

**Books and other Strange Species (Dear Susanne)**  
**by Monika Szewczyk**

Increasingly, the book strikes us as a curious animal, does it not? In the realm of contemporary art – where it is valued as a physical thing (as opposed to a random or immaterial coincidence of code), a mirror of the human animal's symmetry (like us, it has two similar sides, as well as an inside and an outside), an ideal commodity (that can be afforded), a form (that has remained relatively stable for some 500 years) and a repository of special knowledge (even wisdom) – the book seems to be more vital than ever. In the general culture, however, the extinction of the book is prophesied: With the invention of the tablet (cleverly named to evoke things like Moses' mythical stone slabs engraved with The Ten Commandments, or the Stele of Hammurabi, or the Rosetta Stone, all of which are far more ancient than that age-old carrier of knowledge we know as the book), bound paper things are said to be going the way of the Dodo. In July 2010, Amazon announced that it was selling more Kindle e-books than all hard cover books combined. Today, Kindle is the best selling item on Amazon. And perhaps this is a good thing: Might not the extinction of the printed, paper book offset the looming extinction of more trees? Indeed, one might wonder, *Who still desires such things?*

One answer is found by travelling to any one of the dozens of art book fairs, which seem to be proliferating and testifying to a growing desire to make, show, sell, buy, exchange, discuss and otherwise affirm the persistent appeal of the printed book. There, (relatively) small stalls – usually two-meter-long tables – are aligned in rooms otherwise used for encounters with art. The “installation” is not as precise as that devoted to art objects, which is not to say that a great deal of care does not go into it, only that the environment resembles fruit or cheese or meat stands, or sometimes a flea market stalls, more than it does the gallery or the art fair proper. Many people come to peruse and some to purchase; and in the various conversations that are struck up a fine balance is found between the sale of goods and the sale of ideas (sharing of convictions). Amidst these convivial and surprisingly manageable market situations, several of which I've attended as a producer-merchant, I am reminded how much we need – or at least want and like – tangible things such as books to stand in the center of more complex exchanges. The graspable book is, in other words, an appealing antidote to a world that worries about the dematerialization of just about everything (art, information, images, money, relationships, all that we may wish was more solid). It is also a good ground to consider these less tangible forces more carefully.

*Books make Friends* is the title of a small but well-circulated book about artists' publications, which elucidates some of these appeals.<sup>1</sup> Dieter Roelstraete, the

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<sup>1</sup> See *Books Make Friends/Os livros fazem amigos*, (Amsterdam: Roma (90) and Lisbon: Culturgest, 2006).

author of one this volume's chief essays, has also noted, in another publication, that books might equally make enemies.<sup>2</sup> This may be true and we should keep it in mind as it raises the stakes nicely, but I won't pursue the tangent. Suffice it to say that, in a society like ours, which increasingly fetishizes friendships, an object that is a maker of friends and enemies can be a powerful thing. This trend is brilliantly compounded in one of the fastest growing enterprises of all time – Facebook – a very virtual thing, but one that, in name at least, capitalizes on the book as a foil for the immateriality of social relations.<sup>3</sup> The book, as a carrier of knowledge (rather than intuitions and nerves), now looms as *something* of well-nigh mystical stability and tangibility. Ironically, in name only. Thus, while in the general culture the physical book might be heading for extinction, its symbolic avatars are likely to remain potent.

To say that books act as foils for the pesky intangibles of our lives is to link these seeming opposites inextricably. No surprise then that, for all their solidity, books are at the vanguard of the virtualization of shopping. It could be said with some confidence, I think, that as (regularly sized and shaped and thereby easily packed) containers of information, books were *the* ideal commodities of the information economy, facilitating the networks and the trust necessary for online shopping to become as natural as the sea. The trade in books certainly allowed Amazon to become one of the largest online retailers in the world – a development that helped to transform shopping *in toto*. The fact that this transformation is now, in turn, bringing about the digitalization of the book may be noted with some irony, but it remains to be seen to what extent the tangibility of the book will haunt virtual libraries.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps what matters most, however, is that, as a physical *and* as a conceptual form, the book is permeated by a particular alignment of social relations operating at the level of production, that (at least in the experience of this buyer, reader and maker of books) holds out the promise of defying the increasing divisions of labor found in today's late late capitalist world, the fruits of which are said to be offshore or otherwise out of our hands. This could be the strangest and most beautiful thing about books, or at least those we make in the context of art. Anyone who has worked on a book in this relatively specialized arena – where the research, commissioning of content, editing, design, printing and binding all flow together and occur between people in constant dialogue with shared stakes in the final product – will probably agree on an intuitive level. For me, writing something (be this a proposal, an introduction or another part of the book), commissioning other texts (with letters that often also begin or solidify

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<sup>2</sup> See Dieter Roelstrate, Editorial in *F.R. David* (Summer 2010), D Issue "With Love," (Amsterdam: De Appel): 6.

