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INCONVERSATION

MATVEI YANKELEVICH OF UGLY DUCKLING PRESSE with Jon Curley

by Jon Curley

Ugly Duckling Presse (UDP) is a Brooklyn-based, internationally acclaimed small press, “a community of artists, artisans, and creative enterprises.” The vitality of the organization is manifested in the antic energy of its 14 collective members and their various editorial and literary ventures; its Board of Directors; its Advisory Board, which boasts, among others, Charles Bernstein; and its staff and interns. UDP, a nonhierarchical editorial collective, grew out of the eponymous zine of the early ’90s. Incorporated as a not-for-profit and publishing collective in 2002, the press(e) publishes an average of 25 titles a year. Some of the poets are well-enough known—Cole Swensen, Peter Gizzi, Ben Fama, and Dorothea Lasky—but others are the overlooked geniuses of far-away avant-gardes, movement-oriented or personally, often hermetically promoted. In early 2007, UDP relocated to a workshop and letterpress basement studio in the Old American Can Factory, a restored warehouse building in Gowanus, Brooklyn.

Most of the above information can be gleaned from their dazzling, comprehensive website. Until you actually sit down with a UDP book or one of its editors, however, it is difficult to fully discern the commitment of this press to nourishing and generating books, text, image, and design, always against the tendency of standardization, the pitfalls of expectation, and the lunacy of conforming practices.

On the first Saturday in August, 2010, I visited Ugly Duckling Presse and talked about its happenings and hard-won accomplishments with one of its founders and editors, Matvei Yankelevich. When I arrived, Matvei and the interns were compiling the accordion-arranged pages of *5 Meters of Poems* by Carlos Oquendo de Amat, a lost, largely forgotten, minor masterpiece of Peruvian modernism. The bilingual edition, translated into English by Alejandro de Acosta and Joshua Beckman, is a loving act of archival retrieval.

Matvei Yankelevich is the author of several books and chapbooks, including *Boris by the Sea* (Octopus Books), *The Present Work* (Palm), and *Writing in the Margin* (Loudmouth Collective). He is also the translator of such works as *Today I Wrote Nothing: The Selected Writings of Daniil Kharmis*

(Overlook). As editor of the Eastern European Poets Series and co-editor of the 6 × 6 journal for Ugly Duckling Presse, he has brought into life and translation a scintillating inventory of works. Matvei is a puckish, personable, learned, and extremely forceful presence. Many times during our conversation he used the term “conversation” to define a crucial mission of both his personal and the wider publishing enterprise. His talk is without airs and provides a profound, sensitive tour of his publishing, his poetics, and his person.

Jon Curley (Rail): The UDP editorial board and its various production personnel operate as a collective. Can you detail the dynamics of this operation? What possibilities recommend themselves to this process? What are some of the difficulties of such an arrangement? This kind of cooperative seems a very Soviet-stylized ordering of function, in a positive sense. Given your personal background and some of your literary interests, is this intentional?

Matvei Yankelevich: Okay, that’s a lot of questions. Let me start backwards: There’s nothing really intentional about it and there’s certainly nothing like a collective farm about it. Basically, it’s not like any communist or commune-like collective. Different people have different feelings of responsibility to the whole press or certain projects. I’ll back up: We started up with seven or eight people who wanted to start an exchange and decided to make books and the collective was a byproduct of that. So, the collective does not delegate anything—when people want to take things on, they take things on. There are 13 or 14 collective members now, some of whom are of the original collective, and there are also interns and everything happens independently. Different editors come up with different ideas and then, other people, whatever they think about the project, will help out. “I’ll help you with this or that, I’ll help bind that book.” It’s like people sharing a photography darkroom, which I guess is an outmoded example, but as with that, people share resources and everything becomes more streamlined in a shared-resource model. We don’t all agree on one aesthetic. It has been somewhat confrontational in the past in terms of choosing this or that, and it can get anarchic, but we all are guided by the principle that we’re not here to do commercial books or make money or profit. So there are certain things we agree on. I guess there’s a sort of de facto range of aesthetics and it’s very eclectic.

