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Visual catalogue

David Lorente

“This strictly ‘objective’ perception brings the catalogue into the range of other disciplines, such as product design or art”

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Design Mechanisms in Contemporary Catalogues

Over the last two decades several factors have gradually changed the formalisation of visual catalogues (those dedicated to art, architecture, photography and design). The remediation effect of publishing through new audiovisual disciplines and the digital context has provided designers with new mechanisms that enable them to come up with graphic and structural solutions to pages, to narrative sequences and to the book itself as an object.

*This book is not about how to design books but about how books are designed.*¹

RICHARD HENDEL

In 1944 graphic designer György Kepes (1906-2001), who emigrated from Europe to the United States, published *Language of Vision*,² a book that expressed his vision of the image as the driving force of a new visual narrative, as previously developed by his colleague László Moholy-Nagy. Kepes believed that ‘The designer must rethink the book functions in their physical, optical, and psychological aspects.’³ According to this new approach, that dissociated itself from the conception of the Swiss school, based on composition and typography and upheld by Jan Tschichold, Kepes introduced new points of departure from which book design was formulated,

stating ‘A book has weight, size, thickness, and tactile qualities, qualities which are handled by the hand, as its optical form is handled by the eye. [...] The book can be conceived of in the same sense as a handle of a tool or a utensil, and must be molded so that the hand can “operate” it with perfect control.’⁴

Over the course of the twentieth century we come across several moments in which the visual catalogue, to revisit Kepes’s conception, has varied some of its formal and structural aspects, entailing the appearance of new categories of publications that called both compositional and narrative issues into question. Summed up, four specific categories exemplify what we’re saying and can guide us through some of the features of the contemporary catalogue:

1 R. Hendel, *On Book Design*. Yale University Press, New Haven, 1998, p. 11.

2 G. Kepes, *Language of Vision*. Paul Theobald, Chicago, 1944.

3 *Graphic Forms. The Art as Related to the Book*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1949, p. 8. Quoted in R. Hollis, ‘Ways of Seeing Books,’ in S. De Bondt; F. Muggeridge, *The Form of the Book Book*. Occasional Papers, London, 2009, p. 49.

4 *Ibidem*.

— **Photobooks.** Defined by Martin Parr as an ‘extended essay in photographs’,⁵ the photobook is a type of publication in which ‘The photographs lose their own photographic character as things “in themselves” and become parts, translated into printing ink, of a dramatic event called a book.’⁶ The narrative act of assembling images in a sequence was first attempted in magazines and other supports by avant-garde photographers and designers, such as Lászlo Moholy-Nagy’s seminal publication *Painting, Photography, Film* (1925), in order to experiment ‘in space-time relationships that are based on principles of photography and film.’⁷

— **Artists’ books.** These are art works in book form. Published in small editions, with no commercial distribution, artists’ books are a field that welcome experimentation both in conceptual and narrative terms, and as regards their physical properties as objects. Since the sixties, the work of artists such as Ed Ruscha, Dieter Roth and John Baldessari has influenced the choice of materials and formats foreign to the standards of industrial production in these publications.

— **Picture books.** As from the mid-fifties, but especially during the sixties, children’s illustrated books have provided the opportunity to explore original manufacturing solutions, thoroughly exploiting three-dimensional qualities and narrative shaping, as exemplified by the work of Bruno Munari.

— **Visual essays.** *The Medium is the Massage* by Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore (1967) illustrates this category. The smaller paperback format and the development of ‘the cinematic potential of book design by repeating images from one page to

the next in different scales and croppings’,⁸ brought a new dimension to the visual essay, producing hybrid formats: in part books, in part magazines and in part storyboards.

The Contemporary Catalogue

In recent decades, visual catalogues have undergone numerous changes in design, changes that have altered the way in which we approach them, read them and understand them. These variations have been introduced by graphic designers and independent publishers who have examined new directions in the field. Graphic designers have explored and exploited all the latest software options, as they have done with new kinds of paper and other materials, applying them in their practice and formal representations. In their turn, publishers working in independent positions have brought character and personality to new spaces and audiences so as to distance themselves from traditional publishers, using graphic design as a fundamental tool for communication and differentiation.