<sup>3</sup> I might also mention here that, to my memory at least, one of the most popular early features of the Facebook profile was, of course, the virtual bookshelf.

<sup>4</sup> Observe the bizarrely arcane, wood-panelled look of the library on any iPad!

friendships), editing (through various conversations that rarely stop at the text in question), then sitting down with a designer and playing with the different ways all this and various similarly chosen images should work together on the pages of a book, deciding on the cover that will lure more people to get involved and finally finding a press that will help to see the results printed for posterity produces many a thrill, with every single title.<sup>5</sup>

Then, holding the book you've made or contributed to, being able to pass some of your thoughts along in this form as a gift, or seeing someone decide to buy "your" book at a fair (a scenario that the more discrete transactions with artworks usually deny the artist), even when that person is unaware that you, the merchant, are also the author or editor – all this compounds the profound sense of conviviality and confidence that making a book lends its producer. And, finally, this sense does not seem to end once books leave your hands via another's purchase.

Books, like ideas, are somehow never really fully owned. There is also something to be said here – a sense I may not be able to fully articulate but one that I am quite sure of – that (therefore) books cannot be consumed. The only way they have been literally "consumed" is in the fires of Counter-Reformation pyres or the flames born of fascist fear. Unconsumable food for thought! Use, not consumption, being the operative term then, books (like good ideas of all kinds) should belong to those who use them best. And sometimes, this use might imply letting them sit, like the pet cat in the library which may eventually get up and impose itself on our lap, demanding a good handling. At other times, books will leave the libraries where there is no more use for them.

Thus, books may be said to acquire lives in use. Like people, birds or elephants, they migrate. Recently, I purchased (as a gift, it should be noted) a copy of Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* on abebooks.de – that online purveyor of countless choice titles, many of them second-hand, rare and difficult to find in actual shops.<sup>6</sup> The book arrived (the receiver shares my address I must shamelessly add, so I'll admit that this was a bit of a gift-to-self too) with a library tag still on its spine. It is difficult to describe the delightful little knot that forms in the stomach right before opening such a book, knowing that one is about to discover its provenance. What enlightened library may have been interested in the French philosopher's *Five Lessons on Intellectual Emancipation*, to paraphrase the subtitle of Rancière's early ode to Jean-Joseph Jacotot's

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For an account of the establishment of this very particular harmony of production, which accompanies the dawn of the printed book trade, see the accompanying excerpts from Lucien Lebre and Henri-Jean Martin, "The Little World of the Book", in *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing, 1450-1800*. Translated by David Gerard, Edited by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and David Wootton (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Press, 2010), 143-153.

<sup>6</sup> This is not to discount that Abebooks is a network of actual shops, only that the power of this network allows the avid shopper access to so many more shops than they can physically walk into.

pedagogical use of ignorance? And, perhaps more curiously, who in said library would have let such a promising book go? Upon turning to the title page we found the answer to the first question in the form of a stamp that struck us as pure irony: Städelschule Frankfurt. Enough said. What matters here is that book shopping and book making tend to re-write the proverbial book on late capitalist alienation.

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Because she is the artist who sensitized me to the book's migratory condition (and because she's a person who loves books and, as a devotee of online shopping, purchases them often and impulsively, reporting all finds with the fervor of a fetishist) Susanne Kriemann deserves special consideration here. Two of her book projects, to which I am closest – ONE BOOK and ONE DAY – may come to clarify the preceding musings on the nature of the book and introduce the other strange species promised in the title. And both projects, it should be noted, have their genesis in the online purchase of books.

In the case of ONE BOOK, it all began with *Vögel vor der Kamera*, a partially bleached-out blue, cloth-bound volume from 1961 by Marcel Verbruggen, that the artist found on [abebooks.de](http://abebooks.de) in the spring of 2009 while researching another project.<sup>7</sup> For a time, this eccentric account of birds caught on camera remained marginal, its singular images and text serving as occasional inspiration for the research under way. But it was not until Kriemann was invited to create a performance in the context of *Anabasis: Rituals of Homecoming*, an exhibition curated by Adam Budak at Henryk Grohmann's Villa in Łódź (in the context of the Dialogue of Four Cultures Festival) that the blue book really came into play.

