

Curating the content

LARS MÜLLER

From designer to publisher

I studied graphic design in Zurich, where my family moved from Norway when I was 10. Following my education, I went to Amsterdam where I worked for Total Design and had the chance to assist Wim Crowel for a year. This was an experience which influenced me very much. Back in Switzerland, I set up my own studio. Soon afterwards, I started publishing because I realised that books are the only lasting printed matter. This was a very naïve thought, but I rejected all these service commissions where you design a flyer or a poster which only lasts a couple of weeks. Crowel taught me to appreciate books. He had a wonderful library. In 1983, at the age of 27, I became a publisher. You cannot study to become a publisher, you become one out of choice. I was



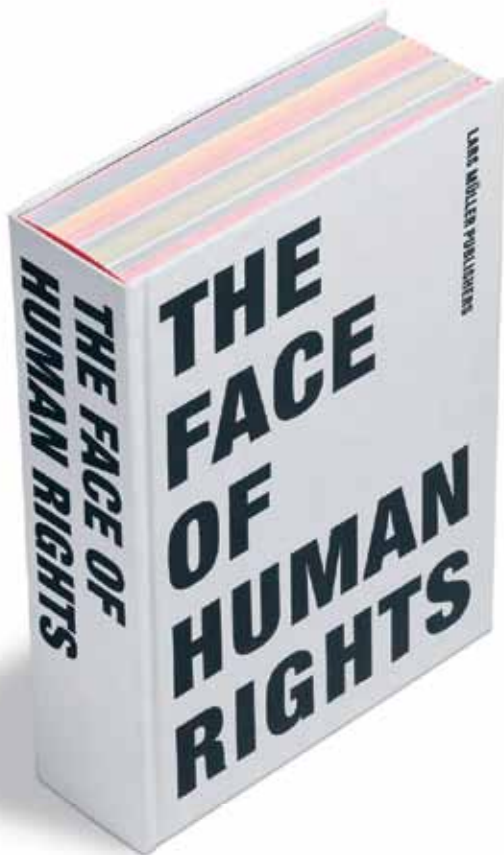
The Face of Human Rights, spread and cover, edited by Walter Kälin, Lars Müller and Judith Wyttenbach, designed by Integral Lars Müller

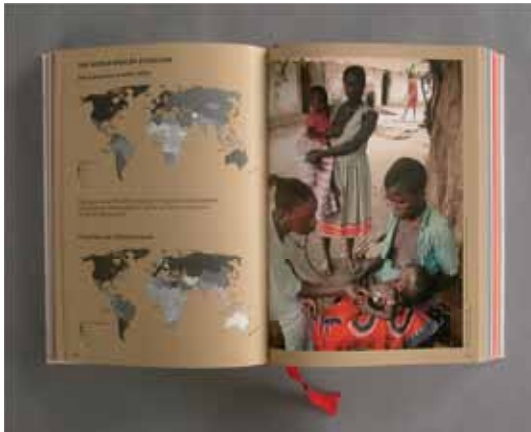
running my studio in parallel with the publishing house. The design work paid for the publishing and for all my failures and miscalculations.

The design studio at the time did corporate design, institutional design, communication programmes, signage systems and so on. There were up to 14 of us working there in a wide range of activities. My passion lay in book design. There is one aspect of book design which I felt intuitively drawn towards, namely that content comes first. In books, the relationship and balance between design and content is very special. My work as a publisher changed my view of graphic design. I believe that you must understand the content before you can find the appropriate materials and tools to serve the programme.

Pleasure, experience and knowledge

I have specific criteria for choosing subjects I want to publish. In this respect, the question I ask myself again and again is about the size of the publishing house. I never gave it a chance to really grow. The reason for this is that a project has to please me personally and the work has to offer me pleasure, experience and knowledge. We spend more time on projects than other publishers do. Often the publisher is the manager who signs the contract and shows up at the book launch. In my case, every project has to meet some of my idealistic expectations. But I also realised that the decision to become a publisher was silly. Already in the eighties we realised that communication technology would change very rapidly and that books would be affected in one way or another by new media. I went for books out of a passionate interest, even though there is very little money in publishing. Although you do not become rich, there is a counter value for your investment in books, that is, experience, pleasure and friendship. I became close friends with many authors and editors.





