

Jeff Rathermel
Narrator

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Interviewer

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At the Rathermel Home
Saint Paul, Minnesota

BB: My name is Betty Bright, and today, July 7, 2015 I am interviewing Jeff Rathermel at his home studio 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.

BB: Jeff, thank you so much for visiting with us today.

JR: Oh, you're welcome, Betty.

BB: Your involvement with MCBA is extensive and wide-ranging. You currently serve as MCBA's Executive Director, a position you have held since 2010. For the six years prior to that you were MCBA's Artistic Director, and yet again for two years before that, you served from 2002 to 2004, as an artist-in-residence at MCBA.

BB: To begin with, let's maybe take us back to your earliest involvements with MCBA. What background or interests may have positioned you to respond to the idea of a book arts center? And you can also touch on, if you had an awareness of the book arts before you heard about MCBA.

JR: Well, when I was doing my undergraduate work at the University of Minnesota in printmaking, I began to be interested in papermaking, and that led slowly to an interest in book. And I didn't even know what I was doing in terms of my printmaking as being bookish. I was working in a way that I liked box sets of prints, I liked interactive work, dealing with, almost games and puzzles and things like that, that people would really enjoy and participate with. And I was really interested in Fluxus art. And it really wasn't until I was in graduate school where I started taking some classes in the book arts with Jody Williams and Jana Pullman, that I had begun to realize that all along this hands-on discovery type of boxed things that I was creating, were books, were artist books. And both Jana and Jody were very closely affiliated with Minnesota Center for Book Arts, and we took tours down there in the book arts classes. That is really how I first became aware

and involved in Minnesota Center for Book Arts, was probably through a field trip with Jody Williams class. And they were in the original space at that time, and I just remember coming in and seeing this wonderful facility.

BB: So, that is the McKesson Building, on First Avenue North. If you could give us any sense of how the neighborhood was, or as you were entering the building, what struck you about that space that made it special, made it unique for you?

JR: At that time, and it was starting to dwindle a little bit, there used to be a lot more galleries and studios in that neighborhood. I felt that MCBA was part of that scene that was happening in that part of Minneapolis. But it was a very different type of experience going into that space. I remember when you walked in, there was the foyer, which was set up as a gallery, and you had your big communal areas on either side with the big tables. I remember liking that, because it was this idea of community and open space as soon as you walked in. It wasn't like there was a formality or a reception desk or something like that, that you walked up to and felt like you had to be let in, or had to pass muster to get beyond that. There was just a nice sense of openness to the space.

BB: So did you and Jody Williams' class, did you walk around, or were you actually working in the studios there?

JR: We walked around and just kind of took a little mini- tour. I was friends with Erica Spitzer-Rasmussen in college. I met her when I was an undergrad as well, and we were both making paper, so I remember Erica was there as a paper artist-in-residence. I remember going for a visit to see a presentation that she was doing.

BB: In those early years, with your undergraduate degree and then your graduate degree at the University of Minnesota, how would you describe your artistic practice for us in general, what kind of work were you interested in doing then as an artist?

JR: Well, as I said, I was working in this print multiples kind of way, that was not a formal print that went up onto the wall, and I liked the idea of mono printing and so I would have these sets of images, and then also I would say that, with the papermaking, that is how I first started to get interested in, how do I create editions? How do I create, even though I was interested in mono-printing, I was starting to be intrigued by the idea of how do you have that spontaneity that you get with a mono print, but then be able to edition it. And then working with different ways: How do you edition paper? How do you edition pulp painting? And so I would say that, towards the end of my undergrad that is what I was doing. And then when I was in graduate school, that became a little more sophisticated, and I was primarily working with handmade paper and screen printing, and then printing on commercial imagery.

BB: Ok, so, as I know you know quite well, in 2000, MCBA partnered with the Loft Literary Center and Milkweed Editions to move to Open Book in Minneapolis'

Downtown East neighborhood. That's where it currently resides, and you began teaching at MCBA, I believe in 2001, which is about a year after MCBA had moved in, so very early on in its present space. And then, soon after that, as I mentioned, you served as an artist-in-residence in the paper studios. At that time Peggy Korsmo-Kennon was MCBA's Executive Director, and Mary Jo Pauly was Artistic Director. Speaking from those experiences, primarily in Open Book but at least a tiny bit of experience in the old space, can you describe for us your community at MCBA early on? Who did you get to know first and second, and how did that start to expand for you?

