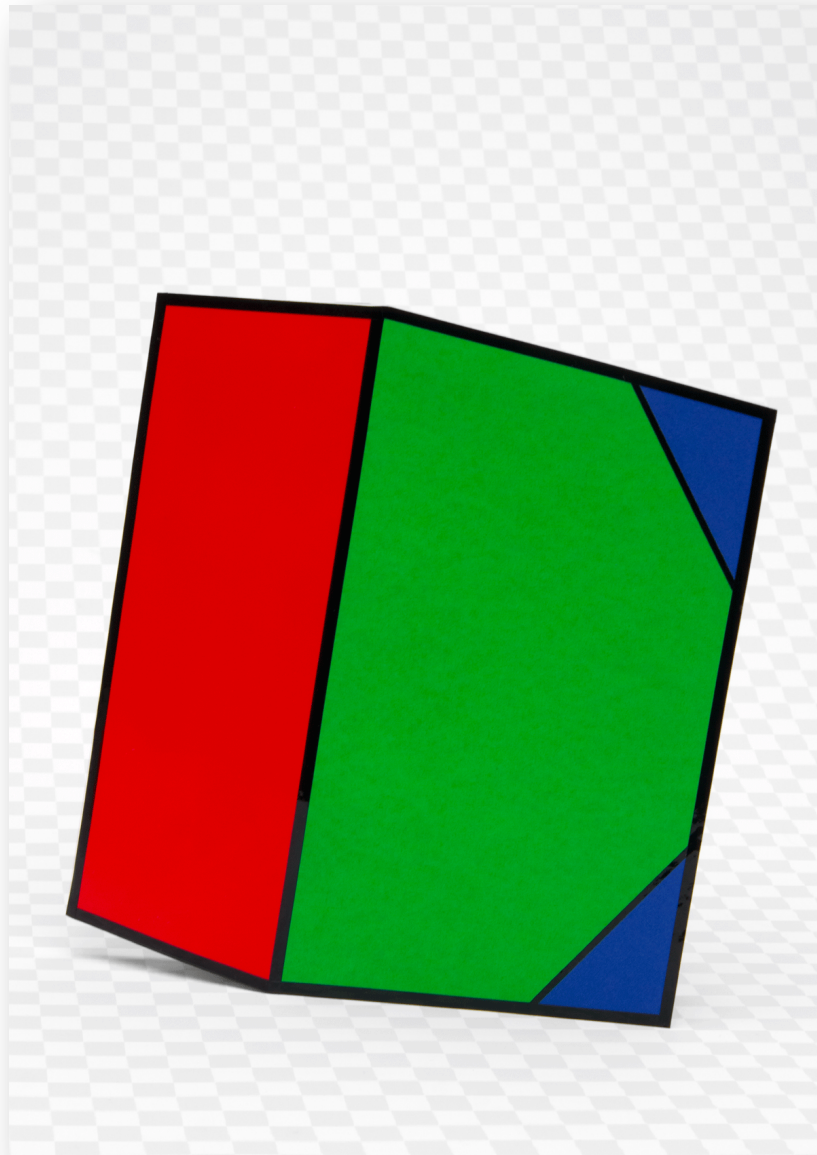


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Approaching (the) Book as Matter



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This thesis will, through a graphic design perspective, discuss a format in flux. It examines the idea of the book format as a material body, as an image and as a conceptual format. The appearance and perception of the material manifestation of chosen design issue lay in mediating through versions of books—referring to a wider perspective of book design, which among other formats, socially and culturally is affected by the Digital Age. The thesis will further discuss the excitement in tweaking already existing experiences of formats, in order to critically address a notion of change.

Keywords: book design, books, codex, format, versions, comparative relation, image, representation, flux, mediating

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1. Design Issue

Approaching (the) Book as Matter is an independent graphic design project. Its issue discusses the book format to be in flux. It examines the idea of the book as a material body, as an image and as a conceptual format.

The project does not aim to find a solution to a specific problem. It rather seeks in an experimental and contemporary fashion to comment on the matter of the book as a physical object. The issue is mediated through versions of books presented in an exhibition setting. I define the versions as material bodies of work and the images as representations. Their apparent relation is central to the project. What is the idea of the book format today?

In extension I examine the experience of graphic authorship and the concept of using meta-narrative as content. The consequence of the Digital Age affects how a graphic designer designs a book. Hence, the aim is to widen the idea of what the book format is today. I intend to contribute to a critical discussion that is going on within the graphic design community.

1.2 Background

The nature of my practical project is explorative. It builds on empirical knowledge gained through years of interest and practice. It is natural to deepen my studies and once again investigate the matter of the book format.

