

*Envelopes ready to be mailed with prints for Volume 1, Number 3 of Tim Svenonius's subscription series.*



by Stephanie Wolff

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

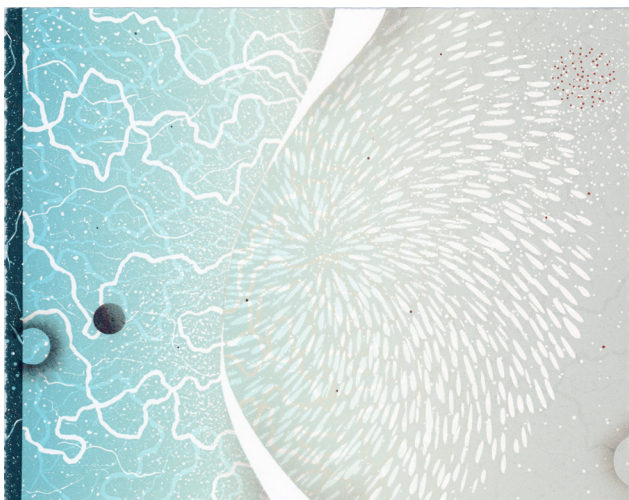
*Stephanie Wolff works with paper, text, textile, and the book form, often on themes of weather, science, history, and rural life. She has been awarded a creative research fellowship from the American Antiquarian Society and was Artist in Residence at the Jaffe Center for Book Arts at Florida Atlantic University. Her work has been exhibited in the US and Germany, and is in many collections, public and private. Stephanie teaches book arts techniques both online and in person, sharing her knowledge from many years in bookbinding, conservation, and fine arts. [stephaniewolffstudio.com](http://stephaniewolffstudio.com), [@stephaniewolffstudio](https://www.instagram.com/stephaniewolffstudio).*

## BOOK ARTS SUBSCRIPTIONS

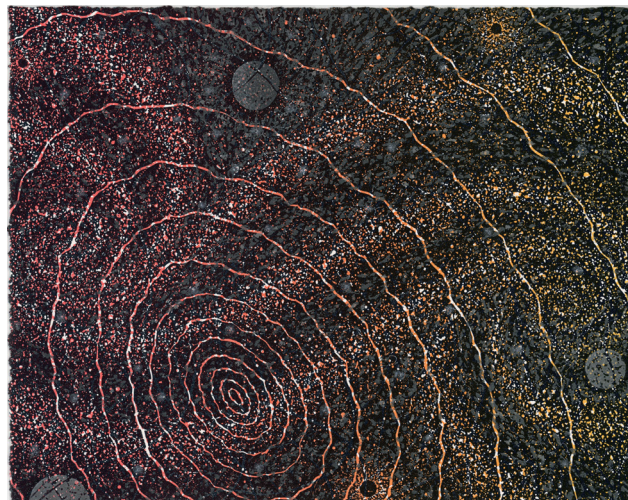
THERE'S NOTHING QUITE LIKE opening your mailbox to find a hand-addressed envelope with some art enclosed. Over the almost thirty years I have been making books, I've noticed that a number of artists who work in the book arts offer serial subscriptions of some kind. Even before crowdfunding and online sales sites, some artists made books or prints, usually smaller, more modest pieces, that sold in the manner of traditional mailed magazine subscriptions. Pay your money and receive a regular mailing of a piece of art—prints, ephemera, zines, or pamphlets.

What does it take to create a successful subscription series? What advantages are there for an artist to produce one? And why should a subscriber sign up? I've been curious about this for some time, so I reached out to a handful of artists with current or past subscription series to find out.





*Wanderer*, by Pati Scobey, December 2012. Four press runs with linoleum cuts and type, and hand stenciling.



