

# The Form of the Book Book

2009

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Richard Hollis

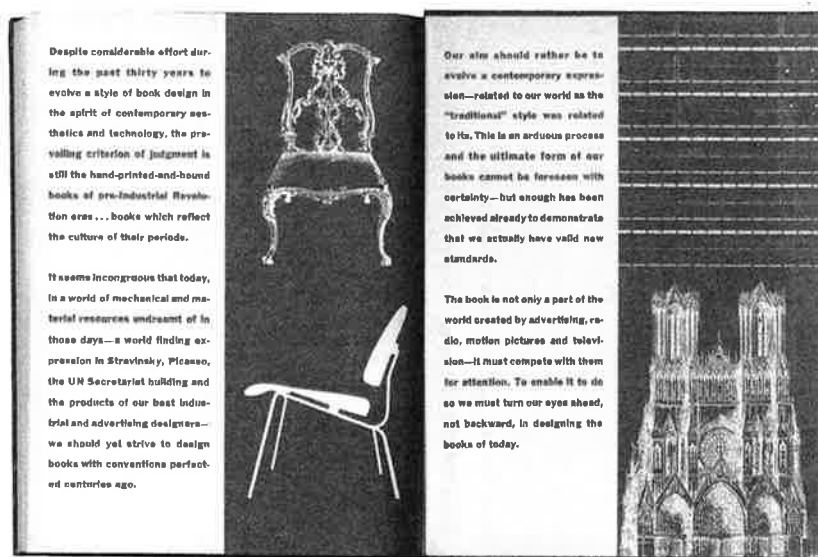
Exactly sixty years ago, a series of meetings took place in Chicago to discuss 'the arts in relation to the book', out of which came the book *Graphic Forms* (Harvard University Press, 1949). Echoing the views of his pioneering friend László Moholy-Nagy, the book's main contributor, Gyorgy Kepes, proposed that the designer:

Rethink the book functions in their physical, optical and psychological aspects. A book has weight, size, thickness and tactile qualities, qualities which are handled by the hand, as its optical form is handled by the eye ... The book can be conceived of in the same sense as the handle of a tool or a utensil ... and with perfect control.<sup>1</sup>

Only after this discussion of the needs of the hand does Kepes go on to talk about the needs of the eye, and of the reader's mind behind the eye.



*Language of Vision* (1944)



*Books for our Time* (1951)

The first illustrations to Kepes' article are of his book *Language of Vision* (Paul Theobald, 1944). This publication is also reproduced in *Books for our Time* (Oxford University Press, 1951), which accompanied the exhibition of the same name in New York at New Art Circle Gallery. In the endpapers of *Books for our Time* the editor states that:

Despite considerable effort during the past thirty years to evolve a style of book design in the spirit of contemporary aesthetics and technology, the prevailing criterion of judgement is still the hand-printed-and-bound books of pre-Industrial Revolution eras... books which reflect the culture of their periods.

It seems incongruous that today (...) we should yet strive to design books with conventions perfected centuries ago. (...) we must turn our eyes ahead, not backward, in designing the books of today.<sup>2</sup>

