

OFF-CENTRE  
NOTHINGNESS  
NEWSPRINT

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**Jonah Sack**

*- artist and academic based in Cape Town*

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## STARTING WITH NOTHING

Zines are about starting with nothing. That is, they are made with what is at hand, with what is readily available, in the circumstances in which one finds oneself. Although I don't see myself as a zine maker – 'zine' is too specific to a particular method, set of aims, and historical lineage – my work with books and publications subscribes to a similar ethos: work quickly, work with found materials and sources, use cheap and accessible reproduction technology, and explore alternative methods of getting it into the world.

As an artist, a researcher and a teacher, I find it useful to think about 'publishing' books, not just 'making' books (let alone 'binding' books). 'Publishing' implies not just a particular type of object but also its distribution. It prompts you to think about the audience for the work and the networks of interaction that form around it. The word 'publication' also has certain commercial and industrial connotations – it evokes the mechanical rather than the hand-made. I'm interested

in the ways that objects get filtered through machine-based technologies, with all of the imperfections and compromises inherent to those processes. Sometimes it's productive to disassemble those processes and lay them out for consideration. So, for example, my work *Strange Camera* is an installation in which I make publications in the gallery using UV lights, stencils, and newsprint paper. When the newsprint is exposed to UV light (artificially or from the sun), the acids that are latent in the paper are activated, turning the paper yellow and brittle. By masking certain areas or by laying an acetate stencil on top of the page you can create a pattern of dark and light areas – an image made without any ink. It's a kind of 'photo'-copying (photon-copying) in which the duplicating process is not hidden within the workings of a machine.



**FIG. 1.**  
Jonah Sack, *Strange Camera* (detail)  
(2022). Installation  
with UV lights,  
newsprint paper,  
stencils. Photograph:  
Jonah Sack

Strange Camera was inspired by an accidental discovery while conducting research into the history of independent publishing in South Africa. While flipping through a copy of *Izwi*, a literary magazine from the early 1970s, I found some newspaper clippings that had been tucked away and left for many years, staining the neighbouring pages with their acidic residue. Strange Camera

harnesses and speeds up this natural process of damage and decay. I feed it with images of political leaders – bad men – who have left their own stain on the pages of history.

## THE INDEPENDENT PUBLISHING PROJECT

I came across *Izwi* while working on The Independent Publishing Project (IPP), a curatorial and research project I initiated in collaboration with fellow artist, teacher and book maker, Francis Burger. We envisaged the IPP as a temporary and itinerant library of self-published and small-scale publications from South Africa, from the early 20th Century to the present.

We have had three public exhibitions or installations of the project, at blank projects in Cape Town in 2011, at the Goethe Institut in Johannesburg in 2012, and most recently at A4 Arts Foundation in Cape Town in 2022. The 2022 iteration took the form of an installation entitled *Papertrails*,<sup>1</sup> which was produced in dialogue with Sean O'Toole's concurrent exhibition surveying the history of South African photobooks.<sup>2</sup> Before each iteration of the project, we spent several months making contact with artists, writers, and readers who had actively or inadvertently amassed collections of self-published material. We gathered a range of independent publications, including poetry journals, ephemeral magazines, and materials on social history, as well as a diverse collection of zines and other artist's publications.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.a4arts.org/projects/reczrON6PULyIqtbU-papertrails>

<sup>2</sup> *Photo book! Photo-book! Photobook!*, curated by Sean O'Toole, 11 February–20 May 2022, A4 Arts Foundation, Cape Town.



**FIG. 2.**  
IPP Goethe Institut, installation  
montage. Photograph: francis  
burger

The installations functioned as research stations and spaces for guided explorations of the archive. But the focus of the project was not the books themselves as much as publishing as an artistic strategy. So it was important to us to include the making process within the ambit of the shows. We prepared the galleries with equipment for making new books: photocopiers, paper, cutting and binding tools, etc., as well as more experimental duplicating machines and 'strange cameras', such as the UV/newspaper apparatus described above.

We opened the space to artists and other makers to come in and produce books in response to the collection. During Papertrails, Francis facilitated workshops in collaboration with Lalela, an arts education NGO based in Hout Bay. The participants cannibalised the material on display (in photocopied form!) to create a series of publications that burger calls 'boekies' (burger, n.d.)