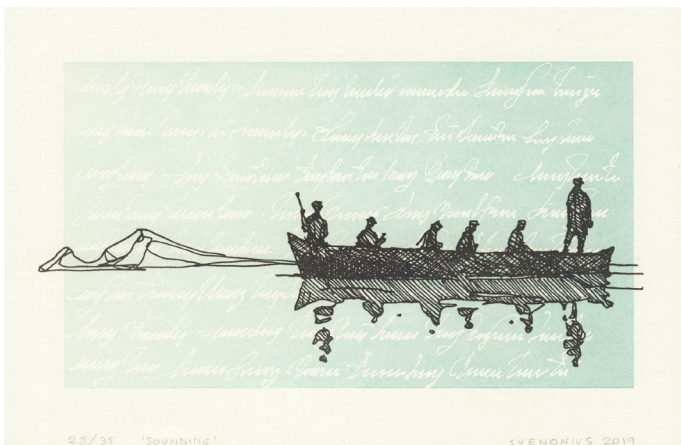
*A Scattering of Light* by Pati Scobey, December 2013. Four press runs of linoleum cuts, with one cut for reduction printing. Finished with watercolor brushwork.

The financial support provided by pre-selling work allows the artist to take some creative risks if they choose. That security may allow for some experimentation of methods, and technical skills get honed with regular studio work. Scobey found this to be true as she produced her subscription series of prints from 2004 to 2014.

Over the ten years, I used my Vandercook more than I ever had previously. I honed my printing skills and figured out various technical problems. My inking skills became more consistent.

Tim Svenonius, whose print subscription started in 2019, says,

The earliest prints were quirky and idiosyncratic, because with every edition I would experiment with a new technique. Over time I developed an arsenal of tricks and methods, so I could say the subscription helped me develop a style and a method.



*Soundings*, 2019. Tim Svenonius. Two-color letterpress print on Classic Crest 110# natural white cover weight. 5.5" × 8.5". Edition of 30.



*Cabal*, 2019. Print by Tim Svenonius. Two-color letterpress print on Crane's Lettra 110# pearl white cover weight. 5.5" × 8.5". Edition of 20.



An array of Ker-bloom! issues. Letterpress printed zines by Karen Switzer/Artnoose.



Ker-bloom! 158: The Beautiful Game, September/October 2022. Letterpress printed zine by Karen Switzer/Artnoose.

A byproduct of a subscription series is the community of subscribers that results. For some artists this community exists only as a spreadsheet or on file cards, while others actively connect with this group. Karen Switzer/Artnoose has published her letterpress printed zine, *Ker-bloom!*, for twenty-five years. She says,

At this point my zine has momentum, and there are people who have been reading my zine for decades. I've had subscribers go away for a while and then find me again several years later, and I still have their old Rolodex address cards on file from some other state. I have even had people subscribe because they found my old zines in their mom's zine collection. Imagine that—having multiple generations of readers.

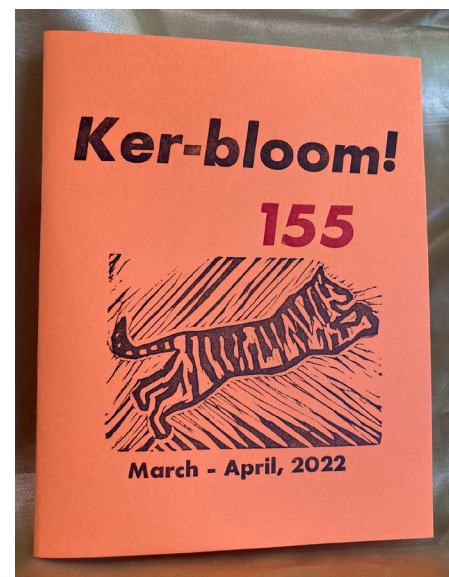
Many artists connect regularly through email newsletters with their audience. Nicholls creates programming such as walking tours in conjunction with her series. She says,

I don't think of the pamphlets just as commodities; I think of them as a community-building exercise that produces income, relationships, experiences, social connections, and conversation.

Much like any cultural object, such as a novel or a performance, these subscription pieces can become central to wider interaction. All artists build a relationship with their reader/viewers, engaging them in work over a period of time in a (generally) one-sided conversation. Nicholls's events allow for dialog, between artist and reader, but also between readers.

