

fold along this line

(MIGHT AS WELL) GIVE AWAY THE BOOKS

— *(might as well) give away the books*

is a knock-off booklet, written February 9 and printed February 11, 2017 for free distribution at the AWP 2017 conference in Washington DC.

Artwork by Basil King for *Yugen* No. 6 (1960).

First Edition of 65 . Cost of printing \$65 .

This is the digital edition. Feel free to print double-sided, then fold and give away; or distribute electronically.

A small chapbook press or a nonprofit publisher pays \$650 for a table at the annual AWP conference. In three days at the book fair, the press sells 13 copies each of its 5 new titles, a total of 65 books at \$10 each, a discount off their usual price of \$15. The cost of the table has been paid for, and the publisher has found readers for their books.

But, in fact, the students and writers purchasing a book from this publisher may as well have given \$10 directly to AWP, because, in effect, AWP sold them the book. AWP made \$10. The publisher made no profit. The publisher thinks they recouped their “costs,” but has no money to put toward future books.

The material costs (not including labor) for each copy are at minimum \$2.50. Considering economies of scale – higher per-unit printing and shipping costs for smaller editions – we could estimate a cost of \$5 per copy, which in turn suggests a pure loss of \$325 in the 65-book sale situation described above. Having spent \$975 thus far on this “sale” of books, the publisher also leaves with fewer items in their inventory, that is, they are no longer able to sell those 65 copies for any gain. They have, in effect, given away those copies to AWP.

In essence, the “sale” of these 65 books has allowed the publisher to be seen at the AWP, with an official badge and table sign and a listing in a 200+ page catalog. To “sell” these 65 books, the publisher has spent \$975 in cash and 3 eight-hour days selling books in a corporate convention center hall (24 hours free labor), and incurred additional expenses for overpriced convention center food and coffee, housing in a corporate hotel room or Air B&B, and travel from another city.

Previously, the publisher had likely spent between 65 to 130 hours on each of the 5 titles they brought to the book fair – a combination of

editing, designing, typesetting, proofing, publicizing (and in some cases printing and binding by hand), i.e. another 325 to 650 hours of free labor.

This labor, in itself, cannot be seen as a problem if the publisher is giving that labor freely, with no expectation of remuneration for their time. However, when a larger institution with a paid staff profits from that free labor, then we are dealing with a kind of exploitation – an exploitation of the good will that cultural laborers such as small publishers exhibit for the enrichment of cultural discourse.

If the publisher in our example wants to find new readers for the authors and books they have published, to benefit both readers and writers, they might as well give away, at no charge, the 65 books directly to the public without stepping foot in the AWP exhibit hall.

Perhaps, outside the exhibit hall, or even outside the convention center, the publisher will come upon someone who hasn't paid to enter the AWP conference, and they will have a conversation about poetry (and perhaps about the values and ideas that this type of small publishing puts forward) without the exchange of money and wearing no official badges of professional belonging or accreditation.

The publisher would thus achieve their goal and find a meaningful exchange without financially benefiting a professional organization that gives nothing back to small publishers like them.

The following year, the publisher may choose to give away 65 books closer to home, saving more of their resources, and will perhaps find that new reader near the public library or in a public park, on the stoop of their apartment building or their porch, far away from the AWP.