An interview by **Andrea Anselmo and Chiara Federico**
Proofreading **Alex Davidson**

Irma Boom
The architectu of the boo



Irma Boom is widely recognised as one of the world's foremost book designers. She is well known for her wide range of productions that counts over 300 books, some of which are part of the permanent collection of Museum of Modern Art in New York and other museum like Centre Pompidou in Paris.

Her love for art and architecture brought her to work extensively with artists and architects. Boom collaborates with OMA (Office for Metropolitan Architecture) for which she designed for example Project Japan and the 15 books of Elements, published for the 14th Venice Architecture Biennale in 2014. Her designs are conceptual and experimental. This interview focuses on these topics with special regard to the importance of dimension in her design.



Irma Boom, SHV Think Book 1996-1896 (1996)

YOU ARE VERY WELL KNOWN FOR DESIGNING PARTICULARLY LARGE BOOKS ALONG WITH VERY SMALL ONES. DOES SIZE PLAY A BIG ROLE IN YOUR DESIGN APPROACH? DOES IT RELATE WITH THE DESIGN CONCEPT? AND IF SO, HOW?

The smallest book I have made is called Irma Boom: Biography in Books. Making books for me is also building books; like architecture it has to do with dimension, scale, proportion, size, and in my case weight. It's all very important, like in my fat book SHV Think Book 1996-1986. This came out half a year later than SMLXL and it was precisely through these big books that Rem Koolhaas and I met. A mutual friend introduced us because of we both made fat books.

The size of that book was very important and in particular its thickness, largely because it came about during a time period ranging from before the computer, to after; from analogue to digital.

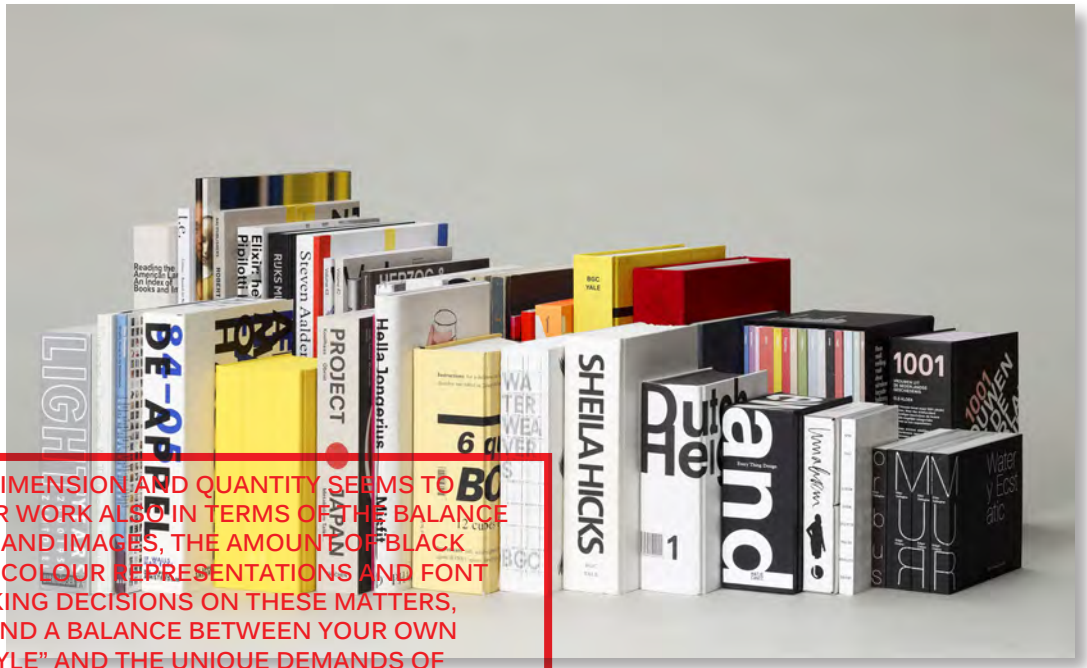
When Johan Pijnappel and I obtained a 5 year long commission we thought we could perhaps do a CD-ROM – DVD didn't exist at that time – but that very soon would become out-dated. Doing research we realised how fast information technology was progressing, so we came to the conclusion that it was better to make a book instead of something digital. In 1991 the Internet was on the rise, and not everybody had a computer yet. For this reason we thought it could be interesting to make a book based on the notion of the internet and the idea of browsing. So, through a three and a half year long research, we produced the content and we organised it following the non-linear structure of the Internet. The fact that the 2136 page book has no page numbers, is crucial. There is no specific beginning or end to the book, you can start reading everywhere. It is a book where if you are looking for something, you will find something else, which is for us much more interesting.



