Paying forward - the NewLights Press model supporting artists' books and print-based communities

NewLights Press was founded by artist Aaron Cohick in 2000 in Baltimore, USA as a means of publishing his own practice - artists' books and experimental printmaking, as well as works by other artists and writers, all printed and bound by hand in house. Currently based in Louisville, Kentucky Cohick established The NLP Public Goods Grants in 2023 as "an experiment in community-based income redistribution, resource sharing, and care. That “public good” could be resources, tools, online platforms, programming, classes, etc. - the basic criteria are to be broad, open, and inclusive."

I spoke to Cohick about the aims of this opportunity for artists and how it has developed over the last two years, and to its most recent awardee. He explains: "For every 50 subscribers, NewLights gives $500 per year to an artists’ books/print/publication project that is helping to grow and care for the ecosystem and community. The more subscribers to NewLights, the larger the fund becomes; 100 subscribers would produce a grant of $1000 and so on. There is no application process. NLP subscribers nominate individuals or projects and then vote on the final recipient. The grants are unrestricted and there are no reporting requirements, but they do often tell me what they’re planning on using the money for." The first recipient was the Book/Print Artist/Scholar of Color Collective who used funds towards supporting their members' endeavours.

Cohick prefers subscribers to propose recipients rather than selecting himself to promote nominations from a diverse pool but also to discover other creatives. "That means that I get to learn about, and sometimes meet, other artists doing and thinking similar things in terms of supporting the community, like this year’s recipient, Ruby Figueroa. Several subscribers have commented about how it’s an opportunity for them to learn about new work too, which is satisfying because it means that the process itself is building awareness about different ways that artists can support their communities."

# Ruby Figueroa is a Mexican American printer and writer, regularly travelling between Chicago and Minneapolis to access printmaking facilities. Originally trained as a painter "I found the transformative process of printmaking exhilarating, particularly monoprint. I was always making comics, writing stories and prose, then once I discovered letterpress I realised a way of making that felt legitimate and valid. Mark making and writing backwards on print surfaces, you consider composition, problem solve."

Figueroa's influences range from Jenny Holzer, David Hockney and Magritte's narrative imagery to heritage centred music of Kendrick Lamar and Bad Bunny. "As a child, my parents would describe their upbringings in Mexico before their immigration to the States, I only ever knew Mexico through their words. I spent hours lost in thought picturing vivid imaginary landscapes from their stories and hoping that I would one day get to experience it with my parents."

The NLP grant has come at a time when the current situation in the USA is impacting upon many creatives. Figueroa "spent so long trying to find out how I fit into the world inside capitalism. Getting this award felt like catching a fragile glass cup in mid-air, I was filled with giddy excitement and a sense of small victory. I felt seen and I want to very much thank the person who nominated me and made me feel heard and wanted in the art world. I want every artist out there to know that I see you and making is the most important thing an artist can be doing during these times."

Cohick considers the NLP funding grant as "a “proof of concept” of how community organising and support can be built into the business of making art. Cohick is keen for others to adopt and build upon it as a possible model that "could (and should) be adapted and improved upon" outside of traditional competitive applications for arts funding. "When I first started doing this I thought, “I have no business giving out grants,” and then right after, “I also have no business printing and publishing books.” So I guess I’m doing grants now too."

As an artist, the important thing about NLP publishing for Cohick is collaboration. "Getting to live inside of another person’s work and engage with them in long conversations about it. And then working with them to make something that neither of us could have made on our own. The careful attention of collaboration is the foundation of all of the other organising that I do."

https://www.newlightspress.com

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