



Conversation with Astrid Vorstermans

Director of Valiz Publishers

by Valentina Rossini

Astrid Vorstermans is director of Valiz Publishers, an independent organisation she founded in Amsterdam in 2003, and lecturer at many different design schools across the Netherlands. With her we talked about books and bookshops, politics and society, and about the future of the publishing landscape.

With its interdisciplinary approach, Valiz builds a wide ground for critical discussions on social matters and their derivatives, with politics, art, and design being among the most important. To reach out to people from different environments, its content not only is delivered by printed books, but also by public debates, by participating at small book fairs, and by organising other events. Moreover, together with Trancity, Valiz publishes a book series focussed on urban spaces and their value in relation to their inhabitants.

In a society governed by fast consumption, writing and reading processes are changed, and the book industry has to adapt itself in order to survive. While small publishing houses often address a specific audience, collaborate with each other, and are structurally more flexible, big ones still own the general market and strive to eat up the rest. In response Valiz is a publisher that is committed to building a community of authors, readers, and publishers, and in that process identifies both meaning and a real future for the industry.

Valentina Rossini: Valiz is an independent publishing house founded in 2003 in Amsterdam. In an era of financial and cultural crisis, how did you make a start and introduce Valiz to the domain of publishing?



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Astrid Vorstermans: My life in publishing began when, at the age of 16, I started working in a bookshop to pay for my initial studies to become teacher in the visual arts and then later my master's in art history. While still at university I got a job as a representative for Idea Books, an international distributor of art books for which I travelled especially around Germany, Austria, France, and Belgium and visited many bookshops and book fairs. For eight years I also worked for NAI publishers in Rotterdam (now called nai010) where I widened my knowledge of the art book world, learned making and respecting a budget, and finding money in public or private funding. That means that before founding Valiz, I had already had more than 25 years of experience in the field, not only in publishing itself but also in book sales.

At the start of Valiz I did not have a business plan, but I knew what I was missing in the art book field. That was fundamental to building a very specific profile for Valiz. It has been tough to create a small, independent publisher on my own since I still had to keep other freelance jobs to earn a living and finance my projects. However I admit that I was lucky in having a network of distributors, bookshops, and other small publishers, and in having the possibility of collaborating with some artists who had already received funding for their books. All in all, it grew very organically and the financial support was not as difficult as it is now with three people on the payroll and hence, having to look for a structured long-term sustainability. To be honest, the most challenging task was developing our identity and our line of content – and when we were on an interesting track, it was 2008; the crisis really hit hard, politics changed in the Netherlands, and the liberals cut all the solid funding programmes. For us the crisis lasted until two years ago and because we survived, I have a good feeling regarding our future.

Valentina Rossini: The publishing industry is dominated by giants that make it nearly impossible for the small ventures to break through. How can one gain shelf space in bookstores and create an audience?

Astrid Vorstermans: Giants have an audience that is very general but the general audience has fallen back a lot because it does not read books anymore. On the contrary, the specialised audience of those people who orbit art galleries and museums, polytechnics and universities, the niche in a certain sense, still wants information and is quite stable. In that regard, I think that the giants of the industry have a more difficult task than the small publishing houses because giants hit and run, they place a book in the market and hope that people will buy it. Of course they have their marketing departments providing feedback, but their programmes do not take many risks. This is a great opportunity for other publishers for positioning themselves in a more targeted way, not directed to the big, general audience but to an audience that itself reflects the publisher's identity and purpose.

When I was working for Idea Books, general bookshops had their own curated design, art or art theory sections, alongside the twelve specialised bookshops spread across the Netherlands. Today, such curated sections do not exist anymore, only a couple of these specialised bookshops are still alive, and the serendipity of walking into a bookstore searching for a book and finding something that you would not expect has gone. This is a huge change that signals that while giants still have the monopoly on the shelves, bookshops are losing their audience in favour of other spaces where book selling *accompanies* initiatives as exhibitions or cultural programmes (as with San Serriffe in Amsterdam and Walter in Arnhem). Bookshops are too conservative and afraid of a changing readership and of a changing society, and I think they should reinvent themselves in order to not shut down.

At the same time, publishers should find their specific audience in a different way. To make Valiz more visible, we participate at many book fairs and we all personally try to be active in each event where the theme is linked to our book series or to subjects that we consider relevant. By doing so, we get in contact with other small publishers that are not represented in bookshops and with people who want to buy our books. Therefore we have the chance to hear first-hand critical, positive or negative opinions and to create a dialogue, in an attempt to build up a loyal community with other publishers and our readers that emanates from the four of us. This is one of our ways of doing “marketing”, far from the big commercial world of the book trades – and it is fun! As bookshops have become unable to act as platforms for truly informing people on what is new and innovative, small book fairs are key to bringing in different voices and different subjects; places where anyone could find a book which may be precious for themselves, not as a luxury, but as a right.

