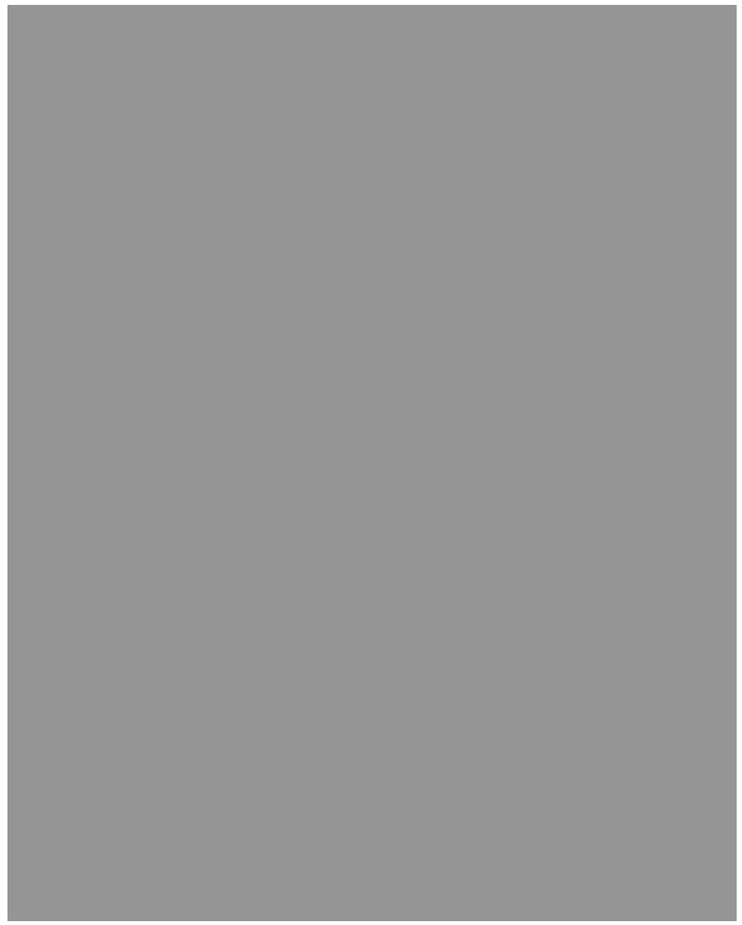


Craft Work

In the UK art scene of the Eighties and Nineties, graphic designer Tony Arefin was a key figure, turning out quietly accomplished catalogues for important art spaces and seminal exhibitions, which came to define a generation. **James Langdon** revisits these often-forgotten works and hears reminiscences of the late, great Arefin from former colleague Jonathan Watkins.

Cover of catalogue for Ann Veronica Janssens/ Richard Venlet, Chisenhale Gallery,1993

I discovered the series of exhibition catalogues that Tony Arefin designed for Chisenhale Gallery while I was working at Ikon Gallery in Birmingham about 8 years ago. I was a recent art-school graduate, tentatively beginning as a designer by taking any opportunity to produce small pieces of print for the gallery in-house. Jonathan Watkins, Ikon's director, had given me copies of a selection of the catalogues as reference material for a project we were working on. I think he was also offering them as a general source of guidance and inspiration for a young designer interested in working with artists. Jonathan had been director of Chisenhale—an alternative gallery space in London—from 1990 to 1995 and had commissioned Arefin to produce twelve books during that period, working with artists such as Christine Borland, Cornelia Parker and Graham Gussin.

Arefin had an enviable reputation in the London art scene of the late 1980s and early 1990s. With clients such as the Whitechapel, Serpentine and Hayward his work was very visible, but he was also involved in working with artists outside the mainstream, designing books for artist-led exhibitions such as Freeze (1988) and Modern Medicine (1990) that are now considered seminal in the early careers of a generation of British artists. The studio he shared on Denmark Street was also the birthplace of Frieze, the contemporary art magazine, whose early issues were designed very much under his influence.

At first the Chisenhale catalogues didn't make much impression on me. I remember thinking that the work seemed somehow obvious. But the more time I spent with them the more I became aware of the very particular way in which Arefin constructed sequences of images, and for me it is this that made his work remarkable and that I often return to these books for. His approach owes more to magazine design than to the conventional form of exhibition catalogues, pages appear designed purely to emphasise visual connections between the works being reproduced, often with no sense of a strict underlying grid guiding the designer.

