



The Art of Clean Up: Life Made Neat and Tidy

Ursus Wehrli , Geri Born (Photographs) , Daniel Spehr (Photographs)

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The modern world can get messy. Fortunately, Swiss artist Ursus Wehrli is a man of obsessive order, as he demonstrates with eye-catching surprise in *The Art of Clean Up*. Already a bestseller in Germany, this compulsive title has sold more than 100,000 copies in less than a year, and the fastidiously arranged images have garnered blog love from NPR, Brain Pickings, swissmiss, and more. Tapping into the desire for organization and the insanity of über-order, Wehrli humorously categorizes everyday objects and situations by color, size, and shape. He arranges alphabet soup into alphabetical order, sorts the night sky by star size, and aligns sunbathers' accoutrements—all captured in bright photographs sure to astonish even the pickiest of neat freaks.

The Art of Clean Up: Life Made Neat and Tidy Details

Date : Published February 19th 2013 by Chronicle Books (first published 2011)

ISBN : 9781452114163

Author : Ursus Wehrli , Geri Born (Photographs) , Daniel Spehr (Photographs)

Format : Hardcover 48 pages

Genre : Art, Nonfiction, Photography, Humor, Childrens, Picture Books, Design, Self Help

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7jane says

A bowl of alphabet soup - arranged A to Z with the few carrots at the end.

A head of a daisy - arranged as the middle and each petal in one line.

An underground map board - lines arranged by length, names alphabetically, the dots in one pile...

A car park - cars arranged by color.

A fruit salad in a bowl - each fruit arranged separately in lines.

This is what this book is about: a certain objects or group of objects (may include people) are arranged in certain order, grouped by type - and it all looks rather funny, interesting and wonderful. Some objects in the after-picture are seen in the 'finished' format (a pond of fish - fish fingers), or as-they-were-before (paprika-flavor crisps/chips - a bottle of paprika powder + a whole potato). The book is not long, so no numbness really sets in.

The artist who made these is also a comedian and a live performer, from Zürich, and seems to have a thing for arranging things in order, strangely. And it's a quite wonderful result that we have here, and fun for those who like to do this type of arranging, even when it just happens in their heads, not in a book like this.

A short but great book to own, and take a look inside now and then.

Amory Blaine says

Ahhh, this book stressed me out so much! The concept is kind of cool - organizing chaotic images (like a multi-colored ball pit) into something more cohesive (ball pit contents sorted into colorful striped sections) - but most of the time, the finished product made me more uncomfortable than the original image. Most of the original images WEREN'T chaotic, and the artist's deconstruction of them felt destructive. For instance, plants and bouquets whose petals/leaves were stripped and tallied. Or a shot of chickens roaming flowering grass outside a coop, which was then turned into a picture of a single hen, a freshly mowed lawn, and a triangle of white eggs. What happened to all those chickens? Were they transformed into embryos?? The surviving hen looks so lonely and sad without friends, plants, or food in sight! Etc. Some images were humorous, but not most, and at least one seemed mildly offensive: a picture of Chinese characters that was straightened into plain lines. Because, you know, Chinese lettering is just so unwieldy.

Obviously the artist put a lot of work into this project, and sometimes the end results are funny or satisfying. Other times, they seem to belittle the stunning photographs that came before, and which captured the range of diversity and beauty in our occasionally chaotic world. Next time I read this book, I'll do so backwards: watching disassembled parts become something beautiful, colorful, familiar, and whole.

Tracy says

Innovative photography where a guy organizes common aspects of life such as a laundry line, a parking lot and a bowl of soup.

Steffi says

Kunst mal anders. Auf jedenfall Kunst, die für mich auch Kunst ist. Es hat sogar was total beruhigendes dieses Bilder anzuschauen. Ich glaub ich positionier das Buch auch auf der Toilette ? Kann jeder mal reinblättern

Christina says

nice idea =)

Helen says

This is a book of before & after photographs of objects/scenes/tableaux the artist/photographer has "deconstructed" and "put in order" that is, sorted usually according to color (that is, gradations of color) material, etc. Actually, the effect is both disturbing and satisfying - it's perfect for the OCD tendencies in all of us, I suppose.

