

# THE ESOPUS FOUNDATION LTD.

## NARRATIVE

The Esopus Foundation Ltd. is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization incorporated in New York State in 2003. It was created to provide a forum through which artists, writers, filmmakers, musicians, and other creative people can make a direct connection with the general public.

The Foundation is largely devoted to the publishing of *Esopus*, an annual publication that features content from all creative disciplines presented in an unmediated format. “Unmediated” means that *Esopus* never features advertisements or commercially driven editorial material, and employs a purposefully neutral editorial voice in order to make the publication a distributor, rather than interpreter, of its content.

## STATEMENT OF NEED

In the United States, a significant portion of the work of contemporary artists, musicians, writers, filmmakers, and other creative professionals fails to reach the general public. Instead, it is either confined to the isolated professional circles of a specific field, or diluted by the agendas of a profit-driven media.

In many cases, this work reaches only a negligible percentage of the American public—a percentage that is primarily well educated, economically advantaged, and living in urban environments with ready access to cultural resources. Contemporary artists’ work is shown and discussed in galleries, specialized journals, and other forums that cater to a rarefied population of collectors, dealers, curators, and critics. New work by important playwrights is seen by relatively few theatergoers in large cosmopolitan centers, often with prohibitively high ticket prices. Lauded contemporary composers reach limited audiences at small concert venues typically located in affluent communities.

When creative expression does manage to reach a larger audience, it is likely to have been filtered by a market-driven system that can subvert the work’s original meaning: An independent musician’s song is brought to the attention of a wider public only after being chosen to score a television commercial. A contemporary artist working with controversial subject matter finds herself “branded” by the media, whose sensationalistic coverage distorts her work and strips it of its complexity. A young author’s first novel is endorsed by an influential TV personality but the resultant publicity threatens to overshadow the significance of the work itself.

As a result, creative people are forced into a “Hobson’s choice”: they must either protect their vision by presenting their work within the segregated limits of their particular field, or risk seeing that vision co-opted by mass-media outlets. Emerging talents are the most vulnerable, and the least capable of controlling their work and its presentation, due to their inexperience combined with an understandable eagerness to put their art before the public.

The situation for most of the general public is scarcely better: Because it is often difficult to access authentic artistic expression, most people resort to a steady diet of formulaic and/or diluted cultural fare.

This unfortunate state of affairs creates a gap between artist and audience that hobbles art’s ability to enrich, and ideally improve, our society. Bridging this gap has been the main goal of the Esopus Foundation’s primary activity: the publication of *Esopus*.

## ESOPUS

*Esopus*, an annual publication, appears each spring. Each issue takes 10 months to produce. Coordinated solely by editor Tod Lippy, this process includes solicitation of content, editing, design, preparation of material for printing, on-press oversight, and distribution and promotion of the completed issue. Content for *Esopus* is selected by the following means: 1) an open submissions policy whose guidelines appear on our website; 2) recommendations and suggestions from the magazine’s board of advisors—which includes respected creative professionals from a wide range of disciplines—and input from other contributors and colleagues; and 3) the editor’s 26 years of experience working in the art, film, and publishing fields.

All contributors are approached directly (never through “handlers” such as agents, gallerists, managers, or publicists) to further minimize any commercial influence, and they are asked by *Esopus* to take an active role in the editing, design, and overall execution of their piece. Each contributor is paid a \$300 honorarium, and the copyrights to all work featured in the magazine remain with the makers.

**Wide-ranging content presented in a dynamic format.** *Esopus*’s content represents a cross-section of creative disciplines that are presented with minimal editorial framing and no advertising, giving our readers the opportunity to access a broad range of cultural expression with very little interference. Each issue’s striking visual format features high-quality printing, unusual inserts (fold-outs, removable posters, booklets, an audio CD), and dynamic design—enhancing the uniqueness of each piece rather than forcing disparate material into a typical magazine grid. It also helps attract and engage general readers who might not otherwise pick up this type of arts publication.

