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Reaching Broader Audiences through Book Projects

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Many professionals in the field of art history who want to reach broad audiences never need to write a book, and never want to. Shorter form writing—articles for print and digital journals, magazines, and newspapers; catalogue essays; wall labels; brochures; websites; blogs; social media posts; and other succinct texts—all have much greater potential to share the value of art history and the humanities with large audiences, especially when that writing does not sit behind a paywall or hefty price tag.

Some of us, however, have a compelling need and/or desire to inform readers in the public sphere with a book-length project. At the outset, I want to acknowledge that writing books is a time- and resource-intensive pursuit, one that frequently exacerbates profound and unfair access inequities within our field. For a recent take on that, see an article by Kathryn M. Rudy on "The True Costs of Research and Publishing" in *Times Higher Education* (August 29, 2019). While we vigorously work to restore the numbers of full-time positions that come with support for scholarship, there is some good news for art historians who are determined, open-minded, and confident of the value of their work. Hopefully, my experiences with several different modes of book publishing and promotion may help a broader array of authors think about the options they have for getting book-length projects into the hands of readers who will be informed and inspired.

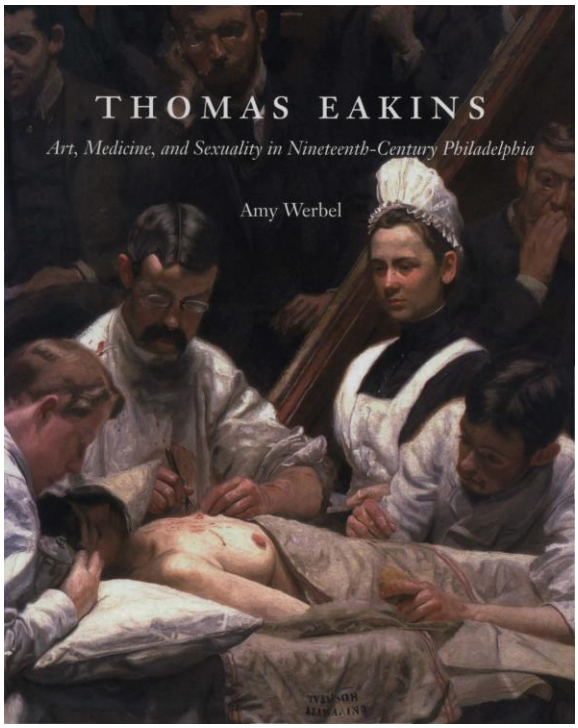

Fig. 1. Amy Werbel, *Thomas Eakins: Art, Medicine, and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Yale University Press, 2007)

As a young academic, I thought of book publishing through a narrow lens. I didn't need a book for tenure at the small, liberal arts college where I taught. However, I was driven to finish research I had begun for my dissertation and knew a book would help my bid for promotion to full professor. My first book, *Thomas Eakins: Art, Medicine, and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (fig. 1) was published by Yale University Press (YUP) in 2007. I received no cash advance from the press but was fortunate to raise the required $5,000 subvention fees for color

illustrations from my graduate school, which maintained a fund to help first-time alumni authors. The college where I taught paid the expenses of rights and reproduction fees, which amounted to another $3,000 or so. The $65 price tag for the hardcover meant that it was mostly purchased by libraries, and the print run was roughly two thousand books. After a few years, the book sold out and used copies became exorbitantly expensive. Thankfully, YUP has been steadily digitizing its backlist, so it is now possible for readers to access the text either as a whole or by chapter. Authors should always ask about this possibility. Flexible modes of distribution and reasonable prices are key to the accessibility of your work.

When your scholarly art history book is finally published, be advised that university presses in general do not have significant budgets for promoting these texts. This means that you will have to make an effort to reach readers, either by promoting the book yourself or hiring a personal publicist. In the case of my book, its interdisciplinary focus helped in reaching audiences outside the art history sphere. Usually, presses are great about sending your book out to any publications that might publicize it with a review, and they will ask you for a list of possible venues. On this front, do not be shy in suggesting a broad group. My most generous reviews came from medical journals, and I corresponded with numerous interested physicians who were fans of Eakins and happy to read more about his links to physicians and medical research. It never hurts to craft a project in a manner likely to reach multidisciplinary audiences.

Looking back, I am amazed at my luck and privilege with this first book, and also by how much academic publishing has changed in the past decade. Print runs tend to be smaller now because fewer libraries invest in hardcover books. Subvention fees are higher, as paper and printing costs have risen. The cost of purchasing academic art history books, especially those with color plates, has soared, sometimes to three figures. This all may seem dire, but serviceable and often beautiful academic art history books still are being published every year, as is evident on the laden book fair tables at the College Art Association conference each winter.