Regular communication with subscribers and consistent production can provide opportunities for an artist to expand beyond the borders of the series itself, through teaching, lecturing, or exhibiting. For Nicholls this seems especially true:

It is the main thing that I have become known for. All of the opportunities that I have been fortunate to receive in recent years have come about as a result of the pamphlets. I have built a community with the series. I have reframed my approach to printing and publishing, and I have been pushed to work more in public, doing walks and working with collaborators.

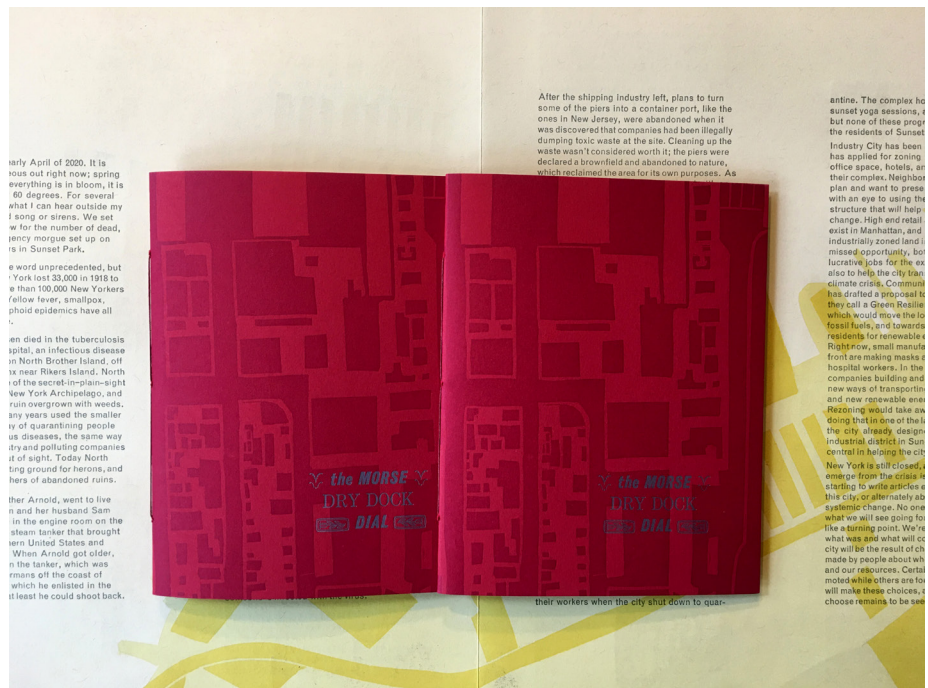


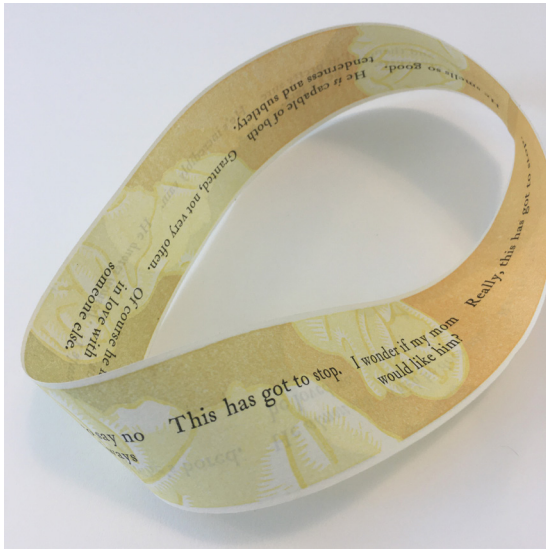
Ker-bloom! 155: First Gay Morning, March/April 2022. Letterpress printed zine by Karen Switzer/Artnoose.

Elm Street, Summer 2021, Brain Washing from Phone Towers informational pamphlet by Sarab Nicholls. Letterpress and linoleum cut on paper. Edition of 300.