JR: Ok. Well, originally, before I became an artist in residence I joined the Co-op, and I was in the Co-op for just a couple months before I got the artist-in-residence gig. And I remember meeting Richard Stephens and Regula Russelle as part of the Co-op. And then when I became the artist-in-residence in the paper studio, it was a little different then, in terms of how they were handling residencies. It was, basically, if you interested, if you were working in the studio, if you were taking care of things, and there wasn't another person that was clambering to get in, you could just kind of stay and hang out and be the artist-in-residence for a longer period. Now we have shorter set terms, so that's how I ended up being an artist-in-residence for almost two years, or a little over two years, actually. I guess my community, I was working there a lot, making paper, I was selling my handmade paper blank books as a sideline, and actually that's how I was putting myself through grad school. MCBA way back in the old space, that was my first venue for selling handmade paper and blank books and printed cards and that sort of thing. So, I was a consignment artist, and I also did book kits, which were quite popular. And I continued to do that as an artist-in-residence, and I was there, I'd say, it was almost like a nine to five job, three or four days a week in the paper studio, making paper, or printing or sewing books.

BB: So you really were floating, pretty much.

JR: Yes, yes. So, I really got to know the staff and some of the Coop members as well, and got a real sense of what MCBA is about. Because when you are there during the day you get to see the school kids come in, you get to see exhibitions going up and down. So I really had a chance to see the full workings of it, probably in a way that other people didn't.

BB: Describe the Downtown East neighborhood back then, since you were there right when MCBA had recently reopened, what was it like, what were your impressions of the neighborhood, say as you approach Open Book and walk in, what are you walking by in the area?

J: Well, when Open Book first opened, the marquee hadn't been built. The marquee wasn't built until I believe, 2005 or 2006, because there weren't the funds. So we used to laugh that we were located across the street from Liquor Depot, because Liquor Depot had the better sign. [Laughter] You would be able to see the Liquor Depot sign when you

were coming down Washington Avenue. A lot of parking lots, surface lots across the street. I can't remember, I think Periscope had just recently moved into their building nearby; I am not really sure. I remember on the corner was Frank's Plumbing, which had this awesome display of pink toilet fixtures in the front window—it was an amazing little blast of the 1950s and the 1940s in their window. But, it was very different. Valspar was there, but there wasn't the development that you have today. It wasn't a neighborhood; it didn't have a neighborhood kind of feel. It had the feel of being an extended on-ramp to [Highway] 35W. There was a gas station that was probably the newest structure, and that was about it.

BB: Did you walk through the space before it was renovated?

JR: Yes.

BB: Tell me about it. Could you visualize what they were going to do?

JR: No, no. And I wasn't, you know, I was just a member at that time. I wasn't anything special, so I didn't know the grand plans or anything. I just remember them talking about the staircase that Karen Wirth was working on, and seeing pictures of that, and trying to imagine what or where is this going to go? The sketches were so beautiful, and you would walk into this space and there were these hanging bare bulbs. It was just a gutted series of buildings...it was like a little evening open house that they were doing. You could sense the excitement from the others who were more closely involved with the project that this was going to be amazing. And so there was just that energy, even though you really couldn't visualize how that was going to be, how they were going to transform this building that was, the last time, an electrical storehouse. But there was just something magical about it.

BB: One of the things I am curious about is if there was a perceptible change in atmosphere to the book arts community when they moved into that space. It was a dramatically different space, it was on two levels. Maybe when you started being more involved there, what was the atmosphere like, the community like?

JR: At that time, one of my favorite things to do was to make paper. So I was really excited to see what the paper studios would be like. When I went to school at the University of Minnesota, we were in the old art building, which I think was an old Naegle billboard sign painting house, and the paper studio was down in the basement, and it was a horrible little...