The progress in the process of *Approaching (the) Book as Matter* is led by my own excitement for tweaking already existing formats. I have investigated the book format multiple times before, often with results that challenge its physicality. The manifestations mainly had features that affected how the presentation text of was perceived. The sum of interpretations has led to material- and knowledge libraries, which function as a foundation and starting point for further experiments. Previous findings trigger my personal engagement in striving for new ways on how to make comments on the book format. I experience continuous learning, and I am filled with huge respect in the means of not knowing enough.

As a graphic designer, interested but not trained in writing, the inner conflict whether I am authorised to write or not complicates the act of writing. I have practiced methods where content and form is co-created. I have experienced that using a method as support liberates the creative process of writing and therefore gives access to the product of text content authored by a graphic designer. The dependency validates the performance of

writing, when performed as a designer and not in the traditional way. Writer, curator, and graphic designer Ellen Lupton, discuss the role of the designer as producer:

The slogan ‘designer as author’ has enlivened debates about the future of graphic design since the early 1990s. Behind this phrase is the will to help designers to initiate content, to work in an entrepreneurial way rather than simply reacting to problems and tasks placed before them by clients. The word author suggests agency, intention, and creation, as opposed to the more passive functions of consulting, styling, and formatting. Authorship is a provocative model for rethinking the role of the graphic designer at the start of the millennium; it hinges, however, on a nostalgic ideal of the writer or artist as a singular point of origin. [...] As an alternative to ‘designer as author’, I propose ‘designer as producer’. Production is a concept embedded in the history of modernism. (2004)

I need to initiate content in order to demonstrate my new designs of book formats for reading. The exercise in designing text as form, although it appears as authored text in a traditional meaning, shall be understood as ‘prototyping’ of text content. As the producer and self-publisher of these new co-dependent readings, I have experienced rather time-consuming processes to reach my vision. The final results, where the issue is designing non-linear ways of reading, often turn out as very complex manifestations. This may be excluding to the general public. In an exhibition setting this is extremely unfortunate and not what this project is aimed at.

1.3 The issue and its relation to the design project

Approaching (the) Book as Matter is an independent, self-published book format project. Its intention is to produce meaning of my own material, manifested in idea and as expression. The main practical focus is to explore graphic book design within the fashion of publishing books as an exhibition. Its total appearance and material manifestation aim to comment on the Digital Age and its effects on the book format. The thematic idea of the exhibition is to communicate the notion of the book format to be in flux. To highlight this notion, I choose to literally imitate a flux by mediating an apparent comparative relation between the material body and the image as representation.

1.4 The relevance of the issue to the field of design

In general, the book object is familiar to everyone. Socially and culturally, the book is loaded with ideas, both in content and as appearance and as well as being a present as a physical object. Naturally, these ideas change over time. In the academic article ‘Designing Graphic Design History’, Triggs, briefly give an account of the graphic

designer's practice in the past century—thence, discusses the current approach to emphasise expanding the designer's role to that one of an initiator/originator of content, and not only serving the role of being a problem solver. "Self-produced design publications provide valuable insights into theoretical and visual concerns that enrich our understanding of the history of profession, graphic artefacts and their cultural contexts." (2009, p. 339)

Approaching (the) Book as Matter is related to others also active in the field of self-publishing. It is part of a critical discussion within a graphic design community and homage to the book as object. My main contribution to the design field is the way I have positioned to independently objectify the book as something self-reflexive. The book versions do not work as containers for information by any traditional means. Rather reflecting on the idea of books published as a thematic exhibition. An exhibition directed to the general public, with the main goal to communicate the book format to be in flux in a Digital Age. The exhibited pieces of work are read as a comparative relation between the material body and the image as representation. It is directed to the general public, mediating the flux of what we know/knew is/was a book. "For the designer to become a producer, she must have the skills to begin directing content, by critically navigating the social, aesthetic, and technological systems across which communications flow." (Lupton, 2004)

Tendencies in Society—social, political and economic ones, create context and conditions for designing. The format, *Approaching (the) Book as Matter*, aims to comment on is 'codex'—this book format is a construction of multiple sheets of paper, compared to its alternative and former version: the continuous scroll. Although both, by definition, are books, the one that is most commonly associated with the term 'book', are 'codices'. The codex has had an influential carrier as format since the 2nd century.

As mentioned, the Digital Age challenges the book format. What is at stake is the bodily experience as well as the philosophical value of our relation to the book format as codex. Whether novels, as genre, have lost a lot of physical sales to e-books (Hanks, 2012)—book designer Irma Boom, argue in an interview by Miltenburg (2012, 88) that books published digitally are those not worth printing. Boom continues by embracing digital technology since it enables her to make the books she makes.

As a graphic designer, I claim there are books that cannot be anything but physical—the digital e-book is a format in itself and only related to codices and the continuous scroll in the way that it imitates the original.