The Morse Dry Dock Dial, Spring 2020, Brain Washing from Phone Towers informational pamphlet by Sarab Nicholls. Letterpress and linoleum cut on paper. Edition of 250.





Without active community building, a link still exists between reader and artist, whether either side acknowledges it or not. Reisbord appreciated the individual connection between herself and subscribers.

I liked that the experience, one reader [to] one artist, wouldn't and couldn't scale. I found myself deliberately making things that didn't photograph well, that couldn't really be understood without being able to manipulate them physically, that were too small for one person to be able to show them to more than one other person at a time, all because I was enjoying the intimacy that restriction facilitated.

The scope of the series needs to be carefully considered—the number of titles in a subscription period, the number of copies produced, and the complexity of the work itself.

The artists interviewed have produced between two and six titles per year. The amount is often based on an artist's other commitments, but may also be based on the simplicity or complexity of their series. As in other artwork, there does seem to be two distinct phases in producing a subscription series: content development and physical production, the time the latter takes being more quantifiable than the former.

A framework for the series, such as preplanning the year's subscription topics and setting a calendar of deadlines, can help minimize costs and stress. In production terms, an artist must consider whether to maintain a consistent size, format, or means of production. Some of the artists found that consistency of format or size restricted creativity, while others found it helpful. Another factor in decision-making is whether to determine the size of the work by envelope size and postage costs. Almost every artist mentioned the challenges of shipping and its associated costs, and recommended careful attention to this aspect.

There seems to be a wide range in the number of subscribers: anywhere between 20 and 130. Similarly, there is a wide range in copies of each piece produced: between 2 and 300. Those whose work is a two-dimensional print or simple zine can produce more pieces more quickly than those whose work involves complex handwork. Many of the artists adjusted their edition numbers before finding the right amount, and most produced extra pieces for individual sales, usually sold at a higher cost. "Big enough to be worth setting the type, small enough that I wouldn't discard an idea just because it was complicated to assemble/construct," Reisbord says of her edition size of 60, which never changed over the entire run of her series. Tammy Nguyen, who publishes *Martba's Quarterly*, has a different

*Unrequited Crush. Coriander Reisbord. Letterpress and linoleum cut on Arches Text Wove. Möbius strip.*

*Blessed Are the Peacemakers (November 2002). Coriander Reisbord. Letterpress and linoleum cut on Twinrocker paper. Flexagon. 3" hexagonal sides.*

Cicada Practices. Issue 2, Winter 2016, of Martha's Quarterly, published by Tammy Nguyen/Passenger Pigeon Press. Woodblock and letterpress printing. Edition of 150.