On pages 4, a small pine branch is taken apart and sorted on page 5 - the result is both sad, given that the "magic" of trees in general can thus be reduced to an orderly "arrangement" but also a pleasing design or arrangement of forms, graphic design wise.

On page 6, an overhead photograph of a bowl of alphabet soup, is on page 7 literally sorted out by letter and carrot cubes, on page 8. I'm sure this book would appeal to Marie Kondo, or other quasi-obsessive "organizers." Again, the design of the square of neatly arranged groups letters - in alphabetical order naturally - is satisfying. I suppose the preference for order, symmetry is probably an innate human trait - organization over chaos. Perhaps because it's easier to understand forms/contents if they are neatly organized?

On page 8, a large number of colorful clothes hanging on what seems to be a community clothesline area, is on page 9 sorted according to color spectrum, starting with the dark colors - black, then green, and deep blues, the brights pink, red, orange, and finally the lights pale blue and white. Of course the effect is somehow extremely pleasing. I think the spectrum gradation of violet to yellow of course is more pleasing than the jumbled mass of clothing in the "before" photo.

In the next "deconstruction" or "rearrangement" a subway map is broken down into its component pieces - station signs grouped together, terminus signs grouped together, names of stations grouped together in a box shape text collection, and finally the subway lines are themselves "straightened" out and simply arranged according to size. The effect is of course much more orderly, but in this case, somewhat sad - as if the mystery and challenge of reading a complicated subway map can be broken down into its component parts, a mere collection of orderly lines, simplified.

In the next pair of photos, an overhead photograph shows people are milling around in an open plaza, the next photo shows the same people laying down on the pavement lined up according to garment color, with their skateboards grouped together in a separate row, ditto segways, knapsack, and even the two balls some

kids were playing with. Actually, the effect is rather unsettling - can life really be broken down into categories this way? Is grouping things together according to type and garment color "fun" or "grim?" Is randomness/chaos more fun or less?

The next before and after photos are oddly satisfying, at least to me: On the left, a Christmas tree sitting in a green glass base is decked out with electric candles, globes, and a silver metallic topmost spire, along with thick silver and green plastic garlands. The next photo shows the deconstructed tree - all components neatly arranged in rows, the tree reduced to a bundle of wooden planks neatly gathered together, and the pine needles in a neat conical pile. The "magic" of the Christmas tree - reduced to its physical component parts. I do like Christmas - but the cliches and forced jollity of the holiday season, the commercialism and so forth, I find annoying at times.

Next photo: An overhead shot of a kid playing with many toys - pails, shovels, dump trucks, and so forth, in a sand box. Next photo: Same kid is sitting on the edge of the sandbox, looking at the sandbox - which has now been neatly smoothed over and the toys arranged by type (digging tools together, dump trucks in a row together, pails together, etc). This is sort of a sad image because I think kids enjoy creating chaos or exploring when they play. Making a mess must be part of the creative process of learning/exploring.

The next two photos are a "gimmick" - on the left is a photo of a starry night sky, on the right, the stars have been arranged according to brightness in neat groupings. This works on a graphic design level I suppose, but the image of a starry sky is so ingrained as a wondrous sight it's creepy to see the same stars artificially lined up and grouped together in categories according to brightness.

Next, a giant bin of containing the artist half-buried within a colorful assortment of M&Ms is the next photo sorted out according to giant color stripes with the artist laying down above looking over at the now "tidy" bin. The bold stripes of color remind me of the color blocks of national flags - this image really doesn't do much for me one way or another. It's similar to the "gimmick" photo of the "sorted out" stars.

The next two photos show a weathered shed, with chickens wandering around out front with a rooster prominently placed in the middle of the flock. In the next photo, chicken eggs are arranged as per a triangle shape of billiard balls, with the chicks now inside the shed and the rooster walking up the ramp to his "domain." This is I suppose "cute" - I suppose one could say the rooster represents authoritarianism and the flock of "chaotic" chickens - freedom. Maybe that's reading too much into these "before and after" photos.