2. Methods and Process

Based on previous studies and judgement of my own design process and final results I know that I require peaks of excitement in the creative process—peaks of not having control and of being in a flow—to later present a satisfying result. The interest in designing new and tweaked versions of objects support an eagerness to proof ideas in material manifestations—this is to visually explain and produce comments of meaning by using graphic design in an exciting way. To find this ‘new’, I started out by evaluating the results of my own previous projects. I tried to pinpoint their extra exciting qualities as designed objects. I perceived that their main feature lay in the function of reading text rather than being visually strong as graphic objects.

The issue of *Approaching (the) Book as Matter* emphasise to make a clear and sharp comment on the idea of a format to be in flux—hence, the obvious look and representation of idea came to my attention already in an early stage in the practical investigation. Striving for a manifestation of flux challenged my personal creative process, and I attempted new directions of studying the issue of the book format and its meaning.

Although knowing I had formulated a clear aim, I fell into old habits and made sketches of complex folds, models to try them out and I also co-created text and form even though I knew this was time-consuming. Nevertheless, and not too late I understood that I ‘investigated’ a too well known field of interest. Chances of serendipity are fewer if knowing something very well. The flow and peaks of excitement that I need were not there until I changed perspective as well as terms for exploring the matter.

2.2 The image as representation

I state there are two major happenings in choice of methods that have nurtured the process and influenced the final result as material manifestation, as well as the formulation of the design issue. The first one, halfway into the practical investigation, is photo shooting six copies of models of books.

As relation, *Books on Books*’ printed title on front, back and spine, refer to the matter of being self-reflexive on a meta-level—literally using text as feature in order to comment on their relation as flux, when the non-linear sentences are built. Their mundane, direct way to express as combinative is appreciated as cheesy and easy approached poetry. The actual size of one of them fit perfectly between one’s thumb and index finger—thence, arrangement and ever re-arrangement is of interest. Although, it is first when ‘captured’ in a photo the moment of arranging disappears. The photo acts differently—mediating a

material combinative of three-dimensional objects, which are solidified and represented as/in an image. The non-linear reading of, and within the image, as image, is presented in front of one and is no longer material in the sense of bodily experience—rather illustrating the idea of notion, of fixating, of presenting a non-option to perceive in different angles, of representing as an image.

