

## Alberto Casiraghy: 30 years of the PulcinoElefante Press

By Elena Bertozzi

“Pulcinoelefante is the happiness of letterpress printing.”

Enrico Tallone (Alberto Tallone Editore)

Osnago is a small town in Brianza where the Padana plain meets the foothills of Lecco and Bergamo. It is a mixture of the old and the new. The old town with its cobbled streets and historic buildings is surrounded by large factories and apartment towers for the many who use it a bedroom community for their daily commute into Milan. The train station, the arrival point for many of the visitors who come to see Alberto Casiraghy's print shop, is merely two platforms linked by an ugly concrete underpass and a ticket stamping machine that is always out of ink. Its banality is tempered by a tiny little café papered with posters announcing upcoming festivals, political manifestos and art film showings.

To get to Pulcino, you walk through the small downtown area, past another café, a tobacconist, a couple bakeries, a restaurant and then down a residential street with small semi-detached houses each with a small yard. They all look more or less the same, until you get to number 12 Via Pinamonte where just inside the gate you see several structures made of silver tubing surrounded by figurines of different types of animals. The wall before you is covered with images, pieces of metal, shells, glass and other objects. To the right is a pool the size of a kitchen sink, covered with moss. When you move, a frog jumps from the edge into the water.

The door beyond the gate is open, when Alberto comes to greet you, you see three hand-lettered signs by the door:

Whatever you do, don't read!

Remember that you must die.

Poverty

Chastity

Disobedience

Fasting

Casiraghy has become widely known for his iconic book format and the unusual method by which he works. While most publishers charge a fee or percentage of profits to print books, Alberto makes his living by inviting artists, friends, strangers and creative people of all sorts to come to his residence and collaborate with him. The collaborator provides a work of art, an idea, a text or some other element which creates a creative spark. Then Alberto prints a single page of text and folds it into a book which both contains and expands on the initial idea. Each book is printed in an edition of thirty (or whatever number of pieces of art the collaborator brings to put

in each book). Then the books in the edition are divided between Pulcinoelefante and the collaborator-- each of whom can sell the books for whatever they please. It is Alberto's philosophy that the books should not be expensive, regardless of the caliber or fame of the art inside them, because he wants anyone to be able to afford to buy them. He started selling them for 6,000 lire and now sells them for 10 euro each.

Over the course of the last 30 years Pulcino has produced over 8644 editions.

Alberto was not born into a world that could readily afford or appreciate art, so he learned early not to take anything for granted or to get too full of himself and his own importance. He was born in Osnago on August 4, 1952. His family had lived there for many generations. Brianzoli are known to be industrious, not particularly imaginative folk. His father was a plumber, his mother a seamstress.

He struggled at school and much to the chagrin of his mother, flunked his first year of middle school. She was so embarrassed that she could not leave the house for a week. He made it through the third year partly due to her willingness to bribe his teachers with delicacies like the local salami. Though he did not excel at school, early on he showed signs of the inventiveness that characterizes his work today. He wanted to play the guitar, but didn't have one, so he built himself one. Then for a while he apprenticed with a master luthier who taught him how make musical instruments and fostered a life-long love of music. He also studied the violin in an academy of music in Monza and dreamt of being a violinist. But more pragmatic considerations prevailed.

After leaving school, he worked in a traditional print shop: big presses with lead type where they produced forms and business cards. Then he got lucky and found a job at a state-owned printing conglomerate in Milan that produced several different daily newspapers. He was delighted to get out of Osnago and into a larger world.

Just after he had learned the craft the way it had been done for centuries, the printing conglomerate introduced computers into the process. Ironically, he was one of the first to learn how to use them, but he didn't like the way it changed the work.

The new technology drove him to another profession. For ten years he worked as a set designer creating scenes for the photography of objects for different kinds of advertisements. The job taught him how to use materials like silicone, fiberglass, acrylics, and Liquitex. He credits this period as being a school of technique where he learned how to be imaginative and creative with almost any kind of object.