If you are one of those who need to jump this particular hoop for the purposes of career advancement, or simply have a driving passion to do so, there is no alternative to succinctly pitching your ideas to the appropriate editors, following up with polished book proposals and sample chapters, and hoping for a lucky break. It is always worthwhile to ask department chairs and deans, and other types of employers, about possible contributions to the costs of publication, in addition to applying for publication grants. For those who don't have these options, my next book project is a good example of a low-cost alternative.

For two phenomenal semesters, 2011 to 2012, I taught American Studies and art history courses to undergraduate and graduate students in the Department of English Language and Culture at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, China, as a Fulbright scholar. Immediately upon my arrival, I started writing lengthy diary entries to unpack what was a fascinating and at times overwhelming experience. These eventually seemed substantial enough to use as the basis for a book that would interest readers curious about higher education in China and about teaching art history and American Studies abroad. I asked several fellow China Fulbright scholars to review the text for accuracy, and I also spoke with a journalist about conventions regarding publishing interviews. By early 2013, I had a manuscript ready for publication (fig. 2): *Lessons from China: America in the Hearts and*

Minds of the World's Most Important Rising Generation (self-published, printed by CreateSpace, 2013).

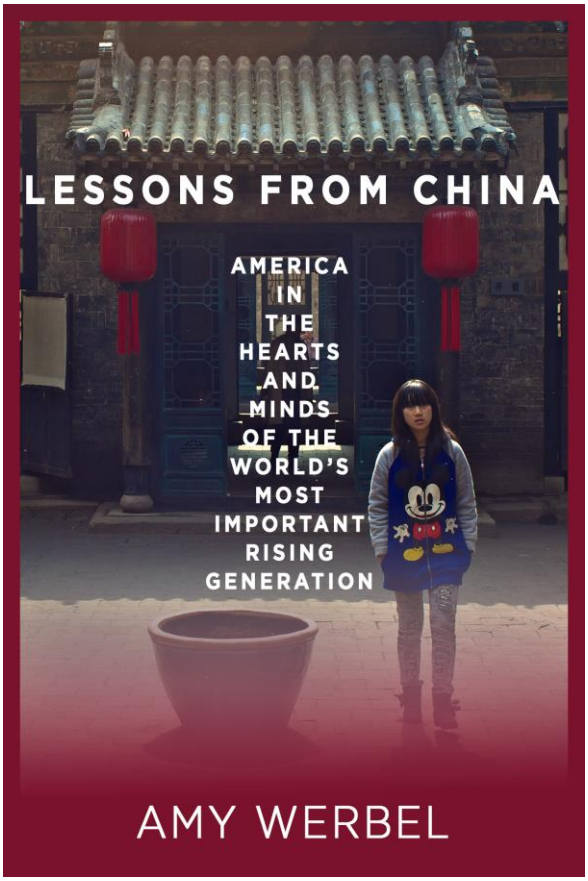

Fig. 2. Amy Werbel, *Lessons from China: America in the Hearts and Minds of the World's Most Important Rising Generation* (self-published, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013)

Although I of course would have liked to sell *Lessons from China* to a publisher who would pay me, and then distribute and advertise it, I went on the job market in the year after returning from China, and then I moved. I never got around to researching potential presses that might have been interested in a book like this. My husband, who is a professional writer, convinced me to publish the book on the Amazon CreateSpace print-on-demand platform—now called Kindle Direct Publishing. I turned the manuscript into a PDF file, my son made a cover for the book, and within forty-eight hours, it was available. I set the price at the lowest possible—$8.99 for a softcover version, and $2.99 for the e-Book.

Self-publishing may at first glance sound entirely irrelevant to art historians, but many of us have writing projects of interest to broader audiences, and not every institution demands a "tenure/promotion" book. Even better, it didn't seem to matter to many mainstream reviewers that the book was self-published. I sent links to free copies of the book to a variety of likely bloggers and news outlets, and to my surprise, it got reviewed in *The Atlantic* online (theatlantic.com), the *China Daily News*, and several other sites with a large number of readers. This kind of public scholarship may never be taken seriously by an elite research university, but most institutions are not so restricted in their thinking about what amounts to a contribution to human knowledge. At both my old and new academic homes, I was asked to give presentations to the boards of trustees about the lessons of *Lessons from China*. The book also has led to numerous really fascinating conversations with students and professors both in China and the United States, and I subsequently did many more presentations on behalf of international exchange.

The takeaway here is that you can get your book out to readers by self-publishing in an eminently inexpensive and fast manner, but there are of course significant disadvantages, too. Self-published books lack the helpful professionals at publishing houses—acquisition and copy editors, and peer reviewers. And the books produced in this mode never look all that great. Self-publishing definitely is not for everyone, but it was perfect for *Lessons from China*, and I learned a lot about letting go of fancy titles to focus on my core objective—writing to contribute to an appreciation for the importance and relevance of the work we do as art historians and as educators.

