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In spotlight is a collection of books and book-related projects that are introduced through the subject of this essay: the erratic life of texts made public. This text takes a look at what happens to books after they've been published, and in what forms can they continue their existence. For this a narrative of sorts has been put into practice where at each step texts are subject to more and more deformation and alienation from the original content. This order defined the selection of projects to be introduced as well as the context for their analysis. This curated collection of books is subject to a close study through examining the different ways material can be treated and made use of, weighing the ups and downs of it and defining the core of these projects.

The text is divided into several different chapters titled by the act material is exposed to and under each title a handful of projects are introduced. Aside from individual critique of the selected examples, the text touches upon subjects such as publishing, authorship, appropriation, reading and books in general.

# INTRO

To make sure his words and the effort put into the work stick around a little longer, an author should welcome all possible means of dispersion, even the ones that he has no control over, in open arms. After all the purpose is to reach as wide of an audience as possible. Unfortunately such undertakings include misinterpretations, strange and out of place quoting, and other types of ill-treatment. But that's the price one has to pay. It's like leaving a ballpoint pen next to a book you've just finished writing — so that anyone could add their own comments, cross things out, add new paragraphs, maybe a few peculiar illustrations etc. Usually the original content would appear visible but even if it didn't, what's the difference. Torn out pages or sentences start having a life of their own. The text served its purpose by attracting people to find new meaning and created a platform for reworking the original into something that can stand on its own.

There's several different methods of (re)using and displaying existing material<sup>1</sup> with or without permission from the author which one way or another ends up alienating the material from its creator. But there's a clear line between using something for one's own benefit and with the aim of simply dispersing the material. Yet even if the text stays physically untouched, it will still lose something of the original. But such undertakings often mean to do no harm. Through this process the original might soon end up as something new, a new original.

The various lives a text can lead is what this essay is setting out to explore. What purposes are behind such endeavors? Not to mention the effects. And who's behind these actions? Who benefits from it? Any type of alteration causes the text to mutate and find new forms of existence. But where's the point it has deformed so severely that it can no longer be recognized? And what is this new creation it has given life to? And last but not least, where does it leave the original? In short, the dispute evolves around the various ways of dealing with existing material and the disappearance (and re-appearance) of the author in the process.

The material under examination regards written text only and more specifically investigates the usage of previously published texts predominantly in the fields of contemporary art, literature and publishing. All the described examples can loosely be categorized as different forms of publishing. The structure gradually follows the multiple paths a text can lead, from merely placing it in a different

1. In order to avoid any misunderstandings the term "material" needs to be specified. The material at issue concerns texts that can one way or another be called finished pieces. This suggests that the material should be already published. It doesn't matter whether it's been published as a book, or a 4-page short essay, or whether it's published online, or one simply read it out loud among a group of friends, but nearly all the examples regard texts as physical objects. Another important aspect to bare in mind is that the material doesn't mean just plain information, but the way it's been written can be just as important (the use of language for instance). So a text as the whole package — with its background, with its contents, with its whatever-else-comes-with-it. Just as the author had it in mind.

context and republishing it in various forms up to altering and quoting, the very last step being the point where the original text can no longer be identified. The order of different methods and examples is by no means chronological.

Several of the discussed topics address the problematic of using other authors' material for one's own benefit, which naturally brings about the issue of copyright. The American writer Jonathan Lethem (1964) thoroughly examines and stands up for borrowing, appropriating and so-called plagiarism in his essay *The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism*<sup>2</sup> published in *Harper's* in 2007. Copyright will be mentioned here and there further on, but won't get the full attention it deserves, so having a look at the essay by Lethem is more than recommended. He begins his article with a quote from the English poet John Donne (1572–1631), which is right up the alley to start off on the wanders of texts made public.

All mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated...<sup>3</sup>

## CHANGING CONTEXT

After a book has hit the market, it is destined to find its place on numerous bookshelves, including the shelves of stores, libraries and homes. From here on, the material will have to make it on it's own, or more bluntly, it has left the comfort zone of being protected by its creator. Onto those bookshelves it will be placed in alphabetical order, in thematic categories, sometimes completely randomly, and sometimes with a very particular reason into a very particular spot.

One of such endeavors is *Raamatukogu Kapsad*<sup>4</sup> (word for word Library Cabbages). The word *kapsas* — cabbage is used in Estonian to refer to a book in poor condition) in the New World Community area in Tallinn, initiated by local activists and the Estonian Writers' Union in 2009. That tiny yet extremely cozy community library is everything but ordinary. Its selection

2. Lethem, Jonathan. "The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism" in *Harper's* magazine. February 2007, pp. 55–71. [harpers.org/archive/2007/02/0081387](http://harpers.org/archive/2007/02/0081387).

3. Donne, John. *Devotions upon emergent occasions and seuerall steps in my sicknes — Meditation XVII*. 1624.



4. *Raamatukogu Kapsad*. Community library in Tallinn Estonia.

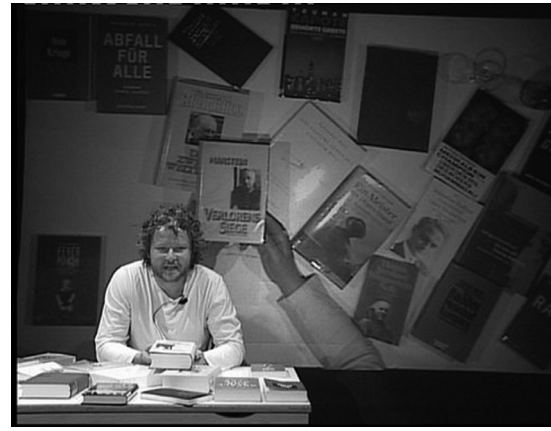
of books is solely dependent on local writers, intellectuals and other notable residents from the neighborhood. Each one of them has been allocated with their own section on the shelf, where they gather books of their own liking (worth mentioning that they provide the library with their personal copies).

A similar model, though not a physical library, was set up in deSingel International Arts Campus, an art space in Antwerp, in 2003. The project called *Curating the Library*<sup>5</sup> was run by the Swiss curator Moritz Küng until 2010. Each month two well-known figures from the fields of art, design, architecture, music and philosophy were asked to present a selection of books in the format of a lecture that had made an impression on them, or that they found relevant to their practice one way or another.<sup>6</sup>

Both of these undertakings place the chosen books into a very specific context. Firstly, the books are immediately affected by the persona of the one making the selection. Why did this person find a specific book relevant? What's it got to do with the field he or she is associated with? What does this say about the person, and what does it say about the book? So not only is the book now haunted by the persona of its author and other books published by him, it's also related to the person recommending it which adds an extra layer of information.

The difference between these two models lies in the simple fact that *Curating the Library* provided the audience with explanations why those books were relevant, and thus suggested the link between the specific choices. Whereas in *Raamatukogu Kapsad* the visitors are only presented with a pile of books that they themselves need to find an order or meaning in. So for instance, being familiar with three books from, say 10, one immediately develops an opinion on the rest of them. And this impression often stays with the reader, even after reading the books. The meaning can strongly be affected by the contents of the other books, that being the third layer of influence after the personality of the author and the recommender. But as much as this additional information may burden the content, it will definitely open it up to new interpretations and insights, and raise a number of questions that might not have occurred before.

Within the above-mentioned examples there's always a common denominator that shades light on all the single texts. This can be both a person — the selector — or the selection that it has become



5. Tobias Rehberger presenting books at *Curating the Library* in deSingel.

6. Those books were made available to the public through the "Library Box" located in the space and an one can still track down a .PDF with the complete lists on their website: [www.desingel.be/download/Curating-The-Library-43994.pdf](http://www.desingel.be/download/Curating-The-Library-43994.pdf).

a part of. Although physically nothing happens to the text, by placing it in this new context it gains another type of value. It can be that a certain aspect of the text is emphasized or for instance someone has found something in it for him that the author did not have in mind. Most importantly all these examples are methods of dispersing the material. The text will most likely gain the attention of other prospective readers through the recommender and, in good luck, also fellow texts that give away parts of its own character, thus luring the reader to explore the whole selection further.

## REPUBLISHING

Rushing now immensely ahead in time, the next step is physically republishing texts, more specifically texts that are out of print and thus difficult to get a hold of. The Mexican writer, artist and publisher Ulises Carrión<sup>7</sup> (1941–1989) has commented on the life-span of books:

I firmly believe that every book that now exists will eventually disappear. And I see here no reason for lamentation. Like any other living organism, books will grow, multiply, change color, and, eventually, die. (...) Libraries, museums, archives are the perfect cemeteries for books.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, books are written almost with a due date on them. Yet there's a notable amount of books that are worth rediscovering and referring back to from time to time. And just as Ulises Carrión states that's why we have libraries and archives. But unfortunately not all books you can find in the libraries located within your reach. And even if you get lucky and find a copy available on Amazon, the cost might have grown too many 0's on it. So when something gets republished, it really gets a new life. But with no knowledge of the present time, though sometimes accompanied with a preface explaining the historical context, those books can often become alien-like objects. Someone has decided that a specific book is truly so important that it deserves being waken up from the past. They are commonly provided with a new form, sometimes even with a new translation. The old text will more or less start all over.

One recent example of republishing old texts in the art world are the *Great Bear Pamphlets* originally published in 1965–1967 by Something Else Press in New York founded and run by the Fluxus artist Dick Higgins during 1963–1974. There were 20 pamphlets altogether, with contributions from George Brecht, Allan Kaprow,

7. Ulises Carrión moved to Amsterdam in 1972 where he among others things ran an art space and bookstore called "Other Books and So" (1972–1975) which later became an archive for artist's books.

8. ? (To be explained further on pages 18–19).



