

Ben Kinmont, Bookseller

The making of art and the selling of books are rarely mentioned in the same sentence, much less practiced by a single person. Indeed, if we drew up a Venn diagram with ANTIQUARIAN BOOKSELLER in one circle and CONCEPTUAL ARTIST in the other, the only words in the overlapping oval might well be BEN and KINMONT.

A few famous bookshops have (in the course of the 20th century) served as sites of artistic activity. Think of Shakespeare and Company in 1920s Paris, where Joyce's *Ulysses* was first published; or San Francisco's City Lights, founded in the 1950s as the Beat movement's unofficial headquarters; or Better Books, that hotbed of 1960s counter-culture on London's Charing Cross Road; or Printed Matter Inc., serving since 1976 as New York's preeminent centre for artists' books. But in the course of his amphibious career, Ben Kinmont has been equally at home in the book trade and the art world. Kinmont sees his work as one of the world's leading dealers of rare books on food and drink as an extension of his life as an artist, making the business he founded in 1998 one of the longest and most unusual artistic projects ever undertaken.

The title Kinmont has given to this work (*Sometimes a nicer sculpture is to be able to provide a living for your family*) has appeared as an enigmatic inscription in the colophon that closes his hand-printed sale catalogues since the very first one was issued on 17 June 1999. 149 lists (and some 5,000 sales) later, the success of Kinmont's business is easy to see. The status of *Sometimes a nicer sculpture* as a work of art, however, remains harder to read.

The *curriculum vitae* that shaped Kinmont's unique profile involved both "Chance & Appointment," to borrow the phrase he had gilded on the shop's original door to describe its irregular opening hours. After his studies at Pomona College and Oxford (where he focused on the literature and politics of 17th-century Britain) and a research fellowship in Europe (where he explored contemporary German art), he started work as an artist in the New York of the late 1980s. More interested in open-ended projects than finished objects that can be shown in galleries and sold to collectors, Kinmont took inspiration from artists working with different notions of production and distribution—including the gift economy of On Kawara, the collaborative economy of Paula Hayes, the business economy of Gordon Matta-Clark, the maintenance economy of Mierle Laderman Ukeles and the information economy of Joseph Grigely.

He also borrowed from Joseph Beuys the key concept of "social sculpture." For Beuys, life itself is a sculpture that everyone helps to shape: every human activity, including planting trees or peeling potatoes, can serve as works of art. In decentering both the artwork and the artist, this approach blurred the boundaries between art and life and put new emphasis on spaces beyond the studio or gallery. One of Kinmont's earliest projects was *Kitchen Table* (1989), a reflection on social sculpture recorded while making bean soup and then washing the dishes. While most of Beuys's interventions were political or environmental, Kinmont's were decidedly domestic: in 1991's *Waffles for an Opening*, 32 strangers accepted his invitation for a waffle breakfast at his own home, and in 1994's *Ich werde Ihr*

schmutziges Geschirr waschen, devised during a trip to Germany, he visited the homes of 11 strangers who took him up on his offer to wash their dirty dishes—giving each of them a sponge printed with the work’s title, to be signed by both artist and host.

Kinmont described such work as “project art” and defined it as follows:

Project art involves the public and the artist in a dialogue that primarily occurs outside of the art world.

Project art often involves collaborations between artists and non-artists.

Project art usually takes place on the street, on the move, or in your home, and only rarely in exhibition spaces.

Project art does not set out to create an art object to be sold and resold.

Project art uses social structures to achieve relationships that are often unattainable in other art mediums.

Kinmont’s work as an artist has also involved activities usually left for others to manage, including curating, archiving and printing. All of these came together in two shows produced in 1996, *The Materialization of Life into Alternative Economies* and *Promised Relations: or, thoughts concerning a few artists’ contracts*. This marked the moment when Kinmont began to produce limited edition catalogues to document his projects, creating his new Antinomian Press for that purpose—which issued, in 1999, the first catalogue for “Ben Kinmont Bookseller,” offering an initial selection of titles on “Cookery, Nutrition, Domestic Economy, Drinking, and the History of Taste.”

This new area of activity may sound like a radical break with the past. But it drew on Kinmont’s decade-long apprenticeship with Jonathan A. Hill in New York, a dealer in books on science and medicine. It revived his early interests in both hand-press printing and the radical texts (by groups such as the Antinomians, the Diggers and other advocates of free speech and common property) that flourished during the English Civil War, when regulation of the press by state authorities was temporarily suspended. By creating his own agency for making publications in support of his projects, Kinmont extended his interest in how artists might take greater control. And by producing sales lists alongside exhibition catalogues, public pamphlets and artistic ephemera, the Antinomian Press has (like the book-selling art project it serves) extended Kinmont’s interest in alternative economies.

In *Sometimes a nicer sculpture*, Ben Kinmont has built sustaining relationships based on common interests with individual clients and institutions rather than courting patrons and second-guessing the art market. His aesthetic sensibility has found an outlet in the expert eye that every great dealer needs to develop in building, describing and marketing their inventory. And his deep research into the history of “home economics” has not only helped him to provide a living for his family but allowed us all to understand the ways in which art, food and books are made, shared and consumed. A nicer sculpture indeed.

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