The kind of book you read from cover to cover

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Designing universal knowledge is a wildly ambitious book by Amsterdam-based designer Gerlinde Schuller that excavates our understanding of information. The text is an obsessive and disciplined examination of search engines, libraries, graphic communication, design-culture, the bias of various mediums, data management, taxonomy, modes of communication and so on. One could keep going with that list and that is partly due to the structure of this remarkable book. Designing universal knowledge is encyclopedic in nature and takes a non-hierarchical approach to delineating subjects of examination. The text neatly compartmental-izes the aforementioned and many more topics with alphabetized dictionary-style indicators. So, rather than arrange, organize and mobilize information to prop up a polemic or central thesis, Schuller has instead created a landscape for us to wander through.

Berners-Lee, Tim butts up against Bibliographisches Institut & F.A. Brockhaus AG and the Big Bang and the reader is left to draw their own conclusions. Despite the neutrality of this organizational scheme there is a definite topography to this landscape. After spending time in this book certain contours of interest become discernible and one can 'dial in' to the logic of this curation strategy.

In addition to providing history and context on diverse topics that span OLPC to Miss Universe, the text also features interviews with a range of prominent designers and theorists. These include: Richard Saul Wurman, John Maeda, Nigel Holmes, Wim Crouwel, Paul Kahn, Jean-Noël Jeanneney, Rop Gonggrijp, Marion Winkenbach, Hannah Hurtzig and Martin Alberts. These were all quite illuminating but the discussion with Hanna Hurtzig about her ongoing Blackmarket for Useful Knowledge and Non-Knowledge was particularly fascinating.

Hurtzig's blackmarkets are invested in assembling teams of experts in various fields and arranging 'knowledge fairs' where participants can book these specialists for one-on-one conversations. Part performance, part commodity exchange these blackmarkets create a 'hallucinated community college' in which 'learning and unlearning, knowledge and non-knowl-edge, and strategies of living and surviving will change ownership in a non-institutional way.'

Filed under Mem for memory, and tucked in the middle of Designing universal knowledge is a graphic timeline of recorded history. Working through this multi-page spread is a bit jarring considering the neutrality of the rest of the book and this is no doubt intentional. Reading this timeline is like examining a brilliant storyboard; time is represented logarithmically and there is a dizzying accumulation of history, events and cultural milestones. The sequence starts with a spartan mix of photography and annotation and ends with the almost illegible spread pictured above. It is a big, bold brushstroke inserted into an otherwise dispassionate index of history and knowledge - almost a wink at the audience.

A good friend of mine described Designing universal knowledge as not being 'the kind of book you read from cover to cover' but I completely disagree. It is exactly the kind of book you read from cover to cover, and return to in the future. Schuller has undoubtedly created a gorgeous text with an engaging layout, smart typography and well-selected accompanying photographs and illustrations, but the true merit of the book is not as a design object but as a brilliant con-sideration of the intersection of information and culture. One of my favourite moments in the text is from Alex Wright's essay Information chaos through the ages which refers to the Ancient Library of Alexandria. An excerpt:
'*The great Library of Alexandria represented the rise and fall of the imperial library, its fortunes bound directly to its political patronage. When the great city fell, so too did its library. Similar fates befell the great libraries of Rome, Greece and China, where the emperor Shi Huangdi destroyed most of his predecessor's library in hopes of imposing a new philosophical order to accompany his new regime. Ultimately, the great libraries of antiquity proved no more durable than the empires that supported them.*'

Designing universal knowledge relishes the ephemerality of information, and, more importantly examines the structures and institutions that package and sanction knowledge. This book should be required reading in this current era of gleeful self-surveillance and infographic cheer-leading as it is equally invested in history and context as design.