Irma Boom *Biography in books* (2010)

AND WHAT ABOUT THE TINY BOOK YOU MADE?

When I make a book, I first make it in its actual size and then in the process, to test it, I make reduced size books for myself as a working tool. In Amsterdam for my exhibition everybody wanted me to make a catalogue but, as I didn't want to make a big book about my own work, I decided to make a book as one of my models: small. So that idea for the publication comes from this idea. It contains an almost complete overview of my work. I decided that every year it would grow by 3% even if I don't publish anything. It is exciting, the idea that when the book becomes bigger more experiences are made. All the time getting better hopefully... and when I am 80 years old I have finally a big book!



A non exhaustive collection of Books designed by Irma Boom

THE ISSUE OF DIMENSION AND QUANTITY SEEMS TO APPEAR IN YOUR WORK ALSO IN TERMS OF THE BALANCE BETWEEN TEXT AND IMAGES, THE AMOUNT OF BLACK AND WHITE, OR COLOUR REPRESENTATIONS AND FONT SIZE. WHEN TAKING DECISIONS ON THESE MATTERS, HOW DO YOU FIND A BALANCE BETWEEN YOUR OWN "SIGNATURE STYLE" AND THE UNIQUE DEMANDS OF A SINGLE PROJECT? IN SOME CASES WE CAN AFFIRM THAT WHAT MAKES A SINGLE PROJECT GREAT IS A PROGRAMMATIC UNBALANCE. IN OTHER WORDS, SOMETIMES, EITHER FAT OR ANOREXIC WINS.

I don't consider myself as a great designer, I was trained as a painter, something completely different – it is only in the last years of school that I studied graphic design – and book design is for me somehow like architecture: you must elaborate a good concept, a good idea, and when you find it you have to execute it strictly, no compromises. The content sometimes has to be created by myself, or other times in collaboration with the commissioner (I never say client, because I am commissioned to make a work). All my work is very structured, maybe that's all to avoid showing that I'm not a good designer...

YOU SET UP YOUR OWN RULES...

Yes, that's what I do and as a graphic designer and book maker it is very important for me to have a clear idea and make rules for my self; and I follow these very strictly. I really need to set the guidelines, because otherwise I think the outcome becomes arbitrary, I want to focus on one idea.

IN WHICH WAYS WOULD YOU SAY THAT YOUR WORKS ARE CONSIDERED "OBJECTS"?

That is a word that other people use but I don't use it often, for me they are books. It could sound so superficial but for me the book is a three dimensional piece, and I think it's really more important to talk about it in these terms. It's not flat like a flat PDF, it has dimensions. A book for me is about turning the pages, making sequences, telling a story. For this reason I decide on everything, the weight, the paper, even the smell! Turning the pages is the action you take to get into the content and for this reason it's important which paper you use, what you want to achieve and which message you want to give.

..right now we are in a moment of revitalisation of the book, it becomes ever more a unique piece, precisely because of PDFs and Kindles.

