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On the name of book *wrighting*¹: Irma Boom's "transformative crossover" production.

By Irma Boom and Danne Ojeda

Irma Boom (NL) graduated from the AKI Art Academy in Enschedé, The Netherlands. She has worked in the Government Printing and Publishing Office, The Hague, where she first gained recognition after designing the books *Postage Stamps Yearbook 1987+88* (*Nederlandse Postzegels 1987+88*, 1988). She later founded Irma Boom Office in 1991, from which she has collaborated with a vast number of institutions and cultural foundations worldwide such as the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, the Museum of Modern Art, Prince Claus Fund, the United Nations, the Venice Biennale 2014, NAI Publishers, Chanel SA, Issey Miyake INC, Fondazione Prada, Ferrari, Masserati, Vitra International, among many others. She is currently senior critic in graphic design at The Yale University School of Art, New Haven. *Irma Boom: The Architecture of the Book* (2013) is the latest book published on her work, on the occasion of the retrospective exhibition: *Irma Boom: Biography in Books*, Amsterdam.

Danné Ojeda (CU/NL) is Associate Professor in the School of Art, Design and Media, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Ojeda's work engages contemporary communication design, art practice and theory. She was a UNESCO research fellow at the Jan van Eyck Academy, Institute for Research and Production in Fine Art, Graphic Design and Theory, Maastricht, the Netherlands. In 2003, she founded *d-file* Graphic Design Studio in Amsterdam, from which she has mainly worked for and collaborated with cultural institutions that include the Singapore Art Museum (SAM), the Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore, the National Institute of Fine Arts, Mexico, and Bimaris Editions, The Netherlands. Ojeda has published, lectured on and curated exhibitions related to contemporary art and design. Her design works have been recognized with the Red Dot Design Award: Communication Design (Germany), the Gold Award, Singapore Design Awards (Singapore), and The Art Books Wanted International Award (Czechoslovakia, France), among others. Her complete publications and exhibition design oeuvre commissioned by the Singapore Art Museum (SAM) was awarded with Asia's Top Designers Award, Singapore Design Award 2014.

Abstract

This statement of practice takes the form of a conversation between Danné Ojeda and Irma Boom with a preliminary introduction contextualising Boom's work. The talk took place in Irma Boom Office, on March 13, 2014 in Amsterdam, and it has been edited for length and readability.

Through the introduction and the following conversation, Boom's practice is positioned within the author-producer-entrepreneur triad and the overlapping margins between these designations. First, design authorship is understood as self-expression that reflects the different ways – whether through technique, material or forms of practice – a designer generates content for communicating her aims. Second, the role of producer is intrinsically related to “the preparation of the work for mechanical reproduction”—in Walter Benjamin's terms—and the consequent mastering of this technological process in order to generate and communicate meaning through objects and materials. Third, entrepreneurship relates to a business model whereby the designer operates with a high degree of independence, planning as well as resolving managerial responsibilities that make all of the above conditions possible. Examples of Irma Boom's book design practice will illustrate how she negotiates this author-producer-entrepreneur triad, highlighting how her creative process originates, is prototyped, developed and finally mastered. Closeness to the processes of manufacture proves a vital component of her graphic design practice.

Irma Boom's design triad: Designer as author-producer-entrepreneur

Design critic Steven Heller locates the emergence of "design authorship" during the late 1980s. He described the phenomenon as a "shift in graphic design practice from designers solely serving clients to becoming one's own client." (Heller, 2011:33) However, it was the essay "The Designer as Author," written by Michael Rock (2002) that brought the debate about the changing role of the graphic designer more sharply into focus. Rock examined different models and attributes of the notion of "author" with references to different creative contexts, while wondering how those attributes could possibly apply to the design profession "traditionally associated more with the communication than the origination of messages." (Rock, 2002:244) He concluded that "while theories of graphic authorship may change the way work is made, critics must still question what it does and how it does it, not where it comes from." (Rock, 2002:237) Rock's argument brings attention to the question of authorship within graphic design. His point is explained in a latter text. I cite in full:

