

**Interview with Erica Wilk by Nichole Atkin in 2017 as part of the Post-Digital Book Arts Project:**

<http://pdba.usask.ca>

**Hi Erica. If you'd like to introduce yourself and describe the work you do.**

My name is Erica Wilk and I run Moniker Press, which is a risograph print and publishing studio in Vancouver, B.C.

**This is a fun one we like to ask. Can you describe your first or early memory with a book?**

Right, yes, I was thinking about this, and I don't know that I have a specific memory with a specific book, but I used to read under my blankets at night, staying up super late until like 3am when I was a kid. And recently like a couple years ago I was looking through a bunch of my old school projects from elementary school, and I found all these reports that I had done, and they were all made into little "books", so I was just like "oh, I guess I did like books when I was a kid." Any report that I had to do I would make into a book - like hand sew it and do collages and stuff like that.

**Very cool. Very cool. Can you describe how risograph printing works?**

So, this is my Mz790, and it's a duo-drum printer, which means that it has two drums. Basically how it works is that there's a thermal unit in this part of the machine that burns tiny little (bitmap) holes into the master sheet, which is here, and the mastersheet is wrapped around the ink drum. When the paper goes through the machine it makes a unique print on each piece of paper. The process is kind of like screen printing. Then these master sheets get disposed of after the prints are done. You can take this whole drum out and put in a new colour. I have four colours: green, blue, red, and black. And yeah that's my MZ!

**So, we're wondering about the materials that you use. Like why do you use soy-based ink?**

Well, risographs only use soy-based inks so I don't really have a choice, because that's what they use. They're designed for soy-based inks. Soy-based ink is interesting because, basically half of it absorbs into the paper, and half of it evaporates, so it always has a bit of texture, or residue that it leaves on the paper...which I kind of like. It gives it a different feel. Each print becomes more unique. If you compare each print side by side, it's almost like a screen print or something. It almost looks hand-printed instead of from a machine.

**Yeah I guess that kind of goes with our next question: what are the more analogue, hand-made aspects of the work that you print?**

I guess it depends on the project, but the handmade aspects of the design might be hand drawn, so that part of the process could be considered analogue, and then the finishing -- pretty much 100% of the finishing is hand done. So I'm folding all the pages, binding, cutting, trimming -- all those things myself.

**Wow. That's a lot of work.**

Yes it's a ton of work. But sometimes I have help from amazing volunteer interns and friends, all of whom become paper folding champions in their own right, haha, couldn't do larger projects without them (or if I did it would take a lot longer).

**So how did you get started?**

I was in this same studio space, and my studio mate at the time was a photographer by the name of Shannyn Higgins, and she wanted to make a book featuring fifty different artists and writers in Vancouver, and basically, she hired me as a designer to create, and produce the books. After doing some research-- we were looking to produce about 400 copies--which is not quite enough for offset printing, and it was very expensive to print it digitally. So, I did some googling, and I was just like, "oh well maybe I should buy my own printer and that would be cheaper to do everything myself instead of paying someone to do it." In the end, I did end up buying a printer: my smaller RZ printer. But, it wasn't cheaper per se. It took a lot of time, effort, and tears. Yeah, figuring out how to make 400 books is a huge undertaking for someone who-- well I had made small books before, but not 400. So that's how it all started, and from there Moniker Press was born.

**That's super cool. So did you have to order your equipment, or how..**

For the RZ printer that I bought: I bought it in the states and we just drove down. I picked it up from an office, so no, I didn't have to order it, but I do have to order new supplies from a riso company, so like, new masters, new ink tubes and things like that.

**And your educational background?**

I have a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. So, I did two years of school in Edmonton at Grant McEwan, and three years at Emily Carr in Vancouver- which is why I moved here. I was studying print, video, painting, sculpture... I just dabbled in a little bit of everything.

**So what are some of the challenges involved with risograph printing?**

Well there is the technical aspect, so there's always issues with the machine. I'm constantly trying to fix it and make it do the things I want it to do. However, I like those restrictions and those challenges. There's been many late nights of frustrating paper jams and issues. Almost wanting to give up and throw the machine down the stairs but it somehow manages to work out.

