

composition, the two are inextricable, often drawing on the same shared pitches and generating an expressive range through their relationship to one another. The minor modes temper the bombastic triumphalism of the major keys, imbuing the piece with ambiguity, ambivalence and instability. While others scream and shout, they assert themselves softly, surreptitiously, *in sotto voce*. Yet, amid the fury and noise, they can all too easily be drowned out.

Chris Clarke is a curator and writer based in Vienna.

Artist's Books

Artists' Books Round-up

Last autumn, a group of independent publishers wrote an open letter to *The Bookseller* warning of a looming 'existential crisis' facing their work. The cold economic climate for arts funding in the UK has been compounded by the impact of war in Ukraine on paper supply and energy costs. Post-Brexit customs fees and Donald Trump's trade tariffs have hampered interaction with European and US markets. Meanwhile, an ever more data-driven and risk-averse sales landscape has squeezed out adventurous titles.

The three presses under perusal here, Glasgow's Wax366, London's Monitor, and Slimvolume, which has links to Manchester's Moon Grove gallery, operate at the cusp of art and language, whereas the signatories to last year's letter were mostly literature presses. (Of the three above, only Monitor put its name to the letter.) Yet the terrain these presses inhabit, very much inherited from Conceptual Art, with its elision of the boundaries between art and language, is hardly protected from the financial storm described.

This article is not about that economic storm, but about the work under threat from it. So, what do these presses make? Wax366 is the brainchild of Glasgow-based, London-born David Bellingham, whose practice is defined by playful yet meticulous interventions into the relationship between matter, thought and language. Mainly publishing Bellingham's own work, Wax 366's roster includes objects - like a lamp with a golden syrup tin in place of a head - as well as cards and books. The press retains strong links with the post-concrete poetry movement in Scotland, having published books of letters, poems and artworks by Ian Hamilton Finlay and Laurie Clark.

Wax366's recent ventures include *WORDSWORDSWORDS*, 2025, which brings together works by the South African outsider artist Chickenman Mkhize alongside several new essays. It is edited by Bellingham and the Glasgow-based South African artist Roger Palmer, who was among the denizens of the late-Apartheid art world to support Mkhize's art prior to his death at 36 in 1995. As the art historian Zoë Wicomb notes in the book, Fanozi Mkhize had previously worked on a poultry farm, hence his nom de brush. He began to set up daily camp outside the Tatham Art Museum in Pietermaritzburg during the death rattles of the Pass Laws, which would previously have seen him moved on.

From this vantage point, Mkhize created rough-and-ready artworks but with a clear, formalist identity modelled on road signs: triangular boards with painted icons inside a red border, above rectangular boards featuring text inside a dotted white line, joined with

wooden posts and supported by wire bases. They bear slogans in English - like the book's title phrase, borrowed from Hamlet - as well as Zulu, his native tongue. The interest lies partly in the satirical power with which Mkhize mimics and deconstructs public rules and signage in a crumbling racist regime. There is also intrigue in the way that, as a non-literate artist, letters are treated as visual rather than linguistic data, with mid-word line breaks and the absence of spacing that creates graphic and phonetic oddities such as 'BUTISI/TART' and 'NOSTILET/TOHEELS/PLEASE'.

Among Slimvolume's publications are texts covering the intersection of word and image from a wide range of vantage points, reflecting the omnivorous interests of editor Andrew Hunt in post-conceptual and concrete-poetic practices. Recent texts by Cedar Lewisohn and Pavel Büchler, for example, explore the semiotics of the graphic novel and letterpress printing respectively. Last year's *A Pastiche of Different Techniques* by David Osbaldeston follows on from related exhibitions at Moon Grove in 2022-23 and Glasgow Print Studio in 2024. The artist's linguistically informed practice is as much about the fuzz of reproduction in obscuring or unsettling symbolic sense as it is about unpicking art-world power dynamics.

The publication includes many of what Osbaldeston calls his 'word props'. The basis for these is a set of painted strips of book-card, done up in Op Art-type patterning, in a perhaps knowing, whimsical homage to histories of post-constructivist art. In the final realisation of the pieces, two card-sculptures appear next to each other, one a neat skinny rectangle resting upright against an angle of horizontal and vertical surfaces, the other more contorted and compacted, as if the first form had crumpled itself up. Below are word-pairs evoking relationships of uneasy reciprocity and mutual tension in the art world: ARTIST/CURATOR; WRITER/EDITOR; PERFORMER/CRITIC; ACTOR/DIRECTOR.

There is a structuralist coolness in the way these relationships are interrogated; Osbaldeston steps back from power dynamics often overlaid with emotive questions of taste and ethics. But that message is itself complicated by the tricky way in which the final, two-dimensional works are created. The mini sculptures are photographed in bright sunlight, with sharp shadows behind them. These photographs are then transferred to a half-tone dot matrix, which is screen-printed onto an oil-applied painted surface. The final appearance fuses the atmospherics of photography, etching and printing, the viewer held in tension between various modes of production and reproduction. This mash-up - or, indeed, pastiche - of different techniques offers both harmony and counterpoint to Osbaldeston's interrogations of grouped art-world relationships.