In 1975, with the help of his parents, he was able to purchase the house that functions as both his residence and print shop. He moved in with his beloved dog, Claudia and started cultivating the garden. In 1980 he got his first press, a gift from

a cousin. It was a simple poster press with a hand-pulled roller. For years he had been writing aphorisms and short poems. He wanted to be able to print them and distribute them to his friends. The first book of this type was printed in 1982. He printed after work, and on weekends – for him it was a kind of play.

The garden is emblematic of Alberto's lifestyle and exemplifies many of the concerns that come up over and over again in his work. There is a fundamental love of and concern for nature. He has plants everywhere and many kinds of animals that have come and gone over the years. There are always chickens, often goats, and the occasional rabbit. Birds are welcome most everywhere but not among the ripe fruit. Shiny CDs hang suspended in the grape arbor to keep the birds away. Figurines, statues, drawings and sculptures of animals, bones, and natural phenomena are on the ground and all over the walls outside and in. The garden and its animals come right up to the kitchen door. As the books are being sewn on the kitchen table, it is not unusual for a goat to stick its head inside and baa.

Soon after friends of his started distributing his poetry, one of his books ended up in the hands of the poet Alda Merini. She asked if he would print one of her pieces. He did and when he brought it to her they started a relationship that would last the rest of her life and profoundly change both of them.

She introduced him to the circle of artists, editors, publishers and celebrities that surrounded her. Always a controversial figure, she was decried by some critics as a fraud who was only recognized as a poet because of the period she had spent time in a mental hospital, she attracted lots of attention from the press. She was moody, cranky, enigmatic and a difficult friend, exchanging up to 20 phone calls a day with Alberto and capable of fits of rage and jealousy when he was not available.

He learned a great deal from her and published over a thousand books with her collaboration. She taught him that the joy of every day is different, that life is incoherent and difficult, that you should make the most of every moment you have. Every day with her was unique because she made it valuable. She showed him that even if you go through terrible suffering, you can emerge and be reborn. Though she died in 2009, she remains present to him in many ways, one of which is the shampoo bottle in the shape of the Disney Snow White character she gave him which is perched on the top of his press, overseeing his daily printing.

At more or less the same time he met Merini (1992), he met another person who transformed his work: Adriano Porazzi.

Walking past the window of a store in Milan, he saw an expertly crafted engraving. He went in and asked who had done it. The shopkeeper said, "He's an old guy who doesn't want to be bothered." But when Alberto finally tracked him down, he discovered a man who was quite happy to be bothered. Porazzi had spent his entire working life doing extremely detailed engravings of all kinds of mechanical parts and objects for technical magazines and catalogs. Now retired, he did little things

here and there to keep his skills sharp. Alberto began bringing him his drawings to have engraved so that he could reproduce them on the press. Each boxwood cut produced by Porazzi is so beautifully done that anyone seeing it recognizes him as an artist even if Porazzi himself never considered himself one. Porazzi engraved hundreds of cuts for Pulcinoelefante as well as for the many other artists Alberto sent to him. Virtually every book printed has at least one Porazzi cut and often several of them. After artists like Mimmo Paladino had their work engraved by Porazzi and then printed by Alberto more and more people became aware of the press's work.

“Alberto is the baker of letterpress printing, pulling a fresh book from the oven every day.” Vanni Scheiwiller (art critic, editor)

As the reputation of the Pulcino grew, so did the print shop. In 1992 he obtained a Piana press and put it in the room that would normally be the living room. It barely fits, leaving space for a row of typesets along one wall which contain the Bodoni and Garamond fonts with which he prints. The type was a gift, an inheritance really, from the great printer Giorgio Lucini.

Over the years he has worked with an ever larger number of people ranging from developmentally disabled students to celebrities and some of the most revered names in Italian art and culture including: Mario di Biasi, Gillo Dorfles, Maurizio Catelan, Fernanda Pivano, Pietro Pedferri, and the novelist Sebastiano Vassalli. Through Enzo Eric Toccaceli he did books with Allen Ginsberg and Laurence Ferlinghetti. Alberto believes that they are willing to work with him because the Pulcino allows him to take work from people, but also to give them something back. Every book is a kind of gift from the collaborators to each other.

