

Artists & Others

The imaginative French book in the 21 st century

Koopman Collection, National Library of the Netherlands

Collectif Génération, Gervais Jassaud

The role fulfilled by Gervais Jassaud as Collectif Génération publisher extends further than the role of most publishers. Obviously he selects the authors and artists that he wants to publish, he brings them together, but he also plays a big part in the book design aspect. He determines the format, the book dimensions and the typeface. Jassaud is a book architect. His choice of typeface is conservative and French: his preference lies with Garamond, Cochin, Bodoni and Kennerley. He does nothing to hide his aversion to the English Gill typeface which he describes as banal and ugly. What remains striking is the many forms that his books ultimately take on thanks to the divergent ways in which the quires are folded; not infrequently parts of pages are even cut back. These are interventions that affect the artist's room for manoeuvre. It should be said that Jassaud is, in this respect, less radical than Iliad (Iliia Zdanevich, 1894-1975) with his legendary publishing house Degré quarante et un (41°). That publisher, greatly admired by Jassaud, not only came up with new and invariably eccentric layouts for each consecutive book but also with new accompanying formats. Jassaud, by contrast, usually opts for a fairly standard format (32.5 x 25 centimetres) with wide margins on every side. To his mind, it is a formula that guarantees for the artist the right space (not too small, not too large) to accomplish generous artworks.

Gervais Jassaud (Colombes, 1944) read Communication Sciences in Paris (1964- 1969) and was employed, between 1970 and 1991, by an international civil engineering company. From 1991 until 2005 he was director of the École des Beaux-Arts in Reims. As a publisher, he was inspired by the literary and artistic movement known as TXT, Textstruction and Supports/Surfaces. He published a magazine (Génération, 1969-1971) and organized collaboration between French artists; something that he continued to do even after changing his career path in 1977.

Since that time he has repeatedly extended invitations to different international artists and authors to work together on publications intended for international audiences. Jassaud will, for instance, match up a Japanese writer with an American artist or an American writer with an Argentinian artist. In that way, the text for a given book can, for example, easily be conceived in Neuilly-sur-Seine, completed in Honolulu, translated in Tokyo, set in Fontenay, printed in Paris and illustrated in New York.

Because of its strong international character, his publishing business has been termed 'a press of the world and for the world' and his books have been dubbed 'polycultural' and even 'global'. The writer Anca Cristofovici claimed that his publishing policy 'diverges from regular understandings of global embrace in that it privileges cultural difference as an agent that relates cultural imaginaries instead of levelling them.'

Jassaud does not publish any translated work. Authors and artists do not always speak a common language; often artists are unable to comprehend the text produced by a Korean, French or

Spanish writer. Such understanding is not essential. On the whole the contact between the parties tends to be indirect, going via Jassaud and email communication. To Jassaud's mind the confrontation between text and image is more important than the synergy between the two. The artist and the author do not need to get involved in each other's contribution. Often, though, that does happen and so one sees that the artist reacts to the text or that the author reacts to the artist's interventions - but that is the less common scenario of the two. There generally tends to be one author, but different artists may well be involved in a single book project.

It can take many years for a book to reach completion with some of the projects never getting finished. The book that was being worked on with the Dutch artist Ger van Elk, who died in 2014, is a case in point. On most occasions it is the text that comes first with the artist then formulating his reaction to it. That takes place within a framework directed by Jassaud. In spite of the fact that Jassaud wants to be a publisher of book objects, he keeps well away from 'the post-modern book, the non-book, and the anti-book'. The initiative lies with Jassaud, which means that the artist does not have the freedom to select a text or to determine the format or type of paper used. Only in very exceptional cases can the artist bring influence to bear on the layout. Otherwise he can exercise complete freedom. The printed book becomes his canvas: he can dip the book into red lead, paint over the texts; he can also decide to fold the pages differently, thus altering the sequence of the texts. The edition size is left to the discretion of the artist. At first that was something Jassaud tried to steer but artists were usually inclined to make fewer copies than he had envisaged. Hence the reason that the edition size is often not mentioned in these books. There is also a discrepancy between 'copies' and 'editions'. Jassaud may perhaps choose to have sixty copies of a text printed which he then distributes to various artists. Certain texts may go to, let us say, seven different artists, each of whom is responsible for a portion of the total number of copies. In that way, different 'editions' of a single book can emerge. This practice is peculiar to Collectif Génération. Jassaud says of the copies of such editions that they are 'similar but not identical'. Obviously that may always be said to apply to any handmade copies within a single 'edition'. Such separate editions produced by individual artists have their own colophons in which, these days, the number of copies - often around ten - is indicated.

