

The Exhibition Catalogue

A Hybrid between Documentation and Seduction, Research and Cultural Business, Applied and Autonomous Art

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Abstract

Given a never-ending array of catalogues, a kind of 'shadow museum' in reproduced form that has been produced in museums and libraries, typographer Walter Nikkels considers the exhibition catalogue as possibly one of the most characteristic book forms of our day. As a unique type of book, however, the exhibition catalogue is still virtually ignored in art history and art research.

Against this backdrop, this chapter addresses the increasing influence of artists on the catalogue, focusing on US-based conceptual artist Christopher Williams' collaboration with book designer Petra Hollenbach; the artists' group BLEK (Patrick Knuchel, Sascha Herrmann and Alwin Lay), based in Berlin, Leipzig and Cologne, in collaboration with typographer Paul Bowler; and the Düsseldorf-based photographer Martina Sauter in collaboration with book designer Anja Lutz. Their catalogues span a wide range, from the documentation of work to autonomous works of art. Selected examples from their publications serve as case studies to testify to the hybrid character of the catalogue, which culminates in the use of the book itself as an exhibition space.

4 BLEK

BLEK IS PLACE BLEK IS SPACE BLEK IS THREE BLEK IS HERE BLEK IS GOOD BLEK INVITES YOU BLEK CONNECTS BLEK IS CONNECTED TRUST BLEK BLEK IS HERE FOR YOU BLEK IS NEW BLEK CANNOT SPEAK BLEK HELPS YOU BLEK KNOWS YOU BLEK IS MALE BLEK NEEDS YOU BLEK IS FREE BLEK TRUSTS YOU BLEK DELIVERS BLEK SHOWS HAS NO HOME COMES AGAIN²⁷

A piece of text in blue capitals on an A3 sheet of paper, with black-and-white reproductions of photos on the back, a place and date without a year, the sheet cut vertically and folded asymmetrically into a letter: 'BLEK IS PLACE BLEK IS SPACE [...] BLEK DELIVERS BLEK SHOWS'. These four statements formed the core of the artistic programme published in 2010 by Patrick Knuchel, Sascha

²⁷ *BLEK#1*, 2010, cf. <http://www.blek.info/content/uploads/blek-program.pdf>, accessed 9 October 2019, quoted from the authors' statement on a previous version of the website.

Herrmann and Alwin Lay, three photography students from Berlin, Leipzig and Cologne (spelled with a K in German) – BLEK, in short – in collaboration with Paul Bowler, who did the typography. BLEK have pursued this concept up to the present day. They deal with a common interest in the question of the implications of contemporary photography and reproduction, and they examine this by engaging with the different art schools at which they have studied: Herrmann at the Academy of Fine Arts in *Leipzig* and subsequently at various others, including, like Lay, the Arts Academy in Düsseldorf under Williams; Knuchel at the Lette Verein, Berlin, and later also at the Burg Giebichenstein University of Art and Design Halle; Lay at the Cologne Academy of Media Arts and, amongst others, at the Arts Academy in Düsseldorf under Williams. They share common ideas about exhibiting, where printed paper forms its own exhibition space, that is, it is not bound to a particular place or institution, and they also engage in discourse with other artists, as in the core proposition in their second publication *BLEK#2*:

Through a clear separation between dialogue on creative positions and the profiling of individual performances, BLEK expresses its doubts about an idealised concept of authorship and at the same time attempts to establish a concept of institutionlessness. BLEK seeks a discourse between the works of different authors whose content intersects and stems from a common starting point.²⁸

BLEK#1 and *BLEK#2*, as well as the later works *BLEK#5* and *BLEK#9*, were published as part of an exhibition. The others are all stand-alone works. Some of the publications encompass several artistic positions; sometimes, all three of the founding members are involved, sometimes just one or two of them are, and some publications are even created without the founding authors being involved at all: for example, an artist-duo was given free rein in the creation of *BLEK#10*. BLEK works can be a folded sheet of paper, a portfolio, a leaflet or a tear-off notepad in a box. For example, one of the editions featuring three placards was transformed into an unbound book through obvious pagination. In *BLEK#3*, original works by 14 artists on the subject of photography, drawing and reproduction were gathered together in a cardboard portfolio in the print run of 80 copies. This has been the largest publication to date, with each artist creating 80 original works for it. This project took several years to complete, which is the reason for *BLEK#3* only appearing in 2014, after *BLEK#5*.