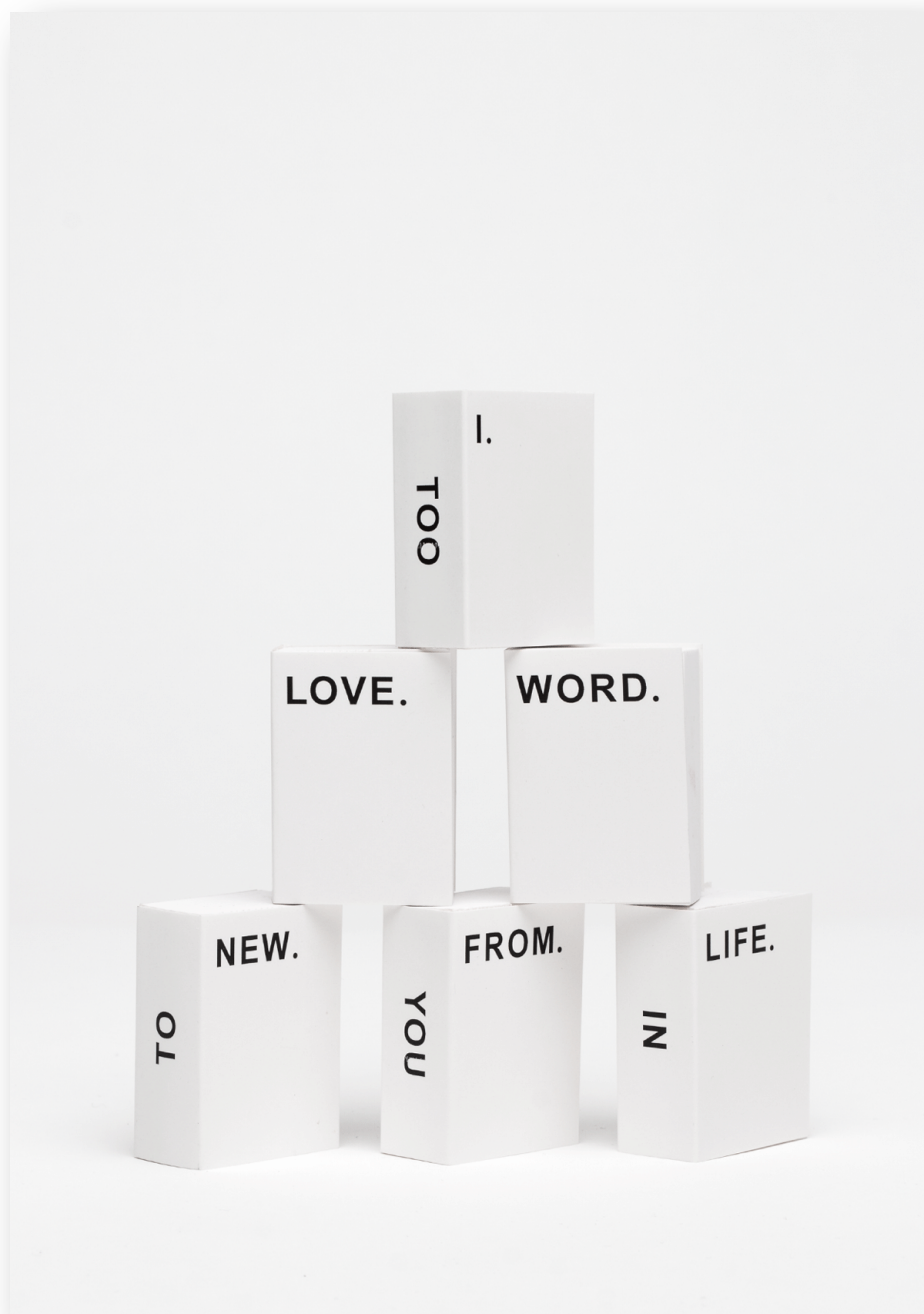


fig. 1. 'Books on Books'

2.3 Serendipity when on detour

The second event of the apparent feeling of excitement happened after, on purpose, doing a ‘wrong’ binding when gluing a book spine. The spine’s angle is not the conventional 90 degrees—instead, it has ‘slided’ out of control, as if being in perspective. To enhance the tweaked feature I trimmed the top-, bottom- and right-side edges, to fully approach the illusion of being two-dimensional, and in perspective. This skewed appearance of material flirted with the idea of the book format as something un-dimensional. Thence also commenting on a flux and merge of formats—the actual appearance of a material body and the idea/image of its appearance.

3. Results and Discussion

The topic of the project, also read in the title: *Approaching (the) Book as Matter*, inhabits the potential in being examined in a variety of different ways. There is no apparent first choice in how to manifest the issue. I argue it comes down to where the producer chose to position as a designer. In other words, projects are dependent on what definitions are picked to explain its design issue, its tentative findings and possible conclusions—hence, making it essential to carefully consider one’s choices when labelling/publishing one’s work.

3.1 Comments on defining

The immense interest in definitions and their accompanied expectations is the core of my project. It has been the centre of my attention when I have approached the practical part of the project, as well as reflection of issue and as formulation of analysis. Although, careful considerations have been made, I am not super sure I know how to exactly formulate, define and evaluate *Approaching (the) Book as Matter*. Still, this does not make the initiator of the project less convinced. I rather agree on aligning the material manifestation and the written thesis with the term of ‘flux’. This flux result also supports the thought of the aimed at relative result of the versions acting in/as relation.

The process has been troubled as well as nurtured with trying to understand already inhabited meanings of definitions, as well as expectations on the book format as an apparent object, which carries a huge cultural heritage. The already inhabited, within definitions, as descriptive and as connoting meaning, shift in relevance over time. The excitement of shift has directly led the explorative character of the practical investigation.

It is funny how I first did choose to formulate the design issue around the ‘physical

book’. The expression, as well definition, is very much in contraposition to the ‘e-book’, which I argue, though there is an ‘e-’, in connection to it, should not even claim the definition of ‘book’. The e-book is a format in itself and does not oppose the physical version. This is one of the essential and triggering findings in *Approaching (the) Book as Matter*, which design issue, took a slight turn towards caring more about the potential idea of the book format rather than its obvious appearance as object. This finding provided me with a much more open mind-set and one more connected to a contemporary discourse—instead of just commenting on something already happening (referring to digitalisation of materiality). The concept of book may be in flux—hence, it opens up its idea as object.

After widening my own idea of a ‘book’ the major interest and excitement lay in the counterview/comparative relation between the abstract idea, the two-dimensional image as representation and the three-dimensional manifestation.

3.2. Description of artistic manifestation

The material manifestation of *Approaching (the) Book as Matter* resulted as an arrangement of work in an exhibition setting. The exhibition’s thematic concept highlights a potential death of the codex format. The visual language and identity of manifestation is definitely flirting with a digital expression. Literally, what are exhibited are five three-dimensional manifestations of handmade codices and three large-scale photos of three of them. The relative relation between the material body and image as representation produces meaning as content—it describes a notion of flux. The five material bodies of book formats are placed and exposed on a rectangular Carrera marble stone, which lay directly on the floor. Above hang the three photos, representing three of the material manifestations of books though solidified as images. The images represent a two-dimensional/flat dimension of three-dimensional works. A five-meter long satin ribbon defines an appropriate distance for engagement.