Rail: The poets you showcase, as well as the visual artists and writers who might fall outside the category of poet are definitionally eclectic. UDP seems to showcase a broad array of styles, genres, modes, designs, and forms. How would you characterize this spirit of miscellany? To what end is it viable to describe this variance and variety as the espousal of literary and aesthetic visions as opposed to a singular vision? Or, speaking for yourself and not the rest of your collaborators, what vision do you espouse?

Yankelevich: It’s interesting to think that for each of us the range of things we’re interested in as individual editors has expanded and, at the same time, has also narrowed. That’s why I have this

Eastern European Series and Ryan Haley has this Lost Literature Series, and Anna Moschovakis has this Dossier Series for investigative texts which aren't really genre specific. And, at the same time, I might help Ryan, like the *5 Meters of Poems* book, which is not my series, and Anna has done books for the Eastern European Series, which is not her series. So somehow the dynamic is really permeable and it's very much crossover. My vision of the press has been changing all the time. The whole point of collaboration is shifting in terms of what we might try next. Every time I try different approaches, even in terms of what kind of technology I'm using for print or what combinations of materials, technology, and design I want to use, I'm trying to expand my vocabulary. And the whole press is really an experiment. It partly has to be a business but none of us have any publishing experience and none of us really worked for a publisher. It was an experiment to begin with: "Well, how do you make the book? What are the steps in getting books out there?" In some ways we reinvented the wheel but we invented it a bit differently. And so our structure and the way we do things and the rules for how we do things don't resemble most other small presses. It's very idiosyncratic. If there's some vision we share it's in the idiosyncratic and that's why we take on some authors that other presses might not and combinations of authors that would not seem to fit together at first glance.

Rail: UDP is one of the most prolific publishers of the small presses nationwide. The output is startling, really, quite a trump to expectation as to the success and failure of publishing entities and how many copies of product can be tenable, financially speaking. How does UDP monitor its economic index? Is it a serious concern as to how many books are purchased as opposed to how many are made? Given the severe economic downturn of nearly half a decade, how would you explain the viability of your collective venture?

Yankelevich: Well, what makes it viable is that the editors are not paid. That was the stance we took early on when it wasn't even feasible for us to be paid. Even if we were, we don't want to professionalize it that way but we do want to make it sustainable. So the workload for each editor has to be flexible because you have to find money and find a way to live and not go crazy. Ideally, we need to raise enough money for a full-time managing director position—which is currently a part-time position—because then it could be sustainable. The way we editors help in production is fairly doable as long as there is a central director running things. So sustainability depends now on fundraising and making sure we have more money in the future to work on publicity and stuff like that. Currently, our part-time managing director, James Copeland, is working more than part-time for a part-time salary and we would like to bring that up to speed. Book sales are decent; in a few cases we have printed some books that didn't at first sell, but even those titles sell eventually. And it's always good to have a few extra copies hanging around—we send them to prisons, the Poulin Project,* and there are a number of ways that we can donate them. And we print around 1,000 copies per book, sometimes more, and they really, for the most part, in a year or two, sell out. And if a title seems to be selling well and finances permit, we'll reprint. Fifty to sixty percent of our budget is made from book sales through distributors, through direct sales, book fairs, our Web site, partner bookstores, and the rest

has to be made up through grants and fundraising. We're not really in debt and we're able to pay for a book when it's printed. We never had money to start with so we never had credit so we can produce our books, more or less, without difficulties. We are nonprofit for a reason: We make more on a book than we spend but that money goes to all the operational costs. Somehow we're able to pay the rent but that also is because we rely on free labor; the interns, people working on different projects putting in their own time. There's a lot of money going through the account but not much stays there. It's odd to think we're operating a business that is basically zeroing-out every year. The free labor is what makes it sustainable and that's what makes it interesting—we're publishing books that are not commercially successful on the terms of a larger press, but they are fine in terms of our needs and our press. Our needs are different. So, in that way, it's both sustainable and not sustainable.

