

# What is the little thread doing? On a few (neo-)avant-garde projects

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I would like to begin with an explanation. I am not a professional editor or a historian of the avant-garde book; neither am I a bookbinding specialist, even though bookbindings are the subject matter of this essay. I am a scholar of modern literature and a poetry critic, and it is in the latter role – that of a user of literary field, participating in it through specific and often one-off interpretative interventions – that I would like to legitimize my voice. In the end, I concern myself here with contemporary poetry, one which seems relevant not only because of the typographic experiment it relies on. To the extent that I have familiarized myself with Polish works on bookbinding studies, I can declare I have not missed out on a lot.

In the most important works, including that of Janusz Tondel or Arkadiusz Wagner's edited volume of crucial essays, bookbinding studies – as a discipline concerning the art of book covers and bookbinding processes – deal with historical issues, problems of book reconstructions, collections and museum repositories<sup>1</sup>. It fits somewhere between library studies, auxiliary sciences of museum studies, materials science and history of art. In this sense it is also fairly resistant to fads in the humanities, including “the pictorial turn” and “turn to things”, which more broadly encouraged me to reflect on the relationship between the typographic design of a poetic book and its functioning in the critical-literary sphere. This reflection inspired questions about the limits of a semiotic in-

<sup>1</sup> See *Tegmentologia polska dzisiaj. Polish bookbinding studies today*, ed. by Arkadiusz Wagner (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2015); Jakub Maciej Łubocki, „Okładkoznawstwo – stare zagadnienie, nowa koncepcja badawcza” [„Cover studies: old concept, new research idea”], *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich* 63, 3 (2020): 61–78.

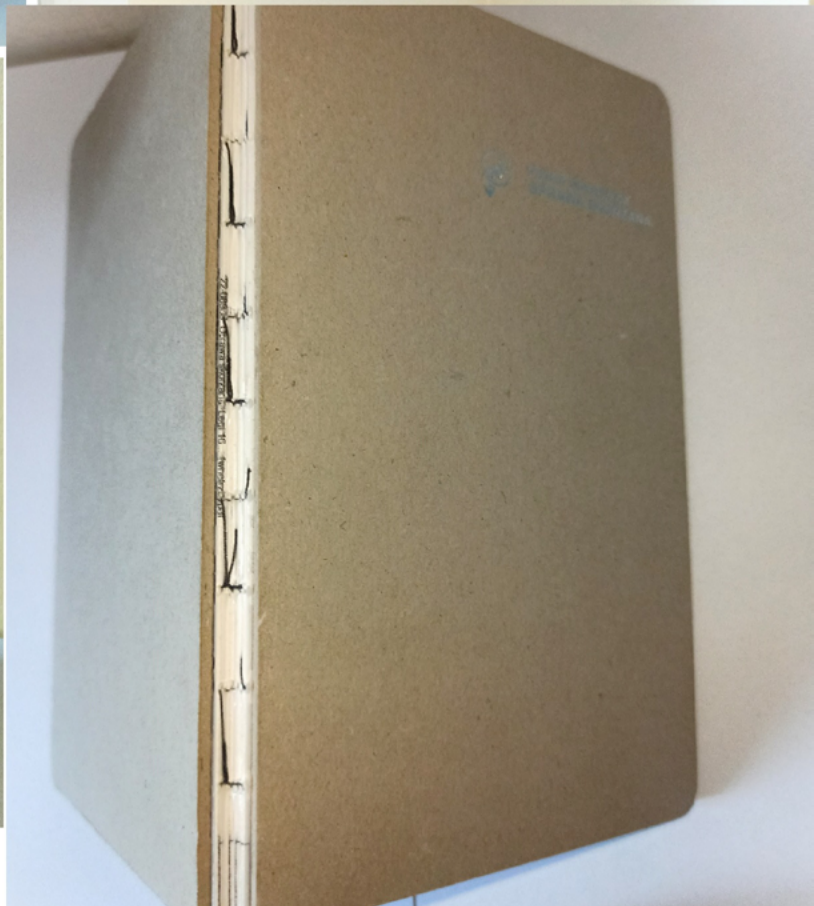
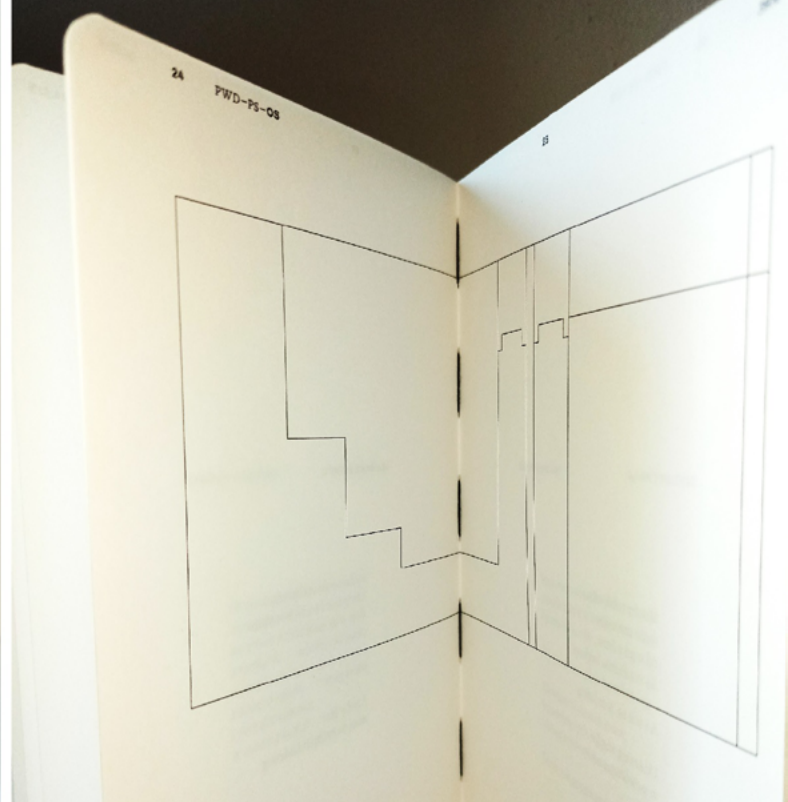
terpretation and its relationship with an embodied phenomenology of perception. Ultimately, this essay will not be a study of the object itself, i.e. the poetic book and the discourse concerning it, but it will constitute a test of its interpretative potential, which is released between the intentionally meaningful design of the book, its textual contents and the critics' practices of reading.