Next, two overhead shots - before and after of people by a pool, on a green lawn, spread out on blankets, beach towels, lounge chairs, under beach umbrellas and so forth, the next photo the blankets are grouped according to the color spectrum, and the people are simply lined up laying down in rows on the grass, with no discernible pattern other than in rows, with their accessories - lined up in separate rows. I guess this is cute but also neither here nor there. Not sure if - other than the color gradation of the colors of the towels, beach chairs, which is pleasant enough - this pair of photos really "works."

Next, a paper plate of fries & ketchup is in the next photo reduced to groups of five fries (four in each group with the fifth placed on top cross-wise) alongside an overturned paper plate and a dollop of ketchup - all very orderly, "clean" and neat. This is somewhat gimmicky, although humorous. Most of us would never look at fries this way so I suppose the "organized" treatment of a common food, does make the viewer think.

Next, a Chinese character sign is in the next photo broken down and grouped according to component parts of the characters. Very clever - but looking at Chinese this way must be disconcerting to a Chinese person I suppose.

Next, a parking lot contained a random assortment of cars parked randomly is "organized by color spectrum" (ranging from deep red through ochre/yellow to dark green and deep blue with white silver and grey cars

grouped by color in the top row) is as "pleasing" as the laundry "organization" photograph. The cars in the "after" photo are now grouped by color, according to the color spectrum, and are now neatly parked. Of course parking lots - and life - never looks like this.

The next two photos are really "impressive" in a "let's finally get rid of all the magic in life" way.. a small nosegay of flowers and foliage is in the facing photograph recued to a stark arrangement of stems, leaves, flowers, buds. Very striking, very effective - but also sad. Yes, the organization of the flowers in rows is "pleasing" in a way - the way repeated designs/ornamentation is "pleasing" - but the "romantic" magic of a bouquet of flowers, is absent in the "orderly" or "quantified" photograph.

The intact flower bouquet is filled with life - the line-up of flowers and leaves, dissected, ripped apart - yes, we can clearly see the flowers and leaves, and they are I suppose "pleasingly" arranged in rows, but the magic of the plants and flowers has evaporated.

The next two photos are even more devastating. On the left, a mass of skiers is shown on a slope the next photo shows only their skis and poles, grouped together in rows. No people, no "chaos" only "neat" rather desiccated looking rows of skis & poles.

Next, a bowl of fruit with whipped cream is - you guessed it - turned into rows of neatly sliced apples, kiwi, orange sections, banana, berries. As an additional visual "joke" even the spots on the bowl have now been removed from the bowl & are now placed in a row alongside the rows of fruit.

Next, 4 shoppers are on line to check out at a deli - each with shopping baskets of groceries. In the facing photo, the same shoppers wait on line but now each is holding baskets of groceries sorted according to color (first shopper only green groceries/products, next white items, next yellow, next blue). On the counter, only red items. Cute - but gimmicky.

Next, an overhead shot of carp/goldfish - with neatly arranged rectangular fish sticks in a square white porcelain baking dish in the facing photograph. Sorta grim - since the fish look so happy and free swimming around. Maybe that's the point of the book - freedom/life vs. order/death..?

The final photo is perhaps the saddest of them all: A single daisy appears in an overhead shot, in a green field. The next photo shows the central yellow fuzzy portion of the flower, by itself, alongside a row of all its carefully plucked petals. Again - all the charm and life is taken out of the beautiful flower as it is reduced to "organization" or "design." It's telling that this simple yet powerful image is the final photograph.