Otherwise, most of the work that I do is freelance, so it's very up and down. Some months I'll have no work, and other months I'll be swamped. It requires a certain balance of things, so those would be two challenges I consistently face.

**So, are you approached by creators or do you reach out to people?**

I do both. I approach the writers that I want to publish and work with, and that is the publishing side of Moniker Press, but Moniker is also a small scale commercial print shop, so I print for clients. People email me with a project and I complete it for them.

**Your website talks about doing international work, so how do you operate on a global scale?**

I'm currently working on an ongoing project called "Mobile Moniker". Basically it's kind of like what you [Post Digital Book Arts] are doing. I visit risograph print shops in different parts of the world as I travel. The first one that I did was when I was in Europe, and I visited- I think fourteen different risograph print shops and documented them. Since then, I've also visited riso print studios in Mexico, and eastern Canada. The main point of the project was to learn from other printers, as well as make work and collaborate with them. So part of project consisted of mailing things that I had made with different printers to people around the world. (I'm a huge fan of snail mail). Another motivator was that, I sometimes feel far apart from other risograph printers in western Canada, compared to Europe, where everyone's really close. They can share ink drums, and hang out together, and have events.. This is a way for me to connect with them, and hopefully those connections will stay. It's still in progress but Mobile Moniker will become an archive website as well as a book project.

**That leads us to ask, how do you work with other artists? Mostly collaboration... or?**

Yes. Collaboration is the main point of my publishing projects. Most things I do in my personal practice as well -- I really enjoy collaborating with people. That can happen in any capacity, like maybe I'll help with the book design, or I'll be writing, or multiple things at the same time with the artist I'm working with. It's really different for every project.

**What kinds of projects interest you the most?**

I'm interested in a variety of things. I have published quite a bit of poetry, illustrative and written work-- contemporary ideas and ways of thinking about things, and then aesthetics. I like books that when you pick them up, they sort of challenge you. So there's something different about it. Perhaps, something subtle in the interaction -- maybe you have to flip it in a different way than you're used to -- or moving away from what is the typical format of a paperback, or even zine.

**Are there any rules that you tend to stick to in book design, or are you very experimental?**

Right now I am very experimental in book design. Each artist that I choose to work with is so different, I don't have a specific style, necessarily, other than what I am personally drawn to.

**Are there any design choices that you tend to go back to? For example, font choices, colour?**

Being limited to 4 colours would be one thing that lumps my work together. But I have really tried experiment with the different colours by layering them so I can get purples and browns and different turquoises. As for fonts and things like that: I am drawn to certain styles, but I don't know that I have a specific way of formatting when publishing books, at this moment.

**I can't believe I didn't ask this already. How long have you been doing this?**

This will be my fourth year!

**Wow! Early stages! Okay. So, what kind of elements have you found make a book more successful?**

I think for me, the elements that make a book more successful, maybe push what a "book" is, in some way. Because I am producing books in small quantities (from around 100 to 150 edition sizes), I don't have the capacity to make editions of thousands of copies I am able to experiment more with different bindings or ways a viewer could pick up a book. . The way that people can interact with the book is really interesting to me.

**Can you talk a little about how the internet has influenced your work?**

In a lot of ways it's really helped to expand my business. It's a way for me to find clients and connect with artists who I might not have met in person before. Otherwise it's a promotional tool, it's a way of connecting with people. I'm interested in a lot of interactions on the internet for my personal writing and book work.

With Mobile Moniker, the internet is a way to connect to printers. It will become a bit of an "e-book", but in a website format, so instead of just having an object at the end, it will also be very digital, constantly changing and being updated. It's kind of just a big hodgepodge of information.

