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AAUP: Reflections on the Judging Process

The 2016 AAUP judging dates coincided with the beginning of a book design class I teach at UConn, a course that starts with the question, “Why make a book?” Here is a selection from the students’ answers:

1. A book is a controlled sequence bringing the reader from one thought to the next.
2. A book provides an experience that is focused and calm with time to reflect and linger over lengthy texts.
3. A book is an artifact, ideally a beautiful one.
4. A book should reflect the content that it holds; the books we own are a reflection of our identity.
5. It can’t be erased.
6. It smells good.

The first four answers also apply to how I approached judging the AAUP competition, because they identify the fundamentals of what makes a good book: a beautifully arranged experience with both physical and intellectual lasting power. The fifth answer is relevant to evaluating books because if we pick up a publication and would like to have it on our shelf indefinitely, then it has successfully engaged us. I include the smell of books because it’s a lovely thing about them.

When we first see a book, we have no knowledge of its content other than what the title and cover reveal. This relationship provides the basis for one of my favorite games, which I call the “First Line Game,” where a person selects a book and shows only the cover to the group. Based on the title and cover image, each player makes up a first line for the book and writes it on a strip of paper. The actual first line is also written down. The person who chose the book reads each sentence aloud; then, the others guess which is the real first line. In this game the players make assumptions about a book based on the title and cover design. Likewise, as AAUP judges, our first opinions were based on messages hinted at by the cover, followed by a quick flip through the pages of each book we considered. If the design reflected the content, there was a better chance that we would know what the book was about. As we looked closer, taking in the flap copy, table of contents, heads, highlighted text, and major images and captions, we had more information. If a book was well organized and compelling, we would want to go deeper—as we often did in the AAUP judging room, with so many interesting topics luring us away from the task at hand. Lastly, we read the designer’s comments, if available, and had a conversation. The process included intuitive experience along with intellectual knowledge and reasoning.

It was important to consider each book individually. The piles of books we were judging represented a huge variety of subject matter and form—a diverse array of titles that included *Theodore Roosevelt: In the Field*; *Black Women in Sequence*; *Feathers, Paws, Fins and Claws: Fairy-Tale Beasts*; *Preserving Family Recipes: How to Save and Celebrate Your Food Traditions*; and *Picasso Sculpture*. Complex books where hierarchy, sequence, rhythm, contrast and surprise are essential could not be compared with books on poetry, which are so minimal that every decision and detail matters.

Ben, Henk, Kimberly, and I complemented one another well as judges. Ben and I would sometimes pause to listen to Henk and Kimberly’s thoughtful discussions on jacket concepts, analyzing them for clarity, cleverness and beautiful presentation. Ben, my partner in judging the books, made sure that we discussed the “big idea” and appreciated idiosyncrasies. I couldn’t help but notice the minutia in rags, widows, and function of the grids. Both of us were delighted with unexpected details (such as headings at the bottom of pages that cause the reader to pay attention), overall variety, fitting typeface choices, and sensitive use of color.

Spending two days with Ben, Henk, and Kimberly was delightful. I appreciate their high standards and passion for book design. Many thanks to Pamela Schnitter, Kim Miller, and Bailey Bretz for taking care of all of the details and allowing us to focus on the books.