

'I'm interested in the book as a tool'

He can't give an exact number, but Joost Grootens estimates that his design studio has been represented in the annual selection of the Best Dutch Book Designs some 30 times to date. The most recent additions to this impressive track record are *Formafantasma Oltre Terra*, published in 2023 by the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design in Oslo and the publisher affiliated to booksellers Walter und Franz Koenig in Cologne; and *Bioregional Design Practices*, published by Atelier Luma in Arles. His very first Best Dutch Book Design was the catalogue he created for the *Prix de Rome Tekenen/Grafiek 2004*, one of many titles on which Joost Grootens collaborated with the then leading lights of publisher 010, Peter de Winter and Hans Oldewarris. "I learned from them to see book design in the broader context of publishing, the role of the publisher, authorship, production, reaching the readership, and commerce."

In the early 2000s Grootens, who trained in Architectural Design at the Amsterdam Gerrit Rietveld Academie, had to get to grips with a field that initially presented him mainly with mysteries. He started to fathom how these worked by watching professionals, making painstaking analyses of examples, and above all by starting to make books himself. "They weren't always a resounding success", he says, looking back on those early years.

But this did give him the practical experience he needed to become familiar with this area of specialisation. Eventually, he managed to project his 'architectural way of looking' onto making books. "You gradually start to appreciate the power of the resources you have available to you as a designer: fonts, Pantone values, choice of paper, and certainly also the physical form in which a book finally appears. When it comes to books, it's not just about the graphic layer, but rather – perhaps even mainly – about the space between the content and the system in which this is presented. Zooming in and out, the relationship between details and the whole. This is what gives a book its architectural quality. Critical evaluation of our resources is always a key instrument in relation to determining the values and ideas we as a studio wish to represent. We also very explicitly carry out self-reflection in this respect: there's no escaping that you have a responsibility for what you make and do." Cooperation is another essential component, Grootens says: both within the studio with his long-term 'partners in crime' Dimitri Jeannottat, Julie da Silva and Linda Ursem, and outside of this with printers, paper suppliers, writers, photographers, clients and publishers. "You never make a book alone. A designer has to understand that we are always part of a bigger whole."

Although Studio Joost Grootens (SJG)'s portfolio covers a much broader spectrum – including exhibition designs, graphic identities, websites and maps – since 2000 the book has steadfastly remained at the heart of the studio's work. "*Most of the time we design books*", is the unassuming statement on SJG's website. At the time of our conversation, the studio has racked up exactly 250 titles. An oeuvre that has garnered much international recognition.

Since his first Best Dutch Book Design, Grootens has received countless awards and honours, both in the Netherlands and abroad.

Grootens: “It actually happened pretty suddenly. Almost from one day to the next, my status changed from a total outsider to an established book designer. Thanks in part to a series of awards during the period 2006-2011. I won gold in Leipzig three times, as well as the Rotterdam Design Award, and picked up prizes in London: suddenly, I was somebody.”

Joost Grootens can now add a new trophy to his cabinet: The Capital, to be presented each year by The Best Dutch Book Designs Foundation to a designer, producer or commissioning party who has delivered an outstanding performance in the area of book design, production and publishing. The principal factors in the selection of SJG’s work for this inaugural award were the strong interlacing of design quality and accomplishment in the consideration of production aspects. Grootens, who prefers to describe himself as a designer of information, rather than as a graphic designer, recognises himself in this characterisation. “We consider how a book will be as a material object right from the very earliest design stage. We have often approached printers to get a quote even before the book design had been worked out. Particularly when you have to work within a small budget, this is a way to look for scope for the design within these limitations.”

“The book,” he says, “is my artistic weapon of choice. I was shaped by books and can express myself best in this medium. It probably all started with comic books or *The New Children’s Atlas* that I got as a Christmas present when I was seven. I’ve never been one to spend hours swooning over a map. I’m interested in the book as a tool. This is why I always strive to make my books active – for example by adding indexes – so the reader can use them in different ways. It arouses my curiosity, for example, when I see the loss of quality in the production of the *Bosatlas* (the best-selling atlas in the Netherlands). 1971 – the year I was born – was the last edition when each of the 12 inks used represented something. Five years later, there were only 4 – and that was the first atlas containing a colour photograph, of the 14th-century cathedral tower in Utrecht.”

Technological innovation – and digitalisation in particular – has had a profound impact on the status of the printed book. But what it has not done, as was initially feared, is marginalise books. Expectations have changed, Grootens notes, both among makers and users.

“Technology has always been at the forefront of change in the field of design. Books, and the industry surrounding them, have had to cede some ground, particularly in terms of the pure transmission of information. Once, everyone wanted to make the railway timetables, or the telephone book. Including me. But once digital media were able to fulfil these functions more quickly, more accurately and – through mobile telephones – in a tailor-made way everywhere, these books lost their utility. This resulted in printed books taking on a different connotation. For me, the emphasis is on the political and cultural position they have always held, but which is now more clearly defined. It is now clearer what a book can do, and what it can’t.”

The actual process of making a book is an essential part of discovering this. “Although I come from a conceptual tradition, for me the discoveries always happen while making. The

realisation that, as a designer, I make the content concrete transformed choices of materials and production decisions into conceptual matters. We frequently work with other ways of achieving multiple colours than the standard full-colour method CMYK. In our colour recipes, we use inks that represent particular ideas from the book. These are strengthened by the way they are manifested.” Typological research is another component of the making process. The studio space where we are talking is full of historical and more recent publications: atlases, exhibition catalogues, dictionaries, Bibles, architectural monographies, photo books. One or more of these typologies will be consulted in relation to the commission SJG is working on at any given moment, and the studio’s Instagram channel regularly provides a reportage on this process.

Joost Grootens considers it important to link this fascination with the history of the field to ‘the now’. “When we are asked to design a new edition of the Bible, we are taking our place within a long tradition. But for me, the real justification for the design lies in the connection we are able to make to the political, cultural, ecological and technological context within which the work appears today.”

Furthermore, the Bible design illustrates how every book is also the result of a strategically tailored process. Joost Grootens: “I couldn’t pretend that faith meant anything significant to me. So instead, I always spoke to the client about reading. About the weight and the tactility of a book that you hold while reading it. At the end of the process, we had made a very humble book.” During the conversation surrounding another big commission – the 15th edition of the Dikke Van Dale Dutch dictionary – he mainly stressed the books’ cultural significance. “For me, the dictionary is a cultural artefact, with a reality of its own that cannot be defined by standard resources. The cover, for example, was a topic of discussion long before we knew what exactly our choice would be. In this way, I try to build authority within the process with our client, which helps us to claim manoeuvring space for the design. And when I talk about the client, it is important to note that I also see the book itself as my client.”

Gert Staal