

Enthusiasms and Eccentricities

A passion for teaching and typographic innovation are what MARLENE CHAN finds when she visits the Université du Québec à Montréal.

ON THE VERY FIRST DAY of the 15-week course on book design offered to third-year students in the graphic design program at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), Judith Poirier proposes the final assignment: a complete book ready for publication. Typically, the very idea is formidable, perplexing and seemingly insurmountable to students beginning to explore the visual communication of ideas through type and print in book form.

However, rather than defeating the student, the intensity and enormity of the challenge fuels the creative fire. There is no safety net for either the teacher or the student. Both success and failure will endow the students with valuable lessons and wisdom.

The assignment propels students into the mindset of a professional book designer. Students are forced to confront the uncertainty of the unknown as well as their own individual deficiencies in knowledge and understanding. Reliance on the professor as a guide is not an option. Their own unique creative process will shape, enlighten and inform critical inquiry.

Imagination is stimulated and expectations triggered in the teacher and the students in anticipation of the result at the end of term. Each project is personal to the student. Various field trips such as to the rare books and artists' books collections of the Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (BANQ), lectures, invited



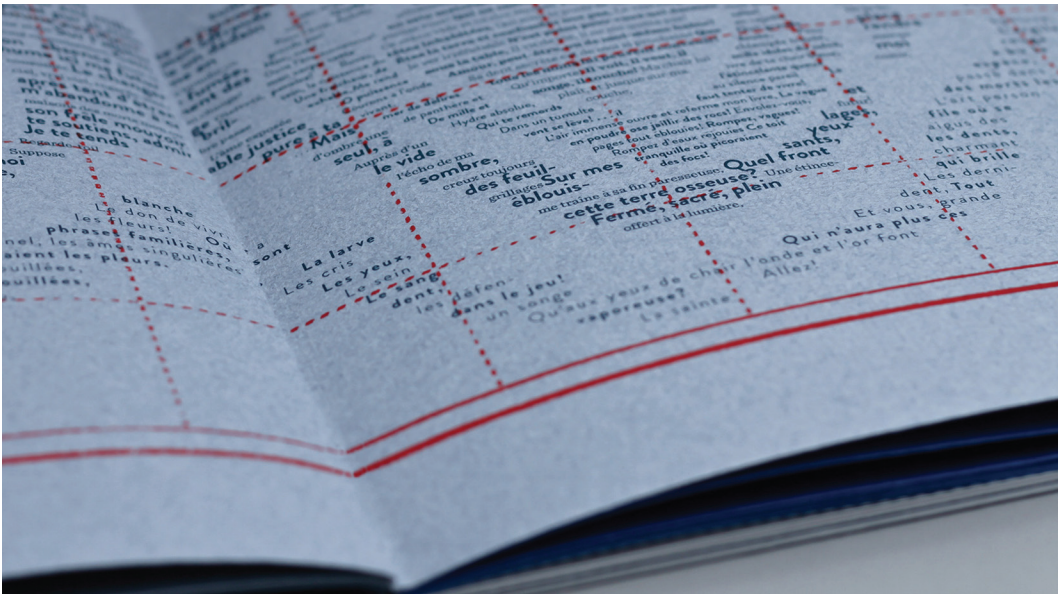
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Judith Poirier.
(Nathalie St. Pierre photo)

guests (bookbinder, editor, professional book designer), suggested readings, hands-on exercises, individual study and short-term projects transform the collective experience of the class as a whole along the way.

THE GATHERING OF MYRIAD IDEAS

The teaching methodology is organic, evolving through a series of phases. The first task, of choosing a subject, consistently proves to be the most difficult. What passionately interests the student and will sustain their interest? The next step demands rigour in the gathering of information, the idea being to “exhaust” the chosen subject. During this phase the subject may be refined or change completely.

The students quickly learn that written texts and acknowledged authorities are not the only sources for comprehensive research. They are encouraged to adopt a technique of uncensored, non-judgmental observation and information gathering in a variety of contexts by documenting lived experiences in words and images. Original thoughts and ideas surface in myriad physical and emotional responses to colour, form, shape, temperature, time, space, sound, silence, light, dark, smell. The creative process evidenced by Georges Perec in his *Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* or Raymond Queneau's *Exercises in Style* is the attitude of examination and enquiry used



Bleu marin: Recueil de poésie by Elizabeth Beaudoin.

to precipitate new thoughts and deep reflection.

There is a risk of being overwhelmed by the information gathered from a wide variety of sources. Paradoxically, being somewhat lost or absorbed by the material becomes the impetus for realizing the full potential of the book's design. By organizing the information and images in a search for meaning, eventually a design concept emerges. The design phase involves the selection of text and images that best represent the subject. Design decisions and choices determine a structure, title, rhythm and personality, inviting contrast, humour and possibly controversy. Various formats, typography, size of images and layout options are questioned and explored. Budget considerations and access play a role in determining modes of production, bookbinding and dissemination.

A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO BOOK DESIGN

When she began teaching book design at UQAM in 2001, Judith had her own doubts as to whether it would be possible to introduce students to the multi-faceted history of the book, its design and printing as well as to have them contemplate the future of the book. Requiring students to pursue their own creation and production of a limited edition at the

same time provided the freedom of scope and motivation. The approach is at once artisanal—steeped in tradition—and contemporary, even futuristic. She views each project as an experiment, as she does in her own art practice.