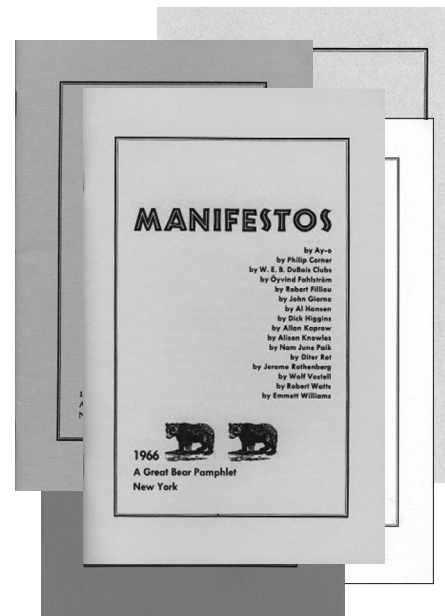
John Cage, Nam June Paik, Robert Filliou, Alison Knowles, Dieter Roth, Dick Higgins himself and other notable artists involved in the '60s avant-garde. Each artist got his/her own pamphlet, all of which were staple-bound and 16 pages in length (besides the Manifesto issue that was double the amount). The publications varied in content from concrete poems, theory, literature, happenings, collages, plays, scores etc, all representing a sampling of an art form. All pamphlets were printed on a different paper, varying both in color and type. They were speedily produced and distributed, guaranteeing a wide readership. These humble publications turned out to be groundbreaking statements of the avant-garde and have been out of print since their original publication in 1960s.<sup>9</sup>

The Great Bear Pamphlets were physically republished in 2007 by Primary Information<sup>10</sup>, a non-profit organization devoted to publishing artist books and writings by artists, focusing on the period from early Sixties to the present. Primary Information is operating since 2005 in New York and is run by James Hoff and Miriam Katzeff. All the pamphlets were published in an edition of 500 as exact copies, facsimiles, adding only an embossed marking "Primary Information 2007" on the back cover of each pamphlet. As far as the form goes, Primary Information really tried to get the look and feel of the pamphlets as close to the originals as possible. They've even gone so far as to explain on their website why they couldn't use the exact same paper as the originals:

It is important to note that the originals also had varying color and paper stock for particular pamphlets, depending on the first or second printing (and on rare occasions within the same printing). For example, Claes Oldenburg's *Injun & Other Histories* was printed on two different shades of peach, one lighter than the other. This facsimile edition was compiled from the copies that we had available to us at the time of the printing and there was no conscious effort made to only print from first or second editions.<sup>11</sup>

Primary Information distributes the pamphlets as single copies but also as a luxurious ribbon-bound collection housed in a handmade pine-box, containing all the 20 pamphlets and in addition essays by Alison Knowles (performance artist and wife of Dick Higgins), Hannah Higgins (daughter of Dick Higgins, who is by the way part of the Primary Information board of directors) and others. Each individual pamphlet is distributed for \$10, and the collection in the wooden box for \$150.

9. All these publications were made available in full as .PDFs through UbuWeb (website for the free distribution of avant-garde material set up and run by Kenneth Goldsmith since 1996) in 2004: [www.ubu.com/historical/gb/](http://www.ubu.com/historical/gb/)



10. The Great Bear Pamphlets. New York: Primary Information, 2007.

11. [primaryinformation.org/index.php/projects/editors-note/](http://primaryinformation.org/index.php/projects/editors-note/)

The form of the original publications was following the idea behind their distribution — to make them as accessible to the public as possible. The pamphlets were clearly produced in the upcoming DIY attitude, they were inexpensive disposable editions. The Primary Information website also offers memoirs from Barbara Moore, who was the first editor at the seminal Something Else Press:

Dick called the Great Bears "A poor man's keys to the new art" and treated them as promotional loss leaders that would attract new readership. Even within the press's modest pre-inflationary price structure they were ridiculously cheap, with prices starting at 40 cents (for Alison Knowles' *By Alison Knowles*) and topping at \$1.50 (for John Cage's *Diary*).

Dick also recognized possibilities for the Great Bears' unconventional distribution. "The pamphlets, all twenty of them, were able to get places that the larger books couldn't," he related gleefully. "For example, in the late 1960's they were sold from a rack beside the produce stand at the Berkeley Coop... ; we were always delighted by the notion of a shopping basket containing ice cream, the makings of a good salad -- and our pamphlets!"<sup>12</sup>

The way the pamphlets are distributed today is nothing similar. They're obtainable from the tables of art book shops, where they don't carry any particular purpose. But then again why should this be similar to the past? These publications don't manifest what they used to any longer. They're not the same pamphlets they were 40 years ago, they're a mere representation of history. A luxurious pine wood box can be in this regard a good call — it's doesn't want to be something that it isn't<sup>13</sup>. So, once again: why even bother chasing the darker peach shade, when it can no way be what it isn't — an original. Nevertheless, Primary Information brought those odd-looking publications back into daylight and shared a piece of history that is worthy of attention and (re)exploration.

The Great Bear Pamphlets were all initiated and carried out by artists who were presenting and distributing their work in the form of printed matter. Recent years have witnessed the emergence of publications from another walk of life: graphic designers. A designer's task is commonly giving form to existing content, but with the knowledge of how to produce printed matter one can easily be tempted to publish something on his own. A seemingly simple solution is republishing old texts in a new form. Yet one problem remains: how to give meaning or value to this undertaking, how to provide it with a cause. This has resulted in publications with very extravagant formal characteristics, where form is considered as important as the content.

12. [www.primaryinformation.org/index.php/projects/barbaramoore/](http://www.primaryinformation.org/index.php/projects/barbaramoore/)

13. Although the boxes were produced similar to former cases for books published by Something Else Press before the series came around.

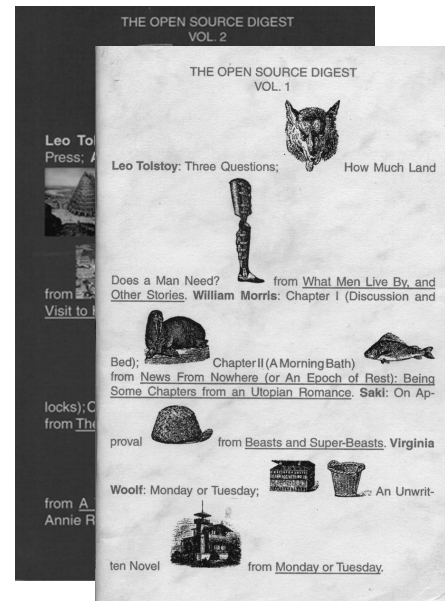
Another way out is publishing readers with texts from several authors. But this is where the editorial descisions join the game.

An example of republishing old texts is a biannual publication called *The Open Source Digest*<sup>14</sup> compiled and published by three young graphic designers, Anders Stockman, Mathew Whittington and Robert Ågren based in London and Gothenburg. The central idea behind this publishing project is to make available texts from the public domain (that is texts that are not protected by intellectual property laws, mainly due to the expiring of the rights). The editors of the publication have said about their undertaking: *THE OPEN SOURCE DIGEST aims to highlight publishing values, question current production models and explore copyright issues, by employing print publishing as a tool for active critical enquiry.*

The first issue of the *Open Source Digest*, staple-bound and 76 pages in length, comprising of seven literary texts (primarily short stories) from Leo Tolstoy, William Morris, Saki and Virginia Woolf, came out in early 2010. The publication consists of scanned pages that have been turned into a book, the size being slightly bigger than the standard A6 size (115×175 mm).<sup>15</sup> The second issue (and so far the last one), this time 156 pages and perfect-bound, was published in the end of 2010 and included texts by Leo Tolstoy, August Strindberg, Mark Twain, H. G. Wells and Henry David Thoreau. It was produced through the online self-publishing service Lulu. The design of the second issue followed the principles of the first one, only the formal aspects changed due to limited possibilities on Lulu.

The people behind this publishing project again aim to do no more than giving a new life to long-forgotten, out of print texts. Yet all of these texts have been part of a collection and are now formed into a new collection of the same sort. The same thing occurs here as with the *Library Cabbages* and *Curating the Library*, but this time on a whole new level: the text is first excluded from its comrades and then placed between other texts that seemingly have no relation to it. By making this selection of texts, the editors surely cast a new light on the material chosen. This brings about a number of questions. How is the selection made? If and how are the texts connected?

Taking into consideration that the publishers are graphic designers obviously makes one wonder what the formal decisions were made upon. The physical form of the publication is very handy, though modest, unpretentious and definitely low-budget, which falls into place



14. Stockman, Anders, Mathew Whittington, Ian Hunt, eds. *The Open Source Digest*, vol. 1 & 2. London, 2010.

15. The content pages are black and white, printed on regular salmon coloured paper, the cover is printed with red and black on slightly thicker light marble paper. Each new author is introduced with a title page with the general design of the publication. Both the cover and the title pages provide us with the same information on the texts: name of the author, titles of the texts and title of the book they were included in (and scanned from). The last content page provides the readers with url's for the four texts and commentary on the source for the small illustrations that they've consistently used in the design on the cover and on the title pages.

with their claim of distributing the material for the cost of its production and distribution, indicating that they've tried to make the publications as easily accessible as possible. But then the editors/designers decided to use scans of the texts instead of type-setting them again. The scans are due to the small format of the publication most often scaled down, and the quality is rather poor. Perhaps they wanted to have some connection to the originals, or emphasize that they're publishing texts from the public domain?

Another reader was compiled by two Estonian graphic designers Elisabeth Klement and Margo Niit in 2010. The publication titled *Vikerkaar*<sup>16</sup> is a selection of texts published in the Estonian literary journal *Vikerkaar* during 1986–1999. But this is no ordinary collection. The selected texts are all one way or another — however abstract the connection — associated with graphic design, the field the two editors themselves come from. The magazine itself was originally published both in Estonian and Russian. Now the selected text have been made available also for a foreign audience through translating them to English. The Estonian texts are presented through scans, providing the reader also with an overview of the rich design history of the magazine, all carried out by the Estonian designer Jüri Kaarma. The texts appear in a chronological order, thus visualizing the way the design of the magazine developed throughout the years.