**FIG. 3.** Papertrails, installation shot (2022). Photograph: Jonah Sack

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**FIG. 4.** Papertrails, installation shot with browsers (2022). Photograph: Jonah Sack

In collecting the publications and in setting up the making space we were guided by a loose set of notes, or phrases to keep in mind:

*making books by mistake*  
*edge cases & border objects*  
*images put to use*  
*publication as stage / mirror / lens*  
*walk-in copy machine*  
*the flimsy and the sturdy*  
*configured as an investigative machine*  
*strange cameras*  
*tactical publishing*  
*private libraries, public space*  
*what would you make if you started with nothing?*  
*pulled from the bottom drawer*  
*copies of copies*  
*I must show you my clippings<sup>3</sup>*

by Jonah Sack



**FIG. 5.**  
Papertrails, installation shot with work in progress (2022). Photograph:  
Jonah Sack

As 'pulled from the bottom drawer' indicates, during the research process we came into contact with a number of artists who had made books and publications that had never previously been exhibited. In one case, I collaborated with Steven Sack (my father) to remake a work of his that had been lost. Trophy consisted of a bundle of sticks wrapped in pages from the newspaper, mounted on a wooden plaque like the head of a buck.

I had watched the piece evolve through my childhood, as the outer layers yellowed and flaked off, revealing more (old) news beneath. (Clearly this work was an inspiration for my own work with newspapers and aging newsprint paper.) By the time of the Papertrails exhibition the original work could not be found, so we remade it using current newspapers.

<sup>3</sup> This last line being the title of the artist and poet Wopko Jensma's best-known book, published by Ravan Press in 1977.



**FIG. 6.**  
Steven Sack, Trophy (c. 1975 - remade 2022). Photograph: Jonah Sack

Another example was an untitled work by Leonard Shapiro. The piece is composed of a series of separate colour-copied sheets, which can be viewed serially or as part of a larger image. It depicts an event that came to be known as the 'Purple Rain Protest'. On 2nd September 1989 police broke up a peaceful anti-Apartheid protest in the streets of Cape Town, using an armoured vehicle with a water cannon to spray protesters with jets of water containing purple dye.

Shapiro (personal communication, 2022) says:

*One of the protesters, Philip Ivey, a conscientious objector and treasurer of the End Conscription Campaign, climbed on top of the water cannon and ripped the hose from the nozzle. This brave and individual action impressed me.*

by Jonah Sack

Shapiro wasn't there but saw images of the event in the newspaper. A day or so later he walked into the offices of Independent Newspapers and was lent two slides from the photographic room.

He (Shapiro, personal communication, 2022) continues:

*I was studying fine art at Michaelis at the time and wanted to make a poster or something out of the image. [...] At that time, colour photocopy had just come out and was the latest and greatest in electronic printing technology. Artist Sue Williamson was probably the only artist in South Africa who had one of these machines in her studio, and she was making art with colour photocopy prints. [...] I asked Sue to print each slide in sections onto a number of A3 sheets, so that I could assemble them like tiles into one large image. I assembled them at home but never showed them publicly.*

*I kept these photocopies carefully in a print drawer since 1989 - that has been 33 years! In some of the photocopies, Philip Ivey can be seen on top of the armoured vehicle wearing a blue shirt.*

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**FIG. 7.** Leonard Shapiro and unknown photographer, Untitled, Independent Newspapers. Printed by Sue Williamson (1989). Colour photocopy on paper. Dimensions variable. Photograph: Jonah Sack

As Shapiro notes, colour photocopying was a novel technology at the time, and it was an expensive one. So these copies had a different kind of relationship to their source material than a black-and-white photocopy would have. It wouldn't have been feasible to mass-produce the poster using colour copying. At the same time, the colour of the original photograph was obviously key to its meaning. Shapiro chose

to use a technology that has connotations of mass production at one's fingertips - that stands in for the idea of home-made endless reproducibility - even if it wasn't actually affordable to print out all those copies. The other option would have been something like a silkscreen, but the photocopy is even more impersonal and machine-like, the perfect medium for when the artist wants to stand out of the way.

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**FIG. 8.**

Leonard Shapiro and unknown photographer, Untitled (detail), Independent Newspapers. Printed by Sue Williamson (1989). Colour photocopy on paper. Dimensions variable. Photograph: Jonah Sack

As a result, rather than a piece of political propaganda, I interpret the work as a reflection on the role of the artist as observer rather than participant. (Maybe it positions Ivey as the actual artist, the wielder of the 'pen'.)

These three works - Strange Camera I, Trophy and Shapiro's untitled work - exemplify some of the research and exhibition strategies of the IPP. We wanted to draw attention to the processes that give rise to these kinds of publications - the making processes as well as the social contexts. Independent publications don't come out of nowhere - they aren't really independent - but emerge from groups of interconnected makers, readers, and collectors, and in their turn, they nurture the growth of these connections.