NOWADAYS ELECTRONIC BOOKS ARE SPREADING AND THE PRINTED MAGAZINE INDUSTRY IS IN CRISIS. THIS COULD MEAN NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE BUSINESS AND EVEN THE READERS BUT, AT THE SAME TIME, IT IMPLIES AN INCREDIBLE WEIGHT LOSS IN TERMS OF MATERIAL QUALITIES OF THE READING SUPPORT: A SORT OF ANOREXIA OF THE BOOK. DO YOU SEE THIS CHANGE AS A FORM OF DISEASE OR DO YOU TOTALLY EMBRACE THE DIGITAL DOMAIN CHALLENGES?

I think that I was very lucky that I was starting as a designer in an analogue era and I could transfer book design into digital. In this time of e-books, e-readers and all electronic devices, in contrast, I can better emphasise what I do and articulate what a book is for me, namely a paper book. So, for me it is a sort of advantage to be a book maker in this time because I can be more specific and articulated in what I am doing. I don't see any danger of book extinction because I think it is an essential part of our culture. Making or designing the book, also editing, printing and binding; it is an integral part of our existence. Therefore, it doesn't need any protection or defence, it will survive by itself and I reckon that right now we are in a moment of revitalisation of the book, it becomes ever more a unique piece, precisely because of PDFs and Kindles. I believe that we are now experiencing the Renaissance of the book.

WHERE DO YOU GET YOUR PAPER FROM?

From Dutch, Italian or German paper companies but I have also my own paper, IBO ONE, which is in a way similar to architecture paper. For me it has some beautiful qualities, such as its translucence. This kind of paper used to be used by architects, but at some point went out of production. So, last year, a paper company asked me if I wanted to have my own paper and then I thought, "well, I want to bring back the architecture paper". At the moment we are using it for the next insert in the magazine Volume "The Architecture of UN Peacekeeping Missions" for Architecture Biennale in Venice.



Irma Boom, Exhibition: Architecture of the book, Institut Néerlandais, Paris, 2013

MAYBE THE AMOUNT OF BOOKS IS GETTING SMALLER BUT YOU SAY IT IS A GOOD THING FOR THE BOOK ANYWAY...

Yes exactly, I think it's really good that a lot of information and content are on internet. No need to make from everything subject a book. At the same time everyone wants to have a book and sometimes it's not worth it. So, I tell them, please put it online. If you really want to make a physical book that costs a lot of time and paper. And if you make a book you better make the best.

DO YOU THINK A WEBSITE DESIGN COULD BE CONSIDERED AS A BOOK LAYOUT SOMEHOW?

No, I think it's something else. I am not saying that a lot of web pages look like bad book designs or bad printing matter but the website is relatively new, so in a way it had to be invented from scratch. In web design there are so many possibilities but it stays flat, so it can never have the qualities of a three dimensional book. The Internet, with its constant flux of content, can change at any moment. If you make a book, instead, you create something fixed, frozen, where you can concentrate much more on what you actually edited. They reflect two different ways of thinking; it is a completely different attitude.



Olafur Eliasson: Contact, Catalog for the artist exhibition at Fondation Louis Vuitton (Paris, 2015). Ph. © Olafur Eliasson

DESIGNING IS ALWAYS A COMPLICATED PROCESS. MANY DESIGNERS FEEL THE FEAR OF THE BLANK CANVAS. IN YOUR CASE, HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHICH DIRECTION TO TAKE IN THE BEGINNING? DO YOU HAVE ANY RECURRENT SOURCE OF REFERENCE OR INSPIRATION IN YOUR WORK?

For me it's always important to talk to the person who commissions me. Confrontation and communication are very important. I listen very carefully, because by listening I, most of the time, have immediately an idea.

I must say that, if talking to the commissioner of the project I don't have an idea immediately, it will never happen. Today, for example, I cancelled a meeting with an artist because he desperately wanted to make a book, but I felt he asked me for the wrong reason. I could feel that.

If you see my little red book you'll realise I have made many mistakes and you don't want to be one of them. For me there has to be a mutual understanding; it is not about liking or disliking the work, it is more an attitude in this mutual agreement to spend time together.