Hence, with a readership seeking cultural activities and a connection with authors and editors, I do not even look at online bookstores as threatening. It is true that algorithms choose what to show on the basis of customer’s search and alleged taste, and that sometimes one may even find something interesting; though I still think that suggestions coming from a person in the flesh are invaluable. We are all idiosyncratic and I reject the idea that keywords tell more than emotion. Emotion is what one finds in a physical space made of people, colours, and a specific atmosphere, and online bookshops cannot replace the variety and the serendipity of a physical space.

Valentina Rossini: Excluding money, what are the core differences between giants and small publishing houses?

Astrid Vorstermans: The nature of being small and independent includes being collaborative and supportive of other small publishers, rather than cannibalising the market as giants usually do. As in a healthy landscape, where there are lots of diverse plants and flowers, each small publishing house has its own focus and aims to create an environment that collaborates rather than competes with other publishers, with each bringing their own different personal character, know-how, and views. Within this landscape, third parties such as schools and universities are fundamental: they know that publishing costs money, they are willing to invest their funds in books, and they usually stimulate students to buy them. Here collaboration is built on mutual goals and content sharing, as well as trust and respect in what one does.

On the contrary, big publishers do not have the agility nor the flexibility to look at their audience from another angle and they are terrified of doing something that might be commercially unsuccessful even if really important in the bigger context of things. By staying so general they will survive but I am quite confident the cost will be their becoming less and less interesting.

Valentina Rossini: When remaining independent, are public funds and crowdfunding valid sources of support?

Astrid Vorstermans: Valiz is constantly supported by funding and I am not ashamed of that. In fact, I am proud of the amount of support that we get for our projects; it means that third, often public parties endorse the values that our projects lay out. When public funds do not work out, crowdfunding is always a valid yet more difficult alternative: indeed, one has to take into account that crowdfunding needs to be paid back one way or another, not with money, but in attention, and attention requires time.

That said, Valiz has a critical programme that addresses many theoretical and social issues and I think the government should support it as a valuable contribution to the community. Some of our books, like the ones written by Pascal Gielen, deal with politics and are therefore linked to this very moment: even though basic ideas and questions will be the same, in a few years the way of theorising those ideas and answering those questions might be completely different. Some others, such as *The Responsible Object* by Marjanne van Helvert, can defy time and open up a lasting discussion. Both kinds of books, as journalism, are part of the public debate and it should be a civil responsibility to financially support different ways of thinking and diverse and divergent opinions. I do believe that democracy is made of differences, and books that express differences are a nuanced building ground for exchange and for a constructive dialogue that fights against populism and against naysayers.

Valentina Rossini: What do you think about the relationship between public funding and politics?

Astrid Vorstermans: In the Netherlands, funding is not directly run by the government but by publicly financed organisations, such as the Mondriaan Fund, in order to avoid any sort of political involvement of the board members; yet, successive governments decide how to use their revenue and how to divide it among culture, health, infrastructure, businesses, and services that the country and population need.

During the crisis, when politics shifted to the right, funding for cultural initiatives was significantly squeezed as a consequence of a general interest in keeping the same level of wealth and of the success of populism, known to reject the arts and design for their tendency to critically question society. However from last year, with a government composed of four parties where the VVD and the left wing are

very much present, and with a general upswing of the economy, cultural initiatives are slowly getting some money back.

To counteract stupid ideas one needs good books, good debate, and good journalism, and I think it is our responsibility as publishers to clarify what culture is and why it is important; this is what we are trying to do with our Antennae series and its specific, quite radical way of criticising neo-liberalism. Well-planned agendas can foresee issues that may need our detailed attention and this kind of approach should always be in the fibre of what we do.

Valentina Rossini: Valiz claims to be a publishing house where its books “offer critical reflection, interdisciplinary inspiration, and often establish a connection between cultural disciplines and socio-political questions”. With this remit, how can you avoid being strictly academic?

Astrid Vorstermans: To be honest, I never know how to position that discussion. For me academic simply means based on good research and on a certain ability of tracing sources, and in this sense I do not really see any distinction with critical writing. Hence when an academic presents us with a book, I feel pretty safe about its structural characteristics, and the aspect I immediately consider is its creativity both in the theme and in writing – there are so many PhD theses that are extremely boring! We have a series called vis-à-vis, entirely curated and written by people working in universities, and it is very easy to read and exciting.

Valentina Rossini: A difference between self-publishing and “proper” publishing lies in the editorial role. While still important to guarantee the quality, its absence in self-publishing leaves the market open to becoming an easy victim of junk. What do you think about self-publishing?

Astrid Vorstermans: Both as an individual and as a publisher, I think it is healthy to have an open arena composed of many different voices – yet it does not mean that I always *get* them! Very often I do not comprehend what a self-published book's urgency is, and since books should explain themselves, if I do not understand them, then for me they fail. To be clear, I do not object to that urge, however, what are you going to do with a book that has a print run when that book is actually just for yourself? Each self-publisher should look for feedback, deal with how their book communicates, and listen to booksellers' reviews instead of just wanting to produce that beautiful piece of self-expression and being dissatisfied when nobody wants to buy it. I am sure that there are lots of stockrooms with piles of paper that are never going to find their audience and that is a conundrum I cannot solve.

