

Brigitte Schuster

Book Designers from the Netherlands

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JOOST GROOTENS

*1971, a formerly trained architect and self-taught graphic designer, runs his book design studio in Amsterdam, along with a few employees. His studio's work focuses mainly on books in the fields of architecture, urban space and art, and specializes in atlases. His studio designs about fifteen books per year. Joost Grootens is also a teacher.

Joost Grootens in his studio in Amsterdam on September 7, 2011, the day the interview was conducted.

What current project are you working on? We are now working on an exciting book, the *Collection Book Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen* in Rotterdam (p. 26, fig. 1). I think that with this book we are entering a new phase. By way of comparison with my previous work, it is an atlas but without maps. It is an information system representing a complete art collection of 140,000 works of art in one book.

What are the most interesting projects for you? I like books that contain a lot of information, like academic publications where one person spends many years doing research into a subject. Some of these books are quite text heavy with many footnotes. I find that books with information overloads are often more fun to make than books with less complex content. Examples of my books that use complex typesetting are *Spacematrix*, which also uses text diagrams (p. 27, fig. 2); or the book entitled *Shanghai New Towns* (p. 28, fig. 3), which we did last year. It contains a huge amount of words in the form of bilingual photo essays and visuals, such as photographs, maps, and floor plans.

As a designer you organize the book's information. Can you talk about the process you go through with the book's author? I am a specialist in how to translate content into a book. As such, I purely deal with the representation of the material by first filtering it and then shaping it. For every book I play a different role. Sometimes I am more of an overseer, jumping in to troubleshoot little problems; other times, I'm more of a director. Those are the extremes, and I usually move in between them. In the case of the *Vinex Atlas* (p. 29, fig. 4), it all started with an idea from the authors to make an architectural guide of Vinex areas (newly built areas that were constructed in the mid-nineties in the Netherlands). I suggested we make a different kind of book, with different photographs than those originally submitted by the authors. The original idea emphasized the architecture, whereas my proposal focused more on the urban design of these areas. This is a good example of how my role as a designer sometimes impacts the content of the book.

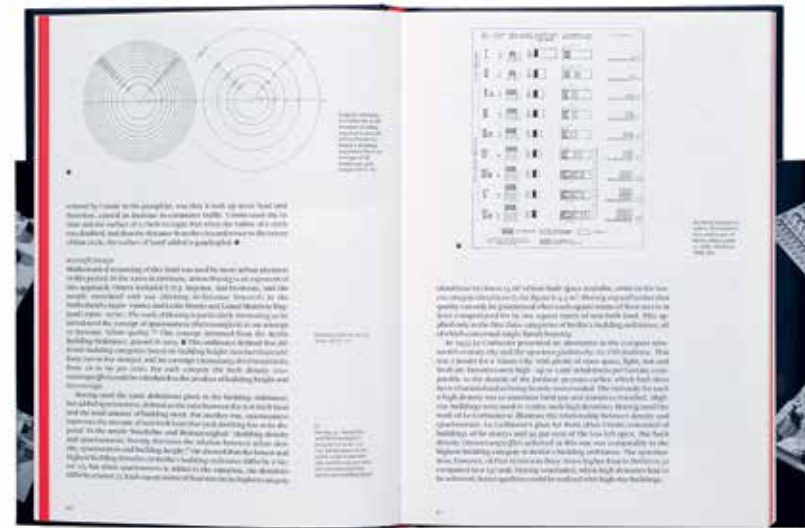
What is your role in the studio? It's different for each project. I do some of the books completely on my own, usually small books that require a more intimate relationship with the author or client. I sketch a lot by hand and review it before going to the computer. Big, complex books, the type of commission we now get more often, are made in collaboration, where we sketch together as a team. For the *Vinex Atlas* (p. 29, fig. 4), I designed the system and the grid behind it. Tine van Wel filled it in, and I worked on the complicated fill-in parts. But nowadays, I have less and less of a hands-on approach. The way we work is to process a book over and over again, and after a certain number of rounds, the book is shaped by me, us, the studio. Sometimes there are eighteen rounds. It is easy for me to work with the team, which is usually composed of about four

to six people. Tine van Wel and Christiaan Drost have been working here for many years. They are quite able to translate a sketch visually just by talking with me on the phone. I could even refer to elements in a few books that I want to integrate, and they would be able to do so.

Your projects appear to be quite work-intensive. Do you automate design processes through computer applications? Yes, we are now starting to do this for the *Collection Book Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen* (p. 26, fig. 1). In collaboration with Systemantics, we developed a software with predefined parameters that uses text and image data from an Excel file. In this way we can generate pages containing visual indexes. I am quite excited about the new developments in programming, and I hope to use it more often. In previous projects, like *Vinex Atlas* (p. 29, fig. 4), and *Metropolitan World Atlas* (p. 30, fig. 5), indexes looked like they were automated, but they were not. This is the result of three people putting on their headsets and turning up the volume of the music for four days. The advantage there of course is that we don't require a programmer who might tend to command high hourly rates. In either case, the 'programming' mind is there; we just do not have the particular skills on our team.

