

Stay Small!
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**Notes on the
micro-publishing
internship at Pulp
Paperworks**

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Stay at v small!!

In 2022, Pulp was vastly different from what it is now. I was mainly working alone, having kept my fledgling bookbinding business open during the pandemic and its subsequent shockwaves. I produced small bindings to sell in my studio (at that time a third of the size it is now) and did commissioned work when it came up. Stephan Erasmus had joined me some months before and was working with me part-time.

While alone in the studio one afternoon, Oteng Kopiso walked in as part of a tour of young artists through Victoria Yards. We immediately got into a conversation about the zines that she was making at the time, and how she might produce a range of notebooks of her own to market to bookstores. A few days later she got in touch and asked if she could do an internship with Pulp. This was not something I had considered before. I had to ask some questions about how to ensure that any engagement through an internship would not be exploitative but based on fair exchange.

I decided to offer Oteng the opportunity to produce her own publication, which seemed the perfect solution in these circumstances. I didn't have the cash flow to take on a new full-

time employee, and internships by their nature tend to be either unpaid or paid based on stipends and not salaries. A stipend is not enough to live on, but the offer of an internship goes beyond the mere transaction of time-based employment to something more critical in our competitive economy – experience.

I began to take more seriously the experience and equipment that I had built up over the few short years of Pulp's existence: the small machines gradually acquired, and the potential therein to pursue creative projects if someone is willing to give the time. I had always wanted to take this direction but had never been able to realise the potential of our setup as it was, because I was always working just to keep the rent paid and materials delivered on time. After a candid discussion about learning, stress, communication, and working in survival mode, Oteng became our first intern, and Pulp's micro-publishing practice began.

Oteng, Stephan, and I immediately clicked. Somehow, the amount of commissioned work we were receiving increased, and we were quickly churning out batches of branded notebooks and creative publications together. We had weekly workshops where we

taught Oteng all the essential bindings that we knew. However, when it came time for us to discuss what Oteng's publication would be, her proposal went beyond our expectations for what an artist's book or creative publication and binding could be.

Entitled Oracle, this book consists of a pair of oracle decks in the form of earrings to be worn with the user/reader's choice of that day's oracle card on display. An oracle deck is a spiritual card system where the imagery and associated meanings are generated by the user. What became clear through our interactions with visitors to the studio, is that this book had an appeal towards multiple audiences. It has been bought equally for its collectability as an artist's book and as a quotidian, functional accessory with individualised spiritual significance. One thing I wish I could be a part of is the conversations generated around each one as it makes its way into the wider public domain.

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I have never seen our developing publishing work as anything other than 'micro' in nature. Each one of these books was sold by one of us through a conversation, and it's the continual conversations (even the ones we don't know are happening) that hold value in this micro-practice.



FIG. 1 A&B.
Oteng Kopiso, Oracle
(2022). Photograph:
Victoria Wigzell.

Speaking of value, Oracle also proved itself to be a financial success – in a micro sense. The proceeds from Oracle are, of course, nowhere near enough to support Pulp’s business as a whole, but as a venture on its own, it continues to generate a small profit that benefits both Pulp and Oteng, personally, to this day.

With the success of Oracle and the fact that our openness to growth had also somehow led to a rapid increase in our workload, Oteng, Stephan and I found ourselves sitting down once again to select new interns from an open call. We were stunned by the response, and a great many of the applications were so strong that we didn’t know how we were going to be able to make a decision. The greatest surprise for me was that so many people were interested and invested in bookbinding as a practice, and in particular, took its value as a creative practice seriously. The early years I spent struggling to get Pulp on its feet were lonely times, in part exacerbated by the struggle to find people willing to do the physically hard, mundane, and repetitive work that is bookbinding. I was suddenly amazed to see a community coalescing around a practice so many consider obsolete.