Of course, there are other important reflections, often akin to those concerning bookbinding, especially ones concerning book typography, their composition or the poetics of covers<sup>2</sup>. These studies devote a lot of attention to the cover and graphic design, as if the very choice of paper, binding or spine finish were not meaningful enough. The object status of the book is thus reduced to such affordances with which the poet is able to interfere, in collusion with the designer (usually a graphic designer). If we consider the historical avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s, there is no escaping the fact that whatever was not embraced under the umbrella of visibility was deemed of little importance. The capabilities of the printing houses or their financial resources then did not permit such experiments, with the exception of a limited number of independent artisan books, but even those were faced with the limitations of printing technology. Even in "common" works or those balancing on the boundary of multisensory and multimodal experiences, like *Sponad* [From above] by the Przyboś-Strzemiński collective, Anatol Stern and Mieczysław Szczuka's *Europa* [Europe] or the Thémersons' early books, the focus is mostly on visual aspects and their relationship with semantics.

In fact, it is no different during the Polish People's Republic (PRL) period. The issues of paper accessibility, technological resources, typographic and material capabilities were also limited and restricted the neo-avant-garde practices, so this kind of "aesthetic enstrangement" (as a formalist move) was limited to artists experimenting within the bounds of the Academy of Fine Arts workshops, to name but Andrzej and Ewa Partum or the so-called Wrocław Group. In consequence, their works were distributed in galleries rather than in books<sup>3</sup>. From this – another issue follows: the majority of studies discuss strictly artistic books (defined as such by different criteria), which

<sup>2</sup> These books constitute a majority and a lot of them concern neo-avant-garde and artistic books; see, e.g. Jan Straus's *Cięcie* [The cut] about the art of editing and the influence of the technique on the cover or Piotr Rypson's classical works, or the most recent one – Paweł Bernacki's *Polska książka artystyczna po 1989 roku w perspektywie bibliologicznej* [Polish artistic book after 1989 in a bibliological perspective] (2020). The latter is particularly useful due to its bibliological and communicological, rather than strictly editorial approach. Even so, it is perhaps less interesting for me as a poetry critic rather than art historian. It is worth pointing out that within the broader scope of cover studies (usually ignoring the issue of book spines) the emphasis was often put on the semantic aspect, rather than material properties, and on the position of the book in the communicative and cultural perspectives. Those kinds of works I would feel some affinity with. See, e.g. Piotr Rypson, *Książki i strony. Polska książka awangardowa i artystyczna 1919–1992* [Books and pages. Polish avant-garde and artistic book 1919–1992] (Warszawa: CSW Zamek Ujazdowski, 2000); Janusz Dunin, „Okładka i obwoluta jako komunikat. Wprowadzenie do problematyki” [„Cover and dust jacket as information. An introduction”], in: *Sztuka książki. Historia — teoria — praktyka* [Book art. History – theory – practice], ed. by Małgorzata Komza (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2003): 83–90; Bożena Hojka, „Okładka książkowa z perspektywy komunikacyjnej” [„Book cover from the communicative perspective”], in: *W poszukiwaniu odpowiedniej formy. Rola wydawcy, typografa, artysty i technologii w pracy nad książką* [In search for a proper form. The roles of publisher, typographer, artist and technology in book production], ed. by Małgorzata Komza (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2012), 61–72; Magdalena Lachman, „Okładkowy stan posiadania (w literaturze najnowszej)” [„Cover-based state of ownership (in contemporary literature)”], *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2012): 101–117; Jan Straus, *Cięcie. Fotomontaż na okładkach w międzywojennej Polsce* [The cut. Photomontage on the covers in interwar Poland] (Warszawa: Stowarzyszenie 40 000 Malarzy, 2014); Nicole Matthews, Nickianne Moody, *Judging a Book by Its Cover: Fans Publishers Designers and the Marketing of Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2016); Paweł Bernacki, *Polska książka artystyczna po 1989 roku w perspektywie bibliologicznej* [Polish artistic book after 1989 in a bibliological perspective] (Wrocław: Oficyna Wydawnicza ATUT, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> I am referring here to broadly understood circles, which think about visual arts, artistic practices and objects rather than about following the rules – in the spirit of Pierre Bourdieu – of the modern literary field.



Il. 1  
 Projekt edycji limitowanej tomu Pawła Stasiewicza „Oprawa skórzana”  
 (wydawnictwo papierwdole/ K.I.T. Stowarzyszenie Żywych Poetów,  
 2022). Kolejno na zdjęciu: okładka, szycie, projekt wnętrza, grzbiet.  
 Projekt i koncepcja tomu, skład i projekt typograficzny: Paweł  
 Stasiewicz [zdjęcia: JS, 2023].

in themselves can be regarded as works of art or liberature<sup>4</sup>, created not so much as a compromise between the author, graphic/ designer and the printing house, as in consequence of the artist's individual work already at the stage of idea or concept, or even more broadly: in the context of the artist's struggle with the matter's resistance. But then we witness a shift in the emphasis from the level of the semantic and material shape of the book (which complement its content) to the artefact itself, with which we interact like we would with an object – as viewers, rather than readers. I will not delve into these complex typologies, let me just describe the issue briefly: the volumes which will be discussed in what follows are neither examples of liberature nor of artisan books.

I am interested in a more basic issue, namely a fad, which opens up for literary criticism interesting gateways or entries into the text, that is: the relationship between a classic book of poetry in the codex format and an experimental visual project, especially the one concerned with bookbinding, in particular the spine. The titular little thread I would like to investigate is the stitching, more precisely – the numerous functions imposed on it by the poet or designer (usually in cooperation), which go beyond a simple binding of a block of sheets. Textbooks of editing (focused on the practical aspect, presently – the triumphant DTP) do not provide too much information on the design of book spines from the perspective of materials involved, and even less about the methods of gluing and stitching the block (more on that can be found in textbooks on bookbinding, especially in those published at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> c., when bookbinding was still a living craft). Yet nowadays every digital printing house has a few personalized solutions on offer.. Following from the popularity of English craft-binding guidebooks published over the last few years, it can be stated the classical spine was first rejected by the contemporary enthusiasts of stationery, and that shift gradually made its way to the book market. The first beneficiaries of this turn were small publishing houses, following a new fad for “raw” style (exposed spine or stitching, which signal the “craftsmanship” of execution), all in the name of heightening the reader's tactile experience.

