

**Portrait of** the Artist

as **a Publisher:**

**Publishing** as an

Alternative

**Artistic Practice**

*Antoine Lefebvre*

In November 2014, I finished a PhD dissertation titled "Portrait of the Artist as a Publisher: Publishing as an Alternative Artistic Practice,"<sup>1</sup> and this idea of alternative art became a focus of my research.<sup>2</sup> This PhD thesis is research of a special kind, which does not exist in most countries, as it is neither the research of art history nor art philosophy, but the research of visual art, made from an artist researcher's point of view. The hardest part of this exercise is that you have to elaborate theory by studying your own artistic practice, which is often influenced by the theory you are reading and the ideas you are developing. Knowing this, I created *La Bibliothèque Fantastique* (or *LBF*) in 2009, a publishing structure for artist books that issued more than a hundred artists' publications until I decided to end it in 2013 to focus on the writing of my dissertation.

The specificity of *LBF* is that its publications are free and downloadable from a website<sup>3</sup> so that everyone can print them at home. Most of these books are exclusive productions. The others are reprints of works that are important for the history of artists' publications. The purpose of *LBF* is to offer a view on books expressed by books themselves. Its works are made of excerpts of other works, with pages, sentences, and words met in a stroke of good fortune. *LBF* is an artistic venture, a commercial artwork, and a laboratory for my research that allowed me to create new artworks by over thirty different artists. The main question I tried to answer researching my own artistic practice is: Why, and more importantly, how is this publishing work an artwork? This is how I discovered that publishing could be considered as an alternative artistic practice. Since Marcel Duchamp's ready-made, it doesn't seem like an artist has to prove that something is an artwork, he just has to say so. But it was important for me to find out what could make this project art in the eyes of others. Should it be because my role as a publisher is creative, because the books are shown in an exhibition setting, or because they express a strong voice, as an artist would in his work?

To answer that, I focused on showing how this approach could be considered an alternative, and tried to create a definition of the artist publisher that I hope other artist publishers will see themselves in.

As intertextuality is one of the important concepts in this research, it was important to me that the form of the dissertation could create connections between books. The dissertation is 750 pages, which I divided into four volumes in a silkscreen case. Each one carries different types of information and complements the others. The first is a catalog of all the publications and ephemera produced by *LBF* during its four years of existence. Each of the publications is presented with a reproduction of its cover, a full bibliographic reference, and a small presentation text. The texts are not explanations that one would need to read in order to understand the works, but rather anecdotes and background

1 Antoine Lefebvre, "Portrait of the Artist as a Publisher, Publishing as an Alternative Artistic Practice" (Ph.D. diss., Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne, 2014), <http://labibliothequefantas.free.fr/index.php?/thesis>.

2 Alternative art is here intended as a type of art that can exist outside of the traditional system of art (i. e., the art market, the art object, the institutions, and even outside of the representation).

3 "La Bibliothèque Fantastique," accessed August 11, 2015, [www.labibliothequefantastique.net](http://www.labibliothequefantastique.net).

history that led to the creation of those specific artworks. This volume is the best source of information on the books of *LBF* as most of them don't have a colophon and very few paratext.

The second volume is composed of interviews conducted with eight people who I consider good representatives of alternative art. Those persons are not necessarily artists, but their actions within art contribute to show a different side of art, or to bring art where it hasn't been before. This volume gives a definition of alternative art through a wide range of examples, as these eight people work to change the definition of art and to make it broader. They are Ben Kinmont (artist, publisher, and antiquarian bookseller), Matthew Stadler (writer and co-founder of Publication Studio), Filip Noterdaeme (artist, writer, and director of the Homeless Museum of Art), Bettina Funcke (writer and co-founder of the Continuous Project group), Ghislain Mollet-Viéville (art agent<sup>4</sup>), Dana Wyse (artist), Bernard Brunon (artist and house painter) and Jean-Claude Moineau (art theoretician). All the interviewees tend to create their own status by mixing activities that one wouldn't think compatible. The result of their actions is always an extended definition of art.

The third volume presents photographic documents showing how *LBF* books have been displayed in fairs, exhibitions, shops, and other places. Displaying books in an exhibition white cube is complicated for three reasons: first, people are not used to touching objects in an exhibition space; second, an exhibition is usually not a comfortable place to read; and third, the books that you allow people to touch should be replaceable, as they will surely be damaged. The solution I found was to hang the *LBF* books on nails,

4 For Ghislain Mollet-Viéville, an art agent is someone who advocates for a particular vision of art, in his case Conceptual dematerialized art. Since 1975, Mollet-Viéville has been a great support for several generations of French Conceptual artists by offering them a place to experiment in his own apartment. His old apartment is now restaged in the Mamco museum in Geneva as part of the permanent collection with all the Conceptual and Minimal artworks of his collection. See <http://www.conceptual-art.net/>, accessed September 29, 2015.

5 "A library is print in its gaseous state filling every available space, and then increasing the pressure." Craig Dworkin, *The Perverse Library* (York: Information as Material, 2010), 14.

so visitors could take them in their hands and browse through them. The printed books are hole punched in the upper left corner so they can be taken off the wall and read. They are hung regularly to fill all available space so the library can spread (fig. 1).<sup>5</sup> As the files for the books are freely downloadable, there are no "original" copies of the books of *LBF*, so the displayed copies are printed each time by the venue producing the installation.

The fourth volume is the actual thesis, an attempt to create a definition of the "artist publisher" using the experience of *La Bibliothèque Fantastique* as a basis for my research. The following quote from "La Bibliothèque Fantastique" ("The Fantasia of the Library") by Michel Foucault was an important inspiration to me, as I used it as a guide to create *LBF*:

"The imaginary now resides between the book and the lamp. The fantastic is no longer a property of the heart, nor is it found among the incongruities of nature; it evolves from the accuracy of knowledge, and its treasures lie dormant in the documents. Dreams are no longer summoned with closed eyes, but in reading; and a true image is now a product of learning:

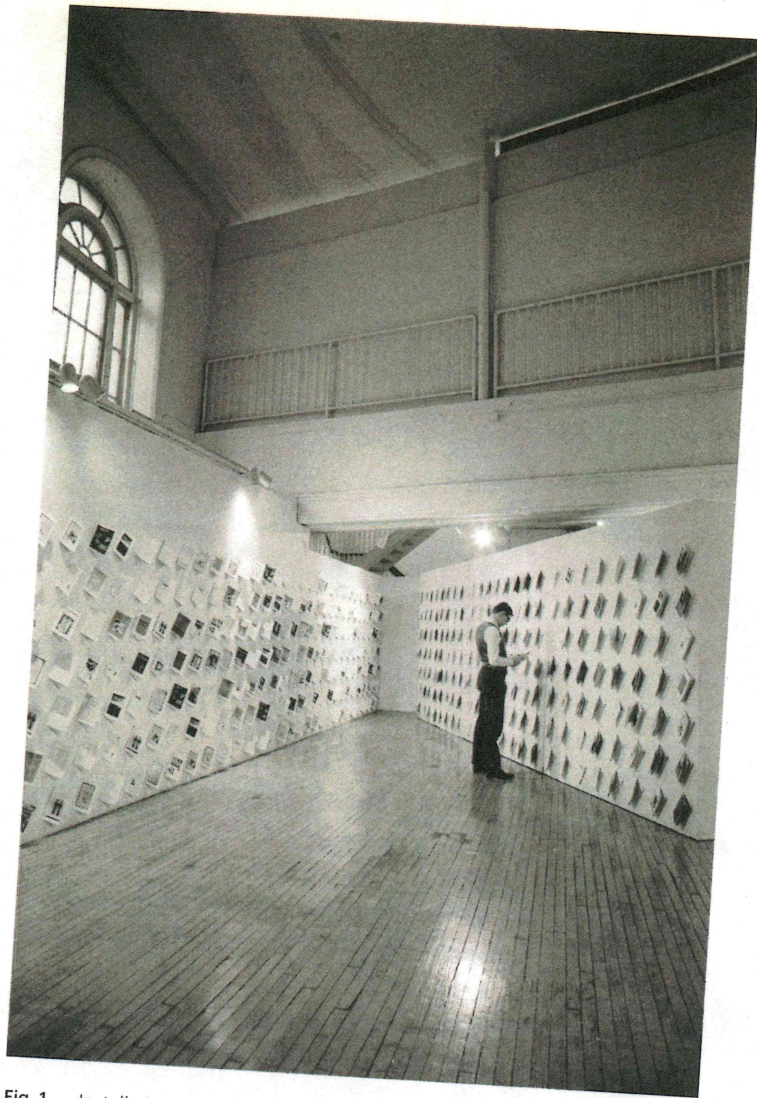


Fig. 1. Installation for the video presentation of *La Bibliothèque Fantastique*, New York 2012. Photo: Lucie Rocher, CC-BY-SA, <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/1.0>.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Fantasia of the Library" (1967), in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 87-109, 90-91. A bilingual version of this text is available on the LBF website.

it derives from words spoken in the past, exact recensions, the amassing of minute facts, monuments reduced to infinitesimal fragments, and the reproductions of reproductions. In the modern experience, these elements contain the power of the impossible. Only the assiduous clamor created by repetition can transmit to us what only happened once. The imaginary is not formed in opposition to reality as its denial or compensation; it grows among signs, from book to book, in the interstice of repetitions and commentaries; it is born and takes shape in the interval between books. It is a phenomenon of the library."<sup>6</sup>

Michel Foucault, "The Fantasia of the Library," 1967.<sup>6</sup>

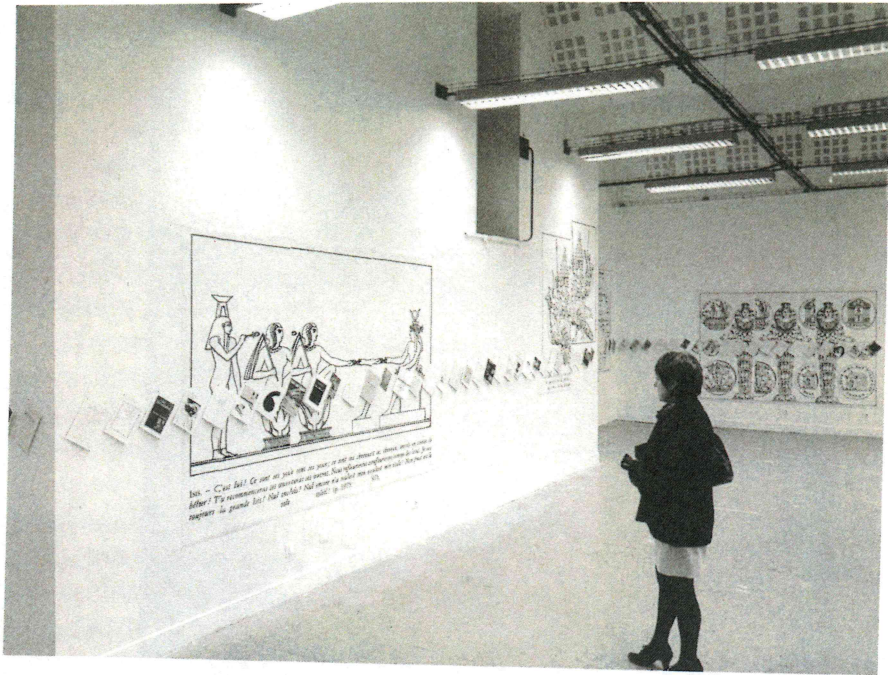


Fig. 2. Installation *Ligne éditoriale & La Tentation de saint Antoine*, made for the PhD presentation, Paris 2014. Photo: Antoine Lefebvre, CC-BY-SA, <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/1.0>.

The photos of the installation I did for the defense of my dissertation can be informative in explaining how this Foucault text influenced my publishing process. This installation is composed of two overlapping elements: a line made out of all the books of *LBF* hung chronologically on nails, and underneath them, a series of giant photocopies of nineteenth century engravings [fig. 2]. These are the images that Foucault had printed alongside his text since the very first publication in 1964 as an afterword to the German translation

7 Michel Foucault, afterword to *Die Versuchung des Heiligen Antonius*, by Gustave Flaubert (Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 1964), 217–251.

8 There is no English translation of this work by Creuzer to my knowledge. The title would translate as *Symbolism and mythology of the ancient peoples, particularly the Greeks*. The French version read by Flaubert was translated from the German by Joseph Daniel Guigniaut: Friedrich Creuzer, *Religions de l'antiquité, Considérées principalement dans leurs formes symboliques et mythologiques*, vol. 4, part 2 (Paris: Kossbühl, 1841).

of *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* by Gustave Flaubert.<sup>7</sup>

In his text, Foucault demonstrates how Flaubert's book is made out of myths and characters borrowed from books of the writer's library. Flaubert especially used the book of the German archeologist Friedrich Creuzer *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen*<sup>8</sup> where the tenth and last volume is composed of engravings representing all the gods from all around the world who come to attempt to make Saint Anthony lose faith. This book was a great source of inspiration for Flaubert, who used these reproductions to nourish the description of Saint Anthony's temptations. This process is what Foucault calls in his text "a phenomenon of the library," a combination of a lot of books from the writer's personal library mixed to make a new book.

The first part of the thesis is built like a mystery novel around the death of the author. It starts by a discovery made by a key witness: the librarian, whose position allows him to see the disappearance of the author first hand. The main idea of this first part is that this intertextual work that Flaubert did and that Foucault calls a phenomenon is similar to the work of the publisher who organizes his publishing as an accumulation of text, title, books, covers, and authors like a librarian would. By doing so, the artist publisher creates a dialogue between these elements that is essential to creating new meaning for his artworks. These links between texts that were thoroughly studied by structuralist thinkers in the 1960s do not express themselves in the library but rather in the mind of the reader as Roland Barthes demonstrated in his famous text "The Death of the Author."<sup>9</sup> The crime scene therefore is the mind of the reader, which is for Barthes the "place where [the] multiplicity is collected, united."<sup>10</sup> All the *LBF* books have a cover borrowed from an existing book, because a certain amount of appropriation is indispensable to create new meaning between books. But these mechanisms of appropriation

challenge the notion of authorship. This type of interaction between texts and books does not leave books unharmed and the biggest victim of this game is the author whose very existence is threatened by the appropriation phenomenon.

The appropriation is the murder weapon by which the author came to die. But it is also the tool that will bring an unexpected twist to this story: the author is not dead! His presence continues to haunt us like a ghost as he rises from the dead as a meta-author. Indeed, in his *Metaphysical Principles of Law*, Kant defines the book as "a Writing which contains a Discourse addressed by some one to the Public, through visible signs of Speech." He therefore defines the author as "he who speaks to the public in his own name." Kant then gives a definition of the publisher, which makes him a meta-author: "He who addresses the writing to the public in the name of the author is the publisher."<sup>11</sup> The publisher is therefore an author who expresses himself through authors, using their speech to build his, and the artist publisher is a meta-artist who creates his own work by arranging or curating the works of other artists.<sup>12</sup>

The second part of the thesis focuses on the nature of the works published by *LBF*. By developing the genealogy of these publications, I found Stéphane Mallarmé to be a precursor in the idea of authors making books, instead of just writing texts.<sup>13</sup> Comparing the different definitions of artists' books, I wanted to find the links between this particular type of artists' publications, counter culture, and subcultures. The goal of this second part is to define a new category of artists' publications that resides at the intersection of artists'

9 Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Aspen* no. 5-6 (fall-winter 1967).

See also Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans.

Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997) and Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language*.

*A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans.

Thomas Gora and Alice A. Jardine (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).

10 Barthes, "The Death of the Author."

11 Immanuel Kant, "Metaphysical Principles of Law" (1797), in *The Philosophy of Law, An Exposition of the Fundamental Principles of Jurisprudence as the Science of Right* (Edinburgh: W. Hastie, 1887), 129-130.

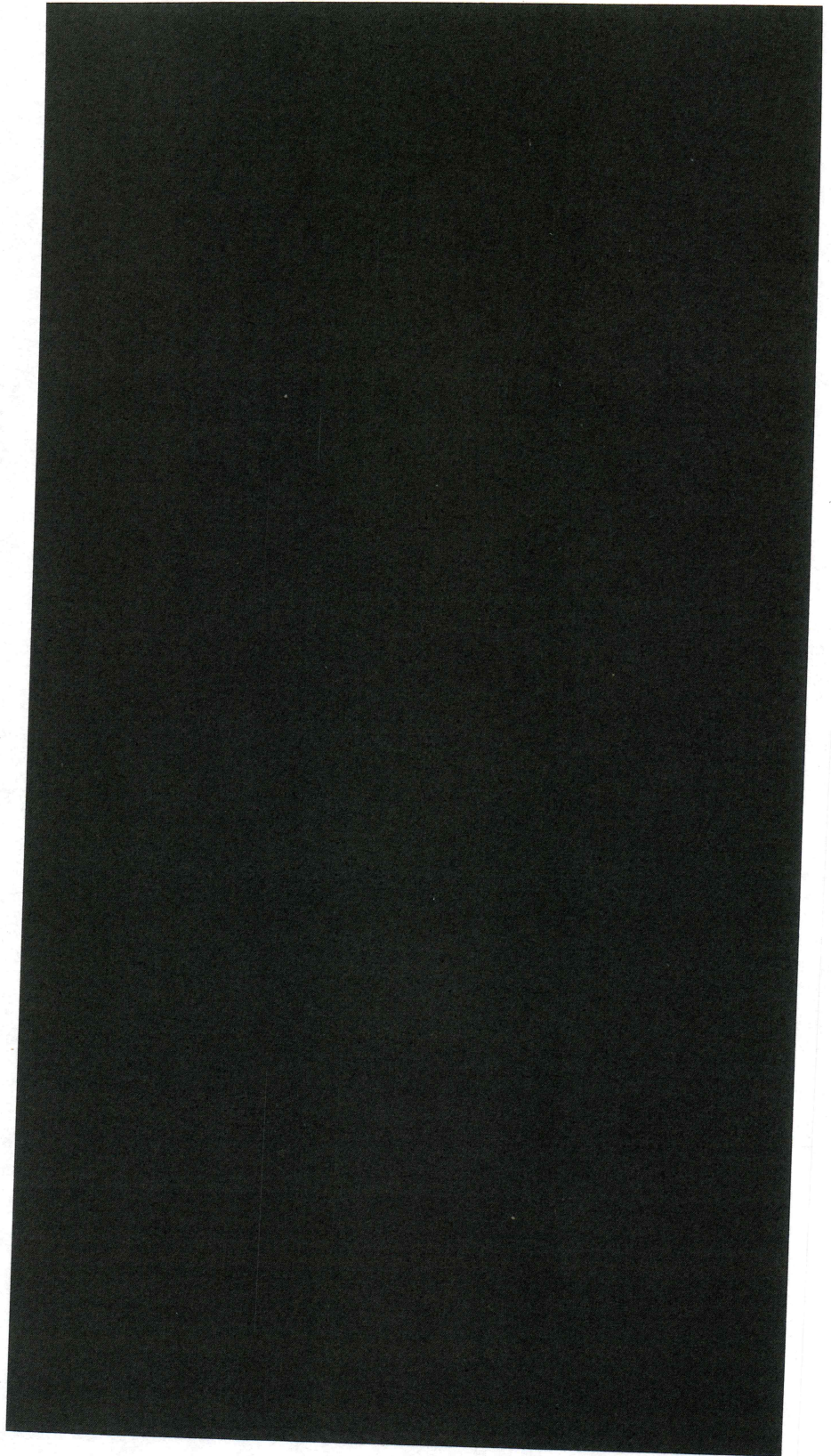
12 See Hanna Kuusela's and Annette Gilbert's contributions in this volume.

13 In "The New Art of Making Books," *Kontexts* no. 6-7

(1975), Ulises Carrión defines bookmaking as this: "In the old art the writer writes texts. In the new art the writer

makes books." Mallarmé would therefore be one of the first examples of this "new art of making books" that Carrion links to artists' books.

See also Antoine Lefebvre, "Portrait of the Artist," 131-154.



books and the Do It Yourself ethos. I call artzines the artists' publications that are produced in a Do It Yourself spirit and therefore belong to zines, but which also have a strong connection to contemporary art, and the history of avant-gardes.<sup>14</sup> The artzines are a subcategory within zines, alongside punk zines, queer zines, perzines, etc., but almost all the zine categories can also be found within artzines—with a little artistic twist.