THIS PAGE:

The Face of Human Rights,
spreads, edited by Walter Kälin,
Lars Müller and Judith Wyttenbach,
designed by Integral Lars Müller

RIGHT:

Herzog & de Meuron: Natural History,
edited by Philip Ursprung and the Canadian
Centre for Architecture CCA, Montréal,
designed by Integral Lars Müller

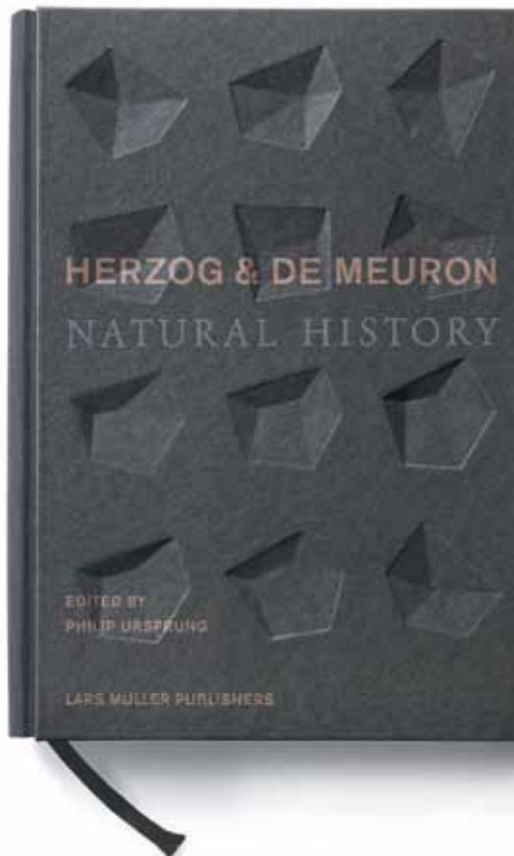
Besides these personal reasons, more objective criteria may be that content should always be of value to the reader too. What I believe in as a publisher should be good for others too. I assemble books very patiently, which may create a message on a higher level. For example, in 1986, I bought the German translation rights of a Miles Davis biography because my English was not good enough to read the original. 20th century avant-garde, constructive art, fifties and sixties design, modern architecture, Miles Davis, a cookbook, a children's book, etc. – there were several themes and topics representing my personal interests and at the time could create some kind of universe, which I wanted to share with others.

A book is an excellent medium for gathering inspiration and sharing opinions and information, and for democratising knowledge. Inspiration is always related to people and experience. This helps us to understand the present, create the future and hopefully multiply idealistic and materialistic wealth. Sharing information with people creates awareness of social context and enables us to act politically. We are all political in trying to balance our concerns and activities. This inspires me.

Design as language

I thought about what it is to be a 'seismographic editor' and what it might mean to me. I spent almost twenty years in publishing and felt very comfortable in the field of graphic design, product design, architecture, art, etc. I was

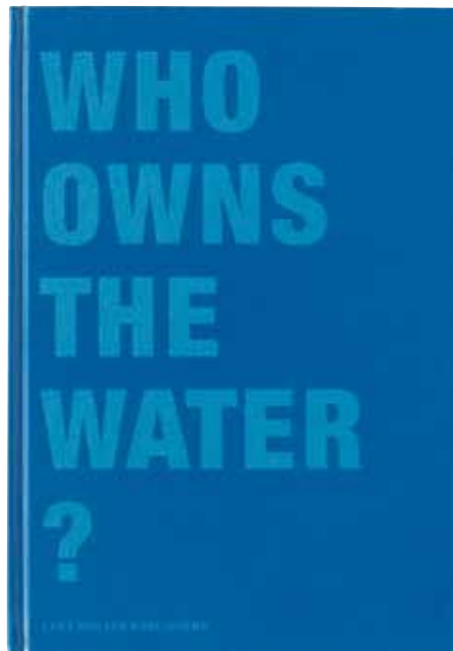
aiming mainly for authorship, signatures and the work of individuals. I rejected the corporate, which probably came out of my political background whereby the individual and the collective represented real power. When I made the first book with Zaha Hadid, I thought, 'What a strong woman with strong ideas; they just do not let her build.' After she created two very small buildings, I offered her a book: a manifesto of her ideas in photographs by H el ene Binet. I would never say that the book influenced her success, but it helped communicate her vision. It does not matter to me whether these individuals are famous. My collection of authors was already a statement, as well as the fact that I was contributing as an author myself. It is misleading to believe that designers claim authorship. We *are* authors while designing. Design is our language. As the publisher of a book, I must reflect my beliefs as much as the author.