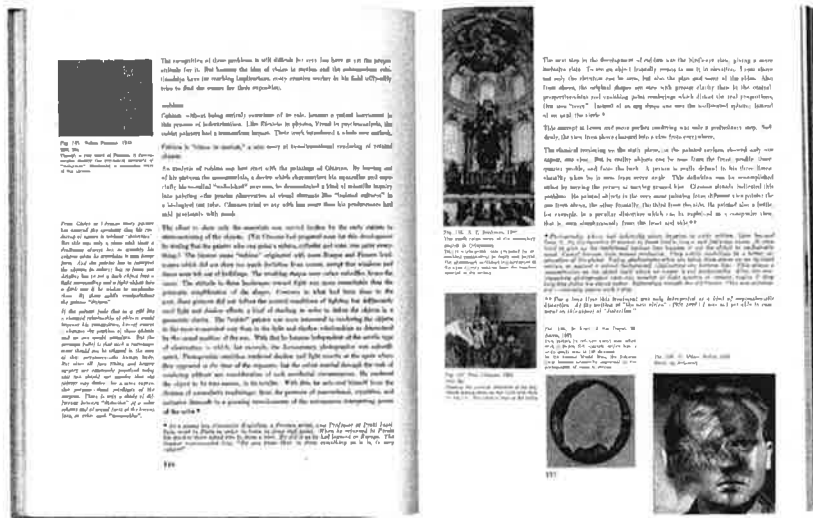
In short, the form of the book has not changed significantly over the centuries: sheets of paper, printed on both sides, folded, trimmed on three edges and fastened together on the fourth with a cover. Once a craft, book making has become an industrial process. Today's mass-market paperbacks even retain the conventions of title page and contents divided into chapters. And the standardisation and success of this form of printed text, its ability to convey a narrative and give it a structure and sequence, has been frustrating to designers. They are left with little scope for invention.

Apart from a few typographic eccentricities, it was not until the modernist upheavals in the years after the First World War that the book's effectiveness in an age of mass media (and of the illustrated weekly magazine) was questioned. But the various historical avant-gardes – Futurists, Dadaists, Russian Constructivists, the Bauhaus masters – did not challenge the physical form of the book. They wanted to extend the ways in which the page could 'speak' to the reader. They were asking for its graphics to be updated, with such slogans as Moholy-Nagy's: 'Typography is the communication of ideas through printed design.'

Another reproduction in *Books for our Time* is a spread of Moholy-Nagy's *Vision in Motion* (Paul Theobald, 1947), published in the year after his death in Chicago. Writing in *Offset, Buch und Werbekunst* (1926), he had expressed puzzlement that:

The majority of our books today have come no further in their typographical, visual, synoptical form than Gutenberg's productions, despite the technological transformation in their manufacture.<sup>3</sup>

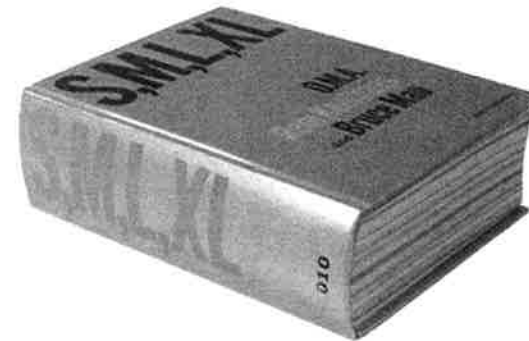
Moholy-Nagy did his best to break with the traditional layout of film scripts in his *Painting Photography Film* (Albert Langen Verlag, 1925), a book full of wild contrasts between words and images. The later *Vision in Motion* uses a more sober style, but deploys the main text, images and extended captions in the same way as illustrated magazines, allowing



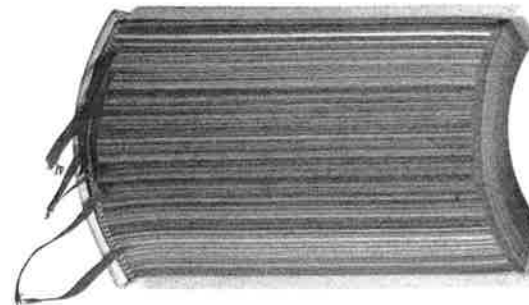
Vision in Motion (1947)

the reader to 'operate' in two ways. First, to skim through, looking at the pictures and captions and, second, after this familiarisation with the book's general ideas, to settle into the text.