I met him in 1999 with the American printer Amos P. Kennedy, Jr. when we made the first of several books together. The process for each book is more or less the same, however the simple structure leaves space for unlimited playfulness and imagination. A collaborator comes to his shop with 22-33 pieces of a something: photographs, prints, watercolors, small sculptures or bits of things to use in an assemblage. Sitting at the kitchen table, the details of the text are sorted out. Alberto is truly an editor in the sense that he whittles down whatever is brought to him. He extracts the nut of the idea and removes things that over-explain it or make it too literal. He describes the work of his life as poetry, and poetry is often saying a thing in the fewest possible words; saying things in a way that allows the reader to fill in the spaces.

After the text is ready, he cuts down the paper, which is almost always Hahnemuhle, though other papers are used as the project requires. Then he sets the type and selects which cuts will be used. He has drawerfuls of Porazzi cuts as well as ones from other artists. The collection is not enormous, though. He prefers to reuse what he has and modify it than have too many things to choose from. When all is ready, he

prints a single page which usually goes through the press three separate times. While this is happening, there is always something else going on. Friends like Alberto Rebori, his great-niece Claudia, and long-time associates R.C. and R.B. stop in and chat, comment and critique on the work at hand, and often pitch in to assist.

After the whole page is printed, work shifts to the kitchen, though only a small part of the room is dedicated to the sink, refrigerator and stove. The rest of the room is full of typewriters and materials. Scissors, pliers and other tools are kept in an orange brick (the type full of spaces for construction with mortar) turned on its side. When the table is cleared of the coffee, tea and biscuits he has offered his guests, Alberto lays the stack on the table, then trims the edges with scissors. He takes a dish of water and a damp cloth and wipes a cross across the paper where it will be folded. Then he goes through and folds each page using only his hand and not a folding bone. He doesn't like to use folding bones both because they leave too deep a mark in the soft paper and because they come from whales. When the folding is completed, a thread color is selected and the now four-page book is sewn with just two stitches down the spine.

At this point many kinds of aesthetic decisions are made. Opinions and the participation of all parties are welcome. The collaborator's piece has to be glued or otherwise inserted into the book, and the way that each individual copy will be decorated has to be determined. On top of the cases and at the end of the table are a wide variety of materials that can be used. These include: stickers, colored thread, colored pencils, markers, wax, gold leaf, watercolors, acrylic colors, glue, silicone, Vinavil, spray paint, and liquid iridescence. He has used coffee and tea to age the pages, and added crumbs, dust, or whatever comes to hand for texture. The final touch is part of the coherence and the incoherence of the work. The "Censored" series of books, for example, are all tied together with string and sealed with wax. In order to see what is inside the book, the structure of it has to be torn apart.

As we work, we talk. He says that he feels privileged to have lived his life like this: meeting interesting people and making interesting work. It feeds the mind. His system demythologizes the process of book making. It shows that a person doesn't have to be famous to be published. It is a way of accessing the poetry of life—or of seeing life as poetry--poetry which he sees as is indispensable even though individual poems themselves may not be worth much.

He is constantly learning from the people he meets. When he first met Amos Kennedy and printed with him, they both learned from each other's distinctive styles. At that time Kennedy was teaching at Indiana University. He invited Alberto (and his partner and frequent collaborator Angela Caremi) to the U.S. to do a workshop and have an exhibition. It was the first time they had been overseas and it was a significant event for both of them. Later Alberto was invited to New Jersey by another collaborator, Karen Guancione.

Despite his current fame, he still lives on the small revenue he earns by selling his share of the books to visitors to his home or at the ever more frequent exhibitions in which he is invited to participate. Alberto's work has been in more than 300 exhibitions such as a recent one in the Casa Cogollo, a Palladian Villa in Vicenza. He says he has been able to live this way because he owns his own home and doesn't have to maintain anyone else. It is however a precarious financial existence. There have been many lean times in the past. Now, having made more than 8500 books, there is a universe of people who love and support him by buying them. His method of sharing books with the artists is a form of barter that allows both parties to benefit without commercializing the transaction. This too is a kind of poetry.