Monitor is, of the three presses considered here, the closest in ethos to an innovative poetry press. Edited by Rory Cook and Rachael Allen, its authors include familiar names from that world such as Nisha Ramayya, Will Harris and Jazmine Linklater. Sean Roy Parker's *Stewarding*, 2024, however, is the product of an artistic practice that has recently expanded to include poetry. For three years, Parker was a core member of The Field, an experimental artist-run living project in an ex-National Coal Board and Steiner School building in Derbyshire. This collection of his work is primarily defined by narrative lyric poetry that touches on questions of agricultural ethics and com-

muning with more-than-human life: 'Art is mostly for and by humans so I make art for worms.' The whole is summed up, in one diagram-cum-poem, by the term 'conviviculture', combining 'soil building', 'world building' and 'community building'. There are also sketches, scrawls and list-poems, combined with images made on 35mm film processed using a developer made from lacto-fermented garlic mustard seeds. It's an earthy and joyful debut verse collection that reflects the workings of a press flexible enough to take on writing in between the interstices of artistic and poetic practice.

What these presses embody - like the others involved in last year's open letter - is the great aesthetic, conceptual and political riches that can be found by transgressing the boundaries of inherited media. In a world of algorithm-driven sales, small presses like these must be sheltered from the effects of market optimisation, of reading monocultures and of philistine governmental priorities.

Greg Thomas is a critic, poet and artist based in Glasgow.

Film

Courtisane festival 2026

'Small but beautiful, poor but manageable.' These were the words used to describe Ghent's experimental film festival Courtisane by Pieter-Paul Mortier, its current director and co-founder. The name is a play on the French *court* (short) but, in the years since its founding, Courtisane has expanded its focus beyond short film. Last year, the festival presented works by Chinese documentarian Wang Bing, whose films typically extend well beyond the three-hour mark. Rather than being short, what defines much of the festival's programming is an appreciation of the 'small', meaning a rejection of the bombast and bloated budgets of the mainstream film industry.

Marking a significant anniversary, this 25th edition opened with a restrained programme featuring quietly political themes as well as an unlikely cast of animals. Moving through two louche and lethargic works by Chantal Akerman and Chris Marker that revel in the pleasures of unproductive time, the programme's divergent themes were reconciled in the final work, *Henry is a Girl Who Likes to Sleep*, 2026, by Marthe Peters (who also co-curated the programme with Leon Decock). A reflection on Peter's chronic sickness and yearning for a life of comfort and slowness, the film is a gesture of identification with the artist's beloved pet cat and the humble snail.

Despite the eschewal of topicality in its opening night, Courtisane did not completely shy away from capital 'P' politics, as evidenced in the number of Sudanese, Iranian and Palestinian artists' films. For the third year running, the festival catalogue opened with a statement of solidarity with Palestine, a message that was also beamed up before each screening. In the UK, festivals such as Alchemy Film and Moving Image Festival, Berwick Film and Media Arts Festival and Open City Documentary Festival have also staked similar political claims in stark contrast to the recent debacle at this year's Berlinale, at which Wim Wenders, jury president, suggested that filmmakers should 'stay out of politics' in response to a question about Palestine.

What these UK festivals have in common with Courtisane is smallness, a condition that precludes the high level of state scrutiny received by festivals like the Berlinale or the BFI London Film Festival.

Based in Germany, Palestinian artist Basma al-Sharif's latest work, *Morning Circle*, 2025, explores the liberal project of assimilation against a background of genocide and displacement. While images of Gaza play out on television, an Armenian man submits to the interrogative questions of a permanent residency interview before delivering his son to kindergarten in Berlin. Assimilation appears as the final link in a causal chain of loss, sacrificing country, culture and even family to a state complicit in the displacement of an entire population. Undoubtedly one of the most compelling films produced last year, *Morning Circle* was presented in a programme of three 'swan songs' curated by al-Sharif - dying gasps that mark the end of an era.

While her own work might be described as a farewell to fantasies of liberal multiculturalism and the geopolitical 'rules-based order', the other films in al-Sharif's programme looked to past and future epochal shifts. Marta Popivoda's *Slet 1988*, 2025, returns us to the final days of Yugoslavia through extraordinary archival footage of the last 'Slet', the annual National Youth Day Performance that brought together thousands of youths from across the sprawling country. Like a tear in the social fabric of collectivism, the choreography was unprecedented in its focus on an individual: the dancer Sonja Vukićević. Later known for her anti-Milošević activism, Vukićević features in the film in the present day as a pensive figure, pictured alone in a civic gymnasium. With a stylistic handbrake turn, an apocalyptic musical by Niles Atallah concluded the programme. Reminiscent of the animation style of the Quay Brothers, *Merrimundi*, 2025, stars a chorus of putrefying dolls singing and dancing like cheerleaders for the end of humankind and the dawn of artificial life.

One of the most startling discoveries of the festival, Ibrahim Shaddad's *Jamal*, 1981, featured in a programme of Sudanese cinema curated by Rund Alarabi & Vincent Stroe. Pitched to the Sudanese Ministry of Culture as a documentary about traditional sesame oil manufacturing, Shaddad's film is in fact an intensely noisy piece of punk expressionism. Blindfolded and bound to a creaking mill, a camel endlessly circles a dark room, screeching with each revolution. Later, the camel exchanges places with its keeper, revealing an eroded threshold between human, animal and machine in bondage to the extraction of labour.

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Ibrahim Shaddad, *Jamal*, 1981, film