

The Optimist from Dallenwil – Prizes are always too late, and especially this time. During the years that I sat on the jury of *The Most Beautiful Swiss Books*, Erich Keiser was shortlisted for the Jan Tschichold Award at least three times. The reason for the delay makes sense – the Jan Tschichold Award is not for printers; it's for the designers of books. On the other hand, the timing of the award is symptomatic: an artistic, creative prize has been awarded to a man whose line of business is probably now facing the most existential crisis in its history. But let me backtrack...

To the early 1980s: shortly before I published my first books – typeset in Zürich and printed in Göttingen, which cost half as much as in Switzerland – and Erich Keiser had just finished his apprenticeship as an offset book printer in Steinhausen. In those days, if you wanted to make an artist's book, you had to take prints of your photographs and the Tipp-Ex corrected pages of your manuscript to the lithographer and typesetter, who had just switched to phototypesetting, and then to the printer, who made offset plates out of the repros, which were then inserted in the printing machine. You would check final changes and pagination on blueprints to get your 'print ready' proofs. Nobody had ever heard of a 'printout'. Office equipment at home and at the office consisted of a television set, a telephone, a typewriter, a cassette player and a camera. Everything was analogue. 'Computer' was an industrial term and only a very few early adopters had PCs, specifically an Apple II or an IBM PC1 – without any peripherals. There was no interactive Internet, and e-mail was just a blip until 1989. The multimedia network linking a diversity of devices was yet to be built and industrial printing had nothing to do with personal writing and communicating, even though the golfball typewriter was essentially a manually operated miniature printshop. New colour photocopiers reproduced photographs in gloriously distorted psychedelic colours on sticky, glossy photo paper, for all the world like a postmodern media artist. Actually, they were digital printers – a scanner read the visual data into the machine prior to printing – and prefigured today's prepress and print technologies. The first home printers were either dot matrix or daisy wheel printers. They were frustratingly monofunctional, excruciatingly slow and nerve-rackingly noisy. No one thought of associating this iconic sound of the 1980s with the deafening noise of offset printing; nothing indicated that a grass-roots revolution, a mind-boggling technological coup, was in the making in the wake of digitalization. It was equally difficult to realize that the very first clunky mobile phones with their miniscule LCD displays were extremely smart in comparison to a telephone – primitive reading machines, Stone Age e-books showing five, barely legible lines at a time.

On 1 June 1990, when Erich Keiser finished his military training – among other things, as the commander of the printing press in a reconnaissance regiment – and started working for David and Gerold Odermatt, the second generation to head up a jobbing press founded in 1964, there was not the least indication that the printed book, top dog in an information society, would ever be an endangered species. Printing workshops were still the dominant manufactories in the world of graphics. But then the boundaries between analogue and digital printing began fraying with such velocity that Eastern Europe developed into a cheap printing haven with the help of discarded Heidelberg printing machines. Printing and publishing suddenly evolved into personally doable processes; home and office printers became quieter, faster, better and cheaper. In 1990 Xerox introduced the digital publishing that was to lead to books on demand.

In 1999, the year that the Euro was introduced in 11 countries of the European Union as book money, the artist and curator Stefan Banz approached me with a project for two artist's books that put an entirely new spin on the family photograph, firmly establishing it in Swiss contemporary art: *I built this garden for you* and *I shot away some flowers*. Surprisingly, he not only provided image, text and design but the complete printing concept as well, in the shape of Erich Keiser, marketing director and a member of Druckerei Odermatt's executive board. His publication of *Nonchalance*, a book designed by Cornel Windlin, had just won the first of 50 (!) awards for *The Most Beautiful Swiss Books*.

It was not a fit of patriotism fuelled by a guilty conscience that motivated my spontaneous decision to switch from Göttingen to Dallenwil – Edition Patrick Frey is after all a so-called subsidy publisher, who relied for years on subsidies coming largely out of the owner's own pocket with little help from Helvetia. Rather, it was the person of Erich Keiser himself, who struck me at the time like hope personified, like a fountain of youth in the Swiss printing trade – although I knew full well that neither Druckerei Odermatt nor Erich Keiser knew much about printing sophisticated, exacting books, not to mention meeting the complex demands of artist's books. Nor were there any objective reasons for me to print 16 gorgeous books over the next eight years with Druckerei Odermatt. What attracted me to Dallenwil was quite simply the energy-laden optimism and down-home charm of this printer from central Switzerland, with his irresistible mixture of gravity, reliability and a positively brilliant talent for marketing. Not only that: his infectious enthusiasm was clearly buoyed by a few vital economic and print-technical visions.

As early as the mid-1990s, Erich Keiser anticipated that a small regional printer like Odermatt, with almost 70 per cent of its revenue coming from the free advertiser *Nidwaldner Blitz* and another 25 per cent from job work, could only grow by turning to high-end printing, which obviously meant technical innovation and first-rate service design. And with equal assurance, he predicted that in a globalized Web 2.0 world, he had nothing to lose by being domiciled in Dallenwil – on the contrary.

In 1996 Keiser had already converted entirely to a computer-to-plate workflow, enabling him, with his inimitable pioneering spirit, to use FM screening throughout – undoubtedly a quantum leap, especially in the reproduction of photographic halftone surfaces. While demand plummeted in the wake of the twenty-first century's first financial crisis of 2000, Druckerei Odermatt not only managed to keep growing – from 15 to today's 50 employees –, the company also bucked the cycle, establishing itself as a newcomer in the international art book market. In 2007, when Amazon had just presented a novel e-book reader by the name of Kindle and shortly afterwards the second financial crisis broke out, Keiser, in collaboration with Heidelberg, came up with a new colour printing concept. Sixplex, a six-colour printing process with CMYK and two freely combinable pairs of full-tone colours, is of an exceptional brilliance that works especially well on uncoated paper – a vital factor in ensuring success in the high-end art book market.

A state-of-the-art printer of books is a machine-minded person, a servomechanism (McLuhan) of his own media-expanded senses. Even in 2011, with the disastrous collapse of the Euro, Erich Keiser maintained his unflappable receptiveness to innovation, once again making an anti-cyclical investment, a prodigious one this time and in the very heart of his printshop. Last December, a Heidelberg XL-75 with one lacquer and six colour printing units and a largely automated feeder and colour control system was installed in Dallenwil, which means that Keiser can now print almost 50 per cent faster than on the preceding model. Using this new Rolls-Royce of sheet-fed presses, Keiser has just finished producing an opulent Damien Hirst catalogue for London's White Cube Gallery. Book designer Paul Neale spent a week at Hotel Kreuz in Dallenwil, keeping an eye on the extremely complex colour matching of the sheets. They worked daily from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m., stopping only for an hour in the early afternoon for the London designer's midday nap.

Like I said: irrepressible charm, paired with innovation and unparalleled service design.

Patrick Frey

Publisher, Edition Patrick Frey

Every year the jury bestows, independently of the books submitted for the competition, the Jan Tschichold Award in memory of the typographer on whose initiative the Swiss book design competition was conceived in 1943. The Federal Department of Home Affairs (FDHA) 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 Erich Keiser (*1967), a printing specialist from the printing company Odermatt in Dallenwil, Switzerland.