28 *BLEK#2*, 2011 (see footnote 27).

A distinguishing feature of the publications is their typeface – Franklin Gothic – and a generally austere, functional typography, which can also be deployed ironically. BLEK always use Franklin Gothic capitals for their lettering. Their work can also be recognised by the high-quality printing processes used, such as hand-offset, screen or risograph printing (a less expensive but equally prestigious form of screen printing using soy inks for small editions). The authors – ‘BLEK IS MALE’ – of each edition are generally not named, though they are included in the Impressum, so that questions of authorship do not shroud the publications in mystery. The practice of the author(s) giving a description of their artistic programme as part of the work itself began with *BLEK#1* and continues to the present day. *BLEK#6* (2015), for example, is both edition and business card at the same time – it is a risograph print of a photograph on A3 paper with the following manifesto printed full-page on the back:

The BLEK press addresses the book as a means of exhibiting artworks and thereby challenges the traditional structures by which art has been represented and distributed. The BLEK press curates and publicises exhibitions as books. This publication is part of the 2015 Radical Bookfair in Leipzig.²⁹

This formulation corresponds to an undated business card in English, which contains the more generalised words ‘... and show the work at bookfairs’. In *BLEK#6*, for the first time, the book medium is expressly mentioned, and BLEK is named as a publisher. The book fair is thus the logical place to present new publications.³⁰

In a text about BLEK which is structured as an encyclopaedia entry and published in *BLEK#7*, Sarah Alberti explicates the mediality and materiality of the

29 Translation of the German version of *BLEK#6*. To date, four versions of *BLEK#6* have been published, which is appropriate considering the function of a business card: Part 1 (2015) in German with a photograph by Alwin Lay was followed by Part 2 (2016) in English with a photograph by Sascha Herrmann, Part 3 (2017) in Italian with a photograph by Patrick Knuchel, and Part 4 (2019) in Danish with a photograph by Sascha Herrmann, produced by BLEK and Moritz Grünke. *BLEK#6* Part 2, which is written in English, reads ‘BLEK considers publishing as an artistic practice and is exploring publications concerning their possibility as an exhibition. BLEK questions classical structures of representation and distribution. This publication appears on the occasion of the exhibition Riefeniz at Künstlerhaus – Halle für Kunst und Medien Graz 2016’. *BLEK#6*, 2016–2019 (see footnote 27).

30 The artist as publisher and the business of printing graphic work in a portfolio as an activity of the book trade dates back to the Renaissance and Albrecht Dürer, who developed a successful business out of it.

book in its function as an exhibition space, although she purposely avoids all mention of the word 'book'.

BLEK, *m. or n.* (proper noun, refers to the cities (of art) of Berlin, Leipzig and Cologne (Köln), also the French pochoir painter Blek Le Rat, b. 1951). (1) *B. gen.* ► curates and ► publishes exhibitions as a material or physical object whose production is achieved by hand or by mechanical means. It consists of a base (► writing material, ► printing substrate) and the linguistic and pictorial signs introduced onto it (► sign). As in the walls of a room, the ► pages in B. stand next to each other and are placed e.g. in order along the axis of symmetry along the ► gutter and are placed over each other in sequence. B. can be moved forwards or backwards by leafing through the pages on this axis. The design (► typography), and the ► layout of the pages, as well as the means of ► structuring and developing the text depend on this property. As a ► sign vehicle, B. stores linguistic and numeric signs as well as pictures. B. is an ► exhibition space independent of place, time, context and recipient, whose main feature is its flexibility. B. challenges traditional representation and business structures and is concerned with communication as a B.-related form for the exchange of meaningful ► signs between a communicator and an addressee (recipient). (2) *B. spec.* [...].³¹

