

# One for

Since co-founding Gestalten in 1995, Robert Klanten has presided over the creation of more than 500 books. How does one run a successful publishing company in the 21st century?



## One for the Books

Text by Hilda Hoy, Photos by Dan Zoubek

### Let's start at the beginning. How did Gestalten come to be?

I was trained as an industrial designer, but by the end of the 1980s I became involved in the curation of prototype shows for the Frankfurt consumer goods fair, which was a great opportunity to meet a lot of interesting people. Around that time the Wall came down and we decided to move to Berlin. My former partners and I were working in graphic design, mainly for the music industry. We did posters for the Love Parade. I had the idea to do a book on all the different creative people we'd met, mainly around the electronic music scene. We spread the news, collected 1,100 pre-order forms and brought them to the bank to borrow money. I didn't really anticipate a publishing company would come out of that.

### Why did you publish in English from the start?

In the 90s, Berlin was very international. You had a great club scene, a squatters' scene, people from all over the world coming to be a part of what was going on, having a great

time, working in bars. There was a great feeling of camaraderie. That was the community that I associated with much more than the German-speaking creative scene at the time, which I found narrow-minded.

### What do you remember of that time?

East Berlin was a very bizarre place, a place without rules. Some of the party people would simply break into houses or cellars with a crowbar. If the police came, they just produced a fake permit. East Berliners believed so much in permits and stamps that they'd say, "Okay." Nobody knew who was in charge. Anybody could do anything. We had parties in the most impossible places, like bunkers, really historic places. It was a very inspiring time.

### Your recently opened second shop, Gestalten Pavilion, is in the West, a location that has become symbolic of the West's broader revival. Why West Berlin, why now?

West Berlin was so run down and so boring and mundane, and whenever you have a situation like

that, you have a lot of potential. Look at what's happening now in Detroit. A lot of people went to East Berlin and it became a bit of a Freilichtmuseum, a tourist attraction. West Berlin has a very different tradition. In our shop in Mitte we get a lot of tourists, whereas in the West we have Berliners, people coming from Potsdam, people who work around the corner. It's a very different mix.

### How did Gestalten get into the retail business?

Around the time of the financial crisis, we were making 80 percent of our turnover outside of Germany and weren't sure what the future would bring. In Germany, we didn't have much of a footprint and we wanted to change that. We wanted to go beyond just making our books available at key bookshops such as Walther König by providing a story around them. So we started doing exhibitions and talks. We began selling products from our books, doing art editions and holding workshops on subjects like infographics, typography or 3D printing.

### Is the Gestalten Pavilion also about building a story around books?

Same thing, different space. We see a different attitude towards products and work. A lot of kids leaving university are no longer interested in pursuing a career in an ad agency and working themselves to death in a cubicle. Now people pick up a traditional trade or a craft because they want to do something tactile, something that will give meaning to their community. Compiling the stories, products and companies that have that kind of work ethos is an interesting mission in itself. We want to shine a light on all these different possibilities and careers.

### Is this ethos something you relate to, taking pride in producing something tactile, something of value?

That is what books should be about. If you look at the way the industry has evolved, the internet did not replace the book, it replaced the paperback. I am not mourning the paperback. The paperback was a mundane, cheap format printed on valuable resources. I totally embrace the e-book to replace that.



What we do has very different goals. Our books are made to provide inspiration and identification. The expectations for the tactile and physical appearance of books are constantly rising. People expect books to be personal, to be something they're happy to have around the house.

### The publishing industry has faced many challenges in recent years. Is branching out into retail what it takes to survive?

What you have these days is e-commerce shops trying to become publishers and publishers trying to sell goods. Why? Because publishers have something others don't: a community. For 25 years, I've been finding products from young designers, interesting stuff, curating it, putting it in a book, in an exhibition. Now I put it on a retail table, let people buy it. When Amazon can deliver a new toothbrush to your house with a drone, people don't have to leave the house to fill their needs. I think retail and art are mixing. People learn about themselves through their emotional relationship with products.

### How do you plan to stay ahead of the game?

I feel like I've been doing the same thing for 25 years, which means

changing, moving things forward. We follow the evolution of the creative industry. This is what people trust us to do well. I think the only thing that is going to change is rethinking subjects, formats and opportunities.

### Rethinking subjects and formats? How will that look?

My understanding has always been that I'm not devoted to putting ink on paper. My devotion, my challenge, my expertise lies in finding and formatting subjects, and then I need to decide what media they should go to. Because information has spread over various different media and formats and devices. I think the most crucial thing is not to say, I stick to my medium; I stick to paper. The most important thing is to stick to your ideals, stick to your readership. Become a trusted source of information for your community.

### Beginnen wir mit den Anfängen. Wie ist der Gestalten-Verlag entstanden?

Ich hatte Industriedesign studiert. Ende der 80er Jahre kuratierte ich Prototyp-Shows auf der Frankfurter Konsumgütermesse. Während dieser Zeit lernte ich viele interessante Leute kennen. Nach dem Mauerfall entschieden wir uns dann, nach Berlin umzuziehen. Meine ehemaligen Partner und ich waren überwiegend in der Musikindustrie als Grafikdesigner tätig. Wir haben zum Beispiel Plakate für die Love Parade entworfen. Ich hatte dann die Idee, all die verschiedenen kreativen Leute, die wir im Laufe der Zeit getroffen hatten, in einem Buch zu porträtieren. Die kamen hauptsächlich aus der Elektromusikszene. Wir haben das publik gemacht und 1.100 Vorbestellungen, mit denen wir dann einen Kredit bei der Bank beantragen konnten, gesammelt. Damals hatte ich allerdings nicht erwartet, dass daraus ein Verlag entstehen würde.

### Warum habt ihr von Anfang an auf Englisch gearbeitet?

In den 90er Jahren war Berlin sehr international und es gab eine große Club- und Hausbesetzerszene. Leute kamen dort aus aller Welt zusammen,

1 & 2 - Gestalten Space in Mitte, the publishing company's first shop

3 - Inside the new Gestalten Pavilion at Bikini Berlin



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um die Stadt zu erleben, um Teil eines großen Ganzen zu sein oder um einfach Spaß zu haben. Es war ein tolles Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl und mit dieser internationalen Gemeinschaft habe ich mich damals viel mehr identifiziert als mit der deutschsprachigen Kreativszene. Ich fand die sehr borniert.

### Woran erinnerst Du Dich aus dieser Zeit am meisten?

Ostberlin war ein skurriler Ort ohne Regeln. So mancher Partygänger benutzte einfach ein Brecheisen, um in irgendwelche Häuser oder Keller zu gelangen. Wenn die Polizei angerückt kam, dann wiesen sie einfach eine gefälschte Genehmigung vor. Ostberliner vertrauten damals auf Genehmigungen und Stempel. Niemand wusste so genau, wer eigentlich für was verantwortlich ist. Jeder konnte tun und lassen, was er wollte. Parties fanden an den unmöglichsten Orten, wie z.B. Bunker oder historischen Plätzen, statt. Diese Zeit war unglaublich inspirierend.

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