BB: It was a bad place. [Laughter]

JR: It was a bad, damp, musty, no-windows space, and I remember seeing the paper studio in the old MCBA space and thinking that, wow, it is upstairs, there is light, it is involved, you can see the other studios from it. And then when I saw the paper studios at

the Open Book building, it was, here are these floor-to-ceiling windows in the upper level studio. There is a bunker that the beaters are put into so that you don't hear that noise as much. So that really struck me: ok, I could come in here, I could make paper, I am not in a damp basement someplace. I can go out, I can get a coffee, and then I can come back into the studio. I mean, it was really feeling kind of hoity-toity, but you could feel that the artists really had an intimate sense of pride in the space. Even though it was much bigger than the old space, it still stayed true to that same feeling, that as a member of the public you could walk in and see the different parts, you could see what was going on, you could see into the bindery, you could see where they were printing, you could see where the Shop was, and the gallery, and the paper studio. It wasn't this mystery, and for the artists [it was] a way to see each other working, because once you get past a collegiate educational environment, as a professional artist, unless you really, really strive for it or share a studio or something like that, oftentimes being an artist is kind of solitary. Some people like that, but others miss that community. I think that the way that MCBA's space was designed, it really facilitated that, not only for the people coming in who didn't know anything about the book arts, but also for the artists that were working there. And I think that is really, really important.

BB: Speaking of that studio in particular, and moving into the artistic vision of MCBA, in 2004 you were hired as MCBA's Artistic Director by Dorothy Goldie, who followed Peggy Korsmo-Kennon as Executive Director. You held that position until 2010, a good long period of time. I was wondering if you could share with me what drew you to apply for the position of Artistic Director, [moving] from being a practicing artist and teacher, into that more of a management and vision-informed role? What difference did you feel you could make by taking that role on?

JR: Yes. Well, I did have a little dirty secret that I had in the past. I do have another degree. [Laughter] When I first started my professional life I was in policy analysis in public administration. And I went to the Humphrey Institute here at [the University of] Minnesota, and got my Master's [degree] in Public Affairs, with Non-profit Management. I worked for the State of Minnesota doing management consulting and organizational development for nine years. So, I had that kind of administrative background as well, [which] I think helped to inform my decision in terms of applying for the Artistic Director job.

I also felt that, after spending time there for a little over two years, I had a pretty good idea in terms of what I was getting into. During that time I had worked on exhibitions; I had worked on Winter Books; I had done some work through Youth Programs working with kids on a couple of special projects that I worked on a contract basis; I had taught some of the classes, some of the workshops at MCBA; I was still selling work in the Shop as a consignment artist; and I had gotten to know the Artists' Co-op, so I felt like I knew the community and I felt that this was a community that I wanted to work with, and it was a medium that I felt very strongly about, and I knew that I had a lot of learning to do about artists' books and the book arts, but I felt like I had a lot of backing and a great

set of people around, not only here but on a national level, that were supportive and saying, come to us if you need information or if you want to know or if you want to see what we are doing. So, I think—that is kind of a long-winded answer, but I think part of it was, I had spent time at the place, and I loved the people that I was interacting with, I knew that I had management experience in my past, and I knew that even though I didn't know all there was, that it was the type of field where you could take chances, and you had people who could provide experience, provide their knowledge, and help you out.

BB: Following on that, if you think back to the early 2000s, how would you characterize that artists' community as far as the strengths of it [at] MCBA at that time, and what were some challenges facing that community?

JR: Well, I think at that time we were still in that [stage]: are you an artist, a book artist, or an artist that makes books? Are you a craftsman or an artist? Are artists' books fine art? It seems like there was a lot of attention being put on those questions, and had been for a number of years. But one of the things that I wanted to do was to get past all that, and to get the artists past all that. To do that I wanted to have a multiplicity of things that were happening in terms of our programming, in terms of what we were showing, in terms of what we talked about, in terms of what our Winter Books looked like. I just wanted to break things down a little bit, to get back to where I think MCBA was in the very beginning, in terms of having a much broader perspective of the book arts.