The span of graphic design is not a history of concepts but of forms. Form has evolved dramatically from one year to the next, and suggests a profession that continually revises and reshapes the world through the way is rendered. [...] The stellar examples of graphic design are often in service of the most mundane content possible: an ad for ink or cigarettes or machinery. But despite the banality of the content, the form has an important, even transformative meaning. The difference between designers is revealed in the unique way each individual designer approaches content, not the content they generate. [...] So the trick for the designer is *to find ways in which to speak through treatment—a whole range of rhetorical devices from the written to the visual to the operational*—to make those proclamations as poignant as possible, and to consistently return to central ideas and repeatedly re-express. It is in this way that a designer builds a body of work and that body of work starts to become a kind of organized content in itself. The content is in short, always Design itself. (Rock, 2011:14–15) [Emphasis added]

If we compare both articles published in 2002 and 2011 respectively, we notice that although Rock evaluates design authorship in its different manifestations (self-motivated

and self-authored projects, writing, publishing, entrepreneurial, political activism; narrative construction), he repositions designers as fundamental agents in the shaping of the material they craft. Rock is concerned with the importance of designers' self-expression, an aspect that derives from the equation "form as content." Hence the question on how form communicates (and ultimately generates) content is placed at the center of his attention. And this is an inquiry that necessarily involves a look at different design production modes, and a greater focus on process and materiality within graphic design.

Production is the center of attention in Ellen Lupton's essay "The Designer as Producer." Similar to Rock, Lupton recalls how the word "author" reaches a new meaning in a design context by highlighting "an entrepreneurial way" that suggests: "intention, content creation, as opposed to the more passive functions of consulting, styling and formatting." (Lupton, 2012:13) Yet, Lupton expands this former notion into "designer as producer," which implies an extension of the concept of "author" based on Walter's Benjamin writing "The Author as Producer." (1934) Lupton (1998: 13) states: "Within the professional context of graphic design, 'production' is linked to the preparation of 'artwork' for mechanical reproduction, rather to the intellectual realm of 'design'." Production, she continues, "is rooted in the material world. It values things over ideas, making over imagining, practice over theory." (Lupton, 1998:13).

Steven Heller builds on these discussions. He remarks that the "design authorship movement" was somehow transitional, as it lead "the way for designers to embrace the even more provocative 'design entrepreneur movement'." He differentiated both tendencies characterizing design authorship as "wishful thinking" and concerned with individual creative pathways, in comparison to design entrepreneurship which "is a more demonstrative business construct, moving beyond traditional service design into self-starting and self-sustaining design endeavors." (Heller, 2011:33)²

It is within this context, where a designer is seen as author-producer-entrepreneur, that I will examine the design work by Dutch designer Irma Boom, well-known for her book design practice. Boom has also collaborated with product and architect studios to deliver ambitious projects such as the 2011 catalog *Knoll Textiles: 1945-2010*, published in conjunction with an exhibition on the company and commissioned by the Bard Graduate

Center in New York; and the recently opened *Cuyperspassage* (in November 2015), a cycle and pedestrian pathway at the Amsterdam Central Station, a collaboration with Benthem Crouwel Architects and the ceramic company Royal Tichelaar Makkum³, commissioned by ProRail and the Amsterdam City Council.

Boom's work and practice fits within this author-producer-entrepreneur mode of practice, and follows the way that other designers work in The Netherlands, like Karel Martens, a source of inspiration for Boom. This mode of working is the result of a system of state run grants and scholarships that the Dutch government have been awarding to its nationals with the aim of first developing their entrepreneurial abilities, and second, to provide a relative space of "autonomy" for the arts and design from the demands of the market. In this regard, designers like Boom, have been able to concentrate and develop their own self-expression and material production skills, a strategy that contributes to maintaining the strong reputation of Dutch design.

