

Die Schönsten Schweizer Bücher 2005, a critique  
(20 06 2006)

On page 73 of *die schönsten schweizer bücher 2005* Mirjam Fischer says *'the seven-man jury headed by François Rappo assessed the entries, as every year, in terms of concept, graphic design and typography, and then for print quality and technical finish of the cover, binding function and material used. Originality and innovation are important criteria'*

Within these parameters no name would fit better than the most beautiful swiss books to the selection the jury had decided to reward this year. A collection of precious (see expensive) books, mainly on art, design and architecture, mainly visual. Competently printed on splendid papers. One might object a lack of substance in Fischer's description. There are of course welcomed exceptions that aren't produced just for the eye, *Plata Pussenta 2002-2006* and *Zoologische Miniaturen von Jörg Hess* are two books where you clearly understand their aim, a simple useful field guide that follows rational criteria of representation and clearly expose informations, and an easy to handle encyclopedia about the animal kingdom inside the context of switzerland. Yet the explanation texts referred to these two books don't speak of anything else but the technical bravura of printers, designers, typographers. Keywords are *'authentic rather than trendy impression', 'outstanding-and very well printed-pictorial material'*.

Mirjam Fischer continues *'The catalogue by Laurent Brenner (Reala) for the most beautiful swiss books competition also caused an international stir last year. The graphic concept was so persuasive that the graphic designer and his team felt justified in developing the idea to a compilation of original pages further, and applying to a new form. Light was to be thrown on specific aspects of book production even more than last year, making the publication entirely into an archive reference work and material book.'*

Can a publication about beautiful books not be beautiful? The catalogue stresses the concepts of individuality and originality by the use of many different papers, as many as the selected books. Pictures of the book's covers are shown in 'presentation' mode printed each on the paper and with the technique used for the actual book-block, on the back an introductory text that explain the qualities for which the book has been chosen is written in 4 languages as to refer to the internationality of the publication. This first part is followed by texts written by the head of the jury and the curator of the exhibition, they explain what they did and how they did it, the feeling a reader has is that they are clearly of minor importance compare to the pictures. The central part of the book shows single pages taken out of the original books, each book has its own format therefore the catalogue works like a procrustean bed, small books will be stretched out leaving as much paper as necessary and books bigger than A4 will be cut. The catalogue ends with a set of paper samples, typefaces used in the selected books, and technical data. It is probably true, as Mirjam Fisher states, that most of the needed help came from printers, paper manufactories and binding workshops, which imply a more prominent evaluation of technicality than other subjects, a surely privileged position within the selection parameters. A page inside the catalogue is given to the remarkable initiative of the swiss federal office of culture that every year reward an outstanding studio with a money prize named after Jan Tschichold, who in 1944 proposed the swiss book design competition, the same person who stated, 14 years before, in a rather strong fashion, *'Standardization, instead of individualization. Cheap books, instead of private-press editions. Active literature, instead of passive leather bindings.'*

Looking back at previous editions, starting in 2000, the first I had personally attended, the structure of the most beautiful swiss books competition didn't change much, same selection criteria, same method of representation. Attending the exhibition and through the catalogue one witnesses beautiful books designed by outstanding designers, full of original ideas and produced with exemplary technique, a selection out of time and space.

The result in doing so lacks truth. The jury moves away from books that don't meet parameters of excellence. Where it could hint at reality, it presents a rosy picture of flawless books in graphic wonderland and where it goes into details, they're purely technical. The impression

one has is of a celebratory up-to-the-moment design glitz, thus mannerism at its best. (Does this method leave any space for the reader? Does it provides enough ground to discover who did it, and why, for what, and for how much?)

*'Yet, it is just where there are some cracks in the surface of what happened that one can get hold on something: cracks then revealed by a truthfulness in telling, by an account that includes the failures and the dead ends and the apparently meaningless episodes that don't fit into a wished-for narrative coherence. I suppose that all human endeavours suffer such imperfections (...) Representation of things not going to plan is a difficult art. I think it must have repercussions on the form and the structure of accounts we give. Representation of what really happened has to admit discontinuity and even some degree of confusion and meaninglessness.'* Robin Kinross 'The uses of failure' DDD2 p.29

It suggests one need to look at books with some perspective, books occur to be in a place at a certain time, under certain constraints. To set them in their specific context by a truthful description of what really happened, all the events that took place during the developing process and give the book its actual shape. Failed attempts, sudden turns, conflicts between the involved parts, resources at disposal are all valuable informations that should be recorded in an attempt for a clear, down-to-heart account. An interest in failures is no more than a necessary part of an interest in how the world is, in this case, how the books are. Publisher, editors, designers and printer could play an important role in drawing up a clear and more truthful picture, far from the idea of perfection the exhibition and the catalogue wish for.

This, concisely enough, provides us elements to search for a new paradigm when evaluating a book. Its final look would play a minor part, aesthetic merits will be valued in relation to the particular context in which the book has been thought, designed and printed. Constraints are part of the everyday workload, some are tougher than others. Another element in evaluating a book could be to test the equation which says that good design is only possible with books of substance, to put in other words, if content adds beauty to books, and on the contrary, if lack on the content side decreases its beauty. Splendid books might reveal inconsistency, discovering that what has been valued as beautiful loses all its strength when it comes to the information it carries on. Attempts to define what is a book are therefore needed. A set of parameters which tries not to overlook what is the purpose of the book, to understand if it provides active criticism to the current cultural debate or it is merely a marketing object. Is the book proposing new perspectives? Is it linked to reality? These are few questions which I believe the jury should concern about when it's time to decide.

Eventually, if something has to filter out of this short text is not merely a critique on the current state of *die schönsten schweizer bücher* but a concise proposal of what I believe is a standard to strive for. A necessity to resolve questions of precision, truthfulness, representation of reality. To look out for substance. The awareness that books are active artifacts.