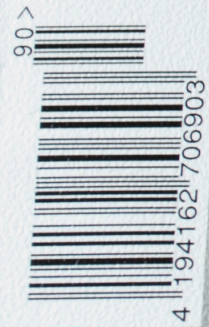


LODOWN

March/April 2014

Mårten Lange
Jonathan Leder
Peter Beste
Christopher Makos
Frank Herfort
Jerry Hsu
Spencer Lowell
Brian Gaberman
Daniel Josefsohn
& other lens men

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PHOTOGRAPHERS ISSUE

VISUAL PARATAXIS

Having released about 30 books since 2003, Dutch artist Elisabeth Tonnard's work is indeed quite difficult to pigeonhole: she often uses preexisting material – both images and texts – and combines them in unexpected ways, but some of her work actually feels more like conceptual art: *The Invisible Book*, for example, “a product without a single fault, available at the lowest price possible” (it's free), isn't even a book really, and yet it's strictly limited to 100 copies. A prolific poet, collagist, curator, photographer, editor, and (self-)publisher, she also came up with *The Story of a Young Gentleman*, a short story that contains the entire text of Tolstoy's *War & Peace*, and a book entitled *One Swimming Pool* – which is just what it says on the tin. In her recently rereleased *In This Dark Wood* (originally self-published in 2008; now available via JL Books), Tonnard has paired 90 different English translations of the famous first lines of Dante's *Inferno* – one of them being: “In the middle of the journey of our life / I found myself in a dark wood / for the straight way was lost” – with as many photos of (mostly alienated) people walking alone at night. For our Photo Special, we just had to find out more about the intricate relationship between visual elements and written language in her work.



Elisabeth, what are you up to these days? Am I right in assuming that you're currently working on more than one book project?

There are always some books shimmering on the horizon that I can't wait to get started on, but right now I am focusing on a collection of my Dutch poetry that will be published by a literary publisher this fall. And one of the “horizon” projects I'd like to start on soon is a book based on an idea or clue that James Joyce mentions in one of his novels and that I'm hoping to expand on. Too early to tell if it will work out.

Having dedicated so much time to self-publishing, how does it feel to now work with other publishing houses as well?

It is nice to experience both. Before the recent collaboration with J&L Books, I already worked three times with Druksel, a small literary publishing house in Gent, Belgium. When working with a good publisher (and these are both good) you give yourself the opportunity to see the circle around the work become much wider. It is like a heavier stone was cast in the pond. More people are able to see the work. While I do believe that you can publish any book yourself (budget permitting) the distribution and promotion often is a big hiccup. That said, I see myself keeping on with self-publishing the majority of my work because it is the most direct way of working and I am not the most patient person. *In this Dark Wood*, which was released by J&L Books as a trade edition last year, was at first self-published too. That is a really nice way to go about it: self-publish a book exactly the way you want it without having to wait for anyone else, and then after a few years have it be released in a different context and for a bigger audience.

What was your first love: photography – or writing? Or just books in general, no matter what shape they're in (and what kind of content they carry)?

My first love was tearing up paper. When I was still in diapers this was my favorite pastime. It is hilarious to think that I may have made my profession out of a sublimated version of this. After learning to read, books became a major part of my life. I grew up in a village but there was a good public library there and I knew every book in it. When I was growing up, you didn't own a camera already when you were five, so photography came much later than books. I recently came across my first experiments with photography done when I was 16 or so and remember that I made an entire calculation of working somewhere to pay for the film rolls and development. It was definitely something I was interested in. I also made my first photo-based book then, even though I didn't know that that was what it was, because it was just a gift for my parents, documenting each of their places of birth. Photography moved to the backseat again when I went to study literature at the university. As to writing – studying literature kept me from my own writing for a while, apart from writings like essays and more scholarly texts. It is an attitude that those who have studied comparative literature might recognize: “There is so much out there, am I good enough to contribute to that myself?” With writing my first book I shattered that attitude for myself by using tipp-ex or whiteout (the correction fluid) on a poem by T.S. Eliot, and writing new poetry from his lines. It has been the right route for me: first know something, study and admire, then break through it, make it your own.

