

From:
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Stählemühle
Bodensee
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To:
Roger Willems
Roma Publications
Amsterdam
The Netherlands

Stählemühle, Münchhof am Bodensee, November 2005

re: a place where things cannot come to their end

Dear Roger Willems,

Books make friends.
Did anybody already use that phrase as an advertisement slogan?
Not the most original one, perhaps, but truly true.
Let me explain.

I don't know you.
I think we met briefly at a symposium in Rotterdam some months ago.
I think we had a talk in a stairway for three minutes, maybe four, at the most.
I can't even remember your face.
And yet, I would call you a friend.

Over the past three years, you consistently sent me the latest Roma publications in order to update my archive.
Needless to say, I took hidden pleasure in unwrapping your Dutch parcels, strolling through well-selected stock qualities, consciously-designed print, and inspiring artworks.
I got to know you through Helvetica and Times New Roman, via blank color covers and nakedly represented ideas, stripped bare of all unnecessary information.
I thus imagined you silent, reduced to the few elements that make up a mind.
This is how books can make friends.
I do not belong to a certain specimen of people who consider their whole social life within the realm of the written word, falling asleep in either a beautifully or chaotically arranged library and waking up with the postman's delivery of the daily communication via the Royal Mail at a reduced shipping rate.
Yet, I believe in the nature of the book.

What an exceptional thing it is.
And, for more than 500 years:
Everybody in the world knows – at least in principle – how to use it.
You put it on a desk, in your hands, or on your knees.
You open it.
You flip the pages from left to right (in Arab countries from right to left).
You feel, you look, you read.
You close it.
And it's not over:
After use, you put it on a shelf, where it will remain.

The whole world knows how to use a book, from beginning to end.
I guess you can't say this about any other media.
It might sound simple – but it is worth thought.
Because books do actually work.

But how do books work?

- a) slow and lasting
- b) everywhere and nowhere
- c) intimate and direct
- d) autonomous and independent
- e) always and forever

Books create their own speed, in various regards. (a) I am thinking of the individual speed of reading that a certain book requires and generates at the same time. But I am also thinking of the slowness of the reception. Nobody will ever give you a clap on your shoulder or raise a glass of champagne with congratulations to you. A book is neither an exhibition – an occasion of glamour and celebration – nor a fetishized artwork on the wall you can applaud. Many artist-authors are disappointed when talking about the reactions to their new book. It takes forever until people might see your new book and realize the amount of work put into it. But books can rely on an age-old system of distribution through bookstores, ISBN numbers, catalogues, and libraries. A paradise set up for effective communication. And books travel far. (b) Very far, almost everywhere. Sometimes you get an e-mail from an almost forgotten continent where someone writes you because they appreciate what was said in a book they came upon years after that publication was released. Books travel in pockets, handbags, trolleys, and post packages. And they can be pulled out of those containers in planes, trains, parks, on beaches, ski slopes, etc. No electricity is needed, and much more importantly, nobody is needed to explain! They say what they have to say by themselves. (c) Books communicate as directly as possible. From letter to eye, from phrase to mind, from one page to one individual reader. Silent and intimate. (d) Although you can pass a book on, you can share viewing, and discuss immediately – it is quite hard to find an equivalent media. And, there's more, books are always on. (e) They are never switched off, even when sitting on the shelf. It's just a question of organization. That's how books work.

Of course, there are some things about books that can make the life of a publisher quite difficult: books are very expensive, extremely heavy, work-intensive, and numerous. But if we consider their value, a book can add to or define the work of an artist, validating his or her ideas, sanctioning (in the very meaning of the word) a lifetime's production. Given this, I guess it is worth the effort.

But back to you.
As I said before, I do not know much about you.
All I know about you and Roma, I know from what is in the books.
As I understand it, you joined with Mark Manders to start this.
Designer and artist – perfect combination.

I always felt there were some parallels and relations to my own work.
I have been an artist and wanted to be a designer.
That's why I started Revolver and produced approximately 400 titles over the last five years.
You have been a designer and wanted to give a universal visual identity to a certain idea of art.
That's why you started a publishing project.

The main parallel between us is that we understand our work as a living social relation.

You're expanding your universe.
Hooking up with a number of artists, writers, designers.
Communicating with institutions.
Setting up exhibitions and public projects.
Somewhere I read that Roma is a *stichting* [foundation].
Sounds like a tropical island.
I leave you some room in this footnote to explain.

