

What a Book Is

On July 15, 2020, Jan Wenzel gave a video talk entitled “[Do I Know What a Book Is?](#)” as part of the “Virtual Residency” program of the Cultural Foundation Schloss Wiepersdorf.

The talk was followed by a conversation with Wiepersdorf fellow Hagen Verleger, which is now (November 11, 2020) available in [text form](#).

Hagen Verleger: Your lecture, Jan, is entitled “*Do I Know What a Book Is?*”—and in the announcement for our conversation today, we said that we would be talking “about the socio-political dimension of book-making and publishing as a political or artistic practice.” So, my suggestion would be that we attempt to bring both together in our talk: To that end, I would like to draw on certain ideas that you touched upon in your lecture and supplement them with further quotations—in the hopes of sparking a dialogue. “I live in a dense network of books.” You gave us this evocative image in the first part of your lecture, and it reminded me of a quote from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who wrote in “*Rhizome*” in the mid-1970s:

“A book has neither object nor subject; it is made of variously formed matters, and very different dates and speeds.

To attribute the book to a subject is to overlook this working of matters, and the exteriority of their relations. [...]

In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification.”

(Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 3)

In this sense, the “network” you mentioned could also be understood as a rhizome.

Jan Wenzel: Yes, exactly.

Hagen Verleger: I would like to add another quote, by the Italian critic and publisher Roberto Calasso:

“[A]ll books published by a certain publisher could be seen as links in a single chain, or segments in a serpentine progression of books, or fragments in a single book formed by all the books published by that publisher.” (Calasso 2013: 6)

On the one hand, we as readers (as you described) live in a network of books that we create for ourselves; and on the other hand, we as bookmakers, and you as publisher, are also part of such networks. There are always these two sides.

Jan Wenzel: Maybe that is precisely what makes the book attractive: that it allows you to continue working, but at the same time it is always a pendulum movement. Without constantly reading, without constantly dealing with books, the desire to work on new books would probably not be as great. At the same time, I often think that one can produce in a more relaxed manner, because there is already a great wealth of books. I am interested in finding a balance between producing and receiving. For some years now, I have been more interested in receiving than in producing—or in other words, since I had written my column “*The Revolving Book-Shelf*” [published in *Camera Austria International*, issues 121 (2013) to 144 (2018)], I have been asking myself how one can depict one’s own reading, one’s own reception. One work that I became intensely involved with last year was the book “*Das Jahr 1990 freilegen*” (“Uncovering the Year 1990”) [fig. 1]. The introduction describes a ‘performative reading,’ because this book basically consists of texts that I had read and assembled in a new way. This was an attempt to develop a form that would make my own reading, my own reception comprehensible to others. With the form of montage, a vastly different kind of agglomeration was possible than if I had simply reported my experience of 1990, using an autobiographical form, so to speak.

Hagen Verleger: I can follow up on that point: You described how the varied, heterogeneous image and text material comes together as a montage on the very complexly designed pages, and in your lecture you characterized the process of creating such books as a polyphonic one: A book is “always the result of a polyphonic authorship, the connection of perspectives: perspectives that reinforce each other, that enter into conflict, that continue to play a theme.” On the one hand, this term invokes literary and art theories of authorship. But the very contradiction and interplay that you mention imply something dialogical, and also a kind of dilettantism—in a positive sense. I

came across a sentence that Heidi Paris wrote to her co-editors Stefan Richter and Karlheinz Barck in January 1989, in preparation for their book *“Aisthesis”*:

“The publisher is a tinkerer, not an engineer.”
(Barck et al. 1991: 456; transl.: H. V.)

To what extent does this view, perhaps, still apply today, for example, to the work of Spector Books?

Jan Wenzel: The tinkerer is somebody who has a different way of dealing with knowledge than the engineer. The tinkerer acts much less secure, but also improvises more. In this respect, I am very fond of Heidi Paris’ description. What concerns us at Spector Books is indeed an ‘improvising’ work situation that we, as a publishing house, create—making this polyphony possible. We are interested, for example, in the very active position of the designers. That would be the ideal: that the designer is the first reader and the design process is also a reading process and a process of understanding. And this is certainly how Bertolt Brecht understood actors: As people who can relate to what they play as a role, who can create a distance. In the design process, a critique of the material can also be built into the design. In this respect, a tension can arise, a conflict, an emphasis on very specific aspects. That is what interests us as a publisher: That books are, in very different ways, also an assemblage of authors. There is a text author, a book designer—even an image editor can influence the interpretation and understanding of a certain image in the way s*he ‘touches’ the images. This interplay shapes the book as an object to a great extent and ultimately leads to more interesting, layered books.

