

Talking in print



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Wendy Murray, *Sydney - We Need to Talk!*, 2018, the book.
Photography by Wendy Murray

Words by **Rebecca Beardmore**

A few months ago I was sitting in the Leichhardt Park Aquatic Centre café, drinking my first coffee of the day among the dedicated fitness buffs, early risers and other long-suffering parents waiting for my son to finish his early morning squad session. This is a routine activity for me. That morning, however, I had brought along a copy of *Sydney - We Need to Talk!*, a limited-edition artist book I'd picked up at its launch the previous evening. Still sealed in its tissue-paper wrapper, the book was produced by artist Wendy Murray in collaboration with The Urban Crew, a like-minded group of socially engaged scholars (geographers, planners, political scientists and sociologists) who have

been meeting together every week for a year in the Madsen Building at the University of Sydney.

Unwrapped, the book is modest-looking as far as art books go: a fifty-six page, A5 format, illustrated booklet, printed largely in black-and-white and finished with hand-saddle stitching. It contains a series of co-authored short essays that address the politics of urbanisation confronting Sydneysiders every day: rampant private development, transport congestion, housing unaffordability, the commercialisation of public space and the ubiquity of street advertising. This is Sydney as it appears now, but it is also a situation common to many urban centres worldwide. The essays map the local and

global dimensions of this conversation around urban space and its transformation.

The seventeen folk that make up The Urban Crew, listed by name in the table of contents, eschew claims to primary authorship in favour of the collective voice. The sharing of knowledge, opinions and experience is at the heart of the book's messaging, which promotes open dialogue rather than disclosure and has its origins in a series of academic discussions that culminated in the Festival of Urbanism, run by the University of Sydney School of Architecture, Design and Planning with the support of the Henry Halloran Trust.

Knowing Wendy Murray's work and Insta feed, I was well prepared for the sociopolitical underpinnings of the



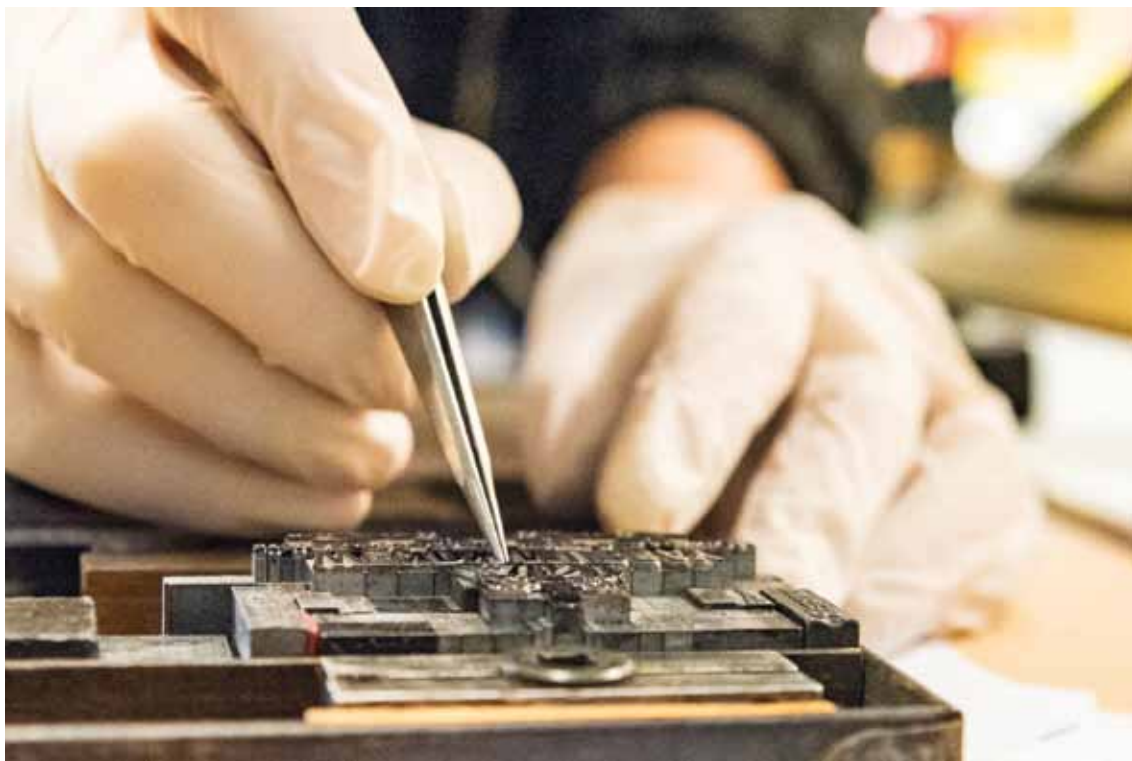
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Wendy Murray, *Sydney – We Need to Talk!*, 2018, book launch poster.