This essay primarily concerns poetic books published in small publishing houses, the publishers' ambitions, which border on craftsmanship and experiment, and the arrangements between the author and designer. In a review article I read a while ago (one I am unable to track down now) the author expressed their unease about the fact that our literary criticism started evaluating book covers and generalizing from those onto the content and value of the books themselves. At face value this allegation makes sense: as far as technical aspects of a volume (like the quality of the paper and the typographic project) must be considered as evidence for the publisher's professionalism (a positive example here are poetic publications of Warstwy), it seems that literally judging a book by its cover (or the graphics on that cover) is unjustified, just like

<sup>4</sup> We must remember that in scholarly typologies, which divide artistic books into those containing contents/ information and book objects; the very label of liberature is an addition and an umbrella term, construed (justifiably and effectively) for the purposes of incidental actions within the local field of neo-avant-garde experiment and museum-archival practices. It is impossible to underestimate the importance of the collection of the Book Art Museum in Łódź. This category, created by the practicing poet and scholar Zenon Fajfer and the researcher Katarzyna Bazarnik, is quite flexible and embraces a range of tendencies, from propositions of a new genre, through historical tales of visual and concrete poetry, variants of neo-avant-garde books, to artistic experiments featuring book objects. In my opinion it does not perform a typological function, even though the creation and reception of the text, as well as the communicative function of the book, have been given a boost by the authors of this concept. One can probably say that works recognized as literature should communicate something rather than simply be present. See Katarzyna Bazarnik, „Krótkie wprowadzenie do liberatury” [„A short introduction to liberature”], *Er(r)go* 2 (2003): 123–137; Zenon Fajfer, *Liberatura czyli literatura totalna. Teksty zebrane z lat 1999–2009* [Liberature or a total literature. Collected texts, 1999–2009], ed. by Katarzyna Bazarnik, introduction by Wojciech Kalaga (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2010).

it does not make sense to establish an interpretative concept of a film on the basis of what we see on a DVD box. However, for some books of poetry this element is not only important but actually key for the book's reading because it shifts our reception from semiotic towards tactile.

Following from this, my understanding of the (imprecise) titular metaphor of (neo-)avant-garde is one of such a book design which is the result of collaboration between the publisher, the designer (who tends to have a specific, artistic vision in mind) and the author, whereas the typographic-book-binding processes turn the book into an aesthetic object and endow it with additional meanings and guide its reception. Such collection of poems remains predominantly textual, and its "contents" are still transferable to anthologies without much semantic loss. This, however, deprives such anthologies of a crucial component which affects the way it operates within the literary field. In what follows I will be applying Benjamin's category of tactility (well-known in the academic discourse), which involves expanding visual perception to include the experiences of the remaining senses, especially touch. I include tactility as a tool for interpreting books of poetry within the broader concept of "haptic aesthetics"<sup>5</sup>. The latter considers also organic (muscular, subcutaneous) processes (like following the working of articulatory apparatus in the case of sound poetry; the question remains if it is not the case that any avant-garde experiment with text exceeds a narrowly defined tactility<sup>6</sup>).

## Stories

One typically distinguishes between a few types of special bookbindings: combined, spiral, integrated, Swiss/ Otabind (e.g. the "red" series of poetic translations published by Ossolineum – "Wygłosy" ["Auslauts"]) and the ones with the so-called open spine, sometimes referred to simply as open bookbinding. I will focus on the latter, although I will also discuss the spiral one. Swiss bookbinding is still relatively rare in Poland, and even when it is used, it does not always reveal the stitching I am interested in. So far I have only seen it in a few publications relevant for the poetic milieu (to name but the monumental catalogue-monograph containing all editions of the Wrocław magazine "Cegła" ["The brick"]).

Let us then begin with the origins of the fashion for experimenting with bookbinding and the spine. The first factor is, of course, the increasing financial resources of society and the publishing market, as well as technological advancement in printing. For obvious reasons, some procedures were either not possible a century before or they required prohibitive financial resources for this

<sup>5</sup> Mark Paterson, „W jaki sposób dotyka nas świat»: estetyka haptyczna [„How the world touches us. Haptic aesthetics"], transl. by Michalina Kmiecik, *Ruch Literacki* 2 (2020): 181–212; Marta Smolińska, *Haptyczność poszerzona: zmysł dotyku w sztuce polskiej drugiej połowy XX i początku XXI wieku* [Extended haptics: the sense of touch in the Polish art of the second half of the 20th and beginning of the 21st c.] (Kraków: Universitas, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> One more methodological issue as a footnote: I am interested in the effect of those niche, form-experimental books on the critical-literary reception, including my own. I have decided to juxtapose with one another a few copies of a given title (depending on their availability) so as not to reduce this kind of interpretation to a singular contact with the work of art (let me suspend for a moment poststructuralist discussions concerning the singularity of interpretation), to draw some intersubjective clues from the object itself and its quality. I also assume that this artistic shape is the final effect, an "ideal model" of a given book for its creator. An interesting thing happens when a book has two parallel editions: the artistic and mass-produced version; even then the critics only write about the former, "perfect" edition, or at least they take into consideration the experience of reception hypothetically/potentially triggered by that artistic version, even if they actually peruse the mass-produced copy. That is because the authorial/ publisher's gesture of addition already happened when the book was conceptualized.

game with the readers' customs to be successful. Let us focus, however, less on economic issues and more on cultural ones. Considering the not-so-distant decade, one must point to yet another fad – one for stationery and the so-called papercraft – creating notebooks or cut-outs. After 2000 that fad was developing in accordance with the development of the Internet and visibility of various journal related forms. Following the popularity of Facebook and Instagram the self-creationist and expressivist burden of the “I” was shifted from keeping a journal in the form of written records, i.e. from a narrative practice, to the appearance of that journal, its personalized nature and, not infrequently, to the craftsmanship involved in its creation, one which follows current trends in material and colour usage (e.g. upcycling or using self-made paper). At the same time, more and more online tutorials emerged, featuring keywords which one remembered from the DIY classes at school. This sphere of practices was quickly subsumed in the capitalist order or perhaps it had always been a product of changes in manners of production: personalized goods as an offer for the growing creative classes. Yet this is not the most important aspect for a critic of poetry; a change in thinking about the structure and ways of binding blocks of paper sheets revealed something previously disregarded by both publishers and everyday users of books and notebooks: the issue of stitches, stitching and binding. Gradually, even in small booklets, instead of a stapler (typical for poetry zines and saddle stitch binding), started to rely on precision stitching (red and purple threads reign supreme), which made them distinct from traditional, i.e. glued books<sup>7</sup>.