In *Vikerkaar* the context of the texts changes dramatically. They're introduced to a new audience, who in many cases have no prior knowledge of the cultural background nor the authors of the texts. The texts are viewed from a new angle, becoming sources of information to a whole new field. At the same time the visual aspects of the original texts are also in spotlight, when before it merely functioned as a shell for the transmittable information.

Clearly the *Open-source Digest* and *Vikerkaar* have different editorial approaches. While the first one is a collection of shorter works of literature from the public domain that bare no clear connection to each other, the editors of second project are more concious of their own background. Yet a collection based on personal preferences is a collection just as much, and surely there's readership to both undertakings. Publications that emerge from a certain field in many cases gain the most attention within that same field. And this is what also happens here: texts are introduced to a specific audience that have no actual connection with the material, providing the texts with fresh associations.



16. Klement, Elisabeth & Margo Niit, eds. *Vikerkaar*. Tallinn / Amsterdam: Asterisk, 2010.

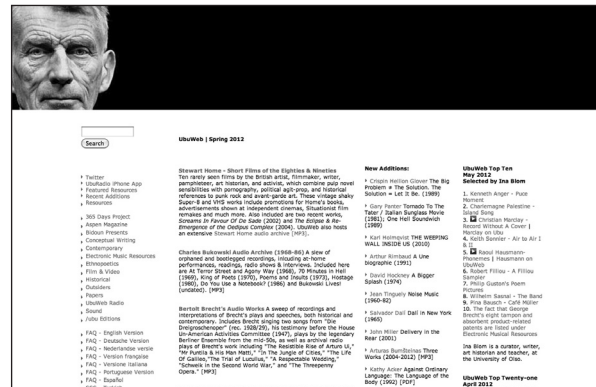


# CHANGING FORMAT

Current times have witnessed the emergence of reading online, and there's several websites and publishers that have committed themselves to the production and distribution of material online. A number of websites perform as resources and distributors of texts that originally existed as objects. But what does it actually mean to turn a three-dimensional object such as a book into digital file? This change in the format of the material results in a strange shift. The text itself stays untouched, nor is the legibility much of an issue, but it loses the shell that was created for it. Scanned texts mainly differ from physical books by the most obvious aspect: the form. Being deprived of its material characteristics is a loss foremost in the feel that the object can create, as the form of a book can play a vital role in how you perceive it. Turning a page has been replaced by scrolling, spreads can regularly end up as single pages. Not to mention the simple difference of not being able to hold the familiar object in your hands... that's where nostalgia kicks in.

UbuWeb<sup>17</sup> is a website for the free distribution of avant-garde material set up and run by Kenneth Goldsmith since 1996. Provided material includes videos, sound pieces, performances and also books. Besides offering scans, the textual works are often re-typeset for the environment of the web, meaning that the texts lose all of their formal features. This can occasionally have rather grave consequences as the material displayed on UbuWeb has in many instances a very distinct form. The result in a definitely a loss of information, even though all the initial material is still there.

When a physical object becomes a digital file the environment where the text is consumed changes as well. This can of course have both a positive and a negative effect depending on the material in question. On the one hand you're closer to finding additional information about the subject matter and on the other you're distracted by the overload of information. Some types of texts (mainly literary works) ask for a more intimate environment where there's nothing that would



17. Ubuweb by Kenneth Goldsmith.

shift your attention. This is of course very closely related to the habits of the reader. But this topic of reading from the screen takes us a little too far (and has been widely discussed regarding e-books already) from the initial subject.

More traditional shifts in the format of the material include public readings and audio books. If the performer was to be the author it would most certainly provide a whole new view on the material, as the author knows his text better than anybody else. And an audio book brings an author closer to the reader than ever. Listening to the Beat writers like Allen Ginsberg reading *Howl* (1956)<sup>18</sup> or Jack Kerouac *On the Road* (1951)<sup>19</sup> is truly a whole new experience that you can't even put into words. Their whole way of being, talking, reading is a bizarre thing on its own. It brings the text into life, and makes the reader feel like he's almost there, fifty years back in time. Again there's an extra level of information accompanying the text. But these examples serve no other agenda than simply mediating existing material. This might not always be the case.

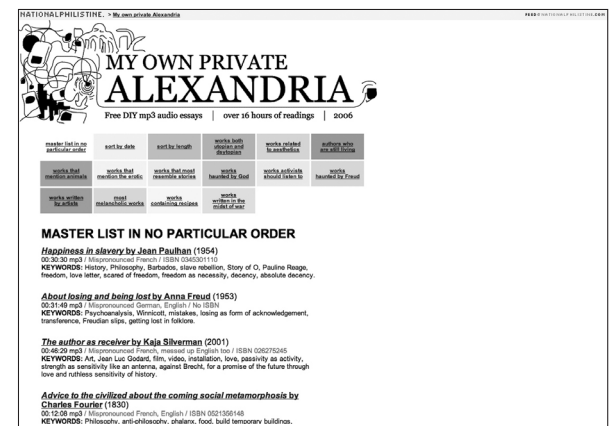
The American artist Paul Chan's project *My Own Private Alexandria* from 2006 is a free DIY collection of mp3 audio essays with over 16 hours of reading published online<sup>20</sup> containing texts from writers that have influenced him. But the whole project raises a lot of questions starting with the title up to copyright issues and the general purpose behind the undertaking. When the project got published in April 2006, Paul Chan wrote the following:

I'm so tired of this war and numb from the fear of the slightest sound and shadow. I just want to leave. Escape. So I read. It helps to think about the history of philistinism and the uses of silence and how color is sex but it's not enough. So I start to record myself reading. And I realize how little I know the reading I'm reading. It gets better. I can't pronounce German, French, Russian, Chinese, Brazilian, Latin, not even English sometimes. I don't care. A task is what I want: to measure the time spent escaping into words that string together sentences that become essays about potatoes and trousers and aesthetic revolutions. I listen and they sound okay. I even like the stammers. But they need music. So I make some. I love Garageband. Here they are.

He has categorized the texts on the website by different, often peculiar titles like "authors who are still living", "works that mention animals", "works haunted by God", but also more general ones: "sort

18. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVG0Y9gom50](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVG0Y9gom50)

19. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=SIETx30WKTA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SIETx30WKTA)



20. My Own Private Alexandria by Paul Chan.

by date” and “sort by length”. The choice of texts is, in his words, based on his personal likes. Yet the selection appears to contain mainly rather well-known figures (including Anna Freud, Kaja Silverman, Hollis Frampton, Theodor Adorno, Martha Rosler, Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Ranciere, Mark Twain, Samuel Beckett, Voltaire, Susan Sontag, Georges Bataille etc). Next to the title and the name of the author he marks the date it was published, the length of the audio file, then mistakes in the file (like *Mispronounced English, German, French or Easy to read in your mind, but much harder out loud, No problems except the war*), the ISBN code of the book and last but not least a list of keywords that describe the content. The file-names also include the title, name of the author and the ISBN. Each mp3 begins with around 10 seconds of music that is followed again by the title and the name of the author. And then the text begins.

The way he’s putting so much emphasis on including the ISBNs reminds us that most of the texts read are surely protected by copyright laws. But Paul Chan is an artist. Is this a work of art, not just a collection of audio books? Obviously. And why’s that music necessary in the beginning of each new text? *But they need music*. Why? There seems to be no logical relevance. And why note down the mistakes he made in the process of reading it? By these actions the question of authorship becomes more problematic. On the one hand the text is written by the author, but Paul Chan created the music for them, and made the selection. And by pointing out that he made mistakes he’s almost indicating that these files don’t represent the texts fully.

What Chan is doing seems to have several purposes. He’s making literary texts freely available in a new form, he’s sharing his own interests and influences and paying homage to them. It’s hard to tell which one of those stands out more. But in several interviews Chan has stated that in the beginning, the one and only idea behind this project was to think of a way how to remember someone who has died — Susan Sontag — and more specifically how to remember her body of work.<sup>21</sup> Whatever it is he’s intending to do, his actions seem to include a commentary on the whole subject of copyright and appropriation in general. But through this commentary he’s also creating a strange new format of combining audio books with music (which is again similar to the Beat writers who often combined their performances with jazz) that could be explored further.

By the way, even the title of the project — *My Own Private Alexandria* — is referring to the movie *My Own Private Idaho* by Gus van Sant from 1991. And not very surprisingly the film’s plot is strongly influenced by Shakespeare’s *Henry IV*. In any case the film turned out to be a hit, and so did the collection

21. Paul Chan in conversation with NEWSgrist in April 2006: *There’s no reason to think that her work will be out of print any time soon. But what is important is that her ideas went beyond her books. She engaged outside the book. She was called a public intellectual. (...) So what does it mean, then, to remember someone who gave the gift of herself beyond the book? And this is what I came up with.* [newsgrist.typepad.com/underbelly/2006/04/in\\_conversation.html](http://newsgrist.typepad.com/underbelly/2006/04/in_conversation.html)

of audio books by Paul Chan. It truly proved to be a success as there’s several people on the internet distributing a link to the site referring to it as a magnificent source for audio books (with comments like *Here is a very nice series of audio recordings of philosophy and the social sciences or more simply Paul Chan reads texts to you.*). Because what else is it in the end than an archive of audio books, read to you by Paul Chan.