Rail: What are some publishing predecessors which the Geist of UDP abides or at least keeps as inspiration?

Yankelevich: Many of the UDP members had some press or periodical that they really liked when they were younger. However, I confess that before Ugly Duckling got started, I knew very little of small-press history, or how to differentiate independent presses from the big guns, and not much in print publications inspired me (except for Russian Futurist books and some zines and tiny magazines I had run across). I came to know many more small presses that I now feel are models or predecessors to UDP as we were forming our own venture. Only after working (volunteering) for a while as an editor with UDP did I start to formulate questions like "What does New Directions mean?" or "What does Burning Deck mean?" and the answers began to form themselves through experience. Something I just found out about, from Keith Waldrop, actually, is a press called Gaberbocchus which was doing some really exciting things in the '60s like the first English translation of Raymond Queneau's *Exercises in Style*. Also exciting: the early *Evergreen Review*, early Grove, and the way they created a counterculture. Slowly, I've been realizing what early Language poetry journals (like *This*) were up to, or what it meant that Ezra Pound edited several Modernist journals, etc., and what, in fact, they were really doing. All of our work at the press has led us to be more inquisitive about the history of certain small presses, and who was behind them, and how it all happened. I think it led to several members of UDP getting interested in reprinting certain important things, like Vito Acconci and Bernadette Mayer's *0 to 9* journal, a facsimile compilation edition that Ryan and James Hoff did. And that spurred James to start this new press called Primary Information, in which he's been doing reprints like *The Great Bear Pamphlets* from Something Else (another inspiring model). That sense of other small presses and their histories and developments became more important to me as UDP was becoming its own something. You start to realize how some of these poets intersect and their lineages connect and the affinities which sometimes don't make sense historically or as linear progression but make sense as a kind of almost geological ordering, different strata, which came together in surprising ways.

Rail: Many words—much print, in fact—have been dedicated to the proclamation of the imminent death of print media. Do you agree with such a view? How will UDP navigate the unknown trajectories of word, world, expectation, e-books, and whatnot?

Yankelevich: We just got a grant from the New York State Literary Presenters Technical Assistance Program to put our out-of-print chapbooks online. Particularly for chapbooks, which are so ephemeral, this is essential—it allows them to be viewable online, for free, and I’m very interested in the opportunities presented by various programs that allow a kind of replication of a physical reading experience, like “turnable” pages. I’m also happy about the archiving and sharing of rare pieces that the web makes possible. That said, I don’t really put much faith in people reading our new poetry books on e-readers. Most people who enjoy poetry, especially poetry which has a visual component, are going to have a tough time really getting into that on screens, although the technology is getting better. What’s important to us is keeping control of the design and the look of the page on screen. That’s why I’m really happy about how we’re doing these online chapbooks. We’re not just doing PDFs that you download and print. We want some of the texture and movement of the chapbook to follow it into the online medium. There’s no question that UDP would not have fared so well if it weren’t for all sorts of new technological developments, whether it be short-run digital printing or having a laser printer. Some of our titles are specifically only published online as they might have been too expensive for print or because they are more suited in their form or structure to web-based reading. In addition, what draws people to UDP is not just what the website looks like (though I’m exceedingly happy with the usability and décor of the new site), but how the books feel in their hands and how they function. For example, what’s important about our magazine, *6 × 6*, is how it moves around in the physical world and gets passed around. We could do it for free online but it would be one more in a gazillion of literary magazines online and I think it’s really about putting it in front of people physically and surprising them with it. What I like about our publications is that they have been able to engage people first by the way they don’t look like a Barnes and Noble book and may introduce them to something they hadn’t thought about reading or hadn’t been aware of. There are so many exciting books coming out of the small presses (Essay Press, Siglio, Canarium, Flood, Krupskaya, 1913, etc.), not to mention chapbook presses like Effing and innumerable others which are doing such a variety of books with such an attention to design and the history of design that I have not seen in commercial books in a long time. Melville House is one of the more recognizable small (medium?) presses with this attention to smart design, and part of a wave of independents staking claims in a bigger (non-poetry) market. This conversation comes up at every panel—“What are you going to do when the book is obsolete?” And I’m like, “Wait, a minute.” It’s like listening to Dana Gioia talk about poetry and it’s like you don’t know or are ignoring at least 50 percent of what’s been done in the past 50 years!