ALSO TO FIND A SHARED CONCEPT OR...

Yes, but sometimes you feel it's not going to happen; you have to follow your intuition. You know that it doesn't work and you have to stop even if the other person really wants to work together... But to protect them is better to say no. It's sometimes painful. It is important when you do something that you really listen to yourself, what your instinct tells you. It is more honest for the person you work with as well.

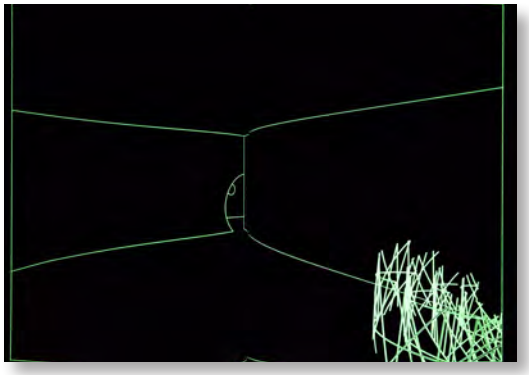
Last Saturday I met Olafur Eliasson to talk about a future collaboration* and I felt we were immediately on the same track, you feel there is trust and it's very reassuring. You feel complete confidence and freedom and this is what I need. These are my keywords. I really need space. If somebody is always on my back with stupid meetings and all this bureaucracy, I'm out. It doesn't matter how interesting the job is!



Full color ink picture printed on black paper Ph. © Olafur Eliasson

THIS FUTURE COLLABORATION WITH OLAFUR ELIASSON WILL NOT BE THE FIRST THOUGH.

No, you are right. We have worked together two other times. The first was a catalogue for his exhibition Contact at the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris. There I had the idea to make the book half black, printed in full colour, and half white, printed in black.



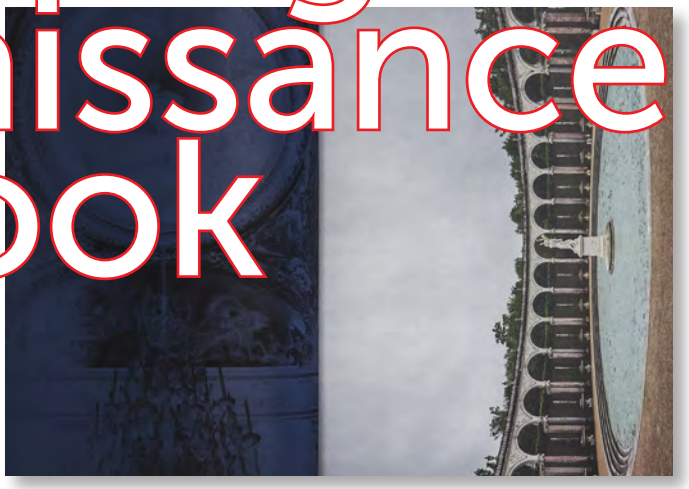
Installation drawing printed with fluorescent ink on black paper. Ph. © Olafur Eliasson

THE EFFECT OF PRINTED COLOUR ON BLACK PAPER IS INDEED VERY PECULIAR...

And the funny thing is that I made the book before the exhibition started, without even seeing it. The second one, instead, was the catalogue for the exhibition Verklighetsmaskiner / Reality Machines in Stockholm. So this will be the third one.

I believe that we are now experiencing the Renaissance of the book







* *olafur eliasson versailles* arose from a remarkable dialogue between artist Olafur Eliasson and graphic designer Irma Boom, and accompanies the artist's summer exhibition, on view in the palace and gardens of Versailles from 5 June to 30 October 2016. The artist's book is printed on three different kinds of paper – black, grey, and white – with different colours for each paper type. Readers are invited to turn the book (some images are oriented sideways), while colour and paper combinations – Eliasson's personal Versailles photographs appear blue on black – add visual uncertainties and hesitation, making you look closer.
Ph. © Olafur Eliasson