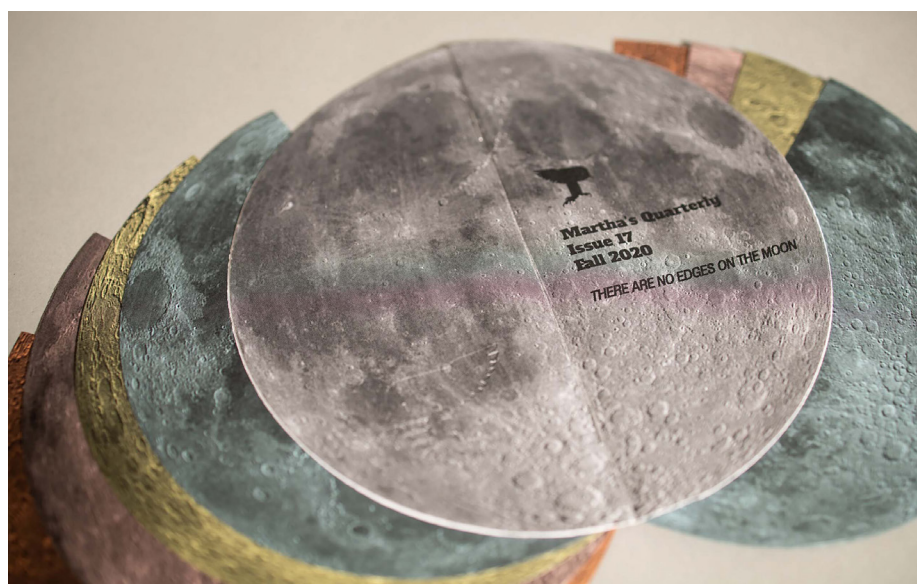
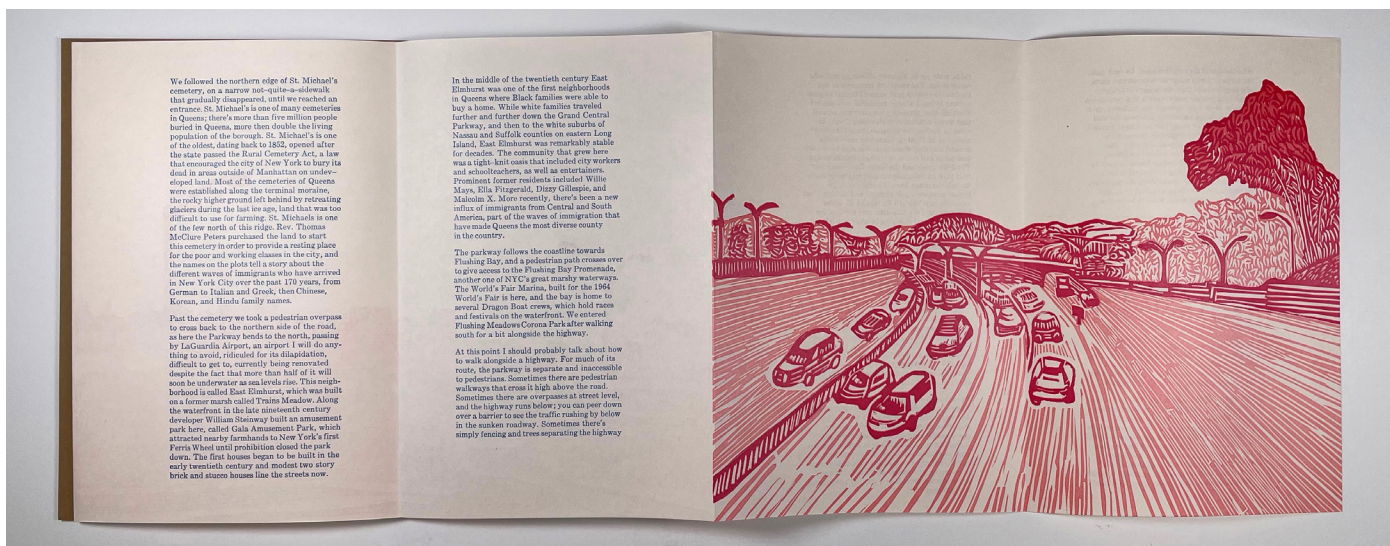
Fields of Fungus and Sunflowers. Issue 6, Winter 2018, of Martha's Quarterly, published by Tammy Nguyen/Passenger Pigeon Press. Digital printing and polymer press printing. Edition of 160.

formula for the maximum number of copies: the amount that can be made in one week by two people. While Nicholls produces a significantly larger number of pieces per issue than subscribers, she is less concerned with her subscriber numbers than with having an interested group reading them. “I think that my goal isn’t necessarily to grow my list as it is to grow my community and make it a strong community.” Her subscriber list “ebbs and flows, and most issues sell out, and it’s a self-sustaining venture.”

Most of the artists didn’t lose money producing the series, but some did not pay themselves a wage. Finding subscribers didn’t seem particularly difficult for these artists and was mostly through word of mouth, as well as via bookfairs and online through social media, Patreon (an online site that supports projects or people), or Etsy. A free add-a-friend option for subscribers has helped spread the word for Nicholls’s series. How to retain subscribers is another concern. Strategies that have worked include using online automatic renewals or slipping in a reminder with the last issue.