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Poet, collagist, curator, photographer, editor, publisher etc. – which is your main (and your favorite) field anyway?

I find myself in between things. This state of constant in-betweenness in which you don't arrive at a fixed destination is a theme in my work as well. Books are good for people in between things. You can carry them from one place to the other, and you can also combine the visual with the literary, and set things moving by flipping the pages. Especially when you self-publish you don't have to conform to any of the established fields anyways. When I published my first book it was self-published after two full years of looking for a publisher: the literary publishers didn't want it because it was too experimental for them or because it was in English (a problem for Dutch publishing) or because it was based on another text, the art publishers didn't want it because it was too literary. A shortcut would be to say that I make literary works by visual means. But there are always side roads and discrepancies.

When did you discover visual literature for yourself? Who are some of the artists that inspired you in the first place? Are there types of visual literature you're not interested in?

I learned about artist books when I did the Master of Fine Arts program at Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, NY, which focused on artist books, photography and film. And an influential course for me during that MFA was "The History of Photography as Writing" taught by Chris Burnett. It connected photography to writing rather than to for instance painting. I was doing what might be dubbed visual literature before that time already, but largely self-inspired and without really having a connection to what others were doing, which was a problem because I couldn't place my work into any sort of context. A visit to the Tate Modern in 2005 was an eye opener. The art works on view showed me a way of thinking that was akin to my own way of thinking. Maybe what I was doing was not so abnormal after all. So I decided to try and see how I would do in visual arts and see if it would help me in my literary work, hence the MFA. Once I got involved in visual studies I also learned a lot more about areas of literature I hadn't seen so far, more experimental work by for instance Information as Material, Christian Bök, Heimrad Bäcker and so many others. I can't really say there are types of visual literature I am not interested in per se, though every variety surely has works that do not interest me. In an art form there are always great works and lesser ones. The same goes for artist books. Overall I am not interested in works that seem contrived.

I'd say that combining words and images very much frames the latter – do you agree? Sure. Though we might wonder if an image is even an image if it is not framed. Probably not. It would just be continuous reality. But I get what you're saying: texts can point an image more into one direction. One project I made using this effect is *Interior Monologue*. It pairs images of Parisian apartment interiors from a real-estate catalogue with "literary phrases" found in a book of Fifteen Thousand Useful Phrases. The reader can't help using the texts to interpret the images, even though the pairings are random since the images are in the order I found them and the texts are in alphabetical order. Something analogous happens in *Another World* where there is a contrast between the texts that are news headlines of events around the world, and the photographs of tiny insects making love on flowers. Without the texts there would just be pictures of insects on flowers. Without the images there would just be a list of news events. Put together with both of them having equal weight, they point at the difficulty of understanding either the mysterious life right in front of us or human events from far away that are only communicated through media. They both seem distant (which is enhanced by the book, type and pictures being very small). So I use texts in an active, performative way, not as descriptions but more like objects. You could very well say that the texts are framed too.

Incorporating images into fictional texts automatically results in a blurring between fact/fiction, a sense of uncertainty (think Sebald, for example), are you interested in this aspect as well, or do you mostly care about interesting, inspiring juxtapositions?

Sebald is a nice example, with indeed a sense of uncertainty. I am not sure if that always happens when images are inserted in fictional texts, what Sebald does is rather special. As to juxtapositions, they are interesting because the elements become a new whole and in that sense they are indeed blurred.



a book to beguile the tedious hours



a callous and conscienceless brute

You have repeatedly worked with repetition, with variations of a certain theme or idea – how do you usually know you're done with a project, because all of them could go on forever?

Yes that is true, most projects are like a fragment of an imaginary archive that could go on forever. The end is sometimes simply indicated because I run out of images, or I run out of texts. And other times you just have a feeling for what length works best.