A point of reference for this can be found in the conceptual art movement which started in the 1960s, with its attempts at dematerialising art objects, a concept which was systematically developed by Lucy Lippard early on³² and which had as its icon Seth Siegelaub's *Xerox-Book*: 'The primacy of the book as an alternative space was established in 1968, when dealer Seth Siegelaub began to publish his artists instead of holding exhibitions'.³³ If we consider the format of the publication – which in the case of BLEK's work might be folded paper, stapled portfolios, perhaps with loose sheets of paper, or placards – then we might initially be annoyed to hear it described as a book. The properties of a book that are retained, however, are portability, pages and – to a certain

31 Translation of the German written by Sarah Alberti, 'BLEK', in *BLEK#7* (Leipzig: Blek-Verlag, 2015).

32 Lucy R. Lippard, ed., *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973).

33 Kate Linker, 'The Artist's Book as an Alternative Space', *Studio International* 195 (1980), 77.

degree – binding. This last aspect might be present in folding, stitching, framing or pagination.³⁴

In 2016, a further business card was created in English and *BLEK#11* was launched. In both publications, the term ‘book’ was replaced with the phrase ‘different typographic spaces’, and instead of BLEK PRESS, the expression ‘publishing as an artistic practice’ appeared. The authors’ names were listed, although their role (artist/artist group, photographer or publisher) was not specified, because when there is a programmatic overlap of creative and publishing practices, this does not need to be specified.

BLEK considers publishing as an artistic practice and is exploring different typographic spaces concerning their potential as an exhibition. BLEK was founded by Sascha Herrmann, Patrick Knuchel and Alwin Lay in 2010.³⁵

With their phrase ‘publishing as an artistic practice’, BLEK became involved in the current debate. The ‘slogan [...] has not gone viral yet’, according to Annette Gilbert, editor of *Publishing as Artistic Practice*, but ‘the potential for it can already be felt’.³⁶ Her book has started to move the theoretical discussion already taking place in literary, art and design circles into the realm of academic discourse, which is still a long way from a theory of publishing.

Through their publishing practice, BLEK shows how a concept can go from being a flyer designed to accompany an exhibition to become an actual exhibition space in paper or book medium. This is an ongoing concept, which they attempt to outline in their publications through autographic and allographic statements, and which they are constantly questioning in order to be clear about what it is they are actually doing (Figures. 22.3 and 22.4).³⁷ Crucial to this process is the realisation of an autonomous structure: it is about taking

34 The same procedure of making a book whose ‘binding’ is limited to pagination can also be found in the work of the artist Max Ernst, cf. the bibliography in Gabriele Wix, ed., *‘tunke den finger ins tintenmeer’. Max Ernst und das Buch* (Cologne: Walther König, 2019), 250–253.

35 *BLEK#11*, 2016, see footnote 27.

36 Annette Gilbert, ed., introduction to *Publishing as Artistic Practice* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 7. Cf. also the contributions by Regine Ehleiter, ‘Publizieren als künstlerische Praxis. Ein Gespräch mit Delphine Bedel’, and in, the context of BLEK, ‘Curating Publications. A Brief History of the Publications Exhibition in Contemporary Art’, both in *Eikon* 86 (2014): 41–47 and 52–57 respectively. See also *Kunstforum International. publish! Publizieren als künstlerische Praxis*, vol. 256 (2018).

37 *BLEK#1*, 2010, see footnote 27.

the exhibition out of a concrete space and into a portable medium and creating an exhibition display using typographical means. Having a catalogue to accompany an exhibition thus becomes obsolete: the exhibition catalogue is the exhibition.³⁸

38 Cf. also I/Minus Eins Experimentallabor an der Kunsthochschule für Medien Köln, ed., *Die Ausstellung*, exh. cat., concept by Alexander Basile and Alwin Lay (Düsseldorf: KIT – Kunst im Tunnel, 2014).