MCBA back in the McKesson Building? In many ways I imagine they are the same, but they seem so different from one another, almost like they aren't even related.

JC: Well, I am not as close to it today, so I don't know that I can. But I sense that part of what you are sensing and is probably true, is that back in the McKesson Building, we would have a board meeting, and it may be true of the new space too, but, the papermaking drains were right over there, and the presses were right there, and there were artists working in the space or there was very much a sense of evidence of the work and the people who were the artists. There was a very small staff, and we were still in the

act of hand-selling ourselves as an organization, and even educating one another about different aspects of what the Center could be or ought to be. And I think today it has got a form, which is cloaked in an organization and much larger—well, not much, but—a much larger staff, a larger body of activity and work, and a more clearly-defined role for a variety of constituencies. So it may not be quite as raw and personal—it was very personal back then—you felt at the front end. It was a bright future but we were thinking six months ahead, we were attempting to develop a lens that would take us further. My sense is today the lens is more sustainable, but to the extent that if it falls out of touch with that kind of raw connection with the art, ultimately that will be a problem, because there has to be a renewal from the art form itself.

BB: And the Artist Co-op—there we see again how that has come back through and it is almost as though it is nurturing it from the studios.

JC: It has to. That really is the point, I think, and not understanding completely how that group is active in the space today or informing the work, my sense of that DNA and that engagement is that it is still present for the organization, and I think it has been really nurtured and passed on with great responsibility among the artists and the artist community. And that's spectacular.

BB: And we are fortunate that we have Jeff Rathermel, who has the management background and coming up as Artistic Director—that's unique to have that connection throughout the staff; they work down in the studios as much as in the offices, so it does seem to be well integrated. Well, this is great, Jay. I know that you have some books that you would like to show us. If you'd like to take a break and do that, I just have, maybe four or five more questions.

JC: I'd love it.

BB: Well, Jay, thank you so much for showing us a few of your favorite books here. What is this first book?

JC: Well, I particularly appreciate this book that was created by Gaylord Schanilec, who is one of the longtime and very great book artists here in Minnesota, even though he reports to work out of Stockholm Wisconsin. This book has two aspects for me. Number one, it really blew me away with the quality of Gaylord's [wood engravings], his capacity to develop extraordinarily nuanced images, not just precise, but subtle. I was clearly seeing the work of a master. But the other aspect is this topic: *The Waterfalls of the Mississippi*. I have always been very resonant with the story of how Saint Paul and Minneapolis came to be here. And for Minneapolis the reason it was established at all is that there was one waterfall on the whole length of the Mississippi—one—and it happened to be just ten miles upriver from Saint Paul, and therefore as I grew up in Minneapolis, I have images of that waterfall in particular and all of the waterfalls leading into the Mississippi. It was really wonderful. Spectacular: the reflections of the virtually

dry bed, but here's a pool of water. Many of these are images and areas that are very accessible to us here, if it's Minnehaha Falls, or Hidden Falls. I love that sense of how a lot of our personal history and social history is driven by geography. And I think in this case more than most people appreciated, it was that one waterfall that really drove the establishment of our home here. So this is one of my very favorite books by Gaylord.

When I think about books that have personal meaning, this is one that comes to mind. Bill Holm was one of the early book artists and poets that worked in MCBA and when I speak of individuals that inspired me to have hope and encouragement that the book arts could establish a strong presence, Bill was one of those characters. A wonderful jazz pianist, an exuberant personality, and a very dear, loving messenger in his work. So this is a book, *Chocolate Chip Cookies for your Enemies*, by Bill. It's got a note of thanks to Page and myself, and it is falling apart a little bit, but it is full of Bill Holm's images and storytelling and I love it for its pocket size. I could imagine somebody just slipping it into a side pocket or into a backpack, and enjoying it in all kinds of different settings. And it reminds me that we've lost Bill but I think he was really encouraging to many people to follow their muse as artists. So I'd think of him as a strong leader.