Over the last few years, the concept of “Japanese stitching” has become immensely popular with video tutorials, blogs and websites; especially *koki toji*; the noble stitching (there are at least two others: *yotsume toji* and *kikko toji*). This decorative manner of binding the sheets leaves the block exposed and becomes the most important visual element of the book/ notebook. The stitching is precise, geometric, producing a number of cuboids divided into rhombuses and triangles (depending on the type of stitching). Workshops devoted to this manner of notebook binding have enjoyed some popularity, becoming an element of influencers' creative activities and their ‘bookstagram’ image, dependent upon developing one's artistic and manual skills. One could argue that *koki toji* is a buzzword, not unlike *zen*, *hygge* or *kintsugi* – all of which refer to the practices of specific historical periods, but have become empty concepts, appropriated by Western societies to be applied in the contexts of self-fulfillment and self-care. Let us add that this is not a particularly complicated form of stitching. In fact, for professional designers and bookbinders it might look amateurish.

But if it is possible, or even desirable, to bind notebooks in this manner (because it is fashionable among the creative classes), why not try the same with books? Unsurprisingly, the first ones do so were artists academically affiliated with studios of graphics and books at the Academies of Fine Arts or museum curators, commissioning innovative exhibition catalogues (or simply, granting design studios lots of freedom). Not only were types of stitching, colour of threads and direction of stitching experimented with, but also, the effects of stitching and gluing were exposed, giving off a sense of rawness and the unfinished status of the book, inviting the reader to look “inside”, into the matter itself and the process of creating the object. Issues of craftsmanship, involved in the creation of

<sup>7</sup> Let us list a few recent examples of important and much-debated works, which were created on the author's initiative and in close collaboration with the designer: Marcin Senddecki's *Przedmiar robót* [Bill of quantities] (Wrocław: Biuro Literackie, 2014), Sławomir Hornik's *południe pozdrawia północ* [the south sends regards to the north] (Wrocław: Fundacja na rzecz Kultury i Edukacji im. Tymoteusza Karpowicza, 2019), Natalia Malek's *Karapaks* [The carapace] (Poznań: WBPiCAK, 2020).

thus understood work of art were probably important, too. If hand-sewn notebooks with exposed spines were meant to be testament to their and their owner's exceptionality (even if they could be purchased in the biggest bookstores and stationery chain stores), a similar mechanism could also be applied to books, especially those in circulation not exceeding 100-150 copies: exhibition catalogues and minor visual projects, sold somewhere between small bookshops and museums of modern art<sup>8</sup>.

Perhaps one more hypothesis should be considered here. Since bookstore warehouses are wary of experimental bookbinding, if only because the open-spine solution prohibits printing the author's name and title on the spine (it is less important for poetry than for prose and for bookshelves in bookstore chains), such a book is condemned to independent distribution. It will be sold in niche bookstores, at fairs of good and beautiful books or even at fairs of artistic and craft books, like the Warsaw one or the best-known ones in New York and Los Angeles. Besides a small group of curators or alternative publishers, few can afford this manner of distribution. At the same time, there will always be those who will be attracted to this manner of publishing their niche books as wink to the reader from within the non-commercial publishing workflow: here is a book which defies its commodity function; here is literature in itself.

## Practices

Meanwhile, I would like to discuss a few volumes worthy of our interest. The first type of binding I am interested in, intentionally revealing its lack of stitching, is spiral binding, which is rare in modern artistic books. An example of this type of binding is Kamil Kwidziński's *Rozłąka* [*Separation*]<sup>9</sup>, published by Tłocznia Wydawnicza "Ach Jo!", in collaboration with the House of Literature in Łódź (the collaboration concerned distribution rather than edition or design). By the time of publish-

<sup>8</sup> An example of a Japanese binding was demonstrated in the album and the aftermath of the 2019 exhibition *Prace domowe* [Housework], from the publishing house/ collective *Dzikię Przyjemności*. *Dzikię Przyjemności*, with their specialists in spine binding are also behind one of the more unusual poetic books of recent years, i.e. Rafał Różewicz's *Podwójna cięła* [Double white line], published by *papierwdole-Katalog Press* (2022). That book features double pamphlet stitch binding: it combines the author's two preceding books of poetry, joined by means of this conceptual stitching, the manner of opening the sheets and the idea of the direction of stitching which also marks a lifeline – like a solid line on the road, prohibiting passing. In recent times an open spine and exposed stitching became a feature of publications by *Tajfuny* – a well-known publishing house, specializing in Asian literature (the choice of binding was contextualized culturally here). Other representative examples include the publications of Łódź Film School – a black-thread binding format with an exposed spine features, e.g. in the journal of photography students "Ton" ["The Tone"]. The textbook *Trening fizyczny aktora* [An actor's physical exercises] has wiro binding (thus categorizing it as a script), whereas Jacek Rokosz's *Stracone dusze. Amerykańska eksploatacja filmowa 1929–1959* [Lost souls. American film exploitation 1929-1959] (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Biblioteki Państwowej Wyższej Szkoły Filmowej, Telewizyjnej i Teatralnej im. Leona Schillera w Łodzi, 2017) has an exposed spine. Let us add that was the first volume of the series about American exploitative cinema, the second one was *Nadzy i rozszarpani* [Naked and torn apart] (2021), but it did not feature similar typography. Exposed spine also features in the beautiful edition of critical-film-theoretical monograph *David Lynch. Polskie spojrzenia* [David Lynch. Polish perspectives] (Toruń: Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej, 2017), with its black, cardboard cover and black stitching which runs across. This choice was dictated by technical requirements: it is more difficult to bind a thick cardboard cover with the block of sheets and additional covering material is necessary. This strategy was chosen by *Warstwy* – a publishing house from Wrocław (they also do not print the titles and names on the spine). From the marketing point of view, probably the most visible solution (definitely quite unexpected one) was the popular series "Dreszczyk kulturalny" ["A cultural thrill"] from Cracow's *DodoEditor*. Three volumes of *Klas Östergren's* (2010–2012) crime stories, as well as *Roy Jacobsen's Child wonder* (2012), and *Göran Tunström's Famous men that have visited Sunne* (2015) appeared with an open spine binding first in printing houses, then on the shelves of *Tanie Książki*; they also featured huge name letters printed on glue. Perhaps it was the first time we were able to see such a bookbinding-typographic experiment on the shelves of big commercial bookstores.