Boom is also the only designer alive whose entire book production is being archived by the Special Collection, a dependency of the University of Amsterdam (UvA) Library. To initiate a discourse surrounding her contributions to design practice, I invoke a question from Walter Benjamin's aforementioned essay "The Author as Producer" (Benjamin 1998: 87): What is the position of Boom's work within the production relations of its time? The response to this question is imbedded in a following conversation with Boom. Nevertheless, a reference to her production *technique* could be a primary answer to it. I explain in brief.

One of the initial book designs that gained Boom a reputation was the SHV book, 1896–1996. *Centennial Album / Jubileumboek*, also known as *Thinkbook* (1996). Boom co-edited this book with art historian Johan Pijnappel. The *editing technique* applied in this book is similar to that of photomontage. Being a book that celebrates a centenary of one of the Dutch' largest multinationals (SHV), *Thinkbook* portrays the company's daily activities and the book's photo editing technique is intended to reflect its history. The book does not have an explicit title — says Carel Kuitenbrouwer — no page numbers, contents, chapters, indexes, or colophon; the illustrations seldom have captions, and its chronological structure runs in reverse. Boom and Pijnappel were assisted by SHV chairman Paul Fentener, who also contributed to defining an *organizing principle* for its

pages. Its foreword reads: "Sometimes we do not find the time to stop all movement and think. Without thought there would be no time, no history, no action. Welcome, Reader, to the past." (Kuitenbrouwer, 1997) The creation of visual content, what later Boom will emphasize as one of her "editing" skills during our following conversation, forms part of her distinct authorial identity.

Photo editing — and specially photomontage — has been, since the artistic avant-garde at the beginning of the twenty-century, a recurrent leitmotif for authorial visual essays. Hence, this technique by itself does not seem sufficient to highlight the relevance of her work. What is it then, that makes Boom's work position so characteristic within the production relations of its time? As shown in the interview below, Boom is a fearless example of an author-producer-entrepreneur who transfigures the book-as-object. On the one hand, the production process of her books defies the usual time needed to complete an assignment, allowing her to experiment and to develop scale models in a constant search for the final object she envisions. Boom might spend years challenging techniques related to the material object of the book, such as editing/binding or searching for a production enterprise that might be suitable to satisfy the needs of her projects. Here we see Boom's acute focus on materiality and process. On the other hand, her production centers on what Sarat Maharaj called a "transformative crossover" that "harbours the possibility of spawning something 'other' than what already exists — the logic of invention and innovation. It is about generating data, new objects and ways of knowing." (Maharaj, 2009:8)

On Irma Boom's 'transformative crossover' production: A conversation.

I arrive at Irma Boom Office on the cold morning of March 13, 2014. Her design studio is located in central Amsterdam, in the same building as where she lives. I took a walk around her neighbourhood, something I do often when I arrive early at a meeting. She receives me at the appointed time, greeting me as though we had known each other for years. She asks me to wait for ten minutes because she is attending to someone else who is about to leave. Left alone in her office, I found myself overcome with desire. I wanted to apprehend every single detail of the space. I am pulling out my camera, when Boom suddenly reappeared. I ask her if I can take pictures of her studio while waiting. "Yes, but please, do not photograph work in progress," she replies.

She keeps me waiting for less time than she anticipated, and then offers me a coffee: Black? With milk and sugar? I show her my latest acquisition — her miniature book: *The Architecture of the Book: Books in Reverse Chronological Order 2013–1986* (2013). This proved to be a useful way to start the interview, as Boom referred to the book during our conversation. The book is a revised version of *Irma Boom: Biography in Books*, first published on the occasion of her homonym retrospective exhibition held at the Special Collections of the University of Amsterdam (4 June – 3 October 2010). The book presents her portfolio work in reverse chronological order with additional annotations and texts.

