

## Mother Tongue Seeks a New Niche

Mona Fertig and Peter Haase have spent nearly two decades publishing from their small studio on Salt Spring Island under the name (m)Öthêr Tøñgué Press. Now the press is adopting a more orthodox typography—and typical orthography—for its name and hoping to break into the mainstream of trade publishing with a new imprint, Mother Tongue Publishing Ltd., dedicated to British Columbia art history, fine art and literature. While (m)Öthêr Tøñgué will continue to publish limited edition chapbooks and offer letterpress and book art workshops, the new venture aims to publish works many other publishers deem to have little commercial merit. The first two trade books, one profiling the late B.C. sculptor David Franklin Marshall and the other, titled *Rocksalt*, an anthology of B.C. poetry, will be printed by Friesens and published later this year. Mona Fertig recently took time to answer a few questions regarding the change.

*Tell me a bit about Mother Tongue Press, and why you've chosen to evolve into Mother Tongue Publishing Ltd. What was the impetus for the change, and does it herald a significant change in direction for the press? How about for the production of your books?*

(m)Öthêr Tøñgué Press, for 18 years, was a private literary press on Salt Spring Island devoted to publishing beautiful limited editions of Canadian poetry; book art, chapbooks and broadsides, as well as offering letterpress and book art workshops, and running a writers' retreat.

The impetus for the change was manifold. I have been researching the Vancouver art scene since 1996 in preparation for a book on the life and art of my father, George Fertig, an important yet neglected Vancouver painter, who died in 1983 ([www.georgefertig.ca](http://www.georgefertig.ca)). Along the way I acquired a retrospective for him in 2010 at the Burnaby Art Gallery. I began my search for a BC publisher a few years ago, sending in my ms synopsis and research. I contacted the BC publishers who publish art books, and even though some said it was a valuable and commendable project they didn't think it was commercially viable, because George Fertig was an unknown. At this point I began to think about publishing the book myself as well as other art books, because during my research I had not only recovered some of my father's art history but I have uncovered and re-discovered many other Vancouver and BC artists whose work was undocumented, unknown and unheralded. Many of these artists were either friends or associates of my father's, and information on them was equally as scarce. I had grown up knowing their names and the names of others (artists, teachers and galleries) that many art historians had never known, or had ignored or trivialized. I realized that if I was to start publishing trade books I would have to

think about it very carefully and revision our mandate. In December, after much thought, research and consultation with various publishing mentors, I decided to take the leap across the chasm, and in January I launched Mother Tongue Publishing Limited. The change is monumental and very exciting. We (Peter and I) will still continue to publish limited edition chapbooks, in particular the "Island Poets" series, and offer letterpress and book art workshops, but probably not during this first year of revisioning. The production of the first two new trade books are in the works and they will be published in the fall. They will be published by Friesens.

*Publishing in Canada has never been easy at the best of times. Why do you feel the current time is ripe for the launch of a trade division focussed on "British Columbia art history, fine art, and literature"?*

The time is ripe for me. This is the job I was born to do. To shine a light on the neglected art history of BC. And it was quite a personal journey traveling to this place. The work of balancing out our art history needs to be guided by someone who was born inside the scene...or rather inside the "outside" scene. No one else is going to do it. You have to be passionate, fearless and believe in what you are doing. Championing those that are unknown, yet artistically and historically significant to this province takes nerve and an "eye" and "ear." So much of the art world is about politics and international trends, (and compared to the literary world it is a very closed shop). In the last century BC was a hotbed of artistic talent, yet it behaved quite myopically, like a wild frontier town. In its endeavor to become known as international and sophisticated it shut out artists and art that were not part of the coterie or trendy collective. Fugitive art, institutional neglect, and a disregard for our own art history has reigned. But the genuine and extraordinary enthusiasm and support I have received from gallery curators, Canadian art historians, writers, artists, families of artists, researchers, librarians, friends and art lovers has also been the impetus for the evolution of our press. In becoming a publisher I am also becoming a curator. Opening the door to a new collection of artists. People, are hungry for these stories. The stories I have been gathering are remarkable, I need a team of researchers to catch them all before they disappear.

*How did you select the subject of your first trade book, David Marshall? Did you commission the work, or did it evolve out of discussions with the author?*

David Franklin Marshall, Vancouver sculptor, was a good friend of my father's. He died recently. He was the first person I interviewed in 1996. It took 10 years for me to transcribe the interview. When I finally did, it was New Year's Eve and he was on his death bed. I felt he was perfect for the first book because not only was he a

Vancouver artist, his work was of International stature and unknown in his own city. His work is beautifully crafted and reflects a European modernism that the VAG never recognized. His sculptures are classically abstract. A major sculpture of his resides in the VanDusen gardens. He is the perfect artist to begin with because a) I knew him, his work & his widow Carel; b) I had the perfect author in mind to write and research the book, Monika Ullmann, is a journalist who knew David and his work and the art scene of Vancouver; and c) if I was to publish my first art book within one year I would need good working relationships with all of the above.

*What are your plans for publicity and distribution?*

Advertisements in BC Bookworld, Quill & Quire, Galleries West, etc, plus book launches in Vancouver, Victoria, Salt Spring, various galleries and bookstores. I have an exhibition and book launch at the Architectural Institute of BC (downtown Vancouver) for David Franklin Marshall for six weeks in Jan 2009. I don't have a distributor for our books at the moment, it's a catch 22 situation. The BC distributors (which are few) want you to have a sales rep. The sales reps want you to have a sales record. So I will distribute direct the first year and see what transpires. I want a BC distributor and there are not many. I don't want to send my books back east, and have them sent back to BC. My books will be regional, although galleries across Canada will be interested. We will also organize an "On the Road For MTP Trek" throughout BC next June (2009) visiting galleries, bookstores and libraries with our books, giving talks and readings. And we will make a short documentary on the artists we interview. If anyone is interested in having us talk next June they can contact me at [mona@mothertonguepublishing.com](mailto:mona@mothertonguepublishing.com).

*Do you see benefits for any ongoing fine-press work stemming from the work of the trade division, either in terms of production or distribution? How will the two work together, or not?*

Yes. For instance we recently held a MTP fundraising art auction in Vancouver to raise money for the first book in the art series. The invitation to the private reception was letterpressed and the cover was a suicide linocut that Peter designed and printed in our press room. I believe in email communication, but I believe that the personal touch creates deeper community. We all enjoy receiving a letter in the mail or an invitation that we can hold and show to someone who has just dropped in to chat. I hope to send out a prospectus for the new books and incorporate letterpress printing or a tipped in linocut. I also see us publishing a history of letterpress publishing/printing/bookart in BC at some time.

*Finally, it would be good to get a few basic details on funding sources for the press (government grants or private funds), ownership (you and Peter, yes?), plus stats on the projected print runs of the first two titles.*

There is no government funding sources for emerging publishers in Canada. That is why it took so long for me to decide to do this. (I had thought about this for years.) Basically you have to bankroll your first four titles. Publish four titles in two years and then you can apply for an emerging publishers grant. I think this is ludicrous, especially for someone who has been in the field as long as we have (it's in my blood). There should be a means test. But 18 years as a private press means nothing to granting agencies because we didn't publish books over 48 pages. So the publishing venture is running on personal funds, credit, fundraising, willpower, good fortune, a new name and belief. Peter and I are the owners, we incorporated in anticipation of future publishing funds. Our projected print run for both books, one is *Rocksalt*: the first anthology of BC poetry in 31 years, and the David Franklin Marshall book, is 1,000 copies each. Pray and duck, consult, laugh, sell all the books and don't look back.

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