

Conversation with Kohei Sugiura :

Keep the Ability to Be Surprised.

○ : Rex How

◎ : Kohei Sugiura

○ : This is a mook we publish, called *Less*. Hope you like it.

◎ : What does this “Less” mean?

○ : It has two meanings. First, in a time of “the more, the better”, we want to promote a philosophy of “less.” For example, spend less, eat less, etc. Second, we find that sometimes things have to be first reduced before they can grow.

◎ : The speech I gave the other day in Kaohsiung was about the similar topic: One is Two, Two is Many, and Many returns to One. That’s the flow of Yin (陰) and Yang (陽). Yin and Yang seem to be two things but in fact have various meanings and can be combined into one.

I often use our fingers as a metaphor. The ten fingers stand for Many. This one can be science, this one the society, this one the environment... But they all stem from the same origin, the One. People nowadays tend to make things more and more, as in the nonstop development of science. Yet they don’t know how to return to the origin, which I think is the problem.

One contains Two and Many, but still, Many will return to One. I’m very happy that we share the similar thought.

○ : I like a saying in Zen very much : ”如拳作掌，似水成波；波即是水，掌即是拳” which in a way corresponds to what we talked about.

You started as an architect. As for architecture, you said, “Knowledge of architecture enables me to make use of time and space more appropriately.” Please explain more.

◎ : Not sure if I can make it very clear and complete...In 1964, I went to Germany to teach at The Ulm School of Design, which specialized in industrial design.

Although I studied architecture, in 60s I still view the architecture only as a structure. Not until then didn’t I notice architecture was just like human body that was composed of many organs, veins, etc. Since then I approach this question from two

aspects: just focus on one small part? Or to look at the whole and then investigate what's inside?

● **A spreadsheet as a unit**

○ : You said because of the architecture background, when you're doing book design, "you see the advantages and conflicts of the book from the periphery." What do you mean by "periphery"?

◎ : A Book designer's job is to figure out a good solution about the book. He approaches the book from the outside to the inside because readers take the same route, first looking from far away, approaching, and then taking the book. But the book has its author, editor, and manufacturer. They also have their own jobs and aims. One book contains many different elements and processes. This is something like the construction process of architecture. In my case, I'm always thinking about the goals of the author, the publisher...I tried to keep in mind so many details, combine them together and bring them into the book design. Take this book for example, from this side of view, it is one book; from the other side of view, it has many sheets of paper. This is One, and this is Many. Also, the book has the right side of the page and the left side of the page, this is Yang and Yin, bound together to make one book. The book is composed of texts, figures, sometimes charts, different kinds of information and materials, all combined together. I think this is something the world itself or cosmos itself. My design is from outside in, and inside out.

○ : But what do the ordinary designers think ?

◎ : The ordinary designers just pursue good outlook of books or something different from others in the bookshop. They only relate with the surface but not reflect the deep structure or deep impression of their mind. As for me, I tried to bring out those things into my book design. That is the reason why my books are always complex and not simple looking.

○ : One problem in Taiwan is that the cover design is usually executed separately from the interior design. What do you think about this ?

◎ : The two should be combined. It should be total, not separate. It should be executed by one unit of designers. Even if two or three designers work together, there should be one strong director overlooking the whole process, otherwise each part goes its own way, arms and legs won't cooperate, like robots.

○ : You said you take every spreadsheet as one unit. The repetition of every spreadsheet makes a story. So what's the main key issue to make the story line ?

◎ : This is something like film making. The story develops gradually with the sequence of shots. This is the title page, this is casting, and then the story begins, part one, part two, part three...maybe scene one, scene two. There should be such a division. But normally books are treated as container, which means container of letters, words, pictures, and information. I instead want to bring in the blood and breath and circulation among the content, try to make it vivid, and try to make it one body. So in the case of my book design, I need many details and movement. I always carry the subject through the whole book, from the beginning until the end. It should be moving, something comes in and something goes out. The book should be like the world, not static at all, but always moving, changing and bringing in new things. So maybe designers should think from readers' aspect. Every time readers read, the first time, the second time, and the third time, they will find new points and new interesting details.

○ : Details are important, but they can also be Devil. If you treat the details in a wrong way, it can result in a disaster.

Detail is also devil, if you do details wrong, they will become devils.

◎ : Exactly, though those details are additional to the main information, not necessary. But in my case, take this talking for example, sometimes I'm thinking, sometimes I speak fast, sometimes with a smile, sometimes I'm angry — such change of atmosphere should be important. I always try to bring in the changing sentiments.

●Difference between books and magazines

○ : How do you apply the concept of “a spreadsheet as a unit” into magazine design ?