Fig 1. *Irma Boom: The Architecture of the Book: Books in Reverse Chronological Order 2013–1986* (mini book edition, 2013). Exhibited in B.O.O.K. (Basic Object Of Knowledge), Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore, 2014.

Photo: Colossalphotos, Singapore.

During our conversation Boom spoke 'in retrospective' (a phrase she herself used more than once) about both her older and more recent works. My first questions were addressed to understand the ways in which Boom sees books as physical objects that enhance communication.

Danné Ojeda (DO): Your book design approach challenges the traditional form of a book. This is visible throughout your body of work, which confirms the importance you give to the physicality of the object book — it's like your language...

Irma Boom (IB): We are talking about a book, which is physical anyway. When you talk

about a book, you talk about a three-dimensional object. You talk about elements such as weight, scale, size, paper... Those elements make a book. For me it is very natural to use those elements to communicate.

DO: You just described a book at a basic, underlying level. However, everyone has a different answer to the question of what is a book. If you had to draw a definition of what a book is for you, what would you say?

IB: A book is a reproduction. There has to be a certain print-run. For me, a one-off book is not a book, it is a piece of art. And if you make one book, you can do anything. One book is an artist's book. There is only one. For me a book is, like I said, a reproduction: it is industrially made. Besides this, the book must have information you might want to share. It is a democratic medium that it is made for somebody else, so people can buy it. To be more precise, in the present time, because there is the Internet, and there are blogs, the whole idea of a book is that it is a container of thoughts that cannot be changed. And because it cannot be altered once it has been printed, it becomes something to reflect on.

DO: It is a sort of time capsule.

IB: Yes. It is like taking a photograph. You freeze time. And I think that this is really interesting, this idea that if you make a book, you freeze time. I can reflect on a book I made last year. If I make a new one this year, it is of course a different book. Change comes with the new book being designed and produced. A book is a moment captured. I have often heard people say: "Well, you cannot change a book, that's it". But that is the advantage. For me, it is there, it is printed, and you cannot change it. So, it becomes something to revert to, to reflect on. What is for most of people a disadvantage is, for me, a big advantage.

[Irma points to the SHV book, 1896–1996. *Centennial Album / Jubileumboek*, AKA *Thinkbook*]

IB: For example, this book is only for a very specific audience, for the shareholders of the SHV Company. It was 1991 when Johan Pijnappel and I started working on it. It was the

very beginning of the Internet era, and we thought that SHV was such a visionary company, that "surely we should do a DVD instead". We explored the idea, but soon understood that we were not going to make one. It would have taken very long, and I am a very impatient person. But imagine if we had made a DVD. It would have disappeared by now. Instead, eighteen years since the book was published, it still exists, and it still serves as a reference for me on many occasions.

DO: A few minutes ago, when defining a book you mentioned: "for me, one book is not a book, it is a piece of art". I am aware that in the process of making your own books, you make many different scale models. You have mentioned how these dummies [a word commonly used in The Netherlands to describe scale models] are a somewhat schizophrenic method of deciding on the final version that is to be actually produced. What do you consider those dummies to be?

IB: The dummy is a tool. I have explained it in this book: *The Architecture of the Book: Books in Reverse Chronological Order 2013–1986*. It is a working tool. When you create something you have to test it.

DO: Are the scale models refined?

IB: No. They are merely a tool.

[Irma reads from the book *The Architecture of the Book: Books in Reverse Chronological Order 2013–1986*:]

From the very beginning I have made the small models for different reasons: 1. Overview of the sequence, 2. Balance between text and image, 3. To look in an abstract way at the rhythm of the book, and if necessary, to recompose it, 4. To contemplate the subject, and 5. Rethink in order to make a specific book for a project. (Boom and Lommen 2013: 88)

But it is absolutely a tool. For me, even when I was doing the stamp book⁴ in '88, I was already making scale models. It is something I have always done.