I think it is just natural that things cycle, where you can have a broader perspective, and then it focuses a little bit depending on the vision of the person that is in a particular role. But I wanted to take it back to really being broad and having people understand that even if you don't think of yourself as a book artist, that there are so many aspects in terms of what makes a book powerful, that artists are using those in different ways, and not even really realizing it, or taking these ideas that are the strengths of the book, like sequence and narrative, and how you can manipulate an audience through an experience—I mean, that is what makes books great. And actually, that is what makes really good art engaging. So, how can we reach these other artists, how can we bring them in, and how can those that are working strictly in a book format learn from them as well?

BB: Yes, I am thinking about the exhibitions you have curated over the years, which I have so greatly enjoyed. Maybe you could bring in some perspective from curating the lion's share of the exhibitions at MCBA, many of which have been groundbreaking for the field. How would you describe MCBA's position in the larger book arts field at that time and then over time? Has that position changed or has its recognition moved nationally or perhaps even internationally?

JR: Well, I think that more and more we started to have shows that were either partnerships with some of the other Centers so they travel [and] that more than just our community here saw them, and I also think that we started to think, ok, has there been anything done for [for example] African American book artists, for black book artists?

And there really hadn't been, and so we got in touch with Amos Paul Kennedy, and we put together a stellar show, called "We Too Are Book Artists," which was the first show that was ever put together of African American book arts. And that was an amazing experience. That was one of the most engaging and exciting shows, and it marked a time when we started to shift, and we started to think, we have a role here and a duty, and we also have a following and an interest that goes outside of Minnesota. People are interested in what we are doing, because what we are doing is really interesting and new. And so, thinking back on some of the other shows that we did, we did a show called "Face the Nation," that was curated through Saint Thomas University that was an amazing show in terms of typography, and then we also did, well, you and I curated....

BB: "Fine and Dirty"! [Laughter]

JR: "Fine and Dirty," which had a nice lifespan in terms of touring, as well as in terms of looking at contemporary letterpress printing. For me, one of the things that was amazing was when we started to do some Open Call shows, and started to get folks applying to be part of the shows from all over the world. And that is when I started to realize that yes, we have grown into this amazing organization that is large and comprehensive, and a leader within the United States, but then starting to get this international relationship with artists in these communities in the United Kingdom, and then down in Australia, that just was an eye opener for me, that people had heard about us through some of these new communities that were opening up. We had always had the book arts list-serve, but then, *Artists' Books 3.0*, which was based down in Australia, and then, Sarah Bodman, at the University of the West of England in the Centre for Fine Print Research—when they were coming through, her and Tom Sowden and doing their manifesto, I think that is where we got a lot of street cred, because they basically said, this is it, this is the largest and most comprehensive in the world, and, here is all of the programming that they have.

And so, through her site, and through those connections in the United Kingdom, things just kind of snowballed. We have this Minnesota, aw shucks, kind of thing, but I think we are embracing that, and there is a real sense of pride, but we are also getting to the point too, where we maintain what is really made us great, and that is this idea of community. So for me, one of the things that I think about and I encourage people to think about as we move forward, is, how can you be a leader within a field, which sometimes involves the idea of honoring quality, honoring some things—there's going to be a hierarchy that develops, in terms of, this work is better than this work, that is what happens when you're honoring quality. How do you do that and then be inclusive as a community, as well? And I think one of the things where the book arts was having some problems, was, decades ago, there was not a lot of critical dialogue because no one wanted to be critical, you know? There was this insecurity that was happening in the field [because] we weren't being treated as fine artists, the work that we were creating isn't being created as fine art, [and] the last thing we want to do is turn on each other—I think it was viewed as that. So if we just kind of say everybody is doing everything and it is fine, then that is a way of supporting ourselves. Ultimately that is not good; it is not good for any field.

BB: Well, that leads perfectly into something I wanted to ask you about, starting the MCBA Prize. As Artistic Director you were a driving force in that, starting that in 2009. The MCBA Prize is the first international book arts prize that recognizes and promotes excellence in new work from across the expressive spectrum of book art, and it is global, of course. It is awarded during MCBA's Biennial and Symposium, and this Biennial marks, not only our thirtieth anniversary, but also the fourth Prize to be awarded. So, if you could just share with us a little bit about your goal in founding the Prize, as well as its international scope, that's seems to lead from what you were just saying.

