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VISUAL DIRECTION IN THE DESIGN OF ED VAN DER ELSKEN'S PHOTOBOOKS: CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS AND METHODS OF IMPLEMENTATION

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The article analyzes Ed van der Elsen's photobook design as an integrated communicative system, focusing on Love on the Left Bank (1956), Sweet Life (1966), and archival mock-ups created with Jurriaan Schrofer. The study examines "visual direction" as a method for constructing narrative structures. Based on materials from the Rijksmuseum and Nederlands Fotomuseum, it identifies key techniques of montage, cropping, and rhythmic organization. The findings demonstrate that these strategies formed a new model of photobook design, integrating photography and graphic design into a unified system that serves as a foundation for contemporary multimedia practices.

Key words: visual direction, photobook design, Ed van der Elsen, visual narrative, graphic design, cinematic sequencing.

INTRODUCTION

Modern media design increasingly relies on visual storytelling, where images function as part of a controlled narrative. This approach originates in the designer photobook, where photography serves as material for engineering sequences, rhythm, and semantic accents. Ed van der Elsen's *Love on the Left Bank* (1956) is a seminal example: its logic of layout, montage, and spread organization transforms the book into a dynamic visual structure.

PURPOSE

This study substantiates "visual direction" methods in Ed van der Elsen's photobooks and determines the role of design mock-ups in shaping the aesthetics of subjective realism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of Ed van der Elsen's archives at the Nederlands Fotomuseum and the Rijksmuseum reveals a method rooted in conscious visual engineering. Extensive experimentation with mock-ups and contact prints prioritizes design thinking over mere documentary recording, transforming the archive into a laboratory for structural synthesis [3]. While *Love on the Left Bank* (1956) established the core principles of this approach, the archival mock-ups for *Sweet*



Life (1966) demonstrate their practical evolution toward a more complex multimedia logic. These materials serve as the primary evidence for the systematic integration of photography into a designed narrative environment.

1. *Variable Cropping as a Narrative Tool.* Working materials show that cropping functioned as a conceptual device shifting semantic accents rather than a corrective measure. By using diverse formats and zoom levels from a single negative, the author strictly regulated image perception and viewer engagement. In *Love on the Left Bank*, tight portrait cropping acts as a psychological tool that eliminates peripheral distraction and creates an effect of "immediate presence." As Frits Gierstberg notes, these scale shifts activate visual perception and define viewer interaction through controlled optical distance [2]. This selective framing transforms the static photograph into a dynamic cinematic unit, allowing the designer to direct the reader's gaze with a film editor's precision. Thus, cropping serves as a structural tool for organizing visual material into a hierarchical narrative.

2. *Montage Organization and Spread Rhythm.* Photobook construction relied on sequential juxtaposition, where each spread functioned as a module within a continuous narrative system. The collaboration with graphic designer Jurriaan Schrofer was pivotal, introducing a rigorous structural organization that treated the book as a spatio-temporal object [1]. In *Feest*, the narrative dynamic is constructed through sharp contrasts in scale and composition, creating a visual "metronome" for the reader. This spread organization aligns with cinematographic montage principles and represents a foundational model of narrative design in photobooks. Furthermore, archival mock-ups for *Sweet Life* (Figs. 1, 2) illustrate the application of precise scale ratios to establish a rhythmic structure that governs the entire publication.



Fig.1. Man and machine. Worker at a shipyard, Burutu, Nigeria, 1959, Gelatin silver print



Fig.2. 'Unspoiled primitives'; naive painter Call Black and his wife Ruby in front of their private museum in the Mojave Desert, Arizona, United States, 1960, Gelatin silver print

Figures 1-2. © Ed van der Elsen, Spread from the design of the photo book *Sweet Life*, before 1966

3. *Materiality of the Photographic Print as a Visual Component.* A defining feature of Elsen's method is the use of pronounced grain, high contrast, and mechanical interventions on the print surface. These physical characteristics



function not as technical defects but as fundamental components of the image's semantic structure. This approach aligns with contemporary visual culture theories where materiality is viewed as a significant communicative element that bridges the gap between the recorded event and its graphic representation. Scratches, inscriptions, and other traces of physical manipulation act as active compositional elements, emphasizing the procedural and iterative nature of image-making (Figs. 3, 4).