At the heart of the series is the content. A clear sense of what topics the series will explore—whether over a year or an issue—is important. Whether research-based, memoir, commentary, or purely visual, having at least a broad theme helps both the creation of that content and the marketing of the series as a whole. Nguyen wants to connect disparate stories over her subscription series. In each issue she brings together multifaceted concepts—ideas that don’t always seem like they relate—presented in an artist book format, with an accompanying essay she has written to help connect them.

A series can allow an artist to engage in a subject over multiple pieces if they choose, building on an idea and sharing these in succession. Nicholls’s work often focuses on the environment: issues of climate change, urban ecology, and the history of her home, New York City. She researches and writes the content for each edition, and to make the research easier, a narrower theme is chosen for each year: “Last year was maps, the year before was urban weeds. [2021] is parkways.” These themes unify the year’s publications, though the physical form of the pamphlet may vary from issue to issue.



Where the Sidewalk Ends (above), Spring 2022, Brain Washing from Phone Towers informational pamphlet by Sarah Nicholls. Printed letterpress from metal type and linoleum cut relief blocks. Edition of 250.

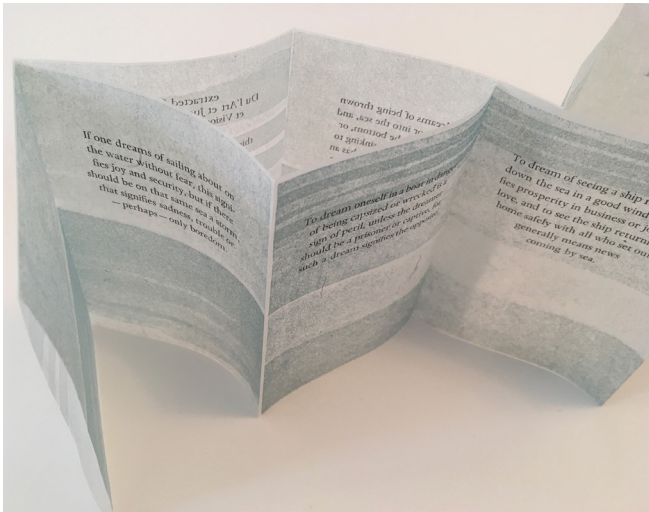
There Are No Edges on the Moon, Issue 17, Fall 2020, of Martha's Quarterly, published by Tammy Nguyen/Passenger Pigeon Press. Xerox printing and laser cutting. Edition of 200.

Consideration of the audience is also important. Nicholls thinks of the content for her series in relationship to the audience. It's geared to any contemporary reader, not necessarily someone with knowledge of art, and the writing reflects that goal of accessibility. She says her pamphlets "are responsive to the current time. I think the pamphlets are all one project, produced in a series of small bursts. They are inspired by ephemera," with the work meant to be widely distributed and read, and handled immediately.

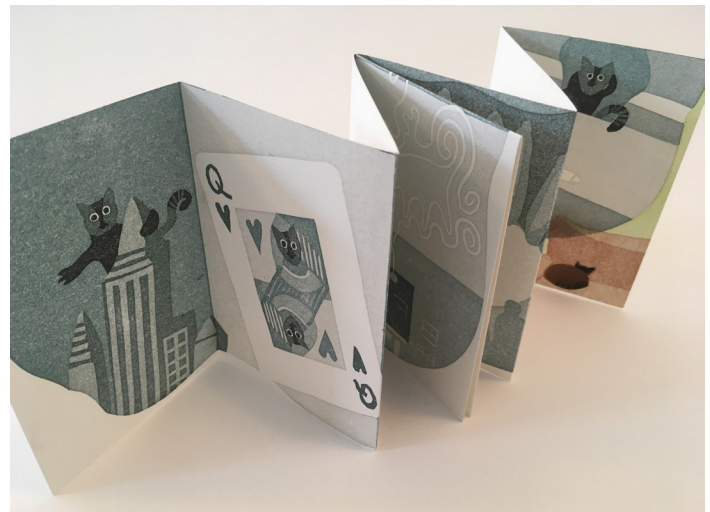
Nguyen would like a subscriber to read an issue of *Martha's Quarterly* and realize it's the thing they didn't know they wanted to read. She wants it to be "reading for humble and normal places." Like some other artists interviewed, Nguyen works in media other than subscriptions, including artist books, and thinks about building a whole environment of her work, wanting a full range from affordable to more expensive pieces.