“The catalogue has adapted new media configurations to redeeming itself as a visual and narrative device that continues to play a valid role in communication”

The contemporary catalogue, like other means of communication, has assimilated the influence exerted by images on words thanks to the growth of audiovisual and digital media and platforms produced over the last quarter of a century. Images

have invaded all forms of communication and catalogues too have ‘grown’ in visual terms, highlighting aspects such as visual narrative, the graphic eloquence of typography, colour, supports and new materials. The written word has been challenged, or at least examined to discover its greatest capacity for expression.⁹

Publishing design has always explored new directions for the evolution of the catalogue as opposed to other means of communication, particularly those that are not printed. This evolution could also be seen as a form of survival in the face of the various announcements of the death of printed media made since the nineties.

Taking Bolter’s idea of the remediation between different media,¹⁰ the catalogue has also effectuated a remediation, i.e. it has adapted new media configurations to make sure it isn’t overshadowed and doesn’t lose market share, thereby redeeming itself as a visual and narrative device that continues to play a valid role in communication.¹¹

Design Mechanisms

In recent years, numerous references to publishing design have come to the forefront. Most of them, however, were either inspirational, illustrating endless collections of examples of the subject, or else were assembled as recipe books, describing how to approach design starting from a whole catalogue of graphic possibilities. All these references were chiefly addressed at students and professional designers, to help them complete projects swiftly, and seldom contained more conceptual reflections.

In this sense, having investigated, surveyed and analysed the European publishing scene of the last few decades,¹² I would like to set out a series of features and concepts I shall call ‘mechanisms’ that

will help us define the contemporary catalogue as a type.

I have surveyed catalogues using three levels of approach that signal three kinds of mechanisms: a global vision, that enables us to see the book as an ‘object’ and defines physical characteristics we shall call ‘matter mechanisms’; a global interior vision, that enables us to see the book as an ‘accessible’ support and defines narrative characteristics we shall call ‘structural mechanisms’; and a detailed vision, that enables us too see the graphic language and compositional structures of each page, and defines the representational characteristics we shall call ‘compositional mechanisms’.

Matter mechanisms

The term ‘matter’ refers to the elements used in making the catalogue, and therefore to all that which concerns its physical characteristics: weight, materials (paper, cloth, cardboard, plastic), the tactile effects these produce, their behaviour when handled by users, etc. All these features are perceived from without, and grant the catalogue its identity while synthesising its interior qualities. In some way the catalogue generates its own iconic personality.

This strictly ‘objective’ perception brings the catalogue into the range of other disciplines clearly focused on the making of objects, such as product design or art. It is connected to product design in terms of usability, if we understand the catalogue as an artefact triggered by users (who handle it, open it, leaf through it, unfold it, store it, tear it, etc.), and to art in terms of its ‘sculptural’ quality, that values its aesthetic and conceptual entity.

Four matter mechanisms can be detected and described: hybridisation, the sculpture-book, the distinctiveness of paper and the index-section.

5 M. Parr and G. Badger., *The Photobook: A History*. Vol. 1. Phaidon, London, 2004, p. 8.

6 Ralph Prins, in a conversation with Cas Oorthuys in 1969, quoted in *Photography between Covers: The Dutch Documentary Photobook after 1945*. Fragment Uitgeverij, Amsterdam, 1989, p. 12.

7 P. Stetler, ‘The New Visual Literature: László Moholy-Nagy’s *Painting, Photography, Film*’. *Grey Room*, 32, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, summer 2008, p. 89.

8 E. Lupton, and J. Abbott Miller, ‘McLuhan/Fiore. Massaging the Message’, in *Design Writing Research. Writing on Graphic Design*, Phaidon, London, 1999, p. 92.

9 The subject of the legibility of illustrated catalogues was one of the main debates of the nineties, stimulated by the work of graphic designers (David Carson), magazines (*Emigre*) and theoreticians (at the Cranbrook Academy of Art).