Sixty years later, book design has become a largely conventional affair, in the hands of publishers (at least in the UK) who often resort to low production standards. At the same time, for better and often worse, it has become a medium for extravagant image-making. Kepes would be astonished by the way contemporary designers deal with a book's 'weight, size, thickness and tactile qualities'. Indeed, these characteristics often overpower the most admired books today. Dutch designer Irma Boom, well-known for a small book of more than 2,000 pages – almost as thick as it is wide and weighing 3.5 kilos – has had to concede that 'the contents of that particular book are so much more interesting than the look of it'. Such fashionable gigantism is typified by Bruce Mau's *S,M,L,XL* (The Monacelli Press, 1995), a huge portfolio for the author-architect Rem Koolhaas and his ideas.



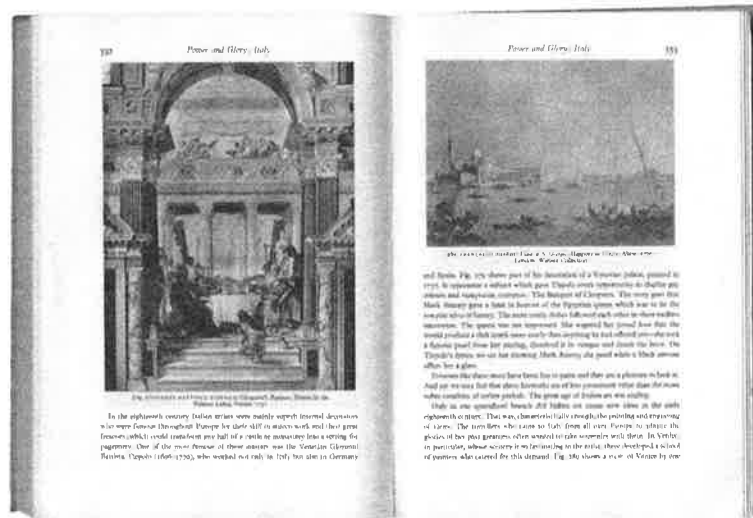
S,M,L,XL (1995)



SHV Think Book 1996-1896 (1996)

Mau also designed a series of books for the Getty Foundation. One is an 850-page volume of essays by the art historian Aby Warburg, who was the subject of a farewell lecture given by fellow art historian Ernst Gombrich. When the latter arrived at the lectern, on which lay the Mau-designed tome, he slapped his hand down on the book and declared, 'This book is too big'.

With fewer than 500 pages, Gombrich's best-known book, *The Story of Art* (Phaidon, 1950) is comfortable to hold, printed letterpress on coated paper. The illustrations appear where they are needed in the text, making this book one of the first 'integrated' books, since at the time plates were usually located at the back, separated from the text. Phaidon, the original publisher, reissued *The Story of Art* in 2006 as a

*The Story of Art* (1950)

pocket-sized paperback with more than 1,000 pages, elegantly produced and typeset, and expertly printed. For this edition, Phaidon returned to the old ways, with text at the front and plates at the back, printed on a slightly heavier paper. No longer does the story unfold. To link the words to the images, the reader is asked to juggle backwards and forwards with the help of woven bookmarks. This edition – and there were sixteen before this ‘pocket’ edition – is the first in which Gombrich was not involved in the layout. As he explained in the preface to the 1971 edition, the original book was:

Planned from the outset to tell the story of art in both words and pictures by enabling readers as far as possible to have the illustration discussed in the text in front of them, without having to turn the page.<sup>4</sup>

This aim was achieved through ‘weeks of intense collaboration’, which included, Gombrich wrote, ‘making me write another paragraph here or suggesting another illustration there’.