For this reason, the IPP installations were designed to be reading rooms where viewers could devote time to engaging with the material, and to connect with people with similar interests. And while many visitors did spend time looking through the books, we realised that the function of this kind of library space is just as much symbolic or catalytic as practical. It presents the idea of a reading room, which can be productive as an idea even if there is no actual opportunity for reading.

Ilya Kabakov describes something similar in relation to his installation, *The Artist's Library* (1998). This work is a collection of books and catalogues about Kabakov's work, arranged in a space with chairs and tables for people to sit and read.

About this work Kabakov (in Stoos 2004:146, my emphasis) says,

*First of all, this is not a collection of all the works of an artist, but rather the image of a library, that is, the image of a book, a book product or something that is very close to it, something that can be read. This is an invitation to read and the 'visual' here rests only in the appearance and quantity*

*- I have in mind the drawings on the walls - that can perhaps be understood and explained through the text, the word. Hence, the image of 'reading,' of understanding through reading, should fill this installation with meaning. It must be said immediately - and this hope for the reading of the albums and other such materials in today's circumstances is insanely utopian - no one has the time today to read all of these things. This utopia is in the spirit of the 19th Century: to skip out of the real time of life and immerse oneself into another world. This desire for this kind of utopia is naive and resembles visiting any reading room for 2-3 minutes 'with the goal of an excursion.'*

Like Kabakov's installation, the IPP library functioned primarily as an 'image' of a library or, in other words, as an invitation to think about books and book-making, and about the role of libraries as archives and social spaces. Some of the choices we made around exhibition furniture reflected the kind of invitation that was being offered. The shelving

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was constructed quite crudely out of found materials and plywood (now a common material in high-end furniture, but less fashionable at the time of the first IPP installation). Books were propped on cardboard holders or hung on dowel stick constructions from the ceiling. We brought in outdated machines: overhead projectors, half-decrepit photocopiers.

We later realised that some of these choices inadvertently re-invented the same solutions used by other zine libraries and similar reading spaces. And no wonder - these kinds of solutions are of a piece with the publications being exhibited: rough and ready, made by hand but without much attention to finish, and made from materials that are readily available for more 'every-day' or commercial purposes.

Most of the work was on open display. When materials were too sensitive, too valuable, or too fragile for the general public to handle we simply put them on a higher shelf, with a notice that those who were interested in reading should call a curator. The installation was crewed at all times - not so much an exhibition as a device with multiple moving parts that required a guide to operate it.

## THE INDEPENDENT PUBLISHING PROJECT

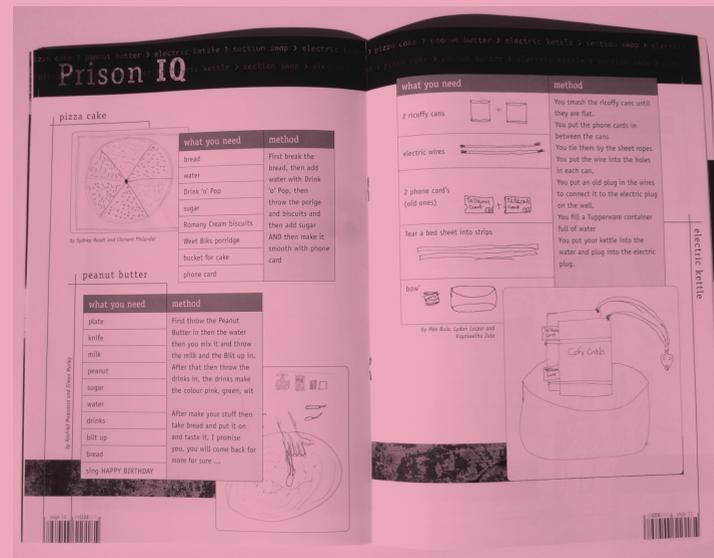
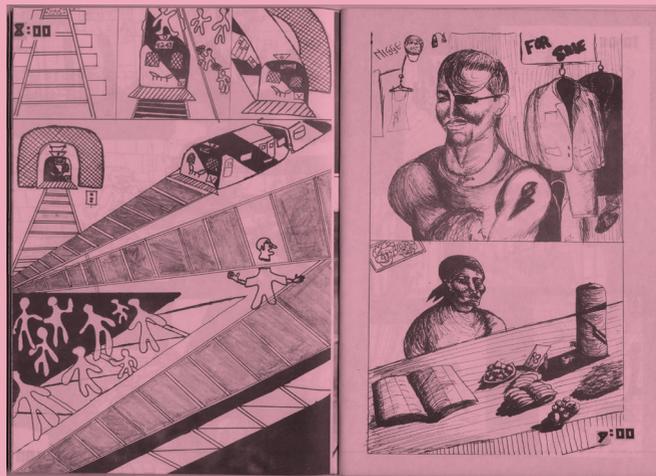
Before the IPP I worked on a number of zine workshops and collaborative publishing projects with people both inside and outside of the artworld. *24hrs and I'm Going to JHB* (2008) are a pair of publications - boekies - made in collaboration with the Joubert Park Project. They brought in artists working with Cascoland (an art centre based in the Netherlands) and together we invited workshop participants from the Zimbabwean undocumented immigrant community.