Another important principle of Jassaud's is that his books be based exclusively on the work of contemporary authors and artists. He would not, for example, print texts written by Rimbaud or Verlaine. Instead, he selects authors who are able to write a new text especially for him. This is what he has to say on the matter: 'All the authors and artists involved in a book project with Collectif Génération share the ability to live in the present and they initiate and take part in contemporary intellectual and artistic debates'. He added that in this way his artists' books can 'reflect the present of contemporary literature and art.' In all of this it is the role of the artist which, for him, remains central. It would be inconceivable for him to publish a book without any text and so it is always the text - or the poet - which leads to the decision to publish something.

Within the debate on the term 'artist's book', the books of Collectif Génération have played a unique role. The American art historian Stefan Klima talks of the true qualities of any artist's book by pointing to the way in which such books are constructed and how, because of their special folding systems, they perpetually challenge the notion of what a book is: it is almost always impossible to read them in a normal way. By contrast, the French art historian Anne Moeglin-Delcroix asserted that Jassaud had missed the boat and that he should have exploited his qualities as a publisher to create 'real' artists' books. Essentially she maintained that he had left French artists in the lurch. He had everything that was required to become a perfect artists' book publisher but had instead opted to remain a 'livre d'artiste' man. Such criticism was typical of the battle for a sense of direction that raged at the end of the twentieth century.

Jassaud let none of this affect him. He stuck firmly to his own convictions:

'I would like to point out that there is an important ideological aspect to the editions of Collectif

Génération'. Jassaud asserted that this involved having 'non-identical books in a world of increasingly mass-produced, look-alike consumable products. Collectif Génération therefore introduced the concept of "difference" to its editions.'



Graceful (2007)

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Jassaud had precious little time for his publishing business in conjunction with his busy job. In 2007, though, his books again started to roll off the presses. One of that year's publications, *Graceful*, revolved around the poetry of Fabrice Melquiot (1972). At that time, both Jassaud and Melquiot were working in Reims but, as usual, it was Jassaud who selected the poems for publication. The one that is central to that book is: 'A l'heure où je t'écris' (an allusion to Victor Hugo). Each stanza starts with the line ('As I sit down to write to you') and describes personal experiences, things imagined, and political events elsewhere in the world, or of the past, as exemplified in these words:

'A l'heure que je t'écris Joris Ivens visite Valparaiso Vivant déjà
On eût dit de lui qu'il était un fantôme.'

[As I sit down to write to you | Joris Ivens is visiting Valparaiso | In a previous life | People say that he was a ghost].

In 1965 Ivens had made a film about the poor inhabitants of the Chilean city Valparaiso. This poem - divided by Jassaud over eighteen pages - is followed by a few other poems. They were set in Garamond (size 18) and printed on BFK Rives paper by Atelier Mérat-Auger (run by Vincent Auger) in Paris. The book is made up of unbound quires, each of which consists of four pages, one of

which is folded. That was done according to a strict sequence: left-right, above-below, first page-second page, but for every 'edition' the order differed. Five artists were invited to illustrate the texts. One edition (entitled 'Al dante'), comprising eleven copies, was done by the Italian artists Giorgio Griffa (1936). His interventions bear the traces of Arte Povera and Minimalism. He used watercolour brush strokes to paint the straight or wavy lines and the dots alongside or between the poems, sometimes at the ends of the lines, sometimes at the bottom of the pages. The publisher was particularly satisfied with this result because the brush strokes seemed to 'caress' the poems.

One of the other four 'editions' was illustrated by the Australian artist Lauren Berkowitz (1965). In her art, she recycles natural materials. After having received the printed quires from Jassaud she came up with an ecological theme for the book. In *Graceful* she wanted to do something with plants and seeds. Australian customs indicated that were she to carry out her plan, export to Europe would be prohibited. They recommended that she integrate instead dried flowers or spices. If she were to do that returning the illustrated copies to Jassaud would pose no problems. 'So, at present', she wrote to the publisher: 'I am rubbing turmeric, curry, chilli, cinnamon, sumac into the paper, to create yellow reddish, orange fields of colour'. In a more literal way than in the work of Griffa, her interventions 'stroke' the poems but the approach is more radical since all the pages have been impregnated with layers of spices (mixed with oil pastel). Sometimes the layers are thick; sometimes thin but everywhere the powder covers the texts. The poems can still be read. The density of the colours used corresponds with the fanciful and dreamy transitions between the stanzas. Berkowitz sprayed the pages many times with a permanent fixative but despite that they remain dusty and so it is impossible to turn over the pages without getting green, yellow or brown fingers. Whilst reading, each reader thus removes a layer of the spices from the pages. Traditionally, books have been perceived as fixed forms designed to remain permanently unchanged, or at least for a long time; this publication fits into a different category, that of the unstable book. The Australian edition of *Graceful* (eleven copies) was welcomed by Jassaud as a book full of fragrance and Berkowitz' contribution - the saturated zones of colour ranging from deep green to earthy colours as 'botanical resonances'.