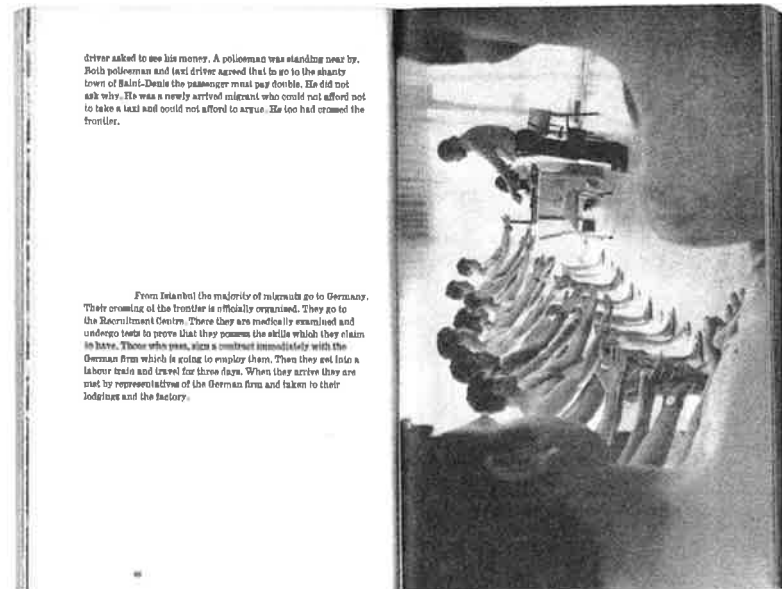
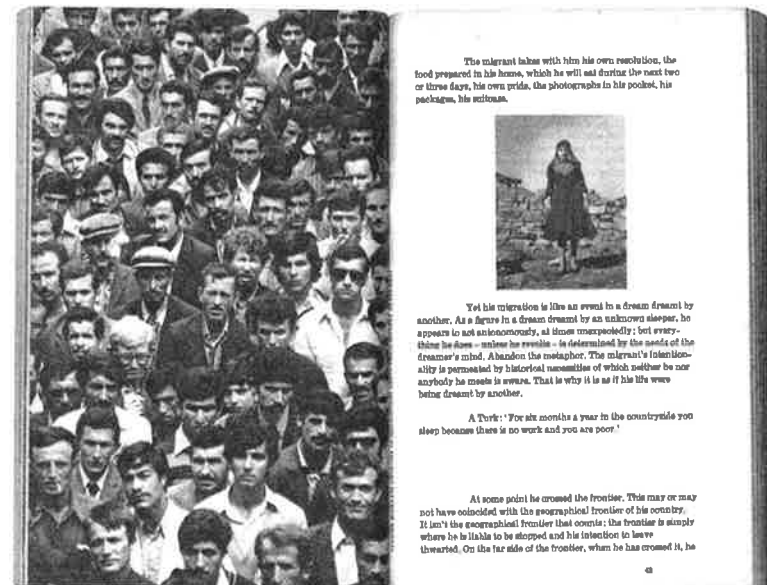
*The Story of Art* (2006)

The case of *The Story of Art* underscores the book's central role as go-between in conveying the author's meaning to the reader. And the most rewarding way to ensure that the go-between has understood the message is for author and designer to work together. Of course, a plain text only presents the designer with the task of making it readable and fit into the smallest number of pages, while at the same time meeting Kepes' requirements for the hand and the eye.

For several years, I worked with the writer and art critic John Berger, starting with a novel entitled *G* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1972). Berger's typewritten text used line spaces rather than indents to indicate paragraphs. This spacing was retained in the typesetting, despite the problem that if a paragraph ends at the bottom of the page, the reader does not know if a new paragraph has begun. Berger also left larger gaps in the text to indicate a change of location or time passing. The typewritten copy was marked up with instructions for the typesetter, since the book was to be printed letterpress. The long galley proofs that came back from the printer were then cut up and the strips of text pasted up, page by page, with precise measurements for placing the type and chapter numbers (there were no chapter titles). These pages became the next printer's instruction. Sitting next to Berger, I felt no awkwardness in asking him if he could cut some lines at one point or if space could be added at another.