A far bolder move was John Baldessari’s (1931) translation of Sol LeWitt’s (1928–2007) *Sentences on Conceptual Art* first published in the magazine *O-9* in 1969 in New York. In 1972 Baldessari created a video titled *Baldessari sings LeWitt*<sup>22</sup> where he sang all of the 35 paradigmatic statements *a cappella* each to a different popular tune. He begins his video saying: *I’d like to sing to you some of these sentences that Sol LeWitt has written on conceptual art. I feel this is a tribute to him. I think that these sentences have been hidden too long in the pages of exhibition catalogs and that perhaps by my singing them for you it’ll bring these sentences to a much larger public*. He too admits making mistakes like Chan with comments like *Maybe that wasn’t too clear and I should do it over. or I’ll try it again*. Sol LeWitt’s straight-forward academic statements are flooded with the sentimentality of the pop songs and Baldessari’s out of tune performance. Austerity is infused with whimsicality and the outcome is a strange clash between two worlds. Without going too far into interpreting Baldessari’s intentions we’ll continue on another related project.

In 2009 the Zürich-based publisher Rollo Press devoted to artist’s books released a young Estonian graphic designer Toom Tragel’s translation of Baldessari’s video titled *Baldessari Sings LeWitt*<sup>23</sup> as well. Here the text by Sol LeWitt has again found its original form but with notable additions. While Baldessari illustrated the video by adding pop tunes, Tragel’s translation of Baldessari’s work is as straight-forward as Sol LeWitt’s sentences. The result is a traditional song book where the sentences have become nothing else but lyrics underneath the notes. The transcription includes Baldessari’s introduction and also the comments mentioned earlier.

The project started out as a school assignment by Indrek Sirkel in the graphic design department of the Estonian Aca-



22. Still from *Baldessari Sings LeWitt* by John Baldessari. 1972. Video.



23. Tragel, Toom. *Baldessari Sings LeWitt*. Zürich: Rollo Press, 2009.



demy of Arts in 2008 where each student got a different audio clip to transcribe and turn into printed matter. This example successfully illustrates the different roles of artists and designers. Whereas the designer's task is to find a suitable form for existing material, the artist uses the material and adds his own voice (this time literally). Yet both create some-thing in the process and no doubt the roles can in many cases be strongly blurred.

## ILLUSTRATING

Continuing on another form of republishing, and returning to the more classical understanding of it, our next stop is the tradition of the illustrated novel.

Four Corners Books is an independent art publishing house in London run by Elinor Jansz and Richard Embray since 2004. One of their publishing projects is the series Four Corners Familiars started in 2007. So far there have been seven books published in the series. With each new book a contemporary artist is asked to respond to a classic novel or short story. The artists choose the texts themselves, the only condition being that the text has to be in the public domain. The original text is always reprinted in full alongside the illustrations.

The first two books *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Dracula* have gained the most attention. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*<sup>24</sup> by Oscar Wilde, originally published in 1890, was re-enacted by the British artist Gareth Jones (1965). The text is accompanied by scans of Gitanes cigarette ads from 1970s issues of the *Guardian*. Instead of including only the ads themselves, whole pages are shown, which results in strange additions of text with no beginning and no end. The ads portray handsome young male models (with earrings) smoking cigarettes that certainly include strong references to the text by Wilde from another era. The ads come about rather sporadically though and don't include much variance so coming across the first one remains the only moment of surprise.

Although a series, each new book is provided with a new design by John Morgan that would suit the specific artwork and the text best. In the case of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the form of the book returns to the original publication of the text in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* in 1890 (and also refers to the

**A young  
man of  
extra-  
ordinary  
personal  
beauty**

24. Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, illust. Gareth Jones. London: Four Corners Books, 2007.

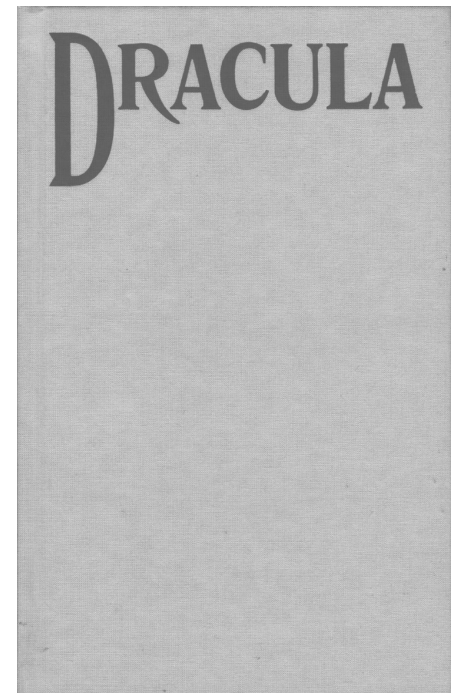
source of the ads). The design of this new edition resembles a magazine by its large format and two-column layout with parts of text emphasized by a larger type size. Although in theory an interesting approach, going back to the publishing history of the text isn't necessarily giving much to the text itself besides offering an environment for reading that is not common to novels. A noteworthy descision was to spread out Wilde's famous preface on 30 pages highlighting each of the sentences and giving them the space they deserve.

*Dracula*<sup>25</sup> by Bram Stoker was turned into a solid hard-cover edition. The artwork for this book was conceived by the British artist James Pyman (1962). The series of pencil drawings depict objects and landscapes that are mentioned by the characters in the book. In the press release for his exhibition in the Maureen Paley gallery in London in 2010 Pyman's work for the book was described followingly:

He was attracted to the structure of *Dracula* which takes the form of an epistolary novel comprising written and recorded diary entries, journals, letters and newspaper cuttings to create a collage of disparate voices. Pyman's intention was to mirror this effect by avoiding the obvious visual tropes of vampire literature and pinpointing passing references in the text to illustrate. Pyman made a pencil drawing for each chapter of the book that focused on textual descriptions of objects and places only briefly mentioned by characters but which were still key to the narrative.<sup>26</sup>

But it's hard to tell if these illustrations really give something extra to the histo-ri-cal text, and if it provides a fresh look on the material. Indeed, he has put aside the classical cliché illustrations of vampire literature, but what he offers as an alternative isn't necessarily a fresh take on the text. His modest and perhaps slightly eerie illustrations can create a certain type of atmosphere for sure, but I wonder if they really act as worthy companions to the book by Stoker.

The Danish artist Joachim Koester (1962), whose work is often based on literary references, has made a series of photographs on *Dracula* of his own. The series from 2003, titled *From the Travel of Jonathan Harker*, depicts scenes from his travel in the footsteps of the protagonist from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* using the novel as a handbook through the Borgo Pass in Romania, to discover the mystical Transylvania — the very place where *Dracula's* castle was located. Koester was of course aware of the fact that Stoker never visited the location himself. And he embarked on the journey only



25. Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*, illust. James Pyman. London: Four Corners Books, 2008.

pyman/press

to discover that Transylvania was nothing more than a suburban sprawl accompanied by illegal logging and a roaring tourist industry. And there was a castle indeed — Castle Dracula — a hotel.

Comparing the Transylvania of Stoker’s imagination with the reality of failed suburban sprawl and illegal logging, Koester posits that fictional narratives are like historical narratives; they contain the potential to leave behind a material trace in space.<sup>27</sup>

Imagining now how this series of photographs could illustrate the same novel, it would most certainly create a whole new book. While Pyman’s pictures merely illustrate scenes from the storyline, Koester provides a work that has something more to say. But the publishers have obviously intended to leave the question of how to produce a fresh take on a classic story up to the artists to interpret. Nevertheless the bulk of possibilities seem endless and would be interesting to encounter more radical approaches to what could be the contemporary illustrated novel in the forthcoming books.

Together with new illustrations, Dracula also got a brand new makeover in design. The book is a yellow cloth-bound hard-back of 496 pages with the cover referring to the first original UK edition. The novel uses very juicy material for the designer by being compiled of different types of texts like diary entries, newspaper cutouts and letters. And this turned out to be the main design decision in the book: choosing different typefaces to represent the different mediums. All the chosen typefaces were in use in the UK while the original book got published. The same principle of carefully choosing the typefaces John Morgan has applied on most of the books in the series. Although the design is meant to be merely supporting the text and the illustrations, John Morgan is still giving Dracula one more layer of information. The spine of the book reads *Dracula Stoker Pyman*, but on the case of this series (and believe me when I say I wouldn’t agree to this on a regular basis) it could in theory just as well be *Dracula Stoker Pyman Morgan*, as the design of the book stands out just as well as new illustrations.<sup>28</sup>

Four Corners Books has succeeded in giving a new life to the titles in the series, yet many aspects could be taken one step further. If the goal is to reinterpret the texts, then the new amount of information the texts gain could be more significant. But this most certainly comes down to intentions. The new books they’ve created are surely interesting objects, but when it comes to the content they rather cheer for the existence of the texts than shading a new light on them.

27. apexart.org/exhibitions/finn.htm

28. Unfortunately this is one of the few books in this series where this choice actually makes much difference. For instance in the case of the Vanity Fair book, the website states: *The text is set in Perpetua and Felicity (partly chosen for their feminine names), two typefaces designed by Eric Gill.* I’m afraid a reader has no interest in a choice that is not visible in the book and even if it was, it just doesn’t come off as something very significant.

# COMMENTING & CONDENSING

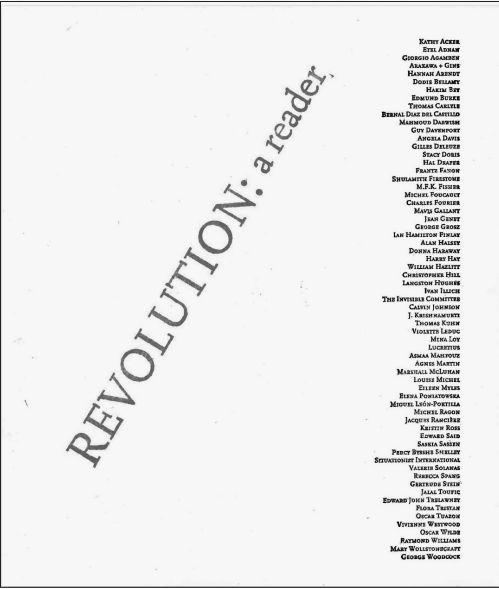
Before digging into books that truly use existing texts as a source material to create something of their own a quick stop at abridged and annotated books, both actions which wish to bring a text closer to the reader. But using what methods?