Odette Graskie and Griffen Alexander were the next two interns to work with us. Each of their publications is equally reflective of their unique practices. Odette, an artist with her own well-established studio practice, who had recently completed her masters in Visual Art at UJ, works with intricately cut layers of paper; these fragmented sheets contain pieces of hand-drawn portraits taken during drawing sessions the artist usually holds in a gallery space. During our interview, Odette showed us artists’ books that she had created – transposing her sculptural installations into the form of a book. Her proposal for a publication was a portraiture activity book, entitled *Unfolding Together*, where the reader can be taken, with prompted activities, through Odette’s thought process on the act of drawing a portrait and its permutations.



FIG. 2A&B.
Odette Graskie, *Unfolding Together* (2023).
Photographs: Victoria Wigzell.





FIG. 3A&B.

Griffen Alexander, *Mother Microbial* (2023). Photographs: Victoria Wigzell.

Griffen, a young writer who had recently graduated from a Wits Creative Writing honours course, came to the interview with all of his own experimental and playful bindings in hand. He told us that his primary interest in the internship was to learn as much as possible about bookbinding, but in terms of content, his publication would be a short story. Entitled *Mother Microbial*, this pocket-sized book holds a kafka-esque, sci-fi set of interconnected vignettes, where each character, seemingly

unrelated to one another, finds themselves drawn to the moment of collectively ingesting a drug that induces a blissful moment of shared consciousness.

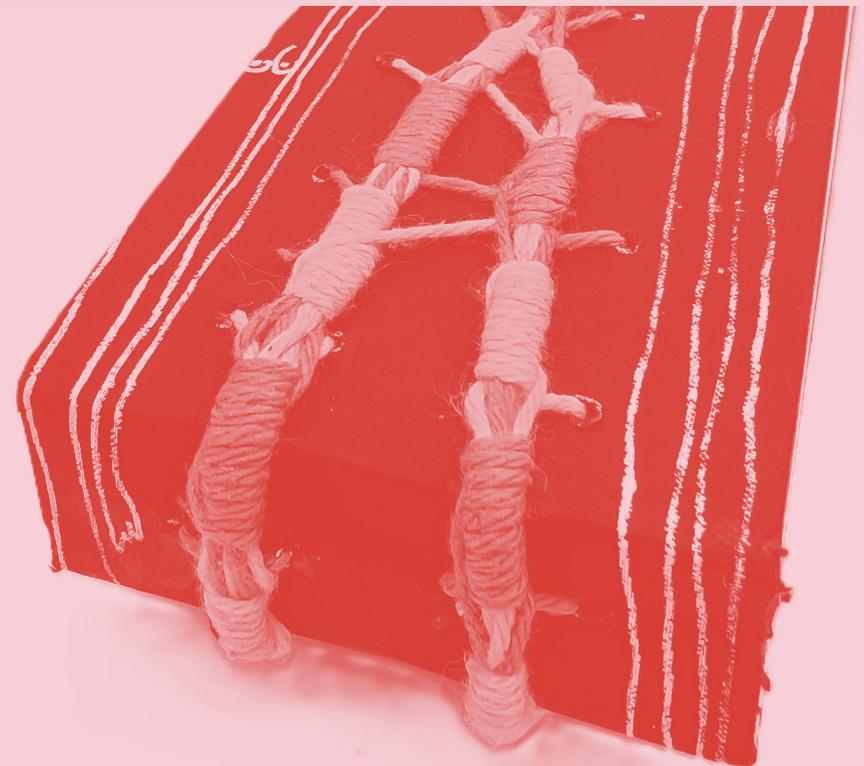
Both Griffen and Odette stayed on to work as part-time bookbinders after their internships ended. At this moment we felt very much at the limits of our capacity, and we could not consider taking on another intern for some time. However, I received an email from someone whose application I had already seen from our open call the previous year. Alexandra Greenberg, a final-year Fine Arts student, was persistently asking to work with us. We relented, and after a few months of volunteering on Fridays, Alex became our most recent intern. Alex was making use of the opportunity to produce book-objects that would also relate to their final year body of work. This saw them coming in on weekends to practice very complex caterpillar stitches, which Stephan had graciously taught them in his spare time. For their publication, entitled *Mythologies Volume 1: The Mother and The Monster* and *Mythologies Volume 2: The Lover and The Loop*

Mythologies Volume 2: *The Lover and The Loop* Alex chose to recreate, in book form, animated videos of four sketched archetypes taken from their interpretation of interrelations in daily life. Through these animations, Alex seeks to undo and recreate these archetypes through their failure to perform themselves.