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Both books are about experiences of life in Johannesburg. 24hrs focused on the texture of daily life, and I'm Going to JHB, on the migrants' extraordinary stories of travelling to the city. In producing these books, we worked with a Ugandan printer in the center of Johannesburg whose usual business was producing advertising flyers. These flyers are typically used to advertise 'Lost Lover' services: fortune-telling, traditional treatments and medicines, etc. He had a tiny offset-litho press which allowed him to add different colours to each side of the plate without stopping the print run. This produces a gradient effect (red running into blue, or blue into black, etc.) that is characteristic of these flyers. We asked the printer to use the same effect on our books, so that they would share the visual language of street ephemera.

The migrant narratives in I'm Going to JHB have inspired subsequent projects working with people with unusual life stories - youth offenders in prison, for example. The workshops encourage them to share their experiences in the form of graphic narratives or diagrams. These pages are then turned into zines or other publications. An example is Inside Out (2009) that featured 'Prison IQ', which was based on a comics workshop I co-facilitated with the organization Young in Prison. The workshop was based on a discussion of the participants' tips and tricks for daily life in prison, which they then drew. One person showed how to make 'pizza cake' out of the materials they had available - bread, water, Drink 'O Pop, biscuits, a phone card for smoothing the cake out, etc. Another explained how to make a kettle for boiling water out of coffee cans, wire, phone cards and bed sheets.

**FIG. 9.**  
24. Cascoland /  
Joubert Park Project  
(2008). Photograph:  
Jonah Sack



**FIG. 10.**  
Inside Out  
(Prison IQ).  
Young in  
Prison (2009).  
Photograph:  
Jonah Sack

I found that asking people for this kind of specific information tends to yield more surprising and revealing answers than asking for larger reflections on their circumstances. The reader gets a sense of the texture of their lives, and the makers experience a sense of possessing secret knowledge.

such as showing someone the ropes in a new situation like finding oneself in prison. Rather their form communicates something about their possible use, which leads the viewer / reader to reflect on the meaning of the publication and its content, and on publishing itself as a potentially subversive act.

There is something about the form of the zine or boekie which lends itself to the transmission of this knowledge. They are disposable yet can be made to endure (more so than digital content - and they somehow have more of a sense of authority). And they're small enough to hide. As with the library / reading room, it's not so much that I think these books will be used for their ostensible purpose,

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## HOW TO ORDER THE DICTIONARY

A subtler act of subversion, *How to Order the Dictionary*, is a pair of works (with an accompanying video) which was made by Sophie Cope, then a third-year Printmaking student taking my Artist's Publishing class at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, in 2021. The prompt was to create two works from a single found book. One work would be an altered book, made by removing pages or fragments of pages or otherwise interfering with the structure of the book, and the other work would be a zine made from the resulting offcuts and detritus. One book a unique object, and the other a multiple.