In annotated books texts are always printed in full with comments on the content that generally serve no other purpose than giving additional information about the subject in question or the author’s intentions. These comments together with the original text become a dialogue between the author and the annotator, though it’s only the latter that provides the actual conversation. And then there’s of course the reader witnessing the discussion who has to make his own conclusions based on the outcome.

The Paris-based art publisher Paraguay Press and Portland-based print on demand publishing house Publication Studio have co-published a subjective collection of essays on revolution called *Revolution: A Reader*<sup>29</sup> edited and annotated by writers Lisa Robertson and Matthew Stadler in early 2012. The over 1100-page book is unique, and relevant to this discussion, due to the way it was annotated. From the introduction to the reader:

The book was conceived, written, and produced in a deeply social process, driven by friendship, conversation, mood, fatigue, hunger, laughter, and the pleasure of travel. Our work composing the texts was more like performance than like the writing processes we were accustomed to. (...) We composed our annotations in September and October via Internet document-sharing, sometimes writing simultaneously from La Malgache, France and Portland, Oregon, watching distant words pop up on our computer screens as we both wrote across time zones.<sup>30</sup>

The layout of the book provides wide margins for the comments of the editors. They’re compiling a reader, a collection of essays, but with their own take on it. The selected texts get republished with a clear new voice accompanying them. The annotation



29. Robertson, Lisa and Matthew Stadler, eds. *Revolution: A Reader*. Paris: Paraguay Press & Publication Studio, 2012.



has indeed become a conversation in the book between two editors, the additions often being very subjective, at times almost forgetting the future presence of the reader. And it gets even better: Publication Studio offers all published books to be read for free online, where all the readers can annotate the books and read the annotations from previous readers. The book is thus provided with multiple layers of information from different sources.

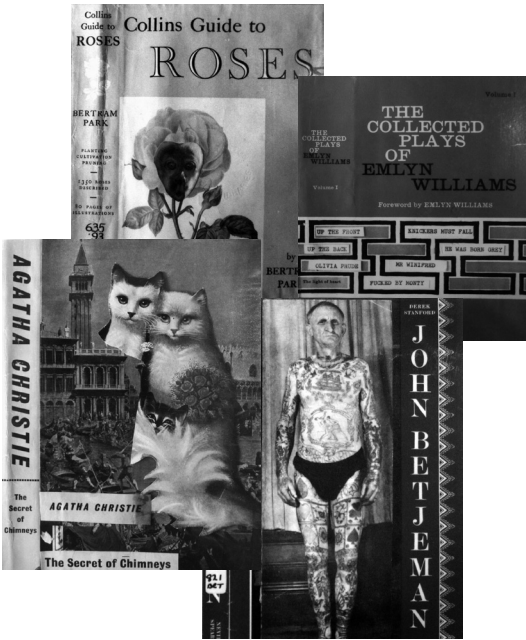
But there’s a non-institutionalized model of annotation as well which by no means has a smaller audience, on the contrary. It’s the marginalia found in library books.

There is a criminal aspect to writing in library books. Perhaps it is the reminder of school teachers telling their students not to deface public property, a guilt that keeps people from committing the act. Regardless of whether or not one approves of marginalia, most have opinions.<sup>31</sup>

These anonymous contributors, writers if you like, provide books with their very own thoughts, comments, attitudes and reflections that come about when reading a text. The fact that their identity will (most likely) remain unknown clears all boundaries and opens the books up to strong additions.

A slightly irrelevant yet thoroughly fascinating example of reworking library books was a notorious deed carried out in the early 60s by two at the time failed comedy writers John (“Joe”) Orton (1933–1967) and Kenneth Halliwell (1926–1967). The couple was incredibly unhappy with the selection of books in their local library which lead them to their strange form of protest. They would one by one steal books (altogether over 70) from the library in Islington and modify their cover art and write new blurbs on a typewriter for the dust jackets, and then return them.<sup>32</sup> Needless to say the alterations were often scandalous and provoking. *What would a librarygoer in 1960 think in picking up The Collected Plays of Emlyn Williams and finding they were about to read plays called Knickers Must Fall and Fucked by Monty?*<sup>33</sup> They both ended up in prison for this prank serving the sentence of being locked up for six months. Yet the time spent in prison had a crucial effect on Joe Orton’s writing, who soon after his release became famous for his black comedies. The series of book covers and dust

31. Sawatsky, Rachele. “The Margins of Discontent” in An Art of the Weak: Marginalia, Writers and Readers. Vancouver: Artspeak, 2007, p. 17.



32. Defaced books in the Islington Library in London by the notorious playwrights Joe Orton & Kenneth Halliwell.

jackets the couple vandalized have since become a valued part of the Islington Local History Centre collection and some are exhibited in the Islington Museum.

But I’m afraid (and glad) there’s no moral to be found in this story. Defaced library books are not an uncommon phenomena, yet rewritten and typed blurbs where you can’t distinguish between the original and the facsimile (though reading the text sure does 4the trick) do ask for another type of commitment.

Another project more precisely devoted to marginalia is the Swedish artist Kajsa Dahlberg’s project A Room of One’s Own/ A Thousand Libraries<sup>34</sup> from 2006 that reproduces all the marginal notes made by readers in the Swedish library copies (Swedish translation Ett eget rum, first published in 1958) of Virginia Woolf’s 1929 pamphlet A Room of One’s Own in one book. Dahlberg borrowed the books from hundreds of public libraries and copied all the notes and scribbles into her new edition, published in an edition of 1000.

In A Room of One’s Own/A Thousand Libraries Woolf’s words are reframed within a collective script of responses, tied together not only across individuals, but also across a period of nearly half a century (Woolf’s book first appeared in Swedish in 1958). One of the most underlined sentences is: “For mas- terpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice.”<sup>35</sup>

By collecting the thoughts of hundreds of readers Dahlberg joins their voices. The text is suddenly inhabited by all the people who ever decided to leave their mark in one of the library books. Woolf’s text is continued by its readers, partially so strongly that the original text becomes illegible due to the number of underliners.

Anyhow, just as defaced book covers, marginal notes are usually considered unwanted scribbles by the library staff. But this doesn’t put an end to the anonymous annotating which spreads faster than any librarian can ever erase. Books become walls for commentary and thus give way to new “authors” that leave their mark, and through this act become part of the book.



34. A Room of One’s Own/ A Thousand Libraries by Kajsa Dahlberg. 2006.

35. <http://kajsadahberg.com/archiveworks/a-room-of-oness-owna-thousand-libraries/>

books/2011/ot/11/library-books-playwright-joe-orton



And then, not far from the annotated books, stand the abridged ones. Abridged books are shortened versions of literary works, usually with the intention of making them more accessible by providing faster and easier reading. Abridgement is necessary to create adaptations as audio books or TV shows, but there are also book series of shortened novels published.

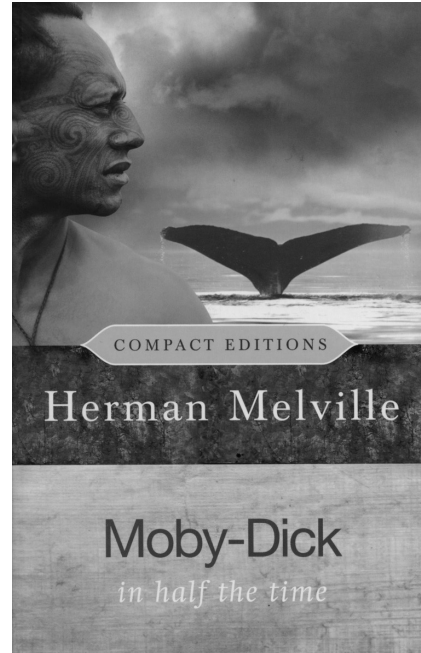
Orion Books is a UK-based publishing house that, in 2007, began to publish a series titled Compact Editions — books in half their length, including abridged versions of *Anna Karenina* and *Vanity Fair* among others.

Compact Editions are some of the greatest books ever written, but they have been sympathetically edited so that most of them are under 400 pages. They retain all the elements of the originals: the plot, the characters, the social, historical and local backgrounds and the authors' language and style. The reductions in length have been done with sensitivity and in no way detract from the spirit of the original.

In May 2007 Herman Melville's 1851 novel *Moby-Dick*; or, *The Whale* got published as well, with a new abridged title: *Moby-Dick in Half the Time*<sup>36</sup>. 336 pages in length, *Moby-Dick in Half the Time* was, alike other books in the series, supposedly sympathetically edited. And by the way, none of the books published contained the name of the editor. So, an anonymous abridger. But the *Moby-Dick* book, according to the words of many, had unfortunately been severely damaged. Adam Gopnik commented on it in *The New Yorker* in the following words:

The Orion *Moby-Dick* is not defaced; it is, by conventional contemporary standards of good editing and critical judgment, *improved*. (...) And when you go back to find them [missing bits] you remember why the book isn't just a thrilling adventure with unforgettable characters but a great book. The subtraction does not turn a good work into hackwork; it turns a hysterical, half-mad masterpiece into a sound, sane book. It still has its phallic reach and point, but lacks its flaccid, anxious self-consciousness: it is all Dick and no Moby. (...) The real lesson of the compact editions is not that vandals shouldn't be let loose on masterpieces but that masterpieces are inherently a little loony.<sup>37</sup>

One particular American writer found the harm done to the truly treasurable book especially outrageous. Damion Searls (1971), who has made abridged versions of texts earlier himself, decided to go for a different solution this time. He gathered together every paragraph, every sentence, every single word and every single punctuation mark



36. Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick in Half the Time*. Orion Books, 2007.