The books end papers show first an image of incredible sloppiness - a jumble of things - M&Ms, miniature national flags, model cars, photographs, postage stamps, clothespins, dice, potato chips, matches, popcorn, paper clips, rubber bands, coins, a plastic triangle (the ones used for drafting or geometry), color pencils, everything in a wonderful jumble. In fact, this is what my desk (almost) looks like (there are M&Ms - but in a jar, and most of the rest of the mess is a mass of post its, notes to myself, books, files, etc). In the end paper at the end of the book, the popcorn is back on to an ear of corn (!) the potato chips have been re-incorporated into a potato, the cars are now lined up as per color, the flags are grouped together in a row, the rubber bands are now gathered together in piles according to color the matches are now not used (not burnt) and grouped together in a row, the colored pencils are in a row according to the color spectrum, the M&Ms are in rows grouped according to color - even the photographs now show before & after "orderly" images in comparison with the photos in the "before" end paper. The image of Van Gogh's famous "Sunflowers" painting in the before photo is now a photo of a bottle of sunflower oil in the after end paper and the coins are now transformed into a dollar bill. Even the triangle has been "straightened" out into a ruler. Hah.

Anyway, this is a cute - perhaps astonishing - book of photographs of a project the artist undertook. It's oddly pleasing yet often disconcerting, even depressing at times. A person can review the photos in a few minutes - some will make you laugh, others perhaps groan. Still, the photos may make you think of things differently -

more analytically? It's a cute concept - well-photographed. Life made more orderly - although life is really never that orderly. Maybe that's the book's or project's "message."

Rachel says

This is a very unusual picture book and ideal (well maybe) for any OCD people in your life (adults or kids). It is wordless and one page shows things mixed up (like laundry on a close line) the facing page shows the same scene but with the clothes ordered by color. It is very cleverly done and I can see kids and adults getting a big kick out of it.

Katy says

Do you like it when things are in order? Or organized by size? Or color? Do you like looking at pictures? Yeah? You may have OCD. And you'll love this book!

Esther says

Heerlijk! Eindelijk orde ;)

Natalie says

This is clever, poignant, fun, funny, attractively composed and did i say funny? as in hilarious. Really enjoyed this !

Linda Robinson says

Delightful, laugh out loud OCD. Wehrli is a fellow traveler on the road to organizing all the stuff that organizing will not benefit. A visual pun, an extraordinary journey. Love this book. Thanks to Natalie for recommending!

Kathy says

Funny, witty, beautiful and a celebration of the unruliness of life. Or a disturbing look at the impulse for organization that some of us think we crave.

Sue Smith says

Mental.

Ursus Wehrli is mental.

I won't deny that this book has its quirky charm - but I just couldn't shake that the author has a serious OCD issue. With an alarming undercurrent of psychosis. Granted, it was fun to see some things in a completely different way - the pattern of the parts and some order in the chaos, but some of the tongue-in-cheek humor was a wee bit disconcerting - like changing the pool of fish into a platter of fish sticks. Hmmmmm.

It does make you think though.

And it makes me realize that I'm infinitely glad that I don't have the OCD compulsion to arrange my stuff into crazy patterns and details.

Kristel says

This is an interesting enough book, but less engaging maybe than I expected it to be. My favourite bit was the inside covers, front and back, which at least were a bit cheeky: the front inside cover had, for example, popcorn, random scattered coins and potato chips. Then the back inside cover had a cob of corn, a single US dollar bill, a potato, and a container of paprika. More clever, the front had a bunch of flags, including the US flag and the Greek flag, then on the back there were simplified versions of all the flags --the US flag became the Chilean flag (split in half with a red band across the bottom, the top left third is blue with a single white star and the right two-thirds is a white band) and the Greek flag became the flag of Finland. The rest of the book... I don't know, it was fine, but was kind of a five minute flip through and then I was done.

Tracey Allen at Carpe Librum says

I loved the work of Ursus Wehrli as soon as I saw it. He takes every day settings and objects, and breaks them down, grouping the items in columns according to a new order.

The order could be determined by size, colour or any number of factors, but it's very amusing to see what he does with objects in a bowl of fruit salad (demonstrated on the cover, left) or a car park full of cars.

I love the way this artist thinks, and by looking at his work I really appreciate his way of seeing the world and the effort he sometimes goes to in order to achieve his re-ordering of the world.

The Art Of Clean Up - Life Made Neat And Tidy is a fabulous, funny and clever book I recommend for all

ages. I think kids in particular will enjoy emulating the Wehrli style.