Since its inception, many critics have considered artists' publications as alternative spaces. Artist publisher Simon Cutts even called them a "critical alternative" in 1986 in the catalog of his exhibition *The Artist Publisher*.<sup>15</sup> But before him, Kate Linker had already designated the artist book as an alternative space, because it is an alternative to the exhibition space as well as to the art market.<sup>16</sup> Barbara Moore, John Hendricks and Guy Schraenen also compared the printed page to the exhibition space and to artist-run spaces.<sup>17</sup> But artists' publications are not alternatives only because they offer another space for art, where art can be shown on the artist's own terms. They are also an alternative, to a mainstream or dominant culture, because some of them, such as artzines, are influenced and share history with the counterculture rebellion and some subcultures.

In the third part I define the creative process of the artist publisher as an alternative artistic practice for several different reasons. First, because creating a commercial venture as an artwork places the artist publisher in a history of artist organizations founded by artists who refused to comply with the demands of the traditional art world. Working with the Sorbonne and the CNRS Art&Flux research team was the occasion for me to address the economic aspect of publishing, which is often idealized when it comes

to artists' books. Commentators tend to see them as a very democratic form of art because they are cheap to buy. But they are only cheap from the point of view of the buyer and they are very expensive to produce for the artist, even more than traditional artworks. The Art&Flux team works, among other things, on the links between art and the economy, and especially on "artist companies" which are run by artist entrepreneurs such as Iain Baxter who created *N.E. Thing Co.* in 1963. Artist entrepreneurs often have a very critical view on the economy and try to show how it could work differently. They also choose for themselves a status that will lead them to exist inside or outside of the art world but always on their own terms.<sup>18</sup>

This idea of alternative art therefore takes many shapes, as Robert Filliou stated in his "autriste" philosophy: "Whatever you do, do something else. Whatever you think, think something else."<sup>19</sup> Alternative art practices can be defined in many ways: as a different way of thinking as Filliou proposes, but I think that the places where they happen can also help to qualify them as such. The concept

<sup>14</sup> See *ibid.*, 155–172.

<sup>15</sup> Simon Cutts, *The Artist Publisher* (London: Crafts Council Gallery, 1986), 5.

<sup>16</sup> Kate Linker, "Artist's Book as an Alternative Space," *Studio International* 990, no. 195 (1980): 75–79.

<sup>17</sup> Barbara Moore and John Hendricks, "The Page as Alternative Space, 1950 to 1969," in *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, ed. Joan Lyons (Rochester: Visual Studies Workshop, 1985), 91. And Guy Schraenen, "Pour une approche des espaces alternatifs (1–4)," *Artefactum* no. 8–11 (1985–1986).

<sup>18</sup> Yann Toma and Rose Marie Barrientos, eds., *Les Entreprises Critiques/Critical Companies* (Saint-Etienne: Cite du design, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> Robert Filliou, *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts* (Köln: Kasper Koenig, 1970), 227.

of heterotopia that Michel Foucault invented<sup>20</sup> is an accurate depiction of how artists tend to bring art into new places or “non-places,” where it has never been before. Alternative art tends to happen in unexpected places, or in places that are transformed by the action of the artist.

But it is an artist publisher, the self-proclaimed Fluxus leader George Maciunas, who brought the most relevant concept to qualify publishing as an alternative artistic practice: Concretism is a type of art that presents objects instead of representing them. To him, concretist artists: “prefer the world of concrete reality rather than the artificial abstraction of illusionism. Thus in plastic arts, for instance, a concretist perceives and expresses a rotten tomato without changing its reality of form.”<sup>21</sup> This definition inspired by Duchamp helped me a lot to qualify publishing as an alternative artistic practice, as it can be considered a readymade activity. It is a banal activity raised to the state of artwork by the will of an artist. To me, the definition of art lies within action. Because as Ernst Gombrich said: “There is no such thing as art, there are only artists.”<sup>22</sup> Also, there is no use for ideas unless they are materialized in a form that can be communicated. Even the most abstract works of Conceptual art have to be transmitted to the viewer, be it in writing or orally. *LBF* is a concretist artwork because its goal is not to give a representation of a library, as you would find in a painting, a photo, or even in some installations, but rather to create a fully functional library where the accumulation of books and titles creates a discourse.

The best example of what I call alternative art is the work of Bernard Brunon, a French artist who has been living in the U.S. since the eighties. His work fits all the criteria I have just defined, as he has founded his own artistic company to act in heterotopias, spaces that he transforms by his action. He is also a concretist artist as he has always painted avoiding representation. When Brunon was a young man studying art in France, he went to the École des Beaux-Arts in Marseille to study with Claude Viallat, an artist from the Support/Surface group, known for his painting work, which questions materials in the painting process. The young Brunon was interested in Viallat’s way of thinking as he was trying to make paintings that wouldn’t be representations of anything. When Brunon went to live in Dallas, Texas for personal reasons, he started working some odd jobs, such

20 Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces. Heterotopias,” trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986): 22–27.

21 George Maciunas, “Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art” (1962), in *Fluxus: Selections from the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection*, ed. Clive Phillpot and Jon Hendricks (New York: MoMA 1988), 25–27.

22 Ernst Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1950), 4.

as painting houses, to make a living. He then realized that when he was painting a wall for one of his clients, he was finally doing what he had always tried to do in his paintings, which is to make a painting that wouldn’t be a representation. Indeed, when Brunon paints a house, he is not representing the house, but painting the world, the reality. He therefore decided that his artistic practice would be house painting, making him a sort of Conceptual painter. When I asked Brunon what part of his process was art—was it the painted wall, the act of painting, his house painting company, or the idea?—he said that all of this was his art and that

he considers his whole activity as art, his “démarche.” The French word “démarche” is helpful to explain: it can be translated as approach or process, but those translations do not fully cover it. In the French word “démarche,” there is the verb “marcher,” to walk. That is why, in my work as in Brunon’s, the whole process; the whole “démarche” is the artwork, because it is active, ongoing, in movement. Because calling those alternative artistic practices readymade activities isn’t quite enough, it is also the daily work of a Conceptual painter or an artist publisher that proves again and again the pertinence of such approaches.

Artist publishers are expected to be more creative than regular publishers, to do things differently, in an original way. In my case, it was by allowing people to download the PDF files of my books for free that I proposed a hands-on Do It Yourself experience to my readers. It was also a way for me to print only the copies that I needed. This experience was a way of expressing my point of view on art, through an extended definition of art that can invade every aspect of life. And also a way to show what I believe to be the future of publishing: the unrestricted distribution of information (through PDF files and the Free Art License)<sup>23</sup> and printing on demand, which is cheap and sustainable. To give a simple definition, I would say that an artist publisher is a meta-artist whose practice is to publish both his work and the work of others. The dialogue between books is a key element for any publisher in order to create meaning; but it is even more

important for the artist publisher to not be only a self-publisher, because artists who only publish themselves do not create a dialogue between authors, and remain in a solitary studio practice. To create intertextuality, and the “phenomenon of library” that Foucault evokes, the artist publisher selects, edits, and organizes content in order to publish it. But publishing isn’t only to print a publication or to distribute it; it is “an essentially political act,” as Matthew Stadler stated. To him, “publication is the creation of a public,” which means that an artist publisher doesn’t only have to print artworks, but also to create the conditions for other people to see them as such.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> The Free Art License was created by the artists Antoine Moreau and Isabelle Vojdani with the help of lawyers.

It is inspired by the world of free software and is now compatible with Creative Commons BY+SA. All the publications of LBF are protected by this license.

<sup>24</sup> “How do you make a lasting meaning for readers? How do you make a readership that cares and will care over time? In short, how do you get from publishing to publication? Publication is the creation of a public; it is an essentially political act. This public, which is more than a market, is created by deliberate acts, the circulation of texts, discussions and gatherings in physical spaces, the maintenance of a digital commons.” Matthew Stadler, “Finding Your Audience in the 21st Century,” lecture at Richard Hugo House’s Writer’s Conference, May 22, 2010, online <http://vimeo.com/14888791>, accessed September 29, 2015.

**How I  
Didn't Write  
Any of  
My Books**

*Aurélie Noury*

For books, you see, are full to the brim with books! Novels overflow with characters who write novels, essays, treatises, poems ...

You just have to lean over a little closer.

Jacques Jouet<sup>1</sup>

The title of this text, borrowed from two figures in French literature, is both a promise and a confession. It promises firstly to reveal a method, the same one that Roussel set out in his famous but no less enigmatic *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*. The promised revelation of a formula—if indeed there was one—is sure to draw the reader in, but not to offer the writer any useful recipes for success. The main reason for this disappointment is disarming in its simplicity: Raymond Roussel—this much is certain—did *write* his books. While this fact does indeed support the existence of a supposed method, it also puts you off from using it. Even if followed to the letter, and assimilated to the point that the methods revealed become seen as one's own, thankfully productive, source of inspiration, they are not sufficient to write a book. Raymond Roussel backpedals on the infallibility of a "process" which he himself qualifies as "essentially [...] poetic," because "[s]till, one needs to know how to use it. For just as one can use rhymes to compose good or bad verses, so one can use this method to produce good or bad works."<sup>2</sup>

Although Raymond Roussel undoubtedly does honor the promise formulated in his title—he does indeed give us a working writing system based on a certain number of rather Oulipian linguistic tricks—in the subject under discussion here, the mere mention of the title almost simultaneously opposes the statistical reality of the method with its counterweight: of

the books whose method of writing I am hoping to make explicit, not one is named. And it's here that the method, the unveiling of which is to the author's great credit, is suddenly tainted with a certain dishonesty, mentioned by Marcel Bénabou in *Why I Have Not Written Any of My Books*, anticipating reservations probably voiced after reading the title:

"When [the author] declares that he has not written any of his books, he can have meant, depending on which element of his affirmation is emphasized: that he has had his books written by others, a practice which is not rare and from which one does not emerge debased as one once did; that he has written the books of others, a practice at least as common as the preceding one, albeit clearly less well regarded; that he has contented himself with conceiving of his books without going so far as to commit them to paper; or, finally, that he has written something other than what one normally terms a book."<sup>3</sup>

But where the *why* of Marcel Bénabou removes any taint of fraud from his methods, as it is a kind of admission

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Jouet, cited by Paul Braffort, "Les Bibliothèques invisibles," in *La Bibliothèque oulipienne*, vol. III (Paris: Seghers, 1990), 246. Unless otherwise indicated all translations by Russell Richardson.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Roussel, *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, trans. Trevor Winkfield (Boston: Exact Change, 1995), 16; originally published as *Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres* (Paris: Pauvert, 1985), 23.

<sup>3</sup> Marcel Bénabou, *Why I Have Not Written Any of My Books*, trans. David Kornacker (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 14; originally published as *Pourquoi je n'ai écrit aucun de mes livres* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002), 18–19.

of inability, the deliberate choice of *how*, dealing not with causes but with the means, raises—not without cause—the suspicion of shameless cheating at one time or another during the enterprise.

When you read the book by Marcel Bénabou, the four interpretations he provides for his title fall one by one. The author did not call upon a ghostwriter, any more than he was one himself; he did not renounce the publication of his manuscripts—though this hypothesis is closest to reality; nor did he choose another form of writing than that offered by a book. He would be a writer without works—and if there were an *oeuvre*—as we have to admit that this book does exist—it would be entirely devoted to its own achievement, or approaching its vicinity. And Marcel Bénabou would join the ranks of abstinent authors, having created a non-productive, non-realized, and non-realizing art.

Talking about his own *oeuvre*, Cervantes said that one should also admire him for what he had not written. This statement contains in itself the whole idea of a counter-literature, a blank or hollow literature, stolen from our hands and our sight for the simple reason that it was never written. Faced with the thousands of volumes lined up to infinity on the library shelves, a work is also everything that was not, or could not be written down on paper: its failures, its hesitations, its regrets, its projects, its fantasies, its ideal even, filling far more than pages, but entire lives. There are books, then, that we must be content with imagining: *Le Traité du dandysme* (On Dandyism) promised by Charles Baudelaire, the six *Célestes* (Luminaries), corresponding to the six *Diaboliques* (*The She Devils*) by Barbey d'Aurevilly, or again the novel *Vita Nova* by Roland Barthes of which we know only the first eight pages; and there are authors with the special status as writers of unwritten books: Jacques Rigaut, a member of the Dada movement whose *Papiers posthumes* (Posthumous Papers), for better or worse, form a volume, remained paralyzed when faced with the creative act. The same fate awaited Jacques Vaché's *oeuvre*—that is, his correspondence with figures like André Breton—which contained in its few lines the foundations of surrealism. As for Joseph Joubert, he left a few articles, some letters, and a total devotion to literature. He dreamed his entire life of his book, which he prepared and began ceaselessly, pouring into his copious notes an ideal he could only long for. He only encountered literature on its peripheries, first as the reader of others, as he was a great admirer of Denis Diderot and Restif de la Bretonne, as well as being a habitué of writers' circles, then as the reader of his own, unattainable works, which he always seemed to hold at arm's length.

Except you must actually begin, as Henry James tried to convince himself: "[B]egin it – begin it! Don't talk *about* it only, and around it."<sup>4</sup> But all through his book, Marcel Bénabou never finishes beginning, to the point where—an irony of sorts—a book appears. So, the reason why he never wrote any of his books, at least as he could have imagined them, has nothing to do with pseudonyms, or with plagiarism, but with the vertigo caused by all the books

4 F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock, eds., *The Notebooks of Henry James* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 110.

already written and the premonition of those to come in the flux of an "ever ongoing production."<sup>5</sup> The paralysis is partly due to quantity: "Perhaps you are among those who, like me, can no longer go to a bookstore without feeling a twinge of sorrow, but who don't leave without feeling a certain uneasiness either, indeed a sort of virtual nausea: so many books."<sup>6</sup> And, partly due to quality, in that we all could have been the objects of our own jealousy if only we could have been bothered: "Will I dare bring up in passing the feeling of frustration that certain books left in me? Not because they disappointed me; quite the contrary. But I couldn't keep myself from thinking as I read that once again I had missed an opportunity. It had, of course, been my place to write this book I had just finished reading," to end on, "more convinced than ever of the absolute uselessness of my efforts."<sup>7</sup>

Yet this labyrinth of books, where Marcel Bénabou situates the roots of his silence, where the talented get discouraged and the mediocre give up, is my opportunity. Because the books which I have not written may well be found there.

From one labyrinth, another.<sup>8</sup>

Bénabou's vertigo is as nothing compared to the limitless library envisaged by Jacques Jouet,<sup>9</sup> the potential library that would unofficially constitute the different kinds of imaginary books set within real books. More than the old game of story-within-a-story, this would involve books imagined at the very heart of a fiction, functioning as a motif. The author could indeed, at some point in his story, have need of a book. For this, he has two choices: the first is to use a real book, written by an actual author, published, and therefore palpable. The reading list of Madame Bovary is of this type, as are those of Proust's narrator, or the books in the library of Alfred Jarry's Dr. Faustroll. In this way, the *Paul and Virginia* read by Emma, the *François le Champi* discovered at the Guermantes', or *The Songs of Maldoror* on the shelves of Dr. Faustroll's library are, without a doubt, identical to those that we have read, or could read. Therefore, in the same way that an author can develop his or her characters in real places, which the reader can then physically visit, actual titles can occur in a story because a character came across them, obtained them, read them, or wrote them. Actually, to choose one's reading according to the hero of a story would be a lovely project.

The second choice would be to invent a book, giving it at least a title, or in the vast majority of cases, a title and an author, whether they are both imaginary or made-up in tandem with a real title or real author, where the hybrid would constitute a third way of creating the book-within-the-book. For example, Jean d'Ormesson in *The Glory of the Empire* attributes books he has made up himself to real authors: *The Life of Alexis* to Ernest Renan and *The Death*

5 Marcel Bénabou, *Why I Have Not Written Any of My Books*, 8; *Pourquoi je n'ai écrit aucun de mes livres*, 12.

6 *Ibid.*, 51-52; *Ibid.*, 43.

7 *Ibid.*, 56, 57; *Ibid.*, 48.

8 [A subtle nod of the head to Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *D'un château l'autre*, perhaps translatable as *From One Castle, Another* rather than *Castle to Castle*. Trans.]

9 See the epitaph to this text.

of Bruince to Georg Büchner,<sup>10</sup> while Jean Paul makes his character Maria Wutz write, in his way, works which he could not personally obtain, such as the *Treatise on Space and Time* or the *Critique of Pure Reason*.<sup>11</sup> In a similar way, certain characters invented by Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy

10 Jean d'Ormesson, *The Glory of the Empire*, trans. Barbara Blay (London: Book Club Associates, 1975); originally published as *La Gloire de l'Empire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971).

11 Jean Paul, "Leben des vergnügten Schulmeisterlein Maria Wutz in Auenthal. Eine Art Idylle" (Life of the Cheerful Schoolmaster Maria Wutz), in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. I-1 (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1960), 422-462.

12 Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote," in *Ficciones*, trans. Anthony Bonner et al. (New York: Grove Press/Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994), 54; originally published as "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote," in *Obras Completas*, vol. I: 1923-1949 (Mallorca, Barcelona: Emecé Editores, 1996), 450.

13 Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares, "Homage to Cesar Paladion," in *Chronicles of Bustos Domecq*, trans. Norman Thomas Di Giovanni (New York: Dutton, 1979), 22; originally published as "Homenaje a César Paladion," in *Crónicas de Bustos Domecq*, (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, S. A., 1968), 19.

14 Respectively cited in the following works: Michel Déon, *Un déjeuner de soleil* (*Where are you Dying Tonight?*); Henry James, *The Figure in the Carpet*; Raymond Roussel, *Locus Solus*; Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Mort à crédit* (*Death on Credit*); Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*; Thomas Mann, *Tod in Venedig* (*Death in Venice*); Marcel Aymé, *Les Tiroirs de l'inconnu* (*The Drawers of the Unknown Man*); Edgar Allan Poe, *The Fall of the House of Usher*.

15 [See Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pécuchet*: "the page must fill itself, the 'monument' completes itself..." Trans.]

Casares manage to rewrite actual earlier works through the process of "deliberate anachronism"<sup>12</sup> or by annexation. Such is the case of the celebrated Pierre Menard who has a sizeable bibliography in Borges's short story in which one finds a section of *Don Quixote*, or the case of César Paladión, "annex[ing] a complete opus"<sup>13</sup> like *The Hound of the Baskervilles* or *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Alongside these conjuring tricks that require reading short stories, precisely because in them Borges reveals the ways in which his characters can pull off such feats, is the dizzying catalog of imaginary books attributed to fictitious authors. In no particular order: *The Bee* by Stanisla Beren; *Right of Passage* by Hugh Vereker; *Olympi Glossarium* by Louis Toljan; *Roof Gardening* by Roger-Marin Courtial des Pereires; *Examination of Christianity* by Louis Hervieu; *Maya* by Gustav Aschenbach; *Petites Introductions* by Lucien Lormier or *Mad Tryst* by Launcelot Canning;<sup>14</sup> without ever being able to give a definitive list because as soon as we start making it, the tragicomic possibility appears that fictitious books are infinitely more numerous than real ones.

For someone who begins to look for these books, one can be found every day, to the point of orienting your reading around them, and nourishing it mainly from this quest. To the extent, also, of discovering an unexplored potential, enticing with each new title discovered, but invariably dropped when merely named. For in the vast majority of cases, the reality of the imaginary book goes no further than the mention of its title and the author's name, falling away like a stage set of which only the visible façade has been built. But for the person who looks a little closer, the "monument" can "complete" itself<sup>15</sup> and the inclusion of an imaginary book inside a real book becomes truly interesting where the author builds clues and verisimilitudes around it that, more than just adding to a fiction, can actually give it form.