Rail: Speaking of expectation, your website refers to one aim of the press as providing an “experience of reading, free of expectation, coercion, and utility.” Can you elaborate on what this phrasing means to you? An encapsulated art for art’s sake manifesto? Or is it a piss-take against those readers and

critics who might try to discern UDP's DNA and assume it is a codified manufacturer of artful commodity? The books you have produced are, materially, highly crafted and seem, in content, semaphores of joyous variety; indirection; and highly allergic to paradigms, set-pieces, or preordained natures.

Yankelevich: It's actually a line by Yelena Gluzman, who's a theater director and performance artist and one of our original members and with whom I'm working now on performance-related texts and books. It's always stayed in the mission statement and I've always liked it. Even though we're not sure exactly what it means, it's something to strive for. Thank you for the compliments about the well-craftedness of the books but we're really amateurish. Many of our letterpress covers come out of mistakes or have mistakes included. Our amateur printing and design abilities are what perhaps makes UDP books look different. None of us went to design school and perhaps our striving not to be coercive or prescribe any particular aesthetic comes out of a desire to do things well, respect our authors, and reach anyone interested in literature. This seems to be one of the most important responsibilities of the press but, at the same time, we do it in a way that may be a little irreverent, a little what we call "junior." For example, when we write letters we try not to be too formal and when we talk to authors about contracts or rejection letters we try not to be boilerplate about it. Because really it's about human interaction and the process of making it interesting for both author and editor. We're not making money doing it so there's no need to make it serious. But we're pretty serious about our mission. And keeping it light is very important to us.

Rail: What is the relationship of local Brooklyn small-press publishers? I know that UDP proclaims its camaraderie with, among other publishers, Johnny Temple and Akashic Books. Johnny was helpful to me several years ago in giving guidance to a publishing venture I attempted with some very myopic partners. The imprint failed, alas. Are there crosscurrents of artistry, artistic communication, and shared ideas and ideals among the local purveyors of print?

Yankelevich: Yes. We've collaborated a lot with Futurepoem, Belladonna, Litmus, and recently x-ing. Johnny Temple is on our advisory board and there are a lot of Brooklyn performance people we're involved with from our DUMBO days. The press was partly in Manhattan and Brooklyn in its beginnings and then it became centralized in Brooklyn, first DUMBO, then Red Hook, and then here at the Old American Can Factory. The Brooklyn Book Festival has created another way of all of us getting together. Akashic and Archipelago are here at the Can Factory, and we often find ourselves discussing the business, as well as the books and ideas. But not all of our authors are in Brooklyn. And I don't think there's anything in common between us just because of Brooklyn. There's a world of difference in what we all publish. I can't say there's a Brooklyn way of doing it but I think a lot of it comes out of DIY. Soft Skull and Akashic and even many of the Brooklyn book artists came out of that DIY culture but, then again, that is also an international culture.

Rail: I recently learned of UDP’s web-only series of books—lost books, found items, whatever radiant fragments requiring a once-over twice or a new look for a new audience—through Ron Silliman’s blog. This kind of archival project seems to me very ambitious and so very necessary. How did you come to conceptualizing and taking on this format?