JR: Right. You know when we had the discussions about what is this prize going to look like? It was, should it be an American prize, should it be a North American prize, should it be international? And from my perspective in terms of where I was seeing interest for the Center, it was coming from all over the place, and I really didn't know, and I don't think any of us do, in terms of where the next great book artist is going to pop up, so I advocated for an international, because ...

BB: I was worried about doing it! [Laughter] Jeff was right!

JR: Well, I didn't want to get into checking passports, or anything like that! But I figured that, if we are going to do this, let's do it big. We were jumping into this right after the worst economic times that we could have ever had, in our life.

BB: The Great Recession.

JR: The Great Recession, right, in our life, anyway. So, it wasn't the best time to be launching something like this, but we were really dedicated to it, and it wasn't only that it was going to be this Prize, but it was going to be a Symposium, and it was going to be a Gala celebration, and it was about bringing the work, the five finalists' work to the Center so that people could see that, and the jurors would come and the jurors would talk, and the finalists would come, and we just have this gathering of these amazing book artists every other year. And then the idea of the Prize being this broad interpretation of Book was what made this kind of really different. There were international prizes for fine press before, but with this growing broad definition of what book art is and what an artist's book can be that MCBA was advocating, it seemed that this was the type of prize that we needed to get out there. Now, that being said, I think that we still have a ways to go in terms of having entries that really start to challenge that idea in terms of what book can be. Because to date they have—although not everybody would think they are traditional—but they really have fallen in line with—they are not installation, they are not truly sculptural objects, they are your more standard artists' books.

BB: It did seem that around that time, around 2009, it was something of a catch phrase: artistic excellence was being talked about a great deal because I think there was a real concern in the artist community that, exactly what you said, there hadn't been that critical

literature to challenge all of us. Then it seemed to quiet down when the Prize was moving forward, because we seemed to have a way to have that conversation in the symposium and elsewhere.

JR: Yes. I don't think there is any field that is going to advance without having dialogue. The critical dialogue, and critique and criticism don't have to be negative. The idea is for it to be constructive, and the idea is for it to be a challenge, and so why would those of us working in the arts, why wouldn't we have a debate about on the same manner that someone would have in the social sciences or within scientific research? I think that is healthy within a field.

BB: I think the response globally is a testament to that. I think people recognized that, and that the artists want that discussion. So, speaking of that, if you look at the book arts field in general, what during your tenure would you see MCBA's role being within that larger book arts community? Is it pretty much organized around the Prize, and responding to the Prize, because that's something that's given us a way to have a voice?

JR: One of the things that was driving us at the time of the Prize was also this idea of visibility of the organization. So the Prize also gave us that visibility; I think we were really successful in terms of that. [Visibility] was key to [MCBA's] last strategic plan for the organization, [it] was a central concept of it. And so this last time when we put together our current strategic plan, visibility came up again, but this time it was, does it need to be visibility of MCBA, or is it visibility of the book arts, or visibility of the field? I think we have really changed our thinking in terms of how we can be a leader and provide not just visibility about what is happening at MCBA, but visibility of the artists that are working at MCBA and making things. The great work that is happening by artists that come out of our community, that we help support, that we meet through other organizations, and then, how can we support the field.

BB: Could you just say a few words about that initiative, the, "This is Book Art" initiative, that is happening at [throughout 2015 during] our thirtieth, to address those kinds of concerns?

JR: We wanted to have this idea of people seeing book art, and realizing that for us we found that the best way to tell our story is through the visual. People see—particularly in person, if they come to our place, if they see what is happening in the studios, they get a better understanding. But in, "This is Book Art," we wanted to have these great master classes with some of our amazing artists that are working in our area; we wanted to have them talk about what is happening currently in terms of binding, in terms of printing, in terms of content development, in terms of looking at hand papermaking in a new way, and then we also wanted people to start seeing bookishness, [Laughter] seeing this idea of narrative, seeing this idea of sequence, seeing this idea of alternative ways to tell a story visually. Our new website is this wonderful mosaic on the home page, of all of these different things, that you may or may think of as book arts, whether it is a performance,

or an installation, or a sculptural work, or just a beautifully-printed, finely-bound codex, all of those aspects are what contemporary artists' books are.

