

## TURN THE PAGE & LOOK - about Randi Annie Strand's books.

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The eye is a sensuous receiver.

The act of browsing through books and *feeling* them was present from the beginning: the codex precedes the printed volume and constitutes the "ur-book", contained as it is by two wooden binders, providing an explanation of the Latin term and with leafy sheets bound in, coated with wax to write in with a pen. I find it hard to imagine a book being more of a physical thing than that.

The Codex is an event that can be sensed through one's fingers, and the sensitivity, the memory of touch passing through my muscles thus connects me with an infinite number of browsers and readers from far back in time. These complex book feelings that I experience, they are part of a history.

With that in mind, I browse through Randi Annie Strand's books.

I happily begin with *99/9 Vestervik*, <https://www.randistrand.no/boker/99-9-vestervik> 2019, this is not her first book, rather it provides somewhat of a departure from her other work. It contains text that fuses and mingles with the photographs, rendering available something that cannot be captured by a photograph alone. It depicts ordinary everyday life and is reminiscent in its format of a logbook, a diary or an accounting ledger. Yet it is not colloquial or mundane at all, not to me at least, since what it reveals are the emergent contours of Norway from a bygone age. A small farm with a breathtaking view of the fjord, documents showing the farm's purchases and detailing the construction of small shipping vessels by the father in the family, followed by a series of family photos. As I browse through Strand's other books, this strain of the documentation of real life is always in the back of my mind. This staggeringly beautiful open landscape with its enveloping clouds. Echoes of a bygone Norway; and the text in *99/9 Vestervik* is a panorama of a past, containing a kind of beauty that can be seen as protest.

First, I want to dwell for a while on the actual feeling of leafing through *99/9 Vestervik*. Holding it in one's hand, it feels like a retrospective logbook that might be found in a home office. The 80-gram paper of the cover is what most of us encounter while using our printers, copiers or typewriters. White, a little rough, and open to all the information the pages are waiting for.

Many receipts are presented as both front and back pages. Along with photos from the family album, they render an emergent image of everyday life. From the myopic sums of the receipts to the endless horizons of the black and white photographs. My fingers run unconsciously over the pages, as if they wanted to feel the vastness of the black and white images. The intimate atmosphere invites me to sit down next to the characters in the book.

The boundlessness of the gaze is emphasized by the fact that the book has no pagination. This also applies to time, which becomes a series of years/pages without focusing on the constraining summary of the present.

Strand has devoted particular care to the writing. The set passages are withdrawn, pale and descriptive; one's gaze and thoughts are sucked into this - for me fictional - *Vestervik*. And I sit in the armchair with the book on my lap with the same feeling as when someone showed me a family album. But it is neither a family album nor a collection of documents. Rather, it is a gesture of

confidence, perhaps a self-portrait made for the artist herself. Something remote and distant is handed over as part of an intimate gesture.

Twenty-five years earlier, Strand produced the book *Ordakt* <https://www.randistrand.no/boker-1990-2011/ordakt> together with the author Ivar Orvedal. Its plastic pages behave differently, they slide, slip away. I think she did this on purpose; simply picking up the book and turning the pages shouldn't be possible to do in just one prescribed way: instead, I find myself slipping, sliding and literally gliding away. If I open the pages as per usual, I see a word in mirror image, reversed. Turning the book over and doing the opposite, my fingers slip over the plastic pages, I allow myself to look a little here and there. And moreover, the words abide by no discernable order either, they throw themselves here and there, interrupt themselves, joining parts of others.

An unexpected display of word bodies in surprising variations. Nothing is given or fixed; it is up to me to combine, read obliquely, slip around in this unusual spiral-bound variant of the codex. The focus becomes like a single focal point (a single? Why not two or more of each member of the glossary?) shifting word by word.

Material and form within an inexhaustible moment - over and over again.

*Tekst-tur*, <https://www.randistrand.no/boker/tekst-tur> <https://www.randistrand.no/landart/tekst-tur> 2000, behaves completely differently. It presents a long poem by Hilde Bøyum, letter by letter that span across the landscape. And needless to say, I immediately recall the vistas contained in *Vestervik*. *Tekst-tur* is something more akin to an act of documentation in the spirit of conceptual art than an ordinary artist's book. The real artist-made book emerges into being as a result of being viewed by a reader turning the pages with his or her feet, letter by letter, throughout the vastness of nature.