One of the goals of *Esopus* is to celebrate the value of the print medium in today’s increasingly digital age. While one cannot discount the power of the Internet and digital technologies for disseminating creative works, our readers repeatedly express their excitement at receiving *Esopus*—a resolutely physical object—in their mailboxes. There is a tactile, intensely visceral quality to engaging with art on paper, especially the high-quality and innovative printing featured in *Esopus*. As blogger Nancy Smith wrote for the literary website *The Rumpus*: “Reading *Esopus* is more akin to walking around an art gallery than flipping through a publication. While technically a magazine, in the sense that it’s a bound stack of paper, *Esopus* is a carefully curated collection of art, photography, writing, music, and other creative projects.”

**Accessibility for general readers.** *Esopus* includes challenging and provocative work by some of the world’s most respected creative talents but presents it without the potentially off-putting critical jargon typically found in specialized arts journals. This approach allows our readers to approach each piece on its—and their—own terms, deepening the connection between artists and the general public. We also regularly invite our audience to interact with our contributors through a series of “subscriber invitationals.” These invitationals involve readers by asking them to generate written or visual content that serves as inspiration for contributors’ own work. Examples include artist Jason Polan’s “Favorite Thing in New York City” project from *Esopus 11*, which featured the artist’s drawings of over 100 subjects submitted by *Esopus* readers, and, more recently, a series of renderings by interior designer Thomas Juncher Jensen illustrating subscribers’ suggestions for “the perfect medical waiting room” (in *Esopus 22: Medicine*).

**Extensive, equitable distribution.** One of the most significant ways *Esopus* has been able to attract a wide, diverse audience over the past 12 years is through its comprehensive distribution. *Esopus* is made available through the national wholesaler Curtis Circulation Inc. (which disseminates copies via distributors to bookstore chains such as Barnes & Noble around the country); Distributed Art Periodicals, which supplies smaller independent bookstores and

museum shops; and Central Books in London, which distributes the publication to bookstores and newsstands in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Australia, and New Zealand.

A crucial component of the mission of the Esopus Foundation Ltd. is to make *Esopus* available to people who would otherwise not be able to afford it, as well as attractive to a readership unfamiliar with specialty arts publications. The most effective decision the Foundation has made in this regard has been to donate copies of each issue to the Distribution to Underserved Communities (D.U.C.) Program, an extraordinary effort of the NYC nonprofit organization Art Resources Transfer Ltd. The D.U.C. Program places donated arts publications, free of charge, onto the shelves of libraries of rural and inner-city public schools, as well as community centers, reservations, and prisons around the country. The Esopus Foundation Ltd. began this partnership in 2005 by committing to offer between 50 to 100 copies of each issue to the underserved communities reached by D.U.C.; in 2014, we made the decision to increase this donation to 500 copies per issue. There is no program that better complements our mission of reaching as wide and diverse a range of readers as possible. To date, 1,634 institutions across the U.S. have ordered free copies of *Esopus* through this program, making the publication available to hundreds of thousands of readers in these communities.

**Contents.** A typical issue of *Esopus* includes six long-form contemporary artists' projects—one by an established artist and two by emerging figures. Among the well-known artists who have contributed projects in the past are Ed Ruscha, Kay Rosen, Richard Misrach, William Christenberry, John Baldessari, Sylvia Plimack Mangold, Dara Birnbaum, Richard Tuttle, and Joyce Pensato. These projects provide artists with the opportunity to push boundaries within the print medium—and their own work—while reaching a more general audience. They also give our readers a chance to own high-quality multiples, from hand-assembled pop-up sculptures to pull-out posters to removable books, by artists who might otherwise be beyond their financial or geographic reach.

Issues also can include personal reflections on various creative disciplines by practitioners like ballet choreographer Christopher Wheeldon, lighting designer Jennifer Tipton, film production designer Thérèse Deprez, *New York Times* crossword-puzzle constructor David Quarfoot, mathematician John Conway, *Mad Men* creator Matthew Weiner, and lauded chef Jody Williams. *Esopus* also regularly publishes poetry (past contributors include Suji Kwock Kim, Jen Bervin, and Jessica Elsaesser) and dramatic writing, such as a series of monologues by playwright Stephen Adly Guirgis and a curtain-raiser by Tony Award-winner Christopher Durang. Issues also contain installments of a number of regular series: “Modern Artifacts,” for which undiscovered treasures from the Museum of Modern Art Archives are reproduced in facsimile and introduced by MoMA’s Chief of Archives, Michelle Elligott, “Guarded Opinions,” which features museum guards’ commentaries on the art they oversee; “Analog Recovery,” copresented with the Magnum Foundation and featuring recovered portfolios by acclaimed Magnum photographers; and “100 Frames,” which reproduces 100 film stills from films by directors such as Claire Denis, Chantal Akerman, David Lynch, Bruce Connor, Lucrecia Martel, and Charles Burnett. Each issue concludes with a CD of brand-new music created according to a specific theme. Periodically, these themes are drawn from subscriber invitationals, for which readers are asked to submit material, such as transcripts of their dreams, used by participating musicians as inspiration for songs.