Dice en su corazón el insensato
(2007)

Another kind of fragile book developed in collaboration with the English artist Barnaby Barford (1977). He creates narrative pieces with mass-market or antique figurines in porcelain. He prepares them by cutting up and exchanging elements or by adding to them and repainting them. That often results in sinister or sardonic images with which he masquerades as a presentday Hogarth and social commentator. For *Dice en su corazón el insensato* he made use of two small porcelain children's heads.

The publication, the title of which comes from Psalm 53, includes Spanish poems written by the Chilean writer Armando Uribe Arce (1933), who is 44 years older than the artist. What is certainly clear is that Collectif Génération not only builds bridges between different continents and cultures but also between generations. The texts were set in Garamond (size 14) and printed, as usual, by atelier Mérat-Auger on BFK Rives paper. The book's format is smaller than that of most of Jassaud's other books (21x18 cm). Eleven copies were furnished with what Barford termed on the title page 'tricks': a couple of small porcelain heads made to fit exactly into the openings cut in the paper around which various depictions were drawn. In each copy, different kinds of heads were used, one might have a hat, another might be very young, some are angelic, some are feminine. The small heads have been glued into the front and back of the books which makes them feel weighty when opened but, once open, the heads lend a degree of stability to the pages.



As one turns the pages, all the heads appear in different situations: a pull puppet on the title page can turn into a child playing with sol di ers or a child laid out in a coffin; a small head between balloons can be turned into a boy asking for the bill as he sits at a table smoking and drinking. On two other pages tl1ey suddenly become the heads of pigeons, followed by more transformations in which they are variously, for instance, cannonballs, bulldogs, drowning people or Buddbists. The figures undergo many changes in outfits, gender and age.

The poems -about notions of a god and death -are hidden and only become visible upon opening up the flaps on the left and right-hand sides of the pages. Jassaud likes to play games witll the reader by hiding either the text or the illustration: 'I want to challenge the reader; I want him to play with the body of the book as he may play with the text and the artwork.' Barford requested a translation but did not get it. For bis part, Jassaud still asked him to go ahead and illustrate the work. Barford therefore did his own translating and concluded that the poems were sombre. One reaction of Barford's to the God and death theme can be found in a written upon newspaper where the text reads: 'There is no God'. The poem beneath the flap on the accom-panying page begins with the lines:

'The foolish heart says. There is no God. If God does not exist, there is no virtue. Everything is possible, everything in order, or nothing.'

Thus, writes Armando Uribe Arce, it is better to trust that there is a god who awaits us after death. Here the publisher and artist are clearly of different minds.

Romantic dadas (2008)

After 2008, a series of publications appeared that were based on the poems of the American poet Jerome Rothenberg (1931). For Collectif Génération there were six different artists who provided art work for Romantic dadas: Juliao Sarmenta from Portugal, Marco Gatini from Italy, Elana Herzog from America, Miguel Angel Rios from Argentina, Jui-Chung Yao from Taiwan and Dominique Liquois from France. There were twelve copies in each edition. The Koopman Collection has two of these copies, the one with drawings and cuttings done by Miguel Angel Rios (Catamarca, 1953) and the one with paintings produced by Elana Herzog (Toronto, 1954). Both artists reside and work



The ready-folded pages, cut according to the pattern described above - but not yet illustrated - were posted to the artists. It was then up to them to decide whether the pages required further adaptation. Herzog did decide to further manipulate the pages: she cut off many of the panels, cut out the text sections and pasted them - with casual carelessness - elsewhere in the book.

Rios added his own texts from newspapers and photos - especially photos of meat - to the book. The pages of this edition are packed with images of dogs and flies. Parts of pages were cut out, which meant that in the 'coupage' process words or lines of poetry occasionally disappeared altogether. Paper patterns were also added. For example, the spiralling of flies circling around rotting meat was shown. He introduced drawings done in pencil as well as in pen and ink, sometimes in dotted line patterns, at other times so lavish that Rothenberg's poems became secondary to Rios' graffiti.

It is fair to say that in all the Collectif Génération books it is not only the hand of the artist that is instantly noticeable but also the far-reaching influence of Jassaud. He exercised considerable licence when it came to the matter of ordering and rearranging poems on the pages - in Romantic Dadas certain stanzas were even taken from their original contexts and transported elsewhere. This explains why the authors and artists he works with view him as the third author or creator.

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