My last book project (fig. 3), *Lust on Trial: Censorship and the Rise of American Obscenity in the Age of Anthony Comstock* (Columbia University Press, 2018), combined some qualities of my first two in terms of being of interest to scholarly as well as more general audience readers. (For those interested, I highly recommend Mary Campbell's review in issue 4.2 of *Panorama*.) At the outset, *Lust on Trial* was turned down by a few art history book editors as not being a good fit with their list, which makes sense for such an interdisciplinary project. My book proposal, however, was a good fit for Columbia University Press (CUP), which does not have a specific art history list but publishes books on New York City history, censorship, and other related topics. My proposal made clear that I intended to reach a wide audience, with text crafted in an accessible voice, free of unnecessary jargon. After some back and forth, we agreed to an advance of $2,500, which covered my rights and reproduction fees. The press also agreed to publish dozens of black-and-white images and an insert of color plates, if subvention fees could be contributed, which eventually happened for the first eight hundred books, thanks to my dean.

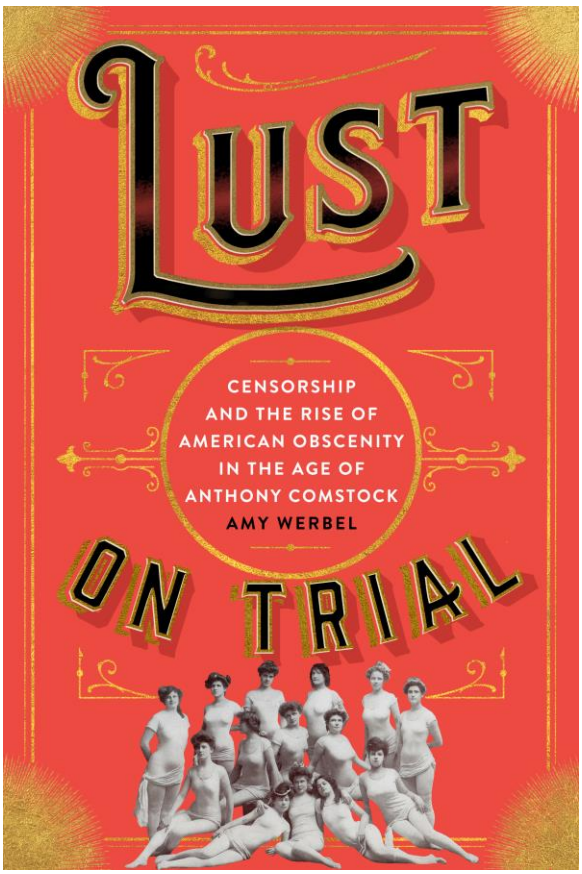

Fig. 3. Amy Werbel, *Lust on Trial: Censorship and the Rise of American Obscenity in the Age of Anthony Comstock* (Columbia University Press, 2018)

As the manuscript neared completion, I was exceedingly lucky to have an editor who pushed for CUP to publish *Lust on Trial* as a trade book. Jennifer Crewe, the director of CUP, recently described this somewhat amorphous distinction in an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*: "Scholarly and trade books are only separate in terms of their audience size and sales prospects. For a university press, a scholarly book is as important to the list as a trade book is—it's a contribution to the field and a potential award-winner, building the press's reputation in that field. A strong trade book can be both of those things as well. The only difference is that we expect the trade book to break even or earn a surplus."[1] Cambridge University Press and several other publishers also are pushing ahead in this mode, acknowledging a "boom in brainy non-fiction."[2]

Crewe is clear that standards are not lowered in any way for books leaning toward the trade category. *Lust on Trial* benefited from all the fantastic contributions a great press provides through editorial guidance, peer review, and copy editing. That said, the differences from my perspective were obvious. As compared to my first strictly scholarly book, the availability of *Lust on Trial* was greater. The book came out simultaneously in hardcover and as an e-book, at a price of $35. I met and corresponded frequently with a helpful and organized publicist at CUP, who secured early reviews at *Kirkus* and *Publisher's Weekly*, followed by podcast interviews, more reviews and blog posts. My own efforts via conference

presentations, social media, book talks, networking, website, and promotional video also helped get the word out.

I am sure there are some who will see all of this hawking of books as distasteful, and it is definitely not for everyone, but the point is that if you want your book to contribute to an appreciation for the humanities and for art history in the public sphere, then you need to get people outside our field to read it. And the only way to do that is to shamelessly and joyfully write a book that is intentionally relevant to more readers— and then promote it as such.

A Postscript

Textbooks and commercial publishing also are options for reaching broad audiences, but I have no experience with either of these, and I ask readers who do to share their advice and experience in a letter to journalpanorama@gmail.com, with the subject line "Bully Pulpit: Public Scholarship." Letters to the Editor will appear in a future issue of the journal.

Notes

[1] Leonard Cassuto, "Worried About the Future of the Monograph? So Are Publishers" *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (April 02, 2019).

[2] "CUP launches trade-focused 'destination list'" *thebookseller.com* (October 10, 2018).