**Promotion of emerging voices.** Two-thirds of every issue of *Esopus* is devoted to the work of artists, writers, filmmakers, musicians, and other creative individuals who are in the early stages of their careers. We feel strongly that emerging artists have the most to gain from seeing their work presented in the noncommercial context the magazine provides.

**Artists.** As mentioned above, each issue of the magazine features two long-form artists' projects by emerging figures in the contemporary art world. These have taken the form of limited-edition prints (Ati Maier, Frank Benson, Mickey Smith, Xylor Jane, Penny McCarthy, Nina Katchadourian), removable objects (Michael Iskowitz, John O'Connor, Berend Strik, Alex Bag), elaborate foldouts (Darina Karpov, Beth Campbell, Marcia Kure, Dawn Clements), elaborate die-cuts (Mary Lum, William Villalongo), and long-form portfolios printed on distinctive paper stocks

(David Scher, Jason Polan, Kira Lynn Harris, James Pyman, Teresa Matas), and have introduced the unadulterated artwork of many emerging artists to the *Esopus* readership.

*Esopus* also regularly debuts the work of completely unknown artists. These contributions have included riveting battle drawings by 13-year-old Alex Brown, never-before-published WWII-era gouache portraits by Holocaust survivor Samuel Varkovitsky, resonant photographs of New York School painters taken by the late Manhattan attorney Marvin Lazarus during his lunch breaks from work in the 1950s and 1960s, psychologically intense drawings of doll-house figurines by Michael Iskovitz, stunning collages by the severely autistic 22-year-old Alex Masket, and the remarkable photo-dioramas of Mark Hogancamp, who used art as a way to rehabilitate from a debilitating hate-crime attack in 2000.

Publication in *Esopus* has led to extraordinary opportunities and increased recognition for many of these previously unknown artists. For example, after Mark Hogancamp's work debuted in *Esopus 5*, he was invited to mount a critically acclaimed one-person show at influential NYC art space White Columns. A documentary about Hogancamp, *Marwencol*, by Jeff Malmberg (an *Esopus* subscriber who first read about Hogancamp in *Esopus 5*), was released in 2010 to overwhelming critical acclaim, and Hogancamp's inspiring story will soon be the subject of a major motion picture directed by Robert Zemeckis and starring actor Steve Carell. Likewise, Neil Greenberg, whose hand-drawn maps were published for the first time in *Esopus 8*, was invited to speak about his work at the "Performance Z-A" series at the Storefront for Art and Architecture in New York City in the fall of 2007 and has since published a book featuring his work. A piece from *Esopus 13* about the work of Alex Masket was excerpted in the Spring 2010 issue of *The Utne Reader*, bringing Masket's work to the attention of that publication's 200,000 subscribers. Masket has since been invited to mount a number of one-person shows, and both public institutions and private collectors have acquired his work.