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Wendy Murray setting type at the Piscator Press, University of Sydney, 2018.

Photography by Sarah Lorien



overall project and her visually captivating contribution to its inaugural publication. Coincidentally, earlier in the year, the University of Sydney launched an eight-week print residency framed around the former Piscator Press, a small glass-fronted workshop on the lower ground of Fisher Library that houses a working 19th century Albion printing press and a modest collection of letterpress type. The University acquired the press in the early 1960s when then-librarian and book-art enthusiast Harrison Bryan set up the small press for the purposes of scholarly research. Bryan considered an intimate understanding of the craftsmanship of hand-printed book production imperative to a more complete study of textual scholarship, and the Library is seeking to renew these convictions through this residency program.¹ Since the legacy of the typographic industry is instrumental to her practice, it is no surprise that Murray was awarded the first Printer in Residence. As part of her fellowship program, Murray drew upon the small archive of historic Piscator Press publications incorporating some of the decorative design features into *Sydney – We Need to Talk!*. Each chapter is punctuated with one of Murray's evocative hand-drawn illustrations accompanied by a cynical aphorism printed in the hand-set type of the Piscator press. Only 100 copies were produced. Mine is stamped '11 SEP 2018' and the edition, 61/100, hand-scribed on the back cover. By the time the book was launched it had already sold out through pre-orders. Also sold out were the series of vibrant, hand-screenprinted posters

of her scaled-up illustrations. I was canny enough to secure a copy of the book before its public launch and can assure you that the hand-printed, four-colour screenprinted dust jacket alone is worth framing.

As a co-authored and collaboratively produced publication made in conjunction with a university-owned printing press, this book invites us to reflect on the dynamic interplay between material form and documented content. I found myself contemplating the correlation between the notion of collectivity at the core of this project and the established collective practices of print workshops and artist-run book presses. The serendipitous involvement of the Piscator Press in the production of this publication as well as the institutional base for the collective's weekly meetings also serves to raise interesting questions around the role of the university as a site for autonomous and independent political exchange, as well as the effectiveness of a printed book as a platform of intervention particularly in relation to the efficiency and accessibility afforded by much more contemporary and pervasive forms of digital media and online publishing.

The material and intellectual culture of print is deeply woven into the fabric of civil society. Since the invention of movable type, print and its industrial practices have played a pivotal role in human communication, reflecting and shaping socioeconomic life through the proliferation of books, pamphlets, periodicals and newspapers. The history of political writing to which this book

owes its lineage, is rife with examples of progressive and revolutionary texts, canonised in books, summarised in journals and disseminated in broadsheets and manifestos. There has however, been a comparative lack of attention paid to the material features of writing and the physical form of its publishing. Ink, paper and press are largely considered an invisible armature in the service of the book's content. As with all processes of reproduction, marked by their ability for faithful transcription, the transparency of materiality is owing to the standardisation of the printed word afforded by mechanical printing. The Gutenberg press transformed the printed book from a self-contained crafted artefact, to a repeatable mass-industrial commodity, establishing conventions characterised by speed, efficiency, uniformity and reach.