Subscription series can introduce a reader to an artist's body of work, but that's not usually a goal of the artists interviewed. Reisbord feels like the work she made had to have some "universal appeal for the subscription series." Her other art doesn't need to resonate with anyone else.

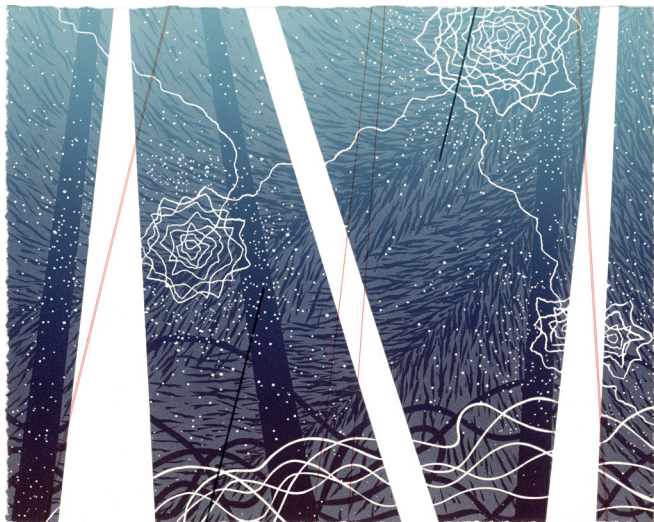




9 Seafaring Dreams by Coriander Reisbord. Letterpress and linoleum cut on thin Japanese kozo paper. One-sheet structure. The text was taken from *De l'art et jugement des songes et visions nocturnes* (1619), a book of dream interpretation the artist repaired for a client. The translations are her own.



Nine Lives by Coriander Reisbord, December 2003. Letterpress and reduction linoleum cut on Rives BFK. One-sheet structure. 3 × 4.25 inches folded; 12 × 8.5 inches unfolded.



Intermittence by Pati Scobey, December 2006. Four press runs, two from linoleum cuts and two from letterpress rule.

If I'm going to send it to more than one person, it can't be something so personal that only I will get the joke. If it's a unique thing, it can be as opaque as I want and if it finds another person in the world, that's fine, but it's not a goal of mine.

Since subscription series tend to offer modest artworks, it could be an opportunity to create small pieces as preparation for a more complex artist book or to test one's interest in a subject. *Martha's Quarterly* is a regularly produced small offering in between larger projects for Nguyen, and sometimes it's a way to explore a topic for other aspects of her art practice, even if it isn't very clear how they relate.

One result of a long-term project with regular production is a body of work. The content of Scobey's relief prints reflects her rural location and the natural world. "My goal was to have each print connect to other prints in the series yet remain visually distinct," she says. Her final set of twenty prints from the ten-year project is "a small cohesive body of work. Without creating this goal for myself, I don't think I would have made this series, which can comprise a small exhibit."

As a subscriber to a handful of series, I know firsthand the delight in being on the receiving end of a subscription. Yes, there's the obvious benefit: the item that regularly appears in my mailbox, giving me another bite-sized piece of Artnoose's life story, or telling me about Brooklyn's history and the questions around its future through a contemporary environmental lens in a *Brain Washing from Phone Towers* pamphlet, or connecting disparate subjects and offering me new insights in an essay in *Martha's Quarterly*.