Olafur Eliasson Versailles, Catalog for the artist's exhibition at the Palace of Versailles (2015)



Rem Koolhaas, AMO, Harvard Graduate School of Design, Stephan Petermann, Stephan Trüby, Manfredo di Robilant, and James Westcott , ed., *Elements* (Marsilio, 2014). Courtesy of OMA

BURRASCA'S 2ND ISSUE WAS CALLED BIENNALI. FOR THE EXHIBITION "ELEMENTS OF ARCHITECTURE" HELD AT THE 2014 VENICE ARCHITECTURE BIENNALE YOU DESIGNED 15 BOOKS CALLED "ELEMENTS". THESE CAME FROM COLLABORATIONS WITH SEVERAL ACTORS: THE AUTHORS (REM KOOLHAAS, STEPHAN PETERMANN, STEPHAN TRÜBY, MANFREDO DI ROBILANT), THE EDITOR (JAMES WESTCOTT) AND HARVARD ARCHITECTURE STUDENTS. HOW DID YOU EXCHANGE INFORMATION WITH OMA, M. D. ROBILANT (WHICH WAS AN OMA EXTERNAL COLLABORATOR) AND HARVARD STUDENTS? COULD YOU EXPLAIN TO US HOW THIS COLLABORATION WORKED OUT?

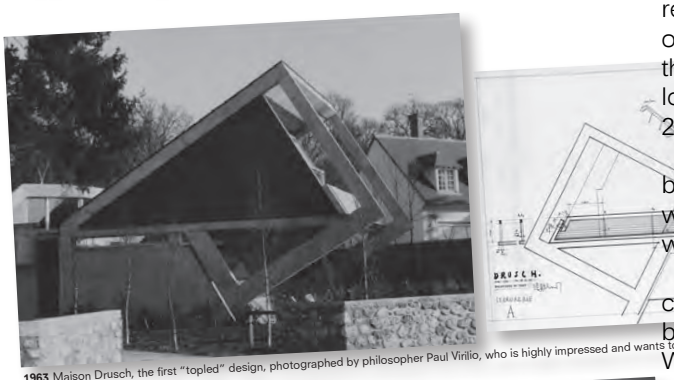
Basically we were making a more than 200 pages book in a very short time! It was complicated, but what I liked about it was the spirit; it was a collaborative effort, as making books always should be. So, they worked a lot in InDesign but, in terms of the layout, designing pages, it did not work. At some point I said to Rem, "I have to give them a structure, a grid". I made a set of rules, an extremely simple grid (only two typefaces: book and heavy) but nevertheless, because of the huge amount of content and people, it turned into chaos. This chaos was also what we needed...

At that point I thought, "let's embrace the mess and work with it". I set up a structure composed by content layers. The first one was a black and white pdf with the content the students researched, and the second layer Rem and I highlighted a sort of navigation, how to read the content, with a spot colour. In the end you see the layers and the content is revealed. Was a lot of fun to do and as said it work as navigation through the 200 pages!

Somehow the chaos stayed intact; it makes all the work very beautiful and exciting. So, in the end, the way the students worked was very effective and challenging: what the created was very important for the design of the books.

Every book has different collaborators but all together they compose a single publication; this is a new way of making a book. It was complicated but so much fun at the same time. What I loved about it is the enormous amount of information. It is fantastic because it doesn't happen so much anymore books have so much information. I learned a lot, it was really exciting.

PAGE **50** RAMP



1963 Maison Drusch, the first "topled" design, photographed by philosopher Paul Virilio, who is highly impressed and wants to collaborate with Parent.



1963 Maison Bordeaux le Pecq, in Bois le Roy, a village in Normandy. Its sloping pagoda-like roof is a prelude to Parent's "fonction oblique" theory, for the moment still concentrated

A book for me is about turning the pages, making sequences, telling a story. For this reason I decide on everything, the weight, the paper, even the smell!

