

CODEX POLARIS TEXTS

A collection of texts about books from
Denmark · Finland
Iceland · Norway · Sweden
with Faroe and Åland Islands

In the Best Possible Way
Thomas Bullinger & Bent Kvisgaard

CODEX ■ POLARIS

Thomas Bullinger and Bent Kvisgaard, printers and book artists living near Viborg, Denmark, in conversation with Megan Adie.

Megan Adie: Could you please describe your careers?

Bent Kvisgaard: In 1968 I was qualified in the letterpress technique – as a typesetter – followed by qualification as a master printer 1972. I had lifelong work at newspapers, publishers, advertising agencies and printing offices – and have seen the changes in methods of production from lead type letterpress to offset and digital communication. From the very beginning I found working with letterpress interesting and inspiring: the products, the techniques, the history of letterpress... After only a decade things changed more and more into photosetting- and offset techniques. In 1980 I started to collect lead type and printing equipment to raise my own letterpress printshop, “OFFICINA typographica KVISGAARDENSIS,” for leisure-time activities.

Thomas Bullinger: I have worked for more than 20 years at an art museum in Viborg. During these years, the museum has worked with a printing company in the city, and with Bent Kvisgaard as a typographer and organizer. Bent and I have for all these years produced posters, printed matter, programs, books, hundreds of them – in offset. Together we have developed a typographic style that corresponded to a museum’s high demands and its classic subjects. After our retirement, we have been able to continue this work with our own topics.

MA: When did you make your first book that could be described as an artist book? What brought you to the medium?

BK: Around 2007, together with others – and in particular Thomas Bullinger as an everlasting inspiring collaborator – we collectively printed several items that could be defined as artist books – and it was obvious: I had the equipment and could operate it, and others wanted to participate – and learn.



TB: Our first joint work was an experimental BASEL book with Kurt Schwitters's funny essay about the Rhine and about Basel's people. With woodcut and linocut in colors and other experiments in a limited number. But it was also a beginning with a bang!

MA: Can you please describe the technical and artistic concerns you have in your own work?

TB: Literary quality and good quality book design are basic conditions for my work with letterpress. I choose texts in different languages: Danish, German, Swedish, English. Sometimes I print bilingual. Authors I have printed include Derek Wallcot, Inger Christensen, Georges Perec, Wsewolod Iwanow, Paul Celan, Jean Paul, Nelly Sachs, Gunnar Ekelöf and Erik Lindegren. Handsetting, letterpress, intaglio and relief printing are my media. Always in collaboration with Bent, who is the secure typographic organizer.

BK: I think it's important to practice the basic rules of typography in the best possible way, in relation to both the traditions and the aesthetic matters – and additionally to use letters for experiments with form and colour. Wood- and linocut have always been of special interest.

MA: Do you feel you're part of a community of artists and printers making artist books in Denmark?

BK: Except from a few titles, made with friends in Berlin and Basel, Thomas and I mostly have worked on our own with non-commercial editions in "New Graphic Society" – up to now about twenty titles. In 2018 I was invited by Imi Maufe and Lina Nordenström's "Nordic Letterpress Collaboration" to participate in "Posted/Unposted," a book art project from the Nordic Countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) with special emphasis on letterpress printing – followed by the actual "Bibliotek Nordica"-project. I'm a member of the Printing Museum "Vingaards Officin" in Viborg, with an almost complete collection of running equipment – just like in the 1950's; my primary tasks are book design and study of the history of the art of printing and typography.

TB: Danish a small language area. Printing books in Denmark means small print runs, even for the large publishers. For book art, it can never become a commercial matter – you print book art exclusively, con amore. I even print books in different languages, sometimes bilingual, which gives a slightly larger circle of readers. Important workshops or printers for this collaboration are Bent's officin in Løgstrup, Denmark, and druckwerk in Basel, where Marcel Mayer is the artistic and technical leader.

The NEW GRAPHIC SOCIETY, of which we are both members, gathers writers, translators,

visual artists, book graphic artists and typographers. We come from different countries and contribute with very different topics. We stick to classic bookmaking with especially the production of books. But the group's variegated and diverse composition means that our workshop and our creations do not become narrow.

BK: Some years ago – in Basel – I joined this international group of like-minded people from Switzerland, Germany and USA during a couple of sessions – and they all later visited Thomas and me in Denmark.

MA: You both have your own workshops. Can you describe the process of building up the machinery and equipment necessary for producing your own books?

BK: The printing presses: An Eickhoff-proofing press from 1955, a Korrex Nürnberg press from 1970, a tabletop proofing press, and four hand platens from the period 1890—about 1980. A comprehensive collection of lead type and a range of wooden letters keeps the *fascination & pleasure of type, typography, typesetting and letterpress printing* alive today!

TB: With Bent's intervention, I have inherited good classical typefaces from the School of Book Crafts in Copenhagen. Later, some newer types came from Basel, later from a Danish printing house Gill and Univers. I can easily settle for that. What may be missing, I must borrow from Bent or in Vingaards Officin in Viborg. In Germany, I bought a solid KORREX proofing press, and later came a table top platen and a intaglio press. More is not needed.

MA: How aware have you been of other people making artist books in Denmark, or beyond?

BK: Until recently not so much – but during the last year or so, and especially because of Posted/Unposted and Bibliotek Nordica, I've made contact with a lot of like-minded people.

TB: The Danish Book Crafts Association and The Danish Bookbinding Competition have for many years been an important inspiration for me. The book production in Vingaards Officin in Viborg / Bogtrykmuseet is my closest professional neighbor. But in addition to Viborg, I am not a member of book-art associations or associations.

MA: Is there anything else related to your practice, history, or your experience of artist books in the Nordic countries that you'd like to add?

BK: I consider that it is important to preserve and promote today's hand-made book as a work of art in the widest possible context and to pass on the technical knowledge to the artists involved – to keep the book alive, so to speak, as the important cultural-bearing element it is. It's important to ensure that letterpress printing not is going to be lost with our generation. At 72 years old, I am one of the last to have learned the craft in a professional context, so now we have to think about how we continue and how we can ensure that letterpress printing comes into the future, so the subject's 500-year history and skills will not be lost. It must be considered differently, if the younger generation wants to learn the art of printing. I feel that many artists are fascinated by the technique, and if they can use it as part of their artwork, then they will have an interest to learn it.

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