In 2001, I published a book with Jasper Morrison (*Everything But The Walls*), assembling his work from the previous 12 years. I insisted on his writing the text for the book himself. I said to him, 'If you write down what you tell me about your work, that may be what people want to read.' He gave it a try and succeeded. It took another year. Many others tried to copy that format and some failed because they did not have a coaching partner. There was a lot of

The extra value or the purpose of books is the responsibility or the autonomy given to the reader.

trust and communication. I also realised that I could become a serial design monograph editor and perhaps make some money. But I felt that this instrumentation of my skills would not be satisfactory. Instead, I referred to my daughter who started to ask odd questions when she was about 12 or 13 years old. She was interested in human rights and joined Amnesty International. Her questions about human rights made me realise that she knew a lot but was hardly able to communicate her ideas, as the topic was too abstract. It is not about justice or laws; it is about life. Since we are designers, we try to explain things visually, but I had no images to share with her. What is the 'image of human rights'? It cannot be a person in chains, a tortured victim or a starving baby. That is not enough. I started to do some research and learned to distinguish between the expression of the violation and the respect of human rights. I found images for both aspects. Cooking dinner for five people at home is a privilege compared with not having any food at all. The opposite of violation is the expression of normality. This was how the book on human rights evolved. I understood the conditions of visual communication and was able to adapt my experience in communicating design, art and architecture to other topics. *The Face of Human Rights* was my first choice. I found a co-editor, Walter Kälin – a professor in international law. During our first conversation, he said lawyers were blind. They do not see the link between images and human rights; they do not think it is necessary. I convinced him with a few examples and he decided to cooperate. Kälin was responsible for the factual content. Together we reviewed thousands of images in order to find the right ones. They were never chosen just for their emotional impact.



Who Owns the Water?
 edited by Lars Müller, Klaus Lanz,
 Christian Rentsch and René Schwarzenbach,
 designed by Integral Lars Müller

All of the images we used were very factual. They had a date and a location. It was a great experience and I felt encouraged to go on. So I initiated the book *Who Owns the Water?*, another experience in communicating something very complex through images. I feel pretty good about using my skills to communicate important content to a wide audience. I believe this is a contemporary response to the visual blast – perhaps ‘seismographic’ in a sense. I believe in the role of the designer as a curator of content.



The unique interaction between the reader and the book

The extra value or the purpose of books today – in an age of upcoming new media – is probably the extra value that has always come with books, which is the responsibility or the autonomy given to the reader. That is quite exclusive compared with other media. The interaction of the reader with a book is unique. It may be compared with yoga: looking at a book or reading for fifteen minutes will calm you and give you a real experience of time. It is the easiest possible way to reflect on yourself. As a container of information, the book has a lasting value. It makes great sense to build your own library. I believe that we have another approach to information gathered on paper than if we search Google or Wikipedia. In principle, books declare that what is printed on paper has a lasting value. This principle is undermined by the ambition of young designers to publish big books after only an insignificant amount of practice, or by architects who include the costs of a book in the overall budget of their first building. This is an inflation of nonsense which affects the reputation of books.

Helvetica, homage to a typeface,
edited by Lars Müller,
designed by Integral Lars Müller

Story of a Typeface: Helvetica forever,
edited by Lars Müller,
designed by Integral Lars Müller

New tendencies in the publishing world

One tendency is the abovementioned inflation. There is speculation about who the readers will be and how much time and money they will spend on

books. And there is the tendency which Lars Müller Publishers may stand for. In 2005, I joined a larger structure, specialised in architectural publications. I sold the majority of my shares in order to deal with some financial problems. Medium- or small-sized publishing houses end up in bigger structures, for the good or the bad. As an employed publisher, I kept my editorial independence, which is exceptional in our business. Recently, I bought the company back and became an independent publisher again. The ongoing concentration of the publishing business may ensure the future of books but it also levels it down. Therefore, every person who feels like opening a publishing house should do it. I try to support younger publishers with my know-how and connections. In every discipline, artists, designers and writers start young and it is fair enough to say that young authors should join young publishers and share their enthusiasm. They may obtain an appropriate product which reaches a young audience. I do not always feel that I am the right publisher for newcomers anymore.

It is difficult for me as a publisher and a designer to visit a book fair or a bookshop and to find an appealing or outstanding book. What I regret is that the more experienced I am, the less I am impressed. Often the imbalance between the content and its visual expression is disappointing. Many books are over-designed and some are under-designed. I doubt that designers like to read and understand what they do. They may also be an easy target for marketing. I am not sensitive to marketing covers. Marketing has destroyed many excellent books. A book can have excellent content and wonderful and carefully designed spreads, but may just have the wrong cover. To overcome that dilemma, I make the effort to open a book and give it a chance.

The best advice I think I can give to a starting designer is to be aware of the limitations of time and energy. To acquire the capability to perceive, to store, to remember, to manage information and to be selective. To create out of a passion. To be slightly compliant. Not to streamline yourself. It is not about how you represent yourself but about the discovery of values which make you unique. I am afraid of these slick, streamlined, pseudo-avant-garde designers. The art of life is to perceive and appreciate new experiences, to relate them to the past and to open up to the future. Learn to ride the wave and develop a passionate sense for materials, for real time and for reality-based experiences as well. Learn to surf *and* to dive. ✕ ✕ ✕ ✕ ✕