There are many approaches. It can begin in the universe of the bibliographical catalog, and the means at its disposal. To a simple alphabetical list made up of the names of authors and titles, a date, a place, and a publisher

- 16 Respectively cited in the following works: Enrique Vila-Matas, *A Brief History of Portable Literature*, trans. Thomas Bunstead and Anne McLean (New York: New Directions, 2015); originally published as *Historia abreviada de la literatura portátil* (Barcelona: Ed. Anagrama, 2002); Pascal Mercier, *Night Train to Lisbon*, trans. Barbara Harshav (New York: Grove Press, 2008); originally published as *Nachtzug nach Lissabon* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2004); Jean-Benoît Puech, *L'Apprentissage du roman* (Seysssel: Champ Vallon, 1993); J. Rodolfo Wilcock, *The Temple of Iconoclasts*, trans. Lawrence Venuti (San Francisco: Mercury House, 2000); originally published as *La sinagoga degli iconoclasti* (Milano: Adelphi, 1972); Vladimir Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins!* (New York, St. Louis, San Francisco, Toronto: Mc Graw-Hill, 1974).
- 17 Jean-Benoît Puech, *L'Apprentissage du roman*; Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares, *Six Problems for Don Isidro Parodi*, trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1981); originally published as *Seis problemas para don Isidro Parodi* (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1942); Roberto Bolaño, *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, trans. Chris Andrews (New York: New Directions, 2008); originally published as *La literatura nazi en América* (Barcelona: Seix Barral 2005).
- 18 Enrique Vila-Matas, *A Brief History of Portable Literature*; *Historia abreviada de la literatura portátil*.
- 19 The entirety of the *Catalogue d'une très riche mais peu nombreuse collection de livres provenant de la bibliothèque de feu M. le comte J.-N.-A. de Fortsas dont la vente se fera à Binche, le 10 août 1840, à onze heures du matin, en l'étude et par le ministère de Me Mourlon, Notaire, rue de l'Église, n°9*, was published in facsimile in 2005 by Éditions des Cendres.

can be added. To quote among many other examples: Skip Canell, *Pessimism*, New York, Indolence Books Ltd., 1948; Amadeu Inácio De Almeida Prado, *Um ourives das palavras*, Lisbonne, Cedros Vermelhos, 1975; Benjamin Jordane, *Fumées sans feux*, Paris, Capitaine éd., 1971; Carlo Olgiate, *Le Métabolisme historique*, Novare, La Redentina, 1931; or such as Vadim Vadimovich, *Podarok Otchizne*, New York, Turgenev Publishing House, 1950,<sup>16</sup> which confer the legitimacy of a scientific reference on a work, and almost incline us to go into the libraries, adding the translators: Robert Nolke, "The stimulating interlocutor," in *Lost and Recovered Prose*, translation by Marc Montmirail, Maillot, 1971; or printers: Carlos Anglada, *The Copybooks of the Diver*, printed by Le Minotaure, Éd. Probeta, 1939; and illustrators: Argentino Schiaffino, *Solitude*, prologue by Morazán, illustrations by Berta Macchio Morazán, Buenos Aires, 1987.<sup>17</sup> If the hypothetical Pierre Marteau has published an excessive number of all too real books, some authors co-opt actual publishers for the edition of works imagined for their characters. Thus, in *Aurélien* by Aragon, the books by Paul Denis are published by Sans-Pareil for *Défense d'Entrée* and by Editions Kra for *Les Promenades Noires*. Even better, Enrique Vila-Matas in the fanciful bibliography concluding his *A Brief History of Portable Literature*, bets on the future release of an unpublished work by Francis Picabia called *Widows and Soldiers (Veuves et Militaires)* of which he proclaims the "imminent release at the José Corti bookstore."<sup>18</sup>

To the simple mention of bibliographies, one might add the material conditions as noted in sales catalogs. Such include the famous *Catalog of Count de Fortsas's Library (Catalogue de la bibliothèque de M. le comte de Fortsas)*,<sup>19</sup> of which Renier Chalon was one of the main instigators, which informs us for each title of the format, the number of pages, even the binding: "12mo 2 part. of 115 & 210 p., illus., bdg. orig. Red Morocco" for the *The Memoirs of Abbot D. M. R. D. F. A. L. (Mémoires de l'abbé D. M. R. D. F. A. L.)*, or "4to of 695 p., illus., bdg. blue velvet, with corners and clasp of silver" for *Promptuarium antiquitatum Treviresium*. The descriptions can go as far as detailing eventual "wormholes in the lower margin" or the "inkblot on p. 21." We can even go beyond the dedicated, and of necessity abbreviated, language of the catalogs to find the fully-fledged descriptions that some authors give their works. In *53 Days*, Georges Perec precisely describes the manuscript of Robert Serval:

"It takes the form of a manuscript of 130 neatly typed pages, free of corrections, deletions or additions of any kind. There is a quite peculiar black and white photograph gummed on the front cover, which is just a sheet of shiny black plastic without the name of the book, or of the author. I presume that what it represents is a painted signboard, bearing a rather primitive but charming sign, that must be posted somewhere in the southern depths of Morocco. It depicts a semi-arid landscape, with a few traces of vegetation and a clump of trees in the far distance, against a background of sand dunes and hills. In the left foreground is a smiling native face, cut off at the bust by the picture frame; the native holds the reins of a camel entering from the left, with only the neck and head of the beast visible in profile. In the middle ground, four camel-drivers ride their mounts towards the right. Against the sky, a long arrow points rightwards beneath the legend stencilled in large letters: TIMBUKTOO 52 DAYS and above that, a legend in Arabic which presumably says the same thing, the other way round."<sup>20</sup>

This gives a very precise image of the work, of which we can easily visualize the cover, more so in that Perec had envisaged using the photograph described here as the cover of his book, and that the Editions P.O.L. actually includes a reproduction on page 7.

Going one step further, Vadim Vadimovich, the writer-hero of Nabokov in *Look at the Harlequins!* goes so far as to discover "a copy of a Formosan paperback reproduced from the American edition" of his novel *A Kingdom by the Sea*. After having described this copy, he tells us about the back cover, in which he is upset by the inevitable misprints:

"Bertram, an unbalanced youth, doomed to die shortly in an asylum for the criminal insane, sells for ten dollars his ten-year-old sister Ginny to the middle-aged bachelor Al Garden, a wealthy poet who travels with the beautiful child from resort to resort through America and other countries. A state of affairs that looks at first blush—and 'blush' is the right word—like a case of irresponsible perversion (described in brilliant detail never attempted before) develops by the grees [misprint] into a genuine dialogue of tender love. Garden's feelings are reciprocated by Ginny, the initial 'victim' who at eighteen, a normal nymph, marries him in a warmly described religious ceremony. All seems to end honky-donky [sic!] in foreverlasting bliss of a sort fit to meet the sexual demands of the most rigid, or frigid, humanitarian, had there not been running its chaotic course, in a sheef [sheaf?] of parallel lives beyond our happy couple's ken, the tragic tiny [destiny?] of Virginia Garden's inconsolable parents, Oliver and [?], whom the clever author by every means in his power, prevents from tracking their daughter Dawn [sic!!]. A Book-of-the-Decade choice."<sup>21</sup>

The profusion of details turns bitter when we realize that our reading has to stop here. For those who decide to hunt down imaginary books inside real books, reading the

<sup>20</sup> Georges Perec, *53 Days*, trans. David Bellos, (Jaffrey: David R. Godine, 2000), 22–23; originally published as *53 jours* (Paris: P.O.L., 1989), 41–42.

<sup>21</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins!* 215–216 [square brackets in original].

back cover, the final touch to a book that was finished and published, can be cruel. There remains that intolerable feeling of receiving something only to have it taken back. That's the fate of many imaginary books: they use an indirect mode via a more or less detailed synopsis revealing the plot rather than the entire text once given anything beyond a title, author's name, or bibliographical reference and description of the volume's condition. So, for *The Crypt*, it's the narrator of *53 Days*, hired to investigate the disappearance of the writer Robert Serval, who devotes almost thirty pages to a detailed report of his reading, presenting the setting, the characters, and the facts, with which he mingles his observations as a reader/investigator.<sup>22</sup>

In Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*, one approaches the content through the commentaries of the hero Antoine Roquentin, which he gives us as he copies out his work on the Marquis of Rollebon: "Tuesday, 30 January: I worked from nine till one in the library. I got Chapter XII started and all that concerns Rollebon's stay in Russia up to the death of Paul I. This work is finished: nothing more to do with it until the final revision." or "7.00 p.m. Work Today. It didn't go too badly; I wrote six pages with a certain amount of pleasure. The more so since it was a question of abstract considerations on the reign of Paul I."<sup>23</sup> The peculiar example of *Les Noces* (The Wedding) by Jean Giono is quite remarkable. Here is a novel, or so it seems at first glance, literally set inside another. Indeed, Giono closes *Noé* (Noah), which is presented as a sequel to *A King Without Diversion* with the announcement of the following book in the series, entitled *Les Noces*, the plot of which he goes on to explain over about twenty pages.<sup>24</sup> The reader thus enters into the confidence of a story as it unfolds, while Giono sketches little by little the settings and characters at a country wedding, which he seems to be discovering along with us, and as the creator, building at the same time: "let's not get carried away [...] gently, now" (p. 845); "Stop! I have something to say about the costumes. [...] What do we imagine? After all I've said, do we imagine the peasant wedding according to the texts?" (p. 847); "First of all, the

landscape I just described, I see it at dawn. It's the morning of the day which will be the day of *The Wedding*. I'll start at that exact time" (p. 855); and concerning the character of the father: "Like every morning, he went outside and pissed. I make him piss, like a horse, with thick, foamy urine" (p. 855); or the old woman: "She approached the father (I'll have to give him a name). She says... No, what she says is already the book. It's already *The Wedding*" (p. 856). This last phrase is telling. The moment he is about to make the old woman speak, Giono changes his mind, because whatever she could say "is already the book. It's already *The Wedding*," and for the time being, he only talks about the general project. This won't go much further, unfortunately, and we will have to be content with reported speech, according to Giono's words, in parentheses.<sup>25</sup>

22 Georges Perec, *53 Days*, 23-48; *53 jours*, 42-68.

23 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions, 1964), 6, 57; originally published as *La Nausée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), 18, 86.

24 Jean Giono, *Noé*, in *Œuvres romanesques complètes*, vol. III (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 844-862.

25 "[E]verything I have to say about this *Wedding*, I have to say in parentheses. This seems to mean that there are some enormous parentheses which, at the end, will fill up with everything I have to say on the subject." *Ibid.*, 847.

Because the true text is precisely what constitutes the work I have been searching for: not the words actually reported or retold, but all the words the author might have made the old woman say, and the entire *Wedding* built around them; it would also include the completed book by Antoine Roquentin, as well as *The Crypt*, liberated by another person's reading. These works are lost for the simple reason that they are incomplete. These books that I have not written will have to remain so. It does not mean, through the pretext of a synopsis or an author's note of intention, developing a text whose precise form can never be known. Nor is it exactly writing in the style of another author, of mimicking the tics of their language, or of hijacking their turns of phrase. Neither is it to extend an unfinished work, or to put forward variations. It means finding, according to the growing degrees of existence of the imaginary book, from vague allusion to quotes, passing via the detailed outline, the cases of autonomous books which contain enough information to be *written* and therefore published in an independent volume. Such books have not only a title and an author, but the entirety of their content is available, quoted at length in the body of the text, requiring just a simple copying, or involving certain literary fictions invented by a real author. This is where the possibility of editorial work to dig out these books from within other books begins, and whose reality, up to now subordinated, only depends on being put down on the page. The publisher that brings these together is called Lorem Ipsum. It takes its name from the dummy text used by printers, randomly generated as placeholder for a missing text, to aid layout and calibration of the proofs. In the same way, the publications of Lorem Ipsum are potential books, which already exist, captured with all the ease of cut-and-paste. The difficulty lies in unearthing these rare cases.

When such a book does appear, it is a small miracle. Having been blindly sought after and devoutly hoped for, the complete reading is often disappointed at the last minute. The vast majority of books that I thought I had found in their entirety evaporated with the whim of story. The main reason for these failures can be explained by the fact that the restoration of the fictive work remains subordinate to the story that hosts it, the main tale.

26 Honoré de Balzac, *Lost Illusions: A Distinguished Provincial at Paris and other stories*, trans. Ellen Marriage (Philadelphia: Gebbie Publishing 1899), 99–103: "Easter Daisies," "The Marguerite," "The Camellia," "The Tulip"; originally published as *Illusions perdues*, in *La Comédie humaine*, vol. V (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), 336–341: "La Pâquerette," "La Marguerite," "Le Camélia," "La Tulipe."

Thus in *Lost Illusions*, Balzac only completely quotes four sonnets from the collection by Lucien Chardon entitled *The Marguerites*, precisely because the latter offers "sample sonnets" for examination by the journalist Etienne Lousteau. Thereafter, following "*Easter Daisies*," the poet reads a second sonnet in the hope of getting some reaction from the impassive listener, then the next two after his request, "Go on" and "Read us one more sonnet." The reading of the fourth sonnet, however, is followed by "a pause, immeasurably long, as it seemed to him," which brings to an end the lecture, and by the same count, my writing.<sup>26</sup>

In the same way, the novel that Peter Morgan writes in *The Vice-Consul* by Marguerite Duras, is only quoted as it is being written, clearly marked in the text by such opening formulae as: "wrote Peter Morgan," or closing remarks such as "Peter Morgan has stopped writing."<sup>27</sup> Between the two, the novel, though freestanding, remains incomplete.

In *The Thibaults* by Roger Martin du Gard, *La Sorellina* by Jack Baulthy (a.k.a. Jacques Thibault) is for its part subordinated to the reading rhythm of Antoine Thibault who leafs furiously through the brochure hoping to find clues to the disappearance of his brother. The short story, set apart from the main plot by the use of italics, is thus cut up by interruptions from Antoine who, in his hurried reading, gets impatient with descriptive passages, and "jumped from one paragraph to another," or "skipped some pages, sampling a passage here and there."<sup>28</sup>

As for the nine stories begun in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* by Italo Calvino, unexpected events (duplicated signatures, printing errors, unfinished works, wrongly inserted texts, swapped out translations, etc.) continually interrupt our reading, making the book a succession of run-ups and false beginnings which we can make neither head nor tail of.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Marguerite Duras, *The Vice-Consul* (London: Hamilton, 1968), 1, 18; originally published as *Le Vice-Consul* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 1, 18.

<sup>28</sup> Roger Martin du Gard, *The Thibaults*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Viking Press, 1939), 641-643; originally published as *La Sorellina*, in *Les Thibault*, vol. II (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 41-43.

<sup>29</sup> Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), comprising: *Outside the Town of Malbork* by Tadzio Bazakbal; *Leaning from the Steep Slope* by Ukko Ahti; *Without Fear of Wind or Vertigo* by Vorts Viljandi; *Looks Down in the Gathering Shadow* by Bertrand Vanderfelde; *In a Network of Lines that Enlace* by Hermès Manara; *In a Network of Lines that Intersect* by Silas Flannery; *On the Carpet of Leaves Illuminated by the Moon* by Takakumi Ikoka; *Around an Empty Grave* by Calixto Bandera; and *What Story Down there Awaits its End?* by Anatoly Anatoline; originally published as *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* (Torino: Einaudi, 1979).

<sup>30</sup> Jean Giono, *Noé*, 862.

Because the work I am searching for has to be complete, and few fictional works manage that, only a close reading of the book which contains them can justify, or not, their selection. What I call in a cavalier fashion "my books," not as their author, but as their publisher, I necessarily cannot have written because I have read them. The kind of writing in question here, which confers all its imposture on "the method," is in fact reading. It means precisely writing by reading, as we used to say of Matisse that he painted with scissors. Missing out the earlier stage of the pencil sketch, Matisse decided to cut directly into the color, at the same time creating its form. Here reading can be, depending on how advanced it is, an all-encompassing synchronous activity of sampling and writing. In order to carry this out, my "scissors" might, during the reading, stumble across an obstacle which, as soon as it crops up, however insignificant it seems, could definitively ruin the project of publication of the fictitious book. A single sentence missed by a character reading, or overlooked by the character writing, for the manifold reasons inherent in the main story, can be enough to lose the thread of a complete text, as the first book will always take precedence over the second book. For it to appear demands the stepping back of the first book, which then becomes a disposable peritext which the author may not mark as clearly as Giono does in *Noé*: "Noah ends here. *The Wedding* begins here..."<sup>30</sup> or as

clearly as Cervantes in *Don Quixote* alerting his readers to the insertion of a short story external to the main book: "One of the faults they find with this history, [...] is that its author inserted in it a novel called 'An Impertinent Curiosity'; not that it is bad or ill-told, but that it is out of place and has nothing to do with the history of his worship Señor Don Quixote."<sup>31</sup> In this particular case, one can simply drop the before and after. In more complex examples, one has to tease out the peritext from the body of the fictional work like so many stage directions, and extract an autonomous text. In the ultimate recourse, one has to activate a fiction. For instance, Borges opposes "the visible works" of Pierre Menard, detailed in an exhaustive bibliography, which he supplies at the beginning of his short story, from his "subterranean" works composed of "the ninth and thirty-eighth chapters of Part One of *Don Quixote* and a fragment of the twenty-second chapter."<sup>32</sup> And yet, even though these texts are "verbally identical,"<sup>33</sup> their meanings are different, the tour de force lying in being able to obtain precisely the same text in the context of contemporary writing. The *Quixote* of Menard cannot therefore be *read* without dissociating it from Cervantes, and without its reification in the story by Borges, at the heart of which it remains the captive of its own myth. The entire works of the latter are in fact marked out with equivalent fictions, from César Paladion to Lamkin Formento, passing by Federico Juan Carlos Loomis. The volumes that are attributed to them do not embody productions of the mind but certain procedures of the mind championed by Borges. The "amplification of units," a writing technique whereby Paladion writes twelve books; the descriptivist critique which leads Formento to apply an analysis to *The Divine Comedy* which is identical to

Dante's original text, after the suppression of the peritext; and the pursuit of a quintessence of literature which brings Loomis to an exact correspondence of a work with its own title;<sup>34</sup> all these are so many strategies of creation which justify the concretization of those works. Their culmination is in the separate volume; better still, to loosen them from their original context is to give them the possibility, postponed until that point, of being *read*.

So, to the question of "How I didn't write any of my books," I can simply reply—using the words of Jacques Jouet—that I have leant over a little closer and gathered the books together, which is indeed what happened. Moreover, Lorem Ipsum is still the owner of a strange work of which I have not encountered any of the authors, whether they were, or were not, of flesh and bone. Furthermore, to whom do these books belong? To their authors? To their characters? To their publishers? Which is a role, in this particular case, that consists of picking them out, and giving them form, and which makes us wonder about publishing as an act of creation.

31 Miguel de Cervantes, *The Ingenious Nobleman Don Quixote de la Mancha*, trans. Tobias Smollet (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004), vol. 2, ch. III, 459; originally published as *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de La Mancha* (Madrid: Ed. Castalia, 1983), vol. 2, chap. III.

32 Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard," 45–48; "Pierre Menard," 444–446.

33 *Ibid.*, 52; *Ibid.*, 449.

34 Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares, "Homage to Cesar Paladion," "Naturalism revived," "A List and Analysis of the Sundry Books of F. J. C. Loomis," in *Chronicles*, 22, 41–48 and 49–56; originally published as "Homenaje a César Paladion," "Naturalismo al día," and "Catálogo y análisis de los diversos libros de Loomis," in *Crónicas*, 15–20, 37–43, and 45–51.

Speaking of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, Michel Foucault wrote "Because to copy is *to do* nothing; it is *to be* the books being copied."<sup>35</sup> It is precisely between the execution (*doing*) and the incarnation (*being*) that the project of Lorem Ipsum acts, the poetic gesture of an act of publishing which breathes life as it appropriates, and whereby each borrowing can improve itself, in turn.

"To read means to borrow; to create out of one's readings is paying off one's debts."<sup>36</sup>

Translated by Russell Richardson

<sup>35</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Fantasia of the Library," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 109; originally published as "La Bibliothèque fantastique," in Gustave Flaubert, *La Tentation de saint Antoine* (Paris: LGF, 1971), 32.

<sup>36</sup> Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, *Letters and Aphorisms*, trans. H. C. Harfield and F. H. Mautner (London: Cape, 1969), 40; originally published as *Schriften und Briefe*, vol. 1: *Sudelbücher* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1968), 46.