◎ : Normally, except for a few occasions, I don't design magazine covers because magazines have too many pages and items. I made several magazines myself, especially during 70s-80s, and I tried to bring in some unique concepts. One magazine has right side pages and left side pages. Once I made all the left side pages be pictures, all the other side be texts. The picture is moving slightly like a film, showing important meanings. And the texts gradually explain Michel Foucault's philosophy. The two sides are made of different materials, one side paintings, the other side philosophical texts. But they are cooperating and bringing about very interesting effects. I always try to find out some new possibilities.

○ : But anyway, the spreadsheet concept can be applied to the magazine editing as well, right ?

◎ : Yes, but not always. There are lots of contents in one magazine, so I tend to divide every part in different styles, and mix them up like Chinese fried rice, which makes unusual taste together. That it's mixed up is very important. It is like arrange noisy sounds and pure sounds alternately. Some noisy sound comes in, some pure sound goes out. Before the pure one, there is always the very noisy one.

○ : But how do you arrange them?

◎ : In the case of magazines, sometime the editor wants to make a special issue. So it goes like: normal issue as usual, the special issue something different; normal issue again quiet, special issue again noisy. If I work with a good editor, we will figure out the tempo and mood changing and design accordingly. We don't always show the same face, but sometimes change the face suddenly, and again return to the normal face, and again change face.....

○ : So it's different from doing books.

◎ : Yes. Magazines continue their existence, like heartbeat. So magazines should beat, and this beating should be developed, and hold readers' interest issue by issue. This beating is like Beethoven's symphony, first movement, second movement, third movement, fourth movement...and the Song of Joy comes. Magazines make beating and rhythm.

But it's different for books. Each book exists in one; while a magazine has continuous existence. However, twenty issues of magazine can be condensed into one book. From this point of view, magazines seem to be many independent existences. One individual book then has its own beating.

○ : Speaking of the text part, you said you "want to make texts so attractive that readers not only use their eyes to read but also want to read out loud." Can you explain more about this ?

◎ : Letters are always connected with a voice. When the voice is frozen, it becomes a letter. We can use different kinds of typography to express different voices, like this is loud, this is softer, this is a lady's voice, this is an old gentleman's voice. I always look at the typeface and think, who is speaking ? What kind of voice they want to express ? My typography is always sounding and noisy. Readers not only look but also want to read with voice. Anyway, in my design, typography is always changing, producing a sounding drama.

○ : What about a novel, it should be one type of...?

◎ : When I can cooperate with the author deeply, I will do it in a more different way—with the author's consent. Normally, they hold a very tough attitude and cannot allow. (laughs.)

○ : What's the essence of typography ?

◎ : To make information vivid, not cool. Today's western typography tends to keep the content quiet, make it look very intelligent, very peaceful. When the typography is clean, the world appears very peaceful. But actually, it's not. There are many things behind. During the Cultural Revolution in China, people wrote many words on the wall, made the wall newspaper. Some words were big, some words were small. Very noisy, but brought out people's energy of action.

Sometimes, even for me, I use quiet typography, but basically I want to make it more noisy and vivid.

○ : Compared to twenty years ago, what are the advantage and disadvantage of today's typesetting since there are so many tools now ?

◎ : Today's IT revolution makes possible all kinds of expressive typography. Sometimes you might do it too much, so it takes clever control. I think it is related to taste, taste of editors, taste of designers, and taste of publishers. Good taste should be set behind.

○ : Where does good taste come from ?

◎ : Well, I don't know. If one breathes fresh air, eats nice food, if one laughs peacefully...? Enjoy life! (laughs.)

● Design and artistic disposition that editors should have

○ : What's the most important thing for the designers who want to bring life into books?

◎ : Good author, good editor, and good printer. I'm always working together with those people. If I miss one, the good book never comes. In the 80s I made many books which were quite new at that time. I had many good authors, editors and printers. We always met together and discussed, trying to create something new, something different.

○ : You also said that "editors and authors are usually not good at dealing with visual materials. Their way of thinking is constrained by the text." So, what makes a good editor ?

◎ : Chinese characters, called Kanji in Japanese, are ideographs. They come from drawings of the nature, imitating the shapes like bulls' figure, horses' figure, and trees, etc. So Chinese characters particularly always want to go back to the nature, always want to have their old home. As a result, editors from Kanji culture are more likely to have the ability to combine images and text. Chinese and Japanese editors should have more of such talent than European. However, in fact, European editors are doing much better. I don't know how they achieve it and what happened to Chinese and Japanese or Korean editors. Now Korean editors are making a lot of progress. Their books contain lot of images and are also full color. But Japanese editors still can't. They treat the characters merely as reflection of scholars' idea, and they cut the relationship between the nature and the characters, which is the most important part. That's why most of the editors are poor at collecting images and finding out the relationship between text and image.

