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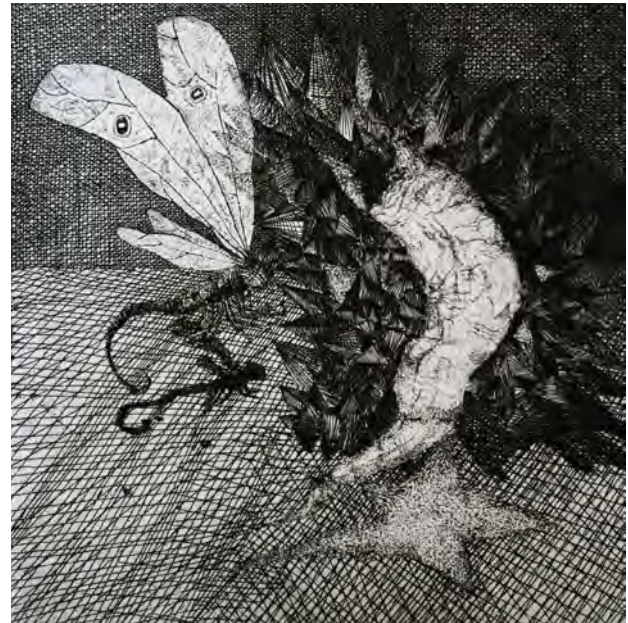
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**CERAMICS BY PETER HAYES & CARINA CISCATO
GLASS BY BEN YOUNG, BRENDEN SCOTT FRENCH
& SHELLEY JAMES; TEXTILES BY ANNIKA EKDAHL
WOOD BY ELEANOR LAKELIN & JIM KELLER**

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'Jack a Bee', 1983, artist's book, 10 etchings and text, 13 loose sections in paper cover and solander box, 70 x 50 cm. Edition of 5



'Jack a Bee', 1983, artist's book, 10 etchings and text, 13 loose sections in paper cover and solander box, 70 x 50 cm. Edition of 5

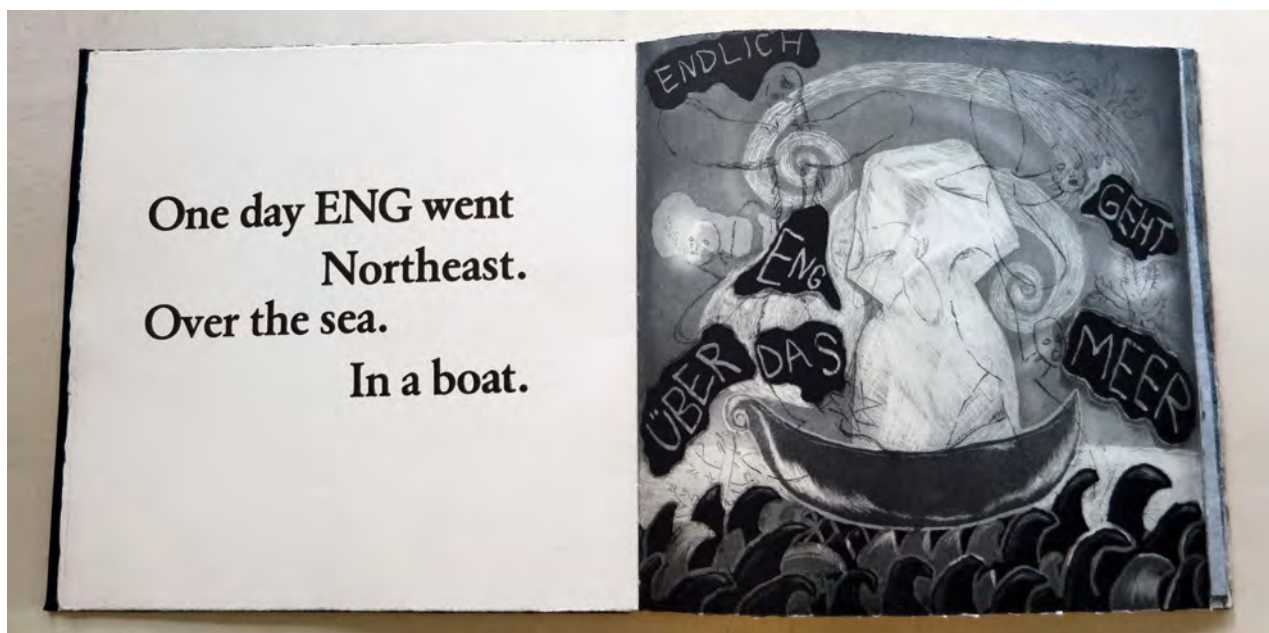
Profiles in Print – Paul Uhlmann

"I will premise that I do not attribute to nature either beauty or deformity, order or confusion. Only in relation to our imagination can things be called beautiful or deformed, ordered or confused."

