

arts

York Grad's Proper Tales Press is an exercise in optimism



Photo: PETER YU

York alumni Stuart Ross has been operating a small alternative press since 1979. Except for an initial agreement with his authors, Ross shoulders the burden.

By KEVIN CONNOLLY

It's difficult to be optimistic these days if you're a Canadian poet. More and more, poetry seems to be appealing to an elite group of mostly poets. Even well-known writers, such as Nobel prize nominee Irving Layton, aren't able to make a living on their poetry alone. Publishing companies, if they choose to bring out a book of poetry, know they are setting themselves up to lose money. Art councils have guidelines that prevent unpublished writers from receiving grants.

It is this poor financial climate which has spawned the appearance of a number of small, alternative presses. Usually devoted to publishing the work of one or two writers (and, by and large, self-publishing ventures), such presses generally lose money, and have a very short life span.

One which has fared better than most is Proper Tales Press,

founded in 1979 by York Alumni Stuart Ross. He began modestly, selling two or three xeroxed sheets for 50 cents at poetry readings, but has since expanded into a larger, and comparatively successful alternative press. Last year, Ross published three titles, and has already matched that total in 1984. He plans to publish what he calls "a very important" book of criticism in the near future by Toronto writer Paul Stuewe. Ross claims that the book "has the potential to overturn the entire Canadian literary industry."

Ross hopes that the new book will mark the beginning of a more commercially successful phase in his publishing. Like most small press editors he operates at a loss, but comes close to breaking even in the long run. His own work turns a modest profit, but he is lucky if he breaks even on the other writers he publishes. Ross is unique in that he takes most of the financial risk himself. Except for an initial agreement with the poets to purchase (at cost) booklets, as needed, he is responsible for all financing, and must retrieve his money as the poet sells his work.

Most of the authors that publish through Proper Tales sell their work in the street. They choose a busy corner downtown and, wearing a placard, sell their work in the street for a few dollars apiece. Ross himself takes care of bulk sales (on consignment) to some downtown bookstores, but by and large, the poet is responsible for his own sales. Ross was inspired by writers like Crad Kilodney, who have been distributing their work in the same manner since the late '70s. Ross says that it's the best way to get his work into the public's hands.

"There are so many magazines out there, most of which publish garbage. Crad Kilodney has had his work in over 70 magazines and has found that it does nothing for his career. The best way is to sell it yourself. No one is going to push my stuff as much as I will."

Ross says that the Canadian media leave poets no choice but to publish their own work. "Canada likes to make a couple of literary heroes and no one else gets any type of publicity. It's convenient for the critics but terribly unfair to other writers." Though he is excited about the small press industry, Ross has also become concerned with the quality of work that is being published. In an effort to give his work, and the work of other serious writers more credibility, Ross has founded *Mondo Hunkamooga*, a bi-monthly magazine of reviews, essays, and interviews designed to expose the best of the small press publications.

Mondo has been Ross' most successful venture so far, attracting critical attention and over 75 subscribers in its short history. Founded in July of 1983, Ross hopes the journal will be a "break-even" project by next issue. As one might guess from its nonsensical title, *Mondo Hunkamooga* is meant as a reaction

to the glossy, overpriced quarterlies with names like *Descant*, *Impulse*, and *Antheus*. It costs only 50¢ an issue.

Proper Tales' latest releases are two small books of poetry—*The Transparent Neighbour* by Wain Ewing, and *ANT PATH* by John M. Bennett. Ross describes Ewing as "a brilliant undiscovered writer" whose poetry touches on surrealism and "automatic writing." He describes Ewing as having an "other world" vision, and says that his work should be approached as if it were a painting rather than a book of poetry. "If you go in looking exclusively for meaning, you're unlikely to find it."

Bennett's book includes some apocalyptic poetry and some visually interesting concrete work. Ross describes him as "the madman from Ohio," and sees his work as "subversive" and disturbing. "We don't have enough poetry that disturbs in Canada, and we don't have enough humorous writing either," adds Ross. Despite his criticisms, Ross has found plenty to be optimistic about. He feels that his street vending has exposed his work much better than any regular publisher could have, and is particularly encouraged by the diversity of his clientele.

"We don't have enough poetry that disturbs."

"I sell to secretaries, bankers, and security guards as well as to students. I'm hitting all sorts of people who would never come into contact with poetry, who would never have considered reading it, and had them come back to tell me how much they enjoyed it."

Ross also describes a reading of sound poetry he and a friend presented outside the Eaton Centre on Yonge Street. He said that the reading attracted about 50 or 60 people, and although many didn't understand what they were hearing, they were still interested and entertained.

Ross feels that Canadians must expand their ideas about poetry to include some of the less conventional forms if the commercial climate is to change. With the continued success of Proper Tales, Ross hopes to expand his outfit into a more commercially viable part-time venture. In the meantime he and his colleagues will continue their entrepreneurial wizardry on the streets of Toronto.

For more information, you can write to Ross at P.O. Box 789—Station F—Toronto, M4X 2N7

AGYU show questions the nature of modern art

By GAYLE FRASER

Turbulence, the new show at the Art Gallery of York University (AGYU), is a confusing but thought-provoking study of technology in the modern age.

Upon entering the gallery one is confronted with large stark black and white prints, tape recorders, a collage of albums and their jackets, video tapes, and a broadcast of a radio show. The content is obviously related to the themes of technology, computerization and loss of humanity, nothing new in the 1984 of George Orwell. The show becomes interesting when the viewer sees a blown-up list of the topics covered on the radio show. This, combined with a quick reading of the show's catalog is an intriguing twist.

In 1981, the two visual artists responsible for *Turbulence*, Sam Krizan and Tony McCauley, began a weekly radio series of the same name at Fanshawe College in London, Ontario that discussed and explored art. The show evolved out of their feelings of geographical isolation in London and alienation from the cultural centers that play host to current trends in art. The radio shows cover a broad range of discussion and music concerning art, with programs entitled "A Bit of The (Art) '50s," "Recent Italian Art," and "Satan."

Since 1981, the artists have enlarged their original concept so that *Turbulence* now encompasses a longer and more frequent radio show, a magazine, several audio and video tapes, and various prints. The physical



Tony McCauley stands proudly beside one of his works in *Turbulence*, a multi-media show currently on display at AGYU.

manifestations of this larger program are what are on view right now at AGYU.

While interesting, it's an open question whether any of this constitutes art. There is a current belief in art that the "art" in "contemporary art" is merely an extension of the theory that underlies it. If you accept this, you will accept *Turbulence* as art. But if you believe that art must stand on its own and have meaning regardless of the artist's intentions, the show will prove disappoint-

ing.

The show seems to lack the sincerity of the *Turbulence* radio programs and leads one to wonder if the artists have become victims of their own "media-ization." It seems that this exhibition functions better as public relations than as art. AGYU curator, Michael Greenwood, points out that all art can be seen as public relations, and in a sense he is right. On the other hand, assuming this is art, then it may be "bad" art in that first, it

doesn't do justice to the artists, and second, it is a good starting place. But where to go from here?

One is left confused and questioning. The bottom line, though, is that *Turbulence* should be seen because it raises a lot of important questions. It allows you to start to think about the function of art and art theory, and it raises some of the relevant questions about humanity in a technical and impersonal world.