See Figure 2 here:

https://www.moma.org/collection/works/110956?artist_id=33693&locale=en&sov_referrer=artist

Fig 2. Irma Boom (b. 1960): *Nederlandse Postzegels* (Dutch Stamps), 1987. Digitale (1) New York, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Book, offset printed, .1: 9 13/16 x 7 5/16 x 1" (25 x 18.6 x 2.6 cm) .2: 9 13/16 x 7 5/16 x 1" (25 x 18.6 x 2.6 cm). Publisher: Staatsbedrijf der PTT. Printer: Staatsbedrukkerij. Gift of the designer. Acc. no.: 892.2007.1-2.
© 2016. Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence.

DO: And when you work on a dummy, is it always a scale model, or have you considered a 1:1 replica?

IB: I do make 1:1 book dummies and I also make scale models so I can have an overview of the book. People used to love these models, and I, of course, loved them too. I always show the models. They show work in progress; I mean, I am showing a process. But because of this, I always insisted [to my comissioners] that we made a small book. Why not? But, nobody wanted that. People prefer a normal size book. So, for my first show in Amsterdam, *Irma Boom: Biography in Books* (2010), I thought I'd be my own victim. Since I always wanted to make a small book, I made it for myself. But, in the studio setting, it is just basically a tool.

I also thought, at the time of the exhibition, that I did not deserve a book. My thinking was to start small, and every year grow the book by three percent. But this one was already nine percent bigger than the first one [Irma refers to the second edition of *Architecture of the Book: Books in Reverse Chronological Order 2013–1986*]. Every new edition of the book gets bigger. When I am 80 years old, it will be the same size as a regular book. As for the XXL edition of *Architecture of the Book: Books in Reverse Chronological Order 2013–1986*, I thought that if each time I produced it, I reduced its size and at the same time, enlarged the small book, when I am 80, I will have a normal size book. By then, I would deserve to have a book. (Figures 3 and 4)

Ojeda, D., Boom, I. (2016). On the name of book wrighting: Irma Boom's "transformative crossover" production. *The journal of Modern Craft*, 9:1, 55–70..

Fig 3. Irma Boom: *The Architecture of the Book: Books in Reverse Chronological Order 2013–1986* (XXL edition, 2013). Exhibited in B.O.O.K. (Basic Object Of Knowledge), Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore, 2014. Photo: Colossalphotos, Singapore.

Fig 4. Irma Boom: *The Architecture of the Book: Books in Reverse Chronological Order 2013–1986* (mini book and XXL editions, 2013). Exhibited in B.O.O.K. (Basic Object Of Knowledge), Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore, 2014. Photo: Marvin Tan, Singapore.

Making a book is really a serious business. You make a book when you have

something to say. And that is what I like about works by Japanese artists such as Hiroshige or Hokusai. They were always making linotypes and drawings of waves. They did them and redid them. They kept on saying: "I have to learn." It is the same as what I think: I have to learn. I am still in a learning process. I am still not there. I am still defining what a book is. And that is what I am doing everyday, learning what it is and why it is the way it is. Everyday. I would never say this is a one-off book. It is always in a series, and I see a book always in a timeline. I don't know if I will make the ultimate book. Maybe it will never happen.

DO: When defining what a book is, you also mentioned that there is always the need to have something to communicate. I strongly sense your voice through your book design. When you said in one of your public appearances, "Forget the brief," what did you mean? Or, in other words, how do you create your "own" story? Does it develop in a form of a dialogue with the commissioner?

IB: The collaborative part of the work is essential for me. The work is always a collaboration with the commissioner, or with the artist. I need to talk to them and forget about the brief. A brief is only for the person who commissions a design. It is made for them, and not for me. The commissioner wants to define what they are doing. That is why... I think it is really good [to have] a brief. As for me, talking to the commissioner makes much more sense. It is totally different. When we email, I have no idea who I am communicating with. A face-to-face meeting is really important to me, and so I always meet the person. When somebody says they have no time to meet me, then I have no time for them. It is that simple. Time is the most precious thing we have. And when I really want to invest time in a person, or in a company, if there is this question of working together, you have to invest [your time]. When it becomes a mutual interest, then I'm quite sure we will get somewhere.

