

Laudation: Jan Tschichold Award Christoph Keller

‘Qualität kommt von Qual’ — No pain, no gain (Felix Magath)

On the process of growing older and wiser in dealing with the likes of my friend, the publisher Christoph Keller, who insisted I write this tribute because, on top of everything else, he even wants his praises sung!

Having finally reached the age of reason, heart and soul, I do just about everything under protest. This tribute to Christoph Keller is no exception. I am not writing it of my own free will, but because I have to, for I have become addicted to working with Mr. Keller, a no-exit situation that gets worse the longer it lasts (over ten years as of this writing).

One summer, towards the end of the old millennium, an acquaintance told me that a publisher friend of hers wanted to visit me in my studio. I agreed unthinkingly, with no expectations, out of naïve curiosity, blithely unaware that the cornerstone was about to be laid for a biographical turning point that would lead from the care-free life of a student, blissfully oblivious to what the next day might bring, to the grey and cheerless existence of a civil servant at a Saxon art academy, burdened by the demoralising lethargy of all too familiar constraints.

After barely two hours in my studio looking through my collection of photographs from local German newspapers, Keller came up with the proposal of using the material to publish a series of at least ten volumes. And on what grounds? As-piring to be admitted to the company of hand-picked colleagues both then and now?

Ignored by the art world and driven by ambition, I agreed – instantly and unconditionally. What choice did I have? The trap snapped quietly shut – just as it already had for so many other colleagues with whom I had chatted at group exhibitions and fairs about working with Keller. The naïve assumption that it would be easy to translate my work into book format didn’t last long. For every new publication that loomed ahead, work that was already finished had to be reinvented from scratch and all the supposedly cut-and-dried decisions resurrected for re-evaluation. My generation, the artists of the 1990s, had been bombarded with the notion that there is speaking, thinking, animated material that exists within us and all around us. It was like a record stuck in a groove that just played on and on.

Within days of his first visit, I had come up with some initial design ideas for a series titled *Peter Piller Archives*. The insidious thing about these early designs was that they were of a simplicity that created the impression that I, the layman, could have produced them myself. Everything about them was concentrated (or rather: distilled). It was as if Keller had already been perched on my shoulder, contributing to the production of the corresponding pictures, drawings and texts, shamelessly grabbing and appropriating everything as his own because he understood the core content of the work so well that every venture with him had the character of a friendly takeover.

Nor did the physical appearance of this person in my studio give me any reason to be alarmed. A young man, just like me at the time, who fitted in so well with the art student crowd that he could have joined the ranks of budding academy graduates without anybody noticing, for he kept his true character under lock and key, in contrast to its now uninhibited display – but more about that later. How was I to know that this visitor had long since read and internalised Machiavelli’s *Prince*, Gracian’s *Art of Wordly Wisdom* and even von Clausewitz’s *On War*? It was not long before it dawned on me that there was no point in trying to talk to Keller about Keller’s designs. Such discussions were invariably doomed, for he has never been known to budge one iota from his convictions. I stood

by in grateful silence as he brought out countless publications of my work, initially in his own Frankfurt-based publishing house Revolver Verlag. Then suddenly, though not entirely unexpectedly, in the year 2005, the personage of Keller underwent a transformation in both essence and physical appearance. Having so far indefatigably brought out one book after another by himself and with his own publishing house, with a small family in Frankfurt, the ugliest and meanest city in Germany, where, as he would later say, he found himself 'holding the fort', ceaselessly and justifiably cursing the vanities, injustice and nastiness of the art trade, he now abruptly abandoned the publishing house and his 'status' and retired to an old mill near Lake Constance. Anyone who chooses to visit him in his idyllic surroundings in the most isolated place in Europe amidst the only flourishing countryside left in Germany will be welcomed by a hairy, bearded creature in overalls, looking – at least physically – not unlike the Saddam that emerged from his hideout in Iraq. Except for his family, this person, who is happiest when he's bumping along on a tractor, now speaks to hardly anyone but his animals, which include some near endangered species of wild East European sheep from Wallachia, five tree-height llamas and a gaggle of geese – while the pent-up rage that he used to feel about museums, curators, critics and dealers is now directed at the hawk that goes after his chickens. Artists' books are still on the menu but they've become slow food produced during the brief seasonal breaks in what has become his main occupation, a distillery. A maker of spirits, that's what he's become, though God only knows why. Of course, these are not just any old spirits, but the most exquisite liquor distilled from European fruits, and, in this field, as in all others, he is nobody's disciple; it was all a matter of reading, improving his mind and cultivating his senses, driven by an indomitable will and, in no time at all, raking in the awards, with gold and silver medallions gracing the necks of his bottles.

No one would begrudge Mr. Keller a middling, moderate, average kind of achievement, just for once, so that he, too, might become acquainted with the mediocre side of human existence.

Addendum:

I hope that these lines may give you a little insight into the character embodied by the venerable Mr. Keller, with all the tyranny, the stubbornness verging on ignorance, the relentless steeliness and almost painful intransigence – perhaps more information than you might wish – and I solemnly swear to the end of my days that I will never choose to make a book with any other designer and publisher!

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Every year the jury bestows, independently of the books sub-mitted for the competition, the Jan Tschichold Award in memory of the typographer Jan Tschichold, on whose initiative the Swiss book design competition was conceived in 1943. The Federal Department of Home Affairs entrusted the jury in 1997 with the task of annually awarding this honour to an individual, a group or an institution for outstanding book design achievement. The Jan Tschichold Award, which is endowed with 15,000 Swiss francs, was awarded this year to the publisher and designer Christoph Keller and his imprint Christoph Keller Editions at JRP|Ringier in Zurich.

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