– Baruch Spinoza, *Epistle 15*¹

DESPITE his surname, Paul Uhlmann came from a very Australian background. Both of his parents were fourth generation Australians, his father of mixed German, Scottish and English ancestry, and his mother of Irish Catholic stock. His father was in the military, an artillery officer, so the family moved from one posting to another every couple of years while his mother taught in the Catholic education system. 'She had a strong faith', he recently recalled. 'She instilled within me a sense that the divine is in all things. A tree, for example, was alive with God's presence – always. I believe that this kind of pantheism is strong within Irish history. I was intrigued to discover, during my PhD studies, that pantheism is also deeply rooted within Germanic understandings of nature.'²

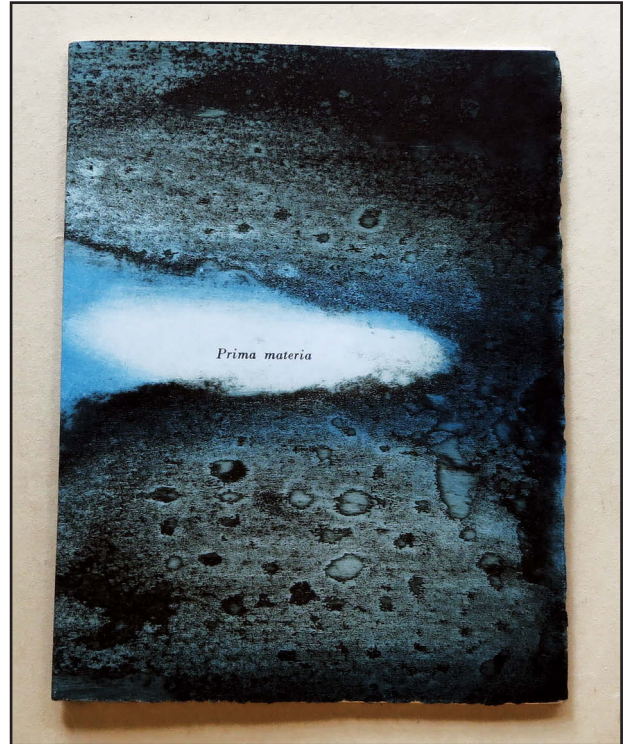
Nevertheless, Paul Uhlmann's art came to be imbued with a peculiarly European sensibility and often chose as its departure point the work of European artists and adopted essentially a European philosophical stance. He was born in Parramatta, Sydney in 1962 into a family of six children, but as part of a military family, by the time he was nine they had lived in Sydney, Canberra, Brisbane, Townsville and Woodside Hills near Adelaide before returning and settling in Canberra in 1971. There were no art books at home and there was little encouragement for art at school. Fortunately, at the all-boys Marist Catholic College he encountered a fellow traveller, a soul mate, one who was equally interested in art. 'I befriended a very quiet bespectacled boy who always drew human figures from the feet up – I always began



'Eng', 1987, prints, artist's books, etching and aquatint, printed in black ink, from one plate, sheet 24.5 x 24 cm. Edition of 10



'Absence', 2000–04, artist's book, seven photo-etchings printed in gold and graphite dust, 14.6 x 7.4 cm



'Prima Materia', 1992, artist's book cover, coloured etching, 14 etchings and letterpress text, 19 x 15 cm. Edition of 5