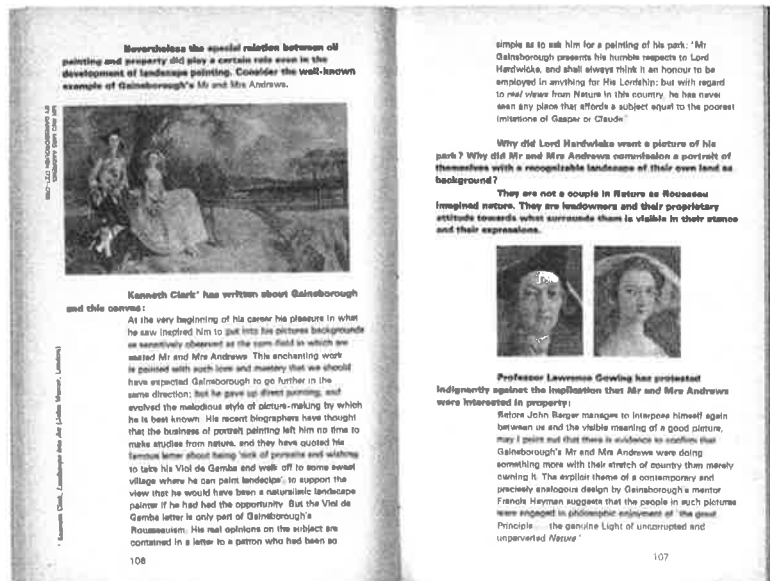
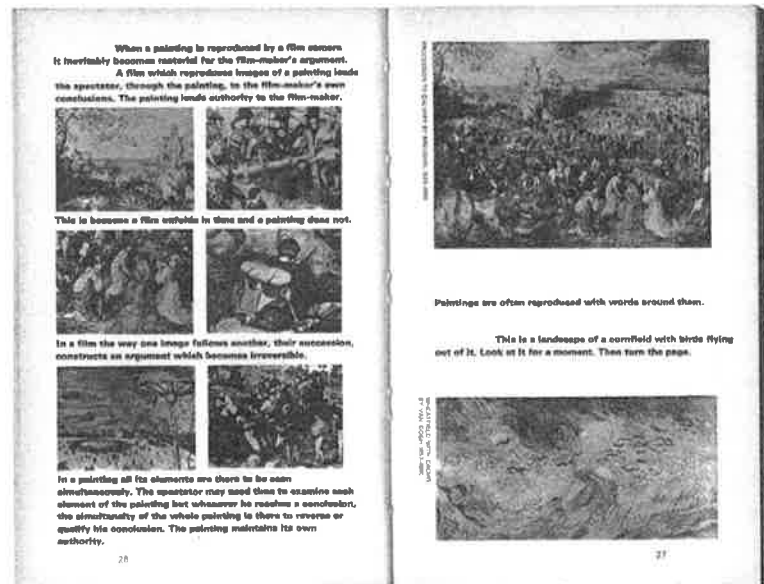
Another book I made with Berger was *A Seventh Man* (Penguin, 1975). Because the type was filmset, photoprinted galleys were pasted up on pre-printed grids, leaving empty rectangles for photographs which we selected as the pages were constructed. As with Gombrich and *The Story of Art*, text and illustration are closely integrated. But in the case of *A Seventh Man*, the images are not so much illustrations – they are as essential as the text.

This integration goes further in *Ways of Seeing* (Penguin, 1972). The book is based on a television series in which Berger's on-screen commentary was addressed either directly at the viewer or as a voice-over accompanying the image of



*A Seventh Man* (1975)



