

# 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.

In its first six years, The Foundation was largely devoted to the publishing of *Esopus*, a twice-yearly magazine 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 magazine a distributor, rather than interpreter, of its content. In the summer of 2009, The Esopus Foundation also launched Esopus Space, an intimately scaled venue located in the Greenwich Village area of New York City that hosts exhibitions, readings, performances, concerts, screenings, and artists' presentations which are offered at no cost to the public.

## STATEMENT OF NEED

In the United States, the work of contemporary artists, musicians, writers, filmmakers, and other creative professionals rarely reaches the general public. Artists' work is shown and discussed in galleries, specialized journals, and other forums that cater to a rarefied population of dealers, collectors, and critics; acclaimed independent or foreign films receive limited engagements at small theaters in a handful of cities; challenging new work by important playwrights is seen by relatively few theatergoers in large cosmopolitan centers, and lauded independent musicians and contemporary composers reach limited audiences at small concert venues or on specialized radio stations. In fact, a large percentage of the most significant work in any creative discipline reaches 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.

When art does manage to reach a larger audience, economic realities dictate that it will have been filtered through a finely woven net maintained by a market-driven system that often subverts the work's original meaning. Examples abound: 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 the meaning of her art and strips it of its complexity. A young author's first novel is endorsed by an influential TV personality but the resultant publicity overshadows the subtleties of the work itself. Emerging talents are the most vulnerable, and least capable of controlling their work and its presentation, because of their inexperience combined with an eagerness to put their art before the public.

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—such as discipline-specific journals, whose specialized jargon can prove off-putting to more general readers—or co-opt that vision in order to reach a larger audience. The situation for most of the general public is scarcely better: Because it is so difficult to access authentic artistic expression, most people must resort to a steady diet of formulaic and/or diluted cultural fare.

This gap between artist and audience—a divide that hobbles art's ability to enrich, and ideally improve, our society—is what the Esopus Foundation Ltd. was formed to address.

## ESOPUS MAGAZINE

In 2003, The Esopus Foundation created *Esopus* to provide an alternative to the scenario outlined above. The magazine's content—contributions from a cross-section of creative disciplines presented with minimal editorial “framing” and no advertising—gives our readers the opportunity to access a wide range of cultural expression with very little interference. Each issue's striking visual format—featuring high-quality printing, unusual inserts (fold-outs, removable posters, an audio CD), and dynamic design—enhance 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 publication.

*Esopus* appears twice yearly, in November and May. Each issue of *Esopus* takes 5 months to produce. This process—coordinated solely by editor Tod Lippy—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 (guidelines appear on our website); 2) recommendations and suggestions from the magazine's board of advisors—respected creative professionals hailing from a wide range of disciplines—and from contributors, subscribers, and colleagues; and 3) the editor's 20 years of experience working in the art, film, and publishing fields.

All contributors are approached directly (rather than 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.** A typical issue of *Esopus* includes three long-form contemporary artists' projects—one by an established artist (past contributors have included Richard Tuttle, Jenny Holzer, and Alex Katz) and two by emerging figures. Among the artists who have contributed projects (three per issue) in the past seven years are John Baldessari, Ed Ruscha, Kay Rosen, Richard Misrach, William Christenberry, Allen Ruppersberg, Sylvia Plimack Mangold, and Yvonne Jacquette. 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 out of their financial or geographic reach.

Issues also typically include personal reflections on a wide variety of creative disciplines by practitioners: Past contributors have included ballet choreographer Christopher Wheeldon, lighting designer Jennifer Tipton, poet Suji Kwock Kim, film production designer Thérèse Deprez, *New York Times* crossword-puzzle constructor David Quarfoot, mathematician John Conway, and chef Jody Williams, to name only a few.

Beyond bringing the work of many emerging artists to our readers' attention through its artists' projects, *Esopus* also regularly includes 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, photographs of New York School painters by the late Manhattan attorney Marvin Lazarus, the stunning collages of the severely autistic (and prodigiously talented) 23-year-old Alex Masket, and the photo-dioramas of Mark Hogancamp, a 40-year-old from Kingston, NY, who used art as a way to rehabilitate from a hate-crime attack in 2000.

*Esopus* has also featured short fiction by previously unpublished authors (several of whom have attracted significant interest from the publishing executives among our readers), a series of monologues by the lauded playwright Stephen Adly Guirgis (currently being developed into an off-Broadway play), and, in each issue, a CD of brand-new music created according to a specific

theme. Further realizing our mission of bringing together artist and public, these themes periodically revolve around “Subscriber Invitationals,” for which *Esopus* readers are asked to submit material, such as transcripts of their dreams, then used by musicians as inspiration for songs. A number of these songs have received ample airplay on influential public-radio stations.

In 2006, *Esopus* entered into an exciting partnership with the Museum of Modern Art to create “Modern Artifacts,” a series appearing in every issue that features never-before-seen treasures from MoMA’s archives reproduced in facsimile in order to approximate for readers the experience of handling these archival materials (available by appointment only to arts professionals). *Esopus* also regularly works with institutions such as Harvard’s Fogg Museum, the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, and the Corcoran Art Gallery in Washington, D.C., to produce its “Guarded Opinions” series, for which museum guards offer commentaries on the art they oversee.

