

A Form of Reading – “The emergence of relations among things, more than the things themselves, always gives rise to new meanings.”
Aldo Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography*

In a recent unpublished conversation with graphic design students from Hamburg, designer Julia Born explained the task of the graphic designer and bookmaker as that of giving structure and form to ideas contained in existing textual and visual material. This implies a translation of existing content in order to make it comprehensible, but also opens a door to the interpretation of such content. In Dutch, *vormgeving*, or giving form, is a common name for all kinds of design: architecture, fashion, interior and product design, as well as book design. The following paragraphs have been occasioned by Julia Born receiving the Jan Tschichold Award for her outstanding book design.

Books are to things what houses are to spaces. Both are common forms that have their exterior and interior arranged in a specific way. But the commonality of books and houses far exceeds the structural parallelism of walls and roofs and covers and spines. Contrary to books, visual communication does not need a specific space: it can be calibrated to work in any location, since words, signs and images can be scaled up or down, as required by task – from the tiny postage stamp, marking its envelope, to the wall-sized billboard, covering a building. Books, on the contrary, rarely exceed the format that makes them portable, and are thus, to a degree, autonomous things that can be exchanged and carried, kept and lost. Books need a room, at the cost of their readers and other things; they *take* space.

The amount of space they take, in fact, is exactly their volume. Books are volumes among other things. Even a thin volume of poems occupies a certain volume, and an encyclopaedia takes more space than a bible. A provisional formula of this equation could be: A room – books owned = space available. The space available around the books – those too tightly packed on shelves, piled up on one’s working table, forgotten on the sofa, tower-

ing or scattered over the floor – can be compared to the space between the lines of a poem, between the signs within the line and even to the spaces enclosed inside the letters themselves. See the large oval plot inside an *O*, bowls of a *B* or nooks of a *K*. It is the so-called free space, the void, the negative space that is a condition for the meaning of signs and words on pages or things in rooms.

A leap, similarly, is never into the void, as there is no void but always a pavement below, a row of houses, a tree in the far and a man on a bicycle passing by or falling into a canal – and all of this in a rectangular frame. A similar topography can be read in the space of text, determined by margins, spacing between the characters and lines, differentiated by sizes and types of fonts. In space, gravity defines basic relations between things: they stand, fall or break under their own weight or the weight of others. Artist Bas Jan Ader brilliantly demonstrated this in works reminiscent of slips of the tongue that performed the fall, exposing the pitfalls of gravity. Other artists who searched for linguistic quality in inanimate things include Robert Smithson, who was concerned with movements of matter in relation to history and geology, but also to words and language, and Carl Andre, who took on mass and structure, solid and plane, and stated that “a thing is a hole in a thing it is not”. Such a sentence could just as well apply to the matter printed on the page as to all things material, or to the work of Gordon Matta-Clark, who cut into buildings – floors, walls and ceilings, foundations and roofs – to expose architecture’s internal *syntax* with a saw.

Between things, a provisional balance can be established by intentional action that for a time prevents them from falling or breaking apart, but the pull of gravity will eventually write their destiny. In his architectural credo, *A Scientific Autobiography*, architect Aldo Rossi quotes a striking example given by Max Planck to explain the principle of the conservation of energy. He describes a “mason who with great effort heaved a block of stone up on the roof of a house,” then notes: “The expended energy does not get lost; it remains stored for many years, never diminished, latent in the block of stone, until one day it

happens that the block slides off the roof and falls on the head of a passerby, killing him”.

Books kill, too, but much less often by falling from shelves. It is the content and form, not the mass, that matters here. There is an art of arranging interiors to suit the taste of their users and the function they serve, and there is an art of making books and of arranging letters and lines on the page. There is also the art of building fonts, in which Jan Tschichold was a remarkable figure. He was not only concerned with designing fonts and layouts, but also with typologies and a criteria of universally ‘good’ design that would, if applied consequently, make our lives better, by making the pages we read clearer and the books that bind them more beautiful – thereby helping to change our consciousness and, finally, our existence. Many progressive artists, architects, book designers and typographers shared this truly modern belief, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s. And it still held true in 1943, when the competition for the most beautiful Swiss books was established at Tschichold’s initiative, though elsewhere it was becoming crystal clear that better design does not automatically make a better human being, which Tschichold also knew best, having fled Nazi Germany in 1933 to settle and work in Switzerland.

And what makes a good book today? The title of Moyra Davey’s monograph *Speaker Receiver* (Sternberg Press), which Julia Born designed in Amsterdam for Kunsthalle Basel last year, describes well the two opposing but correlating modes of making: one of ‘inventing form’, which has to do with producing something out of the void, similar to an act of speaking, and the other of ‘giving form’, or finding a form to receive the matter of language. Seen in this light, Born’s design would be no less than an active form of reading itself.

Adam Szymczyk, Director, Kunsthalle Basel

*Every year the jury bestows, independently of the books submitted for the competition, the Jan Tschichold Award in memory of the typographer on whose initiative the Swiss book design competition was conceived in 1943. The Federal Department of Home Affairs (FDHA) entrusted the jury in 1997 with the task of annually awarding this honour to an individual, a group or an institution for outstanding book design achievement. The Jan Tschichold Award, which is endowed with 15,000 Swiss francs, was awarded this year to the Swiss graphic designer Julia Born (*1975). Born lives and works in Amsterdam, Netherlands.*

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