Japanese Manga is very famous. Many editors come from Manga. So there are two sides: traditional book editors on one side; Manga editors on the other. Sometimes they exchange to combine their way of book editing. But the problem is now Japanese publishing world is getting weaker and weaker. They lost the energy to make adventure, to create something new. This should be a good time to find out the connection of image and character, but they lost such adventurous mind. So in the case of our country, we still cannot find a good solution. I hope Taiwan can find a new way.

○ : And what is your suggestion for young editors who want to make progress and become more talented ?

◎ : Look more, feel more, read more, breathe more, and try to make it one. Now the world is further dividing and the power to unite is getting weak. Science, art, politics, economy...We need to make them one, and make them a good one.

○ : But how can they have the ability to make it one ?

◎ : Use intuition, feel one's own existence, and all the others' existence, always try to make them one. Eat all the information, all the pictures and texts, and try to make them one.

●Importance of the memory of writing

○ : Why do Japanese insist so much of vertical typesetting ?

◎ : This should be the tradition. We have the tradition of poem writing, especially haiku, tanka....We cannot feel the lyricism or tenderness in horizontal writing. Moreover, we are talented to the continuous writing of kanji and kana combined. This

tradition requests vertical typesetting and is related to literature.

○ : There is also poem writing in Chinese, but we are still using horizontal writing.

◎ : Maybe Japanese insist more. Now young people in the university write their paper horizontally. However, even that, if they want to write a poem, it must be vertical. Scientifically, of course, the horizontal typesetting is better for reading because our eyes are set horizontally. We know about that but still insist.

○ : You said the letters will be life through the human body's movement. You also mentioned that kanji is noisy; if you use hand writing, you can put more human factors in there. So what is your suggestion to the nowadays young generation who type instead of writing ?

◎ : In Japan, when I buy something and request receipts from the sellers, they cannot write my name. Most people forget how to write kanji. They can print it out but cannot write because writing kanji requires using all the body. There are lots of elements in there, and these elements are combined with the movement of hand. So kanji is getting extinct not from eyesight but from the absence of the writing memory that supports their structure. So when I ask my friends, they say it's the same even for Chinese people, in Taiwan or Mainland China. The construction of alphabets is easy. Maybe that's why they never lose the writing sense. But writing is necessary for kanji. Kanji is so beautiful when hand-written and such an important tradition. I'm seriously angry about that always trying to explain this point. It is also very significant for the world culture; a large part of it is related with kanji writing.

○ : Can you explain more about this ?

◎ : Yes. Such esoteric characters have many elements combined together, like monsters. Monsters always have horn, beard, many elements combined together because they want to become nameless, something we cannot simply call who it is. They want to be more complex, more unusual. So do these characters. They want to become full of power, so many powers should be combined. They also want to become nameless or not simply named. Chinese characters have this tendency at all times. In Bronze Age, for example, 饕餮 (とうてつ) is the combination of many animals, tiger, dragon, and else, which conveys a very strong feeling. Chinese people like traditionally to multi-combine monsters and characters.

Such an enigmatic existence is always charming to people, like characters or icons that cannot be understood. *The Da Vinci Code* becomes the best seller; the iconography in Da Vinci's paintings is also enigmatic and intriguing. It is the same in Chinese characters, always the combination of many elements. We try to find out the

reason behind and enjoy the process.

Young people today, when using cell phones, try to combine alphabetical signs to express joyful faces or sad faces. This shares the same tendency as Chinese characters and is developing day by day, only they don't know about that.

○ : Like “orz” ?

◎ : Yes, the cell phone signs like this are called Emoticon, emotional icons. They express the sentiments with the combination of signs. On the one hand, the characters become simplified; on the other hand, the characters want to get together and to convey something new. They have these two directions: to be more simplified and to combine and become unusual. The two ways of extension will join at some point and become one, like Yin and Yang. Emoticon and kanji are on the same side, not the simplified side, but to combine and create something new.

○ : Then what is on the simplified side ?

◎ : The alphabets and also mathematic signs.

●Keep the ability to be surprised

○ : What's your suggestion to develop the five senses ?

◎ : The most important thing is the ability to be surprised. That means to be very sensitive to something new and unusual, and then the surprise comes, the five senses become one. Some big surprise can make you jump. The breath and heartbeat, hearing and singing.....The whole body becomes one, and then the jumping...Being surprised is very important for human beings.