FIG. 4A&B.

Alexandra Greenberg, *Mythologies Volume 1: The Mother and The Monster* and *Mythologies Volume 2: The Lover and The Loop* (2024). Photographs: Victoria Wigzell.



In November 2024, Pulp had expanded into its new 160 square-meter home and opened a pop-up retail shop in collaboration with good friends at Edition Verso. We were setting up for an evening discussion about the four publications produced as part of the two years of Pulp's internship programme. Everyone was nervous, setting up benches, and fans to curb the extreme heat, furiously arranging and rearranging the setup of the furniture. As we sat ourselves in front of our small group of guests – almost entirely made up of the close friends and family of Oteng, Odette, Griffen, and Alex – I began to think about how crucial each one of these people and their work had been in the evolution of Pulp from a one-person operation into a small, caring and supportive community.

Some of the evening's discussion hung on our 'each-one-teach-one' approach to training a new intern. A previous intern, or trainee, would be tasked with teaching what they had been taught to the next person who comes in. There had become a real sense of care in how everyone supported each other in the execution of their work, particularly the attention given to content and the technical skills evident in each project. An audience member, who

is an academic from the field of Sociology, commented that this is a prime example of non-alienated labour. The act of work – each person taking control of the means of production and materialising their own creative output – is in my experience, intrinsic to the value of the self. This modest moment of sharing with those most loved by each of our past interns was, for me, a critical moment of engagement and feedback, affirming what constitutes the 'micro' in 'micro-publishing'. There is someone in the bookbinding world called Tino The Bookbinder. He is the biggest game in commercial bookbinding in Johannesburg and runs a factory of 1500 square meters at the age of 84. I had known of Tino long before I had the opportunity to meet him. As we greeted each other for the first time, he said something to me that has stayed with me ever since: "Victoria, stay small!". Staying small, when so much in business is determined by growth and upward trajectory is proving to be somewhat of a practice in itself. However, the advice rings beyond just the nuts and bolts of Pulp as a business, but also in our intentions behind the creation and dissemination of these publications.

Without funding, 'staying small' actually means more room for play and experimentation. I have not until now mentioned that every publication is assigned the same modest budget of R1500.00, which must cover all materials required. There have been many negotiations on this across the four publications, and a notable moment was Odette using the sales of the first 10 copies of *Unfolding Together* to purchase the necessary materials to produce the remaining 73 in her edition. This limitation exists, not only because we don't have more money to spend, but also as a challenge to each artist/author to make strategic decisions around the form that will best speak to their content. These decisions often encourage playfulness, with the pair of earring books being a prime example. Each person has also learned a huge number of new skills – whether a part of their planned training or not: Alex seeking out help outside the studio while screenprinting their own covers, and Griffen troubleshooting problems with our imposition software are two moments that come to mind. Struggling with making, and succeeding in the end is, to my mind, as valuable as the end product.

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Staying small means that the most critical moments around a publication's success lie in the genuine conversations had with strangers in the studio, not with the hope that someone will buy it, but for the joy of being able to share it. Staying small means the freedom to do things on our terms, to embrace a diversity of practices rather than following curated lines of messaging to which all output must conform.

As I write this, we have just finished selecting our new interns for the year – we have now received an enormous number of applications, and some from other countries as well! The applications have centered almost entirely around the projects themselves, and we are looking forward to sharing this wide variety of challenging and experimental projects with our community through 2025 and beyond.

stay
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Victoria Wigzell founded Pulp Paperworks, a small bookbindery located at Victoria Yards in Johannesburg, in December of 2019. Pulp produces a range of branded notebooks and publications in collaboration with artists and writers in its community. Pulp also creates specialised custom-branded notebooks and publications for corporates, publishers, and self-publishers.