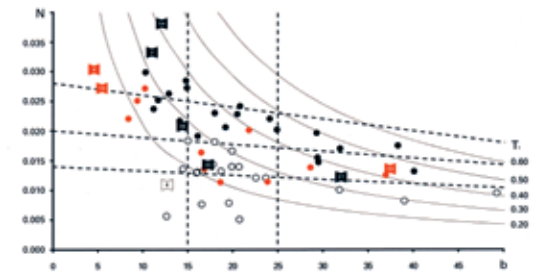
How do you manage to avoid standard grids? We find different grid solutions for each project. The grid is a consequence of the content. For example, for the book *Dutch New Worlds* (p. 31, fig. 6), a book about regional urban design scenarios, we eventually decided to give it a very open and horizontal look, yet have it feel as though it contained a lot of text and footnotes, which was more difficult. For the *Atlases* (p. 29, fig. 4; p. 30, fig. 5; p. 33, fig. 8 a), we used quite complex grids which allowed for many different subdivisions. Other grids are very simple. For example, in *Double Infinity* (p. 32, fig. 7), which is a book about the meeting between artists from China and those from the West, we were inspired to go with a three column grid, since the book uses three languages: Chinese, Dutch, and English. The content also plays a role in determining the way the book opens. We use a dos-à-dos binding, because Chinese readers would start to read from the right, and Dutch readers from the opposite side, while English – in the role of the mediating language – is situated inbetween. The grid evolved from this editorial concept, the encounter of the three cultures or worlds.

You make a clear distinction between art and design. Do you think an artistic approach can be sometimes suitable in your range of projects? I do not think an artistic approach would be suitable for the kind of commissions I do. The way we deal with information has changed a lot in recent years. One aspect is that it has become very easy to publish information and to become an author, which in turn has changed the authority of information. On the other hand, the



1 *Collection Book Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen*, 2012.

2 *Spacematrix*, 2010.



Most of the samples from Barcelona, except for the medieval ones, also show lower network densities than the Dutch samples. As a consequence, the mesh size in general is larger. However, the spread in street profiles is much larger in Barcelona, ranging from Barceloneta ■ in ●● with less than 9 m to Mar Bella ■ in ●● with 40-m-wide streets. The fine-

p. 234, fig. 4
 JEROME DAVID SALINGER, *De vanger in het graan*. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2008. 288 pp, 120 × 190 mm, [Photography by the author].

p. 235, fig. 5
 Series of 20 *final yearbooks* of a total of 25, published by Adriaan de Jonge, 1989–2013. 100 × 175 mm [Illustrations by ADRIAAN DE JONGE].
 JAN TSCHICHOLD, *Twee opstellen over typografie*, 1989.
Honderdeneen regels voor de boekverzorging, 1990.
 REINOLD KUIPERS, *Het boek is van de schrijver voor de lezer*, 1991.
Typo & Type – De mens en zijn karakter, 1992.
Over de hedendaagse typografie, 1993.
Over de herdruk van Enschedés proef van letteren, 1994.
 FRANK BLOKLAND, *Cum libello in angelo*, 1995.
 MARTIN MAJOOR, *Het decoratieve alfabet van A tot Z*, 1996.
 WIGGER BIERMA, *Branding*, 1997.
 MATHIEU LOMMEN, *Helmut Salden 1910–1996 zijn boekomslagen en vignetten*, 1998.
 JAN DE JONG, *De grenzen van het boek*, 1999.
 MICHAEL HARVEY, *Letterontwerpen*, 2000.
Uitvinder U en de 27 dwergen, 2001.
Korte cursus esthetiek, techniek en logica in zetwerk, 2002.
What's your problem? Interviews met Gerard Unger 1975–2003, 2003.
 FRANS A. JANSSEN, *Zethaak en pen*, 2004.
 NICOLAAS MATSIER, *Het visitekaartje*, 2005.
 W. A. DWIGGINS, *De vormgeving van het algemene boek*, 2006.
Manuel R. Goldschmidt in gesprek met Piet C. Cossee, 2007.
 RON VAN ROON, *Anders kijken*, 2008.

p. 236, fig. 6
 6 a Unknown book title [Photography by the author].
 6 b BERTHE MEIJER, *Leven na Anne Frank*. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2010. 269 pp, 136 × 215 mm, [Photography by the author].

p. 237, fig. 7
 REMCO CAMPERT, *Dagboek van een poes*. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2007. 63 pp, 120 × 190 mm, [Photography by the author].

p. 237, fig. 8
 HANS SLEUTELAAR, *Vermiste stad: Rotterdamse kwatrijnen*. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2004.

60 pp, 125 × 200 mm, [Photography by the author].

p. 238, fig. 9
 HELMUT OTTO MICHAEL SALDEN, *Helmut Salden: letterontwerper en boekverzorger*. Rotterdam: Uitgeverij 010, 2003. 192 pp, 225 × 285 mm, [Photography by the author].

p. 239, fig. 10
 B. VAN DE POL, M. STEENMEIJER, *Jorge Luis Borges, alle gedichten*. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2011. 1246 pp, 125 × 215 mm, [Photography by the author].

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