Yankelevich: We all have been interested in republishing books that are out of print or have never been translated or collected in English. I think it’s a curiosity about what is out there. For me, it was part of the Eastern European Poets Series from the beginning. It started with a little chapbook which we have now done a fourth printing of, *The Grâÿ Notebook*, by Alexander Vvedensky, a ’20s and ’30s Russian poet. This was a notebook found in Vvedensky’s stuff after he died. It was even out of print in Russian and we put it out in English. Particularly the authors I know from my background, Russian authors, going back to the Moscow Conceptualist crowd through stuff in the ’70s, ’80s, and ’90s, are ones I would like to see here in print. A lot of these Eastern European Poets Series books have been earlier 20th century writers. We just put out Srečko Kosovel, a Slovenian modernist, and Ivan Blatný, a mid-century Czech poet. We were just like, “Why are these things not in English or in a good translation in English or easily available in English?” We try to find work that is not the obvious establishment stuff from other countries. Like *5 Meters of Poems* by Carlos Oquendo de Amat, which is a Modernist classic and yet had not been widely available in English. That is the kind of project that really appeals to us on a number of levels that widens the scope of what literature is and the conversation we’re involved in about it. This stuff has to be available or we can’t keep it in the conversation. Similarly, we’ll approach these things the same way we approach new writers, American writers or new writers from elsewhere, thinking that these, too, should be a part of the conversation.

Rail: A trickster spirit and perhaps the silhouette of Kafka, Beckett, and Bernhard seem to glimmer on UDP’s homepage and its timeline, detailing gleefully some publishing and performing successes, many failures, and an indifference to seriousness or standardization. Is mischief a guiding principle of this enterprise? After all, you all are adamant that the ugly duckling refuses to become a beautiful swan.

Yankelevich: The short answer to that is, “Yes.” It has to remain fun for us because some things can become, with time, untenable and we have to think of new ways of being mischievous. It’s good—it puts pressure on us. For example, a book we’re doing by Julien Poirier, one of our original editors, has a fake title page so that you have the title of the book on the cover and then you open the book and it’s a title page for a totally different book. And that’s just the beginning of Julien’s mischief: *El Golpe Chileno!*

Rail: In a spirit of collectivity, incorrigibility, and reflective ardor, peddle a postscript voicing UDP’s accomplishments, dedication to creation and the promotion of creativity, and how it perceives itself as intervening in the future of the Word.

Yankelevich: In some ways I wish I could be in the basement of the American Can Factory for more than four days a week, which I am anyway, and play around with the letterpress and make ephemeral stuff for fun to add to the growing catalogue of the weird off-prints that we make and send out randomly. I'd like to put out boxes around the city with some weird print accidents instead of a newspaper for people to grab. It's such a struggle to make sure that all the steps involved in making a book happen, things are proofread, and that we have enough money to pay the rent the next month or write a check to our one paid employee. That's a lot of pressure these days and there are always snafus. We got to pay for this or that. We're constantly being affected by the unexpected as we are trying to make books that are unexpected and surprising. We are also affected by surprises negatively. But it's interesting to get around these problems and to realize—we're doing this book so how are we going to finance it? Or, we started this performance text series and how do we get it to bookstores who actually sell play scripts? Or how do we get this CD out to people who sell CDs? So there are always challenges. Basically, our plan is to play around in the workshop and play around on the web and see what comes of this structurally. It's very important to us to keep interrogating how the actual process of making books works. How is it affected by the economy and the state budget? How can we put something out there that causes people to ask: "How do my books get to me?" "Why these books?" "How does one find books that are sustaining and not simply a commercial venture?" And to keep the conversation more fluent about all the different ways books can be made and distributed and publicized.

I really hate final words. I was recently reading Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* and I really love the book but with this ending I was thinking, "Is he trying to tie things up?" Not such a great idea. I don't want to tie things up because UDP is very open-ended and I really don't know what will happen. Maybe we'll be around for 25 more years or it'll be passed on to new editors. Actually, we're hoping to have new editors to come aboard at some point, people who like to give their lives away for nothing to make books. We don't know how tenable the whole press will be. So, yes, I'm not looking to tie things up; it's a loose-end business that we're in. If I could make money selling off loose ends, I'd be a millionaire (and no more fundraising!). We have a lot of those here.

* A distribution network for books to underserved communities.