

## Q & A with Jon Gams

Q. How did Hard Press Editions get its start?

In the 1990s, the NEA was gutted and the art world was hung out to dry. Alternative publishing, especially serious alternative publishing, took an almost fatal blow. In defiance, friends of mine and I started the magazine *Lingo*: a journal of the arts. Its mission was to give people in the art world a home, exposure, and support. Using our connections in New York we gathered as much material as possible on as wide a spectrum as possible. We had close ties to artists and writers who eventually urged Hard Press to publish books rather than just the magazine...longer shelf life, larger works. We worked closely together and in depth so that contributors could trust our intentions and commitment. Each book was uniquely realized and the process was truly collaborative in nature. We were breaking new ground, off the beaten path, and progressive. People knew that they could bring their work here for a fair reading and a real chance. I work with and hang out with brilliant people - they may not all be the most stable, but they are truly alive and care about ideas and care about people by virtue of what they do. Sometimes I think to myself, "How did I get here?!"

Q. How did you get involved in the arts?

I grew up in New York City. My mother went to the high school of performing arts; my Dad was a scientist/engineer who had a great appreciation for Jazz and Art. I grew up surrounded by my parent's musician and artist friends. My grandmother brought me to museums often when I was very young and I loved it- Calder, Giacometti, Matisse, Picasso-pretty heady stuff for a six year old. Art of all forms has been a huge part of my life so it was natural for me to get involved. I've made films and videos. Went to NYU Film School when Scorsese was in the grad school. We were all jealous!

In the 70s and 80s I lead a progressive "rock" band called People Falling and wrote music. The music scene in New York City was intimately involved with painters and poets at the time and we all hung out together. I think that the late 70s to the early 80s was the last successful, truly grass-roots, art scene. There was Punk, New Wave,

the remnants of Pop Art, Minimalist Art, Conceptual Art, Figurative Art and Performance Art all coexisting and feeding off each other. I see glimmers of that kind of cross-pollination now in the art/music scene inhabited by the 20 to early 30-somethings around the edges of the city. The children of the Baby Boomers --Watch out!

Q. Why the Berkshires in Western Massachusetts?

Hard Press was founded in 1992 in West Stockbridge and now we are up the road in Lenox. The Berkshires is equidistant between Boston and New York City, so we have the culture of both cities here. You are never really out of touch. There is great culture based here like the Boston Symphony at Tanglewood and parts of the New York dance scene at Jacob's Pillow. Shakespeare and company is fabulous! Also, because of our proximity to the two cities, a significant number of people from both places have decided to live here full time. Their interests, influence and support will only make the Berkshires even more cultured!

Q. You are concentrating a lot of your efforts recently on Art Criticism. Why?

Critics are deliverers of a message that should kindle interest in the discourse about art and society. Unfortunately, Art Criticism has been marginalized and brought into question by the monetization of the art market and the loading of museum boards with collectors who have a huge interest in influencing who will be included in a new "Academy". This commercialization has diluted the meaning and value of art to society-at-large. The last time art itself was a topic of intense discussion was when Art Criticism was a battlefield of ideas rather than what we have now- mere reportage with no education. Many art critics are trying to redefine the roll of criticism and move it back to a more personal, subjective style. They believe in making value judgments and gauging the relative worth of art works and artists. If they are successful art will become more of a merit-driven part of society. This is what art is supposed to be, a qualitative picture of where society is at any given time.

Q. What are your thoughts on contemporary art?

The soul of art has been kidnapped and is being held for ransom! In the late 20th Century art became viewed as a commodity. It had a monetary worth. Less and less value was placed on its worth to society. Artists like Basquiat and Warhol were able to change art and society in ways we are just starting to understand. This is potentially dangerous and unsettling to some. People like to have a preconception of what art is so they give it meaning by asking, "How much is it worth?" The problem with this compass is that when the material possession of a thing called a piece of art is more important than the subtle ways it works on one society, it is numbed even more than it already is to its own soul.

We have broken the connection between artist/public/society. We need to get back to the artist's studio, a return to art that identifies with the individual not with what a gallery or collector sees as merely a commercial opportunity. I think there's a good chance that the pendulum will swing back. Look at the music industry-we can make our own records now and reach an audience on the web. Art will go that way and we will have a new Avant-garde. It has gone so far in the other direction it has to come back.

Q. What makes a project Hard Press-worthy?

We publish and distribute meaningful publications. Look at our list. It is filled with people who have gone their own way; that have an inner direction, from Stuart Davis at the beginning of 20th Century to Marjorie Strider, in the 1960s-70s, who happened to be a real pioneer. Someone like Jim Barsness has not had a lot of attention but has a fully realized style and a kick-ass world view. His message is undeniable. It needs to be seen.

We need to focus on the art world now because it is in flux. It has a way of communicating below the radar to a society that really needs to rediscover its soul. The resources Hard Press has are thrown at the most sensitive and prescient projects. In art publishing we really don't see anybody doing exactly what we are doing.

Q. In 2004, you formed a partnership with Antique Collectors' Club (also know as ACC Distribution). Why?

For more than 40 years, Antique Collectors' Club has distributed and published a unique mix of quality titles to an audience that has already demonstrated an interest in fine art. ACC recognized that they did not have a strong presence in Contemporary art and Art Criticism and a partnership was formed. So, we are giving a wide audience an opportunity to experience and relate the same qualities that they see in Classical Arts, on the level of skill and technique, to Modern Art. This is a direct connection to the audience we care about and want to serve. It's very exciting to have a partner to work with to find new ways of getting contemporary artists and writers the exposure that they deserve.