DO: We could say then, that you do not work with pre-established ideas. For example, in the context of Sheila Hick's book, I believe that you were inspired by a text by Arthur Danto that you read in the book's contents. And since you called this book, 'a manifesto for the book', what do you think makes it so? This might also help define what a book is (Figure 5 and 6).

Fig 5. *Sheila Hicks: Weaving as Metaphor*, 2006. Exhibited in B.O.O.K. (Basic Object Of Knowledge), Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore, 2014. Photo: Colossalphotos, Singapore.

Fig 6. *Sheila Hicks: Weaving as Metaphor*, 2006. Exhibited in B.O.O.K. (Basic Object Of Knowledge), Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore, 2014. Photo: Colossalphotos, Singapore.

IB: I call Sheila Hicks's book "a manifesto for the book" because it is just such a simple book. It is a book for an artist, which is extremely difficult to make. It was interesting that in considering Sheila's book, we started with a very open conversation. She had been introduced to my work through another person who had showed her the stamp books I designed. This started our conversation. It was not like, "You make my book". No. It was a conversation on a possible collaboration, to make a catalogue *raisonné* for Sheila Hicks.

So, we starting talking, and she gave me Danto's text. She didn't say anything, but I was so intrigued by this text. It was so wonderful. We started travelling, we started eating together, we went to exhibitions together — we got to know each other. She was educated in Yale, both at undergraduate and graduate level, and I had taught there for

twenty-two years. We had some things in common. All throughout this process, I was making models for a possible book... all the time.

DO: It seems as if you carried out your dialogues alternatively, this time with the materiality of the book, while you and Sheila were conversing during your meetings. How many models did you make?

IB: Fifty to sixty models, basically all small models. All were made to find out what the possible book might be, what we could do with the book. So, talking, as well as refining the book to become more precise all the time — that was the whole process. And at some point, there was no other way but for the book to look like it did. For me, it was obvious, but it was not for all the people involved, not even for Sheila. The actual book is an extremely simple one, and her work is represented extremely well. I found a photographer that photographed her works perfectly, and the book was well printed and bound. Its edges also bear an image of her work, which is very simple but very precise. (Figure 7) And that, I think, is the ultimate thing that I am looking for: that it is all precise, and very specific. All the elements of the book — the weight, the size, the paper, the printing, the typography, the sequence — when they're all finished, in a sort of ultimate form, that only happens once in ten or twenty years, it does not happen that often.

Fig 7. *Sheila Hicks: Weaving as Metaphor*, 2006. Exhibited in B.O.O.K. (Basic Object Of Knowledge), Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore, 2014. Photo: Colossalphotos, Singapore.

DO: Is Sheila Hick's book your most relevant design? You speak as if it is.

IB: Yes, it is a manifesto. It is precise. And, yes of course, it is in the top ten. But, in retrospective, the stamp books are equally important to me. I tend to write more about the stamp books every time, because in retrospective, they are becoming more important to me. They were extremely naive.

I would have never been able to invent or create this book [the stamp book] (Figure 2) with a computer because I used the old fashioned way of making a book. It had an enormous print run in 1988, with 8000 books. It was the first time I worked at an estate design office, the government printing office and a big publishing house. So, it was very

different from how I was used to working — you get the image, you get the text and you make a book. However, when I took the stamp book assignment, it was really new (for me) to be the editor of a book, and to organize a compiled book. I did the image research. I basically did everything. Paul Hefting wrote the texts, but the idea for the visual story was entirely mine.