It is only with the rise of digital and mobile screen media that printed matter has ceased to be the default mode of knowledge production and the mediated form of textual expression come into full critical view. The written word has been so significantly swept along and subverted by the proliferation of user-driven social media platforms, characterised by reactionary and compulsive communication. Even as all the contributing elements that have facilitated this digital condition continue to accelerate, the sheer volume of words now competing for our attention seems to carry less meaning. We have become desensitised to the word and the message to the point that it has become white noise.



Wendy Murray inking up on the Albion at the Piscator Press, University of Sydney, 2018. Photography by Sarah Lorien

Does the counter-tradition of the artist book offer a critical alternative with its potential for slow writing, slow production and slow engagement? As an aestheticised textual object, the artist book is a format that generates value from the integration of content and form. As a creative activity, the artist book is often associated with printmaking in a fraternity of mutual reprographic engagement, but it is a medium equally beholden to the conventions of the publishing trade and the linguistic structures inscribed within language, even when bereft of text.

Joanna Drucker, in her canonical text, *A Century of Artists' Books*, distinguishes two distinct forms of artist books: the rare and/or auratic object and the democratic multiple.² It is the latter that best encapsulates the social imperatives of this experimental book project. The communality of its production likens it to the collaborative practices of politically minded community-based print workshops that flourished in Sydney in the 1970s and '80s, such as Redback Graphics and Earthworks Poster Collective. In *Sydney - We Need to Talk!* the proposed anonymity of the collective voice challenges normative writing practices by destabilising hierarchies of

authorship and emphasising *graphesis*, an amalgamation of drawing and writing, as a form of knowledge production. Artist books of this form emerged as a relatively inexpensive art object, which forfeited aura in order to access the democratic potential of the printed multiple. Importantly, they presented an alternate to the dealer gallery, bringing into existence a more publicly oriented art-sphere in which ideas and aesthetics could be efficiently disseminated to a much wider audience.

Through intent or by necessity, *Sydney - We Need to Talk!* is less a low-cost, high-volume graphic run than a skilfully produced object of allure. The project's adoption of the Piscator Press prescribed a set of idiosyncratic design and production parameters characterised by the meticulous manual processes of letterpress printing, something once considered a form of industrial efficiency. If this means of production limits broader circulation, it nonetheless accounts for powerful messaging. As Vanessa Berry proclaimed at the book's launch at the 5th Festival of Urbanism, 'handmade processes are an antidote of sorts to the sleek promotional images that illustrate visions of, for example, the

sinuous curves of the Westconnex St Peters interchange as they coil through the lush green Photoshop parkland.³ On that early morning back in September, while I was drinking coffee by the pool and leafing through the freshly printed pages of my new book, I was approached by four separate bystanders. They were all interested in the object of my engrossment: a small handheld book no bigger than a tablet. Disappointed to hear no copies remained, I was quick to reassure them that you can download it for free from Wendy Murray's equally engrossing website.⁴

Notes

1. Applications for the 2019 residency close on 3 March 2019. For details go to: <https://library.sydney.edu.au/collections/rare-books/events/printer-in-residence/residency.html>
2. Joanna Drucker, *A Century of Artists' Books* (New York City: Granary Books, c2004).
3. Berry, Vanessa (24 September, 2018), 'Talking Across Cities: the Urban Crew's Sydney - We Need to Talk!'. Sydney- We Need to Talk Blog, <https://www.sydneyweneedtotalk.com/blog/> Accessed 5 January, 2019.
4. Info and images of the project's residency and publication can be found on Wendy Murray's website: <http://www.wendymurray.com.au/sydney-we-need-to-talk/>. A complete copy of the book can be downloaded for free here: <https://www.sydneyweneedtotalk.com/the-book/>