37. Gopnik, Adam. "The Corrections," in *The New Yorker*. October 22, 2007, p. 68.

from Melville's *Moby-Dick*; or *The Whale* that was missing from *Moby-Dick in Half the Time*. The outcome, naturally titled ; or *The Whale*<sup>38</sup>, was published in the journal *Review of Contemporary Fiction* as a 400-page special issue in summer 2009. Searls called it the first contemporary fiction by Herman Melville to appear in almost 150 years.

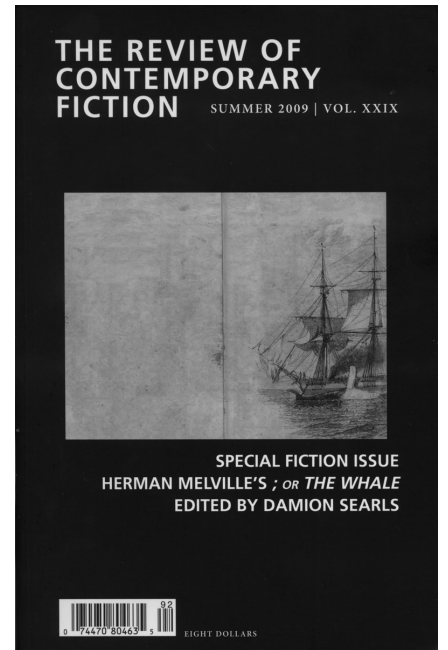
The result was no doubt a piece of art on its own. Yet whose? Searls'? Melville's? The anonymous abridger's? In an interview regarding the book Searls claimed that he wouldn't call himself much else than a producer. In Searls' words he was *genuinely curious to see which half the time would be more worth spending, Orion's tight plot arc or the whaling chapters and bizarre vocabulary they left out*.<sup>39</sup> No matter which one (although I'm sure Searls knew the answer beforehand), ; or *The Whale* proved to be something truly different from the original (and of course so did *Moby-Dick in Half the Time*) and the mere fact that this book got published is a victory on its own.

The case of the *Moby-Dick* book published by Orion Books shows how dangerous such undertakings can be, and with what care and respect one has to treat original pieces of art, for the one seemingly responsible of the outcome would, from the perspective of the reader, be the author. So whenever modifying a work the one behind the act should step forward, for none of the above-mentioned books can be written on the account of Herman Melville.

## ALTERING

We've reached the point where the "damage" to the original texts is perhaps the strongest. There's no question here about intentions or authorship. The source text is subject to alteration that diminishes its whole existence, its purpose. The text is used as a tool to develop something that barely has any connection to the original. Yet the text is still present, witnessing the disappearance of its cause but also the creation of something that could've never come into being without it.

Reading and interpreting literature have been in the center of attention of many contemporary artists' practices. Exploring literary works and providing their own takes on texts as readers is well repre-



38. *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. Melville, Herman. ; *Or the Whale*. Ed. Damion Searls. Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, summer 2009.

39. "The Other Half Of Moby-Dick: The Damion Searls Interview" in *The Quarterly Conversation*. 2009. [quarterlyconversation.com/half-of-half-of-moby-dick-the-damion-searls-interview](http://quarterlyconversation.com/half-of-half-of-moby-dick-the-damion-searls-interview).

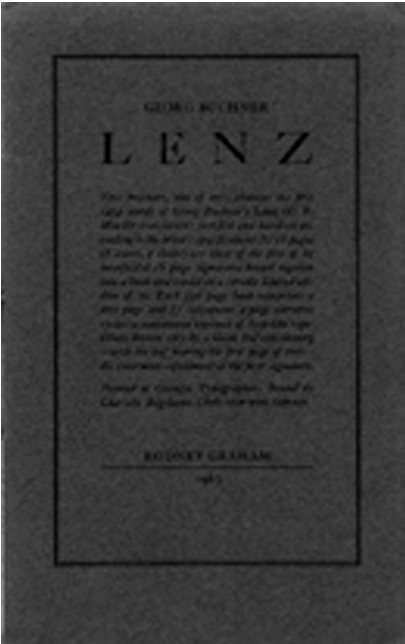
sented in the Four Corners Familiars series discussed earlier. But an artist’s interference with a text can go much deeper where the original work is physically used to create a new work of art. The Canadian artist Rodney Graham (1949) has produced a number of works that fit the criteria like a charm. Since 1983, Graham has been making works which use existing literary texts as ready-made material.<sup>40</sup> This includes publishing several books as well that take the content from previously published texts to create a work of his own where the narrative is extended through the artist’s actions. Noteworthy is also the fact that before becoming a visual artist, Graham studied art history, anthropology, English and French literature.

His earliest book project is *Lenz* from 1983 that materialized in a 16-page brochure<sup>41</sup> in an edition of 210 and a 336-page hardcover book in a slipcase in the limited edition of 10. *Lenz* is an unfinished book by the German Romantic author Georg Büchner (1813–1837) from 1835 about an unhappy poet named Lenz, a friend of Goethe, who suffered from a mental collapse. Graham came across the English translation of the book by C.R. Mueller and discovered, in his words, a happy accident: the words *through the forest* appear twice at points where the story continues from one page to another. He was able to create a textual loop using the first 1434 words of the book through repeating words 241–1434 over and over again (in the 336-page book 83 times) by typesetting them on exactly four full pages. The book becomes an endless narrative where words become redundant, it’s merely the act of repetition that carries meaning.

Graham’s book is nothing but a mechanism gone completely out of whack. What takes place in his *Lenz* can best be described as the turning ‘on’ of a type of writing-machine in which presence is never present, instead it is forever deferred by being multiplied. Although we, as readers, remain attentive to what a text in general presents, in *Lenz* we are unable to detect precisely what is presented since its ‘meaning’ seems to disappear in the very act of reappearing.<sup>42</sup>

Yet his deed falls in place with the subject of the extracted text — *Lenz*’ struggle in the forest through the infinite landscape — resulting in the protagonist’s continuous retracing of his steps. So even though Graham’s interference with the material is solely based on the act of exclusion and repetition (and naturally the publication of the book), he is still engaging in the narrative. But the new book is no doubt one of Graham’s and not Büchner’s. Büchner’s words are still present but they’ve become part of the background of Graham’s creation.

40. [www.christineburgin.com/exhibitions/eh\\_graham\\_1999.html](http://www.christineburgin.com/exhibitions/eh_graham_1999.html)



41. Graham, Rodney. *Lenz*. 1983. Brochure.

42. Haraldsson, Arni Runar. "In-Quest of Folly: Reading Rodney Graham's *LENZ*" in *C Magazine*. Issue 5. Spring 1985. [www.ccca.ca/c/writing/h/haraldsson/hara009t.html](http://www.ccca.ca/c/writing/h/haraldsson/hara009t.html).

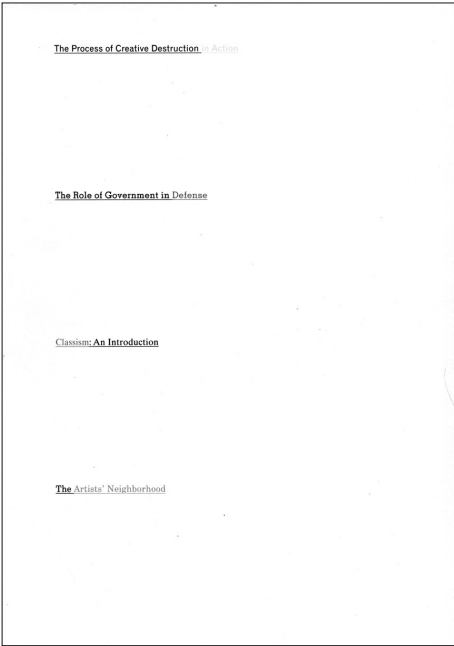
The same type of appropriation can easily become subject to academic texts. An example of this is another book published by Paraguay Press in 2009 — Joe Scanlan’s (1961) *Red Flags*<sup>43</sup> produced for his exhibition of the same name at castillo/corrales (run by the same people behind Paraguay Press) in Paris. The 40-page book consists of four parallelly running stories. Each of the texts uses a previously published academic essay on politics or economy that is altered to give forward another meaning. The original texts are *The Process of Creative Destruction* (1942) by Joseph Schumpeter, *The Role of Government in Education* (1962) by Milton Friedman, *Orientalism: An Introduction* (1978) by Edward Said and *The Country Town* (1923) by Thorstein Veblen. Notable is also the fact that none of the authors were alive when the book by Scanlan got published.

The four essays of *Red Flags* — which reinterpret and rephrase developments about absentee ownership, stagnating markets, colonialism and government subsidies — come at the right time. But these economic arguments have been repositioned in light of Scanlan’s preoccupation with artists’ neighborhoods, Chelsea galleries, taekwon do lessons, and Jack Kerouac and will be further extended in the form of a multi-part installation.<sup>44</sup>

The alterations are marked with different colours for each text and the changes within a text are defined by a gradation of the color to show the extent of the alteration where the mildest is the most and the strongest the least visible. Each of the steps is assigned a different keyword: *Moved, Altered, Rewritten, Added* and *Transformed*. The parts of text that are not modified are represented in black.

Although Scanlan has published a notable amount of articles and reviews, he’s still foremost an artist. His attempt to show the connection between different worlds is by no means a big revelation. Besides creating a new text, Scanlan is deliberately exposing the process behind his “writing” and paying more attention to the action itself than the outcome, the new texts. Comparing the original texts and the ones modified by him, the alterations turn out to be rather subtle despite the colorfulness of the double pages. But perhaps there lies the reason Scanlan kept associating the essays on economics with the art world in the first place.