BB: Absolutely, and this is 2015, and I just realized that I got ahead of myself, because you were then hired as Executive Director in 2010, but what has been so exciting is to have that artistic vision as it has continued to develop and grow and then be carried through into an Executive Director's leadership. So, I think I should probably mention that!

JR: [Laughter] Well, in many ways it was just kind of this progression!

BB: Well, I just remember a lot of high-fiving going on when you agreed to take the position! We felt very fortunate. I have a few more questions, just to finish up, but I did ask you if there was a book that you might want to talk about and show us from your perspective as an artist?

JR: Yes, I did. I brought the first Winter Book that I did when I took on the role of Artistic Director. The previous year there hadn't been a Winter Book, and I was around the place at that time, and the Winter Book is always the symbol and the flagship publication of MCBA. And you could tell that people were kind of disappointed that we didn't have a Winter Book the year before. So, when I became Artistic Director there wasn't really a plan to have one that year, either, and I came on, in late summer/early fall of 2004, and I just remember one of the first days that I was there, I went in, and I was talking with Dorothy [Goldie], and I said, could we have a Winter Book this year, and she was like, well, sure, and so I thought, ok, and this is one of the things that I think, if I would have known then what I know now, I probably would have never have taken some of the chances that I did, because there is something wonderful about being naïve. But I thought, ok, we are going to have a winter book. I know this community and I had talked with somebody, and they said, there is this guy up north who is writing these wonderful prose poems named Louis Jenkins. So I looked them up, and thought, these are great, these are wonderful. And I just got on the phone and called up Louis and said, hey, I am Jeff Rathermel and I am from MCBA and we do this book every year. Would you be interested? He said, sure! And so I got an author.

BB: That is easy!

JR: [Laughter] Yes! So, I have a poet, and so now I need my team, and so I was talking with Jana Pullman. She was really interested in having a Winter Book again. Chandler O'Leary, who was a letterpress printer, was an artist-in-residence at that time, and so I talked with Chandler about doing some illustrations and helping out with it. She said, sure, and then Sara Langworthy was around as well, another wonderful letterpress printer, and [then] she was on board, and so, we got this team together.

In just a couple of months we put together this beautiful—this is the deluxe edition—together [*Distance from the Sun*, 2004], and Chandler hand-colored all of the deluxe illustrations; it is beautifully printed. And it was just this amazing, amazing project, and then [at] the Minnesota Book Awards we won the Fine Press Award that year, for this book. For me, this epitomizes or characterizes the wonderful community that we have at MCBA. I often think of it as some of those old Judy Garland / Andy Rooney shows back when they are kids and it is like: come on, kids, let's put on a show! And in some of those ways, it is like: come on, let's make a book, and it is not just like some little backyard production, it is a gorgeous, beautiful book, that to this day is one of my favorite publications that MCBA has done.

BB: If you were to characterize MCBA's vision or mission, when you started as Artistic Director, all the way through to today as Executive Director, do you have a sense that there has been a change to that vision or mission, or has it remained fairly constant?

JR: For me, my artistic vision has always been [to] broaden this. Let's demonstrate what contemporary book arts is to people, and let's learn from other artists coming in to our community who might not be book artists—but then, as book artists, let's show them what we have as well, to strengthen their work. Organizationally, I see a change in terms of—and this gets back to what I was talking about earlier—this visibility of MCBA, visibility of an organization, where now it is like using the organization to create visibility for an art form. So that is a big difference, and that is what taking on a leadership role means. Taking on a leadership role means stepping back and letting the art form that you are leading take center stage, not you or the organization. And having the confidence to do that. So, I have seen it that way, as being a big change.