He is satisfied with much of what he has accomplished, but still has many doubts. One of which is that many people come to visit because he is unusual, different, and produces things that are beautiful. But he notes that most of the fish in the rivers of Osnago have been killed off by industrialization, so even though he is doing something, he is not doing enough, particularly to help nature.

Nature is the most important thing for him – it has always been. Alberto's connection to the natural world is visible all around, in the figures of animals, goats, chickens, cats, lizards, and birds that cover the walls, in the content of his books and in the choices that he makes in his everyday life. He hasn't eaten meat for 40 years except when politeness requires it, despite the fact that he would like to. He very much enjoys the taste of meat but doesn't eat it out of respect for the suffering of animals.

Alberto doesn't just write aphorisms, he generates them throughout the day as he works. The shop is permeated with his wry humor. When a visitor asks about smoking inside, Alberto waves her away and comments that it is a better thing to have a nipple in one's mouth than a cigarette. As he tears off pieces of masking tape to raise a cut so that it prints better, he says, "Printing is a kind of alchemy. You have to keep improvising to invent the ways of achieving the effect you want. I didn't used to be as good at printing as this, but over time I have changed the process and the process has improved me."

When he visited New York, people berated him for not having a computer or being online because it makes him so hard to reach. He replied, "But I know how to play the violin very well."

As we walk back to the train station, he tells stories about the people who have collaborated with him. He is often moved and fascinated by what motivates them to come. "What I do is an anthropological thing. The books are artifacts of the process, a memento of the stories, friendship and emotions that drive people to come here and do books with me."

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To order books from Alberto, go visit, or send him a letter. An interview with Alberto Casiraghy and footage of his house and work is included in the documentary *Proceed and Be Bold* by 20K Films. He has written and illustrated many books with other publishers:

- *Aforismi sulla saggezza della morte*, Milano, Shakespeare and Kafka, 1992
- *Pericoli indispensabili: sogni e racconti da immaginare*, disegni di Max Marra, Salvatore Carbone, Pino Rosa, Milano, La vita felice, 1994
- *Distrazioni e giraffe: aforismi e riflessioni sul tempo che corre*, disegni di Igor Ravel incisi su legno di pero da Adriano Porazzi, Cernusco Lombardone, Hestia, 1996
- *Aforismi per bambine inquiete*, disegni di Igor Ravel, Milano, La vita felice, 1997
- *Dove e nato il pulcino: aforismi per bambini amanti della liberta*, Milano, La vita felice, 1997
- *Meditazioni dell'occhio sinistro: tre poesie di Alberto Casiraghy*, una incisione di Luciano Ragozzino, Scandicci, F. Mugnaini, 1997
- *Novantottesima Avenue*, disegni di Alberto Rebori, Milano, La vita felice, 1998
- *Storie di piccoli fiumi segreti: aforismi*, postfazione prefattiva di Ambrogio Borsani, Milano, La vita felice, 2000
- *Disegni per il rosso*, disegni e aforismi di Alberto Casiraghy; testi di [Alda Merini](#) e Roberto Borghi, Milano, Galleria l'Affiche, 2001
- *Dove volano gli occhi: domande per giovani filosofi*, Milano, La vita felice, 2002
- *L' anima e la foglia*, presentazione di [Giuseppe Pontiggia](#), Milano, Frassinelli, 2003
- *Quando: novantanove aforismi quieti e inquieti*, con tre disegni di Alda Merini, Castelmaggiore, Book, 2006
- *Nel silenzio atteso*, con collages de José-Joaquín Beeme, Angera, La Torre degli Arabeschi, 2006
- *Dico molte bugie, quando la verita confonde*, con disegni di Felix Petruska, Milano, Cabila, 2007
- *L' estasi della foresta*, Milano, Il ragazzo innocuo, 2008
- *Gipi: lo straordinario e il quotidiano di un narratore per immagini*, Roma, Coniglio, 2008
- *Gli occhi non sanno tacere; aforismi per vivere meglio*, con un testo di [Sebastiano Vassalli](#) e illustrazioni dell'autore, Novara, Interlinea, 2010