





# APPROACHING THE ARCHIVE

## I

It is Saturday morning and I am on my way to the temporary space of Kunstverein in Hazenstraat to visit 'Sorry! NO we don't do REQUESTS', an exhibition by Will Holder about his work as a writer, editor, teacher and graphic designer in the last twenty years.

The structure of the exhibition derives from the book-collection and archive of Will Holder and a weekly curated selection from one out of nine invited guests, in where the archive is being approached from various angles throughout the exhibition period - opening up for "more intimate points of acces" as he later describes it to me. Among the invited guests are Linda van Deursen and Elisabeth Klement - both Amsterdam-based graphic designers whose work I know and admire.

Coincidentally I bump into Will just as I am about to park my bicycle outside. Rather confused and still not fully awake, I attempt to strike up a conversation with him. Unfortunately, he is busy as he is on his way to the airport, leaving Amsterdam until the end of the month. Instead, he gives me his email and we agree to keep in touch for the next weeks to come. Just before we split, he tells me that one of the two shelves containing the collection inside, has fallen apart and that he would highly appreciate if I could give the intern Victoire a helping hand sorting it out.

Surely, as I enter the small exhibition space, I see that a shelve has tilted towards the back wall and books are laying scattered on the floor around it. In the following hours to come, I help Victoire reorganizing the books into separate stacks, providing me with an unexpected framework for my derivé through the collection...

One of the first books that I pick up from the piles is a small pocket size guide, containing the maps over London and its suburbs. It has a blue spiral binding and a nicely done typeset on the cover. On top of a nearby stack I find 'A room of ones own' by Virginia Woolf and I am reminded by the essay 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure'. A text in where Virginia Woolf is roaming around in the streets of London in the 1930's under the excuse of having to buy a new pencil.

I continue my search and come across an old and worn out book that has 'Short Essays' written as the only information on the cover. Inside it, I see pencil scribbles in Chinese on top of the english text - perhaps a small remnant of a previous owner of the book. I am intrigued by the way that the writing is done quickly, without any concerns to its legibility, as my previous encounters with asiatic writing always has had to do with calligraphy in one way or another. Here the shapes are almost dissolving into eachother, creating an image that reminds me of the asemic writing of Henri Micheaux.

I browse through a few issues of Dot Dot Dot magazine by Stuart Bailey and Peter Bilak, in where Will Holder's name figures several times - mostly in relation to a text called 'The Middle of Nowhere': an ongoing novel that was published in a serialized form with each issue of the magazine. Placed nearby is the so-far collection of 'F.R. David', a journal dealing with writing in relation to contemporary art-practices, edited by Will Holder and published biannually through 'de Appel arts centre'. I open up an issue from 2008, and read the first part of a text by the french philosopher Roland Barthes called 'The Rustle of Language':

“Speech is irreversible; that is its fatality. What have been said cannot be unsaid, except by adding to it: to correct, here, is, oddly enough, to continue. In speaking I can never erase, annul; all I can do is say “I am erasing, annulling, correcting,” in short, speak some more.”

The space is filled with a certain sense of awkwardness, due to the intimacy that I am forced into sharing with Victoire. She is obviously stressed out about the situation with the shelves, and though I try to be as little in the way and as much of a help as possible, I cannot help feeling that I am interrupting her by my very presence. In addition to that there is a language barrier that disconnects our communication. The whole set up is rather claustrophobic and so I quickly turn my attention back towards the books.

The archival selection of the week is made in collaboration with Johanna Ehde - a former Rietveld student - and has ‘first’ as its topic; ‘First book design’, ‘First climb in the Swiss Alps’, ‘First response to the New Presidential Election’, ‘First public reading’ etc.. A yellow reader is laying on the table together with the selection, in where a short explanation of the chosen content is written. I pick up a blue notebook from the desk. Inside is pages full of hand drawn Comic Sans Aa’s “produced during a 6 month trip to Switzerland with the intention of learning Comic Sans by hand”.

Ironically enough, the last book I look at before I leave, is called ‘A Stack Of Books/A Book Of Stacks’ by the Estonian artist Triin Tamm. The book works as an archive in itself consisting of a collection of excerpts, ranging from “existing and semi-existing books to non-at-all-existing or soon- to-be-existing ones”..

## II

Exactly one week after my first visit, I am once again biking through the streets of Amsterdam, heading for Kunstverein. Autumn has arrived and it is raining heavily. By the time I reach Hazenstraat I am soaking wet - not exactly the best condition to be contemplating a large quantity of books in. This time I am accompanied by a few other visitors, and the atmosphere inside is warm and damp. Needless to say, I - once again - find it hard to get comfortable with my presence in the space, looking more at the door leading back out into the street, than at the content on display. Furthermore, my hair is dripping so that I have to keep the books out at an arms-length, in order to avoid messing up the pages. The intimacy that I want to have with the material is being challenged and the old wooden floor creaks with my every move. I begin to consider if my strategies for approaching the archive has to be redefined...

I turn my attention towards the bookshelf itself. It is made in a simple wood construction and stands, leaning against the wall, creating a lot of space in-between the shelf and the wall, which provokes me to pick out titles only of a certain size, so as to avoid others next to it from falling down. As I realize this, I get frustrated, and with regards to my visit last week, I already have little trust in the stability of the thing. Although, as I think it over I start to conceive it as another kind of framework that helps me with sorting out material. The obstacle becomes a tool. I am reminded by a sentence that has stuck with me for a while: “To weaken in order to reveal”.

After a while, I fix my eyes on a small picture hanging by itself on the opposite wall from where I am standing. The picture depicts a wooden cabin in a snowy mountain landscape, presumably taken around sunset or early in the morning. I ask Will about it over a cup of tea a few weeks later:

“It’s a hut in the south of Switzerland, in the alps - almost on the border to Italy. I go there as much as I can, and I do think of it as a bit of a home. You walk up for about four or five hours just to get to it. I went up there a couple of weeks ago, walking for five days in this complete white-out snow. Just nothing. Walking and walking for six or seven hours a day, having no idea about how much ground I covered.”

A stack of topographical maps is laying on the floor nearby the picture. I cannot help to think of the similarity between the two words ‘typography’ and ‘topography’, both being so different, yet so very present in the archive, and thus I begin to imagine my eyes scanning the titles on the shelves as bearing a resemblance to those reading a map of a landscape. Perhaps it has more to do with the drawing of a map - of a trail to walk along for a while, in order to grasp just a bit of all the information that I am faced with.

Later that afternoon I meet Elisabeth Klement at the San Seriffe book store. We talk briefly about the exhibition and some of Will Holder’s work. We also discuss the selection she did for the exhibition. In relation to that she mentions the mechanism that one - from the viewpoint of a graphic designer - always has with trying to make up certain systems to organize and process content through, and how these systems were important for her to try to avoid, in order to make it as much about Will and as little about her as possible.

As I reach the end of my essay, I begin to question whether my text is actually doing somewhat the opposite... and so, I leave the last words to Will:

“All my work is about the language needed to redistribute someone else’s work, and the attention towards that kind of language... The reason why I make books, is because it involves a relationship with someone that you normally don’t generate...”

- Mark Emil Poulsen, 2016