The other thing is extending what has made MCBA great, and I know I have said it a number of times, but our community is what makes MCBA great. So, how can we expand that, and what do you do with community within a leadership role? That becomes, becoming a convener. It becomes sharing your community, and it becomes bringing others in to be a place where they can meet, where they can discuss, where there are resources for them to use. This past year we have had a wonderful expansion of the James and Marilynn Alcott Library, that is just a first step in terms of becoming a place where people can not only do the stuff, where we have the equipment and the studio space for people to experiment and to learn from a hands-on craft creative process, but also now we are going to have this wonderful resource, reference and archive collection that people can draw from, and that is the next step. So, what a wonderful combination in terms of having a reference library and archive, as well as studio space that you can see while you are learning about a type specimen in a book and seeing type actually being set in a couple studios over.

BB: Yes, thinking about the renovation that just happened in the last year, and talking about our visibility, it seems as though we are quite visible, nationally and internationally. I am also thinking about the part of the renovation—I know you were

deeply involved in the design—that took away the opaque wall and made it basically a transparent glass wall, so people who enter Open Book can see more directly who we are.

So, keying off of your thinking behind that, how visible do you think we are within Minnesota now as compared to fifteen years ago? It seems like we are well known outside Minnesota, but how have you seen that develop, and what challenges or directions might you want to pursue in the state of Minnesota?

JR: Just in terms of our neighborhood, where we are at Open Book has changed. That Liquor Depot sign isn't there any more, [Laughter] we have beautiful condos and apartments, and it has really become a residential neighborhood. So we have all this foot traffic, which is great, because again, one of the best ways that we can explain what we are is to have people come in and see it. There again, it is visibility, but it is like the physical visibility of seeing into a gallery, seeing into a shop, seeing into a studio. So, for our neighborhood, I think we are becoming better known. We are certainly able to sell and better represent the consignment artists in our Shop, because we are able to display more in a much more professional setting. I think that the book arts themselves, and letterpress printing in particular, have come to the forefront in terms of different art centers, community art centers, and graphic designers. That “look” is what people are interested in, and I think that has helped, as well.

And, certainly, we are seeing tens of thousands of kids every year, and we are probably going on a third generation, well, maybe not quite yet, but definitely the kids of kids are coming into our space. I think our numbers were 24,000 or 25,000 kids that we have an interaction with every year. Those kids hopefully are going to remember that experience, and a lot of them do; people will come in and apply as an intern, or apply for a job, and say, I was here when I was in third grade and I made a book. So that is pretty amazing. The arts, we are very fortunate in Minnesota to have an environment that really is supportive of the arts, to have philanthropic interests that are very generous in terms of their support of the arts, so I am very optimistic that our visibility will increase.

The other reality is that even though I think that the book arts are the bestest, there is just amazing art all over this place, and so we have a lot of competition, and that is ok. Some people might be textile people, some people might be clay people, some people are going to be photography, some are going to be interested in glass. We have all of those different, wonderful, strong organizations here, and I think that if we were the only arts organization in town we would have great visibility, but I think we have great visibility because we also have this great environment, as do these great organizations that we partner with.

BB: To stay with the Minnesota focus and speaking from your involvement at MCBA, which has spanned more than fifteen years, as well as extended periods of travel time for you—I know you have taught overseas, and your work has certainly shown internationally, and you have spoken overseas—is there something that is

characteristically Minnesotan that could be represented in MCBA's lifespan? Being founded, developed, and basically the very fact of our longevity, are there keys to our longevity?

JR: I think one of the things is that you can look at the book arts in general. So, this is taking one step back from just being Minnesotan. The book arts in general are known for being a pretty good community that is very willing to share and support each other, and there is a long tradition of collaboration. We all can't—well, some of us can, not me—but (only) a handful of people can make paper and do fine binding and be excellent letterpress printers, but not everybody can, and you just don't have the time to do all of it. So we have this collaborative nature, which involves having good relationships and not having a lot of trade secrets. Add being Midwestern to that natural proclivity to be a community and sharing, and it is extrapolated in terms of being willing to share. I think that there is also some degree of personalities, too. I think that the people who have been involved with MCBA have been pretty congenial and outgoing. [They have also been] willing to help, so I think that there has been a progression of people involved in terms of MCBA, whether it has been through the Co-op or leadership, who really are walking their talk and are interested in forming partnerships and exploring and going out and being giving. [They also have] not been intimidated by a larger organization in terms of seeing if they want to partner. Or being overbearing in working with [an organization] that might be smaller. So, I think that that has played a real role in terms of the organization.