The books he made with sculptors are the most exemplary. In the Chisenhale catalogues he designed for Gereon Lepper and the 'shared sculptures' of Bill Woodrow and Richard Deacon, spatial relationships between works are expressed on the page in a formal and direct graphic language. Arefin paired carefully selected, cropped and positioned photographs to produce striking graphic effects, but executed with a sensitivity that meant they were never a distraction from the work being represented and always suggestive of the actual objects as they were positioned together in the exhibition space.

I asked Jonathan Watkins to speak about working with Tony and how this series of publications had been conceived, interested to discover what the mechanics of such a productive collaboration had been.

Had you worked with Tony before you arrived at Chisenhale?

No, we first worked together on the Perry Roberts and Craig Wood catalogue, which then became the first in this ongoing series. He already had such a substantial reputation by that time. For me it felt great that somebody like Tony, who was so established, would want to work with somebody who was starting out. Chisenhale was my first gallery and to get him on board signaled a kind of seriousness—people would pay us more attention because we were working with Tony. Sometimes the reputation of the designer can be enhanced by an institution that they work with, but arguably at Chisenhale it was the other way around. And I think for him that picking up on this alternative space conveyed the fact that he was curious and alive to things.



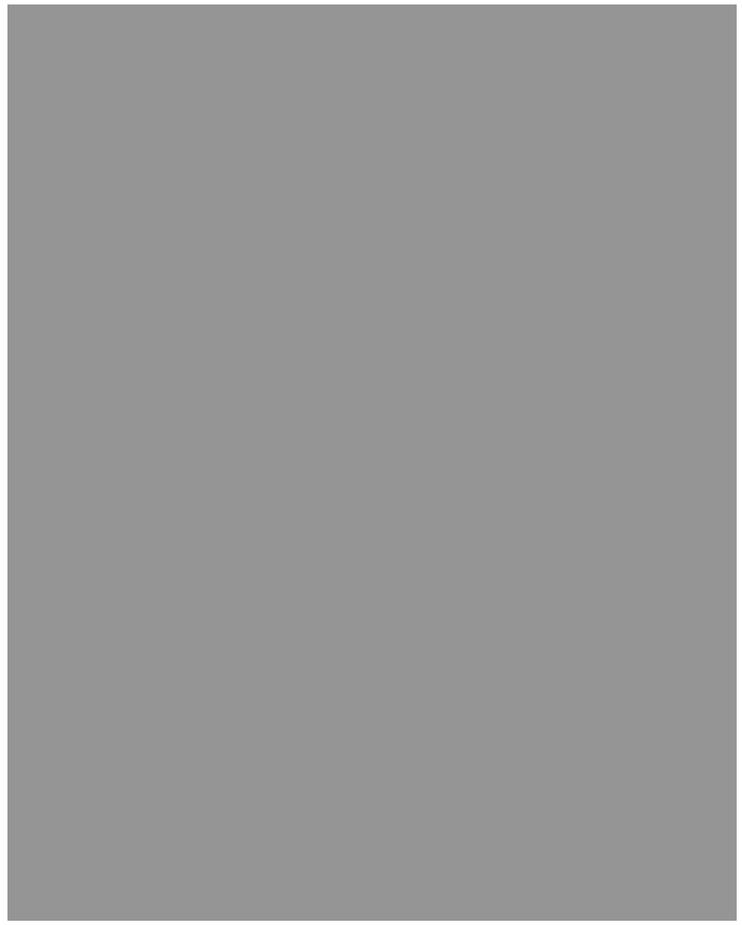
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02

01, 02
Spreads from catalogue
for Richard Deacon/
Bill Woodrow,1993

03
Cover of catalogue for
Gereon Lepper,1992



03

The Chisenhale books follow a single format—230mm x 290mm, twenty-four pages with a printed jacket wrapped around the soft cover. Did that format begin with the first book that Tony did for you, or were you already using it?

It was devised by Tony for that first book. I remember we wanted it to be roughly A4 but definitely not exactly A4, so that it would still feel like something special. So that format was arrived at because you could have double page spreads that were very revealing and suited the dimensions of the Chisenhale space well, but then you could also do justice to images that were portrait format. It felt both cost effective and generous.

Photography is central to the design of the books. To me it seems that they could hardly have been designed in the way that they were without a direct engagement between designer and photographer. How did Tony approach this?