3.2.2 Mediating idea through three images

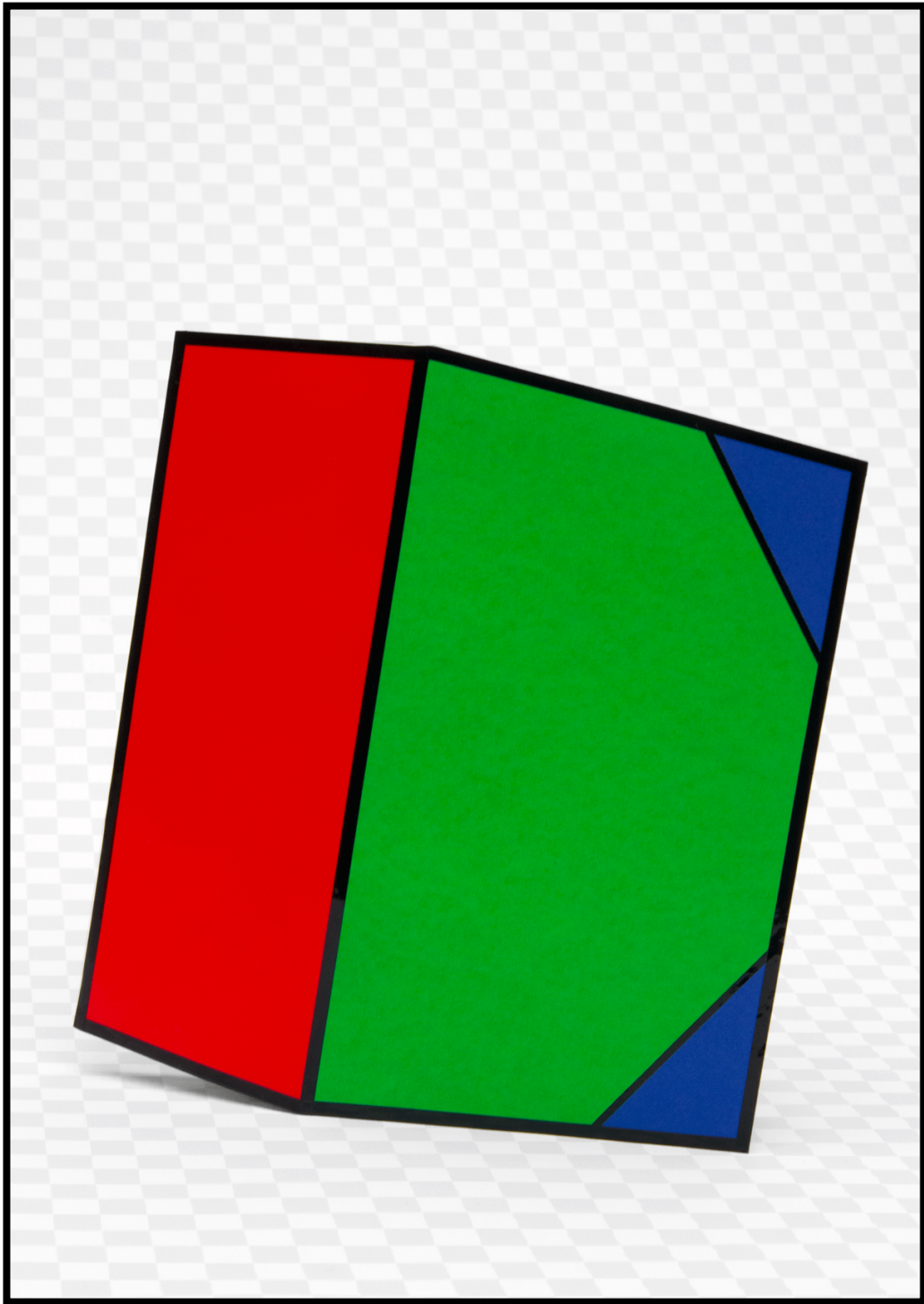


fig. 2. Image one: 'Red, green and blue book' (photo of a physical copy on a backdrop, imitating two-dimensionality of physicality when captured in an angle, presented on a 'transparent layer' as backdrop, 500x700)