The academic texts are entered into a context that was never intended for them by the authors. The words become part of an artwork by someone else who uses them as a container for his own



43. Scanlan, Joe. *Red Flags*. Paris: Paraguay Press, 2009.

44. [www.castillocorrales.fr/galerie/index.php/2009/04/21/29-currently-elsewhere](http://www.castillocorrales.fr/galerie/index.php/2009/04/21/29-currently-elsewhere)



self-expression, his own agenda. But there is more to it than that: the artist is making a strong generalization by stating that while reading texts on politics and economy, all he could hear was talk about the art world. This more or less indicates that these texts were chosen by chance — all they represent here is the symbol of the subject in general. Even so authors and the original texts do get their honorable mention on the last page.

# QUOTING

Now that we're done with altering a work, the next quite obvious step is quoting. Single lines or paragraphs are excluded from the body of the text and then used to illustrate or support an argument or to provide direct information on a subject. But for several reasons, mainly due to the foolishness or inaccuracy of the one quoting, the source of the quote often goes unnoted. Quotes are foremost assigned to the author (he said this, he said that) and not so much to the actual location where the quote can be found.

This is exactly what has happened to the quote by Ulises Carrión mentioned earlier. I stumbled upon the quote in the book *Put About: A Critical Anthology on Independent Publishing*, edited by Maria Fusco and Ian Hunt, published by Book Works on the occasion of their 20th anniversary in 2004. It was included in the essay by Lucy Lippard called *Double Spread* comparing artists' books and their circulation in the 60s/70s and today. The text displayed no other indication of the source besides his name, Ulises Carrión.

Like many bookmakers, Ulises Carrion's anarchic fluxus interest was in what artists made rather than in dissemination. "I firmly believe," he said, "that every book that now exists..."<sup>45</sup>

And, well, in a way who cares, right. It was the quote itself that mattered. But then again... In this case the quote will start a new life — a life completely independent of the text (and who knows, maybe it wasn't even a text). It is pulled out of its context and may thus be subject to notable misinterpretation. And then there's the circulation of quotes that can encourage even stronger and stronger alienation from the original meaning. So the quote becomes something on its own, a new form that is disconnected from source text.

Quoting finally brings us back to the essay by Jonathan Lethem mentioned briefly in the introduction. The *Ecstasy of Infl-*

45. Lippard, Lucy R. "Double Spread" in *Put About: A Critical Anthology On Independent Publishing*, eds. Maria Fusco and Ian Hunt. London: Book Works, 2004, p. 87.

ence: A Plagiarism<sup>46</sup> is made up of fragments from previously published books, articles, lectures, songs etc. But the quoting of Lethem is by no means dishonoring the original authors and their work. He cites the sources of all the quotes at the very end of the article, going so far as to even note down who else have used this method of collaging in the past. What Lethem is doing is using the quotes as a tool to express his own thoughts. But compared to the book by Joe Scanlan, Lethem is still using the original content of the quotes not just the form. Quite obviously he's writing his text by looking for quotes that would suit his own agenda, his own voice (hence the term 'collage text' that he uses to describe his method is definitely an accurate one).

But the story gets even better. First I ran into an online review titled *Something borrowed*, and something else borrowed by Zsuzsi Gartner (published in *Globe and Mail* on December 9, 2011) of Jonathan Lethem's collection of essays of the same title as his essay: *An Ecstasy of Influence*. Gartner concludes his review with the following lines:

In the spirit of Lethem's ode to bricolage and defence of plagiarism, most of the sentences above are borrowed — with seams tightened or let out — from Lethem on Lethem, from Lethem quoting Mark Twain consoling Helen Keller, from Lethem writing on Italo Calvino, and from myself on previous work by Lethem. But every word is true.<sup>47</sup>

And then, when looking into the influences of Jonathan Lethem on creating his essay, I came across another name: David Shields (*Closer to home, my efforts owe a great deal to the recent essays of David Shields, in which diverse quotes are made to closely intertwine and reverberate, and to...*<sup>48</sup>). As it turns out David Shields (1956) has published a book titled *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*<sup>49</sup> (Knopf, 2010) of literary criticism on roughly the same topic of Lethem's essay (three years later). And it comes as no surprise that Shields once again used the familiar method of collaging when creating his text — the book contains 618 numbered passages where his own quotations are mixed with ones from various sources. The origins of the quotes are noted in the Appendix at the back of the book. But as we learn coming to the end of the book, that hasn't been done willingly:

This book contains hundreds of quotations that go unacknowledged in the body of the text. I'm trying to regain a freedom that writers from Montaigne to Burroughs took for granted and that we have



46. Lethem, Jonathan. "The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism," in *Harper's Magazine*. Feb 2007.

47. [www.theglobeandmail.com/news/arts/books/the-ecstasy-of-influence-by-jonathan-lethem/article2265862/](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/arts/books/the-ecstasy-of-influence-by-jonathan-lethem/article2265862/)

48. Lethem, Jonathan. "The Ecstasy of Influence: A Plagiarism," in *Harper's Magazine*. Feb 2007. p. 71.



lost. Your uncertainty about whose words you’ve just read is not a bug but a feature. [...] However Random House lawyers determined that it was necessary for me to provide a complete list of citations; the list follows. [...] If you would like to restore this book to the form in which I intended it to be read, simply grab a sharp pair of scissors or a razor blade or box cutter and remove pages 210–218 by cutting along the dotted line.<sup>50</sup>

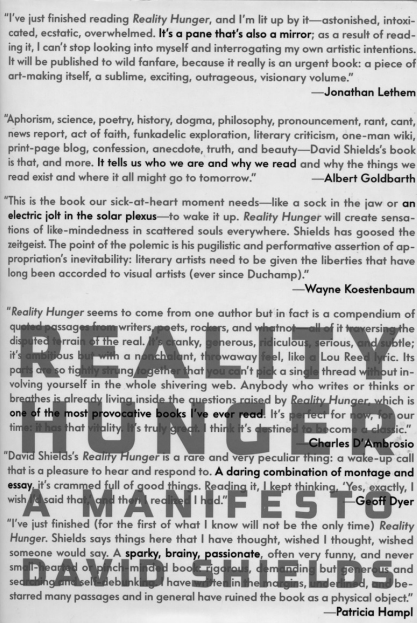
But Shields’ quoting is different as he’s really compiling his book out of quotes, whereas Lethem “writes” his essay through modifying the quotes to make up a coherent narrative (though of course the order of quotes in Shields’ book has an important role to play as well). And naturally the subject matter of his book is not one to one the same. Shields’ take on the topic has an emphasis on the reasons why contemporary writing desperately needs to seek for a reform, in order to increase its engagement with our everyday reality.<sup>51</sup>

But Lethem and Shields, as so many other “creators” mentioned in this essay, have a very downright motive for their actions. The way they “build up” their writing (not to mention the collaborative effort, reusing each other’s work but not just plainly copying it) becomes a commentary on the subject they’re addressing. Through the method they’re incorporating to illustrate the matter, they’re creating a genre on its own and also banging the drum for the birth of new forms in general. In Shields’ case this is more prominent than ever as, besides appropriation, a substantial part of his argument regards the intersections of fiction and nonfiction, and the death of the novel in its current form.

A major focus of Reality Hunger is appropriation and plagiarism and what these terms mean. I can hardly treat the topic deeply without engaging in it. That would be like writing a book about lying and not being permitted to lie in it. Or writing a book about destroying capitalism, but being told it can’t be published because it might harm the publishing industry.<sup>52</sup>

The result is a true blurring of genres and, as Shields would put it, the win of reality over narrative.

Story seems to say that everything happens for a reason and I want to say, No, it doesn’t.<sup>53</sup>



49. Shields, David. Reality Hunger: A Manifesto. New York: Knopf, 2010.

50. Ibid., p. 209.

51. Do also check out the website realityhunger.com titled Reality Hunger, Remixed which is a good example of the change in the format of a text discussed earlier. It's apparently the same book in the web environment, with the difference that the creator of the site (no name included) has added the sources of the quotes that were originally in the Appendix now alongside the quotations. The site also reads: *Minor changes have been made to pronouns in the sources to reflect the fact that this is an unofficial site, in no way affiliated with either author or publisher.*

52. Shields, David. Reality Hunger: A Manifesto. Knopf, 2010, p. 209.

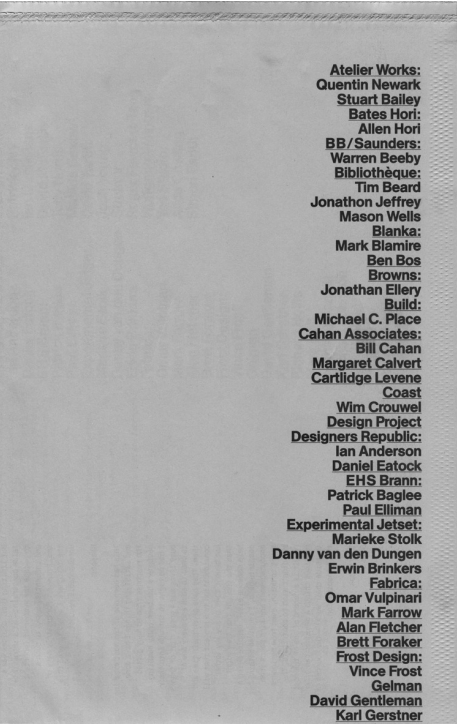
53. Ibid., p. 114.

# RETELLING & MENTIONING

And we’ve nearly made it to the end of the line. There’s nothing more left of the text than a title and/or the general concept. The form, the physical aspect of the text has been lost. The process ends not far from where it began: sharing, but this time only sharing a link to the material. Curated libraries wish to simply mediate the content and make it more accessible, they lure the readers with prospective interest to the texts. There’s no actual addition to the material. An example of a curated reading list, where there’s no other trace of the material than the name of the publication and the author, is the second issue of Spin magazine in the UK published by the graphic designer Tony Brooks in 2006. The issue was titled 50 Reading Lists<sup>54</sup> and contained, as the title states, 50 reading lists by graphic designers that were all asked the same question: *What are the top ten books that you believe designers should read?* There’s no explanations, just a list referring to the books.

