

Watch

Sending haikus into the wild

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A Swiss duo creates a 3-D app-based book where verses and statistics combine to paint a hairy picture of a planet — and its species — under siege

*“As in the great flood
deaths in the animal realm
who’s building the ark?”*

Dystopian haikus fly across the streets, while skyscrapers built out of images and texts shudder with the burden of the statistics they share. Has the digital revolution changed the way we read books, I asked Swiss writer Markus Kirchhofer (57) and digital artist Marc Lee (50), who were recently in Kolkata to release *More and Less* — their three-dimensional app-based book.

Yes and no, they replied. Lee, who has designed the book and developed its digital software, explains, “Traditional books will never die out... But I think certain subjects can be made more impactful through digital possibilities. Books can have non-linear narratives and open-ended themes, but physically they have an end. Digital three-dimensional books are endless — you get to decide how the book ends, and if it should end at all. You can keep adding to the book — there are countless narrative possibilities here.”

Kirchhofer, who has been writing haikus for over 50 years, is fascinated by the idea of putting his work into an interactive format. Of Japanese origin, a haiku is a poem containing 17 syllables — in three lines of five, seven, and five. “It’s exciting to see how this ancient form of poems merges with new digital technology to create multiple dimensions. I hope this adds new impulses to the world of literature,” he says.

Kirchhofer wrote his first 5-7-5 meter poem at the age of seven. “In 2018, I challenged myself to write at least one haiku a day. In a little over a year I wrote close to 300 haikus, 50 of which have been included in our new book.”

More and Less is Kirchhofer’s 15th publication and the first in a 3-D format. His earlier works include 10 comic books on a range of historical subjects. The idea for the 3-D project was born out of Kirchhofer and Lee’s impulse to respond to the escalating extinction crisis in the world.

Of the over 1,00,000 endangered animal species, several have already gone extinct. By 2050 there will be close to 10 billion human beings on Earth, according to the UN World Population Prospects 2019 report. On the other hand, natural habitats are depleting at an alarming speed, posing challenges to the other species that share the planet.

“When I first heard these numbers I was shocked. Living in Switzerland, our only point of reference to the environmental crisis would be the melting glaciers, which are visibly diminishing every year. But animals and plants going extinct is something that seems distant from our everyday reality,” says Kirchhofer. *More and Less* was created to help raise awareness on the issue.

Kirchhofer describes his book of flying haikus as one with an “ephemeral quality — quite in-sync with the subject — a dream-like, short-lived, disappearing existence”.

*The wild bee spends its
evening clinging to a
swaying stalk of wheat*

“The content has been designed to not seem instructive or wave a finger at anyone but to give information in a playful manner; the reader can find her own way to navigate the information and absorb it. Using an interactive medium gives us that advantage,” he says.

Both Kirchhofer and Lee champion the use of open source data in their work. “We have used an open source software to create this app. With open access to the code you can improve upon it and advance the software — this made it possible for us to create this work. The extinction data used in the project has also been sourced from an open database — the IUCN Red list of Threatened Species.”

Unlike conventional protests such as the Extinction Rebellion in the UK, this project is their way to contribute to the larger discourse to save the biodiversity of the planet, Lee and Kirchhofer say. “We chose to contribute to the movement by using our skills as artists.”

In mid-January, *More and Less* was released as an Android app in Switzerland and, days later, in Kolkata at the Apeejay Kolkata Literature Festival. In India, the duo also took part in a research

residency with the support of the Prohelvetia — Swiss Arts Council. The residency took them to the Sundarbans wetlands to gather more data and lyrical impressions to add to their book.

“India is going to soon be the most populated country in the world. Cities in Switzerland are not densely populated and, therefore, visiting India has been a thrilling experience for us. In Sundarbans, we want to find out more about the natural environment and gain a deeper understanding of the way in which nature and man live symbiotically there.” Guided by their creative instincts, and the new data they have collected, they intend to add more material from this region to their ‘endless book’.

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