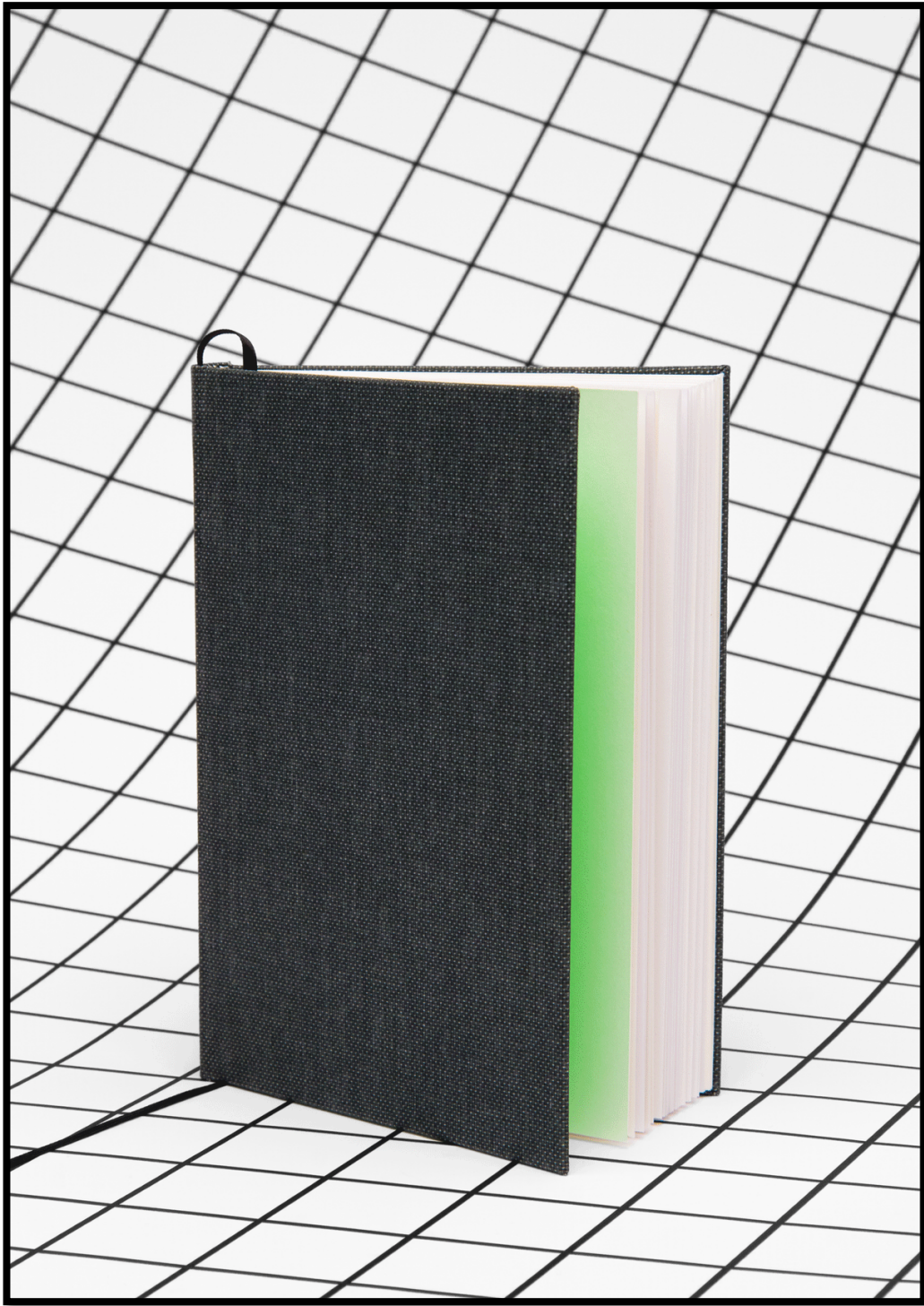


fig. 3. Image two: 'If opened' (photo of a physical copy on a backdrop, apparent green function if opened, 500x700)