<sup>9</sup> Kamil Kwidziński, *Rozłąka* [*Separation*] (Tłocznia Wydawnicza „Ach Jo!”, Dom Literatury w Łodzi, 2019).



## II. 2

Projekty edycji popularnej oraz limitowanej tomu Konrada Góry „Dzień został w nocy. Wiersze miłości i z nienawiści” (wydawnictwo papierwdole-Katalog Press/ Wydawnictwo Dzikie Przyjemności). Kolejno na zdjęciu: okładki obu książek, zbliżenie na okładkę i grzbiet edycji limitowanej. Projekt okładki: Dominika Łąbądz i Konrad Góra; druk, preparacja, skład ręczny: Wydawnictwo Dzikie Przyjemności [zdjęcia: JS, 2023].



ing *Rozłąka*, the author, born in 1989, had written two books of poetry and one poetry sheet. In the words of the graphic designer Maciej Kielbas, the spiral binding was Kwidzyński's own idea, and the publishing house was trying to realize that vision, despite a number of problems. This type of binding may well have indicated a perfunctory character of the book, or even its calendar-like nature, which would suggest the author's immaturity in his relationship to the passing time. It was that "boyish" unreadiness that was crucial – the creation of a maturing, manly "I", amorous and conquering, like the avant-garde poets, and similar to other *Bildungspoetries*. One reads Kwidzyński's book of poetry like one would a calendar or notebook (directions from the printing house also mention this type of binding in the context of photo albums). The coil is fastened along the shorter edge of the book (although there is also a test printout with binding along the longer edge), making it similar to a coil notebook. The cover creates the illusion of a torn page, from underneath which a fragment of the poem *Apollinaire* can be gleaned. This cover too distorts readers' habits and points to some kind of temporariness or accidentality of the book; it definitely signals its openness. It is thus the design of the book which recalls a notebook and a kind of ecstatic life-writing, reminiscent of the records of Jacek Podsiadło or Edward Stachura<sup>10</sup>, even though the poems too make reference to historical avant-garde (to mention but Apollinaire, Pablo Neruda or Generation 27). A similar type of coil binding could be applied to all books which feature an element of suddenness, note-taking and tolerance for tearing pages out – wasting poems.

Yet, I am even more interested in the over-presence of stitching than in lack thereof. Founded by Konrad Góra and Jacek Żebrowski, the publishing house papierwdole has a better brand recognition than Tłocznia "Ach Jo!". For Góra and Żebrowski (both with anarchic background) set off with their publishing project with a vision to test the "buoyancy" of a book of poetry. In his own poetic enterprises Góra has repeatedly tried to escape the codex format, e.g. in *Siła niższa (full hasiok)* [*Lesser force (full dumpster)*] (Wrocław: Fundacja na Rzecz Edukacji i Kultury im. Tymoteusza Karpowicza, 2012). The book's appearance, reminiscent of that of a newspaper, was impossible to ignore in the literary-critical reception. Here I would like to focus on two tactile works published by the celebrated duo: Konrad Góra's *Dzień został w nocy. Wiersze miłości i z nienawiści* [*The day stayed at night. Letters of love and hate*], experimenting with roughness and friction, and Paweł Stasiewicz's *Oprawa skórzana* [*Leather cover*], which plays with smoothness, ovalness and unsealing. Both books have an open spine, accompanied by a thick cardboard cover. These are limited editions, published in a few dozen copies, which are not typically sent out to jurors of poetry contests or reviewers. Yet it is these, rather than their mass edition versions (published a bit later in that same year), which delineate the interpretative horizons of the two volumes.

My sense is that the experiment with an artistic book began for papierwdole from the volume *Dzień został w nocy*<sup>11</sup>, which was sold through the auction model Apart from papierwdole and Katalog Press publishing house the book also features Wydawnictwo Dzikie Przyjemności. The latter which proves to be an artistic workshop, employing a few people with anarchic, leftist roots, and founded by

<sup>10</sup>See Jakub Sajkowski, „Sezon arktyczny? Ciepło, coraz cieplej. O debiucie Kamila Kwidzyńskiego” [„Arctic season? Warm, warmer. About Kamil Kwidzyński's debut”], *Kwartalnik sZAFa* 44 (2012); Karol Maliszewski, „Idą poeci nowsi” [„Newer poets are coming”], in: *Wolność czytania* [The freedom of reading] (Mikołów: Instytut Mikołowski, 2014), 232–233; Jakub Skurtys, „Wszyscy będziemy jeszcze młodzi (Kamil Kwidzyński: *Rozłąka*)” [„We shall all be young again (Kamil Kwidzyński: *Rozłąka*)”], *ArtPapier* 373 (2018).

<sup>11</sup>Konrad Góra, *Dzień został w nocy. Wiersze miłości i z nienawiści* (Ligota Mała – Dün Éideann – Wrocław: Wydawnictwo papierwdole – Katalog Press, Wydawnictwo Dzikie Przyjemności, 2021).

Dominika Łabądz and Joanna Synowiec, curators once related with Wrocław's BWA (DP is a studio, i.e. an entity focused on action and cooperation, workshops and participation of visitors, who will prepare their own bindings. In Góra's volume too we can access graphic records of the project's painstaking realization. In imprint the names of Góra and Łabądz are listed as those responsible for cover design, whereas the DP's contribution is supposed to be "print, preparation, manual assembly").

