

Launching a Bold Venture Against the Odds

The publisher of limited-edition art books, who is HIV positive, has outlived his doctor's expectations . . . and outpaced his resources.

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When William S. Bartman learned that he had a terminal illness, he did what many thinking 40-year-olds would do. He took a long trip, spent quality time with friends and figured out how to make the most of his abbreviated life.

Bartman had already had two careers-the first as a theater director and the second as a screen writer and film director whose credits include "O'Hara's Wife," a 1982 autobiographical film starring Ed Asner. But instead of returning to the familiar territories of stage and screen, he launched a bold new venture: publishing limited-edition books about contemporary artists.

As a longtime art aficionado and collector, Bartman was fed up with the elitist jargon he found in most art criticism. His idea was to produce books in collaboration with artists and to let them talk about their own work with an interviewer of their choice. The first trio of books, on Kim Abeles, Judy Fiskin and Anne Scott Plummer, was released in 1988-89 by A.R.T. Press, the publishing arm of the William S. Bartman Foundation. Volumes on David Reed, Pat Sparkuhl and Jimmy DeSana followed, and books on Vija Celmins, Mike Kelley and Andrew Spence will be released next year.

The project is a success, but Bartman has a new problem. Having lived five years after being diagnosed with HIV-and well beyond his doctor's expectations-he has exhausted his financial resources.

"Basically I've been paying for the whole thing myself and I don't have any more money," he said in an interview at his art-filled home in the Fairfax area.

"I was planning on not being alive, so I was spending my savings and investments, figuring I was investing in the future of an organization whose value would be self-evident," he said, noting that several people who have helped with the project are capable of continuing it.

"I did the first three books as prototypes for the foundation's board of directors since I thought I wouldn't be alive for the second set of books," Bartman said. "I don't know why I'm alive. I guess I'm alive to make sure this happens. I literally live from doctor's appointment to doctor's appointment. I'm not sick now, but I'm watching people die and living with the reality that I could get sick at any time."

His right leg has been amputated (after a chronic infection) and he was gravely ill when his attorney set up his foundation, but Bartman seems astonishingly vigorous. The epitome of a man with too little time to complete an important mission, he stomps around his house on his prosthetic leg, talks in great bursts of energy and plunges into each book project-cajoling artists, sitting in on interviews, editing text and working with designers Judith Lausten and Rene Cossutta.

"I thought I would leave the foundation with a lot of art and a little bit of money, enough to raise funds and to do a year or so of activities," he said. But now the foundation's primary asset is Bartman's 300-piece contemporary art collection, and he doesn't want to sell it. He would prefer to find an exhibition space for the collection and raise funds to continue publishing.

"We're in the process of forming our Library Fellows program, to be composed of 30 people or groups. The idea is that members will give \$5,000 a year, which is tax-deductible, and the \$150,000 a year will

finance about half of the printing of the books. The rest will have to come from grants, sales and other fund-raising," Bartman said. Each slim paperback book costs between \$40,000 and \$70,000 to produce. They are sold by subscription in sets of three at a rate of \$30, but Distributed Art Publishers will soon begin supplying individual copies to bookshops. Originally all the subjects were California artists in mid-career, but the geographic reach has broadened and the focus has shifted to "people who represent a current issue and are very committed," Bartman said. The artists must be willing to spend a considerable amount of time on the project and they must be articulate about their work, he said.

Library Fellows will receive special signed, hardcover editions of the 1992 books about Celmins, Kelley and Spence—each containing an original work of art—plus a selection of one book from this year's editions. Letters soliciting memberships have been sent by foundation board members, including Los Angeles City Councilman Joel Wachs, artists Judy Fiskin and Betye Saar, dealers Patricia Faure and Margo Leavin and Richard Armstrong, a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

"We're looking for a special group of people who can be as involved as they want to be," Bartman said. Sales of a portfolio of Jimmy DeSana's photographs of nudes (on view at Asher/Faure in West Hollywood through Jan. 18) will also benefit A.R.T. Press, as well as the artist's estate. Persuaded that DeSana was an influential figure whose work was only known to artists, Bartman rushed to do a book on him before DeSana died of AIDS.

"It was a pretty terrific experience," said artist Laurie Simmons, who interviewed DeSana and will be the subject of a future book. "Talking formally in the interview we said things that we had not been able to say before, and we were very close. It was another way of saying goodbye."

Being the subject of a book provides "a form of legitimacy" for artists, Abeles said. "It's very helpful when I arrange for exhibitions and apply for grants. It makes me look like I'm real. Even with feminism, it's so difficult for women to tap into the art world."

Doing a book with Bartman is a commitment that Abeles equates with a major retrospective exhibition. "Narrowing down all my ideas was difficult, but Bill is a unique man. I've met my share of generous people, but he has the kind of devotion I see in artists. It's an attitude of 'I just need to do it and I'm going to do it, no matter what,'" she said.

"Bill is very forceful and very positive. He really enjoys the process and I think he learns a lot; it isn't just some job," said Celmins, who chose Chuck Close to interview her. "The book was a lot of work, but it was a chance to talk about what I do in a workmanlike way and that's very unusual."

"The interview should have been broadcast live because it wasn't only about art but the insights that Chuck and Vija have after studying the world in an intense kind of way," Bartman said. "Being in a room with them for two days gave me goose bumps. I felt like a fly on the wall at Potsdam."

Only a fraction of the interviews are actually printed in texts that range from 2,500 words to 20,000.

"They can be as long or as short as the artist feels is necessary. The books are as close as possible to what the artists want—an expression of how they want themselves to be heard with someone they have chosen," Bartman said. Although the books' covers are all the same size (8 1/2 x 10 inches), the number of pages, design and content vary considerably. The relatively modest publications are neither definitive nor complete documents, but Bartman believes they change the way the artists look at their own work. "This gives them an opportunity to come face to face with whatever issues they have been dealing with, issues of the future and where they are right now. It's very frightening for them; every one of them has a moment of crisis when final decisions are being made, but I think it's the way history is going to view these people. This is the source material that people are going to go back to," he said.

Bartman attributes his inspiration for A.R.T Press to an experience 10 years ago in the office of Patterson Sims, his Trinity College roommate and best friend who is a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art. "He was trying to put together a show from the '20s and '30s, and he had big volumes of work from that period that the Whitney owned," Bartman recalled. Leafing through the books, Bartman was shocked to discover that he had never heard of most of the artists. "I knew nothing about why they were important enough for the Whitney to have their work in the permanent collection," he said.

"It struck me that there was this really desperate need for artists who are important at a moment in time to have a forum to express themselves in the way that they choose to be remembered," Bartman said. "If I go back to the '20s and '30s and don't know anything about artists, can you imagine 100 years from now? "People who try to find out about the concerns of artists or why their paintings are in museum collections will have no idea because there will only be second-hand information in an undecipherable language. So much of what's being written about contemporary art has to do with marketing and the articles are written with made-up words and art jargon so that an ordinary person can't possibly make any sense of them. It's like hieroglyphics," Bartman said.