**Writers.** In its second issue, *Esopus* instituted its "New Voices" series, which features short fiction written by never-before-published authors. More than half of the writers whose work has been chosen for the series have since gone on to publish novels with major imprints or have had subsequent stories included in prestigious magazines (*The Atlantic*) and esteemed fiction compilations (*Best American Short Stories*). Lev Rosen, whose short story "Painting" inaugurated the "New Voices" series in *Esopus 2*, published his first novel, *All Men of Genius*, with Tor/Penguin Books in 2012, and produced two more works of fiction, one for Little, Brown and one for Regan Arts, in 2015. Vivien Shotwell ("Methods of Rest," *Esopus 7*) had her first novel, *Vienna Nocturne*, published by Ballantine Books and Doubleday Canada and translated into 6 languages in 2014. Since his story "Carter and the Kid" appeared in *Esopus 8*, Stuart Nadler has written two books published by Little, Brown: the short-story collection *The Book of Life* and the novel *Wise Men*, which was chosen as one of Amazon.com's "100 Best Books of 2013." Maureen O'Leary Wanket's "The Cameraman" was featured in *Esopus 11*; Wanket has since gone on to publish two novels, including *How to Be Manly* (Giant Squid, 2014) and *The Arrow* (Geminid Press, 2015). Ethan Rutherford, whose "For Emergency Use Only" appeared in *Esopus 4*, saw his first collection of short stories, *The Peripatetic Coffin*, published by Ecco Press in 2014; it was praised as "100% Grade-A storytelling" by *The Lovely Bones* author Alice Sebold.

**Musicians.** Every issue of *Esopus* concludes with an audio CD compilation of commissioned songs written and performed by a diverse group of musicians. At least two-thirds of these musicians are emerging artists, many of whom have since gone on to achieve widespread critical acclaim and popular success, such as Grizzly Bear, Dirty Projectors, Kimya Dawson, Autre Ne Veut, Marnie Stern, Cloud Nothings, and Sam Amidon. Music from *Esopus* CDs has been cited by the likes of *The New York Times*, Pitchfork, WNYC, and KEXP-FM. "Today's Top Tune" on KCRW-FM, the influential public-radio station based in Santa Monica, California, has selected several songs from *Esopus* compilations, and the respected NPR program "Soundcheck" has twice devoted segments to *Esopus* compilations.

**Critical Acclaim.** Over the past 12 years, *Esopus* has been the subject of numerous laudatory articles in a range of publications from around the world. A front-page Arts and Ideas piece in *The New York Times* from late 2004 called *Esopus* "a thing of lavish, eccentric beauty, less flipped through than

stared at, forcing readers to reconcile their expectations of what a magazine is with the strange artifact in their laps.” In 2007, *Print* magazine asserted that “*Esopus*—a melding of art, ethnography, and journalism—expands the definition of what a magazine can be.” Design critic and educator Steven Heller featured *Esopus* on his blog “The Daily Heller” in November 2009, stating “Each issue is more than a good read (or look), it is a kinetic experience, full of unusual content and exemplary special effects. For my money, it just may be the most innovative print magazine of the 21st century.” *Esopus* has also been the recipient of numerous awards, from sources as diverse as the *Utne Reader* (“Best Design” nomination in its 2007 publishing awards) to *Graphis* (which included the cover of *Esopus 5* in its prestigious 2006 annual) to *Specific Object* (“2007 Publication of the Year”), and the International Association of Printing House Craftsmen (a gold medal for *Esopus 10* in the 2008 “Gallery of Excellence” Competition).

**Reader Feedback.** Fostering engagement with creative works is central to the mission of *Esopus*, and so reader feedback is the best barometer for measuring the success of that mission. We encourage feedback from readers through an easily accessible contact page on our website and by actively soliciting commentary, feedback, and recommendations from readers via social media. A recent email from Emily Smith, a reader in Laramie, Wyoming, is excerpted here: “I think that *Esopus* is the most exciting magazine published because rather than being about art it is art. I am so glad that you have made it affordable to students and regular people (a big thank you to the people who can afford to donate and do!). Art should always have elements that are accessible and attainable to people who don’t have the economic or educational prerequisites that seem to be assumed by the art establishment nowadays. So, um, thank you for existing. I think what you are doing is not only enjoyable, it’s important.”

## ESOPUS SPACE

In June 2009, a capacity-building grant from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Arts enabled the *Esopus* Foundation to move from its original 250-square-foot office and take a three-year lease on a substantially larger combined office and exhibition venue in downtown New York. The space hosted both one-person exhibitions and group shows, including those conceived by guest curators. *Esopus* Space, which seated approximately 50 people, also hosted a series of readings, musical and theatrical performances, panel discussions, lectures, and screenings of film and video.