In addition, the approach is a collaborative and shared venture with the students from the beginning, so the outcomes are all part of the learning for everyone, including the professor. A sense of community is fostered. Judith's innate curiosity and constant questioning push the limits, engaging students in the process. Faculty member and renowned artist-photographer and designer Angela Grauerholz works with her in developing and fine-tuning the program and alternates with her in teaching the course.

Judith and Angela share a studio lab space known as TAO at l'École de design (UQAM) where they direct "research-creation" projects, experimenting with typography and publication. These interdisciplinary projects are open to a diversity of collaborations and enhance the teaching of graphic design to students. One of the research projects, *la chose imprimée*, addresses issues around the book and the sensorial experience of the reader. The website, LaChoseImprimee.com, includes a journal diary on the progress and results of the various projects.

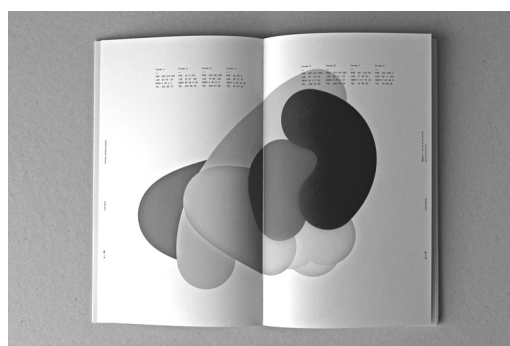
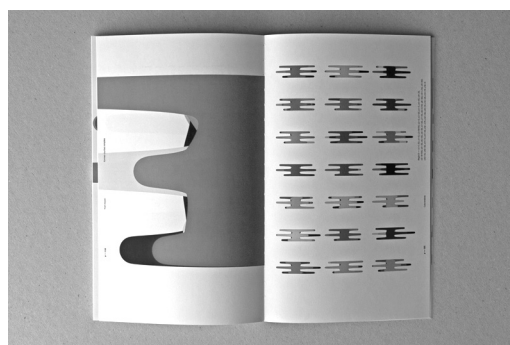
Judith is inspired by her own experience as an artist and professor of typography at UQAM since 1993 and especially as a master's student in typography at the Royal College of Art London (1999–2001). Her studies in London followed the co-curating of an exhibition at UQAM in 1994, *Typomondo: la lettre dans tous ses états*, which aimed to investigate the impact of new technology on typography. The following year, she organized a workshop for students with the French master of expressive typography Robert Massin. Massin was art director of Éditions Gallimard for over 20 years, and his most famous works have been described as “typographic eccentricity,” strongly influenced by the late innovative French book designer Pierre Faucheux.

Faucheux treated each new book as a new object, and the choice of typeface invariably has some relationship derived from the meaning of the text. With much trepidation, Massin chose the theme of the workshop, one that had preoccupied him for 30 years. It was based on an atonal piece of music, *Pierrot Lunaire*, a melodrama by Arnold Schoenberg. Judith's imagination was immediately captured by this experience, and it has generated further exploration and experimentation over the years with sound, music and animation.

AWARD-WINNING STUDENT CREATIONS

Judith's own method of animating typography involves letterpress printing directly on 16mm and 35mm film stock, producing a printed publication and a film animation companion piece. She won an Alcuin Award for the publication component of such a work, *Dialogue*, in 2010. That same year, the book was awarded a Certificate for Typographic Excellence by the Type Directors Club (TDC) New York. In 2011 the book was shortlisted in the prestigious international book design competition held annually in Leipzig. The short film, *Dialogue*, was no less successful and screened at film festivals in London (U.K.), Melbourne, Ottawa and Montreal.

The letterpress brings together what she loves most: the smell of ink, the imperfection and wear of wooden type, the sounds, the shapes, the rhythms, the harmony and the discord, the relief impression of the letter on the paper. Transfer to film heightens the chance



Colorimétrie by Nicolas Ménard.

or randomness that cannot be calculated in the design process, eliciting the excitement of an aleatoric and abstract quality to the outcome.

Other works-in-progress explore film genres: an abstract western-style short film and another one described as “a typographic horror film,” featuring the Gothic typeface. The soundtrack of these films is unique and naturally produced by ink on celluloid.

On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Alcuin Awards for Excellence in Book Design in Canada (2012), three student submissions won awards in the competition's Limited Editions category. All three winners produced their work at UQAM in the book design course taught by



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Judith Poirier in the studio.
(Laurent Guérin photo)

Judith Poirier. The win was a tribute to the design students themselves, l'École de design UQAM and the vision of their graphic design teachers.

Elizabeth Beaudoin (*Bleu marin: Recueil de poésie*) and Nicolas Ménard (*Colorimétrie*) were two of the UQAM winners in a three-way tie for first prize. Alcuin judges always try to identify a clear winner in each category, but when the skill and talent are of such a high standard, they are compelled to acknowledge the achievement. Emanuel Cohen (*PTTx Archive & Correspondance*), another student from UQAM, was singled out as one of two honourable mentions in the category. Judges are not obliged to award an honourable mention but do so on the basis of exceptional merit.

Judith and Angela represented the three winning UQAM students at the award ceremonies in Leipzig, Germany, for the international competition Best Book Design from all over the World in March 2013. They also met the directors of the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst (Leipzig Academy of Visual Arts) and the Institut für Buchkunst (Institute for



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PTTx Archive & Correspondance
by Emanuel Cohen.

Book Design) to discuss common goals of teaching book design and publishing in-house.

The legacy of the UQAM program is now well established, and seminal to the career aspirations of students in graphic design and the future of book design and its evolution. As professionals, Judith and several of her former students continue to gain national and international acclaim.

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 ~ Marlene Chan is a contributing editor of *Amphora*.