Hagen Verleger: Your publishing house is known for this different or even “new” way of making books, for taking the book seriously as a self-reflexive medium. In the second part of your lecture, however, you spoke of the book as “the invention of a ‘dynamic vessel’ for human knowledge—a container that is equally a means of transport and a place of storage.” I would like to take this as a point of departure and bring into play a variety of historical critiques of this very idea. The Mexican artist and writer Ulises Carrión, for example, postulates the opposite view in his text *“The New Art of Making Books,”* first published in 1975:

“A book is not a case of words, nor a bag of words, nor a bearer of words.” (Carrión 1975: [7])

At a later point he continues:

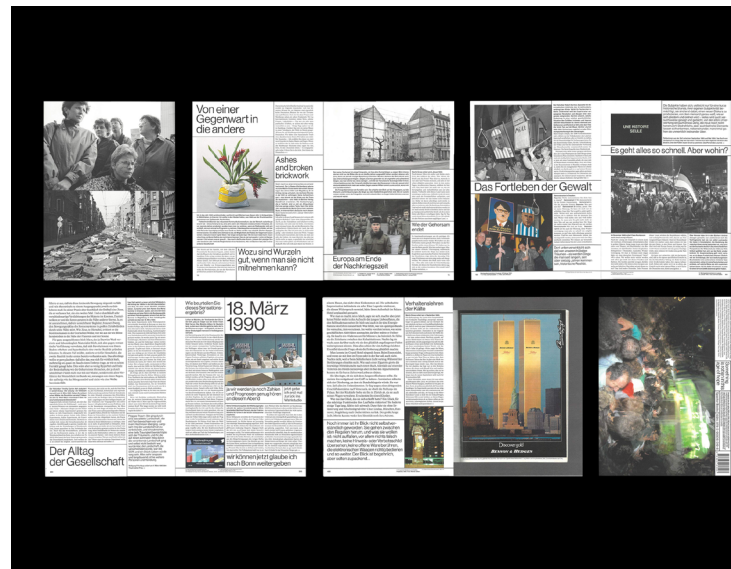


Fig. 1: Jan Wenzel (ed.): “Das Jahr 1990 freilegen,” Spector Books 2019.

“A book may be the accidental container of a text, the structure of which is irrelevant to the book: these are the books of bookshops and libraries.” (Carrión 1975: [7])

(Precisely those books that Carrión and you are *not* concerned about.) One last quote from his text:

“A book consists of various elements, one of which might be a text. A text that is part of a book isn’t necessarily the most essential or important part of that book.” (Carrión 1975: [13])

We see here a new interpretation of the book—and I find it remarkable that this criticism does not only appear in the 1970s, but that similar thoughts already appear in Stéphane Mallarmé’s work. In 1897, under the title *“Quant au livre”* (“Concerning the Book”), he compared the media forms, book and newspaper, as follows:

“What is the newspaper lacking in order to outrival the book? [...] Nothing, or almost nothing—if the book stays as it is, an indifferent catch basin [...]” (Mallarmé 1998: 257; transl.: H. V.)

There, too, we see the idea that the book must be, or become more than a mere container, a bag, a collecting tank. Another example is the essay *“Virtual-aktuelle Buchanzeige”* (“Virtual-Actual Book Display”) by the artist Ferdinand Kriwet, published in 1961. There, he asks, when

“it will finally seem to make more sense to the book to become its own character, its own performance—instead of remaining a ‘day and night shelter’ for arbitrarily interchangeable and arbitrarily reproducible forms of written-language [...]” (Kriwet 1961: 91; transl.: Z. A.)

These three positions, in a way, are also compatible with a phrase from your lecture: “A book is a stage.”

Jan Wenzel: For a long time, I saw it that way: the book should not be the container for texts, but it should claim an autonomy, it should ‘speak’ for itself. Recently, however, it has become clear to me that this desire for the autonomously articulating object does not necessarily contradict the function of the means of transport. For even if the book becomes a stage, it remains a means of transport and a storage place. I can store something in it and I can send it out into the world. These are the basic qualities of this object—its mobility and its perseverance—which ultimately also make it attractive. One could say now that it is not enough that the book only functions as a means of transporting a text. It can do more, I agree with that totally! Nevertheless: we often receive e-mails from readers in areas of the world we have never visited before—and we understand that something we produce sometimes has very different possibilities of movement than we do ourselves. I find this very attractive because it creates a different kind of communication that goes beyond our own radius of movement. Especially at a time like the present, we are becoming more sensitive to the fact that our physical radius of movement has decreased, but that the means of communication we have at our disposal—books, for example—nevertheless create the possibility of expanding this radius enormously. This leads to contacts that we would have never made ourselves in person, because the books take us to places where we are not, and we can meet people who have very similar interests. So, books are also liaison agents. Therefore, once again, I would like to praise the means of transport: the book’s mobility and at the same time the possibility to store something in it for a long time are qualities that seem very important to me.