Paper is the skin of books under browsing fingertips. I become aware of this in the photo project *Forestilling*, <https://www.randistrand.no/foto-video/forestilling> 2009, and moreover in *Berøringsstrofer* <https://www.randistrand.no/boker/berøringsstrofer> made together with Ivar Orvedal, 2012, *Den største form har ingen kontur*, <https://www.randistrand.no/boker/den-storste-form> 2012, and the small book *Pangea*, <https://www.randistrand.no/boker/pangea> from 2012. The cover is hard and very tangible thanks to the use of braille, which provides a relief surface lying under my fingertips which doesn't mean I can orient myself, merely understand that this is how words can physically appear. And at the same time, I can't help but think how much the readable topography of these finger flowers reaches all the way back to the ancient codex I reflected on at the beginning of this text: that writing which was scratched in with a pencil on the wax-covered, leaf-thin pages. And also reminds me of the clear indentations and reliefs created by the typeface in books set by hand. Hold up an old book, caress the paper and feel the words; and you can bear in mind that the typesetter at the time would've quickly been able to identify and assemble the letters required, using only his fingers. See with your hand - wood and lead type landscape in relief along the sides. It was no coincidence that this typographic sensitivity gave rise to words conceived of as pictures or blocks. Typography - topography.

Paper is also the room and space of books. You see with your fingers and feel with your eyes. And rarely has it been more tangible - instantly poetic - than with the flimsy Japanese paper Strand used in her suites *Arabesk*, <https://www.randistrand.no/boker/arabesk> 2016, *Prisma*, <https://www.randistrand.no/boker/prisme> 2019-2022, and *Orbit/A*, <https://www.randistrand.no/boker/orbit-a> 2023.

Lightly floating, delicately fragile, slowly and without haste I gently lift the hard black cover to find the inside as if completely naked and bare. Tenderly I touch the sheets, lift and hold my breath to move this page and its image to the left with the lightest of movements. Colors and shapes flash and change immediately. The force of this work is borne of slowness and fragility.

No pagination, no given sequence, yet a waxing and waning that reminds me to keep breathing. The connection between these lightly colored Japanese papers and the black and white photographs in *99/9 Vestervik* is obvious; here the endless landscape is presented with the topography in muted tones, like memories fading away. The pages provide vague afterimages, only to alter their shape after just a few changes. The movement involves both the act of browsing and to momentarily refrain: the abstract geometric shapes with their definite colors open into a depth of vision. And this is particularly evident in *Orbit/A*, where scrolling through the pages suggests a planetary movement in an unfinished space. And if we turn its perspective around, the book reminds us of the movement of the eyes. A close and a distant spatial movement. Shifting spaces as in the previous series, abstract without points of reference. The lightness also contains tension. Like *the Metaphor Book*, <https://www.randistrand.no/boker/metaforboken> 2016. A sturdy volume, a book as much as a sculpture, both solid and illuminated with an airily constructed inlay.

In *Tingbod*, <https://www.randistrand.no/boker/tingbod> 2022, the inlay has moved away from the cohesive covers and found a fixed point on a wall. Next to another object that is more fluid in form. The lightness is there as if both book sculptures have just been arrested in a slow fall, much like falling autumn leaves. In addition, the text page recalls its origin in the scroll. The childhood of the book embodied as text in a diffused dream state.

I have now been browsing Randi Annie Strand's artist's books; their roots lie in the history of the art of printing and of the book itself. And here I make a stop and imagine two topos.

First, from the early days of the book:

In 1625 Francis Bacon wrote:

"Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested; that is, some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but not curiously; and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention."

This almost sounds like the poet and book artist Ulises Carrión. Yet again it shows how the oldest history of the book is reflected in artist-made books. In 1978, in his book *In alphabetic order*, he writes: "A book is a series of surfaces. Each of these surfaces is perceived at different moments - a book is also a series of moments." And furthermore: "[...] The books of the new art movement often do NOT have to be read in their entirety. The reading of them may well be interrupted when the total structure of the book is understood." <sup>1</sup>

It makes sense that Strand has also made her books into films. Everything in a traditional book is thus dissipated in a transparent and soft material. Liquid, floating "readings".

And second, from the childhood of the book:

That position is the one point in indefinite time and place where I imagine her books. And the other topos I impose on her work is even older. There is a fresco in Pompeii of a young woman with a

writing pen and a codex in her hand - some say it is Sappho, others say it is Sulpicia. In any case, her portrait is the one which reminds me of the physicality of writing, the sensuality of the book:

"Thank you for having the courage to entrust me now with so much." <sup>2</sup>

Again, a contemporary comment from Carrión: "Space is the music of unsung poetry."<sup>3</sup>

Browsing so far, I describe Strand's books in this way - carved in relief and depth, set and shaped with the dexterity of an artist typographer - and a yearning for the book to encounter others and gently take its place in the room.

Her works are gentle and careful. They have a quiet beautiful impact. They are like visual whispers. Shifting between the sensuous, i.e. tactile, and the sensual, as in the intense experience of proximity.

With different pages, she welcomes the browsing hand and the close, intimate gaze. A word which comes to mind and that approaches the image of the landscape, the space of water and sky: expansion. And thus, I tenderly take her scrolls apart.