10 J. D. Bolter and R. Grusin, *Remediation. Understanding New Media*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1999.

11 See L. Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2002.

12 D. Lorente, *El catàleg contemporani. Mecanismes de disseny*, Final project, Top-UP B.A. in Design, ELISAVA, 2011- 2012 [unpublished]. Project supervisor: Raffaella Perrone.

— **Hybridisation** consists in a typological approach, taking the formal or conceptual features that characterise a certain kind of publication and applying them to another. The results obtained are basically related to changes in format and graphic language.

Hybridisation can result from the use of graphic language, prompting new forms of narrative; from changes in format, altering volume; or from changes in structure, varying layouts.



▲ Hybridisation by altering the format. An artist's monograph that takes the style and format of the telephone directory. M. Hevia and J. Reus (Eds.), *Barceló abans de Barceló. 1973-1982*, Círculo de Lectores/Galaxia Gutenberg, Barcelona, 2009. Design: Josep Bagà.

— **The sculpture-book** behaves as an independent work, perceived through its objective and physical values. Design decisions are directed, iconically, at drawing attention to the perception of the object in its relations with other identifying objects, and to the qualities enhancing its physical appearance.

This mechanism exploits the use of new materials and the manipulation of traditional materials in order to achieve tactile and volumetric qualities that are removed from standard solutions. This 'sculpturisation' can be produced by transforming existing volumes or materials by means of graphic techniques that reconsider the shapes of books (creating relief, layers, matrices, folds, etc.), or by mimesis (using a specific material to evoke another refer-



▲ A tear in the paper of the cover. M. Horn, R. Van Bladel, and F. Lomme (Eds.), *Intimate Stories on Absence. Artist in Residence 2010*. Eindhoven: Onomatopee, 2010. Design: Remco van Bladel & Rob van den Nieuwenhuizen.



▲ Different types of paper related to different types of content. C. Macel (Ed.), *Sophie Calle: M'as tu vue - Did You See Me?*, Centre Pompidou and Edition Xavier Barral, Paris, 2003. Design: Atalante/Paris.



▲ The index-section. *Intervenciones 2008*. Madrid: La Casa Encendida, 2009. Design: Base Design.

ential object). The end result is that the catalogue obviously becomes visually independent from its contents.

— **The distinctiveness of paper.** In recent years the paper industry has diversified the quantity and quality of the paper it produces for printing purposes. Designers have embraced the new options, granting paper a key role in the representation of contents.

The use of different kinds of paper in one and the same publication conveys, to begin with, important physical information and helps us read and visualise the various sections. But it is also a structural matter, for each different paper acts as a specific content or 'voice' related to the narrative discourse. When

we speak of different voices within a publication we are referring to the various agents that intervene in its contents: a publisher who introduces it, a curator who proposes and selects its contents, and an author who enlightens. Each one may be assigned a different type of paper, which enhances the different situations in the narrative discourse. Paper, its qualities and weight, can be related to graphic elements or else simply be chosen to organise content.

— **The index-section.** This mechanism can be described with the simile of the geological cut that reveals the different densities of content. It is the visible outer surface, the upper, lower and lateral areas of the body of the book. The 'section' of the catalogue provides information on the inside of the book, and could therefore act as a sort of visual index.

This situation has been exploited to generate all kinds of visual and chromatic representations with typographic elements, navigations, etc., and this section is therefore a meaningful part of the catalogue's exterior to be graphically explored. The gold patina applied to the edge of bibles is one example of this mechanism in the field of traditional publishing.

Structural mechanisms

*Ideally a book would have no order in it, and the reader would have to discover his own.*¹³
RAOUL VANEIGEM

The catalogue is an artefact derived from the act of reading—its passage—and therefore establishes a beginning and an end, the basic idea in narrative construction. In the case of catalogues, narrative doesn't follow such a homogeneous pattern of contents, for they are made out of a wide range of textual and visual materials. Reading may lose its linearity and become incomplete, fragmentary. Readers may move around, seeking points of interest; the

¹³ R. Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, Rebel Press, London, 1994, p.5.