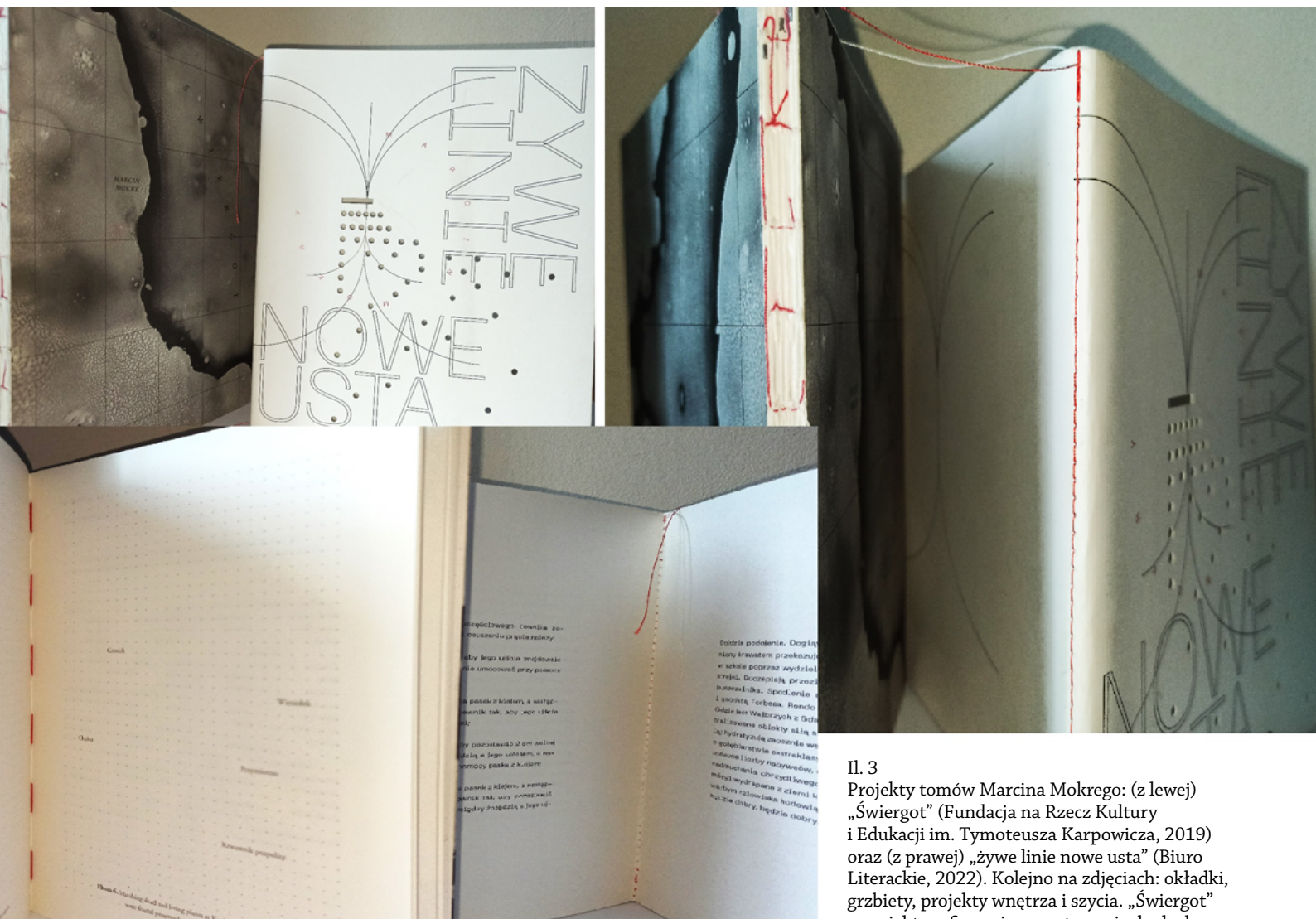
One can say that the author of *Siła niższa* thus fulfilled one of his dreams. Even against the background of other open spines and artistic books his book looks particularly shabby, carelessly glued and bound in a crooked manner, not to mention the print and paint deficits. The cover is adorned with a sandpaper veneer (of different colours and variants – depending on the copy), whereas the seam consists of a few (four) transverse white strings (it is hard to call them a thread, even when compared with the meticulous stitching on chapbooks or poetry sheets – it is more of a twine than a thread), which are rugged, covered in glue or even splitting apart. Góra's book – let us say it directly – is ugly, unaesthetic, unpleasant to the touch, and its barely visible ink is frustrating. At the same time, this pretend-carelessness is supposed to fit in what the poem has been promoting as trash, anarchic poetry, supposedly indifferent to middle-class tastes and aesthetic procedures which were applied to earlier volumes, often out of necessity<sup>12</sup>.

Are we supposed to love or hate such a book, clashing with its cover, trying to decipher blurred letters, noticing careless gluing and the sweeping stitches? Arguably, cooperation with the *Dzikie Przyjemności* collective shifted the emphasis from the volume itself and poems within it to the process of its creation – helpless and residual (sheets of sandpaper look like they are being reused, they are sometimes dirty, frayed or fragmentary). Góra-the artist made no secret of the fact that he was interested in the materiality of the text and its becoming (his 2016 *Nie [No]* is a one-off oratory, whereas the volume itself is an inimitable score). In his poems Góra hides a number of clues about the need for a physical annihilation of the message, analogically to political acts of resistance, like historically attested cases of self-immolation. Let us quote from Kacper Bartczak's blurb, casually glued onto the fourth page of the cardboard cover:

Góra belies the claim that if language (i.e. form, ambiguity, resistance), then not the world, not the body, not love, not hatred. Here one slip of the tongue will separate for you, oh, Pole derived from various dialects, the body from its bones, it will separate you from idols, faiths and ossifications, it will expose you painfully [...].

Let us take this fragment not as advertisement (its status in poetry is dubious) but as a frag-

<sup>12</sup>Against the background of the lukewarm reception of the volume (usually glossing over the material aspect), one ought to highlight Alina Świeściak's essay, in which she openly calls Góra's proposition an elitist gesture (publishing 100 copies of an expensive volume and distributing it via bidding, which inflated the book's value considerably). At the same time, it plays a game with the capitalist approach to the goods and an aesthetic distinction within the bounds of the logic of gift and "temporary zones of autonomy", i.e. communities of readers, connected by the desire to possess. Considering the sociology of field and related gestures of positioning, Świeściak does not ask how the mercantile aspect of the volume in the context of reading encounters its material, object and residual character. Let us add that in this sense the "poorer", mass edition is the smoothed version, "cleared" from all the breaks and inconveniences. See Alina Świeściak, „Wokół elitaryzmu. Trzy przypadki” [„Around elitism. Three cases”], *Forum Poetyki* 28–29 (2022): 60–75; Łukasz Żurek, „I niósł, ale nie doniósł – chciał zabić, a karmił” [„He was carrying but never carried through – he wanted to kill but he was feeding”], *e-CzasKultury* 20 (2021).