Hagen Verleger: With that you introduce a very important thought. Many discussions about the book lead to dichotomies that are ultimately not very productive: People often try to pit one point of view against the other. Depending on the point of view and the respective question, however, both can actually be the case—the book can be a container and a stage at the same time. This leads us back to the title of your lecture, or to the question “What is a book actually?” You said that this question was, perhaps, “too obvious, too self-evident to ask,” and it is indeed a very simple and at the same time a very difficult question—the answer to which will inevitably be guided by a cognitive interest and can turn out to be quite different, depending on the perspective and context. Dozens of definitions—not only in book studies, but also in oth-

er disciplines—have been established in the meantime, some very narrow, some very broad, taking either the material object or the formal object into consideration, characterizing the book as a sign, a metaphor, a commodity, as an object of utility, a medium, etc. To complement your lecture, I would like to draw two of these attempts at definition into our discussion. First, the position of the literary scholar Carlos Spoerhase, who wrote the following in “*Das Format der Literatur*” (“The Format of Literature”):

“Although [...] the book is an object that circulates in [many] cultural fields and links these fields with each other at different levels, it turns out to be an ‘open’ object, the specific contours of which are only stabilized situationally in certain social functional contexts and usage practices.” (Spoerhase 2018: 22; transl.: H. V.)

A second position comes from Diter Rot: he published the artist’s book “*246 little clouds*” in 1968, and the 94th of these ‘246 little clouds’ states quite succinctly: “a book is a knot.” That ties in very well with your idea that books form a network: In these multifaceted networks, the individual books, as ‘open’ objects, then, in turn, form the nodes, the intersections of various connections and relationships. With regard to the question of what the book is, however, it can also make sense to speak of “bookishness”—a term which we encounter, for example, in Jonathan Freedman (Freedman 2009). In this way, the focus is not on the “what,” but to a certain extent on the “how”: in the sense of a media specificity that is consciously worked out in many of the books you publish.

Jan Wenzel: I find your comment productive on a number of different levels. On the one hand, this has to do with the fact that we are always trying to expand the possibilities that the medium of the book has, that in the working process we try to find out how books can be constructed today, how they speak on very different levels. It always entails an interrogative approach: With every new project—even though we have published quite a number of books [more than 500 titles since 2001]—we start all over again. It is not so important for us to work from a secure position, but to be able to start from point zero again and again. On the other hand, I have been trying for some time to clarify for myself what it means to live with books: How do they give you direction? What does it mean to finish reading a book and then decide which one to read next? In what way do you move in relation to a non-human counterpart? This permanent ‘counterpart’ of books, which also means an expansion of one’s own time horizon and contacts, is something I see as an enormous benefit in my own life.

Hagen Verleger: In this context—living with books—we can talk about the fifth and final point of your lecture: Under the title “A Bookshelf is a Homeland” (“Ein Bücherregal ist eine Heimat”) you introduced Ursula K. Le Guin, who proceeds from a very specific concept of ‘homeland,’ but also introduces the concept of ‘being at home.’ This is an important difference, because when one talks about ‘homeland’ (‘Heimat’) today, it must be clear that this concept has been massively appropriated in the recent past by groups such as the “New Right” and the so-called “Identitarian Movement”—not to mention that 20th century German history has generally problematized the concept of ‘homeland.’ Especially with regard to books, it seems to me much more appropriate to think in terms of Le Guin’s concept of ‘being at home.’ It reminds me, for example, of Walter Benjamin’s 1931 essay “*Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting*,” and his thinking about precisely these things: about the figure of the book collector, about life with books, and about ones intimate relationship to ones own library, to the “bookshelf” that becomes or can become a home.

Jan Wenzel: Yes, and sometimes a library also functions as a kind of mirror, in which you use this collection of books to record what must have interested you over a long period of time—at least once at some point. But it also changes and certain books get removed, because you know: this book will never interest me again. And then there are books that you gave away half a year before and suddenly there was something interesting about them and you buy them a second time.