Names are shadows.
I have no idea why you called this thing Roma.
You're based in Amsterdam, Holland.
And actually, I am the one (of the two of us) living in a Romanized country.
So, let me spin a story.

All roads lead to Rome.
Rome was not built in a day.
Rome – the eternal city.

What has always struck and impressed me very deeply about the Roman Empire was the fact that Rome was the first to define and record a system for a true corporate identity. As opposed to rulers of previous civilizations and also his immediate precursors, Emperor Augustus/Octavian was the first to fully understand the meaning of a visual language with regard to the control, distribution, and organization of ideas. He set up a system of image policy, encompassing all fields of human activity: architecture, the economy, culture, politics, war – a set of visual rules, a reduction of visual elements, the uni-form. His image – literally: the image of his face in a sort of half profile – was updated on an annual basis and spread via high-speed communication systems (by boat, by horse, on coins, and on sculpture templates) from the west of Spain to Syria, and from the north of Germany to Egypt. The image of the world was united. The world was one. A visual language was constructed that everybody understood. And keep in mind, there was no print, there were no books two thousand years ago.

Why am I writing this here?
I can't tell exactly.
But I think I can see something of this vividly in Roma.
Conclusions, results. Small scale.

In analogy to the seven hills Rome was erected upon, I would like to offer you my seven "Cs" as some encouragement and instruction to keep doing what you do, that is, *mediating an idea of contemporary art in printed form*.

As you may notice, I am trying to keep away from the term "publishing" here.

"Publishing" in the true sense of the original word has absolutely nothing in common with what we do. The press was invented by Gutenberg in Mainz, so we should situate our terminology (virtually, at least) within German linguistics. The German term for publishing is *verlegen*, a publishing venture is a *Verlag* – and it is similar in Dutch, I suppose. The term is taken from a purely economic background, in fact, the realm of investment and banking, meaning to put some money on the table in order to realize a project and benefit from its sales, lending money to a person and gaining a profit from that person's multiplied and therefore widely accessible and distributed work.

Obviously, what you and I are doing cannot be classified within this terrain or its logic. There is no cash return for us.

So, let's stick with the "mediation of contemporary art in print."

Thus, here are seven Cs for Roma:

1. Consistency

(see also: *Continuity, Chromatics, Chronicle, Coherence, Collection, Compilation, Conception, Constancy*)
(be aware of: *Cover, Compatibility, Confrontation*)

If you are aiming at long term effect and a substantial influence on a potential understanding of art, you will have to hang in there. Single publications can have wonderful effects – economically, in terms of generating hype and career catalyzing, and also subjectively – but they won't last long within a system of ideas. Repeat to yourself, again and again. Prove your stubborn belief. Consistency and continuity will not only prove your capabilities as a publisher and designer, but will also generate trust in your conception of an art idea. People will rely on that.

2. Control

(see also: *Canon, Codex, Correspondence*)
(be aware of: *Consultation, Construction, Circus, Conspiracy*)

Of course, the selection of issues and artistic resources is the key to a coherent agenda. Choose well with whom you want to work, which issues you want to address, and always keep control of the sort of canon you are inventing. The sharper and the more reduced the elements and subject matter, also in the way they are transformed and transported, the more you will be able to transform naked content into living social reality.

3. Context

(see also: *Chance, Coincidence, Curiosity, Change, Compromise*)
(be aware of: *Complexity, Coexistence, Combination, Commission, Communication, Conflict, Connection, Contrast, Cross-Reference*)

does not always lead to the best results. Give chance some space and let the dice roll. Coincidences, especially within the social network of collaborations, often lead to changed reference points and improve the ways to communicate. Since we are all bound to human input – not technical improvement – development is not always predictable (network, peer-group, clan). And this is good.

But always be clear and aware of chance happening and never sell coincidental events as conscious decisions. This is about credibility. And, chance is a reliable factor within the production of art.

4. Concentration

(see also: Credibility, Capacity, Character, Competence, Confidence, Conscience)
(be aware of: Condition, Craft, Cultivation)

Do only what you actually *can* do, what you are capable of doing.

As simple as that.

But quite important to remember.

Recently, after running Revolver for only 5 years, I have been asked to do many different things." To write texts, for example (in which I will never succeed), curate exhibitions (= catastrophes!), give lectures, teach (poor students).