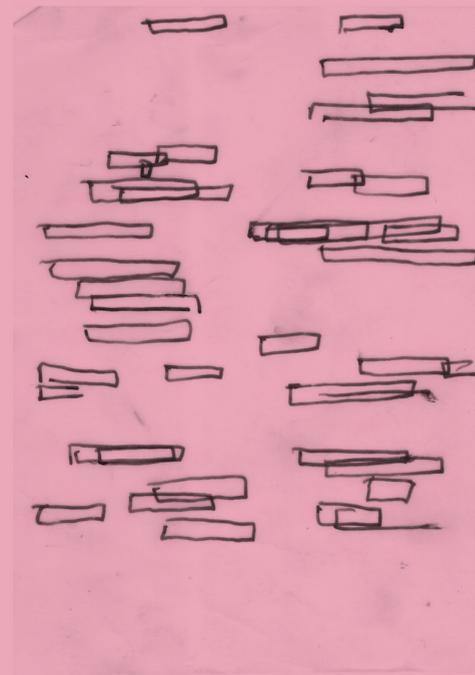
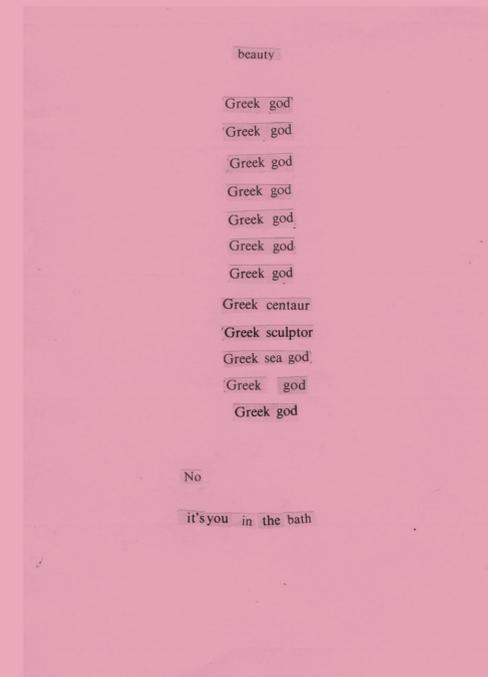
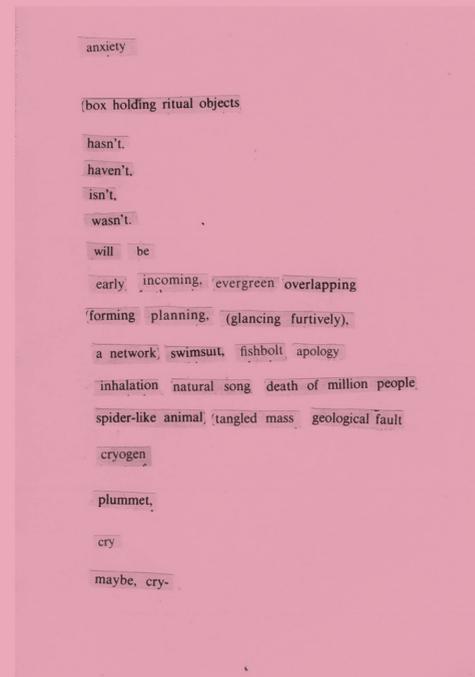
Sophie worked with a dictionary, producing a book of poems assembled from the isolated words as well as a book of rubbings taken from the dismembered original.

Sophie (Cope, personal communication, 2021) says that the book of poems

*is a dictionary of definitively biased, subjective, undefinable terms. Breaking the rules of an existing system, re-constellating it into my own: this is an exploration of the great utility and flimsiness of words – and of systems of ordering more generally. [...] In papery glued-down rectangles, it offers a material landing-strip for the thoughts that are almost never allowed to land.*

**FIG. 11.**  
Sophie Cope, *How to Order the Dictionary* (2021). Photograph: Sophie Cope

by Jonah Sack



Not just dictionaries, but all books, are ordering systems. They impose a structure - and suggest a narrative - from what would have been a pile of independent pages. The thrill of making an altered book, or of using parts of an existing book to make a new one, is in destroying that system and the story it tells. Or rather, in fragmenting it so that its elements are still recognizable, but are configured into new forms.

So, for example, in one of the poems Sophie writes (if that's the word),

### Beauty

**Greek god**  
**Greek centaur**  
**Greek sculptor**  
**Greek sea god**  
**Greek god**  
**Greek god**

No

**it's you in the bath**

Sophie has taken a series of words that were blandly informative and turned them into something intimate and personal. Instead of the abstract click of information, we feel the jolt of real experience. The repetition of 'Greek god' evokes the meaninglessness of the alphabetic ordering system (mirroring the idealised blandness of classical style) which are set up in contrast to the idiosyncratic reality of the person in the bath. Meanwhile, in the second book t

he rough pencil marks of the rubbings from the cut pages draw our attention to Sophie's physical interaction with the substance of the book itself. The first book is also material - those 'papery glued-down rectangles' - but we can look beyond that to their content. Whereas in the second book we think only about the mute acts of cutting, removing, rubbing, together, the two books are a reflection on presence and absence, speech and silence.

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**Jonah Sack** is an artist based in Cape Town. He studied at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, and received his MFA from the Glasgow School of Art. He has been a fellow of the Skye Foundation and the Gordon Institute for Performing and Creative Arts at the University of Cape Town. He works across a range of mediums but considers all his work as a form of drawing. He is interested in the interplay between threat and solace: in our relations with each other, and in our connections to the spaces around us.