The other thing I touched on before in terms of something that is unique to Minnesota is our funding environment, in our philanthropy and the support that we get from the state of Minnesota. This is really important. We have this amendment that supports the environment, clean water, cultural heritage and the arts in our constitution, and that has tax money set aside. I think that is pretty unique within the United States. I think that is truly Minnesotan: we want to have this investment in terms of our past, in terms of keeping those traditions alive, but then also maintaining a quality of life that makes living here wonderful, and makes up for...February in the winter! [Laughter] But I also think that being located in Minneapolis, we are in the—I don't like the term flyover—we are in the middle, and I will talk with Alex [Campos] in New York [Center for Book Arts] or Jeff [Thomas] in San Francisco [San Francisco Center for Book Arts], who are the directors there, and ask how are things are in the east and the west, and things are fine in the middle. [Laughter] We also are this drawing area of talent from some amazing schools, so we have a lot of people coming up from Iowa and Madison, and from Chicago, so we have this benefit after years and years—thirty years—of drawing talent to this area, that it has become a real community of incredibly talented and gifted artists. It is almost a fact that if you are working in Minneapolis or having an association with MCBA, there is cachet to that, there is something to be said for having an association, because we have so many amazing, talented people that are coming here, or work here for awhile and go off or go to school, and then come back. It is just amazing that way.

BB: If there were one last question that I would like to ask, it has to do with the kind of thing you are dealing with when you deal with anniversaries, and that is legacy. If you think back over your understanding and your deep involvement in MCBA in so many ways over that thirty-year period, what legacy do you think MCBA has provided to-date, both locally and in the larger book arts community? What have we given back?

JR: Well, [there are] hundreds of thousands of kids who have come through and had an experience in our place, even if we are just touching a small percentage of that. That is pretty amazing in terms of the impact we can have, generating not only an interest in the book arts but an interest in the arts in general. And how wonderful being creative can be. And that having a creative experience is a great way to learn. I think that we have one of the most amazing youth and community programs in the world, because we are not only having these kids do a make-and-take, but they are learning. Almost everything that we do is custom. We work with a curriculum with the schools, because that is what schools need to do, to justify having an art experience these days. But that is also good, because you learn differently by this hands-on, arts-integrated education. I think that is a wonderful legacy that we really can be proud of.

I think that another part of that legacy is the professional artists that have worked with us for a while, or maybe they started out as an intern and now they are having amazing careers in terms of the book arts, or maybe they went into industries that support the book arts. I am thinking of [Harold] Kyle, with Boxcar Press. He was an artist-in-residence and now he has this wonderful business with Boxcar that helps to support letterpress printers all over the globe. That is a wonderful legacy. Sara Langworthy was an artist-in-residence at the same time I was in printing, and worked on a Winter Book along with me. She is teaching down in Iowa and she is a finalist for [the 2015] MCBA Prize. There are all sorts of stories—I mean, obviously MCBA can't take credit for the careers of these people, but hopefully we provided them [with] an environment that helped them get to the next stage, or provided a community that helped support them, and gave them the confidence, the education, or whatever to move beyond. And then there are plenty of people who have stayed. Jana Pullman is an amazing, amazing artist who was in school in Iowa and then in Madison. She was originally from Utah and moved here because of MCBA, and knew that there was this great book arts community. That was decades ago. So, this legacy that we can have is really through the people that are continuing to either work in the field or just have a better understanding of how important art can be, in life.

BB: I think that is a great place to end...I hate to end, but that is a good spot. I just want to thank you, Jeff, on behalf of MCBA's board, staff, faculty, and just in general for your extraordinary service and creativity. Thank you for taking time today.

JR: Oh, thank you, Betty.