BESIDES THIS, YOU DESIGNED OTHER PUBLICATIONS WITH OMA - FOR EXAMPLE PROJECT JAPAN. AS THE AMOUNT OF THE INFORMATION TO BE INCLUDED WAS HUGE, HOW DID YOU MANAGE THE SELECTION OF THE MATERIAL, THE LENGTH OF THE BOOK, THE SIZE OF IT? DID YOU HAVE TO NEGOTIATE WITH THE EDITOR ON THE FINAL FORM OF THE BOOK?

Project Japan was very intense process of a year with Rem, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Kayoko Ota, James Westcott and myself. I was actually the third person they had chosen to work on this project. The first choice was a designer from the same period, a modernist, which was an interesting idea but they couldn't handle the quantity of materials and the way that OMA works, so it didn't work out in the end. Then they tried to do it with in-house designers but that also didn't succeed. Then I was asked. What I did was what I am always doing: create a concept. I'm a really structured person, making structured designs is the only thing I can do. To make the book workable I cut the book in pieces. For each architect I made a booklet. This worked because there was so much information to handle and by cutting it into pieces it became something comprehensive. It required many meetings with Rem. He lives very close to my office and that helped us to have short, but very effective, meetings quite often to move fast in designing the book.

I strive for perfection but I never get there... The imperfection makes the design human.



Rem Koolhaas, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Kayoko Ota, ed., *Project Japan* (Taschen, 2011). Courtesy of IBO

IN MARCH YOU FINISHED REDESIGNING THE MAGAZINE VOLUME THAT YOU HAVE BEEN DESIGNING FOR SEVERAL YEARS. WHAT CHANGED IN THE NEW VOLUME? CAN THE CONCEPTION OF A MAGAZINE BE COMPARED WITH THE ONE OF A BOOK?

You cannot compare it to the design of a book. A book is something completely different.

Volume is a very dense magazine, there is a lot of information, but we could never go over 160 pages. As a potential reader, user and architecture lover, I really wanted to make it readable. So I asked the editors: "can you write less, so we can make the text bigger?"

You really have to be more generous with your content - more subheadings, book quotes, more diversity. We wanted to make it more attractive to read, there was so much text and not such many images, so we concentrated more attention on the illustrated elements. My assistant Julia Neller did a great job on new image essays for example. For me, at some point, it was very necessary to open it up - bigger font sizes, more white spaces, more images - in order to make it attractive to read.





Covers of *Volume #47: The System** and *Volume #45: Learning*

AND HOW IMPORTANT IS THE COVER IN THIS REGARD?

For Volume I have been designing almost all covers (not so much the C lab ones). In the past few years we have designed typographic ones, which I like best. For its renewal we will still have to work a bit on it but I am convinced that what is important to sell a magazine is to conceive an interesting one.

WHAT CAN CHANGE IN A MAGAZINE AND WHAT SHOULD STAY THE SAME?

For every issue we always change certain ingredients, an image treatment, sometimes printing only in black and white. Small things can always change but the masthead should always stay the same.

IN A RECENT INTERVIEW, YOU DEFINED YOUR PUBLICATIONS USING THE WORD "ROUGHNESS". DOES THE LACK OF RATIONALITY OR VERY STRICT GRID-BASED DESIGNS HAVE SOMETHING IN COMMON WITH YOUR PAST AS A PAINTER?