In the basement of Grohmann's villa – a red brick structure recalling the Italian Renaissance designed by Hilary Majewski and built in 1892, which soon became a salon where the prominent Polish textile industrialist of German origin sought to host the literary and musical luminaries of his day (such as Henryk Sienkiewicz and Ignacy Paderewski) – there is a collection of old printing presses. Today, having been bequeathed to the Polish state by Grohmann, the villa has also become the home of a private collection of art books, accumulated by Jadwiga and Janusz Tryznowie, which serves as the basis for the Museum of the Art Book. This and the basement atelier is tended to with expert care by a certain Pan Jan. Discovering these machines and this gentle man who could help her operate them, Susanne Kriemann resolved to make use of the now arcane devices and devised a situation where one book would be produced that encapsulated several leitmotifs running through her work: a fascination with the restless migratory movements (especially those born of modernity) and with the

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<sup>7</sup> *One Time One Million* – this work is described in greater detail in Hans Dickel, "Reading – Books by Susanne Kriemann".

modern arrest of such movements (especially by the camera); a desire to observe *and* to use cameras and other vestiges of mechanical modernity (such as presses); as well as the attempt to discover how, in our postmodern information age, all of this activity can highlight the latent tension between thought and its material trace. At the Grohmann Villa, *Vogels vor der Kamera* would become an avatar of these impulses. But this second life could only begin after the book was unbound and put through the press, again.

To make the most of this transformation, the artist invited the aforementioned philosopher and curator, Dieter Roelstraete, to think along – which he did, taking the morning of October 4<sup>th</sup> to produce a text (about his love of books, the material conditions of reading and writing, and the desire, as well as the impossibility, of thinking of home in the singular in these nomadic times). In the handwritten pages, we might see the man of letters distinguishing himself from the machine of letters, but (in reading his text out loud that evening) he also worked in concert with the artist, the mechanic and said machines. Working on an impromptu assembly line of two, Susanne Kriemann and Pan Jan fed the pages of *Vogels vor der Kamera* through the presses, imprinting the lower margin of each double-page spread with the two words, ONE (on the left) and HOME (on the right); then, in a larger font, each right-hand page was printed again with one of the four letters that spell out HOME, over and over and over again, until the pages ran out and Roelstraete concluded.

Witnessing this performance alongside some thirty fellow humans and about three or four wandering cats, I had a canny sense of camaraderie that should go down in the (natural) history books as a very good example of complementary work and parallel play. ONE BOOK forged this temporary society. The beautiful unity of disparate people, ideas and times promised by just one book – well used – was a lesson of sorts that the artist carried into another book project, in which I again took part, this time as an editor and producer. Then again, by now, it was becoming difficult to distinguish the productive difference between witnessing and producing. This is perhaps because our second example of Kriemann's work with books, ONE DAY, is an act of what was once called appropriation, but involves something that I find difficult to name as such. With its emphasis on propriety, the term "appropriation" implies taking over ownership, a notion that obscures the work and play of *using* books, as well as the images and texts that books house – bringing them out of their stagnant proprietary cages and into the commons. If we are not used to thinking of these creative forms in such a freely functional way, if such a notion is as odd as a pack of three elephants walking through the city streets (to call up the confounding cover of the book in question), then it is perhaps time to think of a day when the notion of use could supersede the notion of ownership.

ONE DAY is an archive of Rotterdam but in many ways, as its title suggests, it looks to the future. It began with an invitation from Witte de With (Nicolaus Schafhausen and myself) to Kriemann to consider how she might portray the city

of Rotterdam in the form of a book. No sooner did the call arrive, than the artist was online searching for all the previously published books that she could find about this Dutch city, which is still half her home. At a certain moment, she made the conscious choice to restrict herself to books published after the tragic bombing of Rotterdam by the Luftwaffe in May 1940, as it was after the devastation of the city – one of Europe’s most strategic ports – that photographic books proliferated, indexing the tragic destruction, the triumphant rebuilding and, later, the complex transformations of the new urban culture which arose, and which continues to evolve. Again, certain long-explored leitmotifs came to permeate the project: the intersection of military technologies with visual technologies (particularly aerial bombing and aerial photography); the strange proximity between the (re)building of a city and the (re)building of a book; as well as the intersection of the (second) life of images and of books with the (second) life of cities and of the people who come to call them home.

Within weeks Kriemann amassed about 20 volumes and began selecting images that could bring these abstractions to life, and that could all the while maintain a strength to preserve a life of their own. Then, partly perhaps in order to preserve this singularity and in part to impose an overall unifying structure so strong that it might erase the sense of history and of past traumas (in our conversations we always left the reasons open), she ordered all of the final 115 images in the language that photography knows well – the language of light – subtly tracing the course of one day, from dawn until dusk. And, so as to allow the images to say something new to us and to each other, none of them appear with the captions that originally accompanied them (some might say kept them captive) in the books that served as their former homes. These captions, also now free of the images, migrated to the back of the new book and began to speak their own story.