**Organic Book  
Design from  
Dwiggins to  
Danielewski:  
The *Metamedial*  
Aesthetics  
of *Embodied*  
Literature in  
American Trade  
Publishing**

*Alexander Starre*

In 2011, Jennifer Egan's novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) won the Pulitzer Prize. The book made waves not least because it experiments with constantly shifting narrative perspectives and also features a chapter told entirely through PowerPoint slides. The majority of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* nevertheless consists of conventional text, set in uniform progression on each page. Yet, just as readers may concentrate on the visual dimension of the PowerPoint chapter, they may also feel inclined to look at the text instead of reading it and take note of its typography. The first hardcover edition, published by Alfred A. Knopf, actively invites readers to engage with typographic form on its final pages. Besides biographical data on Egan, these pages carry "A Note on the Type," an item rarely found in contemporary books:

"The text of this book was set in Electra, a typeface designed by W. A. Dwiggins (1880–1956). This face cannot be classified as either modern or old style. It is not based on any historical model, nor does it echo any particular period or style. It avoids the extreme contrasts between thick and thin elements that mark most modern faces, and it attempts to give a feeling of fluidity and power."<sup>1</sup>

For the casual reader, the information given here might appear puzzling. To grasp the aesthetic and historical meaning of this note, one would need to know the differences between Old Style typefaces like Garamond and modern ones like Bodoni. Most importantly, however, this comment explicitly asserts that the text's typographic form is meant to trigger a specific aesthetic effect during the reading process.

The man mentioned in the above note—William Addison Dwiggins—had campaigned for the inclusion of such design commentary in mass-produced trade books:

"The colophon, headed 'A Note on the Type in Which this Book is Set,' was a device adapted at Dwiggins's instigation from private press books as a means of calling the reading public's attention to a book's design and manufacturing background. Initially ridiculed by other trade publishers as an affectation, it has since been copied to varying degrees by many of them."<sup>2</sup>

Today, Knopf books still include these typographic notes in all first-edition hardcovers. My essay departs from the semi-hidden note in a contemporary text to inquire into the notion of publishing as an artistic practice in the field of mainstream literature. I will argue that graphic design forms a crucial area of literary communication, a missing link, perhaps, between classical conceptions of visual art and language-based theories of literature. In the realm of American graphic design, William Addison Dwiggins's role is of some historical importance. The first section of this essay surveys Dwiggins's work from the 1920s to the 40s, a period during which he used the literary trade book as a vehicle to transport a pragmatic design philosophy attuned to the commercial sphere of trade publishing. In the second part, I then return to contemporary American literature so as to show

1 Jennifer Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (New York: Knopf, 2010), 278.

2 Paul Shaw, "Tradition and Innovation: The Design Work of William Addison Dwiggins," *Design Issues* 1.2 (1984): 30.

how numerous writers, designers, and publishers now contribute to an evolving aesthetics that (re-)introduces the designed and embodied literary text into the increasingly digitized literary communication circuit. In a final step, I use Mark Z. Danielewski's novella *The Fifty Year Sword* (2005/2012) as a tutor text that presents a fictionalized version of the "organic book," thus recalling the central design ideal sketched by Dwiggins and his contemporaries. This collaborative product of a "bibliographic author" and a design-oriented publisher illustrates the ways in which writers take advantage of the digital workflow in contemporary publishing to expand their authorial control beyond the written text to the typography, the page layout, and the material shape of their works.

### Dwiggins and the Ideal Trade Book

William Addison Dwiggins was born and raised in Cambridge, Ohio, which he left at the age of nineteen to study design with the eminent typographer Frederic Goudy in Chicago. At the turn of the twentieth century, several private presses sprang up in the U.S., emulating the bookmaking principles of the British Arts and Crafts movement. As Megan Benton has convincingly shown in her study *Beauty and the Book*, the transatlantic migration modified the radically autonomous ideologies of Arts and Crafts, with American presses less inclined to faux medievalism and not entirely adverse to the market.<sup>3</sup> Even more than other influential American book designers such as Bruce Rogers, Goudy and his disciple Dwiggins were thorough pragmatists of print. Neither praising, nor outright rejecting new printing technologies, they judged all available tools strictly based on their functionality. In his pioneering compendium *Typologia* (1940), Goudy wrote:

"When the machine is used as a tool, as a means to an end, by a craftsman who wishes to secure the utmost control over every stage of his work and does not pass the fulfilling of technical requirements into the hands of mere artisans, the result may be comparable to that produced by hand, in spite of the limitations imposed by the machine."<sup>4</sup>

Goudy here counters the common assumption by craft purists that the technological revolution of mass printing eradicated any possibility of making beautiful books. While arguing for a conscious use of machinery, *Typologia* also contains an emphatic endorsement of the arts-and-crafts ideal of the beautiful book:

"To be fine, instead of merely charming, the ideal book must include, too, a beauty of proportion, wherein the trained taste finds ever an appeal to delight; a beauty of form and rhythm in consonance, showing the hand of the artist in every detail; the well-proportioned leaf whereon the type has been handsomely placed, the lines well spaced, and the decorative elements of like origin with the types, cut with like tools and with similar strokes. The ideal book requires the use of the best materials

<sup>3</sup> See Megan Benton, *Beauty and the Book: Fine Editions and Cultural Distinction in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Frederic W. Goudy, *Typologia: Studies in Type Design & Type Making, with Comments on the Invention of Typography, the First Types, Legibility, and Fine Printing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1940/1977), 159.

in order that permanence may be assured, as such materials contribute to the esthetic quality of the whole by the feeling of pleasure they inspire apart from their use. In short, the book beautiful is a living and corporate entity in which each part is exquisite, conceived harmoniously, with true regard for the intrinsic requirements of the work seen as a whole."<sup>5</sup>

In calling the book a "living and corporate entity," Goudy expressly subscribes to poetological ideals of the organic nature of a work.<sup>6</sup> He thus strategically latches onto Romanticist aesthetics and its celebration of organic unity as expressed in the works of Goethe, Schlegel, Coleridge, and Emerson. Speaking from a somewhat regressive standpoint, Goudy claims that this organic model can not only be preserved, but enhanced through technology.

With similar design attitudes, Dwiggins left the small New England community of private presses in 1906 to launch a career in advertising, which earned him a comfortable living and growing professional esteem for the next two decades. However, well before the pinnacle of his career—the publication of the seminal *Layout in Advertising* in 1928—Dwiggins had privately announced his break with commercial work in favor of high art.<sup>7</sup> Instead of leaving one of these spheres completely, Dwiggins eventually ended up synthesizing both. This merger of arts-and-crafts workmanship and mass-produced advertising needed a new name, and Dwiggins had already supplied it in an article published in the *Boston Evening Transcript* in 1922. The text entitled "New Kind of Printing Calls for New Design" has frequently been cited as containing the first use of the term "graphic design." In it, Dwiggins distinguishes between three types of printing, "plain printing; printing as fine art; and a third large intermediate class of printing more or less modified by artistic taste."<sup>8</sup>

While graphic designers now populate the staff of diverse businesses, the American origins of this professional field—at least in the figure of William Addison Dwiggins—are tied to book publishing. Trade books were Dwiggins's medium of choice to convey his innovative ideas for designing beautiful objects. As mass-produced commodities, books demanded the pragmatic, economical design he knew from his work in advertising. At the

same time, Dwiggins had learned to appreciate books as aesthetic objects in his early work with Goudy. The mass-market printing practices of the 1920s were a far cry from small-scale private press endeavors: the speed of the cylinder presses used in mass printing required thinner ink, which in turn led to pages that lacked contrast and looked gray; the new wood-pulp papers quickly turned brittle and yellow; cloth replaced leather for bindings, and pages were no longer sewed but encased. In all of this, the printer—not the publisher—remained responsible for most of the design.<sup>9</sup>

In the late 1920s, Dwiggins cast his lot with Alfred A. Knopf, who had founded his own publishing house in 1915, marketing his literary program through an emphasis on

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere in the book, Goudy expressly states that "beautiful printing is organic." Ibid., 165.

<sup>7</sup> See Shaw, "Tradition and Innovation," 28–29.

<sup>8</sup> William Addison Dwiggins, "New Kind of Printing Calls for New Design," *Boston Evening Transcript*, August 29, 1922, reprinted in Ellen Mazur Thomson, *The Origins of Graphic Design in America, 1870–1920* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 185.

<sup>9</sup> See Shaw, "Tradition and Innovation," 31.

quality in design and bookmaking. Dwiggins worked for Knopf for the rest of his life, designing 280 books throughout the years.<sup>10</sup> His most distinguished achievements within this period were several prestige designs for limited editions. Design historians still pay tribute to his work on the 1931 edition of H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, illustrated throughout with his unique stencil drawings. Yet Dwiggins's lasting, if largely undiscovered, significance for the arena of book design lies less in such bibliophile excursions than in the tenets of design that he established while producing more conventional books at Knopf. His introductory essay for an exhibition catalog of the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) from 1927 contains his rationale in a nutshell:

"[I]t would be interesting to try to meet the cost handicap in book manufacturing on the basis of *design*; i. e., to make books which were obviously cheap books—which did not masquerade as *editions de luxe* (in reduced circumstances). An art is not hampered by the material in which it works; stimulated thereby, rather. It is conceivable that very lively volumes could be made on a lower economic plane if only you were willing to forget about printing *at its best*, and to work out a product artistically in terms of its material."<sup>11</sup>

Renouncing any avant-gardist aspirations, Dwiggins did not aspire to producing auratic artists' books that experiment with the material features of the

bound volume. Voicing a pragmatic ethos, he nevertheless argues that designers should consciously and creatively work with the limitations of the book medium. He insists that readers experience a book as an artistic whole, and thus urges fellow designers to turn every ingredient into an "organic part of the book."<sup>12</sup>

The numerous books that he produced at Knopf enact this philosophy. Dwiggins acted as cover designer, hand-lettering artist, and type-setter, thus reversing the neat subdivision of labor that dominated the large American publishing houses of the day.<sup>13</sup> He also sought direct contact with each part of the manufacturing apparatus for books, feeling his way into multiple production technologies. For the printed letters themselves, he had to look beyond the Knopf publishing house to the Mergenthaler Linotype company, which supplied the machines and licensed the typefaces used throughout North America in the twentieth century. Mergenthaler started commissioning typefaces designed by Dwiggins in the late 1920s. From a large number of designs, Electra and Caledonia emerged as the most successful and lasting typefaces.<sup>14</sup>

The typeface Electra debuted on the pages of Willa Cather's essay collection *Not Under Forty* in 1936. On the outside, the first edition hardcover is stamped with stenciled

<sup>10</sup> See *ibid.*, 30.

<sup>11</sup> William Addison Dwiggins, "The Structure of a Book," in *Mss. by WAD*, ed. Paul A. Bennett (New York: Typophiles, 1947), 60.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>13</sup> In practice, this meant that Dwiggins had to coordinate the interests of the publishing house Knopf, of each respective author, and of the printing firm Plimpton that manufactured the books. Alfred A. Knopf recounts Dwiggins's mode of production and his collaboration with the various printing firms in "Dwig and the Borzoi," in *Postscripts on Dwiggins*, ed. Paul A. Bennett (New York: Typophiles, 1960), 31–70.

<sup>14</sup> In a table in his *Layout in Advertising*, Dwiggins listed several book faces and graded them on a scale of 0–10 according to legibility and quality of letter design. For his own fonts, he lists a 7 and a 9 (Electra) and a 9 and a 10 (Caledonia). William Addison Dwiggins, *Layout in Advertising* (New York: Harper, 1928), 22.

## Not Under Forty

BY

WILLA CATHER

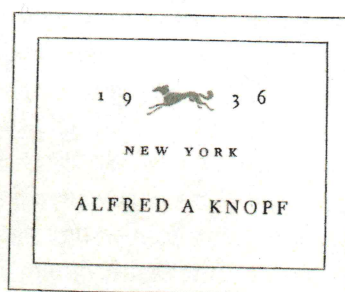


Fig. 1. Willa Cather, *Not Under Forty* (New York: Knopf, 1936), title page.

15 William Addison Dwiggins, "Designer's Note," in Willa Cather, *Not Under Forty* (New York: Knopf, 1936), 148.

16 After Cather started publishing with Knopf, she took a very active interest in the design of her books. While her suggestions sometimes enervated her editors, Dwiggins appears to have enjoyed collaborating with her. In promoting Cather's work, Knopf used the careful design of her novels as a marketing strategy. The *New York Times* carried an advertisement for the novel *My Mortal Enemy* that showed neither the author nor the book's cover, but a facsimile reproduction of a regular page of text. See Amy Root Clements, *The Art of Prestige: The Formative Years at Knopf, 1915-1929* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 113.

illustrations. The typographic title page then allows generous amounts of space to the letter shapes, which are printed in classic contrasts of black and red (fig. 1). The body text of the volume is also widely spaced with broad margins. In the back of the book, Dwiggins explains in a "designer's note" that the airy look of the pages intends to "give a kind of holographic, hand-written quality to the pages."<sup>15</sup> It is very hard to ascertain, however, how much of an impact, if any, these small notes had on the readership. Suspended in the tenuous middle ground between art and advertising, Dwiggins hardly left a trace on the history of literature or of visual art. Large numbers of American readers encountered Willa Cather's works on the pages of a Dwiggins book. But of course, it was Cather who entered the American literary canon and not Dwiggins.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, to understand the recent turn toward book design in contemporary American literature, we need to reengage with the graphic and material history of printed texts. In a peculiar twist, the digital revolution in book publishing has

led to a resurgence of the organic design ethos pioneered by Dwiggins. And once more, the firm Alfred A. Knopf figures as a crucial agent in this arena.

### How to Produce Metamedia (and How to Read Them)

Our historical detour began on the pages of Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. The iconic jacket design of this book—showing a stylized guitar handle on an aquamarine background—was designed by Barbara de Wilde, a member of the Knopf design team. Aside from its visual finesse, the *Goon Squad* cover subtly employs paper finish and variable inks. De Wilde has a sizeable portfolio of cover designs for bestselling books, among them the jacket design for the short story collection *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*

For  
the Relief  
of  
Unbearable  
Urges  
Stories by  
Nathan Englander

Fig. 2. Barbara de Wilde, book jacket design for Nathan Englander, *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges* (New York: Knopf, 1999). © Barbara de Wilde, 2015.

(1999) by Nathan Englander [fig. 2]. The purely typographic cover uses the font Mrs. Eaves—a reinterpretation of John Baskerville’s famous eighteenth-century types—for the title and author’s name, with some of the letters appearing stained by blotches of ink. De Wilde’s layout weaves itself into the embodied medium of the book. Not merely creating its aesthetic effect *on* paper, it actively works *with* paper.<sup>17</sup> In visual form, De Wilde does what fiction does with words: she creates an aesthetic illusion. We are asked to imagine that someone—a prior reader? The author?—has shed tears on the cover of this book. A material book that contains a fictional text hereby turns itself into a fiction.

Aside from Barbara De Wilde, Chip Kidd is the most renowned member of the Knopf design staff. Kidd has designed countless covers for Knopf and Pantheon, but he has also followed Dwiggins’s approach of applying organic design to entire books, as in the American edition of Haruki Murakami’s novel *1Q84* (2011). What is more, Kidd has himself written two novels, *The Cheese Monkeys* (2001) and *The Learners* (2008), which follow a young design student through his college years and his early career at an advertising agency. Kidd’s novels ask the reader to read text and book, design and artifact as integral parts of the narrative.<sup>18</sup> Granted, many critics continue to write off such design work as inconsequential gimmickry or superfluous decoration. This bias against the visual and tactile qualities of literature in most cases stems directly from the axiomatic understanding that the essence of literature is language—and nothing else.

Literary scholars need to reconsider such axioms every once in a while and test whether they still adequately represent how readers read, how writers write, and how the affordances of publishing affect the aesthetics of mate-

<sup>17</sup> Dwiggins had singled out the conscious use of paper as a trait of good design: “This difference of mental attitude—the difference between thinking about paper merely as a background upon which one draws or paints or prints, and thinking about it as an active element of design—is radical and important. It is a touchstone by which you can determine whether or not you are properly a printing designer.” Dwiggins, *Layout*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> On Kidd’s novelistic work, see Alexander Starre, *Meta-media: American Book Fictions and Literary Print Culture after Digitization* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015), 172–182.

<sup>19</sup> See Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 22–26.

rial texts. So what do we study when we study literature? As a complex phenomenon arising from networks of authors and readers, publishers and designers, humans and non-humans, literature in a most basic sense is communication. In his capacious theory of social systems, Niklas Luhmann has argued that art and literature are unique forms of social interchange since they self-referentially turn the form of communication into the subject of communication.<sup>19</sup> From a broadly systems-theoretical perspective, the evolution of communication media, while important for all forms of social exchange, figures critically in the domain of art. This holds especially true for the period since the advent of a completely digitized ecosystem for publishing in the late 1990s. Since then several authors, designers, and publishers have explored the ways in which a post-digital print culture could supplement literary production.

To grasp the communicative relevance inherent in the material forms of literary communication, I believe it is vital to uphold a critical distinction between technologies and

media. In 1972, the communication scholar Harry Pross proposed a tripartite typology of media based on the role of technologies in the encoding and decoding process. In Pross's framework, "primary media" such as hand gestures or the human voice are internal to the human body and can be decoded through our sensorium without additional machinery. "Secondary media" are mechanically inscribed into a material substance that is intelligible to human eyes—think books, newspapers or photographs. "Tertiary media," finally, need technical equipment on both ends, such as recording machines and phonographs or film cameras and TV sets.<sup>20</sup> While scholars such as Bernard Stiegler and Katherine Hayles have recently proposed similar taxonomies, this basic materialist theory has found little resonance in media studies and even less in ongoing research on new media.<sup>21</sup> This is hardly surprising, of course, as a bias toward tertiary, electronic media is hardwired to modern communication studies and shows itself symptomatically in the ease with which we can talk about the book as technology or about transmedia storytelling. However, if we insist upon keeping production technologies and carrier media distinct, smooth convergences between media types appear more like neat allegory than actual fact. Secondary and tertiary media operate on different sensory levels. Such a materialist media concept may help to refocus the analysis of literary communication on the embodied reading processes on paper and on screens.

In my recent work, I have developed the concept of "metamedia" to account for instances in which literary texts bind themselves to a specific medial format.<sup>22</sup> Materiality does not automatically possess a distinctive contribution to the effect of a particular work. Narrative texts need to activate their material dimension *within* narrative to foster metamedial reflexivity. Much as a metafictional novel shows itself to be aware of its status as fiction, a metamedial one is sensitive to its medial embedding. Metamedial effects can be triggered in a number of ways. While unconventional book forms and extensive paratextual commentaries are the most direct techniques, numerous diegetic components can also expose the materiality of the book, often pairing rhetorical elements with page design. Jonathan Safran Foer and Mark Z. Danielewski have explored such techniques across their respective oeuvres.

Works such as Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) and Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) are book fictions in a material sense: they extend the aesthetic illusion outward across the entire bound codex and ask readers to suspend their disbelief about the ontological status of the book. In *House of Leaves*, the creation of the text is credited to the fictional editor Johnny Truant and the physical design of the pages supposedly replicates the typescripts of the elusive scholar Zampanò.

Many accounts of aesthetic production in the digital age present a flat, supposedly democratic system of exchange, which sees weak authors at the behest of strong readers

<sup>20</sup> See Harry Pross, *Medienforschung: Film, Funk, Presse, Fernsehen* (Darmstadt: Habel, 1972), esp. 128–262.

<sup>21</sup> See N. Katherine Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Bernard Stiegler, "Memory," in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 66–87.

<sup>22</sup> See Starre, *Metamedia*, esp. 28–66.

whose commenting, remixing, and rewriting activities form the basis of an emerging convergence culture.<sup>23</sup> The story of convergence emanating from recent American book fictions, however, reads differently. Instead of simultaneous production and reception in the digital cloud, writers in the vein of Foer and Danielewski harness the potential of technological convergence in writing and design. We see here an ascendant form of strong authorship that can claim each part and parcel of a literary production as being under complete authorial control. Instead of a mere writer, this variant of the author is also a bibliographer in the literal sense. The bibliographic author writes not only *in* books but *with* books.

Mark Danielewski composes his books completely in Adobe InDesign, cutting out any design intermediaries at his publisher Pantheon, an imprint of Knopf. Through this practice of bibliographic authorship, he can invite readers to decode his novels on all levels of signification, from the verbal to the typographic and material. In his official online forum, there is ample proof that readers follow this trail and participate in wide-ranging hermeneutic discussions on typography, page layout and even minuscule changes between different editions. From the vantage point of such book fictions, the descriptions and self-descriptions of digital culture appear increasingly inadequate. While digital technologies do sustain flexible, mutable, and trans-medial forms of communication, they have also encouraged the creation of hyper-stable print objects that through their very immutability and embodied design in turn spark numerous derivative productions across the Internet.