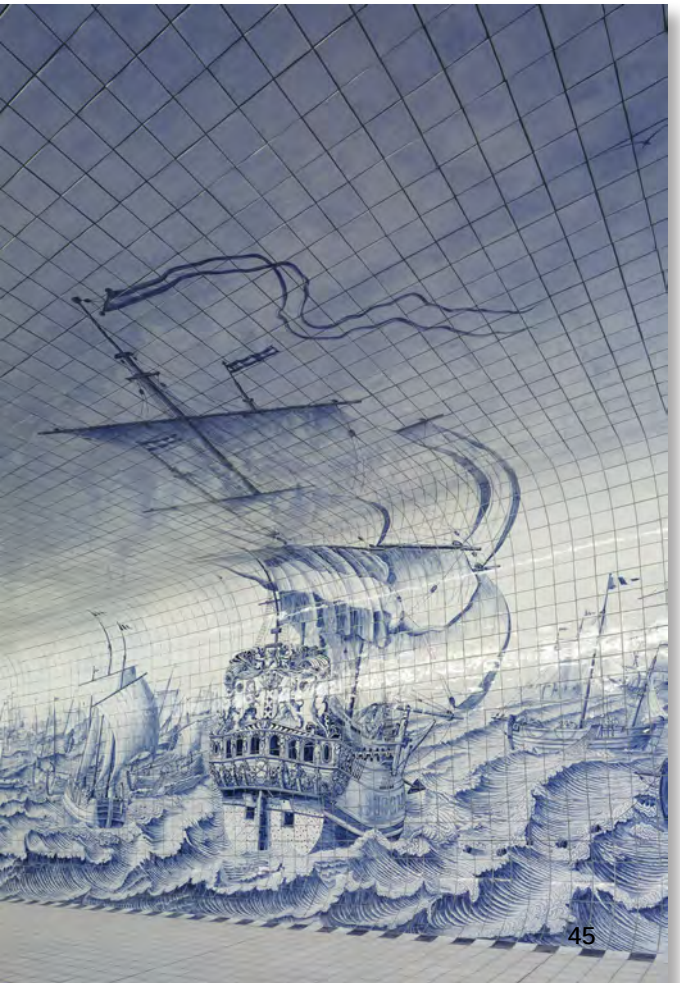
Many people say that what I do is perfect. I strive for perfection but I never get there; I don't mind, anyway it's a wish, it is something you should aim for. Everything I do follows an idea but it is exactly because of this very strict idea that you are allowed to do something else sometimes. When you set a rule it means that you can do it a little bit different, and this is what I like. Even if the printing isn't great I don't care so much – of course it depends for which book and which project. Everything is different and every book is specific. So roughness, the imperfection makes the design human. Perfection is a goal, maybe when I will be hundred years old I will reach perfection but not now.

Making books for me is also building books; like architecture it has to do with dimension, scale, proportion, size, and in my case weight.



YOUR LAST PIECE OF WORK HAS BEEN A HAND PAINTED CERAMIC TILED MURAL FOR THE CUYPERSPASSAGE THAT RUNS UNDER AMSTERDAM CENTRAL STATION...

The design is actually from 2009 but it just opened. At the beginning they wanted me to design a 30 centimetre high strip. I tried, but it didn't look great. One day though I was sitting at the Royal Tichelaar Company in Makkum and I was looking at one of their hand-painted ceramic cups, suddenly I thought to apply the same material to that tunnel. At that time I worked for the Rijksmuseum for which Tichelaar had just restored an a 17th century tableau (ceramic tile piece). I decided to use ceramic tiles with that image all over the walls. When I presented that idea people were shocked I wanted to use the 13 x 13 cm tiles, but I told them go to Moscow, Paris, London or New York; everybody use small tiles for their stations.



Cuyperspassage, Handmade ceramic tiles wall designed by Irma Boom, Architecture by Benthem Crouwel, Amsterdam, 2016

THIS PIECE OF ART IS QUITE DIFFERENT TO ANYTHING YOU HAVE DESIGNED SO FAR. WITH THIS IN MIND, WHAT SORT OF PROJECTS COULD WE EXPECT FROM YOU IN THE NEAR FUTURE?

Actually it is not the only one. I've made a curtain for the United Nations headquarters, stamps, coins, textiles... We have worked a lot in exhibitions as well. Someone lately suggested that I should make a movie. I think a movie in the end is like a book, it is a narrative. Then I thought... No!

But still I think it is good for people propose things like that to me... maybe... in the future. Who knows?

It is a book where if you are looking for something, you will find something else, which is for us much more interesting.