**Promotion of emerging voices.** Approximately two-thirds of each issue of *Esopus* features the unadulterated work of artists, writers, filmmakers, musicians, and other creative individuals who are in the early stages of their careers. Publication in *Esopus* often leads to a number of other opportunities for these under-recognized artists. For example, after Kingston, NY–based Mark Hogancamp’s stunning photodiaras were featured for the first time 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*, was completed earlier this year by Jeff Malmberg (who first read about Hogancamp in *Esopus*) and recently won the “Best Documentary” prize at the South By Southwest Film Festival; it will be shown on PBS later this year. 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. The piece in *Esopus 13* about the work of severely autistic Alex Masket was excerpted in the Spring 2010 issue of *The Utne Reader*, bringing Masket’s work to the attention of that award-winning publication’s 100,000 subscribers. *Esopus*’ musical contributors have been cited by the likes of Pitchfork Media, *The New York Times*, and KEXP-FM. Most recently, New York–based musician Tim Fite’s contribution to the *Esopus 14* CD was named “Today’s Top Tune” on KCRW-FM, the influential public-radio station based in Santa Monica, CA.

**Accessibility for general readers.** *Esopus* includes challenging and provocative work by some of the world’s most respected creative talents but makes a point to offer this work 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 “Subscriber Invitationals.” These invitationals invite readers to generate written or visual content that serves as inspiration for contributors’ own work (a recent example is 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).

**Extensive distribution at dramatically subsidized prices.** In seven years and 14 issues, *Esopus* has seen its circulation increase from 3,000 to 10,000 copies. The magazine currently counts subscribers in 49 states and 27 countries and is distributed extensively to bookstores and newsstands throughout the U.S., Canada, Europe, South America, and Asia. Our readership includes professionals from the art, film, theater, music, design, and publishing fields; public libraries, educational institutions, and arts organizations; and, most important to our mission, general readers who have learned about the publication through major features in *The New York Times*, Munich’s *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *China Business News*, and other sources. Offered at a deeply discounted cover price (significantly less than its production cost), *Esopus* reaches an

audience who might not otherwise be able to afford this type of publication and who may be unfamiliar with specialty arts publications.

**Critical Acclaim.** Over the past seven years, *Esopus* has been the subject of over 30 laudatory articles in a wide 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.” Germany’s largest daily newspaper, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, claimed in 2005 that *Esopus* was “as much a work of art as a magazine.” *The Village Voice* picked *Esopus 6* as one of their “Best Summer Reads of 2006,” lauding the magazine as “a forum for the open exchange of artistic ideas and theories, unhampered by the constraints of commercial publishing.” In 2007, *Print* magazine asserted, “*Esopus*—a melding of art, ethnography, and journalism—expands the definition of what a magazine can be.” *Esopus* has been the recipient of numerous awards, from sources as diverse as the *Utne Reader* (which nominated *Esopus* for “Best Design” in its 2007 publishing awards) to *Graphis* (which included the cover of *Esopus 5* in its prestigious 2006 annual). In June, Specific Object named *Esopus* its “2007 Publication of the Year,” and the International Association of Printing House Craftsmen awarded *Esopus 10* with a gold medal in its 2008 “Gallery of Excellence” Competition. 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 SPACE**

In June 2009, with the help of a capacity-building grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation, the Foundation moved from its original 250-square-foot office to a 1,000-square-foot combined office and exhibition space in downtown New York. This intimately scaled space has embarked on an ambitious programming series that includes concerts, recitals, readings, artists' presentations, screenings, lectures, and exhibitions featuring both well-known and emerging voices working in virtually every creative discipline.

**Exhibitions.** Exhibitions in Esopus Space feature work from *Esopus* contributors as well as from emerging and established figures in the contemporary art world in New York City and beyond. In its first year of operation, the space has mounted seven exhibitions, ranging from one-person shows of artists such as Michael Iskowitz, Clayton Patterson, and the late Dwight Ripley to group exhibitions including work from contemporary artists like Roxy Paine, John Baldessari, Judy Pfaff, Oliver Herring, Mickey Smith, and Kerry James Marshall. One of the most popular exhibitions in our first year was “The Assembled Picture Library of New York,” which 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.

**Events.** What makes Esopus Space particularly unique is the opportunities it provides both artists and audience for an authentic, completely unmediated exchange. The space seats just 60 people, and events are meant to feel less like formal presentations than dynamic exchanges between performer and audience. In the past 12 months the space has hosted capacity crowds at artist’s presentations by Mary Ellen Carroll and Chris Doyle, concerts by Sam Amidon, Natureboy, and El Perro Del Mar, a book signing event 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.