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ONE LAST THOUGHT: For you Susanne, a lover of one’s and perhaps also that certain unity that “one” implies. I am struck by that fact that in all the discussions leading up to this text, you as its first reader, have not asked me *why* I have made so much of casting books and images and even texts as living “species” and why I have tried to make them seem rather strange. Perhaps like me, you wish that things like books and images and texts (and the thingness of images and texts is what books tend to support rather well, don’t they?), as well as all species of animals, like the elephants on the cover of your latest book and the pelicans you love (both the imprint and the birds you wish to photograph in the future), could somehow become more recognizable to us as comrades. Perhaps, in the end, we are all one strange mutable species, moving on together.

Monika Szewczyk  
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Excerpt from *The Coming of the Book*  
Lucien Lebre and Henri-Jean Martin

,Living off and among books, in daily contact with men of letters, intellectuals and theologians, and also with students and the cultural public, – in a word, with all who wrote and read – printers and booksellers naturally interested themselves in things of the mind as well as in commerce, if only to conduct their business more profitably.

From time to time writers turned printer – to print their own works, see them through the press ensuring their accuracy and good appearance, supervise their distribution and so have a direct influence on the reading public. This was and always will be an ambition common to many intellectuals. At times of intellectual crisis and of conflicts over questions of conscience, when polemical literature flourishes, this will be particularly the case. This kind of action on the part of intellectuals was never more influential than in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century when the vital mission of printing was the diffusion of ancient texts in their pristine purity, an age when philosophy was queen. Many scholars and writers were engaged as publishers' proofreaders, and many turned to a career as printers and booksellers. Men of action as well as being humanists, living in an age of comparative economic prosperity, supported by publishers or investors able to recognise their qualities, they achieved many publishing successes in the service of the new humanism, and helped the victory of the cause.

[...]

These humanist publishers were not only pure scholars concerned with the production of accurate texts and of their own scholarly publications. They were also, and possibly first of all, thoroughly professional printers just as concerned over the appearance and physical format of their books. We have seen how Aldus had more readable and elegant Greek characters cut than any previously used, and introduced italic.

The humanist publishers of this period revolutionised the appearance of the printed book, making it much plainer. The Estiennes knew how to give the title page a sober, well-proportioned look, and some humanist printers were so in love with their art that they were more concerned about the appearance of a text than about its meaning.

Looking after a printing house business, correcting proofs ceaselessly, while at the same time carrying out the duties of a publisher; corresponding with foreign booksellers and with men of letters, while writing their own scholarly works – all this (we could be forgiven for thinking) would have exhausted lesser men than an Aldus, Joost Bade or Robert Estienne. It was a task that only the tireless enthusiast, the real Renaissance man, could sustain. Henri Estienne indeed explains, in the preface to his Thucydides, that he rose during the night to work on his scholarly editions as a relaxation from proof correction and the many routine cares he had as head of the firm! In fact many of the printers and booksellers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century whom we justly call humanists had neither the time nor perhaps the inclination to produce personal work. Men of culture and refinement, they were enlightened publishers and ensured that they were surrounded with writers and intellectuals for the greater good of their business. At the same time they encouraged them in their work and secured their services as partners and sometimes as close friends.

[...]

From the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the attitudes of printers and booksellers changed, as did relations between authors and publishers. The great generations of humanist printers disappeared in the upheavals at the close of the century. After a hundred years of exceptional prosperity printing was in crisis. The innumerable editions of books had gutted the market; capital to finance publishers

was not forthcoming because of the general economic crisis, and unrest and strikes broke out among the workers. The first concern of publishers was simple survival, especially in France. Then, while Germany, which had been least affected by the crisis, was being devastated by the Thirty Years War, the trade slowly pulled round in the rest of Europe at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The world of the book emerged impoverished and diminished from economic turmoil. In general, booksellers and printers had by now formed into guilds and corporations, the scholar who starts a new firm is no longer on the scene. The masters found themselves in an overcrowded trade, had difficulties in making ends meet, and often lived in pitiable conditions with the social status of petty artisans. Publisher-booksellers were no longer concerned to patronise the world of letters, but only to publish books with guaranteed sale. The richest made their money on books with an assured market, reprints of old best sellers, standard religious works and, above all, the Church Fathers. The leading firms were those on the side of the Counter-Reformation – important merchants but humble servants of Jesuit policy, supporters of the ultramontane faction. Publishing was in total subjection to authority. Originality was shunned, and new works, which by now were usually in the vernacular, were not favoured. The publishers of the great French classics cut a modest figure, and writers were not interested in mixing with small shopkeepers and tradesmen who were in any case poorly educated and from an inferior class. Writers and scholars no longer gathered in printer's houses or workshops but in the literary salons of high society, or in the libraries of the aristocracy, at the invitation of learned librarians and under the patronage of powerful individuals, or even in monasteries.

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