Well, we were working regularly with the photographer Hugo Glendinning. I met Hugo not long after meeting Tony, and the two together were a good match. They knew each other and there was a good rapport, I think we were all aiming for the same thing. Hugo would spend a lot of time working things out, knowing what Tony was looking for and the kind of publication the images were destined for. One remarkable thing about Tony was that he hardly ever saw the shows. He liked being at his office, and just having images that he would work with. He would sometimes turn up at things, but often he was too busy working. He was a kind of magnet in his studio that drew people in.

Were the books ready at the openings of the exhibitions?

Sometimes they were. For example, Perry (Roberts) and Craig's (Wood)'s would have been – we would have the photography done during the installation and turn the design around very fast.

What about Tony's relationships with the artists – did you tend to mediate those conversations, or would Tony work directly with an artist after you had introduced them?

For each book there probably would be two or three meetings with the artist, Tony and I. Artists were very drawn to Tony and they loved the way he talked about their work. He was so charismatic in that way, and I think it felt like they were engaged in an interesting collaborative process with him. It would just be Tony and I at the end, usually late at night in his studio in Denmark Street, getting the text right, making sure that images were the right way around. They weren't the most substantial publications, but we did really concentrate on getting them right.

Looking across the series one gets the sense that Tony wasn't much interested in the material qualities of the books – the fairly ordinary matt coated paper and satin covers are consistent throughout.



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01, 02
Spreads from catalogue
for Christine Borland/
Craig Richardson,1993

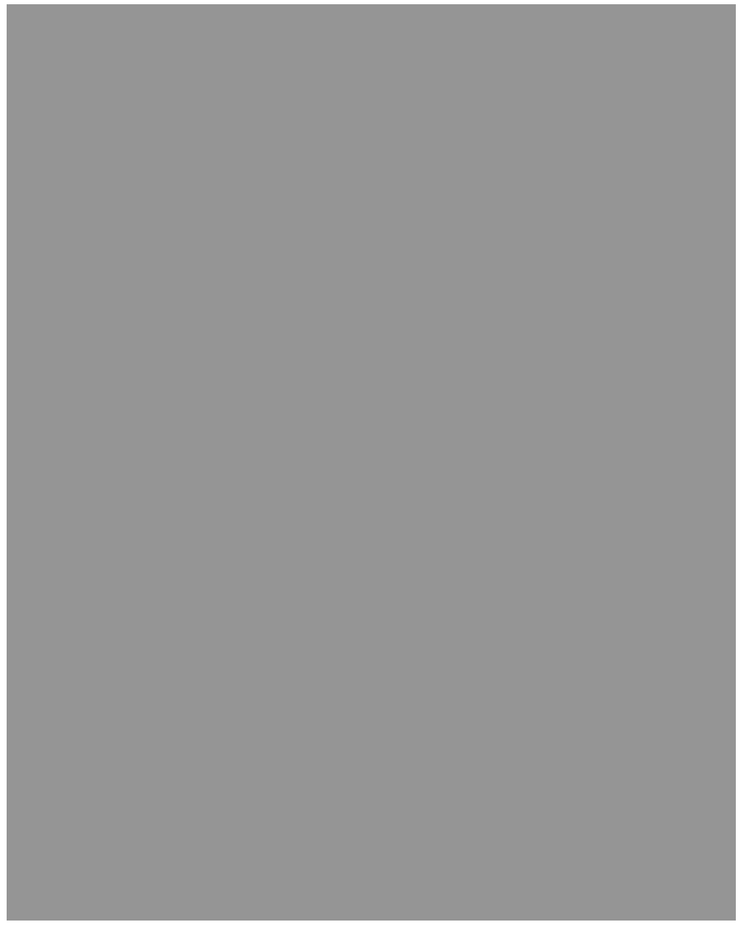
03, 04
Spreads from catalogue
for Grenville Davey,1992

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Cover of catalogue fir
Cathy de Monchaux,1993





