

A Short History of *The Largest Living Bird*

In 1955, after living in San Francisco for five years, David Ruff and his wife, the poet and playwright Holly Beye, decided to return to the east coast. Ruff was unwilling to turn The Print Workshop (TPW) into a commercial venture and longed to return to painting. Before selling his equipment and stock and closing TPW, he wrote the poems in this book, did the three copperplate engravings, handset the type, printed the texts and images on French Arches paper and assembled one set. It was the last work to come off the presses at TPW and Ruff's last work as a graphic artist and printer.

Ruff took the pages and prototype with him when he and Beye left San Francisco for upstate New York. Over the next ten years, the packages of pages moved from Mount Pleasant, to Bearsville to Byrdcliffe, then Woodstock. Ruff painted. He had shows in Woodstock and New York City; built a house/painter's studio and a writer's studio; planted a garden; did odd jobs at the Woodstock Artists Association; was active in Kingston-area CORE; marched from Selma to Montgomery; spent the summer of 1965 working for COFO in rural Mississippi. He meant to have the pages bound but other things seemed more urgent. *The Largest Living Bird* was stored in his studio, remaining there after the couple divorced in 1965.

David and his second wife, Susan Finnel (me), moved to Europe (first Holland, then Italy). He had the one set of pages he'd assembled but the remaining copies were somewhere in the studio in Woodstock. About twenty-five years later, when we were living in the country in northern Italy, Holly wrote to say she'd found them. *The Largest Living Bird* came to Italy with her brother Charles in mid-August 1992. After we moved to Turin in September 1993, David looked into the possibility of having the book bound but nothing worked out. His sudden death in June 2007 seemed to have put an end to the project.

When in 2016 a Turin art publisher asked me about books David had printed at TPW, I explained that David didn't hold on to things. He traveled light. And then I thought of *The Largest Living Bird*. Now, 62 years after they came off the press at TPW, the pages have been bound and have become a book. After all its stopping places – hamlets in the Hudson Valley, sublets in Amsterdam, the stone farmhouse in the Italian Piedmont, the former synagogue in the center of Turin – *The Largest Living Bird* has taken shape, as always it was meant to, and is in your hands.