The book before the codex. *Rolls* - the original movement of browsing through pages. I'll leave the poetic words for now, those that are unfurled; pulling something out to reveal a message, a moment in time that opens and closes soon again.

With the scroll in hand, light as a feather and thin as a leaf, a word just revealed flickers for a few seconds: "umvelting" on pink paper, "ordefar" on green paper, "lauvsus" on orange paper, to take three examples from *Ordefar*, <https://www.randistrand.no/boker/ordefar> 2017, pages of soft colored chords that are faintly illuminated by the text. And from the other *Ruller*, <https://www.randistrand.no/boker-1990-2011/ruller> 1992-1994, in soft ochre: "forløser", "forener" as an example of the clearly leaded text in black ink.

These crisply rolled yet springy pages are like holding a word in your hand and delivering it, birthing it into a picture. A word picture.

And here one might find another path through Strand's books.

Where the large and the small meet, combine and spread out. Physically, as in *Ruller*, where the single word in letterpress comprises a single large surface that wants to roll up like a butterfly in its cocoon.

For that is the nature of the typographic word picture. She often scales it down to words that intersect, words that are waiting to be read, words that want to become images.

The words appear one by one in *Ruller*, among others - cross-fertilized and in a wild mood as in the concrete poetry of *Ordakt*.

But here she adds a feature that she has in common with the books in rolls that preceded and partly were coterminous with the codex. But she has combined the two by typesetting the text instead of writing by hand like the copyist. However, through the very act of unrolling and stretching the paper, Strand's *Ruller* invites a slow reading, contemplation - every single word is pondered; it is reminiscent of the *lectio divina* of book history and devotional prayer:

"A particular way of reading in which the text is taken in, teaspoon by teaspoon and ruminated on, digested while emphasizing that the reading should be for its own sake and similar to a prayer"<sup>4</sup>

In its visually coloristic expanse, each scroll prefers a certain background to be seen and read; the word then steps out and into your own space.

In other books by Strand one can see similar phenomena. Forming a space around the word, becoming a landscape that extends further than the eye can see. Here I am thinking of photographs from her home region and the words in *Tekst-tur*. And what is that installation work if not a huge, scaled up version of the land art of *Rullerne*.

At the heart of this work there exists an intimate relationship with the book itself both as a form and idea. And the artist who works with artist books has a great deal in common with the art allied typographer, the old master printer in an office; typesetting, image, word picture, in everything they were the ally of the fine arts. And there is good reason to highlight this similarity and line of inheritance in the contemporary creation of artists' books. In that regard, Randi Annie Strands work is an excellent case in point.

And this is of course visible in the completely separated bindings. And equally in one of the key features of the book: the letter, the sentence, the image of the words that take their place on the page.

There is a long tradition here from Guillaume Apollinaire to Ernst Jandl; it does not have to be eye-catching as in the Baroque frontispieces. Strand seems happy to retain a distanced, demure form that puts its trust in the sensuous. And that's how I think about the gray-toned simple texts in *99/9 Vestervik*. The way they entice the reader to immerse themselves in thought and imagination; as if her intention has always been to portray what her childhood home actually felt like in the first place.

There are also images related to these typographic sensibilities. How the landscape opens up and bestows an emotional perspective to the whole book. And those landscapes are particularly important when she stretched out the text over the mountains with the help of letters. I can see in her a thought, a feeling, a hint of wanting to do the impossible, to sensually create parallels with a kind of infinity. A kind of luminosity or darkness to be explored - not to be primarily subjected to a rational reading. Here I see a reason why she uses Braille to make her relief surfaces. In *Forestilling*, there is even a double sense of hesitation. My fingers examine these points in relief that I am unable to read, and they are interspersed with galactic bodies that are equally beyond my view. There is something outside of me, that exists in darkness and is created through the act of searching.

What remains is a close, cherished touching of the raised dots that line each page.

In *the Memoria series*, <https://www.randistrand.no/foto-video/memoria> which consists of photographs with braille 2003, blurred images and views are combined with braille that I like to think explain what I can only vaguely see. The poetic resolution of "Juledag" with all the whirling snowflakes is a marvelous fusion of writing and image that combine into a calm (inner) weather, full of stillness.

There must be a deep desire in Strand to reconcile external and internal form and change without losing the sensuality of the works. And I am attracted to *Den største form har ingen kontur*. A linen-bound cassette with spiral binding - but here the braille expands into entire mappings which extend far beyond the pages themselves, and this makes me think of both the photos in *99/9 Vestervik* and *Tekst-Tur*. In the latter case the expansion is geographical, but in *Den største form har ingen kontur* it is a landscape unfolding within the viewer who, while closing their eyes lets their fingers caress the pages, following the dots, testing the boundaries of the shapes.