Dante, E. A. Poe – how do you find authors for your works? Is dealing with their work (or translations thereof) comparable to creating new poems yourself?

Well, they are not exactly obscure. I work with what I know or happen to encounter; whether it is text in newspapers, handbooks, personal correspondence, existing poetry or my own older works. The writers you mention are of course writers who have created works that are in our collective memories. It is almost impossible not to think of them in connection to certain issues. I do believe that dealing with other people's texts is comparable to making new poems yourself. It is always a mix anyways, that's the funny thing about language. It does not come brand new like an inspiration on the wind, it is built up out of old scraps. The way you combine the old scraps can be new. Like I said, I made my first book by applying tipp-ex to a T.S. Eliot poem. This wasn't done out of a concern to analyze the old so much as it had to do with the fact that I was reading a line of poetry and wanted it to say something else. This meant some letters had to go and be corrected.

The same goes for photos, what is it that draws you towards found material? And how/where do you usually find it?

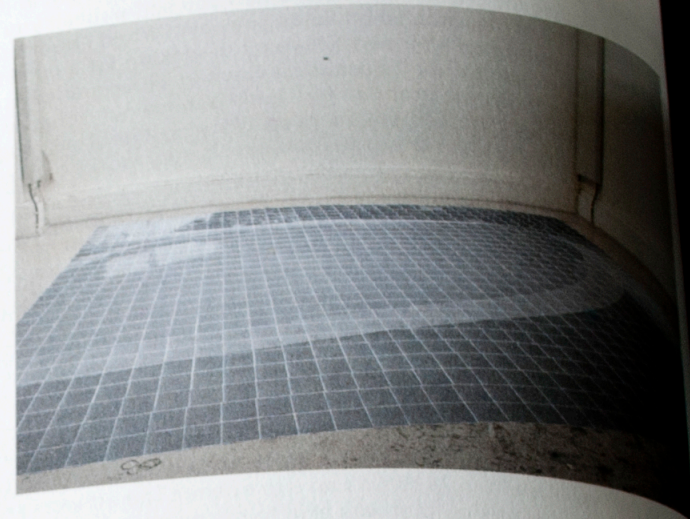
What draws me to certain photos is that they were done with other intentions in mind and that there is an openness or emptiness in them. Like the images of the Parisian apartments I mentioned, those images were made to sell a house, not to create art. I also like the kind of images you can see in small local newspapers, the images of firemen, collisions, weddings, parades etc. The point is that when the photographer is absent, the photo is more like a material, just like words in a language. For my work I made use several times of the collections at Visual Studies Workshop, especially the stuff that was uncategorized or abandoned. Both *Two of Us* and *In this Dark Wood* are based on an incredible collection at VSW of negatives left behind by a business specialized in street vendor photography (taking snapshots of people in the streets and trying to sell them the print). The amazing perspective resulting from their unartfulness was what attracted me, together with the fact that here was a collection of essentially the same picture taken over a million times. When pictures come in multitudes like that, you can start to see patterns, and those patterns might spell out something about the world that was previously invisible.

By the way, are you planning a sequel to *The Story of a Young Gentleman*? He could be reading something else!

Well yes, it is good of you to think of that. I might in fact do nothing else from now on since he might be extremely well-read! I did think of a Russian version at some point.

What else can you announce for the future?

In a few weeks time I will receive the Kleine Hans (Little Hans) award for my work with photography and texts. This is an award initiated in 2007 for "photography without pretensions," granted by a jury consisting of artists named Hans (Hans Samsom, Hans Eijkelboom, Hans Wolf, Hans van der Meer and Hans Aarsman). I love both the concept and the artists so it is truly an honor. There are also some exciting shows lined up this year, one in which I will install *One Swimming Pool* on the floor for the first time, and then a solo at the Van Abbe museum focusing on all my books.



Midway the journey of this life I was 'ware
That I had strayed into a dark forest,
And the right path appeared not anywhere.