▲ Uncover. The story begins on the cover and continues on the first page. E. Jardí, *Pensar con imágenes*, Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2012. Design: Enric Jardí.

act of reading no longer linear but condensed in moments and situations. The reading order grants narrative meaning to the exposition of contents, but stories unfold in more than one narrative pattern, altering content layout.

In historical terms, the structuring function now played by publication contents was fulfilled by publishers, who would receive material from authors and weave the stories that would then be shaped by designers. In the nineties, a number of voices began to champion the role of designers in this process.¹⁴ Designer Bruce Mau has called for a closer involvement of these professionals, along with authors and publishers, in the conception of publications from the first, so they can decide on narrative devices as well as the formal mechanisms they are traditionally assigned.¹⁵

Four structural or narrative mechanisms can be described: uncovering, the visual preface, element swapping and seamlessness.

— **Uncover** is used to describe books that have no covers. Traditionally, we establish a distinction between the cover and the interior of a publication, two elements that have different structures and

meanings, clearly separated. The cover identifies and synthesises content. A catalogue without a cover is physically unprotected, but it can still be graphically identified. The interior assumes its exterior representation and a transparent effect is produced: we have direct access to the interior, without intermediaries or interpretations; reading begins on the cover.

Several actions describe the use of this device: suppression (when there is no tangible cover); camouflage (when the first inner page becomes the cover); transition (when the cover is the first frame in a sequence); and replacement (when the cover inte-

▼ Fragmentation and rearrangement. The content is explained from three points of view and follows three different paths. M. Kubo (Ed.), *Seattle Public Library. OMA/LMN, Verb Monograph 3*, Actar, Barcelona, 2005. Design: Ramon Prat.



14 See R. Poyner, *No More Rules: Graphic Design and Postmodernism*, Laurence King Publishing Ltd., London, 2003, p. 118.

15 B. Mau, *Life Style*, Phaidon, London, 2000, p. 340.



▲ Visual sequence from the beginning of the catalogue. OMA, R. Koolhaas, B. Mau, *S, M, L, XL*, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam, 1995. Design: Bruce Mau.

grates a kind of content that would usually be found inside (index, introduction, credits, etc.)

— **The visual preface**, created with graphic or photographic elements in a sequence of several pages, opens the catalogue. The visual and narrative nature of this mechanism grant it a highly cinematographic quality. More than an idea, a situation, a context or atmosphere that introduces readers into the contents, the visual preface attempts to move them. As a sequence, it has an enveloping quality and creates a fluid transition between the impact of the cover and the first introductory pages. The preface can include the cover as the beginning of the sequence.

— **Element swapping** alters the order of appearance of the different contents (the front/body/back structure of classical catalogues) and rearranges them for a new reading. The various elements can also be previously fragmented into sub-elements to obtain more dynamic reading rhythms. Another objective is to highlight certain packets of content in the narrative sequence.

This kind of global variation affects the catalogue as a whole and obliges designers to focus on the ensemble and not only on details. Designers now act as publishers, controlling the rhythm, the frequency and the force of the appearance of the book's contents in the general sequence, exerting a greater influence on structural than on formal is-



▲ Free-flowing sequence of images. L. Müller (Ed.), *Freitag*, Lars Müller Publishers, Baden, 2001. Design: Lars Müller and Sandra Neumaier. Photos: Sandra Neumaier.

sues. This work process is based on the storyboard, with its obvious cinematographic symbolism.

The variation can be reinforced if accompanied by the use of physical and formal resources, like the graphic emphasis on changes, which are indicated by means of different formats or printed on different kinds of paper, with different weights, qualities and colours.

— **Seamlessness** refers to the dissolving of the concept of ‘catalogue’. This device contradicts the one previously mentioned, but is equally radical. It aspires to achieve the disintegration of the organisational structure, its disappearance even, the dissolving into a continuous reading. The ensemble becomes less hierarchical and yet gains in unity. There are no pauses in narrative and the intensity and surprise effect of certain pages take centre stage.