**Can you talk more about the e-book aspect?**

I haven't made any other books available online. I've done videos where you can flip through the book -- you don't actually flip through but you watch it. I'd like to get more into e-books. I

think they're interesting. I have a friend [Sylvana d'Angelo] that did this really cool project I think you might like. Produced by Zine Club and Print Ready, and basically, it's a website and a publication. They print and bind it on the spot for you, or it can be printed from home. The website randomly chooses the images for each book when you press Command+P. So each one ends up being different. It's pretty cool.

I also did this book called "Ends" which started out exploring the "end of the world" in a lot of ways, but ended up being about *endings* in general. There's a lot of content that I found from the internet in it, so, different chat room conversations, artificial intelligence, found writing ... There's something about taking content that's digital and making it into a more permanent object that I find interesting.

**So something that we're really interested in is transferring the idea of craft bookmaking into a digital format, so this really connects to what we're doing.**

I can send you the Mobile Moniker website when it's finished, I have tens of thousands of photos or more that I'm trying to go through, and a bunch of writing. It's so much work to put that kind of archive together. It's a big process.

**How do you feel about digital books then?**

I'm definitely not against it. I think the more digital books there are, the more important actual book objects are going to become. People want that interaction with the object. It's different than a physical object which is fine in my opinion, and there's cool things you can do with each. Maybe you can combine it, and have a book that needs to be read with the digital book, or some sort of -- collaboration again! -- between digital and analogue books... you're giving me ideas!

**Do you own a kindle or an e-reader?**

I have an iPad that has e-books on it. I don't use it though, To be honest, I don't have a lot of time for reading these days, unfortunately. Sometimes I sit in this corner [of my studio] and read these inspirational books that I collect from other riso printers at zine fairs or when I'm traveling.

**Here's a kind of big question: What role do you think the book has in society today?**

I think the book is still really important. I know a lot of people say that the "book is dead", or "print is dead", and I think that because that slogan came out a couple years ago, people are realizing that "we don't want this to die. This is important." Book fairs are growing -- especially art books, and different books/zines, that maybe have posters, or things that people can interact with in a different way. Perhaps we want tactility. I know that when I was in school, I was working with a lot of video and that kind of thing, and almost everything I did was reliant on digital processes. I was designing on the computer constantly. I also moved into doing freelance work after graduating, and I started really wanting to make stuff with my hands again, and to

actually do the physical labour to create them. Maybe I'm a little crazy for folding thousands of pages by hand constantly. But it's something that I like - the repetitive action becomes meditative. I do still enjoy using a computer, working on InDesign, and that kind of process (in some cases I'm dependent on it), but I also want to feel a connection with an object, and you can't really replace that with digital things.

### **Not even with an interactive concept?**

I think an interactive concept could be great,, but in my opinion you can't discount the physical altogether for the digital. Maybe each are better suited for different things depending on their content. For example, maybe some books should be only e-books. Some should be both. Some should only be physical.

### **What would constitute something worthy of a physical book for you?**

That's kind of tricky because I make physical books, so for me, everything, haha, should be (and has been) physical. But perhaps there are some paperbacks that are mass-produced that would be better produced digitally.. I think that making books accessible to people is important too, and digital mediums have the capacity to reach a larger audience, and thus become a good way to distribute for environmental reasons, especially. I don't necessarily feel I should be the only one to determine what books should be physical and what shouldn't, as it's entirely subjective. For my publishing work, the content and imagery by the artist are what inspires me to choose to produce a book or zine, whether it be translated from a digital work, words, or paintings.

### **Okay, last question, fun question. What kind of music do you listen to when you work?**

I have a really old ipod, so I listen to a lot of music that I listened to like ten years ago, on shuffle. I listen to CBC radio, and like most genres -all over the place! When I am listening to my own music, it's anywhere from classic oldies, blues, folk, psych rock, to rap. Maybe Beyonce if I feel like dancing.. Depends on my mood when I'm working too. Sometimes I need some pump up jams to keep me awake (I'm a studio night owl). Today, my favourite has been the band, Chicano Batman, but tomorrow I'd probably say something different. I also have a recording studio on one side of me and a DJ studio on the other side, so I get a lot of good music coming through.

**Well, great, that's it! Thank you so much Erica.**