But then there’s instances where lists go together with opinions, providing new information around the subjects in question. The content itself is gone, it has been replaced by something that merely points to it. We don’t need to look far searching for an example of this. This very text you’re reading is not doing much else than creating discussion around projects, namely books, and placing them in a context suitable to fit the subject of the essay. It’s a curated collection. Although certain general information is supplied for the reader to be aware of the context, it has little to do with objectively describing the specimens. The examples are here to serve another cause. There are indeed quotes, but not quotes from the books themselves, instead from a number of external sources that again do no more than looking at the source from a specific angle.

Among these external sources are interviews and book reviews that have appeared in magazines, newspapers, blogs. While interviews with the author aim to clarify the background and the creator’s



54. Brooks, Tony, ed. 50 Reading Lists. London: Spin, 2006.

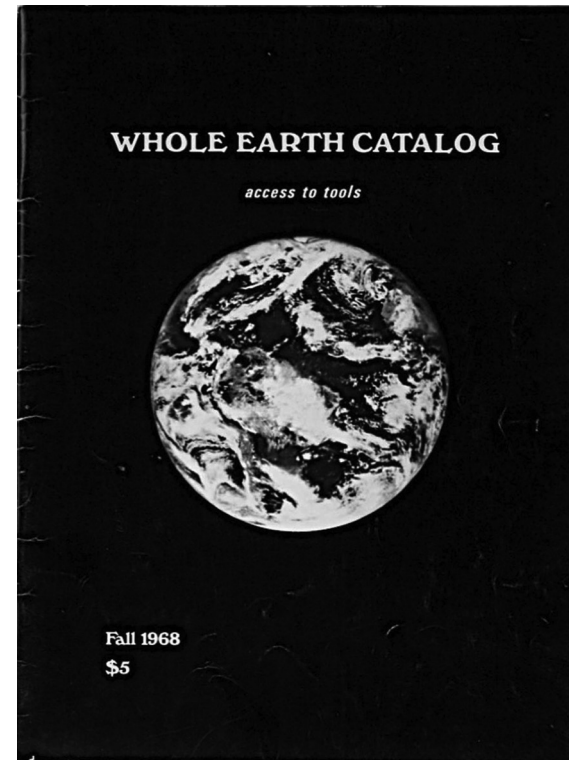
intentions, reviews provide an analysis on the content generally from the readers' perspective. A review is never a plain summary.

An interesting example of mediating books in the form of printed matter was the American counterculture catalog called the *Whole Earth Catalog*<sup>55</sup> published by Stuart Brand between 1968 and 1974. Brand's goal was to make a variety of tools accessible to newly dispersed counterculture communities, back-to-the-land households, and innovators in the fields of technology, design, and architecture, and to create a community meeting-place in print.<sup>56</sup> So it was a catalog that listed predominantly books (but also clothing, tools, machines etc.) and provided the readers with general information about the products alongside with information on how to get hold of these tools. It was in a way a sort of a curated encyclopedia of items. From the catalog:

The *WHOLE EARTH CATALOG* functions as an evaluation tool and access device. With it, the user should know better what is worth getting and where and how to do the getting. An item is listed in the *CATALOG* if it is deemed: 1) Useful as a tool; 2) Relevant to independent education; 3) High quality or low cost; 4) Easily available by mail. *CATALOG* listings are continually revised according to the experience and suggestions of *CATALOG* users and staff.<sup>57</sup>

All the items in the catalog were organized in chapters like *Communications* and *Community* and were provided with images and reviews, written personally by the editorial staff of the *Whole Earth Catalog*. And as the catalog itself states, the model was interactive, a shared effort — the readers could suggest books to be added in the selection.

In the case of this catalog the readers were solely dependent on the words and opinions of the ones writing the reviews (and making the selection). It was hardly ever possible to get acquainted with the content beforehand, as the publications were generally ordered by mail. But as the books in the catalog had already past the "quality control", the reviews did have more of a descriptive tone (again, kind of like an encyclopedia entry), yet with a personal touch.



55. Brand, Stuart. ed. *Whole Earth Catalog*. Menlo Park, California: Portola Institute, 1968.

56. [www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2011/AccessToTools/](http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2011/AccessToTools/)

57. Brand, Stuart, ed. *Whole Earth Catalog*. Menlo Park, California: Portola Institute, 1968.

This situation where physically nothing is left of the original besides the title can occur with both sharing the content and creating something new based on it. In the case of the latter the original and its author are still recognized and the new creation often, at least partly, serves as an homage to the source. But as there's materially little left of the original to play around with, this field is foremost covered with other writers reflecting on literary works from the past.

The writer and translator Damion Searls, who was behind the creation of the second "abridged" version of *Moby-Dick*; or the *Whale* discussed earlier in the essay has also written a book, his first work of fiction, called *What We Were Doing and Where We Were Going*<sup>58</sup> published by Dalkey Archive Press in May 2009. The book comprises of five short stories, all of which are loosely based on a text by either André Gide, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Yasushi Inoue, Vladimir Nabokov or Tommaso Landolfi, five authors that seemingly don't have much in common. A quote from Keith Gessen accompanying the book reads:

Literature is dead, everyone knows that, and also — another thing every-one knows — all the great literature has already been written. But if we were somehow to begin bringing literature into the present day, we'd do it by updating, reimagining, rewriting, and then finally once and for all forgetting the past masters. That is what, in these funny, eclectic, and ultimately very contemporary stories, Damion Searls somehow manages to do.

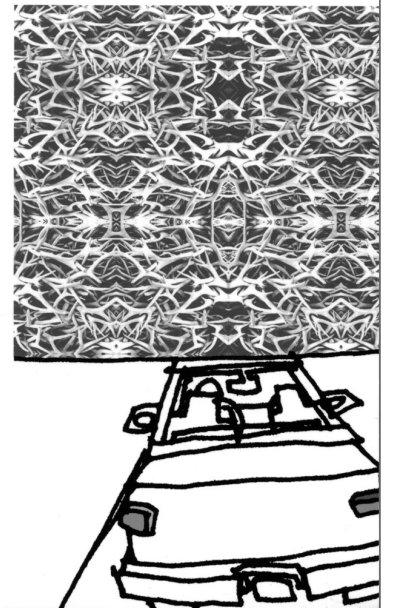
The hidden clues, though often quite literal, are there only for the ones familiar with the predecessors.

For the rest they're just exciting stories, a good read.

But drawing parallels from other authors' texts provides the new ones with significantly more substance. The "borrowed" aspects vary from text to text — the connections to the archetypes offer different takes on appropriation as such. He becomes both an interpreter and a commentator. All the five stories end up being connected through the last one, so in some distant way Searls is connecting the five authors of the original texts. Not to mention that all the stories by Searls have some connection to literature in general.

By providing these texts with contemporary interpretations Searls is honoring the masters of the originals, adding new value

what we were doing and where we were going  
damion searls



58. Searls, Damion. *What We Were Doing and Where We Were Going*. Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2009.



to the texts, and creating something genuine that can stand completely independently from the source. Notable is also the fact that Searls himself is a known translator, and this is his first work of fiction. Isn't it a noble way how to start — by paying tribute to his influences and offering a fresh view on literature on a broader scale?

# TO MAKE A LONG STORY SHORT

There you have it: this is the point where nothing physical has re-mained from the original. The references to the content go on, but the actual text is left behind. Everything that exists after this can be categorized as fiction as there's little basis to prove the connection. There's no material trace of the source, thus there is no source. This doesn't mean there can't be signs or suggestions, fuzzy hints, but those are no good here. Such references are visible only for the ones already familiar with the content beforehand. The text lives on but only as a part of something else, supporting the new creation.

Texts are subject to recontextualization, alteration and appropriation on a daily basis. This can occur through simply dispersing the material, adding something to it with the intention of offering more information, excluding parts of the texts to use it as a tool for creating something independent or excluding parts to justify one's claims. The main aspects that stand out are sharing the material and creating something new from the material. In all instances something is gained and something is lost. No matter how the original text is treated, it develops into something new as the act of publication is not up to the author any longer.

Sharing existing texts includes bringing texts from the past back into day-light, presenting texts in subjective collections, changing the format of the material to reach a wider audience, and adding notes or comments or other additional information in order to create a new layer of meaning. In these cases the context of the texts changes resulting in new information that wasn't originally intended.

And then we have the rest, either a combination of sharing and creating or just pure creation. This includes artworks that use texts as source material, and new texts that incorporate parts of pre-existing ones. Yet when using something that doesn't belong to you,

one has the obligation to treat it as precious as one's own creation. Here the reference to the original in many cases also functions as an homage to the previous author.

The people behind these projects come from different fields and therefore have different motifs and connection to the material. Writers that appropriate other authors' work usually do it with significant honour and respect. This of course makes more sense than ever as they're in the same position. With artists the issue is a bit more complicated as there's a number of different approaches that can all bare an alternative agenda. But one thing is for sure: the steps are often more radical and careless. The artworks can still serve as homage to the originals but in many cases also portray opinions on the texts or just use the texts as opportunities to create something of one's own. With graphic designers the projects have a lot to do with the act of publishing in general. It's also important to mention that the different roles can easily get mixed in these processes. We can see writers incorporating the techniques classically associated with artists and the other way around.

Alongside the disappearance of the material, somewhere between sharing and creating, uncommon types of publications and projects emerge that infuse (parts of) existing texts with new layers of information that begin interacting with the chosen content. The additions can be textual, image- or form-based where the selection of the source material can also often have a key role to play. All the models, no matter how simple or perhaps seemingly worthless, provide numerous possibilities for the creation of new publications. Through questioning and implementing the "originals" newer and better formats may emerge.



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