Once the object changes, methods have to adapt. To tackle such book fictions analytically, literary studies has to take the material dimensions of text seriously. For one, this means that the practices of close reading—still the most distinct method of literary studies as a discipline—should be extended to aspects like typefaces, book formats, and the embodied interactions with carrier media. Among theorists such as Friedrich Kittler and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, engagement with materiality almost automatically spells doom for hermeneutics.<sup>24</sup> Yet as the work of Jerome McGann, Katherine Hayles, Jessica Pressman and others shows, a materialist hermeneutics of the printed book is not only possible but pays rich dividends.<sup>25</sup> Medial close reading is not to be understood as a throw-back to the intrinsic method of sealing off the literary text from the influx of cultural contexts. In fact, the outward form of texts, in any medial carrier, creates a rich interface to the social context a given work arises out of and inscribes itself back into.

23 The foundational work in this field is Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

24 See Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

25 See Jerome J. McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991);

N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002);

N. Katherine Hayles and Jessica Pressman, eds., *Comparative Textual Media: Transforming the Humanities in the Postprint Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

## Organic Books 2.0—Staging Literary Texts as Book Art

As we have seen, the publishing house Alfred A. Knopf has through its century-long institutional history established a firm reputation of fusing literariness with a strong design ethos. In recent years, Knopf has expanded this design focus toward new forms of embodied literature by publishing the work of Mark Z. Danielewski under its imprint Pantheon. Both his cult book *House of Leaves* and the follow-up novel *Only Revolutions*—a mathematically calculated book sculpture—adapt Dwiggins’s print pragmatism in their embrace of digital design tools. In this process, these works extend the sphere of literary signification deep into territory of book production and design, converting Dwiggins’s “organic book” into “organic narrative.” Danielewski’s first two novels metamedially entwine text and book form to represent and perform spatial fictions. *House of Leaves* asks readers to decode the printed codex as a material metaphor for the eponymous house, while *Only Revolutions* contains a free-wheeling cyclical prose-poem that is reinforced through various numerical and visual design features.<sup>26</sup> In his book *The Fifty Year Sword* (2005/2012), Danielewski most directly merges book, text, and diegesis by using the trope of sewing as the central narrative and structural conceit.<sup>27</sup> The protagonist of this novella, a seamstress named Chintana, visits a bizarre Halloween party also attended by Belinda Kite, who had an affair with Chintana’s husband that led to the couple’s divorce. In the course of the party, a mysterious storyteller arrives to entertain the young guests, five orphaned children whose voices supposedly make up the fractured narrative.

Centering *The Fifty Year Sword* on the idea of “text-as-texture,” Danielewski continues his preoccupation with post-structuralist theory as introduced in his debut novel. Throughout *Dissemination*, Jacques Derrida had used the metaphorical configuration of fabric and weaving to illustrate

his theory of textuality. For Derrida, the texture metaphor illustrates the precarious status of hermeneutic acts:

“The dissimulation of the woven texture can in any case take centuries to undo its web: a web that envelops a web, undoing the web for centuries; reconstituting it too as an organism, indefinitely regenerating its own tissue behind the cutting trace, the decision of each reading. There is always a surprise in store for the anatomy or physiology of any criticism that might think it had mastered the game, surveyed all the threads at once, deluding itself, too, in wanting to look at the text without touching it, without laying a hand on the ‘object,’ without risking—which is the only chance of entering into the game, by getting a few fingers caught—the addition of some new thread.”<sup>28</sup>

As we see here, Derrida’s account of reading fuses notions of organic embodiment with a semantics of stitching, sewing, and tearing apart. On the semantic level, *The Fifty Year Sword* repeatedly employs terms like “stich,” “thread,” “embroidery,”

<sup>26</sup> A useful critical survey of Danielewski’s work is Joe Bray and Alison Gibbons, eds., *Mark Z. Danielewski* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

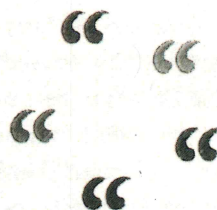
On *House of Leaves* and *Only Revolutions* as book fictions also see Starre, *Metamedia*, 128–166.

<sup>27</sup> *The Fifty Year Sword* appeared in a limited edition with a very small print run in 2005 with the Dutch publisher De Bezige Bij. The redesigned 2012 U.S. edition used for this essay has been more widely circulated and has received significantly more attention in the press.

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* (London: Continuum, 2004), 69.

# The Fifty Year Sword

by



Pantheon Books New York

Fig. 3. Mark Z. Danielewski, *The Fifty Year Sword* (New York: Pantheon, 2012), title page.

as well as various synonyms and other similar phrases. In addition to this, Mark Danielewski's authorial persona claims all visual and material features of the printed codex to be part of the literary work.

As in similar metamedial book fictions, this visual-material expansion happens most directly through paratextual communication. On the title page of the book, Danielewski appears not as the author, but as an editor or cura-

tor. Disclaiming authorship through the device of the fictional editor, Danielewski asserts that *The Fifty Year Sword* is the creation of five voices represented by colored citation marks.<sup>29</sup> These are visually rendered on the title page in the form of embroideries (fig. 3). What is more, the backsides of these embroideries appear perfectly matched on the verso side of this page, fostering the illusion that someone has stitched these marks right through the paper sheet. The

29 In a short foreword, that is typeset so as to resemble the blade and handle of a sword, Danielewski's authorial voice claims to have merely "lend together these gathered and rerealed bits" of the story. Mark Z. Danielewski, *The Fifty Year Sword* (New York: Pantheon, 2012), 10.

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copyright page contains detailed information on the typefaces used in the book, as well as on the Pantone colors that represent the various characters. Whereas other Knopf and Pantheon books use typographical colophons for pedagogical purposes, Danielewski's paratextual explanations serve to authorize design as part of the fiction. Through these devices, *The Fifty Year Sword* stages itself as a metamedial book fiction, fixed in a specific typographical and material form, all of whose components contribute shades of meaning to be decoded by the readers. As we can see from numerous postings in the official forums on the Internet, many readers follow this lead and provide elaborate hermeneutic discussions about the fictional relevance of Danielewski's typography and book design.

In the main part of the book, the written narrative appears solely on the verso sides of the pages, while the recto sides are either completely blank or decorated with various embroideries. Whereas Danielewski has often claimed to design all parts of his books by himself, he did collaborate with several other artists on *The Fifty Year Sword*. Most importantly, he employed three textile artists who created illustrations for various scenes in the story. On many of the book's pages, the reader can see that these artists used colored threads to stitch embroideries through paper or cardboard. Reprinted as high-resolution, full-color scans on the pages of the Pantheon book, these images create a material trompe l'oeil effect that accentuates the papery surface of the book. Unlike conventional illustrations, they do not float in a textual vacuum but instead anchor themselves to the physical page.

The organic unity of text, book, and fictional world informs several moments of the narrative. The plot reaches its climax when Belinda Kite tries to debunk the storyteller's tale of the eponymous fifty-year sword—a handle without a blade, whose lacerations only take effect when their victim turns fifty. Belinda stabs herself repeatedly with the imaginary blade only to collapse at midnight, as she is about to give a toast to her own fiftieth birthday. The woman's body violently disintegrates in front of the crowd, with fingers and hands splattering into the snow on the ground in a "spray of blood" (276). The ensuing pages illustrate the carnage with large tableaux of white and red thread. Where Derrida only likened textuality to fabric, Danielewski's novella extends the reach of this metaphor to depict human bodies as frail webs of string.

The outer layer of the book further intensifies the material signification of sewing. For the dust jacket, Knopf's associate art director Peter Mendelsund employed a stark orange background and a simple typographic design using Dante, the trademark font used by Danielewski for printed renditions of his name. In addition to its visual dimension, the jacket bears the marks of needles, having been pin-pricked in several dozen spots through a mechanical process at the printing shop. The final component of the embodied design of this book draws attention to the sewing process that is still part of the manufacture of many hardcover books. Commonly, books that are sown through the fold of their individual signatures use white or cream-

colored thread that readers will hardly notice as they leaf through the book. The textblock of *The Fifty Year Sword* is sown together using thick, bright-red thread that shines forth from the gutter of the book in sixteen-page intervals.<sup>30</sup>

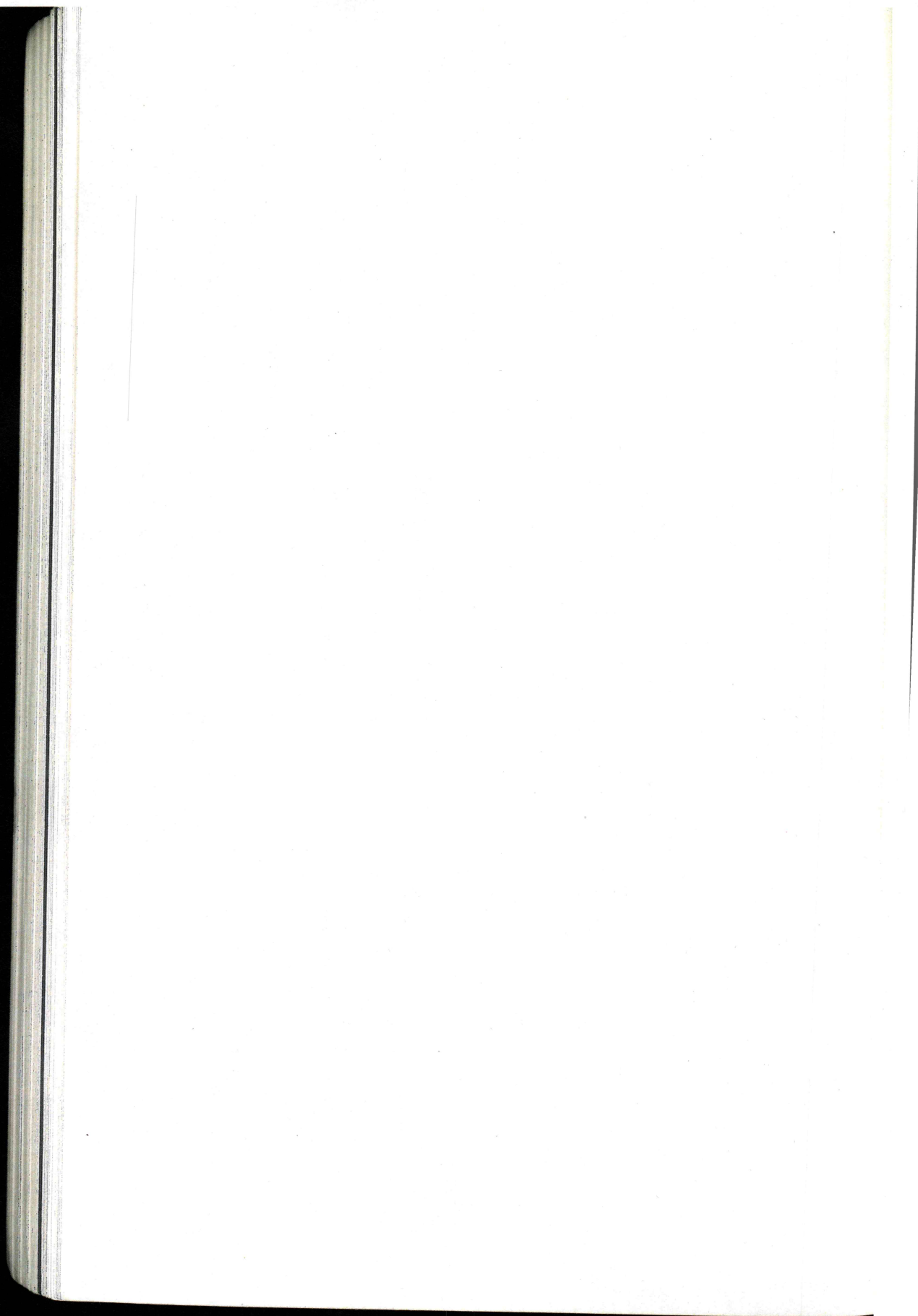
In a conversation published online, Mendelsund and Danielewski explain how the financial constrictions of a mass-market publisher and the technical limitations of book manufacturing often forced them to adapt their creative ideas. Both of them nevertheless claim that these limitations are not antagonistic to the free expression and the aesthetic ideals of literary writing. With recourse to the supposed flexibility of electronic texts, Danielewski holds:

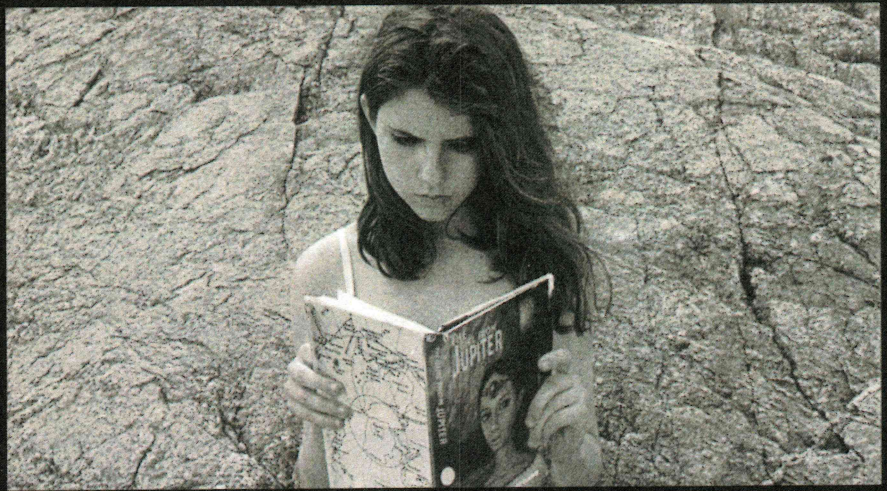
“The way many tablets automatically alter fonts, for example, or authorize the reader to select from a limited list, disregards a tradition, centuries old, of designing and carefully selecting a type design. And it’s a tradition not born out of constriction and control, I think, but expression and the aesthetics of sense and beauty. We both know how much time goes into designing a book. Personally, I go through hundreds of fonts before choosing one. And that’s just the start: margin size matters (put that on a T-shirt!). Folios. Colors, of course. Not to mention how the book as an object sits in the reader’s hand.”<sup>31</sup>

Danielewski, Foer, and Kidd, along with many others represent an emergent type of literary artist, who transgresses the border between writing and designing. While these authors use visual and typographic enhancements that have in the past been associated with avant-gardist or experimental literature, they manage to appeal to a mass audience through collaborations with major trade presses. To make sense of their work, we need to overcome the simplistic idea that print and digital are always already antagonists or competitors. All of these artists can only produce such extraordinary printed artifacts because of their command of digital design tools. In our explorations of contemporary literature, we should be cautious of the teleological narrative that proclaims a full-scale shift from print to digital. In a trade publishing system that increasingly accommodates artistic manipulations of the printed codex, books no longer figure as neutral carriers of text, but instead turn into narrative media that have their own story to tell.

30 Pantheon also published a limited deluxe edition of *The Fifty Year Sword* that featured a special form of binding without a spine, leaving the decorative sewing on the back of the text block openly visible. This edition came in a box with metal latches, resembling the box in which the fictional storyteller carries the mysterious sword.

31 “Q&A: Mark Z. Danielewski,” *Powell’s Books*, October 9, 2012, accessed November 16, 2015, [www.powells.com/blog/qa/qa-mark-z-danielewski-by-mark-z-danielewski](http://www.powells.com/blog/qa/qa-mark-z-danielewski-by-mark-z-danielewski).





# The Mediatization of Contemporary Writing<sup>1</sup>

*Nick Thurston*

Trying to figure out what marks contemporary literature as contemporary is a deceptively complicated job because the concept of contemporaneity at stake is itself complicated. Those complications are sustained by the unqualified way that the word *contemporary* seems to refer to both a quality of being with (*con*) in time (*temp*), in the colloquial sense of something being “of its time,” and to *simultaneously* identify our current moment as a historical period, a period that we’re historicizing as we live it because one of the qualities that distinguishes it from previous periods is an obsession with now-ness.<sup>2</sup> Within discussions of the arts, this doubling has been theorized at greatest length by those studying visual culture (usually vis-à-vis contemporary art, which John Douglas Millar has rightly pointed to as contemporary culture’s placeholder—its unelected parent category), not least because premonitions about post- and post-post-modern life put forward during the late-twentieth century were most popularly obsessed with the growing presence and influence of images.<sup>3</sup> All such forethoughts focused critical approaches to twenty-first century culture in terms of the visual: what can be seen (the visible) and ways of seeing it (visibility and our visualizations).

On the surface of contemporary life, the compression of multi-megapixel cameras into networked smartphones that feed data-streams like Instagram via one-click apps suggest those premonitions were well founded. What excites me and some other poets who have been at the forefront of the Conceptual writing scene is a simple observation that problematizes such premonitions and the visual bias they ground. In short, although the surface of life is constantly being flooded with images, its depths, structures, flows, and our interactions with them have proved to be more dependent than ever on written language, not least because all computational data is a kind of emic, alphanumeric code. The really new features of twenty-first century life are reforming life under the surface—in relational networks that we only have limp metaphors to describe, like “the cloud”—and so we need to read every-

thing and anything legible below the surface in ways that go beyond seeing. As writers we seem to ask: what might it be interesting to write if we were to wager that, rather than being *over-written* by the visual, the contemporary world has become more fundamentally *textualized* than any period before it?<sup>4</sup> And as readers we seem to ask: what kinds of literacies might we need to read these new textualities forming on and below the surface?

I don’t want to stray from an observation to a clumsy truth-claim, I don’t want to rehearse arguments about the textualization of everything, and nor do I want to resuscitate out-of-date ideas about the difference between “visual” art and literature. But I do want to take the above speculation seriously and to think about the importance of technical mediation to the changed horizons of new writing—to the new now-ness of contemporary writing and the unprecedented

1 Extended from a feature essay of the same title commissioned by the *White Review*, London, published September 2014.

2 As different from, for example, the futurology of modernism: new, new, new ...

3 As John Douglas Millar told me, winter 2013.

4 Robert Fitterman re-defined the practice of Conceptual writing as a wager on the unexpected textualization of twenty-first century culture during a “Literature and the Law” seminar that I convened for the University of Leeds, March 2014. See also Fitterman’s *Just Another Soft Machine* (London: Veer Books, 2014).

(im)mediacy of public language acts. One of the strengths of the best Conceptual writing is that it steps outside of the should-be territory defined by previous poetics and the nineteenth-century's epistemology of literature to concern itself with, and even begin amongst, what Gerald Bruns would call "literature's elsewheres" and I have started to call the (im)properly extra-literary.<sup>5</sup>

One aspect of contemporary life is that there are more people than ever producing and consuming public language, and more private language becoming public than ever before: there's more language, and a higher proportion of it ends up being public. This is happening in obvious ways, which have become common news issues over the last ten-to-fifteen years, but also in less obvious ways, as the NSA surveillance scandal has paradoxically obviated. Digital software-hardware combinations have standardized desktop publishing, seemingly naturalized the database as an organizing principle for life, and now aggregate flows of data in constant streams around the world in volumes way beyond the limits of what we can actually read. Every time we type on a computational device our keystrokes are being published by default, to some degree of discretion, every few seconds. They're saved automatically into the file we're making, onto the archive drive of our devices, onto the linked backup servers our workplaces have installed, and evidently onto the

5 Gerald Bruns developed the idea of literature's "elsewhere" (or "otherness") from the work of Maurice Blanchot and Hugh Kenner. See, for example, Bruns's *Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

6 For a fuller discussion of self-publishing and Conceptual writing see my article "Conceptualist Reading Performances as a Praxis of Publishing," *Journal for Writing in Creative Practice* 6, no. 3 (2013-14): 421-429.