Books are means to work out ideas, and generally speaking I think that books self-published by artists make sense because for artists they are instruments for deep self-exploration. Though, when speaking about textbooks, to me it is a whole other story. In this case publishers are fundamental to guarantee an editorial process and an audience. If somebody self-publishes a textbook, I am suspicious that the reason lies in the inability to find a publisher and hence there might be a question about the quality of the writing. Here the publisher's filter is extremely necessary not just in the editing process but also for better defining the design and the structure in the context of a larger programme, to start off a discussion and create an exchange with other people.

Overall I think that self-publishing is good because you never know what exploration it can lead to, and I do believe in the strength of a multi-coloured landscape; but once more it does not mean that I always understand it and of course it is not our way.

Valentina Rossini: Some established bookstores now have an immediate book-printing machine that creates a bound book within minutes simply by plugging in

a USB drive with a PDF file in it. Knowing that it especially addresses self-publishers, do you think it can affect the industry?

Astrid Vorstermans: In my opinion the Espresso Book Machine, as it is called in the Netherlands, does not make the landscape more interesting but it is just another system invented by giants to make money. Nonetheless I accept that it is useful for self-publishers to have a first print-run to handout to friends and family so to receive feedback and grow to the role of proper authors who may be published by real publishers, or that it can be an alternative to copy shops when finding on Google PDFs of books out of print. Also, once I heard about a library in Rotterdam that used the Espresso Book Machine to print out a collection of stories created by its neighbourhood's inhabitants. To me this is a wonderful example of a community art project that could not have been developed in the same way if proposed to normal publishers – they would have thought about numbers and figures and they would have surely politicised it.

Anyway, I am very sceptical about book-printing machines and about the influence of small print-runs on the public debate. Maybe I am naive but I cannot imagine that they have the same value and reach of books with proper distribution.

Valentina Rossini: People do not read as they used to – book sales have collapsed and fast news is more popular than long-format articles. Is there a future for the publishing industry?

Astrid Vorstermans: Actually, I think that people read more now than in the past, yet applying a different method: they browse news and snippets on the internet, they just graze the field, and they are not involved in deep reading anymore.

In this context, critical publishers should take on the responsibility of getting people more involved in their projects and stimulating deep reading by creating broader platforms which contain diverse curated content, not only paper-books.

Zed Books for example is a publishing collective that spreads its programme across different media and that is equally shared by its workers – I find it so interesting that I opened a discussion with the Valiz team on changing our ownership structure. It is not just about money, but about building a community and sharing; about being all together in one group and thinking differently.

I believe there will be a future for critical publishing but maybe it will be in a different way, with a different media or a different network; a different fabric I imagine.

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Further Investigations

Jeroen Boomgaard and Rogier Brom (eds.), *Being Public: How Art Creates the Public*, Valiz, Amsterdam, 2017.

Jeroen Boomgaard, Rini Hurkmans, and Judith Westerveld (eds.), *Compassion: A Paradox in Art and Society*, Valiz, Amsterdam, 2017.

Barbara Cueto and Bas Hendrikx (eds.), *Authenticity?: Observations and Artistic Strategies in the Post-Digital Age*, Valiz, Amsterdam, 2017.

Annet Dekker (ed.), *Lost and Living (in) Archives: Collectively Shaping New Memories*, Valiz, Amsterdam, 2017.

Making Public is a new series that Valiz launched in 2017 that deals with the public domain, not just as a physical space, but also as a digital and mental area. These four titles are interesting in light of the democratic potential books have.

Anything from our Antennae series – we really do like it to the extent of becoming a signature line of our programme. It maps the interaction between changes in society and in cultural practices by looking upon the arts as "antennae", feelers for the cultural interpretation and articulation of topical political, economic, social, technological, or environmental issues. Furthermore, it is a peer-reviewed book series that validates artistic, critical, speculative, and essayistic writing as an academic publishing method.

Bojana Kunst, *Artists at Work, Proximity of Art and Capitalism*, Zero Books, Alresford, 2015.

Among the titles on art and capitalism published by Zero Books, I find this one very inspiring for mixing the experience of the artistic practice with critical theory. Moreover, Zero Books is as important as Zed in giving a platform to marginalised voices.

Jan Wenzel, *Die zwölf Arbeiten des Verlegers*, Spector, Leipzig, 2015.

A pamphlet that explains the most important considerations for a publisher, from building your community and working

in a fair way, to the value of attention to detail and distribution. Unfortunately, the paper version is not available anymore, but can be found in digital format:
<http://www.editiononline.de/blog/die-12-arbeiten-des-verlegers>

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