I was at a family reunion a number of years ago, and at family reunions often you meet cousins that you have never met before. I met a cousin who I had never met before, who in the process of introducing herself to the group pulled out a self-made chapbook about what being a member of this extended family was like.

For me it was very charming. First of all, [there is] the book itself, which is titled, *When Attending Cowles Family Meetings*. It is a book of truisms about our family's tendencies as we gather. It was not only a lovely expression of us, of me, but to have the book arts—and I view this kind of a small chapbook as a very familiar expression of the book arts—to have it suddenly emerge into my personal family life as a vehicle [was] startling and delighting and really satisfying for all of the family members who had a chance to get one. I love it as a reminder that the book arts don't just exist in museums and libraries and in special collections. It is a form that can be everyday.

So, this is a small book of truisms: “When attending Cowles family meetings, confirm early (this is at the bark level), read the magazines read the newspapers read the magazines read the newspapers, it's very important that people stay up to date with current events before coming to a family gathering. Pay close attention to the schedule of events; there is a flowchart. Sit next to your mother; be sure to take care of your mother; recognize your elders; meet these people that are from other branches that you may not have met before.” These were--Morley and Luther were family members that kept people in touch with one another, and this [drawing] is a final recognition that in the end we all turn back into the nuts for the next generation of the family tree. And the tree continues to grow and grow. So, that is a dear piece of memorabilia.

BB: Wonderful. Thank you so much, Jay. I have a few more questions. Could we sit back down and visit?

JC: I would be happy to.

BB: Great. Thank you.

BB: Thank you so much for showing us those books; they were lovely to see. I just have a handful of questions more. Before we move forward, I was thinking as you were describing this process with Open Book, [that] it was a long and challenging process. What positives, within that situation and MCBA, convinced you that the Center had the capacity to move through this kind of an unknown period to a position of strength? What gave you hope as far as staying the course with this unknown process?

JC: That is an interesting question, because as I said, there were a lot of questions that were not easily answered, and there were really limited resources, limited time. Part of it for me emerged out of the commitment of the artists to their work. Having faith that at some level that the artists saw in this medium, important visions for them to tell as artists. I somehow felt that, and out of my own love of books as a young person, as a vehicle for imagining the world—I just had faith that the artists were serious, and I liked them too, they were interesting, wonderful characters. Robert Bly would have a reading, and I knew that something special was happening. So, a part of it was just being exposed to the art and believing that it ought and would demonstrate its value, and that it ought to have a platform.

The other part was the individuals that were there, the other people. I had colleagues, I never felt entirely alone. I was only chair for three years, and during those years I had a board that I made sure was every much in the swim with me on these issues so as best we could; we made this a community issue; not just mine to bear. And I liked the people I was working with. I actually hold that as a fairly regular standard for myself in terms of how I want to spend my time: is it with people I like? The people who were on that founding board, the people that were attracted to the artist community, the staff, I liked them, and so we did what we could and then we came back the next day to have another look at it and see what more we could do. But I think we also, I also tried to be realistic about it. It was conceivable that we were going to close, or that we would have to in some way become a much more modest organization at different moments. But that really wasn't my decision to make, it was a decision that the MCBA community needed to make, so we just kept putting lines in the water, kept having conversations about meaning, purpose and vision, and then dealt with the practical issues along the way, and ultimately we got something going.

BB: Well, I think we didn't just get something going. I think all of you in the community didn't just survive that challenge; it has flourished. It has made that transition. There are always issues that face every non-profit, but MCBA is clearly doing well at Open Book

now. I can imagine that some people who are watching these interviews are curious as to whether there are identifiable keys to longevity. What might there have been as an ingredient or set of ingredients that helped MCBA to move through and get beyond it. You mentioned the artists, but [can you think of] any other keys from an organizational or community perspective?

