

Some Latent Linguistic Irreverence: Alta L. Price on language learning while printmaking



Image sources: Alta L. Price, World Editions

As an undergraduate arriving at Rhode Island School of Design in 1997, Alta L. Price was dead-set on studying German at “the school across the street” — Brown University. Growing up in New York’s Mohawk Valley, Price had fallen in love with the language rather by accident as a teenager after stopping by the village green to browse a used book sale raising funds for the local library. They left with *New Directions 19*, a 1966 anthology containing four poems by the German writer Hans Magnus Enzensberger translated into English, and an appetite whet by the realization that literature could live across languages. In PVD, Price received approval from both RISD and Brown to begin their first German classes. A requirement: climbing College Hill.

“The presence of German in my life is definitely like a bizarre childhood dream that just insisted on surfacing in strange ways no matter where I was or am,” said Price.

At RISD, an initial interest in drawing shifted toward printmaking, following a taste of lithography with Andrew Raftery and an introduction to the intaglio technique led by visiting professor Carol Wax. They wandered the RISD Museum and lingered in the campus library amidst the sights, sounds and smells of half a million prints and clippings held in the Picture Collection.

Although Price hoped to study abroad in Mainz, Germany — home to the Gutenberg Museum — departmental requirements limited the option. Instead, they followed the advice of a drawing instructor, Tom Mills, to set sight on a junior-year honors program in Rome. In preparation, Price said PVD became “my own personal Babel.” They juggled German at Brown, Italian at RISD, and “a welcome respite from all language” in the studio. While studying in Italy, Price met an international network of German-speaking artists at a conference and exhibition in Tuscany.

Adept in both German and Italian upon returning to RI, Price found the art of translation across their studies, from philosophy to handmade paper and writing systems to the literature of the Bible. During a

class in graphic design, Price discovered the professor John Hegnauer alternated the course title between an introduction to the *hand-carved* letter and an introduction to the *hand-drawn* letter. The fluidity and variability of that naming, said Price, “might have spoken to some latent linguistic irreverence lurking within me.”

From PVD, Price moved to the outskirts of Washington, D.C. for their first job after graduation, at an art center in Riverdale, Maryland. An interest in reconnecting with fellow RISD alums later brought them to New York. During nearly two decades in Long Island City, Queens, they worked in publishing and earned an MFA at Hunter College. Price now resides in Chicago.

As well as papermaking and printmaking, Price runs a consultancy specializing in literary translation. Their works range from artistic resources *Alfa-Beta: The Study and Design of Type* and *The Book Cover in the Weimar Republic* to narratives like Alexander Kluge’s montage *Anyone Who Utters a Consoling Word is a Traitor* and Anna Goldenberg’s family memoir of Jewish exile and return, *I Belong to Vienna*. PEN America named Price as one of five finalists for its 2022 PEN Translation Prize for their translation of *New Year* by Juli Zeh from German.

“Radfahren ist pure Entspannung,” Price construes as “Cycling is pure relaxation” in *New Year*’s opening. Like many of Price’s experiences, the pages resurface a memory of PVD. During Price’s senior year, they were bicycling when a pre-med student opened a car door directly into their path. A helmet protected their head from the pavement. More than two decades passed, until 2021, before Price rode a bike again. In *New Year*, they continue as the protagonist “shifts gears, pushes down harder on the pedals, and forces himself to keep breathing calmly.”

“I am only a translator today,” said Price, “thanks to a string of serendipitous events during my years in RI and the ongoing support of folks I met there, at both RISD and Brown. ”

Alta L. Price’s translation of Juli Zeh’s novel New Year was published in 2021 by World Editions.