7 Understanding "technical" objects as products of human innovation, and as thus distinguished from "natural" objects, is an extension of the philosophical difference between technical (*techne*) and empirical (*episteme*) qualities. See, for example, Bernard Stiegler's *Technics and Time* book series (1994, 1996, 2001, to date), which have been published in English translation by Stanford University Press (Redwood) in 1998, 2008, and 2010.

monitored databases of international surveillance groups. That's an edition of four before you've even finished a sentence; and at least philologically speaking, it seems to me important to remember that the word "publish" derives from the Latin *publicare* (to make public) via the middle English *publicen* (to get rid of, to let go of). What this kind of *immediate* and *invisible* reproduction demonstrates is that often, now, writing and publishing are the same action—that self-publishing is something we do to ourselves by default, even if only by allowing our writing technologies to do it for us.<sup>6</sup>

By the broadest theories of media, one can argue that languages themselves should be understood as a technology. By the corresponding sociologies, members of each society co-develop a version of this technology to mediate their expressions and relationships with both one another and their self-understanding. By more narrow theories of media, one can argue that the technologies of language are only the apparatuses made to carry a language, rather than any language itself. Any sociology that involves such an idea has, at some point, to distinguish the carrier (medium) from the carried (language), and to do so in terms of *technics*: the former has to be a technical construction, something made by people, and the latter has to be something else.<sup>7</sup> Figuring out what kind of "something else" language might be has in the past depended on distinguishing between some independent presence of

language (as if language were a thing-in-itself regardless of people) and the technicity of its being represented (language as a thing-in-itself that people *produce* representations of). These are natural language theses, as when people maintain that language is natural because, for example, the word is God's and so we can only speak imperfect second-order representations of His true word.

Without some such faith that language has a natural state, status and presence, it's difficult to think of writing as anything other than a representation of a non-presence, or rather, a present representation, as many high modernists believed. The idea that any language is anything other than the collective history and practice of that language being enacted—its materializations—plus the temporality of those representations as material—material that only has a “being” insofar as it gets engaged with—dissolves, like a faith unraveled, with the demystification of the idea that our languages could've ever been anything other than made and re-made by societies. Written language *isn't* “something else,” something other than what we make it, something with an innate constitution. Language acts are representations of a schema of representations, they're representations of representations, and all representations try to re-present something that they're not. Language is the thing in between, in the middle, the medium; but it's also always socially constructed and the mediator of anything made public in or with it (i.e., *within* it). The 140-character limit on Twitter doesn't only constrain Tweets; it has echoing effects on attention spans, contractions of spelling and punctuation, and the skills expected of marketers. It's not that words no longer represent concepts, as the bandying of Marshall McLuhan's famous “the medium is the message” can mislead people to think, but that we have to recognize the increasing significative power of all the re-mediating processes and institutions that intersect to make any language act public.<sup>8</sup> In short, we have to find new ways of *reading* publishing.

Every language act re-mediates the mediality (the in-between-ness) of its language in a specific way, and every act enters into sequences of language networks, networks that in turn re-mediate the remediation etc., etc. As the networks become more accelerated, pervasive, and *invisible* so too do the acts. It should come as no surprise that some of the poets who inherited the consequences of the above debates are interested in exploring how the newly accelerated *immediacy* of language is, perversely, an expression of the mediatization of contemporary writing in the contemporary world generally.

I'm calling this change perverse because it flips the modification performed by the prefix *im-*, and so formulates a productive paradox: Now the *im-* in *immediacy* can be read as signifying a “movement toward” the quality of being mediate, rather than signifying a “lack of mediality” or a being “not mediated.”<sup>9</sup> That second, negative sense of the prefix *im-* has until now modified the meaning of *immediacy* to

<sup>8</sup> Marshall McLuhan first proposed the phrase “the medium is the message” in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

<sup>9</sup> All citations are from “Oxford English Dictionary,” Oxford University Press, accessed July 6, 2014, <http://www.oed.com>.

signify an experience of direct contact between an *I* and another *thing-in-itself*, a contact that is direct because there's nothing in between them. I'm not claiming that this definition is now somehow wrong—that now, when people have sex, it's necessarily less immediate than it was, say, one hundred years ago—only that this definition is too simple if we're going to try to analyze our experiences of writing and reading in our mediated age. If language-in-itself is a constructed representation then any immediate contact with language must be directly with a representation *plus* the schema(s) it's situated in. Representations can't be themselves without a context because the (albeit real) present-ness of a representation is insufficient-in-itself by definition. Contemporary public language has productively extended this insufficiency by converting it into a hyper-situated-ness, linking links to links—always elsewhere, always more, always multi-directional.

But what about the status of the *I* that comes to that immediate instance of direct contact with language-in-itself, language as a multiply-situated, impermanent, and insufficient representation? The term *mediatization* turns the stem noun *mediate* into a verb, which is a form (turning nouns into verbs) that seems to irritate a lot of people. In this compound the suffix *-ization* literally means “to make x,” and it gets us a little closer to articulating the tidal movement (below the surface, out of sight) of our contemporary medial condition.<sup>10</sup> The specific constellation of significant media at our “now” moment in history structures something more than a media-scape for culture—something more effective than a passive backdrop—something more like a mediated-and-mediating-scape. Under the surface of the language we read, the tidal movement of these interacting media seems to mediate everything that has contact with it, to unlimited, accelerating, and ever-more pervasive extents.

Short of ethical objections, there's no reason to think that in this adolescent era of digitally-inflected post-humanism the human authorial subject *should* be invulnerable to this tide. In short, we can't just *use* these networks and networked technologies and maintain whatever integrity we come to them with; when we engage them “they” (a clumsy shorthand, I know) begin a process of mediating us with soft and hard power. Some of those operations and their affects are visible, others not: Every time the predicative typing software on our mobile phones overwrite the letter order we actually key, or our web browsers syphon data about our search behavior so as to customize the adverts we're shown, the medial network is mediating our use of the medium and us too in turn. These interacting media are doing so behind the veil of an interface, behind the lumpen presence of hardware, and behind our seeming ownership of both, according to chains of algorithms that are so long and so many and so changeable that we can't possibly *see* how they're re-mediating us. When I make a Google account to embed their Analytics HTML in a website I manage, and start to worry about the stats it returns, I'm performing my own interpellation—I'm pretending to be the policeman and hailing myself.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

These are crude examples of what I'm calling the mediatization of writing, and of the fact that our medial condition will depend more and more on textualization as the virtual and actual increasingly combine to mediate whatever it is that our contemporary reality is becoming, at least at the level of code-algorithm and software-hardware interactions. Lots of smarter people than me have pushed our knowledge of these emergent conditions further and more intelligently than my sketch above.<sup>12</sup> In tandem with their technical and philosophical advances, some poets have been willing to hyper-extend these re-mediations and hyper-extend the cultural register of poetry by again re-mediating such formations of language—this was the modus of Conceptual writing—nominating such formations to a context where people are willing and able to read differently. The best of such work has allowed us to experience otherwise unimaginable aspects of the fact that public language has never been so unstable.

The forms of languages, their ranges, their userships, and the demographic variety within each language's usership, all only add to the historical baggage that inevitably builds up as a language gets older. When lexicographers add webspeak terms to the *Oxford English Dictionary* news broadcasters react with chatter about how language is changing. But to do so by looking at the lexicon is to miss the more dramatically new change, which is fundamentally one of materiality—it's a change in what language *is* (as a multiply-situated, impermanent, and insufficient re-re-re- ... representation) not necessarily what it's used to say. Contemporary public language is clonable and fluid, overlaid and reproducible on-demand; it's polymorphic and regulated

11 This characterization refers to Louis Althusser's "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses" (1970), which contains his famous example of how individuals take part in their own subjectification if they self-identify as the addressee when a policeman shouts "Hey, you there!"

12 See, for example, McKenzie Wark's *A Hacker Manifesto*, written over a decade ago using message boards as a feedback loop for revisions, published by Harvard University Press (Cambridge, MA) in 2004 and still eerily prescient.

13 The hyper-extension of our lives via "the Network" and "the cloud" hyper-extend the artificial subjectivity we create through writing rather than negate it. Our artificial subjectivities are now too real to be simply artificial. This artificiality is not negated; it's doubled-back and doubled-up.

by vectors, relayed from spinning magnetic discs elsewhere and as unstable as the media that has mediatized our ways and means of writing *within* it. Now it's easy to feel like the language act is more immediate and dynamic than the supposed authorial subject behind that act. Now, more than ever, public language seems less and less like an expression of some already-public subject and more and more like that subject's post-human proxy, my all-too-real avatar. Administering a popular Twitter account, for example, can make that authorial subject's other contributions to public life seem inadequate. Mediatization leads to our artificial subjectivity becoming more real (or more really dynamic) than any other aspect of our self-subject-hood. It's as if via our artificial artificial subjectivity we can become more immediate and immediately engaged with the contemporary "real" world than any pre-, un-, or less-medial subject-position could possibly allow.<sup>13</sup>

How and what do our avatar societies *output* as writing? What forms of literature are being written at the extremes of our contemporary real that weren't previously possible? Automated writing services that compose new texts using a

method called narrative analytics are a kind of limit-less limit case. For example, the Long Tail algorithm has been used to write over 890,000 new books, which have been published by Icon Group International since 1999. So-called narrative analytics programs not only analyze a dataset for you but also narrate that analysis and produce new findings.<sup>14</sup> Until now the latter at least—the production of new insights—which is to say, scientifically, the production of new knowledge—had been assumed to be the preserve of human authorial subjects. I can't imagine a properly contemporary poetry, in the complicated double sense of contemporaneity that we're now working with, that doesn't explore the modes of writing or questions raised by these kinds of technical and non-literary developments. They cast a technical foreshadow in front of (*before*) all new writing.

Poets who problematize the shade of this foreshadow, like those of us amongst the Conceptual writing scene, do so by taking the risk of producing

improperly extra-literary acts that often can't or aren't *seen* to be poetic. These communities of writers and readers bring into question commonly held assumptions about what literary output is by misusing their social status as cultural producers (authors) to turn attention to the growing gap between the form of literary products (publications) and the form of literary production (publishing). For example, if being a Conceptual writer means, in a certain sense, being a performative reader in hyper-relational networks, then the actual authorial work for any such writer is to choreograph performances of (re-)publishing. By showing that any publication is an *imago* or illusory mirror image of a specific act of publishing, via which the real act or actual labor of writing and making language public come to consciousness, such work makes it possible to think of publishing itself as *the* meta-condition of public language acts, to think of choreographing the event of publishing as a creative act, and to therefore re-conceptualize reproduction as a form of production.<sup>15</sup>

It's complicated to establish quite what writing and literary output are in a situation where the industrial logic of manufacturing, which was honed during the Second Industrial Revolution, is turned on its head. Mainstream literary presses still depend upon a manufacturing flow of *production-then-reproduction*, buying or commissioning the writing of transferable manuscripts that get edited and then replicated in units. As we stumble into the age of the Third Industrial Revolution, where computer-driven logics of *mass customization* are fundamentally changing massification, outputs are being modified in and through the process of reproduction.<sup>16</sup> For £120 the sportswear giant Nike will let me design my own trainer from a database of options on

14 The Icon Group International is an imprint begun by Philip M. Parker whose research work led to the development of the Long Tail program. Parker alone is the listed author of well over 100,000+ automated books already, available in e- and print on demand versions. All statistics are from spring 2014.

15 This model of misidentification was borrowed by Jean Baudrillard for his 1973 critique of Marxist productivism, *The Mirror of Production*, trans. Mark Poster (London: Telos Books, 1975), from Jacques Lacan's 1949 paper, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London & New York: W. W. Norton, 1977).

16 Against Jeremy Rifkin's Internet utopianism in *The Third Industrial Revolution: How Lateral Power is Transforming Energy, the Economy, and the World* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), I find the questions raised by current changes in manufacturing to have been well introduced by the *Economist's* editorial, "The Third Industrial Revolution," published April 21, 2012, and brilliantly demonstrated by the London Design Museum's 2013 exhibition, "The Future is Here."

their website, displaying instant renders of my shoe, with its Volt-white heel loop, Wolf Grey swoosh, Medium Berry lining, Total Orange laces, Deep Royal Blue tongue loop, white speckled outsole and any twelve characters of text I want embroidered across the heels. These shoes are an output, a product, a materialization, of a newly inverted manufacturing logic, a logic of *reproduction-as-production*.

My Nike Roshe Run Flyknit iD shoes would be assembled in a sweatshop where computers drive the factory and human employees fill in the gaps. But how would a literature based on reproduction-as-production work and what work would writers do to produce it? Speculative answers are being shared, around the world, all of the time, in extra-literary forms that hyper-extend the new status anxieties of poetic voice (maybe best articulated as “status\_anxieties”) and the seemingly infinite ambience of its formations.<sup>17</sup> During summer 2013, my most recent collection of poems was published in a formally conventional book entitled *Of the Subcontract. Or, Principles of Poetic Right*. All one hundred poems had been written for me by low-paid workers on the Mechanical Turk labor pooling service run by Amazon.com. I arranged the content they sold to me according to cost-of-production, from 1-cent to 1-dollar, rather than by thematic affinity. I typeset a standard layout, prescribed four sections based on my financial investment, and paid freelancers to generate the texture of *my* text.<sup>18</sup> People like me who share these new textual objects may or may not have engaged in conventional acts of writing-as-composition but are non-the-less exercising some kind of cultural authorship. And the new intensity with which we have been doing so seems to modify the question of authoriality that is central to the epistemology of literature. Now, instead of asking “who wrote that text?” it seems more apposite to ask “who is taking responsibility for that text?” *in the present tense*, and to expect answers that are as liquid, multiplied, and impermanent as contemporary life.

Re-theorizing this theoretical question is a reaction to the change in how we work as writers—it is a symptom of the fact that certain forms of authorship are, now, primarily an act of taking responsibility for particular cultural object(s) in contextually-specific circumstances. The impropriety of this reduction is only proper to our circumstances. Communities who make these new forms of language public—new publishing communities—seem better able to approach the fact that there’s never been so much public language and yet public language has never been so insufficient, and seem better able than most to turn that fact into a conceptually productive (and shared) problematic. The (im)mediacy of much such work manages to quickly capture, then just as quickly lose, the interest many poetry readers by inverting the status of reproduction and production and letting the categories of poem, poet, and poetry be spun in the process. Given that

17 For a longer speculation on how the problems of contemporary poetic voice seem to be characterized by certain status\_anxieties see my article “Status\_Anxieties,” *Convolutions: The Journal of Conceptual Criticism* 1, no. 3 (2014), available on the Electronic Poetry Center’s online archive: <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/thurston>.

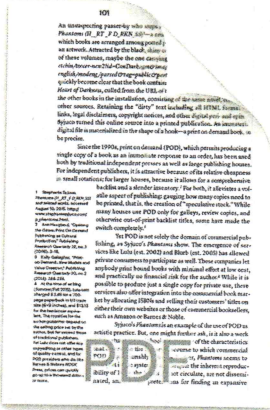
18 For a broader discussion of *Of the Subcontract*, see Stephen Voyle’s long interview with me in the *Iowa Review* 43, no. 3 (2014), also available online: <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/thurston>, or Rita Raley’s “Out-sourced Poetics,” *American Book Review* 35, no. 2 (2014): 5–6.

the prefix *im-* is a variant spelling of *in-*, we might better bend English grammar to describe these (im)mediate public language acts as *inmediate*. I suggest so not least because the artificial artificial subjectivities that we re-re-re ... produce through inmediate public language acts seem to make the mediatization of writing starkly legible where it might otherwise remain invisible and culturally unread.

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# Contemporary Writing

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# Experimental Writing in its Moment of Digital Technization: Post-Digital Literature and Print-on-Demand Publishing

Hannes Bajohr

An unsuspecting passer-by who steps into Stephanie Syjuco's installation *Phantoms* (*H\_RT\_F D\_RKN\_SS*)<sup>1</sup>—a couple of stools in front of a table on which books are arranged among potted plants—might be unaware that it is an artwork. Attracted by the black, shiny covers, the visitor could pick up one of these volumes, maybe the one carrying the title <http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=ConDark.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=all>. Leafing through, the reader would quickly realize that the book contains the text of Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, culled from the URL of the university website on the title; the other books in the installation, consisting of the same novel, come from other sources. Retaining the “dirty” text including all HTML formatting, links, legal disclaimers, copyright notices, and other digital peri- and epitext, Syjuco turned this online source into a printed publication. An immaterial digital file is materialized in the shape of a book—a print on demand book, to be precise.

Since the 1990s, print on demand (POD), which permits producing a single copy of a book as an immediate response to an order, has been used both by traditional independent presses as well as large publishing houses. For independent publishers, it is attractive because of its relative cheapness in small rotations; for larger houses, because it allows for a comprehensive

backlist and a slender inventory.<sup>2</sup> For both, it alleviates a volatile aspect of publishing: gauging how many copies need to be printed, that is, the creation of “speculative stock.” While many houses use POD only for galley, review copies, and otherwise out-of-print backlist titles, some have made the switch completely.<sup>3</sup>

Yet POD is not solely the domain of commercial publishing, as Syjuco's *Phantoms* show. The emergence of services like Lulu (est. 2002) and Blurb (est. 2005) has allowed private consumers to participate as well. These companies let anybody print bound books with minimal effort at low cost, and practically no financial risk for the author.<sup>4</sup> While it is possible to produce just a single copy for private use, these services also offer integration into the commercial book market by allocating ISBNs and selling their customers' titles on either their own websites or those of commercial booksellers, such as Amazon or Barnes & Noble.

Syjuco's *Phantoms* is an example of the use of POD as artistic practice. But, one might further ask, is it also a work of literature? Syjuco's books lack many of the characteristics that determine the literary discourse to which commercial POD unquestionably belongs. Rather, *Phantoms* seems to take part in the system of art: despite the inherent reproducibility of POD, the books do not circulate, are not disseminated, and have no pretensions for finding an expansive

1 Stephanie Syjuco, *Phantoms* (*H\_RT\_F D\_RKN\_SS*) and related works, accessed August 10, 2015, [http://www.stephaniesyjuco.com/p\\_phantoms.html](http://www.stephaniesyjuco.com/p_phantoms.html).

2 Ann Haugland, “Opening the Gates: Print On-Demand Publishing as Cultural Production,” *Publishing Research Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (2006): 3–16.

3 Kelly Gallagher, “Print-on-Demand: New Models and Value Creation,” *Publishing Research Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2014): 244–248.

4 At the time of writing (Summer/Fall 2015), Lulu.com charged \$3.85 for a 200-page paperback in US trade size (6×9 inches), and \$13.13 for the hardcover equivalent. The royalties for the author-publisher depend on the selling price set by the author, but far exceed those of traditional publishers. Yet Lulu does not offer any copyediting or other types of quality control, and for POD providers who do, like Barnes & Noble's NOOK Press, prices can quickly go up to a thousand dollars or more.

readership; they do not refer to, comment on, or interfere with the rules and practices of the system of literature. And although these books are fabricated by a technology that ensures virtually infinite print runs, they are treated as unique objects, bound to the space of the installation and the time of its exhibition. Not least, they adhere to the logic of the art market, which produces value through scarcity.

It matters whether a POD book is read as an artwork or as literary text, and not only because, from the perspective of reception, the interpretative arsenal and thus the evaluation of the work differ. The artist's arsenal of production—the methods and strategies available to them—also varies considerably depending on the system in which they decide to operate. Indeed, a whole subculture has developed that deliberately chooses the system of literature, and not art, to investigate the bond between digital and analog by

employing POD. It is not through the technology's application in commercial publishing, but rather through consumer-use POD providers, that a new genre of literature has consolidated. Lulu and Blurb have not only provided the means of production and distribution, which led to the emergence of a range of publishing platforms like Gauss PDF and Troll Thread; through the constraints of the medium of POD, they also helped shape a genre that fuses elements of Conceptual writing, electronic literature, and what was once, in Soviet formalism, called factography. This genre might be called *post-digital literature*. Like *Phantoms*, it plays on the strange status of POD as at once analog and digital; but unlike Syjuco's work, it scrutinizes the implications of this ambiguity through decidedly literary means.

I propose that we view exponents of this current as forging a new interchange between publishing technology, dissemination strategy, and textual genre. This development is symptomatic of a larger cultural shift toward digital technization, and of the fact that the object produced by POD is paradigmatically post-digital in its ontology. But because the meaning of these terms is not self-evident, let me start with some basic considerations.