Il. 3  
 Projekty tomów Marcina Mokrego: (z lewej) „Świergot” (Fundacja na Rzecz Kultury i Edukacji im. Tymoteusza Karpowicza, 2019) oraz (z prawej) „żywe linie nowe usta” (Biuro Literackie, 2022). Kolejno na zdjęciach: okładki, grzbiety, projekty wnętrza i szycia. „Świergot” – projekt graficzny i przygotowanie do druku: Karolina Wiśniewska (gyyethy); „żywe linie...” – projekt okładki: Karolina Wiśniewska, projekt typograficzny: Marcin Mokry [zdjęcia: JS, 2023].

ment of a critical reception. Bartczak is a poet also searching for different ways of materializing experiences (although without resorting to tactility). The “resistance” which he is concerned with, along with the issue of linguistic form, is presented to the reader not by means of a poem but by means of the book object. It is the resistance of fingers on book pages, the resistance of the speech apparatus, of grammar, memory and reality, which will not align with the needs of the *signifié*. One might posit a claim that this intrusive, physical presence of the book keeps the reader “grounded”, reminding them that body is key to everything, and the act of reading is both traction and clashing, not only with the meanings of words.

In light of the above, another open-spine book published by papierwdole is something entirely

different. Paweł Stasiewicz's *Oprawa skórzana*<sup>13</sup> was also published in 2022 in a limited edition, according to the author's own design. It was supposed to be a matrix, later utilised in the series "Pał, ponowa" ["Tracks, powder snow"], but none of the subsequent volumes in the series featured this kind of binding or "personalisation" – a ready-made template was used instead. Stasiewicz also relies on a thick, grey-and-beige cardboard for the cover, but instead of a crude veneer the title features in the right top corner as gilded, minimalist embossing. Edges of the cardboard and block have been cut and rounded, as if to prevent folding and possibly hurting the reader. The black thread stitching, etched across the spine, is often visible on different levels of the block, and is revealed on opening the volume, as if from within the blocks, from whence it runs freely.

It seems that Stasiewicz, who is predominantly a visual artist, normally working with videoart, knew exactly what kind of binding he needed for his poems and what kind of effect he wanted to achieve. What matters is not so much the typographic design within, which forces us to consider the book as concrete poetry, and, for example, directs the reader's attention to an empty corner, "the right upper corner cornucopia", in which there is nothing (p. 47), to the white space of the sheet itself, or enforces a bodily experience of the process of seeing – "with a finger in the eye", "with an eye in the lungs". It is also about the tension between the title – a leather cover – the grey cardboard of the actual cover, and the volume's subject matter: the lyrical "I's" corporeality – a skin bag with organs and secretions. The black stitching consistently "enters" the sheets: twice on a two-page spreader, which features only graphics, twice announcing and closing the whole volume, when poems adjoin each other on a white empty page: *krótkie oddychanie* [*short breath*] and *ja.gif* [*I.gif*]. The quality of this typographic project was acknowledged by all reviewers, and the volume toured various literary festivals as an award nominee.

What matters is the fact that it is difficult to imagine this physical, tactile and touchable aspect in Stasiewicz's writing – similar to burying one's finger in the eye or inserting it in a wound – without revealing the imperfections of the book itself, without the tension between a perfectly cold, embossed cardboard of the covers with the gilded sign and a carelessly executed, open book spine. It would seem that we are constantly asked how much precision the DTP – a consistently applied, constructivist aesthetics, reduced to a few geometric shapes and lines – can achieve in terms of organicity and materiality of the book itself, gluing and sewing the blocks, a manual rather than a machine-made alignment. In the background another question returns (already formulated through poems): what is the relationship of this organic, sick and dying body (flesh) to various practices of embalming, nurturing, framing and powdering? The titular leather cover does not concern the cardboard cover and – contrastingly – the exposed spine, but the skin cover and the dark fleshiness of body organs.

Is it really so? Do not the interpretative possibilities arise precisely in this contact with the materiality of the book, in its being fortified with a grey and excessively thick cardboard on the one hand, and – on the other – in the designed "opening", letting the reader go where the suture is running? Even though at the semiotic level we are dealing with tactility – controlling our eyesight, paying attention to the movement of the eyeball, with geometric analogies be-

<sup>13</sup>Paweł Stasiewicz, *Oprawa skórzana* (Ligota Mała – Brzeg: wydawnictwo papierwdole, K.I.T Stowarzyszenie Żywych Poetów, 2022).

tween the line and the surface, it is in the sphere of understatement, as if in the sign exterior of the book, in its metaphysical underbelly, that haptic aesthetics is operating: dark matter and the invisible work of the organs. Let us quote one poem, which directly problematizes the tension between the book seam, the textile seam and the stitching of the skin:

*Wiesowi*

A mi się marzą  
długie bezszwowe kołdry

Żeby nie było żadnego  
uciskania odleżyn  
po odejściu

Żeby przy zmartwychwstaniu  
nie było wszystkiego  
zdrętwiałego

Żeby ta cała krew  
tak stała cierpliwie  
i czekała

A nie odpływała  
nie wiadomo gdzie

*(Bezzwowe kołdry, p. 34).*

[Literal translation]

I dream of  
long seamless duvets

So that there is no  
pressure on the bedsores  
after leaving

So that on resurrection  
nothing is  
numb

So that the whole blood  
stands patiently  
waiting

Rather than flowing away  
nobody knows where

(*Bezczwowe kołdry* [*Seamless duvets*], p. 34).

We can, of course, assume that the lyrical situation would become clear even without the tactile context. We are dealing here with a monologue of a dying or sick body, which fantasizes about its own departure, reconceptualizing the inconveniences (bedsores, numbness) of the body in life into a state “on resurrection”. One problem in this grotesque, morbid poem is “the whole blood” – something from the inside, an abject, departs the subject, flowing away “nobody knows where”. This leak of contents happens because of “seams” – points of contact – here, of the duvets, but also of the bodies and skin, which is an insulating layer. From this perspective an exposed spine, which confronts us with the stitching, as well as the hard, cardboard cover play a game with “seamless duvets”, which are a fantasy about a tight, holistic departure and a possibility of return. From the sewn-up body the content will leak just the same as from an exposed book spine – as if from a ripped, insufficiently sealed book. This problematizing of the relations of inside-outside, hard-soft, membrane-wall, cover-skin, bright-dark is won not only by the number of somatems in poems but predominantly by initiating haptic associations in the very act of encountering the work.