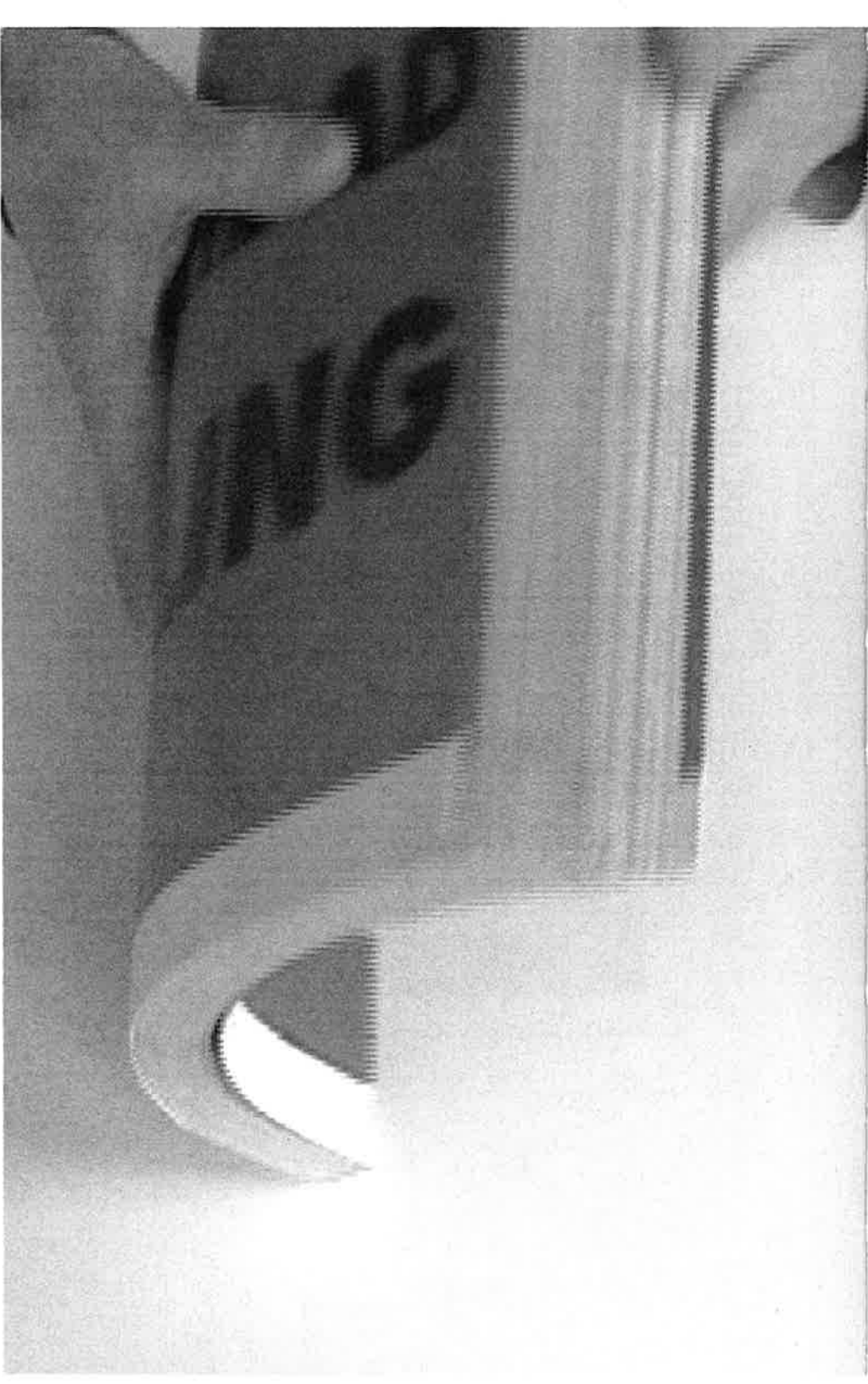


a painting. On occasion there was an image without sound – this silence translated on the page as blank space. In fact, this interaction between word and image was hardly new, having been perfected in the 1930s by John Heartfield, among others.

In *Ways of Seeing*, a bold typeface grants the same weight to the text as to the images – unlike traditional popular art histories, which the reader can treat like a coffee-table book, scanning the pictures, glancing at the captions. To avoid distracting from the flow of argument, the captions in *Ways of Seeing* are limited to simple identifications running vertically alongside the images.