Hagen Verleger: That’s an interesting topic: On the one hand, how does a library grow? On the other hand, how do things need to be removed in order for it to grow? At what point do we part with books?—In your lecture, you also talked about the fact that every library generates “a multitude of amplifying effects, interactions, and counter-movements.” I would like to come back to this: The interplay between books—whether within a library, on a shelf, on a table or in our imagination. I found a meditation on this subject the other day; by chance, one might even say, where I least suspected or remembered it—in Virginia Woolf’s “*A Room of One’s Own*,” first published in 1929. There, almost casually, she makes two very beautiful observations:

“[B]ooks continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately.” (Woolf 2004: 93)

A few pages later she adds:

“[B]ooks have a way of influencing each other.” (Woolf 2004: 126)

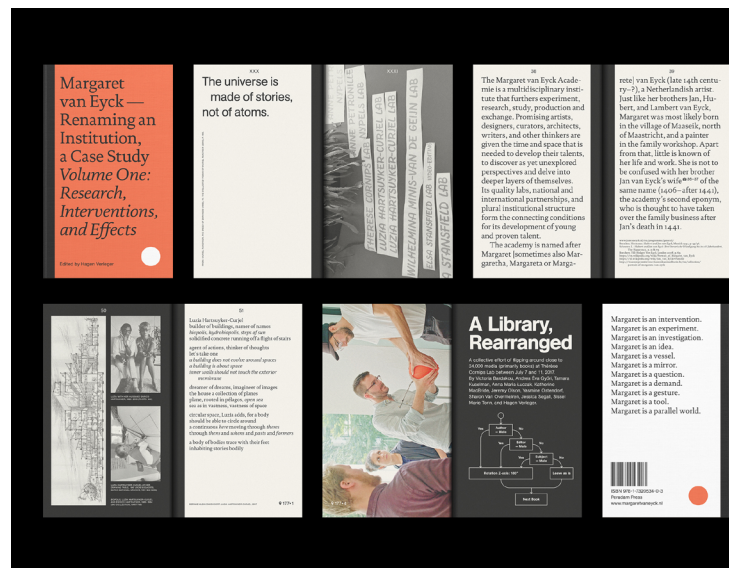


Fig. 2: Hagen Verleger (ed.): “*Margaret van Eyck—Renaming an Institution, a Case Study (Volume One: Research, Interventions, and Effects)*,” Peradum Press 2018.

This is aimed precisely at the interactions and mutual references that you mentioned. Of course, they exist within each library, but some of them are also explicitly created within individual books. Let me give you an example: “*Margaret van Eyck—Renaming an Institution, a Case Study*” was published in 2018 in two volumes: *Volume 1* [fig. 2] in March, *Volume 2* [fig. 3] in September. The second volume functions as a commentary on the first one and allows the reader to jump within the book as well as between the two books by means of a reference system. You have tested and described a comparable “back and forth” between books in your column “*The Revolving Bookshelf*”—namely how to ‘read’ books with other books. How could this method of talking about books be explained?

Jan Wenzel: The point of departure for the column each time was having ‘read’ two, sometimes three photography books together. I placed them next to each other on the table, and then started to interpret one through the other in a dialogical way. My impression is that there is a communication, a conversation ‘in’ media: books talk to each other. The ‘reading’ or the observation of the books lying next to each other is then, actually, almost like a recording of what happens in the communication between these books. As soon as I have a library, I do not read a book on its own, but always read it against the backdrop of the other books, and I am immediately involved in the communication between the books while reading. I have found this to be very productive because it expands the possibilities of differentiation for the formal quality of books.

Seeing how certain formal decisions influence how a book works, how we understand a book—and then incorporating this into the work on new books, this observation of the formal possibilities of the book itself: I find that very exciting!

Hagen Verleger: The work on new books is not finished with design and production. An essential part is their distribution. In your lecture, you even asked yourself, “whether it is perhaps only this dispersion—the process of distribution—that makes the printed object a book.” I also see it that way: a book is not really ‘finished’ when it is printed and bound, but everything that happens afterwards makes it a book—the distribution, the reception. In this context, one could also think of the ways in which the book is used. There is what one could call, for example, the ‘bookish’ modes of use (intended by the producer(s)), i.e. reading or contemplating and leafing through the book—and then there are also completely different modes of use. For example, is a book positioned under a wobbly table leg still a book, or rather a stack of printed and bound paper? The book scholars Ursula Rautenberg and Dirk Wetzel distinguish between “primary” and “secondary” book functions (Rautenberg and Wetzel 2001: 51). Distribution and reception are thus one aspect, but more generally speaking, the question “book or not?” depends on the way it is used. For even if a book is distributed, it can subsequently lose its ‘bookishness’ again. This thought is already indirectly found in a Latin proverb that goes back to a poem by the ancient grammarian Terentianus Maurus: *Habent sua fata libelli*—books have their own destinies...