**Exhibitions.** The 18 exhibitions mounted at *Esopus* Space over its three years of operation included work from *Esopus* contributors as well as from emerging and established figures in the art world in New York City and beyond. These ranged from one-person shows of artists such as Dwight Ripley, Clayton Patterson, Mark Hogancamp, and Bonnie Lucas to group exhibitions presenting work from contemporary artists including Roxy Paine, John Baldessari, Judy Pfaff, Oliver Herring, Mickey Smith, Don Bachardy, and Marcia Kure. Its most popular exhibitions were those that were interactive and audience-focused: for instance, “The Assembled Picture Library of New York” turned the gallery into a collaborative work environment in which hundreds of visitors were encouraged to create artworks from the image collections of artists Jason Polan and Robin Cameron. “Ray + Bob Box,” a show in which Robert Warner publicly archived 13 boxes of correspondence he had received from the legendary late artist Ray Johnson for captive audiences over the course of five weeks, received an enthusiastic review in *The New York Times*.

**Events.** *Esopus* Space seated just 60 people, and events were meant to feel less like formal presentations than dynamic, unmediated exchanges between performer and audience. The space hosted capacity crowds at artist’s presentations by Mary Ellen Carroll and Chris Doyle, concerts by Sam Amidon, Natureboy, El Perro Del Mar, Nina Nastasia, and Third Wheel Band, a book signing for conceptual artist Kay Rosen, a screening of films by lauded experimental filmmaker Peter Hutton, an evening co-hosted with the Museum of Modern Art of poetry readings and performances related to the late underground poet and artist Bern Porter, and many other events.

## LIMITED-EDITION ARTWORKS

In the summer of 2014, the Esopus Foundation Ltd instituted a new publishing schedule and subscription model for *Esopus*. Originally published twice yearly in the spring and fall, *Esopus* is now a much larger annual publication appearing each spring. Basic subscription prices still remain at the same deeply subsidized price, but the Foundation instituted a new “premium” subscription level, which includes a limited-edition artwork shipped to premium subscribers each fall. The inspiration for this series came from the fall of 2012, when *Esopus* invited acclaimed artist Robert Gober to create a limited edition, *Hope Hill Road*, to serve as a “placeholder” gift to subscribers during a shift in our production schedule. Reader response to the multiple was overwhelmingly positive, and we realized that these editions would not only further our mission of providing affordable artworks to our audience but also allow artists to work in a range of formats that were beyond the scope of a regular issue of *Esopus*. The second limited-edition artwork produced by the Foundation in the fall of 2014 was Mark Hogancamp’s *Women of Marwencol: Recent Photographs*, consisting of six 24 x 36” posters, along with a custom-designed booklet; the edition for the fall of 2015 is an audio-visual collaboration between artist Beth Campbell and musician Charles Bissell (The Wrens).

## OTHER ACTIVITIES

The Foundation also regularly programs well-attended events at arts venues in New York City such as P.S.1/MoMA, the Kitchen, Pioneer Works Center for Art + Innovation, the Museum of Modern Art, Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and the Museum of the Moving Image. These programs often coincide with the release of an issue and reflect the multidisciplinary approach of the magazine, incorporating poetry readings, musical concerts, film screenings, panel discussions, and theatrical performances from magazine contributors. Editor Tod Lippy is regularly invited to speak about *Esopus* to high school, college, and graduate-school students. Recent lectures have been given at New York’s Nightingale-Bamford School for Girls, the Elizabeth Irwin High School, the School of Visual Arts, the University of Virginia, the Cooper Union, Rice University, Bennington College, Maryland Institute, College of Art, and USC’s Roski School of Fine Arts, among many other institutions.

## ABOUT THE ESOPUS FOUNDATION LTD.

**Personnel/Boards.** From the inception of the Esopus Foundation Ltd. until February 2007, all activities, from the editing, design, production, promotion, and distribution of *Esopus* to fundraising, bookkeeping, and all other administrative functions were handled solely by Tod Lippy. Lippy, who is the Foundation’s president, was previously a senior editor at *Print* magazine and the founding editor of both *publicsfear* and *Scenario* magazines, as well as the author of the 2000 Faber & Faber book *Projections 11: New York Film-makers on Film-making*. The goal of having a single employee was not only to reduce operating costs but also to further the Foundation’s mission of minimizing “interference” between contributors and readers. With just one person acting as mediator between these two parties—as opposed to the more typical array of editors, art directors, publishers, marketing professionals, and administrative/technical staff—an intimate level of trust and exchange between artist, editor, and audience would occur.