JC: Well, we cannot say enough about our philanthropic community here. There is a patience, a persistence and a commitment in that community that are deeply personal values; they're not natural to institutions. I think they are expressions of personal values of the leader of that organization or the family that formed it, and that I think that is truly maturity on the part of our funders. I remember every six months or every quarter I'd be on the phone, calling donors who hadn't re-upped from the year before. And one year I noticed Bruce Dayton had not given. He was giving at a modest level; he was not a major donor. But we needed everybody, so I called up Bruce, and Bruce said, Jay, I can't keep giving to every organization in town. And I said, Bruce, I absolutely respect that. I understand it personally. And I am calling you to ask you to please continue to support MCBA. And he wanted to be impatient, he wanted to be decisive in saying no, but he didn't, he wouldn't, he stayed.

That made the difference, is that there were enough friends and allies. So that kind of maturity I think in our support for the arts is absolutely critical, and then it really is about leadership, but it's not just the Executive Director. This interview shouldn't pass without recognizing your leadership as one of the key staff members from the earliest years. You gave us a sheen of academic and professional credibility and perspective and knowledge that I couldn't offer, and I relied on it from you. So the leadership has to come from a number of places, and I think that is what you always want to be calling for. It's part of the reason why I have always thought the most important committee on a board of directors is the Nominating Committee, because ultimately the talent you are able to attract and get on your board is your future leadership or your future resources or your future networks, and similarly I think it's true in attracting talented staff and so forth. Attracting great people is absolutely crucial.

BB: I try to ask in each of these interviews if there are aspects to MCBA's story that are characteristically Minnesotan, and it sounds like at least in part [you are suggesting that] it is the philanthropic community. Are there other factors—you are well traveled—that come to mind when you visit elsewhere, that you sense might be more true here in Minnesota, and that would support an organization like MCBA with an art form that basically had to be introduced to most of the state?

JC: You know, in some respects, while we have some glorious museums and performing art centers that are world class and we probably don't fully recognize that, I think in some respects we are also a place where we haven't strayed too far from the working artist. There aren't too many layers to the everyday working artist. [For example] I love visiting the art exhibits at the Minnesota State Fair. I'm delighted to see extraordinary work that

is coming out of the corners of Minnesota. In some respects I think that our philanthropy is noted, too, for our ability to support the artist, and an extension of that is to support extraordinary leaders of arts organizations without overly programming the organization from the board. I give Ken Dayton and his work on governance a lot of credit for establishing that, and his own personal leadership as a model. And [there are] numerous others, as we watch the Walker, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the Guthrie, and other organizations mature. Again, I think it is a sign of maturity in the community that we're able to tolerate and nurture extraordinary leadership and talent at the heads of these organizations.

BB: If there is one question left to ask, it is a question that comes up at anniversaries, and that concerns the word, legacy. If you think about MCBA and its lifespan, what kind of legacy do you feel that MCBA has offered to Minnesota at this point in time?

JC: I consider MCBA to be one jewel in the literary arts crown, and I think that it is a very important identity for it to have attained. I am not sure it was there in its early years, and I think it is an identity that is appropriate and reflects well back into the literary community, with the respect and profile that it has locally and nationally.

I think, too, that in many respects MCBA was the first of what now has become a small ecosystem of craft centers in the Twin Cities. The Northern Clay Center, the Textile Center of Minnesota, Highpoint Center for Printmaking—the notion is essentially artist Co-op driven or similar centers. The Loft Literary Center is that same kind of artist-driven organization, or it was at its core. Working artists. I think that we are a valuable example of developing sophisticated expression and a platform for working artists in different fields, and I think we are perfectly capable now of asking and answering some of the great questions for the world, such as, what are the book arts. We have established a credibility and sophistication and curiosity and leadership to really represent all that the art form can offer as well as anybody in the world, and that I think will lead to an ever more interesting future.

BB: That is fantastic, and a great place to end. Jay, I want to thank you on behalf of the entire MCBA community, I can list board, faculty, artists, the kids who come in by the thousands each year. You've given us exceptional leadership and we very much appreciate the conversation today. Thank you so much.

JC: Thank you, very much.