The way I made the stamp books was fearless. When the books were finished, many people were angry at them. I never thought that people would be angry at the way a book was designed. I believe that the combination of images I had selected also made them angry. If I think of it now, of course I can understand why. But at that time I didn't even think about it. I just thought it was obvious that two things looked alike, so, I just put them together, even if one is made in 1930, and the other in 1980. It is a good exercise to compare them. Judge for yourself. So the book, was extremely important content-wise.

DO: You were both the book designer, and the editor.

IB: Michael Rock also mentioned that. I think it was in *i-D* magazine. It was the first time that I realized, "Ah! That is what I am doing: editing."

DO: I see you more as an author though. I mean you tend to control every detail from generating the content to the production with a great degree of independence. And at this moment of your career, of course you have gained this freedom and overall knowledge. Yet, you must have had times where you had to "fight" for this independence. Can you recall those experiences?

IB: I go back to the stamp books. That is why the stamp books are so important. Although I worked at a government printing office and there were many books being produced, I never got the top books because there were people who had worked at the office for many years before me. When I worked there, I designed everything they gave me to design. I would never say, "I don't like it," or "it is not good enough". I basically did all the designs of books that were under the radar, and never the top books. They could have asked me to design anything. "Can you design a book for how to use a toilet?" — I would have done it. Because, under the radar, nobody was taking care of design and I could do whatever I wanted. I could experiment freely. The top books always had to be

conventional. They always had to look like a certain kind of coffee table book. But I know that now, in retrospective.

DO: You mentioned that the stamp books came to be known as "brilliant failures". Was that failure part of the editing and the overall experimentation process?

IB: That comment was made during Best Dutch Books Design Awards, which I won with the stamp books. My colleague Karel Teves was on the jury that year. He did not really like the books. But the rest of the jury thought the books were avant-garde. He had to write a jury report, and in his report, he described the book as a "brilliant failure". Thanks to that book and that jury, I suddenly became known as a designer in The Netherlands.

DO: What were the objections he had to the book back then? What were his reasons for calling it "a brilliant failure"?

IB: He said that it was not legible. I used five sans serif typefaces, I had no paragraphs... I'm very stubborn. I have a vision. I imagine something in my mind. If somebody comes to me, for example, if you were my new commissioner, and you tell me to work on something, I will immediately know what to do. I will immediately make a drawing. Last week, I was with an artist in Berlin. We were twenty-four people in an editorial board, and I started drawing. And he said: "What are you doing?", and I said: "I'm designing your book". He said: "Already? Now?" and I said: "Yes".

But going back to failures, making them is very important. The issue is not whether to make a failure or a success. My biggest strength is that I was not afraid of failure then, and I still do not fear it now. That is why the stamp books are so important to me — I had and I have no fear.

DO: And currently, your work leads us to re-think perfection. I refer to this, because of the manner with which you describe your Sheila Hicks's book contrasts with the way you describe the stamp books. They seem to be on opposite ends: perfection versus failure, precision versus experimentation.

IB: Yes, they are very different, but both of them are also very experimental in their own

way. I believe that they are very closely related. Look at the edges of the Sheila Hicks' book, it is a total experiment, and everybody's advice was: "Don't do it." Nobody could understand it, but I had all these models and ideas with me, so I could visualize what I meant.

DO: I see that it is a complex book in terms of production.

IB: Yes, but that is not an issue. It is simply a book for turning the pages. That is important to me. It does not have 10 foldouts, you don't have to turn it upside down to read it. It's a very simple, and extremely well produced book. And more importantly, it is so good because all the elements come together. In retrospect, I think that the same applies to the stamp books. For both, there are no compromises.

I was fired while working on the Sheila Hicks book. They did not understand what I was doing. I was surprised, but I continued working on the book, which also surprised the commissioner. I had already worked on the book for four years when this happened. After it all, the woman who fired me became one of my best friends.