This device departs from a certain typological hybridisation, for in formal terms it takes arrangements from other kinds of books, such as novels, or other communicational mechanisms, such as lectures, where the continuity of discourse is vital. A similar technique, the uncut continuous shot, can be found in the case of film.

Compositional mechanisms

*There are no more simple images. The whole world is too much for an image, you need several of them; a chain of images.*¹⁶

JEAN-LUC GODARD

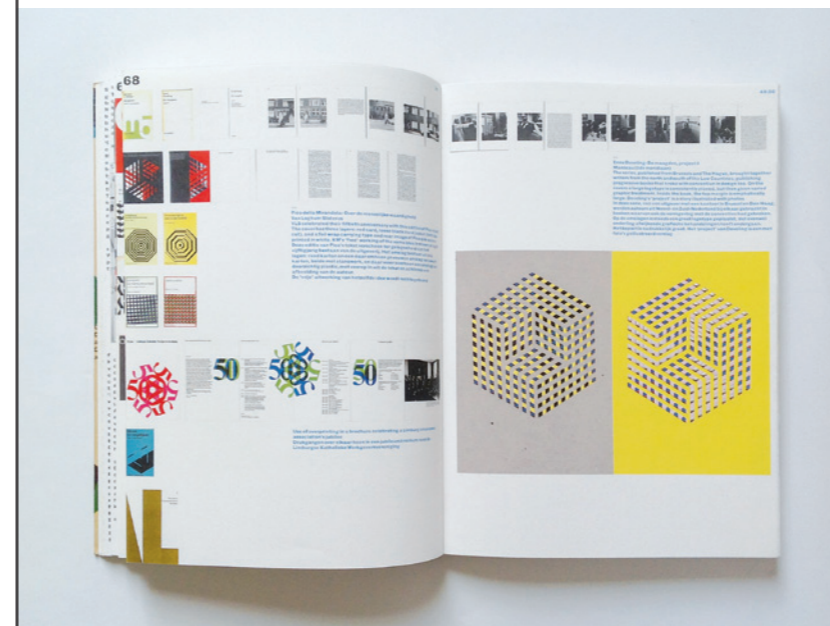
The evolution of graphic design since the onset of the digital age has been continually accompanied by the language derived from the graphic environment of computer programs. Work palettes, menus, toolbars, desktops, backgrounds, wallpaper, files, etc., have easily found their way into graphic composition, sometimes generating meaningful trends (such as pixelated letters or underlined hyperlinks). Indeed, the screen format can be compared to the double spread of a catalogue. The language of computers has deftly made its way into the everyday tasks of graphic designers too. To speak of layers, navigation, links, multi-readings, fluxes, etc., in a non-digital environment such as that of printed publications is now quite commonplace, and reinforces the idea of remediation between media.

To a great extent, the four compositional mechanisms we shall proceed to describe—heterogeneity, layers, navigation and multi-grids—derive from the influence of these digital environments. One of the aspects that have changed the most is the progres-

sive tendency towards fragmentation of contents. Images and the whole set of graphic elements that accompany texts have gained in prominence, thereby generating hierarchical changes and multiple readings. From the point of view of readers’ reception, textual and visual reading has grown in complexity and lost unity, and therefore requires increasingly specialised audiences used to such changes.

— **Heterogeneity** refers to the multiple and diverse representations of contents. Projects are no longer explained by one single image; we now need many. When they were, this image was always that of the finished work and became an icon, a synthesis that formed a part of the memory of the process. In the nineties, however, the creative process itself began to be appraised—rather than the end result, the work carried out by the artist to attain the result was shown, explained and valued, and ended up co-existing with the ‘final’ image.

▼ Coexistence of heterogeneous content. K. Martens, *Printed matter/drukwerk*, Hyphen Press, London, 1996. Design: Jaap Van Triest/Karel Martens.