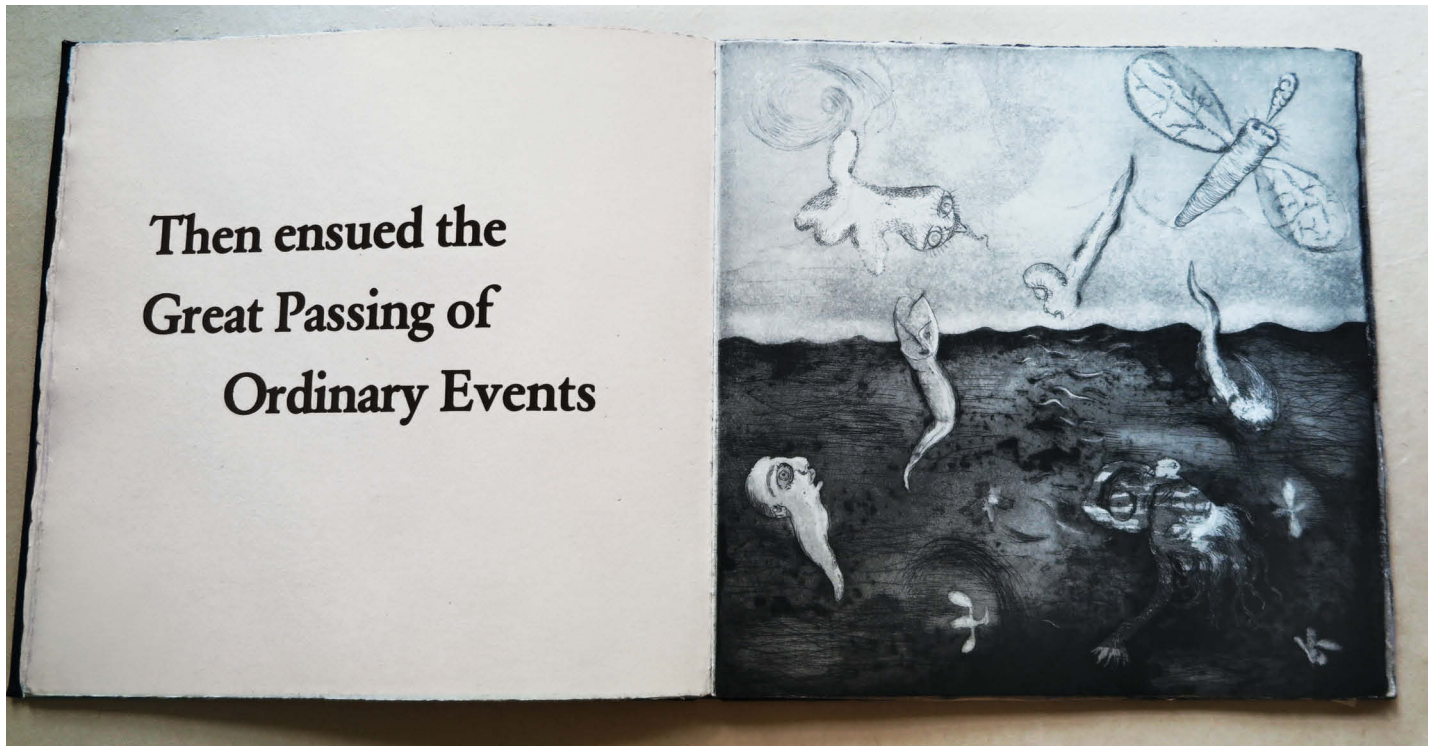
my figures with the head – however, this shy quiet lad, Paul McDermott, had other ways and means to tackle the problem of conjuring images. He was the only other boy at school to take art seriously and so we swapped information and bonded during those years.³

In 1980, the two 17-year-olds were accepted into the Canberra School of Art, which had just been revamped and re-established by the energetic new director, a printmaker from Cologne, Udo Sellbach, who adapted for the school a fundamentally Bauhaus model of a series of workshops with intentionally porous borders. Sellbach sought out some of the finest artists of the time to head these workshops and many of them came from Europe and brought with them European concepts of art and art teaching that were in contrast to the strongly Anglicised traditions that still prevailed in many of the other Australian art schools. Uhlmann entered the Graphic Investigation Workshop with the brilliant Czech-born artist Petr Herel at the helm, who brought with him an extensive experience of Eastern European and Parisian art practice, particularly in the area of printmaking and book arts. The adjacent Printmaking Workshop was headed by the German-born master Jörg Schmeisser who brought with him the exacting discipline of multi-plate intaglio colour printmaking. Uhlmann benefited immensely from this influx of European-trained graphic masters, all of whom became key players in the upsurge of activity in book arts which took place in Canberra at this time.⁴

The curriculum at the art school appeared fluid and was built around “immersive studio teaching”, where students were encouraged to find their own voice. Uhlmann recalls, ‘I was unsure what I had got myself into until a few months into my first year, when Petr Herel brought into the studio a series of pencil and ink drawings that he had made from as early as the age of 13 through to his twenties. These works were incredibly fine renderings of angels and mystic beings on small pieces of paper.