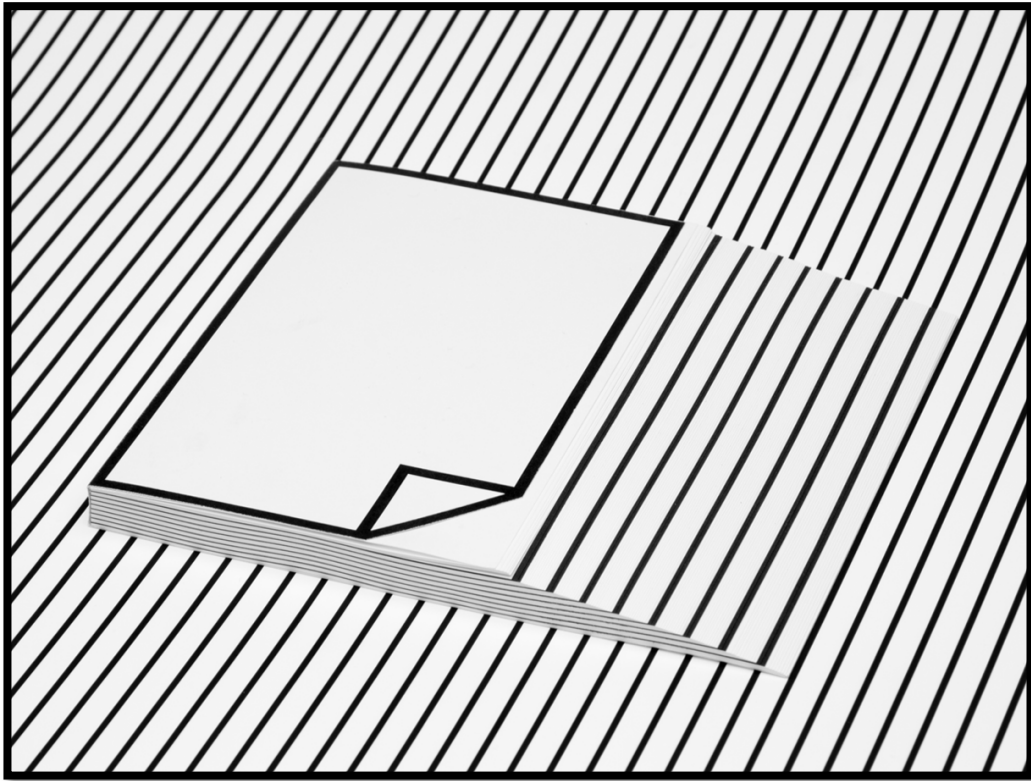


fig. 4. Image three: 'Book made of paper, illustrating a paper stack' (photo of a physical copy on a backdrop, illuminating though revealing of spine thickness, 700x500)