### POD as Post-Digital

In *Post-Digital Print*, Alessandro Ludovico writes that “the death of paper—in retrospect, one of the most unfortunate and embarrassing prophecies of the information age—has obviously not happened.”<sup>5</sup> In his account of the development of independent and neo-avant-garde publishing, paper hasn't been replaced by screens, and, on the contrary, the

5 Alessandro Ludovico, *Post-Digital Print: The Mutation of Publishing since 1894* (Eindhoven/Rotterdam: Onomatopoe 77, 2012), 29.  
 6 *Ibid.*, 153.  
 7 *Ibid.*, 70.  
 8 Melvin L. Alexenberg, *The Future of Art in a Postdigital Age: From Hellenistic to Hebraic Consciousness*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Intellect, 2011), 10; Florian Cramer, “What is ‘Post-Digital?’” *APRJA* 3, no. 1 (2014), accessed June 22, 2015, <http://www.aprja.net/?p=1318>, now also in: David M. Berry and Michael Dieter, eds., *Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, Computation and Design* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 12–26. One could argue that in this interpretation, “post-digital” describes a pervasive cultural mood of discontent with the digital, as testified by the increasing ennoblement of the thing in art, theory, and everyday life. The rise of thing and materiality theories would then be the academic equivalent to the auratization of the post-digital, the handcrafted and artisanal, in the kind of tweed-and-embossed-cowhide semiotics that rose to the epitome of futurist style in the 2013 film *Her*, which seems so plausible a depiction of the future precisely because it so obviously announces the longing for tangible substance.

relationship between digital and analog turns out to be not antagonistic, but complementary: “Digital is the paradigm for content and quantity of information; analogue is the paradigm for usability and interfacing.”<sup>6</sup> Because the book, rather than the screen, is the most user-friendly and offers the best interface for the engagement with text, it will survive. More importantly, however, Ludovico maintains that it is increasingly the very materiality of books that gives them their cultural weight. A digital file, or more precisely, one represented on a digital reading-device, seems fleeting, cheap, and less serious than a tangible “post-digital” object. This is what makes POD so popular.<sup>7</sup>

The term “post-digital” is often employed to denote the recuperated value of materiality. Mel Alexenberg has called the post-digital a longing for the “humanization of digital technologies,” and Florian Cramer considers it the state of “disenchantment with new media,” as well as a flight from the increasing hegemony of digital technology toward DIY culture.<sup>8</sup> But it seems odd to use the term post-digital for POD, not only because it is a form of digital printing (and not something “truly analog,” like, say, silkscreen), but because its outcomes often look cheap and lack the very quality that “post-digital” seems to indicate (just look at the blindingly white paper, template typesetting, and often imperfect binding of most any recent academic book).

POD is not post-digital in this sense of a nostalgia for materiality-as-quality. Rather, I would like to understand it in epochal and ontological terms, and follow an observation made by Cramer: “‘Post-digital’ [...] refers to a state in which the disruption brought about by digital information technology has already occurred.”<sup>9</sup> POD is post-digital because it points to the historicity of this disruption and makes it perceptible.

## Technization and the Post-Digital

What does it mean for a technology to no longer be new? German philosopher Hans Blumenberg made a distinction between “technology” and “technization.”<sup>10</sup> *Technology* suggests itself as discrete matters of fact in the objectivity of its artifacts. Once introduced, it is there, only to be replaced by better, newer technology. *Technization*, on the other hand, is the ongoing process by which technology fades into the background of our everyday experience. Blumenberg called this quotidian consciousness the “life-world,” a term borrowed from Edmund Husserl, who defined it as the “realm of original self-evidences.”<sup>11</sup>

For Blumenberg, the life-world is that which in its unquestionable obviousness (*Evidenz*, often translated “self-

9 Cramer, “What is ‘Post-Digital?’”

10 Hans Blumenberg, “Lebenswelt und Technisierung unter Aspekten der Phänomenologie,” in *Schriften zur Technik*, ed. Alexander Schmitz and Bernd Stiegler (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2015), 163–202. Translations from foreign sources mine, unless otherwise noted.

11 Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 127. Blumenberg modifies the concept of “life-world” considerably. For him, it does not describe an actual state, but acts as a “limit concept” (*Grenzbegriff*), that is, something that can only be inferred but never actually reached. Absolute life-world would be the absence of all resistance to reality. He offers another name: “paradise.” Hans Blumenberg, *Theorie der Lebenswelt*, ed. Manfred Sommer (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010), 34, 50.

evidence”) lacks all resistance that would make it stick out as conspicuous. Similar to Heidegger’s “readiness-to-hand,”<sup>12</sup> but without his scorn of technology, Blumenberg described technization as the slow sinking-into-the-life-world of what was once artificial, unnatural, obtrusive, and novel. Any technology is, in the process of technization, “always-already” on the way toward this transparency, and becoming invisible to its users. Only a sudden event of resistance can disturb this process and make it apparent—a resistance that, as I will show, POD provides.

It seems that, with the initial rise of digital technology more than a generation behind us, we are now experiencing a threshold moment of such technization. The fact that something is produced, distributed, or perceived by digital means is no longer the first thing we notice about it, if we notice it at all. Digital technology is in the process of losing resistance to our experience of reality. Gradually, as Blumenberg writes, “The artificial reality, the foreigner among the encountered things of nature, sinks back into the ‘universe of what is pre-given as obvious,’ the life-world.”<sup>13</sup>

12 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1962), 98.

13 Blumenberg, “Lebenswelt und Technisierung,” 190; he quotes Husserl, *Crisis*, 180.

14 Hans Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Possibility of the Novel,” in *New Perspectives in German Literary Criticism: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Richard E. Amacher and Victor Lange (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 29–48. My description of the “concept of reality” is too abbreviated to do it justice and it deserves more explanation than I can provide here. My point is that it makes sense to differentiate between the transparency of technology and the transparency of the way this first transparency changes our experience of reality.

15 Understanding “the digital” as epistemic and temporal category might help to restrain the term again somewhat after its recent over-expansion, which has threatened to wipe out for good any residue of meaning left in this already highly vague concept; see Alexander Galloway, *Laruelle: Against the Digital* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

If today’s subjects of technization are digital technology and its practices, then the outcome of this process—their having become life-world—might be called “the digital.” Thus understood, the digital is, first, the epistemological integral of digital technology; Blumenberg calls this a “*concept of reality*,” that is, something that conditions the experience of the world without itself being apparent as a factor.<sup>14</sup> But because this process of digital technization is not complete (after all, we can still be aware of it), the digital does not yet determine our life-world absolutely. The digital can therefore also describe, second, a *temporality*, a threshold moment that is precariously situated not between the old and the new, but the “opaquely” novel and the “transparently” evident; it vacillates between the no-longer and the not-yet.<sup>15</sup>

If the digital is a concept of reality or a temporality, increasingly transparent to scrutiny, the post-digital is what performs the sudden yank that makes it apparent again. It provokes a disharmony in the structure of the obvious, thus drawing attention to it, and makes the process of technization experienceable. The post-digital denotes the *ontological status* of an object, ambiguously lodged between the already-evident and the still-new. As soon as it is possible to question which category applies in a given case, the post-digital offers the resistance necessary to bring back to consciousness the otherwise elusive process of technization and its resulting concept of reality.

What this means is that we don’t live in a post-digital, but very much a digital moment. The digital and the post-digital are not opposed terms, nor does the post-digital come

“after” the digital. Rather, they operate on different categorical planes: As a concept of reality/temporality, the digital is what is disclosed by the ambiguous ontology of the post-digital. With Vilém Flusser, one could call the post-digital object an *Unding*—an object suspended between ontological states.<sup>16</sup> A book produced by POD technology has the potential to be a post-digital

*Unding*. Its vacillating states are usually described as “analog” and “digital,” its forms of presence as material and immaterial. The most notable way in which it embodies its ontological ambiguity is in the relation between file and product.

POD has an inherent connection to a digital file; its very existence relies on the creation of a digital master from which the copies of the book are made. While this is true of almost any book printed today, with POD this connection between file and object is especially unstable. Because of the ease of production and dissemination that services like Lulu and Blurb provide, it can be investigated, manipulated, and thrown into crisis by artistic and literary means (Syjuco’s *Phantoms* already hint in this direction). In turn, as we shall see, the attributes of the file are determined by the material constraints of POD. Any inclination to hierarchize the two elements—the text and the book, the immaterial and its materialization—thus inevitably fails. “Electronic textuality is [...] locatable, even though we are not accustomed to thinking of it in physical terms,”<sup>17</sup> Matthew Kirschenbaum pointed out in discussing a “forensic” approach to storage media. This idea holds for POD as *Unding*, too; few things illustrate “the heterogeneity of digital data and its embodied inscriptions” as well as this post-digital object does.<sup>18</sup>

### Infrathin Platforms: Gauss PDF, Troll Thread, OxOa, Traumawien

This heterogeneity informs both the focus of investigation and the mode of production in a recent literary current that could be called post-digital literature, whose dissemination strategy combines digital publishing and POD. Notable authors include Holly Melgard, Joey Yearous-Algozin, Steve McLaughlin, and Gregor Weichbrodt; notable publishers are Gauss PDF in the US and Traumawien in Europe. Sometimes, the term “publisher” is avoided in favor of designations like “publishing collective,” as in the case of Troll Thread, or *Textkollektiv*, as with my own project, OxOa.<sup>19</sup>

Whatever these entities call themselves, they execute the “publishing gesture”<sup>20</sup> that is a minimum requirement

16 Vilém Flusser, “Das Unding I & II”, in *Dinge und Undinge: Phänomenologische Skizzen* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1993), 80–89; English as Vilém Flusser, “The Non-Thing I & II,” in *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design*, trans. Anthony Mathews (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 85–94. It is hard to find a suitable English equivalent for the German term *Unding*. While the lexical meaning is “absurdity,” it literally translates as “non-thing,” and this is how the English version renders it. But it is a peculiarity of the German language to retain what is apparently negated by the prefix “un-.” Rather, it qualifies something as questionable in its essence: An *Unmensch* is not a non-human but an inhumane one, and an *Unkraut* is not a non-plant, but one that is not wanted, or in the wrong place: a weed. Similarly, an *Unding* is a thing whose very thing-ness is in question. Jean-François Lyotard employed a similar ambiguity when he used the plural for the title of his 1985 Centre Pompidou exhibition “Les Immatériaux.” Taking Lyotard as a cue, a possible translation for *Unding* could thus be “immatter.”

17 Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 3.

18 *Ibid.*, 6.

19 [www.gauss-pdf.com](http://www.gauss-pdf.com); [www.traumawien.at](http://www.traumawien.at); [www.trollthread.tumblr.com](http://www.trollthread.tumblr.com); [www.OxOa.li](http://www.OxOa.li) (all accessed August 10, 2015). There are certainly many more platforms/publishers, like Truck Books or basbooks, but I believe that their practices are well represented by the ones discussed here.

20 Ludovico, *Post-Digital Print*, 67.

for partaking in literature as a social system. Even in the digital, this gesture remains necessary. The status of a PDF file available on a private website changes considerably once the very same file has been “published” on the website of a “publisher.”<sup>21</sup> J. Gordon Faylor, the operator of gauss-pdf.com,

21 This is *contra* Florian Cramer, “Post-Digital Writing,” in *Code and Concept: Literature and the Digital*, ed. Hannes Bajohr, (Berlin: Frohmann, 2016): “In the 21st century, even the primary criterion of literature has become obsolete: that it must be published. On the Internet, the classical distinction between non-published personal writing and published writing is moot, and with it the distinction between everyday communication and publishing.” This position overlooks the fact that the perlocutionary part of a speech act (and the publishing gesture is one) depends in its outcome on the identity and the status of the agent performing it: It makes a difference *who* publishes *what* in *which* context. The blindness to these conditions accounts for much of the crushed hopes of early Internet utopianism.

22 Caleb Beckwith, “Interview with J. Gordon Faylor,” accessed June 24, 2015, <http://theconversant.org/?p=8426>. It is important to note that the “PDF” in Gauss PDF is not supposed to refer to the file format but the Gauss probability distribution function in statistics—although it is clear that the association with the file type is very much encouraged.

23 Kristen Gallagher, “The Gauss interview: Chris Alexander talks to J. Gordon Faylor,” accessed June 24, 2015, <http://jacket2.org/commentary/ gauss-interview>.

24 J. Gordon Faylor, “Lulu Kind,” in *Code and Concept*, ed. Hannes Bajohr (Berlin: Frohmann, 2016).

25 *Ibid.*

26 Tan Lin, “Gauss PDF Interview with J. Gordon Faylor,” accessed June 24, 2015, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2014/05/ gauss-pdf-interview-with-j-gordon-faylor/?woo>.

has thus called his practice of hosting files not only “publishing” but also providing an “infrathin platform for the staging of submitted works.”<sup>22</sup> Gauss PDF does little more than what authors could do on their own given a modicum of digital competence. But in a literary system largely devoid of monetary expectations, this staging has a social rather than a commercial function. It not only makes public but also publicizes; it offers recognizability, multiplication, and an advance of trust for the author.

Gauss PDF was founded in 2010 as an online platform for “digitally based works.”<sup>23</sup> It publishes Google docs and zip files as much as movs and mp3s. “Who’s to say that something as miniscule or ephemeral as a JPG or hyperlink (i.e. an HTML file) couldn’t be considered as much a publication or circumscribed production as a 300-page book or a collection of MP3s?” says Faylor.<sup>24</sup> While it still publishes digital submissions, Gauss PDF has followed a trend in contemporary experimental literature of turning away from purely digital publications to a post-digital form of dissemination: a dual strategy of web and print-on-demand publishing. In 2013, Faylor started the imprint GPDF Editions. Each title is free for download as a PDF, and can be purchased as a POD book on Lulu.com. “With little more than a working knowledge of the [Lulu publication] wizard, one can easily bypass editorial intervention, marketing strategies, and the general publicity bullshit that bolsters most literary markets.”<sup>25</sup> Faylor chose Lulu as the “most efficacious way to manage hasty production at a relatively low cost. I bet TROLLTHREAD agrees.”<sup>26</sup>

It does: Troll Thread, using a Tumblr with a simple theme as a website, has used this model since its inception in late 2010. At first limited to a small group of authors, increasingly it publishes the work of others, too. Thus, the term “publishing collective” has been both chosen and dismissed, and Troll Thread’s exact status is unclear even among its members:

“Chris Sylvester: [...] It was careless, largely sloppy. Lazy disregard for convention or standard operating procedures or whatever. Troll Thread started on a whim: publish what we wanted when we wanted. This shambling-ness still happens. That’s why Troll Thread is a tumblr and not a press and I like that.

Holly Melgard: But Chris, TT is too a press. How is it just a tumblr?  
 TT is a press that publishes using a tumblr and Lulu Print On Demand.  
 TT publishes each poem by uploading it onto Lulu and then linking  
 it to tumblr in the form of both a downloadable .pdf ebook for free and  
 a P.O.D. book for purchase.”<sup>27</sup>

The PDF/POD dual publishing model has since become a soft standard for experimental writing, and has even been copied by the art establishment. The 2014 Zurich exhibition *Poetry Will Be Made By All*, co-curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Kenneth Goldsmith, featured books by authors born after 1989; on the accompanying website, all titles could either be downloaded or purchased on Lulu.<sup>28</sup> German author Gregor Weichbrodt, whose output was represented in Zurich with the book *On the Road for 17,527 Miles* (a list of Google Maps driving instructions recreating the route of Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*), started his own writer’s collective, OxOa, in 2014 (of which I am

the co-founder). On its website, Weichbrodt has re-issued the book, with a new design and OxOa as the publisher, again as PDF and Lulu print.<sup>29</sup> Such re-dressing and re-contextualizing has become especially easy with POD.

Another influential platform is Vienna-based Traumawien. Founded, like its American peers, in 2010, Traumawien is a self-described “paradoxical print publisher.” The paradox here, as co-founder Lukas Gross wrote in a mission statement, consists in “transferring late-breaking digital aesthetics into book form.”<sup>30</sup> The form of the book means that these aesthetics are not merely a conceptual feint—they are actually meant to be read. Traumawien’s is a decidedly literary gesture, not one belonging to the visual arts. J. R. Carpenter spells out the underlying assumptions thusly: “The vast majority of the text produced by computer systems—protocols, listings, listings [sic], logs, algorithms, binary codes—is never seen or read by humans. This text is nonetheless internal to our daily thoughts and actions. As such, Traumawien considers these new structures to be literary.”<sup>31</sup>

While the presentation of these entities might differ considerably—whereas Gauss PDF and Troll Thread are often intentionally obscure, rarely offering any description of their publications, OxOa and Traumawien tend to explain and interpret their work<sup>32</sup>—there are some basic similarities that allow for grouping these platforms together: Apart from the dual publishing strategy of PDF file and POD book, they rely on the Internet as the sole medium of distribution, and combine elements of Conceptual writing and generative electronic literature.

27 Tan Lin, “Troll Thread Interview,” accessed June 24, 2015, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2014/05/troll-thread-interview>.

28 “Poetry will be made by all!” accessed August 10, 2015, <http://poetrywillbemadebyall.com/library>. So far, the exhibition, co-curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Kenneth Goldsmith, lists 131 poets.

29 Gregor Weichbrodt, “On the Road,” accessed August 10, 2015, <http://OxOa.li/en/text/on-the-road>.

30 Lukas Gross, “Traumawien Statement February 2010,” accessed August 10, 2015, <http://traumawien.at/about>.

31 J. R. Carpenter, “Paradoxical print publishers TRAUMAWIEN,” accessed August 29, 2015, <http://jacket2.org/commentary/paradoxical-print-publishers-traumawien>.

32 In the case of Troll Thread, there is not even a hint as to what it is; the “about” page offers the vaguely Fichtean equation: “TROLL THREAD IS TROLL THREAD.” The difference can at least somewhat be explained by the fact that the US-based platforms are part of a literary discourse that is more open to, and more acquainted with, the aesthetics of Conceptual poetry; more about this in the next section.

## "A Genre unto Itself": Elements of Post-Digital Literature

If POD is a post-digital *Unding* that by virtue of its inherent ontological ambiguity makes the process of technization experienceable, then any POD book should be able to carry out this destabilization, and this is certainly so. But what characterizes the post-digital literature of platforms like Gauss PDF, Oxo, Troll Thread, and Traumawien is that it highlights and exacerbates this destabilizing potential. What unites their various strategies and elevates them to the level of literary genre is that they all proceed from an acute awareness of the latent self-disclosure of post-digital objects in their structure, production, and dissemination.

I would now like to look at two elements of this genre that seem to characterize it especially well: The influence of generative and conceptual practices that play with the status of the connection between file and object, and the turn to factography, a type of writing that takes as its topic the structural, socioeconomic, and material conditions of its production.

### A) The Generative and the Conceptual Element

Many of the titles that these platforms offer as POD books and PDFs are, in a way, anti-books. They are rarely intended to be read closely, but rather flipped through, or just thought about.<sup>33</sup> Sometimes, thorough reading is discouraged by content; sometimes, by the sheer quantity of the published material. Many works exhibit an anti-expressive sentiment, and revel in the excessive, combining strategies of Conceptual writing on the one hand and

electronic literature on the other. Computer-generated literature is based on the ability to produce large amounts of texts automatically, and has an almost natural tendency toward inundation. Conceptualism, understood as letting the idea of a work take precedence over its material form or the experience of that form, often relishes the conflict between an idea and the limits of its realizability—just think of Douglas Huebler's *Variable Piece #70 (In Process) Global* (1971), in which he proposed "to photographically document the existence of everyone alive." Both modes of production, because of the rule-following inherent to them, have a penchant for displacing the author-subject, and giving the outcome an aesthetic autonomy even as it devalues its status as "work."<sup>34</sup>

However, neither electronic literature nor Conceptual writing seems to fully encompass post-digital literature. The "return to print" performed by these platforms stands counter to the purported genealogy of electronic literature "as a continuation of experimental print literature,"<sup>35</sup> thus suggesting some kind of directional development. Post-digital literature

33 "Joey Yearous-Algozin: [...] I think people read TT in passing and sporadically. We know from Lulu that only a few people actually buy the physical books." Lin, "Troll Thread Interview."

34 Especially for Conceptualism, these arguments have become commonplace, and the backlash against them has already begun; see Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Craig Dworkin, "The Fate of Echo," in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), xxiii–liv.