'Spinoza: a letter in fragments, letter XV (XXXII)', 2013, cover of a unique book with typewritten text, containing six etchings by the artist, printed on Kozo Japanese paper with loose leaf etchings and folded pages, 26 x 16 cm





'Eng – Passing Events', 1987, etching and aquatint, printed in black ink from one plate, sheet 24.5 x 24 cm. Edition of 10



This arcane mysticism struck a cord with me as I was at the time very interested in Max Ernst and William Blake. Herel's works were Eastern European Roman Catholic projections of invisible beings and indeterminate states of understanding. As I was steeped in the Catholic tradition, which communicates complex ideas through a world of imagery, I understood intuitively the other-worldly images he presented, more than I understood how to make such work myself. But I made steps towards understanding. I remember him passing to me once a few words from Gaston Bachelard: 'the world is large, but in us it is as deep as the sea'. His teaching in a way was very subtle ... Both Jörg Schmeisser and Herel made a lasting impression on me – they were part of a continuous tradition from Europe, where there was respect for creative endeavour. In many ways their example was like passing a baton on to me from this studio tradition, which relied on immersive deep contemplation with a respect for practice and history.⁵

Uhlmann's early work at art school included a series of small wash and ink drawings of portly men caught at twilight, possibly a metaphor for the twilight of our civilisation. He was interested in the writings of Carl Jung⁶ and explored various forms of automatism in invoking dream-like states, where chance shapes made by inks on damp paper evoked various associative realities. By his second year he became preoccupied with etching, in part for its diaristic qualities, where the whole process of creation of the final image is preserved, but also for the potential to surrender to serendipity and to allow the alchemy of technique to take over. It became a collaboration with acid and inks, where the artist was a participant, rather than a dictator. 'I realised printmaking was a cognitive space and that suited my temperament – this seemed like a tremendous freedom to me.'⁷

Uhlmann produced a series of etchings titled *Jack a Bee* for his 1983 graduating exhibition. They were all hard ground etchings, where the plate was covered with wax rosin and then exposed to smoke, so that the images could be gradually released – quite literally, as if seen through a glass darkly. He strapped the etching needle into a clutch pencil with tape and then began chipping '*Spinoza: a letter in fragments, letter XV (XXXII)*', (detail)



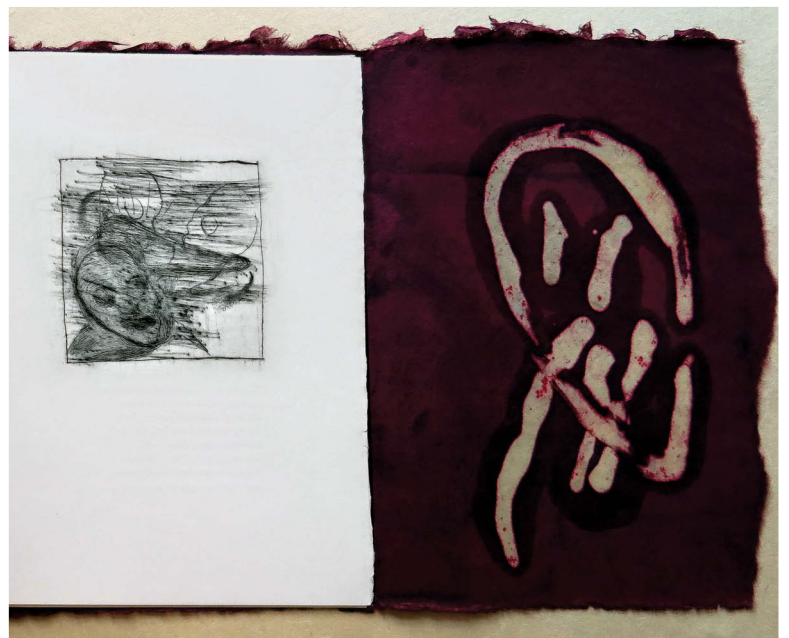
'Finsternis', 1991, artist's book, six etchings printed recto and verso on three sheets; hand-set letterpress text, portfolio (closed) 26.2 x 16 cm. Edition of 10