3.2.3 Exhibited as a relative relation



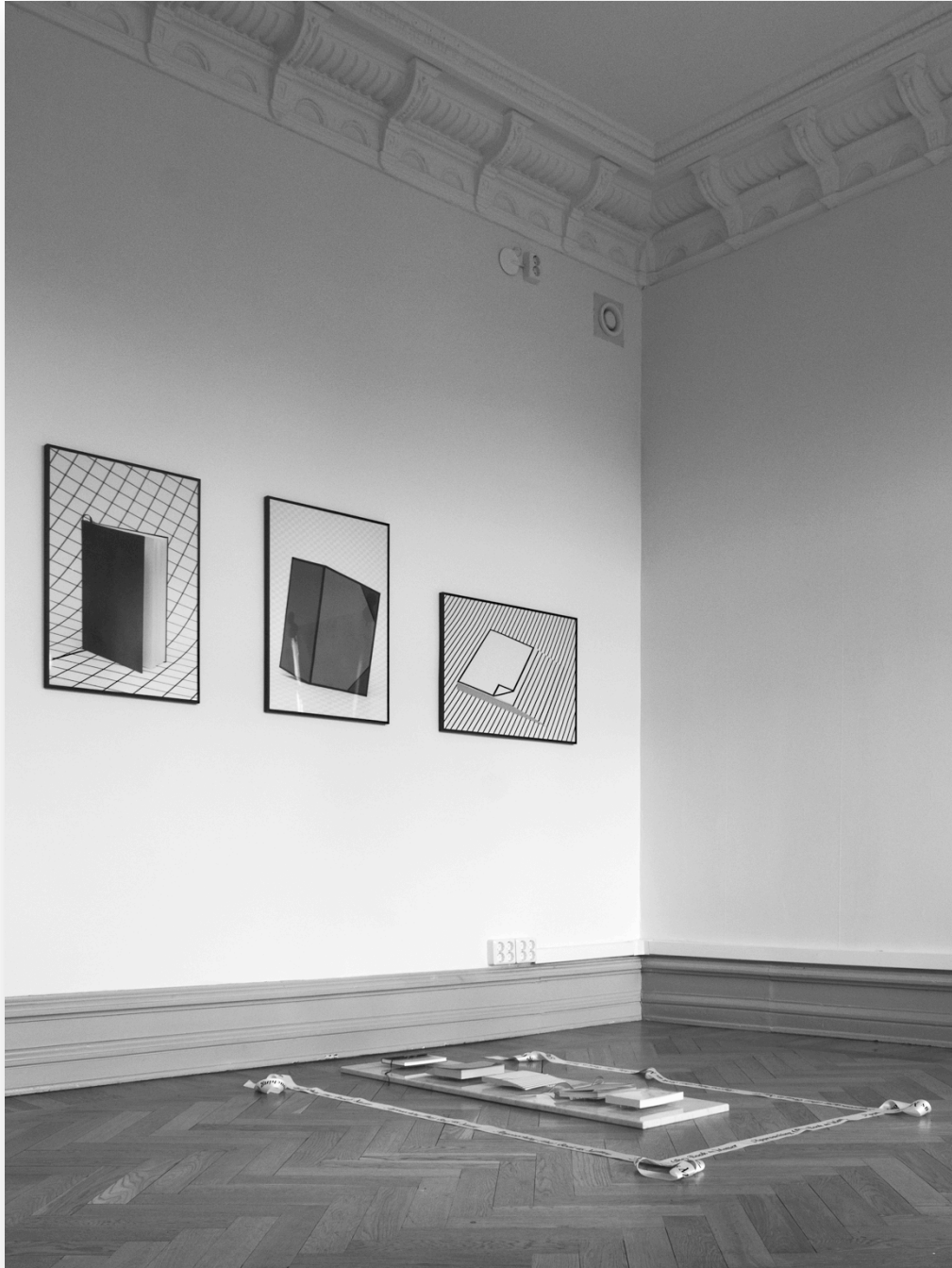


fig 5. (previous page) Five material bodies of books, arranged in a row and displayed onto a Carrera marble stone.

fig 6.

Obvious relative relation between the three-dimensional codices and the framed photos.

3.2.4 Details

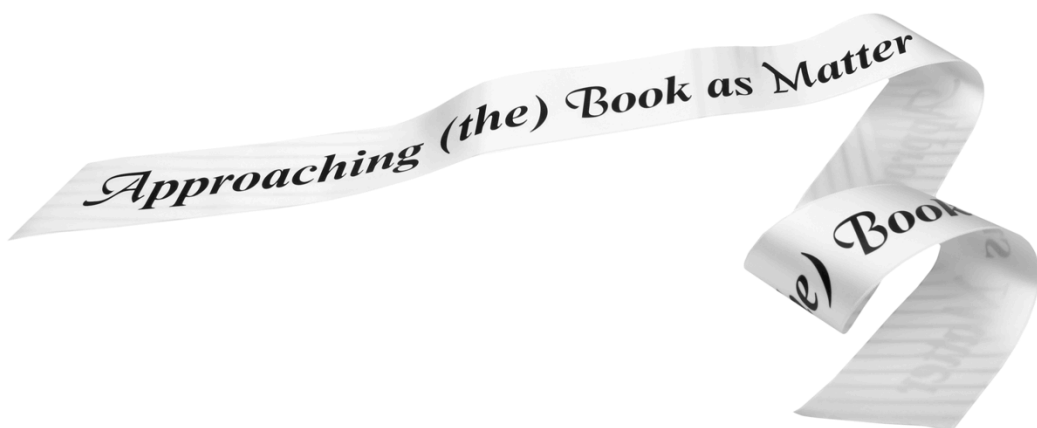


fig 7., 8. and 9. Hand bound codices, with precision.

fig 10. Satin ribbon with the title.

3.3 Relevance and contribution to the field of design

Approaching (the) Book as Matter does not strive to be ground breaking in the sense of the traditional concept of ‘new’ design. It rather aims to act as an experimental entry in a quite vivid discussion within a graphic design community. Although the design issue may be of most interest for those within the community, I find the critical discussion to be of importance to a general public due to its societal, cultural as well political matter—referring to that a potential death of the codex will most probably affect the masses.

The choice and success in publishing my work as a critical exhibition instead of i.e. publishing a book supports a fast, clear and more easily approached meaning of issue. The exhibition space also inhabits the potential to be general and open to the public—visitors may be intrigued to enter a discussion that usually goes on within a graphic design community.

3.4 Conclusion and summary of the discussion

As formulated the project aims to critically address the notion of the book format to be in flux today. This has affected the interpretation of material manifestation in the way that I decided to make codices without content (in traditional means) [in other words, all pages are blank]. The decision was made upon the fact that it definitely fastens the process of building up spine thickness. Even without content, I argue the interpretations to effectively produce meaning—though, based on other values e.g. being self-reflexive on a meta-level. The codices comment on the book format by visualising its matter by critically addressing its own appearance as material body, conceptual format and as relative dimension when represented in an image. The exhibition context supports the idea of versions of visions.

It is extremely exciting that the idea of notion may be the beginning of a project with a huge explorative character. I am not a writer. Do not believe me. The matter of meaning is up to everyone.

What does it mean to call for a graphic designer to be an author? Authorship, in one form or another has been a popular term in graphic design circles, especially those circles that revolve around the edge of the profession, the design academies, and the murky territory that exists between design and art. The word has an important ring to it, and it connotes seductive ideas of origination and agency. But the question of how designers become authors is a difficult one and exactly who are the designer/authors and what authored design looks like depends entirely on how you end up defining the term and criterion you chose to determine entrance into the pantheon. (Rock, 1996).

As a young designer, to independently publish and visualise critique, is a necessity. Being aware I am publishing is an authorial criterion enough.



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