Jan Wenzel: Yes, that can happen. Continuing with the question of distribution: the passage that you quoted from me had been written from within my own publishing history. When we started making books in 2001, we were mainly interested in the work on the object. The desire to combine design and editorial, content issues. After a few years, the question of distribution grew very important for us in our publishing work. We started out as amateurs, so to speak, and it was only during our work that we realized how central it is not only to bring books to the print shop, but also to invest at least as much time, passion, and work in sending them out into the world. Only this secondary step leads to there being a contact, the possibility that somebody will read the books, will deal with them. The moment a book leaves the print shop is not the end of the work.

Hagen Verleger: To conclude our conversation, I would like to take a look at the second topic, the “(so-



Fig. 3: Hagen Verleger (ed.): “Margaret van Eyck—Renaming an Institution, a Case Study (Volume Two: Comments, Contexts, and Connections),” Peradam Press 2018.

cio)political dimension of bookmaking and publishing.” In 2018, an *open letter* to Stiftung Buchkunst was published, written by your co-publisher Markus Dreßen, among others, with the subtitle: “Against ‘the beautiful (German) book’”:

“Design is always political. Thinking differently about graphic design in today’s world would be irresponsible, because (graphic) design influences our hyper-medialized everyday life more than any other aesthetic discipline. Given capitalist appropriation and increasing populist distortion of language and communication, graphic design in general and book design in particular must be a place of differentiated aesthetic negotiation.” (Transl.: H. V.)

If we remember that the commercially produced book is always also a commodity that is bought and sold, circulating in this capitalist system, how can we, as publishers, relate to this? What role does this certainly play in your own actions?

Jan Wenzel: I would argue that markets are, first and foremost, a form of human exchange. That markets are something that is enormously important and enormously enriching for the constitution of societies. As a reminder, the first decade of the new century was a time when many small publishing houses were founded—publishing houses by artists, by designers. At the same time there were, starting with Christoph Keller’s “Kiosk” exhibition, a large number of independent book fairs—so there were parallel public spheres at that time that had a strong interest in books. The history of Spector Books is closely linked to this, but at a certain

point in our publishing history we decided that the infrastructure offered by the traditional book market is important to us. It was not our intention to develop a parallel infrastructure, so to speak, and to establish ourselves in a niche, but to be perceived alongside all the other art book publishers, alongside all the other publishers. To let our alternative model of production take place within the framework of a large book market—that is the much more political gesture for us. To make books in a different way and to create this freedom for us to continue through our entrepreneurial activities. This is something that is very important to us in our daily work.

Hagen Verleger: This idea that you formulated—to use existing structures, but to let a completely different model of production take place within them—can also be transferred to the level of (book) design. Johanna Drucker sums up this subversive potential in her text “*The Myth of the Democratic Multiple*”:

“Books [...] have the power to introduce non-standard thought into the arena of public discourse through the Trojan horse of an ordinary appearance.” (Drucker 1998: 178)

She describes how books can use their design to introduce unconventional ideas into the arena of public discourse—namely under the guise of an “ordinary appearance.” Especially a conventionally designed paperback can act as a “Trojan horse” and transport radical content. This, by the way, was also my approach for the “*Margaret van Eyck*” volumes [fig. 2 + 3]. And I see this in analogy to your suggestion to infiltrate existing systems or structures by bringing another form of production into them.

Jan Wenzel: Yes. We do not live in times of great utopias. Through the experiences of my childhood and youth in the GDR, I know how demanding the task is to push through a real alternative. I believe that today alternatives can be worked out very concretely. One can try out things in a group, in a small community of people, and thus demonstrate how processes can be organized differently, how differently they are possible. At the moment I see this as a possibility for me to change even bigger things: By trying something concretely in your own practice and seeing what is possible. I think this is also a point in the open letter you mentioned. It is also very much about how one can create public spheres for these issues. How can we exchange ideas about graphic design, and about how to make books readable in a new way through their design? That, if I understand it correctly, was the wish that was articulated in this open letter: Beyond awarding a prize to the “most beautiful,” to create a public sphere in a



Fig. 4: Referenced books and texts.

different way, where people can exchange ideas about what they expect from the medium and what kind of handling of the medium they desire and seek.

Hagen Verleger: Thank you very much for the conversation.

Translated from German by Zaia Alexander

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