The original *Ways of Seeing* was a more or less standard paperback production of the early 1970s. It is now re-issued by Penguin Books in a series called *Modern Classics*. In a smaller format, repaginated, the cover reworked, without a title page but with the preliminary pages at the back – including the essential 'note to the reader' – underinked on heavier paper with the grain across the page, far from easy to open, or 'operate', the book at least reflects the culture of its time: an abuse of new technology under market-driven pressure. In the worst sense, a Modern Classic.

Where production values are so low, the arrival of new technology, such as the Sony Reader and Amazon Kindle, may at least satisfy Kepes' demands for 'a utensil' 'with perfect control'.



## **Every Book Starts with an Idea: Notes for Designers**

Armand Mevis

Every year around 400,000 new titles are presented at the Frankfurt Book Fair. Every time I hear this number I ask myself in disbelief: that many books in merely one year? And what about all the others that do not make it to the Fair? Though I have never been there, I imagine it as a hellish place you just want to run away from.

Out of all those books there must be only a few hundred whose design is worth looking at, fewer to talk about and fewer still to discuss in depth.

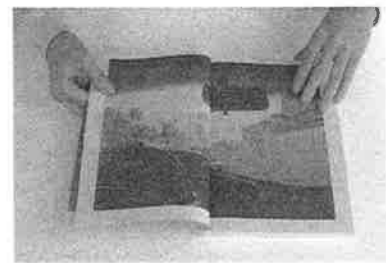
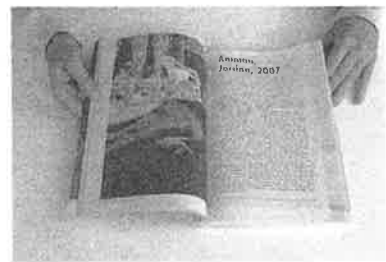
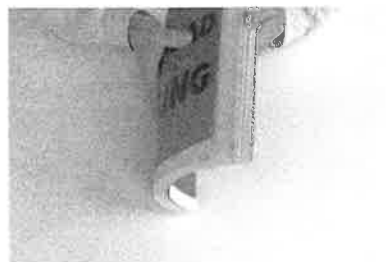
All these books have to be designed. Someone needs to decide which paper, typography, cover, to use. This is good news for designers: there is still plenty to do. It may be a jungle; you may find it hard to get the nice job, and you might get lost, but that is part of the adventure.

Looking back at the work Linda van Deursen and I made over the last 20 years, I count around 120 books, all of which fit on one shelf. Our whole career is just 100 inches wide, printed in small print runs.

Not all of these books have succeeded. We have learned by doing, as mistakes are inherent to the job of making books through trial and error. Sometimes, by pure luck, a book can come out well. Over the years we have learned to limit the number of mistakes; we are now much more in control. This does not mean that all our books are interesting. Some are even done too well, books where nothing happens at all.

Ideally, all books start with a question. The clearer the question, the more precise the answer, but this is rarely





## Every Book Starts with an Idea

the case. You have to find out what the question is. Sometimes those involved need to sit together for days, weeks, months before a book takes shape – and then I am not even talking about its design, but the shape of the content. As designers we are as responsible for content as anyone else.

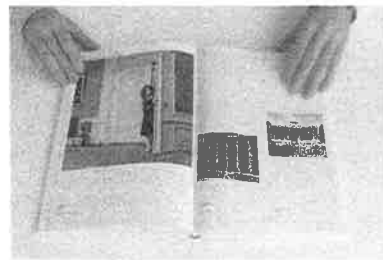
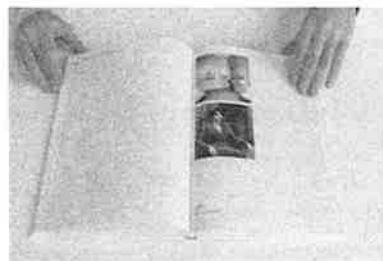
Some books arrive in plastic bags like garbage, stacks of unsorted images on CDs, bits and pieces of writing, with no editor, no writer, no publisher and no money. Where to begin? Other books come almost ready-made, with the publisher having taken most design decisions, including dimensions, paper, binding and cover image. What's left for the designer is to make it all look good. How do you convince someone that this is not the way you want to work, that these decisions are an integral part of the design process? How can you make this situation more interesting, rather than simply rejecting the job?