These are wild landscapes that Randi Annie Strand creates.

And they are, as I see it, variations on the letterform, the word picture.

And thus, she keeps the very heart of the matter in her sights and in her hands, acknowledging the ultimate sensitivity that a book can bring forth. For I see the mutability and elusiveness of the geometric shapes in *Arabesk*, *Prisma* and *Orbit/A* as a conquest of the essence of the typographic word picture; its malleability that compels an action, thought, or feeling forward. Nothing stands still.

As in Ernst Jandl's poem "Antipodes"<sup>5</sup>

a sheet of paper

and below that

a sheet of paper

and below that

a sheet of paper

and below that

a sheet of paper

and below that

a table

and below that

a floor

and below that

a room

and below that

a cellar

and below that

a planet earth

and below that

a cellar

and below that

a room

and below that

a floor

and below that

a table

and below that

a sheet of paper

and below that

a sheet of paper

and below that

a sheet of paper

and below that

a sheet of paper

Layer upon layer, loose, transparent, open.

To continue this Jandl association, in the first instance Strand has nothing, then a language, then an entire life and capacity for thought. Memories sharpened by the senses, especially the tactile, which are present throughout her entire production. Encountering her work is like getting drunk on the tangible experience that one gains access to through one's eyes and the use of one's hands. Her artworks always emerge through layers of coherence.

Boundless, the space that Jandl refers to makes me think of *Den største form har ingen kontur*. As does the cutting of the spiral-bound pages. Inside the thick, buttoned-up linen cover rests the inlay. It feels unusually large and physical. The spiral binding is shorter than the height of the paper. In an unexpected way, however, my eyes experience a lightness and harmony that is probably due to the fact that the length of the spiral itself (18 cm) is balanced to the width of the paper (30 cm) in a way corresponding to the golden ratio. Despite the apparent imbalance and heaviness, this relationship transforms the sheet of paper into a floating state of balance. Then, after opening the book the relief prints alternate between braille and maps. Everything creates an experience of space. And give rise to the questions: what does language look like and when do images become language?

That question is reinforced by the text, which appears in pale gray to be read and transformed into relief.

I view these works: *Arabesk*, *Prisma* and *Orbit/A* as varying constructions of language.

How geometric shapes in various color schemes might be comparable to words, sentences, combinations. This linguistic aspect of the shapes harks back to Auguste Herbin, who went so far as to create an alphabet of geometry and then combined the shapes into tangible visual sentences.

Strand does the same. And the variation, the mobility of shapes, never remaining in a frozen pose, each part meeting another, all this then gives rise to new constellations. Movement is important, static art denotes a standstill. Changeability is important.

Her interplay of shapes and colors is also rooted in the work of Josef Albers. *Prisma* is a prismatic journey in form, a core is a cube in transformation but with an opening that can give birth to new geometric shapes. Unlike Albers, Randi does not lock her images into a predetermined template, here additional elements appear which stretch the play of forms and open up for new unexpected leaps in how the image may be viewed.

*Read/see wordPicture, that is - word pictures.*

The series entitled *Arabesk* is presented in various color schemes. Hard covers and an almost floating inlay of Japanese paper. The geometry can create illusions of parallel perspectives. The pauses in the void are interspersed with reproduced variable shapes. They are visible and intermingled already before the page is turned. Strand tests languages - different sentence structures in *Prisma*, *Arabesk*, *Orbit*. As is often the case in art, it is about what cannot be said. There are no transitions between spread and execution, everything is there when the cover is opened. With an image, I see these covers on Japanese paper as a gust of wind that carries with it a cloud of scents that I can only identify one by one after a while and which, in the end only remain as a distant memory.

As is often the case in art, it is about what cannot be said. And the language used is about seeing, discovering, uncovering, new structures and spaces. To open borders and let them remain open.

This is what Lennart Sjögren wrote:<sup>6</sup>

"Time and time again we think we are drawing boundaries, we think we have found a formula, but in the face of a new work of art, our assumptions are shattered, we are filled with a new enthusiasm or new reservations - the boundaries have to be revised."

The reader who browses through the pages closes the covers, but the books remain open.

<sup>1</sup> Kaleidoscope, 1&2, 1980, translation Sune Nordgren.

<sup>2</sup> Gunnar Harding, *Hardings café*, 2023, translation Gunnar Harding, Tore Janson

<sup>3</sup> Quote as above.

<sup>4</sup> Joel Halldorf, *Bokens folk*, 2023, page 116.

<sup>5</sup> Ernst Jandl, *Mitt skrivbord är dukat för alla*, 1993, translation Ingemar Johansson.

<sup>6</sup> Lennart Sjögren, *Notes on pictures*, 2008.