Yet another noteworthy activity is that of Marcin Mokry, whose works originally belonged to concrete poetry. Once he became affiliated with the publishing house Fundacja na rzecz Kultury i Edukacji im. Tymoteusza Karpowicza Mokry joined forces and ideas with the graphic artist and designer of „Magazyn Materiałów Literackich Cegła”, Karolina Wiśniewska (gyyethy). Together they designed first his poem *Świergot* [*The chirping*] and then – in Biuro Literackie publishing house – the limited volume *żywe linie nowe usta* [*living lines new lips*], now described as a mockumentary about Tadeusz Peiper. I have already written elsewhere about the material properties of *Świergot*, so I will not repeat myself here<sup>14</sup>. The other of the two volumes was also broadly discussed and frequently awarded. The problem of multisensoricity and hapticity – the latter term derived from Greek *háptein* ‘bind’, ‘fasten’, ‘catch’ – was indirectly noted by Michał Trusewicz in his insightful review:

The condensed and abridged semantics of the poem circulates around the body, individuality and community. What “touches” a moment later can turn into that which “closes” in the asymmetrical relation of power. This is a particular type of concrete poetry, derived from the materiality of speaking and shouting. Mokry demonstrates an original record of different registers of hapticity: shout, incoherent semantics of mumbling and an allogical concentration of sounds. A reading of that poetry must be a hectic “performance” of these poems – the printed text is just a poor man’s version of the lyrics, on whose surface different experiences are revealed<sup>15</sup>.

On the plane of the lyrical situation the touch is divided into characters violating each other’s

<sup>14</sup>Jakub Skurtys, „że nie porozdzielani szliśmy (Marcin Mokry „Świergot”)” [„that we were walking undivided (Marcin Mokry „The Chirping”)”], *Wizje – Aktualnik* (17.11.2019), <https://magazynwizje.pl/aktualnik/skurtys-mokry/>.

<sup>15</sup>Michał Trusewicz, „Dotykani i dotknięci (Marcin Mokry, «żywe linie nowe usta»)” [„The touching ones and the touched ones”] (Marcin Mokry «żywe linie nowe usta») *Wizje – Aktualnik* (6.07.2022), <https://magazynwizje.pl/aktualnik/trusewicz-mokry/>; see also Michalina Kmiecik, „Nowe linie w żywych ustach” [„New lines in living lips”], *BiBLioteka* (2022), <https://www.biroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/recenzje/nowe-linie-w-zywych-ustach/>.

bodily inviolability (medical worker and the patient's ageing body) and the intrusiveness of sounds in the articulatory practice, in the manner of pronouncing commands and telling stories about life, which bind together words belonging to different orders. However, Trusewicz does not pay much attention to the typographic project of the book itself, even though this is where the greatest tensions between the publisher (who needs to follow market requirements) and the Mokry-Wiśniewska collective arise. The "limited" edition features at least three important meaning additions: 1) the cover is perforated, with holes, but these are arranged in what looks like a regular pattern, not discernible at first glance; 2) the book is not glued but sewn with a red stitch, which contrasts with the whiteness of the book, black font characters and letter contours, as well as the lines on the cover, but matches the redness of the author's name (who appears in the volume as his own *alter ego* – Janusz Zimny's caregiver); 3) the stitching is not cut, which means that the top and bottom of the book is marked by two pieces of thread – red on the outside, white on the inside<sup>16</sup>. These threads dangle freely, but cause unease and are an obstacle rather than an entertaining element. They are definitely useless as bookmarks – this is not their function.

Sometimes, however, they will arrange themselves in accordance with the course of the lines on the cover – of curves spreading out and converging, as if they were extensions of these lines beyond the space on the sheet and the book object itself. This is important because this meeting of curves produces the first graphic poem in the volume. Individual pieces „do”, „ty” and „my” from the words „do-ty-ka-my” ‘we touch’ / „do-my-ka-my” ‘we close’ meet for a moment, only to move apart like the threads do. Just as if the meeting spot – of a touch, a look but also of violating someone's space – can only happen in a very limited space and time – on the seam. *Żywe linie nowe usta* is not only a volume about touching but also about divergence – Janusz Zimny diverges from Tadeusz Peiper, who he thinks he is. The intentions (care, help) of the professional caregiver diverge from his actions (indifference of procedures, violence) and the articulated words diverge from their *signifié*. In the end the author's afterword also diverges from its explanatory function because it conceals more than it reveals. In that sense the thread of the seam, let loose into the space beyond the book, starts performing a similar role to Stasiewicz's seam – instead of combining and binding blocks of paper and impressions, it highlights the source hiatus, a rip.

Probably a similar reading would be applicable to a few recently published books of poetry as well. At this stage I only want to point to the existence of a potentiality of meaning, which is embedded in book design, and shifts our reception from one which involves navigating codes and signs to one which depends on introspective questions, directed also at the recipient's body and senses. Moving on to conclusions, let us try to answer the titular question: what exactly is the little thread doing? First, of course, it stitches the block of paper, i.e. it connects – that is its bookbinding function. But, as it turns out, it also cuts, materializes, eposes, extends and prolongs, marks organicity and spatiality, negotiates tactile relations or enforces a haptic reception. And sometimes it simply dangles.

<sup>16</sup>Wiśniewska applied a similar idea to Kamil Zając's *Rygor i wyobraźnia* [Rigour and imagination] (2022), the glittered pink-purple cover features loosely hanging yellow and pink threads of the binding. In that case, which seems to be congruent with the aesthetics of the entire book, the key aspects are camp interceptions with elements of a child's play.

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# KEYWORDS

cover

*book design*

TYPOGRAPHIC  
EXPERIMENT

**ABSTRACT:**

The essay is devoted to a few contemporary books of poetry, whose visual aspect and realization of the typographic project encourage new interpretative hypotheses based on the manners in which the book manifests itself as an artifact rather than based on the reading of poems themselves. This shift of reception from semiotic to tactile requires a consideration of the organic and ethical aspects of communication. The present author is therefore interested in the role of stitching the blocks and types of bookbinding, especially the aesthetics of an open spine, which provides the books with new meanings.

*haptic esthetics*

## TACTILITY

## MODERN POETRY

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