It's all about labeling, that is a sad fact. Once labeled, one is dragged and torn.

And there is danger in that. Consistency will result in a lot of deflections.

Don't get distracted.

Remain under-designed.

5. Caution

(see also: Carefulness, Certainty, Clearness)
(be aware of: Concession, Clamor)

Well, what can I say? Always think twice. Always know the whys, whos, wheres and hows. Don't get euphoric. There is no reason for such a thing, even if there is loud shouting all around you.

Just be careful, since people need to be able to rely on you.

6. Creativity

(be aware of: Costliness, Challenge, Color, Commerce, Competition)
(final threat: Collapse, Crash, Cataclysm)

Since you are a designer, it is quite obvious – but at the same time unnecessary – to ask for creativity. You are trained in this field. But I am not speaking of typefaces and layouts here.

Within publishing, creativity is mostly needed when it comes to money. As we all know, to produce and distribute publications is quite a costly thing to do, so you will always have to challenge yourself to find resources to make projects possible. That is your real job, the only one as a publisher, actually. Find solutions.

7. Courage

(see also: Choice, Classification, Confession, Content, Counter-Current)
(be aware of: Circle, Clan, Cluster, Coalescence, Company, Conjunction, Cooperation, Collaboration, Crowd)

The most important point. The hardest one.

Saying "yes" is the easiest thing in the world, and will make you loved by everybody.

Saying "no" is essential to a mission.

If you want to say one single thing, you will need to say "no" to one hundred other things. Especially when it comes to art, mediating art ideas, and publishing. You will have to make choices and turn down a lot of requests: interesting requests from interesting people, friends, good guys, famous artists.

We live in an (art) atmosphere, where (almost) everything is interesting. Every day an interesting proposal (not to use the word "project" all over again) will knock on your door and you can go on forever.

But you will have to stop at one point.

I know, if you are not there yet this will not sound like a problem – but it will, believe me.

I am not sure, if this last prayer will enter your eyes and ears."

It actually doesn't matter if it does or not.

Since things will not come to an end anyway.

I just wish and hope that Roma will always be a place for those things.

Sincerely yours,

Christoph Keller

· I found this phrase in the colophon of one of your books and have no idea why it was there. I guess it belongs to a work by Mark Manders, but I evoke it here because I think it makes a nice headline for this letter.

· Please excuse my stumbling, bumbling English, which sometimes falls to pieces. It is quite difficult for me to write a proper letter in English, something that, I suppose, is quite common in these days of short message communication.

· On the occasion of the exhibition of the *Kiosk* archive at the Witte de With (2–17 April 2005).

· Is this actually a really long lifespan for such an integral part of our life?

· I know, Roma publishes much more than just books, including posters, postcards, newspapers, etc. But to keep it simple, let's stay with the book, okay?

· I do not want to get too pathetic here, but in the end, the character of an independent publishing project is one of social sculpture.

· Christoph, unluckily: the *stichting* has nothing to do with a generous old lady or any other kind of patronage. The only reason for its existence is the fact that we needed a legal platform for transactions outside of a personal bank account. Our official status is that of a non-commercial enterprise, which gathers money and spends it, project after project, balancing out around zero. Luckily: it's a thing we feel affection for, and it is safely in the hands of Mark, Marije, and myself – the three of us on the board, fulfilling minimal requirements. We don't do conferences or write reports, we only keep reminding ourselves that Roma is going fine, we are sure. More than a tropical island maybe, the *stichting* is like a tropical plant, able to survive in northern zones and become a palm tree if fed and kept at the right temperature.

· Please check out the marvellous book by Paul Zanker, *Augustus und die Macht der Bilder* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1990). I am not sure if a translation into English or Dutch is available.

· Obviously, I could have turned this into 70 Cs, but to keep a minimum of logic in this text, I will list the alternatives in italics. Now, read with pathos and emotion!

· I actually retired only quite recently, so here I am allowing myself a quite cynical look back.

· I know, this all may sound like the devilish comments of a senile, yesterday's man. And I never meant to teach or instruct you. You don't need this. I just had some fun, sketching out my own nostalgic conclusions, resulting from some recent decisions. I took this as an exercise to reflect upon what I have mindlessly, thoughtlessly, and restlessly done in the last few years. That's where the melancholic tone comes from – just ignore it!