And with the stamp books, something similar happened. I was working and working and working — I had to make two volumes in three months. I did all of it on my own. It was like cutting and pasting. I did not design pages, but sheets. It was done that way to speed the production up. I was the only one who could understand the whole process. Nobody knew what I was doing. Even my chief, my former teacher asked, "Do you need any help?" I didn't. I did not make any compromise. I was working twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. In a government printing office, everybody works from 8:00am to 5:00pm. But I was working all the time, and I had the whole schedule planned, although nobody knew what I was busy with. I was making the book like I was a crazy person. At the end, when it came out, I did not like it because the French folding was wrong. Every intended left page was right and vice versa. Suddenly, it became very confusing. I thought it was totally a misunderstanding from my side. I gave away the first copies I received. I did not want to have them. They had to get out of my sight. But, in retrospect, they turned out really well. I only talk about these books in retrospect. Now, I like them very much.

DO: Commissioners usually look for your involvement in certain projects, not only because of your unquestionable talent and experience, but also because they

acknowledge that Irma Boom is a seal of quality. You offer value to the books you are involved with. Yet, you lead your own design practice, which comprises a couple of assistants and yourself. I wonder if your attitude of being all at once an editor, designer and author also defines your role as an entrepreneur?

IB: Yes, of course. I do it all because I am used to not making any compromises. What is really important for me is that I make the book I have in mind. For example, for the book I did for the Smithsonian's Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, I was initially asked to make a catalogue of about 140 pages, but the actual book has 864 pages. It is still a book about their collection, and they loved it. I was paid what we agreed based on the initial 140 pages, but at the end, it paid off, because I got to make the book that I really wanted.

In my office, along with all the work, the teaching and the other tasks, I even take care of my own administration.

DO: A last question. In the retrospective exhibition of your work, *Irma Boom: Biography in Books*, you performed yet another role, which was that of a curator. I understand that you selected books from the Special Collections of the University of Amsterdam Library for this exhibition. In what way do these historical books establish a dialogue with your own book production?

IB: I wanted to find books that were somehow under the radar. If you ask the specialists at the Special Collections: "What is your most beautiful book?", they would answer: "It is the Aldus Manutius book". I selected it, and put it in the show because it is their top book. But how did I place it in the show? It was closed, and almost nobody noticed that the book was there. It is a really fantastic book, but I was looking for books that were different. I was looking for things that I thought I invented, but were basically already two hundred years old. I did this to make my own book production relative. And I have seen such beautiful books! They have the biggest library in The Netherlands! I was lucky to be able to count on the help of good conservators whom I asked to go to the archives, and not to look through the Internet. I told them: "There must be a book that look like this one, or that one." I also, visited the archives. At the end, they really understood what I was looking for. They said, "This book is not catalogued. Do you mean something like this?", and I was like, "Yes! That is it!" That is how I found books on colour, for example,

that I could place together with my own books on colour. It was an interesting experience. At the end, there were books that I have made, books from my personal library, and books from the university's library. There were three different sources. So, it was not a show on my work, but my work in context. It was the other books and I. And that is why I think the exhibition was so interesting, because you could see books from different special collections.

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Notes

1. *Wrighting* refers to both: the act of *writing* — creating while making —, and to the designer's craftsmanship.
2. These ideas had a pedagogical repercussion in the School of Visual Art (SVA), New York. They lead to the creation of the MFA program "Designer as Author & Entrepreneur."
3. The mural is a citation to *Seascape with a herring flee*, a tile mural authored by Cornelis Bouwmeester, made circa 1680–1720 in Majolica technique that is currently part of the collection of the Rijksmuseum, Netherlands national museum. The *Cuyperpassage's* glazed-tile mural took five years to be completed. There were produced 70,000 hand painted tiles by the ceramic company Royal Tichelaar Makkum, established in 1572, which is the oldest company in the Netherlands in the field of ceramics.
4. Boom is referring to the Postage Stamps Yearbook 1987+88 (*Nederlandse Postzegels 87+88*, 1988). This book was designed as part of her job in 1988, while she worked as a designer in the Government Printing and Publishing Office, The Hague.