away at the plate with tiny dashes, dots and strokes until strange images emerged, such as trees sprouting heads, birds decaying while in flight, where celestial imagery is intermingled with surreal insects and their transparent wings. At the time Uhlmann was studying the etchings of Giorgio Morandi, while the narrative for the series was provided by his own penned horror story influenced by original Brothers Grimm tales where a monster tears to pieces a maiden whose dismembered parts then merge into the fields, water and the sky. A tale of horror was thus sublimated into a unified cosmic worldview. While at art school, he and Paul McDermott formed a cabaret group called "the gigantic fly", that performed anarchistic Dada-like skits and paraded in masks through the centre of town. Subsequently they worked with the Doug Anthony All Stars, with McDermott joining them as their main performer and Uhlmann turning to full-time art making.

Following his graduation, Uhlmann spent the following six years as his *Wanderjahre*, the traditional journeyman years, where the artist on finishing their apprenticeship would travel for a number of years gaining experience before establishing their own workshop. He lived and worked in Adelaide, Melbourne, London and Glasgow, spent a year at Germany's second largest college of fine arts, the Hochschule für Bildende Künste Braunschweig on a DAAD scholarship, lived at the Besozzo Australia Council Studio in Italy and worked at the Rotterdam Academy of Fine Arts on an International Samstag Scholarship. It was while studying in Germany that he met Thomas Gosebruch, a German colleague, who would spend the whole night working on a printing plate before affirming that the resulting print was "so beautiful", his hands shaking uncontrollably from emotion and exhaustion. This inspired Uhlmann to name the imprint for his artist's books, as those made with "trembling hands". During this period, artist's books gained an increasing prominence in Uhlmann's oeuvre where he could invent a private narrative and explore the physical and meta-physical processes in printmaking. *Eng* was one of these

'I have longed to move away poem by Dylan Thomas' (detail), 1990, artist's book, four etchings and letterpress, seven loose sections in dyed paper cover, 23 x 18 cm. Edition of 7

fantasy books made in Germany in 1987, in which the character *Eng* (German for narrow) becomes a Candide-like character who explores a bizarre world where reality merges into fantasy. Darkness and an eschatological atmosphere pervade a number of his artist's books as he increasingly attacked his etching plates with mechanical tools to produce deep pools of black. In *Finsternis*, 1991, the darkness pervades as the book becomes a form of meditation on the total absence of light. He recently noted, 'I fell in love with a sense of blackness which seems to breathe through such German workshops. I haven't really been able to recreate this sense of blackness here – though I've tried and my work is permeated with it these past 29 years. This blackness, of course, is metaphysical. It is also alchemical. I would work with layers of aquatint and etching to achieve the blacks I was after. I would work with neat acid – often applying it with a brush to achieve a watercolour effect – I would watch the toxic fumes rise off the plates and hear and smell the dangerous effect. I would etch lines and figures into the plates