But sometimes the conditions are ideal. You work with people who share your interests, with printers who do everything to get the book beautifully printed, and everything points towards a perfect solution.

Regardless of the initial circumstances, there are questions that need to be answered: What needs to be done? What are the main issues that need attention, the problems to be solved? What does not work, what is missing? How to create the right conditions for a workable situation?

Along the way you might need to fight for money, fight against expectations, fight for content, fight for fewer or more images, fight for readable text. Even when the situation appears promising there will always be messy parts that need to be resolved. You cannot just sit down and wait until it comes to you, because it will not come by itself.

To know how to solve things you need to be open, to reinvent, to rethink what a book can be. Rethink the form,



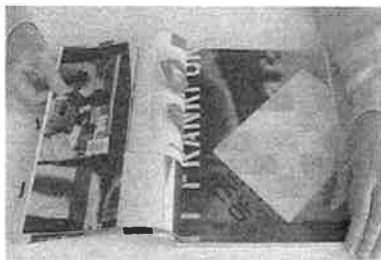
## Every Book Starts with an Idea

rethink how information can be organised, rethink the editing, propose alternative directions. From all this a book and its design will benefit. Designing a book is a collaborative process, the designer depends on others: all of you have to move together in the same direction. If the brief lacks clarity, be clear yourself. Ask the right questions, tell those you are working with what you think and need, explain your idea, get them involved.

All books start from their content. The content is a source of inspiration in itself, it tells you where to go. Understanding what the book is about is essential. Design and content need to go hand in hand, like a perfect dance. Sometimes there is too much design and not enough content, or the other way around: you need to find the right balance.

Even when you do nothing, you are doing something. Be aware of your decisions and what they mean for the book you are designing. You can make books better or worse. The content is the engine that leads to ideas, personal ideas, crazy ideas. Be clear about who you are, what you believe in and do not try to be someone else. Stick to your ideas. Embrace them. However impulsive or intuitive they might be, they are your treasures. Rely on the inner feeling that what you look for will work, that it will be right. Use your imagination to make the book that does not exist yet. It could be your best book ever.

All books tell stories about why or how they are designed. Some stories are good, sometimes even interesting. But every time unexpected problems occur and need a smart response – from rejected design proposals to technically impossible solutions – there is always drama. In the end these stories do not matter; what does is if a book actually works or not, that is, if you managed to get everything the way you wanted. If you were able to link the content to your concept and the concept to a form, you have succeeded.



## Every Book Starts with an Idea

To find this form you are restricted on many fronts. First, there are technical restrictions. Almost all books are printed on paper. The printing technique is usually offset lithography; you can use black and white, full colour or Pantone colours. Not all dimensions for books are economical, as the size of books relates to the size of the printing machine and the size of paper it can handle. Books are bound in signatures of 4, 8, 16 or 32 pages. You realise that page 1 sits next to page 16 on a printing sheet. Paper has two sides, can be smooth or bulky. You always have to deal with the gutter in the middle of a spread. You can choose perfect binding, saddle stitching, soft or hard covers.

Besides technical restrictions you need formal skills. You can express your ideas through typography, page layout and the structure of information. Juggle these elements to find new combinations. In other words, make the best of restrictions. No matter what you do, in the end all books look like books, they don't look like buildings or cars, and amongst all 400,000 books at the Frankfurt Fair you will not find two books that look alike. Like fingerprints, they are unique.

This is the real challenge. Use your imagination, talent and skill to move successfully through the complexity of designing and making books. You need to dream about the books you would like to design, and this dream is what drives you; it is what keeps you going, wanting to do the next book and the book after that.