At the same time, images began to multiply in a wide range of channels and platforms, becoming accessible to ordinary people who also began to take, edit and distribute pictures of their own. Projects are now described in the same number of images and graphic languages as those involved in their making. Everyone contributes pictures, and they are all valid, and this accumulation and variety of sources is reflected in the pages of all sorts of publications. As a result, the image has ceased to be a key reference on a page, and has become a frame in a sequence of images, a fragment in a visual story.

— **Layers** can obey different types of content appearing simultaneously on the same page. They can relate to different voices in the narrative, like the characters in a film, and play leading or secondary roles. In other words, they can appear in the foreground or in the background, as reflected in different graphic styles, technical resources or layouts.

Layers help generate parallel discourses, and in some cases discourses that are independent or not directly connected. The layout design starting from grids, the definition of whites and the use of typography are key elements to emphasise the importance of each part of the content.

Layers of content can interfere with one another through concealment, overlapping or transparency, or else can be arranged simultaneously in order to create parallel or independent readings.

— **Navigation**, a popularly accepted term, refers to the ability to connect readings between websites through links or hyperlinks. Traditionally, catalogues contained information that helped readers find their way, such as page numbers or chapter references. In navigation systems, however, these graphic elements, that used to be printed discretely in the margins of pages, are prominent and much more expressive features.

Navigation can reinforce the arrangement and classification of information, and visually guide

¹⁶ Jean-Luc Godard, quoted in ‘Image, Time and Motion. New Media Critique from Turkey, Ankara (2003-2010),’ *Theory on Demand 7*, Institute of Network Cultures, Amsterdam, 2011.

readers through the various parts of extensive complex catalogues, creating a graphic identity. Graphic 'excess' can trigger mutual tensions between elements and strain our perception of the main content of catalogues.

— **Multi-grid/no grid.** Grids act as frameworks for structuring and organising the composition of the contents of pages, defining workspaces. If contents are complex, it may be preferable to have different grids or layouts in one and the same catalogue. Single grids sometimes produce multiple fragmentation, and at other times multi-grids produce, in compositional terms, a similar sense of fragmentation or lack of unity.

The decision not to use grids, on the other hand, can generate compositions based on the optical adjustment of elements, intuitively creating visual balance. Doing away with grids can imply losing fixed references, changing the hierarchy of those that still appear and give rise to new and unexpected compositional arrangements.

Conclusion

We can recognise the physical, narrative and graphic characteristics that intervene in the configuration of catalogues by simply looking at them, for they form a part of their essence. The mechanisms described in this article highlight some of these features, and contribute to the conceptual definition of catalogues. In many cases, the simultaneous presence of more than one mechanism grants meaning to the book as a whole, although only through balanced use, not indiscriminate accumulation.

None of the studied catalogues is defined by more than four or five simultaneous mechanisms. The painstaking use of one or more devices emphasises the key concepts behind their design, whereas an unselective use can lead to a design overdose.

Having described the various types, I discover that matter and structural mechanisms are those



▲ Overlapping of layers. X. Rovira (ed.), *liquidDocs Bookmagazine_01*, Sònia Gómez. liquidDocs Editions, Barcelona, 2007. Design: Xavier Rovira, Rein Steger, Ulises Chamorro. Photo: proxi.



▲ Colour-code navigation. O. Riewoldt (Ed.), *Light Years - The Zumtobel Story 2000-1950*, Birkhäuser, Basle, 2000. Design: Irma Boom.



▲ Multi-grid. M. Gerritzen, *Catalogue of Strategies*, BIS Publishers, Amsterdam, 2001. Design: NL Design.

that differ more greatly from the traditional design conception of visual catalogues, understood as two-dimensional graphic composition. This kind of device favours solutions that conceive the catalogue as a product-object (rather than a graphic-object), and a narrative artefact. As a result, catalogues are able to compete favourably with devices taken from other creative and communication disciplines that use the same codes and configurations, ensuring they remain visible in a dense cultural market and in a context that challenges their future existence.