But as the circulation of *Esopus* increased, this situation, though desirable from a financial and philosophical standpoint, became untenable. At the beginning of 2007, the Esopus Foundation received a significant capital-infusion grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts that earmarked funds to cover the salary of a part-time administrator. Since then, Keriann Kohler, a graduate of the University of Southern California, handles the majority of administrative tasks, from subscription fulfillment to bookkeeping to database management, while Lippy continues to edit,

design, and coordinate production for *Esopus* by himself. In the past 12 years, Lippy and Kohler have also had the good fortune to work with more than 40 high school and college interns from the New York City area.

The Esopus Foundation Ltd. functions with the invaluable contributions of two boards: its seven trustees, who meet annually and who offer important financial and logistical advice and support, and *Esopus's* advisory board, composed of 20 leading figures from various different creative disciplines who provide suggestions for potential contributors and content.

**Internet and Social Media.** The Esopus Foundation and *Esopus* have a significant Internet presence. The site for *Esopus* ([www.esopus.org](http://www.esopus.org)), redesigned and relaunched in January 2013, provides in-depth previews of each issue's contents, web-exclusive material (including streaming audio and video), a custom facsimile viewer that presents content from sold-out issues, a video player, and an audio player that offers streaming songs from each issue's compilation CD. The site also includes a fully searchable database of all content appearing in *Esopus*, a comprehensive listing of past press coverage, a news page, a contact page with submission guidelines, a regularly updated list of the stores where *Esopus* is sold, a mailing list opt-in form, a regularly updated list of our supporters, and a secure area for subscriptions and single-issue orders. *Esopus.org* receives over 100,000 page views each month, and generates the vast majority of sales, subscriptions, and submissions. In addition, the Foundation regularly engages with the *Esopus* audience via active pages on Facebook (4,200 fans), Twitter (nearly 1,000 followers), and Soundcloud (approximately 40,000 "listens" to date), which not only streams tracks from past CDs but also offers *Esopus*-related podcasts.

**Public and Private Support.** As outlined above, *Esopus* is offered at a subsidized price in order to attract a broad readership. In order to provide that readership access to creative expression with no commercial interference, there is never any advertising in the magazine. Since the Foundation cannot count on the profit margins or advertising revenue many other arts publications take for granted, it is deeply dependent on contributions to bridge the gap between sales and subscriptions (approximately 25% of gross revenue) and expenses. Over the years, the Esopus Foundation Ltd. has been the recipient of significant grants from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, the Dedalus Foundation, the Greenwall Foundation, the Lily Auchincloss Foundation, the American Center Foundation, the LEF Foundation, the Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation, the Stephen and Mary Birch Foundation, the Fifth Floor Foundation, the Strypemonde Foundation, the Puffin Foundation, the Coby Foundation, the Mondriaan Foundation, the Fleishhacker Foundation, the Mary Duke Biddle Foundation, the Peter and Carmen Lucia Buck Foundation, the JKW Foundation, the Milton and Sally Avery Arts Foundation, Foundation for Contemporary Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA), and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. In addition, our annual fall fundraising drive typically yields several hundred donations from individuals (including a number of subscribers) ranging from \$5 to \$5,000.

**Donations in Kind.** The Foundation has been successful in soliciting donations from paper companies, consultants, and even specialty-ink manufacturers, all of whom have offered donations in services and goods in exchange for subscriptions, extra copies of issues, and of course, acknowledgment in *Esopus*. Most significantly, our printer, located in Winnipeg, Canada, has helped us to reduce costs through a combination of creative thinking, flexibility, and generosity.

## **FUTURE PLANS**

The Esopus Foundation plans to continue an annual publication schedule with *Esopus*, expecting an increase in circulation consistent with past growth, and will continue to seek out partnerships with other arts organizations in order to further expand its audience through events and exhibitions in New York City and beyond. With all of these activities, the Foundation's main objective will be to maintain an unmediated, accessible forum through which artists can connect directly with the general public.