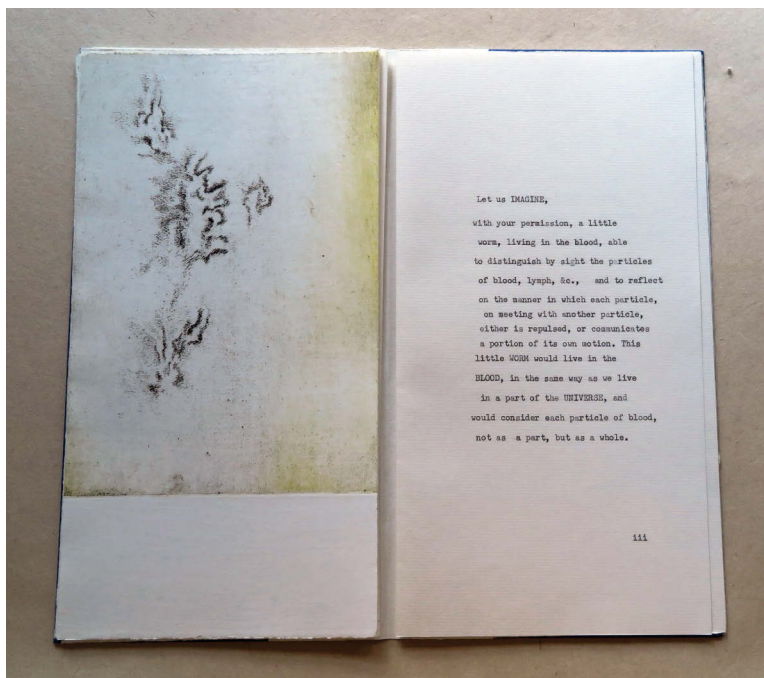




'Absence', 2000-04, artist's book cover, photo-etching, portfolio (closed) 14.6 x 7.4 cm



'Find meat on bones poem by Dylan Thomas', 1990, artist's book



'Spinoza: a letter in fragments, letter XV (XXXII) - Let Us Imagine'

and then cover the whole plate with areas of blackness and then try to rediscover the images by burnishing back the layers. We all printed with blacks – warm blacks – red-blacks – blue-blacks. I asked a technician what his favourite colour was – “schwarz, schwarz ist immer schön”. There was no need for any other colour in this upside down divided world ... [In Germany] I was immersed in a long tradition – I felt myself to be part of it. When I went to study German in Freiburg someone said when they marked my name off the role ... “du kommst zurück!” [you have come home]. I felt at home and alienated all at once.’⁸

When he returned to Australia in 1988, he was offered a teaching position in the Graphic Investigation Workshop at the Canberra School of Art, where he stayed for four years while he completed a Master of Arts course on artists' books. Several years later, in 1996, he accepted a post at the Edith Cowan University in Western Australia and has been teaching and making art in the State ever since. One of the major artist's books to emerge in the new century is *Absence*, 2000-04, where using as his source material photographs he had taken in Besozzo a decade earlier, as well as images from his everyday life in Australia, he printed them on Japanese kozo paper using gold dust and graphite dust. The resulting image is both present yet ephemeral – it appears to belong to another frozen world, which remains intangible and transient. It is these qualities of impermanence, the shifting of sand and a deep internal contemplation, which have become some of the central preoccupations of his art.

The Dutch 17th century philosopher Baruch Spinoza has become a recent obsession for Uhlmann, with his radical theological views, ideas of “one substance” and notions of nature and beauty overriding youthful religious tendencies. On one hand, Spinoza took him into a PhD at the RMIT, while on the other hand, he inspired him to create one of his most precious artist's books, *Spinoza: a letter in fragments, letter XV (XXXII)* in 2013. The cover consists of inverted images of clouds, while inside, faint, trace-like etchings accompany a typescript of Spinoza's famous letter about the worm in the blood, where the philosopher argues that the worm in the blood sees itself only as part of the blood, just as we see ourselves as separate from the sky and trees. We are, however, part of all living things. The imprint of the book remains with “trembling hands”.

Although Paul Uhlmann's art has changed over the past 30 years, it has also remained constant, like an ever intensifying spiral forever looking in on itself. It is a deeply contemplative form of art, where all extraneous matter has been expelled from the field of vision until only mysterious echoes and traces remain and they are allowed to echo through the shape of time.

Emeritus Professor Sasha Grishin AM, FAHA,
Australian National University, Canberra

FOOTNOTES

1. Spinoza letter to Henry Oldenburg, letter 15 PO1, translation R.H.M. Elwes, *The chief works of Benedict de Spinoza*, vol 2, London, George Bell and Sons, 1901, p.290.
2. Paul Uhlmann, written interview with the author, 3 July 2015.
3. Paul Uhlmann, written interview with the author, 3 July 2015.
4. Sasha Grishin, “Books in the Canberra region: the golden years”, *The LaTrobe Journal*, No 95 (2015), pp.32-41.
5. Paul Uhlmann, written interview with the author, 3 July 2015.
6. At art school he read Carl Jung's *Man and his Symbols* (1964).
7. Claire Colebrook, *New literary histories: New historicism and contemporary criticism*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1997, p.206.
8. Paul Uhlmann, written interview with the author, 3 July 2015.