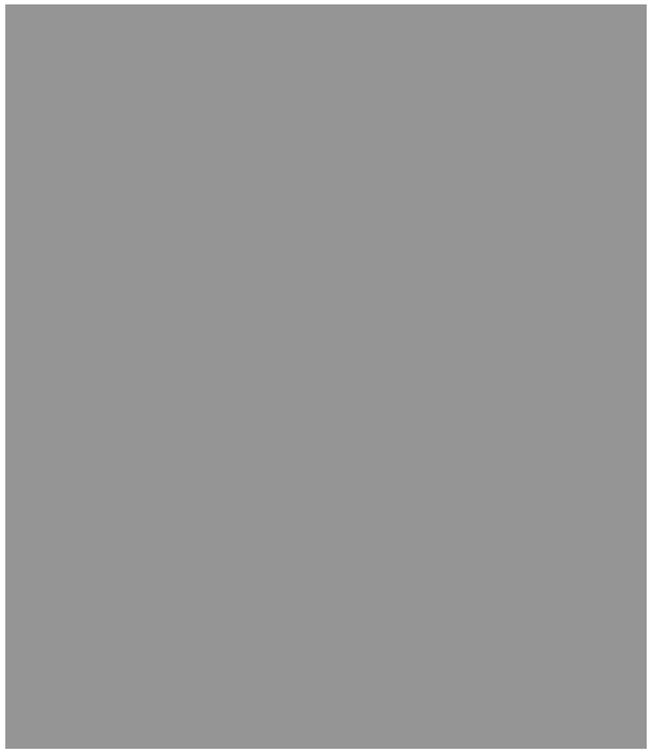
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02

HE WOULD BE SO EXCITED THAT HE MIGHT BE THE FIRST PERSON TO USE A PARTICULAR TYPEFACE. FOR THE CORNELIA PARKER BOOK, FOR EXAMPLE, THAT WAS THE FIRST TIME THAT TEMPLATE GOTHIC HAD BEEN USED IN THE UK.

01



01
Cover of catalogue for French Window (Elisabeth Ballet, Cecile Bart, Sylvie Blocher),1992

02
Spread from French Window, (Elisabeth Ballet, Cecile Bart, Sylvie Blocher),1992

02



Graphics and typefaces were what interested him. He would be so excited that he might be the first person to use a particular typeface. For the Cornelia Parker book, for example, that was the first time that typeface (Template Gothic) had been used in the UK —he would know that and be excited by it. As far as the format and the materials were concerned, I think we had decided that there was a point to having a strict format. It was a way of communicating a certain substance and solidity about Chisenhale. It was an alternative space, but by the time I left I think it would be fair to say that it had established a considerable reputation internationally. And that was to some extent due to the fact that we had these publications that were reassuring in their regularity and sameness of format. You felt you were in the middle of some kind of programme, and that was quite a deliberate strategy.

Within the series there is always variation in design, in terms of the use of images and typography. Each publication is a unique treatment of the artist's work within the common format. It has always appealed to me that the covers very often don't use the gallery or artist's name on the front – it creates a kind of unmediated first impression. Were these design decisions difficult for you?

No, not at all. The idea of somehow embodying the proposition of the artist in the design was always there. And again it's this sense of the consistent format identifying them as Chisenhale catalogues, so people knew that they were from us. I think people liked the freshness of there being no type on the cover, and no spine. Logo wasn't something that we were overly concerned about—there wasn't that formula of half title, title page, foreword, plates—we were very free with all of that. And I think from Tony's point of view, it was exciting that he was at such liberty.

The book that seems the most resolved as a response to an exhibition is the Ann Veronica Janssens and Richard Venlet. I assume that Tony conceived that treatment, in which both type and image are arranged on a centred axis that follows throughout the book, as a response to the content of the show. Did you ever talk about that?

I'm sure we would have talked about it. It was such a minimal show, there was hardly anything to document—it was basically a pipe inserted into a hole in the gallery wall that protruded through into the disused warehouse next door (from which Tony would likely have come up with the idea of the book's formal axis), a window opened, some panels on the wall that were the same colour as the wall so they were barely visible, and then keeping the front door open all of the time.

Finally, how did Tony's relationship with Chisenhale end?

He was restless, feeling the repetition of it all in London, and there were exciting stories of what was happening in New York. He did so many catalogues, you could argue he was heading for burnout. I think we made one, perhaps two books together after he moved to New York, but the dynamic wasn't the same without the studio as a meeting place. Looking back at that period of five years or so that we worked together it's clear that Tony had a profound impact on me. Later, when I worked with other designers, if I was asked what my opinion was about this or that, I'd often think about conversations I'd had with him. The use of full page bleeds, the use of details, the use of space and the lack of graphic devices. That's a pet hate of mine—the gratuity of lines and boxes—I find it annoying, and Tony's approach had a confident boldness that cut through all of that.

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Photography by Stuart Whipps
www.stuartwhipps.com