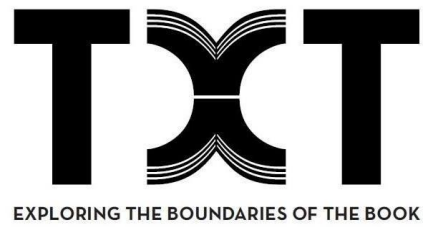


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Breaching the Boundaries

An Interview with Visual Editions

By Elisa Nelissen

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In 2010, a new publishing house hit the market that aims to explore and defy the boundaries of the book. With ‘Great looking stories’ as their tagline, Visual Editions has published five books so far, using a storytelling technique founders Anna Gerber and Britt Eversen have dubbed ‘visual writing’. I talked to editorial assistant Leah Cross about the publishing house, visual writing and the physical vs. digital debate.

Consisting of two new editions of already existing books, two entirely new works and one collection of maps, Visual Edition’s portfolio looks quite varied at first sight. This is partly explained by the fact that the publisher does not have an in-house design team, ‘as we like to work with different designers depending on what we’re working on’. What ties it all together, however, is this notion of visual writing, which Leah describes as a combination of ‘the written word and the aesthetic which surrounds it. It can alter a text in many ways by enhancing the reading experience visually and/or aesthetically.’ Almost any text could be made into visual writing. ‘[S]ome may lend themselves to the aesthetic more than others, but ultimately there are so many interpretations of the written word that literature cannot be easily separated into two columns.’

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In *Tree of Codes*, for example, author Jonathan Safran Foer literally cut a story out of an existing story (see Figure 1). The result is a book with ‘holes’, created with a die-cutting machine, in which you read from multiple pages at once. After a long search for a company that was up for the task, the book was

Fig. 1: *Tree of Codes* by Jonathan Safran foer

You can't lose track,
as there is no track.

printed by the Belgian Die Keure. One could worry that this technique intervenes with a continuous reading experience, but maybe that is not the point. *Tree of Codes* is not designed and thought out in the same way a standard paperback is. 'Our books are aesthetic and our description 'visual writing' breaches the boundaries of the traditional book.'

Composition No. 1 by Marc Saporta, originally published in 1960, evokes a different kind of confusion (see Figure 2). The 'book' consists of a box filled with loose sheets, each with 'a self-containing narrative'. It is then up to the reader to form his or her own unique version of the story. 'There is a purpose of *Composition No. 1* to be un-bound: Saporta's intension was to create something which can be read in any order. You can't lose track with VE3 as there is no track.'

Maybe the visual elements can even help the reader, whose concentration is increasingly put to the test because of continuous distractions as a result of the digital age. Is it then easier to read books with visual aids? Isn't everything visual in some way? Even a Penguin paperback has a designer working hard to create the right cover, format, layout, font, etc. I think there is more to engaging concentration than the visual alone. It is indeed striking and of course it's engaging, that cannot be denied, but it's not that black and white. When thinking of a reader, there are many things which entice. Visual elements can complement a text and catch the reader's eye, but the writing and the subject matter also have to be enticing.'

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Saporta's book was republished after his death in 2009. Another new edition of an older book is VE01, Visual Edition's version of *The Life and Opinions of of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* by Laurence Sterne, originally published between 1759 and 1767. With all this experimentation, this may have been a safe bet, since the author was not there to give his veto and they could go their own way with the editing and design. 'In many ways it makes sense for a small company's first text to be public domain, and it can act as a foundation for future publications. We like to work with both reimagined classics and new authors, no preference there.'

While it seems that Visual Editions is all about the paper book, the digital realm is definitely not left out. 'In some ways I think we are making a case for the book, we create beautiful editions which can be cherished. However, I personally have always bought books and I'm not going to stop doing that just because someone invented the Kindle or the blog. We also create websites and apps to complement our publications, and I think what is more important is using both mediums to complement each other, rather than championing one and acting against the other.' For *Composition No. 1*, the publisher released their

firs—and so far only— app along with the book. The app allows the reader to randomise the pages in a much quicker and less tedious way than the paper version. Though Leah adds that the company is not necessarily focusing the digital. For their last publication, *Where You Are*, they created www.where-you-are.com, a beautifully crafted website which allows you to navigate the contents of the book. It seems that it is all about the right balance. ‘We like to branch out into the digital world when it works for us, and not confine ourselves to either print or digital publishing.’

The *Where You Are* website is open to everyone and the app for *Composition No. 1* costs a mere £2.99, which brings us to the next issue: that of price. It seems that the people at Visual Editions

have understood that people do not like to pay for virtual things, but what about the physical ones? Are these highly customised and beautifully designed books not incredibly expensive? Well, no. Ranging between £15 and £35, the books are surprisingly affordable. This is especially so when compared to art books, similar in their function as cherished objects of which the materiality is of key importance. When asked whether they see their audience as design lovers



Fig. 2: *Composition No. 1* by Marc Saporta

or if it also includes the general public, Leah answers: ‘Someone in between, I suppose! We have a lot of admirers from the design world, but our books aren’t exclusive or elitist, they are for anyone who loves great looking stories. Does there have to be such a strict boundary between the two?’ The answer is, again, no. This is a refreshingly open and democratic view that highly prized (and priced), limited edition art books often lack.

In a review of Saporta’s *Composition No. 1* for *The Guardian*¹, Jonathan Coe lists a number of other visual writing books, such as B.S. Johnson’s *The Unfortunates*, which is suspiciously similar to Saporta’s book in a box, and Tom Phillips’ *A Humument: A treated Victorian novel*, which is practically the same concept as Safran Foer’s *Tree of Codes*. Coe concludes that this proves ‘that there is nothing new under the experimental sun’. He continues by warning for ‘a frequent pitfall of experimental fiction,’ which is that authors often worry more about presenting an innovative form, rather than a well-developed content.

However, the great merit of Visual Editions' publications lies not in its originality but in the fact that 'at a time when so many publishers are in a panic about the rise of electronic formats, here is an object whose visual and tactile beauty simply cannot be reproduced digitally.'² And that is exactly what the publisher is about: finding the best suitable format to tell each story. In an interview with Bookseller,³ co-founder Anna concludes: 'What we've laid our foundations on is that it is an exciting time to give books a reason to be. Throwaway, three-for-two paper-backs probably do live better on the Kindle, but there is loads of potential for books that can only live as an object. It is as much about pushing the boundaries for physical as it is for digital.'

No worries about the future here; with an ambitious Don Quixote project in the making, it seems like there are still many boundaries to breach for the publisher. When asked if we should worry about the paper book, Leah simply replies: 'Maybe. I don't.' If more people would be thinking so innovatively about publishing, maybe no one should. ■