

BArch DR 1 / 2385

or:

Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore / If on a Winter's Night a Traveler

In the spring of 2023, I was invited to participate in the exhibition »In This Moment: The Book as Witness« at the Environmental Design Library at UC Berkeley. The works in this exhibition were asked to address a current social issue from the individual perspective of the artist or their community, and could range from global issues to local and personal stories.

At the time, I was working on the book 2¹¹ (a project on copyright and perception) and was exploring, among other things, the topic of »censorship«. In the course of the research, I came across the print approval process in the East German publishing industry and the efforts of many GDR publishing-house employees to circumvent censorship through clever argumentation.

The (West German) Ministry of Culture writes in the Federal Archives:

»The constitution of the GDR did not provide for censorship. In fact, however, censorship was carried out under the alternative term of printing approval and affected almost the entirety of book production. The Cultural Advisory Council for Publishing had been responsible for this starting in 1946, the Office for Literature and Publishing (Kultureller Beirat für das Verlagswesen) since 1951, the Ministry of Culture (Ministerium für Kultur) since 1956, and the Central Administration for Publishing Houses and the Book Trade (Hauptverwaltung Verlage und Buchhandel) since 1963.

The printing approval procedure proceeded as follows: approval of the publishers' thematic plans by the Central Administration; submission of the manuscripts for technical and ideological review; decision on the basis of publishers' expert assessments, expert assessments of the Central Administration, and external expert assessments; if necessary, amendment negotiations after mostly verbal briefing of the publishers; compromise or even non-issuance of the printing approval«.

Source: The Federal Archives, Ministry of Culture, Introduction.

An interesting example of a GDR publication that was released despite critical content is the novel »If On A Winter's Night A Traveler« by the Cuban-born, Italian-raised author Italo Calvino. Although Calvino describes, among other things, the censorship authority of a repressive state and its chief censor Arkadian Porphyritsch, which is not dissimilar to the system in the GDR or Soviet Union at the time, the novel was published in 1984 by the publishing house Volk und Welt. The fact that it was published in the GDR was largely due to the skillful argumentation of the publisher's reviewer Carola Gerlach and her clever choice of Sigrid Siemund as an outside reviewer.

The printing approval procedure for »If On A Winter's Night A Traveler« can be found in the Federal Archives under the designation BArch DR 1 / 2385. In this artist's book, I have quoted a passage from Calvino's novel in which Arkadian Porphyritsch justifies censorship using the love and appreciation of literature.

Prophyritsch's praise of the repressive police state is embossed on a total of six thin, waxed papers, the transparent paper turning white at the embossing point. This handmade material was originally used as a stencil for mimeography, a precursor to xerography. The mimeography stencil is representative of the many simple techniques writers and artists used to reproduce texts that had no chance of publication in the official publishing system of the GDR. The six sheets loosely surround and cover a narrow booklet containing two expert assessments from the Federal Archives.

To read Calvino's text, the reader must open the sheets like a wrapper and fan them out. Through use, the wax layer will gradually acquire small white fractures; over time, the fine and fragile text may become completely illegible, its materiality disappearing, but the content will have impressed itself on the reader.

The booklet inside contains the two expert assessments on the novel submitted to the Central Administration for Publishing Houses and the Book Trade, a publisher's assessment by the editor Carola Gerlach and an external assessment by Sigrid Siemund. In their reviews, both argue for publication, whereby Carola Gerlach mentions the critical passage quite pointedly and presents it as a fine and clever satire by Calvino: »In the distorted satirical image, world literature created by the interaction of humanistic national literatures has been replaced by the international organization for the exchange of politically questionable and trivial texts, which absorb readers and authors alike and render them subjectless, controlling them through total mental manipulation. In this somewhat gloomy world view of the trivial novel, in which revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries work blithely with and against each other as »organizations,« one cannot actually blame the bourgeois author Calvino for his fine satire of the censor Arkadian Porphyritsch in the imaginary land of Irkania.«

The two texts are printed on handmade Mitsumata paper, which in its coloring and through small inclusions is reminiscent of the thin typewriter papers produced in the GDR. Underneath is another sheet with black block stripes, indicating the constant threat of censorship.

The gray cover with yellow embossing is reminiscent of a file, veiled by the thin waxed papers with Calvino's quote criticizing censorship. Both are kept in a multicolored acrylic box with the file number of the approval process as the title.

Text: Italo Calvino, Carola Gerlach, Sigrid Siemund

Idea, design, printing and binding: Veronika Schäpers

Paper: Toshaban (waxed Ganpi paper), Mitsumata paper and Rayon paper

Binding: Kozo covered Enduro Ice paper with embossed title

Printed from polymer plates

Multicolored acrylic box with silk-screened title

18 pages + 7 loose sheets, 15 x 30,5 cm + 30,5 x 46 cm

Edition: 15 copies numbered with Arabic numerals, 8 copies numbered with Roman numerals

Karlsruhe, 2023

»Nobody these days holds the written word in such high esteem as police states do,« Arkadian Porphyrich says. »What statistic allows one to identify the nations where literature enjoys true consideration better than the sums appropriated for controlling it and suppressing it? Where it is the object of such attentions, literature gains an extraordinary authority, inconceivable in countries where it is allowed to vegetate as an innocuous pastime, without risks. To be sure, repression must also allow an occasional breathing space, must close an eye every now and then, alternate indulgence with abuse, with a certain unpredictability in its caprices; otherwise, if nothing more remains to be repressed, the whole system rusts and wears down. Let's be frank: every regime, even the most authoritarian, survives in a situation of unstable equilibrium, whereby it needs to justify constantly the existence of its repressive apparatus, therefore of something to repress. The wish to write things that irk the established authorities is one of the elements necessary to maintain this equilibrium.