35 N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 17.

rejects this teleological trajectory; as I have shown, it rather highlights the connection between object and file, insisting on the work's status as post-digital *Unding*. Similarly, J. Gordon Faylor deems the association with Conceptualism accidental,<sup>36</sup> and Troll Thread member Joey Yearous-Algozin considers "this writing as coming *after* conceptual writing. It couldn't have been made without that break, but in the permission it afforded us, something different emerged." While both electronic literature and Conceptual writing are influences, "this work has become a genre unto itself."<sup>37</sup>

These self-descriptions certainly must be taken with a grain of salt; they are more apt for some works than for others. For instance, Traumawien has professed a focus on "networked texts, algorithmic texts, interfictions, chatlogs, codeworks, software art and visual mashup prose,"<sup>38</sup> and published a book by Australian codeworks writer Mez Breeze, whose poetry appropriates the look and vocabulary of programming languages (*Human Readable Messages*, 2011). Conversely, a book like Lawrence Giffin's *Ex Tempore* (Troll Thread, 2011) seems to be what one could call an "old fashioned" Conceptual writing project. Each of its 5,000 lines contains nothing but the time of day, typed out manually by Giffin, over a period of 24 hours. It begins: "It is now 12:00:00 AM on October 28, 2011,"<sup>39</sup> and ends, 163 pages later: "It is now 11:59:59 PM on October 28, 2011."<sup>40</sup> Combining performance and self-constraint, it is written in the vein of Kenneth Goldsmith's *Soliloquy* (2001)

and *Day* (2003), in which Goldsmith wrote down everything he said in the span of a week, and retyped an entire edition of the *New York Times*, respectively.<sup>41</sup> But simply by being published in the context of Troll Thread, the fact that *Ex Tempore* was typed—and not copied and pasted, or generated by code—is alternately highlighted and called into doubt, raising the suspicion that it was not produced in the asserted manual way (how to start exactly at 12 am? how to reach exactly 5,000 lines?). This suspicion is enough to give it a post-digital status, making apparent the digital as a concept of reality, which *Day* did not (yet) have.

An actual combination of electronic literature and Conceptual writing strategies can be found in Stephen McLaughlin's *Puniverse* (Gauss PDF, 2014). "An ingenuous crossing of an idiom set and a rhyming dictionary" (as the subtitle reads), *Puniverse* plays through all rhyming combinations of the elements of a given number of idioms, producing a plethora of "puns." An expression like "a bad egg" is multiplied thusly:

"an ad egg / an add egg / a brad egg / a cad egg / a chad egg / a clad egg / a dad egg / a fad egg / a gad egg / a glad egg / a grad egg / a had egg / a lad egg / a mad egg / a nad egg / a pad egg / a plaid egg / a rad egg / a sad egg / a scad egg / a shad egg / a tad egg / a bad beg / a bad keg / a bad leg / a bad meg / a bad peg / a bad segue."<sup>42</sup>

36 "Given the accessibility and contemporaneity of its affect, Conceptual methods have accrued a wider audience since 2010, doubtless. But despite precipitating some misleading characterizations of GPDF (e.g. that it only publishes Conceptual work), this has mostly been an invigorating development. [...] GPDF acts merely as a feasible place for Conceptual works to land among other types of work; there is certainly no direct or overarching affiliation." Lin, "Gauss PDF Interview."

37 Lin, "Troll Thread Interview," emphasis mine.

38 Gross, "Traumawien Statement."

39 Lawrence Giffin, *Ex Tempore* (Troll Thread, 2011), 5.

40 *Ibid.*, 168.

41 It is also almost impossible not to think of On Kawara's "date paintings," which, however, have not been read as literature, at least not to my knowledge.

42 Steven McLaughlin, *Puniverse*, vol. 1 (Gauss PDF, 2014), n.p. [8 in PDF].

(Note that the original phrase is not included and has to be inferred.) McLaughlin achieves this output with minimal effort: All that is needed is to execute a script that checks the elements of the finite idiom set for the rhymes of their sub-elements, and returns the results; yet the outcome of this function, once printed, requires 57 volumes of Lulu books.

This type of generative Conceptual literature—constructed, not found; written, but by code—heightens the rupturing gesture of post-digital technization once it is put back into book form, not least through the joy of the excessive that equips the work with an inner aesthetic tension. While *Puniverse* can be circulated as a PDF file—and indeed is—it still requires the *possibility* of being printed in order to achieve its vertiginous effect. As in much of Conceptual literature, its potential, so to speak, is its potentiality, and it very well might be that actualization neutralizes the tension derived from its “wastefulness”; such an accumulation of print could be more sculptural than literary. But what is important is that it *can* be actualized, and Lulu will do it for a mere \$381.90.

If McLaughlin’s text achieves its expansiveness by a combinatory operation, another way to elicit such an overwhelming effect is to willingly offer only a slice of the vastness implicit in a concept. This is what is achieved by Gregor Weichbrodt’s generative work *I Don’t Know* (OxOa/Frohmann Verlag, 2015). The text is created by a Python script that concatenates the titles of linked Wikipedia articles with a set of stock phrases. The result is a soliloquy in which a narrator denies knowledge of the subjects they list. It begins:

“I’m not well-versed in Literature. Sensibility—what is that? What in God’s name is An Afterword? I haven’t the faintest idea. And concerning Book design, I am fully ignorant. What is ‘A Slipcase’ supposed to mean again, and what the heck is Boriswood? The Canons of page construction—I don’t know what that is. I haven’t got a clue. How am I supposed to make sense of Traditional Chinese bookbinding, and what the hell is an Initial?”<sup>43</sup>

As Julia Pelta Feldman observes, the narrator’s questioning “skews from the absurd—‘I don’t know what people mean by ‘A Building’ [...] to the perfectly reasonable: ‘Vinca alkaloids are unfamiliar to me. And I’m sorry, did you say ‘Vinpocetine?’”<sup>44</sup> More often than not, the text undermines itself: “I’m completely ignorant of Art Deco architecture in Arkansas. Can you tell me how to get to The Drew County Courthouse, Dual State Monument, Rison Texaco Service Station or Chicot County Courthouse?”<sup>45</sup> The reader, Feldman writes, can hardly fail to acknowledge this incongruity: “I don’t know about you, but the narrator of *I Don’t Know* knows a hell of a lot more about Arkansas’s architectural history than I do.”<sup>46</sup> And after having jumped, in truly Latourian fashion, from literature to book binding, to soccer, to architecture, and a plethora of other topics that are only connected through Wikipedia’s internal genus-species

43 Gregor Weichbrodt, *I Don’t Know* (OxOa/Frohmann Verlag, 2015), 4. For this book, Weichbrodt cooperated with e-book publisher Frohmann Verlag; while the e-pub can be purchased through the publisher, the POD can be ordered from Lulu.

44 Julia Pelta Feldman, “Gregor Weichbrodt: No Offense,” accessed November 5, 2015, <http://OxOa.li/en/gregor-weichbrodt-no-offense>.

45 Weichbrodt, *I Don’t Know*, 212.

46 Feldman, “Gregor Weichbrodt.”

relation, the book ends after 351 pages, seemingly unaware of yet another performative contradiction:

“I’ve never heard of Postmodernism. What the hell is A Dystopia? I don’t know what people mean by ‘The Information Age.’ Digitality—dunno. The Age of Interruption? How should I know? What is Information Overload? I don’t know.”<sup>47</sup>

That the text closes here is almost too good to be true, and again, it raises a suspicion—this time of authorial intervention: Wikipedia’s taxonomical structure could indubitably fill more pages—but how many exactly? By withholding the answer, and choosing a very deliberate point for the text to break off (“Information Overload”), the text conjures a feeling of sublimity similar to *Puniverse*, precisely because the expanses of the unknown are unknown; it certainly adds to this effect that *I Don’t Know* is a long reminder of the vastness of individual ignorance in the times of networked communication.

McLaughlin and Weichbrodt’s texts, no matter whether they are spelled out completely or appear abridged, are finite. There is an end in sight, and this end is determined by the logic of the system employed, be it the entirety of Wikipedia, or the number of total iterations in a non-recursive function that couples list items. As soon as recursive functions—functions that call themselves—are employed, however, things change. Executed on a computer, a recursive function lacking a set breakpoint would either run forever or, more often, overflow the computer’s memory and cause it to crash. A text thus produced is potentially infinite; its finitude is again an index of intervention, authorial or otherwise.

This vector into infinity remains even if this recursion is done manually. In Lawrence Giffin’s *Non Facit Saltus* (Troll Thread, 2014), each page is an explanation of how to reach the next. For example, page 13 reads: “If you want to go to page 14, turn to page 14.”<sup>48</sup> It is a very basic recursive function, that of incrementation, but without an external criterion for when to stop, it could go on forever. In Giffin’s case, this criterion is provided by the finite and discrete structure of the book. Because of the book’s spatio-temporal stability (as opposed to a stream of potentially infinite text, as in the case of Twitter bots), it references distinct pages that can be “called” independently (this would not work with a scrollable page or a mere text file); because of the unambiguous imperative “turn!” they require the materialization of the object, or, as metaphorized ones, the simulated makeup of the book: a PDF. Again, we find the structure of file and object pointing back and forth to one another—another post-digital self-disclosure.

## B) The Factographic Element

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 352.

<sup>48</sup> Lawrence Giffin, *Non Facit Saltus* (Troll Thread, 2014), 13.

<sup>49</sup> Ludovico, *Post-Digital Print*, 98.

While relative document layouts, like Word files or e-pubs, allow for a text to be “reflowed” responsively for every conceivable output device,<sup>49</sup> a PDF, just like the page of a book, is

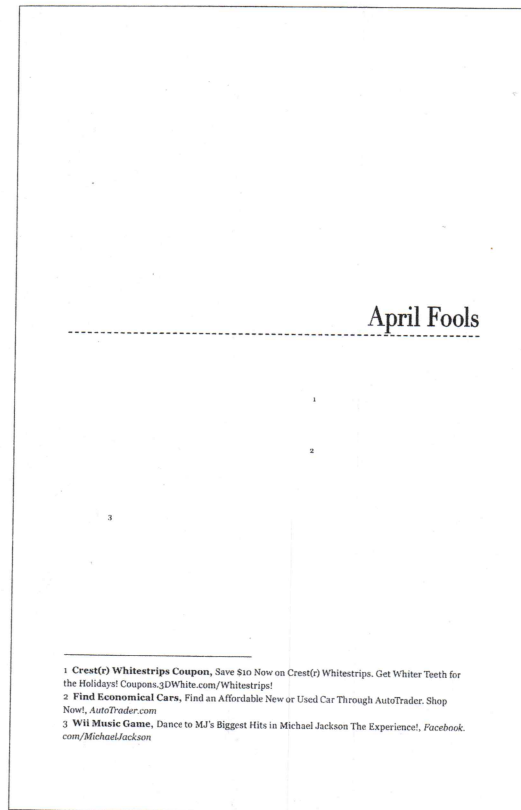


Fig. 1. Jason Huff and Mimi Cabell, *American Psycho* (Traumawien, 2012), 3.

absolute in its layout. The de-facto standard of commercial e-publishing, aimed at Kindles and iPads, is the e-pub format; for the experimental platforms here described, the specifications of the commercial POD providers made PDFs their standard. Thus, not only do the constraints of a service like Lulu's (maximum number of pages, page size, etc.) inform the way the POD book is created, disseminated, and perceived, but they also have reverberations for the form of the text: the formatting of the POD book influences the formatting of its underlying file, and vice versa.<sup>50</sup>

A direct riff on this interplay is Joey Yearous-Algozin's *9/11 911 Calls in 911 Pt. Font* (Troll Thread, 2012). It contains what its title announces: nine-hundred-and-eleven characters from a New York Fire Department transcript of calls to 911 on September 11, 2001. Because they are set in a font size of 911 points, the text extends onto a little under 900 PDF pages (mostly, a single letter fills one page, but occasionally it is two). A text that would scarcely occupy the screen of a Kindle is stretched to the size of two heavy volumes. Since the dimensions of the PDF follow Lulu standards, the char-

<sup>50</sup> See Harry Burke, "Page Break," *Texte zur Kunst* 98 (2015): 118, also online: accessed August 29, 2015, <https://www.textezurkunst.de/98/burke-page-break>. Burke acknowledges that "PDFs [...] gain authority by looking and functioning like a page." But this is only half the story. While he highlights a leftover element of high-brow book fetishism, he overlooks that it is the commercial and technological substructure of POD itself that prescribes this format. The page/PDF relationship is dictated by current technological needs rather than by overcome values.

acters shown on each page are cut off, making the resulting text almost illegible.<sup>51</sup> As soon as it is highlighted in a PDF viewer and copied, it is possible to view it in its short entirety; the text “hides” under the constraints of the printed page but is left legible in the file.

*American Psycho* by Jason Huff and Mimi Cabell (Traumawien, 2012) plays on the relationship between three materializations of the text: The PDF and the POD book, and also the original layout of Brett Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*, on which both instantiations are based [fig. 1]. The entirety of

Ellis’s novel was sent back and forth “between two GMail accounts page by page.” Huff and Cabell then “saved the relational ads for each page and added them back into the text as footnotes. [...] The constellations of footnoted ads throughout these pages retell the story of *American Psycho* in absence of the original text.”<sup>52</sup> While the main aim of their work is the privacy-encroaching advertising model that fuels the Google empire, *American Psycho*’s conceptual framework requires the closest possible resemblance between source and outcome, book, file, and POD.

Works like these become self-aware of the conditions of their production and gain the flavor of what a certain current in Soviet formalism called “factography.” Probably its best known description is Sergei Tret’iakov’s essay “The Biography of the Object” (1929). Tret’iakov proposed to center a novel not around the psychology of the protagonist, but the production process of an object, thus doing away with bourgeois subjectivity, anthropocentrism, and obliviousness to socioeconomic processes. The biography of the object, “extremely useful as a cold shower for litterateurs,” is constructed like a “conveyor belt along which a unit of raw material is moved and transformed into a useful product through human effort.”<sup>53</sup> Instead of *The Brothers Karamazov*, such factography could have titles like “*The Forest, Bread, Coal, Iron, Flax, Cotton, Paper, The Locomotive, and The Factory*.”<sup>54</sup>

While Tret’iakov still had a representational, world-depicting model in mind—a realist novel for things, not persons—the post-digital literature considered here makes factography perform itself. Yearous-Algozin and Huff/Cabell focus on the intricate and often circular relationship between file and object. They do not “say” anything, as one could put it with Wittgenstein,<sup>55</sup> about digital technization but “show” it by thematizing this relationship performatively; instead of directly writing the biography of the thing, the *Unding* reveals its story on its own.

If factography here addresses the medial aspects of the underlying data structures, in some works such

51 The full text of the two volumes fits in a footnote: “FDNY 911 Calls Transcript – Fire – Part 9 9-11-01: WORLD TRADE CENTER, 911 FDNY TELEPHONE CALLS RECORDER: This is Fire Alarm Dispatcher Carlos Sanchez of Fire Dispatch Operations. This is a continuation of Citywide Job Number 5-38 which was originally recorded on September 11, 2001. The following will be a series of phone alarms which were received on Brooklyn Master Tape Number 505. Message number 0001-B, which was received on Channel Number 4, and it commences at 0800 hours, 50 minutes and 24 seconds. DISPATCHER: Fire Dispatcher 414. What’s the address? OPERATOR: There’s a plane crashed into the World Trade Center. I couldn’t get through to Manhattan. DISPATCHER: Okay. We’re aware P.D. 414. OPERATOR: Okay. RECORDER: Message Number 0001-B concludes at 0800 hours, 50 minutes and 34 seconds. Please stand by for Message Number 0002-B. A telephone alarm received on Channel Number 4. The message commences at 0800 hours, 50 m.”

52 Jason Huff and Mimi Cabell, “*American Psycho*,” accessed August 11, 2015, <http://traumawien.at/prints/american-psycho>.

53 Sergei Tret’iakov, “The Biography of the Object,” [1929] *October* 118 (2006): 57–62, 61.

54 *Ibid.*, 62.

55 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge 2002), 4.1212, 31.

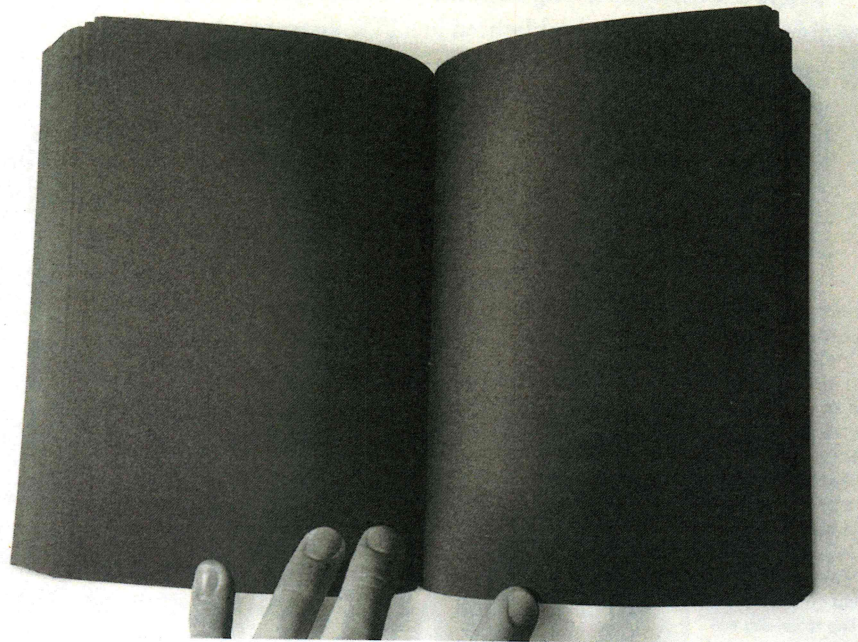


Fig. 2. Jean Keller, *The Black Book* (Lulu, 2013). Photo: Hannes Bajohr.

factographical showing extends to the socioeconomic conditions of their production. Jean Keller's *The Black Book* (self published, 2013) is a good example of this type of factography-as-publishing [fig. 2]. It is a tome of 740 pages—the maximum number allowed by Lulu—that is completely black. A gallon of ink used for POD printing costs over four thousand dollars, Keller explains on the Lulu sales page:

“However, the price of a book is not calculated according to the amount of ink used in its production. For example, a Lulu book of blank pages costs an artist as much to produce as a book filled with text or large photographs. Furthermore, as the number of pages increases, the price of each page decreases. A book containing the maximum number of pages printed entirely in black ink therefore results in the lowest cost and maximum value for the artist.”<sup>56</sup>

At first appearing parasitic, even sabotaging, since it raises the possibility that Lulu might lose money printing it, *The Black Book* is a reminder that post-digital writers are enmeshed in negotiations about their productive resources just like any other artist; resorting to an act of subversion like Keller's “hack” makes apparent that writers get the short end of the stick as they represent Lulu's main revenue stream.

<sup>56</sup> Jean Keller, “The Black Book,” accessed August 12, 2015, <http://www.lulu.com/shop/jean-keller/the-black-book/paperback/product-21008894.html>.

In *Reimbur\$ement* (Troll Thread, 2013), Holly Melgard similarly exhibits the limits of post-digital writing and the precariousness of the author's labor conditions by focusing on the dissemination, rather than the material production, of the work. In the introduction, she states: “Sometimes the

work I do results in earning neither income, livelihood, nor play, and often I find myself paying to work rather than being paid for work. Whenever this happens, I count my losses and take my chances gambling for alternatives.”<sup>57</sup>

This is meant quite literally: The book is filled with scans of lottery tickets and scratch cards—six years worth of gambling for “\$ for life.” Because Lulu lets its producers set the selling price at will while the costs of production remain the same, Melgard’s book is \$329.53, the equivalent of her gambling losses, “plus whatever Lulu charges for its print on demand services.”<sup>58</sup> It is at once a utopian and a commonsensical project, as it demands no more than pay equivalent to labor—“Reimbursement is for the work”<sup>59</sup>—except the work being play, and the play being the gamble for the sustenance that makes the work possible in the first place. Both Melgard and Keller, then, employ an internal—institutional—critique of the seemingly liberating potential of POD; in the economy of the digital, the position of the writer is as precarious as ever, and just as dependent on access to the means of production.

These are only two of the elements post-digital literature employs in its strategy of self-disclosure, and I certainly do not mean to suggest that there aren’t more, nor that this disclosure is the only function it serves. However, I believe that much of post-digital literature’s relevance today derives from its unique capacity to articulate the process of digital technization—be it in its technological, epistemological, or socioeconomic form. Because of this, it is an exceptionally contemporary, or *actuel*, type of practice. None of the platforms I have discussed are older than six years, and it is anything but certain that they will exist six years from now—in their current form, unlikelier still. But this is a strength, not a weakness: as post-digital literature uncovers a temporality and a concept of reality that are very much our own, its works bind themselves to the moment of their production and dissemination, and can *show* us more about the epochal threshold we live in than any writing that merely *says*.

<sup>57</sup> Holly Melgard, *Reimbursement* (Troll Thread, 2015), 4.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*