I once made the Map of Taste and the Map from Dogs. One aim is to transmit our existence into other animals, or into other existences, other conditions. Human beings tend to think we are the center of the world, thus we sense through one sense. But at the same time, we should think about all the creatures around us: they also survive, they also breathe. In the 70s, I walked around Asia quite often. And I found in many places that there were a lot of beings living together, even trees, trees were breathing...The world was so noisy! So I tried to shift my senses into those trees, and animals, or into my tongue, my ear, and tried to find out other ways of feeling, combined them together again in my body and tried to understand what was “Me,” who was relating with the others. So, One is reflecting Many, Many is reflecting One, always like that.

○ : Why do people lose the ability to be surprised ?

◎ : Since education has developed, people become conceited, like “I know the world,

I know everything.” Also, in the city, lighting illumination spreads everywhere. We have no dark space, no dark woods. The dark symbolizes the unknown. People write about what is known, what we know in 24hrs, and we lost the unknown part. When we are surprised, we are facing the unknown, and it’s an opportunity to combine the known and unknown together.

○ : Then, how can we recover the ability to be surprised ?

◎ : This should be difficult. Nowadays most people face computers. Computers never laugh, and people’s faces become monotonous and lose smiles. People should be aware of this problem. It’s necessary that we separate from computers sometimes and laugh together. Ancient people spend a lot of time like that. They were always laughing, crying, eating and dancing; at the same time they created fresh five senses and got vivid life as human beings. We’ve lost these things by 90 percents, even in Asia. We lost not only the tradition, but also the whole way of life.

○ : Is it more serious in the west ?

◎ : It’s even earlier in the west, almost around 60s or 70s. More than that, when I visited Germany in the 60s, people didn’t laugh but keep crying. Their typography was always showing the same face, calm and cool.

But most Asian designers now are following this trend. They don’t take care of Asian vividness. I think we need this vividness again to separate from the computer.

○ : So the ability to be surprised seems like a principle. As for practice, how do you suggest..... ?

◎ : I don’t know. I’m trying too. Each person should make some effort for that; they should try to get surprised once by themselves.

○ : Sometimes it can mean a lot even if you have some accidents, some bad things.....

◎ : Yeah, bad things can be a good symptom.

●Books should be a friend that is willing to sit beside the reader

○ : What kind of books do you read yourself ?

◎ : Many different kinds. There are almost two hundreds types of books in my library. For most of them, I never finish the whole book but just read some parts, but I keep in mind what the other parts are about. When I face a new program, I search one book and another, combine various parts little by little, and then make it one. Another subject may come from a different book. So when I look around the three hundred six degrees, all the interest is spreading out.

Fortunately, I have good editors that support my design, and also friends around

me, including artists, writers and musicians. Day by day, I get a lot of information from them, like a sponge.

○ : Do you use computer and internet ?

◎ : Not really. I want to keep my eye sight as clear as possible.

○ : What's your opinion about digital reading ?

◎ : Monotonous.

○ : Even if they can present colors and pictures, they are still monotonous ? Why ?

◎ : Books can be touched. Books have five senses. I'm always repeating that the soft stuff of PC is never soft

○ : What about electronic paper ?

◎ : You know, that is plastic. The traditional paper, especially the Chinese paper, is mixed up with wood or wool fiber, so they can keep air, they can keep humidity, they can keep light. The outlook is so deep that most people cannot see the details of the paper, unless they feel through intuition. Plastic reading sheet is so different from that. Even if they imitate the paper very well, there must be some different shining, some unusual equipment. I think it will take more than ten years to make them look the same. Old paper is much more familiar, and much more local.

○ : So you are a believer of "Books never disappear" ?

◎ : Yes. Books never disappear. If we make it more interesting and beautiful, books never die.

○ : You mentioned that paper making in Japan is very prosperous. What do they do?

◎ : They make a lot of effort to make unusual and different kinds of paper. The Takeo Paper Company, for example, keeps trying new materials, imitating western as well as eastern paper, to produce something new. The paper they make gives designers strong stimulation and influence. As I said, book is music; different parts of the book can sound differently. The paper itself is talking, is a vivid existence.

○ : For the general readers, do you have any suggestion for them to understand and appreciate the quality of books ?

◎ : Nowadays people request publishers to make books as cheap as possible, and also small, easy to carry. In Japan, books are getting smaller and smaller, like this pocket size. I think this is the end of books; this is the cemetery. Books should be not only

cheap but also expensive. Books should be expensive and luxurious. Books should be like a friend who wants to sit beside me; books should be a lover of the reader. So publishers should publish not only the cheap edition but also the luxurious edition, otherwise books should not be existing. Cheap edition is just the essence of information that can easily be put in PC. Lovely books don't belong there.

Readers should not only search the cheap and simplified edition, but also try more to find out such a book, to enjoy touching books and eating books' spirit into your body.