Fig. 3. Portrait of an old woman in Japan, with lettering in black felt-tip pen, 1984, Gelatin silver print

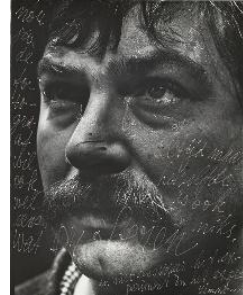


Fig. 4. Portrait of Karel Appel, 1958-1963, Scratched gelatin silver print

Figures 1-4. Collection Rijksmuseum-Amsterdam, © Ed van der Elsken

Furthermore, this focus on the physical substrate challenges the traditional hierarchy of the photographic image, where the "what" (content) is usually privileged over the "how" (process). By highlighting the materiality of the print, the authors introduce a meta-narrative level where the technical artifacts of production become intentional semiotic markers.

Elsken and Schrofer transformed photography into a material surface for radical graphic intervention. Scratches, handwritten comments, and physical alterations shatter the illusion of neutral reality, turning the print into an autonomous design object where materiality and gesture become integral to the visual message. This approach emphasizes the tactile nature of the image, shifting the viewer's focus from the depicted subject to the process of its construction. Consequently, the photographic print is redefined as a site of expressive synthesis, where the boundaries between documentary evidence and graphic art are deliberately blurred.

4. *Significance of Archival Mock-ups.* Archival materials, notably from the *Crazy World* exhibition (Rijksmuseum, 2020), provide a unique perspective on the photobook's evolution from raw contact prints to complex final spreads. This archival evidence confirms that mock-up creation was not merely a technical necessity but a systematic and critical stage of design engineering [3]. Each mock-up functions as a spatial prototype where the relationship between image, white space, and typography is rigorously tested and refined. Furthermore, these archives demonstrate how "visual direction" was meticulously planned through iterative physical manipulation, proving that the final publication is the result of a rigorous



architectural logic applied to photography. This process reveals the transition from "taking" a picture to "constructing" a narrative, establishing a methodology that remains relevant in the era of digital storytelling.

CONCLUSIONS

Ed van der Elsen transformed the photobook into a cohesive narrative system where "visual direction"—achieved through variable cropping, strategic scaling, and rhythmic organization—prioritized semantic integrity. His deliberate material manipulation integrated photography and graphic design into a unified communicative structure, making the image surface an active participant in the story. This research redefines the layout as a primary carrier of meaning, where the synergy between Elsen's photography and Jurriaan Schrofer's structural logic bridges analog heritage with contemporary UX and multimedia practices. Consequently, the experimentalism of the 1950s–60s remains a vital blueprint for innovations in modern visual media.

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ПРОКОПЧУК І., ПРИСЯЖНЕНКО О., ПРОКОПЧУК А. ВІЗУАЛЬНА РЕЖИСУРА В ДИЗАЙНІ ФОТОКНИГ ЕДА ВАН ДЕР ЕЛСКЕНА: КОНЦЕПТУАЛЬНІ ЗАСАДИ ТА МЕТОДИ РЕАЛІЗАЦІЇ

Проаналізовано дизайн фотокниг нідерландського фотографа Еда ван дер Елсена як цілісну комунікативну систему на прикладі видань «Love on the Left Bank» (1956), «Sweet Life» (1966) та архівних макетів, реалізованих у співпраці з графічним дизайнером Юрріаном Шрофером. Досліджено їхню взаємодію крізь призму концепції візуальної режисури як методу проектування наративної структури. На основі аналізу матеріалів Rijksmuseum та Nederlands Fotomuseum виявлено прийоми монтажу, кадрювання й ритмічної організації розворотів. Матеріали свідчать, що ці стратегії сформували нову модель фотодизайну, яка інтегрує фотографію і графічне проектування та стала підґрунтям сучасних мультимедійних практик.

Ключові слова: візуальна режисура, дизайн фотокниги, творчість Еда ван дер Елсена, фотодизайн, візуальний наратив.