**Offsite Activities.** Prior to having its own facilities, the Foundation occasionally programmed well-attended events at arts venues in New York City such as P.S.1/MoMA and The Kitchen. These programs, called “Evenings with Esopus,” generally coincided with the release of an issue, and reflecting the multidisciplinary approach of the magazine, incorporate poetry readings, musical concerts, film screenings, panel discussions, and theatrical performances from magazine contributors. Editor Tod Lippy is regularly invited to speak about the magazine 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, Rice University, Hunter College, and USC’s Roski School of Fine Arts in Los Angeles).

## **ABOUT THE ESOPUS FOUNDATION LTD.**

**Personnel/Boards.** From the inception of the Esopus Foundation Ltd. to February 2007, all activities, from the editing, design, production, promotion, and distribution of *Esopus* to fundraising, bookkeeping, and virtually every other administrative function concerning the Foundation were handled by one person, 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*. It was clear from the inception of the Foundation that having a single employee would not only significantly reduce operating costs; it would also further the Foundation’s goal of minimizing “interference” between our 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—a level of trust between artist, editor, and audience could be established and maintained.

This situation, however desirable from a financial and philosophical standpoint, became less and less tenable as the circulation of *Esopus* increased. Fortunately, the Foundation received a significant capital-infusion grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts at the beginning of 2007, with a portion of these funds earmarked to cover the salary of a part-time administrative assistant. Currently, Keriann Kohler, a recent USC graduate, handles the majority of administrative tasks, from subscription fulfillment to bookkeeping to database management. Lippy continues, however, to edit, design, and coordinate production for *Esopus* by himself.

The Esopus Foundation functions with the invaluable contributions of two boards: its five trustees (including Lippy), who meet annually and who have offered important financial and logistical advice and support, and the magazine’s Advisory Board, currently composed of 15 leading figures from nearly as many different creative disciplines, who offer suggestions for potential contributors and content.

**Web Presence.** The Esopus Foundation, *Esopus* magazine, and Esopus Space have a significant Internet presence. The Foundation’s site ([www.esopusfoundation.org](http://www.esopusfoundation.org)) offers detailed information about our mission, news about current and future activities, a list of our funders, audio clips from past events, and a secure donation form. The site for *Esopus* ([www.esopusmag.com](http://www.esopusmag.com)) provides in-depth previews of each issue’s contents, web-exclusive material (including streaming audio and video) not available in the magazine, a Flash viewer to allow visitors to read select content from our sold-out back issues (*Esopus* 1–7) and a Flash mp3 player that features full-length streaming songs from our sold-out CDs and clips from the most recent issues. The site also includes a comprehensive listing of past press coverage, a contact page with submission guidelines, a regularly updated list of the approximately 700 stores where *Esopus* is sold, a mailing list opt-in form, and a secure area for subscriptions and single-issue orders. *Esopusmag.com* receives over 100,000 page views each month, and generates the vast majority of our sales, subscriptions, and submissions. The Esopus Space website ([www.esopusspace.org](http://www.esopusspace.org)) includes regularly updated information about upcoming events and

exhibitions as well as an archive section that offers downloadable images, press releases, and links to relevant reviews and critical mentions of past activities. In addition, the *Esopus* magazine Facebook fan page provides visitors with announcements of upcoming activities at the space as well as hundreds of photographs and videos from past events.

**Public and Private Support.** There may be no better indicator of our success than the substantial support we have received from a wide variety of sources in our first seven years of existence. As outlined above, *Esopus* is deliberately priced well below its cost of production in order to attract a broad readership. Furthermore, to provide that readership with access to creative expression with no commercial interference, there is never 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 30% of gross revenue) and expenses. Over the years the *Esopus* Foundation has been the recipient of significant grants from the following public and private organizations: The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, The Greenwall Foundation, The Lily Auchincloss Foundation, The American Center Foundation, The Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation, The Fifth Floor Foundation, The Coby 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 Jane Henson Foundation, 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).

**Donations in Kind.** The Foundation has been aggressive (and increasingly successful) in soliciting donations from paper companies, resulting in a savings of approximately \$15,000 per issue. Other vendors—technology companies, computer consultants, and even specialty-ink manufacturers—have offered donations in services and goods in exchange for subscriptions, extra copies of issues, and of course, acknowledgment on our donors page. Perhaps most significantly, our printer, located in Winnipeg, Canada, has helped us to dramatically reduce costs through a combination of creative thinking, flexibility, and generosity.

## **FUTURE PLANS**

The *Esopus* Foundation plans to continue a twice-yearly publication schedule with *Esopus*, expecting an increase in circulation consistent with past growth, and will continue to expand its online offerings. It will also maintain a full programming schedule of events and exhibitions in *Esopus* Space.

Besides expanding its efforts to solicit individual donations, the Foundation is actively pursuing funding from a wide range of institutional sources for 2008 and beyond. These include The Peter Norton Foundation, The Jerome Foundation, the Edward John Noble Foundation, the Altman Foundation, the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation and a number of others. We will also reapply for continued support from The National Endowment for the Arts, and expect to see our multi-year grants from NYSCA's Literature and Visual Arts Programs renewed in 2011.