But there are at least a handful of other benefits. A subscription provides ongoing support to an artist—not only in terms of financial assistance, but also in the way it signals admiration for the work itself and a belief in the artist’s creative process. Subscriptions can provide the start of an art collection with a small investment. These pieces can be wonderful teaching examples, whether for their writing, format, or technique. Subscribing to a series can connect people to a community of others who are reading, talking, or thinking about the same artwork, or who are all interested in a common subject or artist. Sometimes there are direct conversations, or interaction on social media sites, or even possibilities for participation in events related to the series, expanding on the content. Another positive aspect to being a subscriber is the delivery of new art or writing that might be outside of one’s regular pattern of reading or viewing—the possibility of new perspectives otherwise overlooked.

These days there are many ways for artists to receive support for their work and art practice. The internet makes it easier than ever to run a business as an artist, selling directly to a buyer without a dealer or gallery. Web hosting and sales platforms offer mailing lists, automatic renewals, and shipping assistance. But the web also makes it harder to set oneself apart from the multitude of others with something to sell. A buyer has to be looking for an artist’s work, and the work needs to be easily found. Creative funding options have evolved, such as Patreon, Kickstarter (which helps raise money for individual projects before they begin), and other crowdsourced funding platforms.

Artist books can be costly to produce and expensive to purchase. Making them takes significant time, and more people are now doing so. Libraries and museums face shrinking budgets, and finding collectors can be a challenging task. Marketing work can have substantial costs: bookfair expenses, shipping, insurance, etc. Selling an artist book often means paying a commission to a gallery or dealer, which can be well worth it, as tending to the sales end of an art practice may not be an artist’s interest or strength.

*A Chronicle of Images, prints by Pati Scobey, 2004–2014. Top left: Custom box containing the twenty subscription prints, the title page, and interleaving with text about each print printed on translucent paper. Top right: Title page. Bottom left: Shifting, December 2008. Bottom center: Intermittence with interleaving, December 2006. Bottom right: Inside the Song, June 2011.*

The business model of a subscription series flips the traditional sales scenario around. Marketing happens upfront, and a sales push could be of a concentrated duration before moving on to the creation phase. For artists with little interest in longer-term complex projects, a number of smaller works produced regularly with a subscription series might be a good strategy to consider. For whatever reason artists produce their subscription series, I'm glad they do. I always look forward to opening my mailbox. ■

Artist interviewed	Dates active	Number of subscribers	Copies per issue	Issues per year	Cost	Website
Tammy Nguyen: <i>Martha's Quarterly</i>	Since 2016	130	150–200	4	\$40	passengerpigeonpress.com
Sarah Nicholls: <i>Brain Washing from Phone Towers</i>	Since 2015	50–70	200–300	3	\$50	sarahnicholls.com
Coriander Reisbord	1999–2009	60	60	3	\$50	corybooks.com
Pati Scobey	2004–2014	115	100–150	2	\$60	patiscobey.com
Tim Svenonius	Since 2019	20–40	20–50	12 (half year also available)	\$160	lostlatitudes.net
Karen Switzer /Artnoose: <i>Ker-bloom!</i>	Since 1996	120	250	6	\$20	etsy.com/shop/artnoose patreon.com/artnoose

**Other subscription series in the book arts:**

Hope Amico, formerly Gutwrench Press	hopeamico.com	<i>Keep Writing</i>
Central Print	centralprint.org	<i>Play on Words</i>
Jennifer Farrell, Starshaped Press	starshaped.com	<i>Print Club</i>
Lisa Rappoport, Littoral Press	littoralpress.com	Letterpress subscription series
Lindsay Schmittle, Gingerly Press	gingerlypress.com	<i>Hot off the Press</i>
Rachel Simmons	rachelsimmons.net	<i>The Heartbreaker Zine Maker Club</i>
The Southern Letterpress	thesouthernletterpress.com	Letterpress postcard subscription
Carolyn Swiszczy	carolynswiszczy.com	<i>Zebra Cat Zebra</i>

Interviews conducted via email correspondence with Nicholls, Reisbord, Scobey, Svenonius, and Switzer, and telephone conversation with Nguyen. All conducted by Stephanie Wolff, Spring–Fall 2021.