

# Book Presence in a Digital Age

Edited by Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, Kári Driscoll,  
and Jessica Pressman

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC  
NEW YORK • LONDON • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC  
Bloomsbury Publishing Inc  
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC and the Diana logo are trademarks of  
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in the United States of America 2018

Copyright © Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, Kári Driscoll, Jessica Pressman,  
and Contributors, 2018

Cover design: Daniel Benneworth-Gray  
Cover image © Brian Dettmer

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

Bloomsbury Publishing Inc does not have any control over, or responsibility for, any third-party websites referred to or in this book. All internet addresses given in this book were correct at the time of going to press. The author and publisher regret any inconvenience caused if addresses have changed or sites have ceased to exist, but can accept no responsibility for any such changes.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
[to come]

ISBN: HB: 978-1-5013-2118-4  
ePDF: 978-1-5013-2120-7  
eBook: 978-1-5013-2119-1

Typeset by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India  
Printed and bound in the United States of America

To find out more about our authors and books visit [www.bloomsbury.com](http://www.bloomsbury.com) and  
sign up for our newsletters.

## Infrathin Platforms: Print on Demand as Auto-Factography

Hannes Bajohr

The presence of the book, taken quite literally, depends to a considerable degree on the ease of its production. In the development of printing technology, one of the latest and arguably biggest leaps toward broader accessibility of book production has been the emergence of digital print on demand (POD) (Haugland 2006). First established in the 1980s, POD allows the production of a single book—both printing and binding—from a digital file as an immediate response to an order. Since it became commercially viable in the 1990s, POD has been used both by traditional independent presses and large publishing houses as it alleviates a volatile aspect of publishing: gauging how many copies need to be printed, that is, the creation of “speculative stock” (Gallagher 2014, 244). As Kelly Gallagher puts it, “POD has fundamentally changed the very essence of the publishing model that has, since the days of Gutenberg, been premised on printing a book first and then trying to sell it” (245). Thus, not only does POD allow a more integrated cycle of purchasing, production, and distribution, it also reduces the minimum number of books printed to one.

It is exactly this quality that extended the attractiveness of POD beyond the domain of commercial publishing. Apart from the use in libraries and book stores to reproduce unshelved or out-of-print titles (Rapp 2011), 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 with practically no financial risk for the author. 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. Thus,

writes Whitney Anne Trettien, the new technology is redrawing “the boundaries between books, facsimiles, electronic files and databases and, in the process, reconfiguring relationships between readers, authors and editors” (Trettien 2013).

In this chapter, I would like to address a particular instance of this reconfigured relationship. Since 2010, a whole subculture has developed around this private-consumer POD that tries to harness its possibilities for experimental literature. In this literature, one can discern an interplay of reproduction technology and genre that is not unlike the relationship earlier zine culture had to mimeographs or photocopiers (Ludovico 2012, 31–35; Gitelman 2014, 136–50; Anna Poletti’s chapter in this book), a feedback structure of which Lori Emerson has called “readingwriting” (Emerson 2014: xiv). Likewise, in POD publishing the printing technology and the aesthetics of its products stand in a reflexive relationship and influence each other. However, unlike zine culture—which shared a porous boundary with and often incorporated Xerox art (Emerson 2014: Chapter 3; Urbons 1993)—this new POD subculture insists on its products being part of the system of literature, not art. Repeatedly, its proponents made clear that their use of POD does not result in artist’s books or “bookworks,” but in works of literature that are circulated as such (Lin 2014b; Beckwith 2014; see also Bajohr 2016b, 101; Gilbert 2016).

In what follows, will take this self-description seriously and suggest that we view the exponents of this current as producers of experimental literature, and as forging a new interchange between publishing technology, dissemination strategy, and textual genre, which fuses elements of conceptual writing, electronic literature, and what I suggest to call “auto-factography.” What unites them is that they make the technological condition of production, and specifically the relationship between digital file and printed book, one of their main literary themes, while feeding back their output into their aesthetic practices.

### Infrathin platforms: Gauss PDF, Troll Thread, 0x0a, Traumawien

Let me begin with a brief overview of the individuals and groups associated with the experimental POD literature I have in mind. Some of the authors in this subculture include Holly Melgard, Joey Yearous-Algozin, Stephen McLaughlin, and Gregor Weichbrodt; some notable publishers are Gauss PDF in the United

States 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*, 0x0a.<sup>1</sup> Whatever these entities call themselves, they execute the “publishing gesture” (Ludovico 2012, 67) that is a minimum requirement 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>2</sup> J. Gordon Faylor, the operator of gauss-pdf.com, has thus called his practice of hosting files not only “publishing” but also the provision of an “infrathin platform for the staging of submitted works” (Beckwith 2014).<sup>3</sup> *Inframince* was Marcel Duchamp’s term for the undefinable, pure difference that, for instance, still remains between identically produced objects (Duchamp 2008, 264). This differentiating non-difference of such publishing lies in the fact that 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 to the author.

Gauss PDF was founded in 2010 as an online platform for “digitally based works” (Gallagher 2013). 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 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” (Faylor 2016, 218, my translation). Faylor chose Lulu as the “most efficacious way to manage hasty production at a relatively low cost. I bet TROLL THREAD agrees” (Lin 2014a). 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, it has now expanded to publish 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 (Lin 2014b).

The PDF/POD book 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*, cocurated by Hans

Ulrich Obrist and Kenneth Goldsmith, featured books by authors born after 1989; on the accompanying website, all titles could either be downloaded for free or purchased on Lulu (Luma Foundation 2014).<sup>4</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, 0x0a, in 2014. On its website, Weichbrodt has reissued the book, with a new design and 0x0a as the publisher, again as PDF and Lulu print (Weichbrodt 2014a; Weichbrodt 2014b). Such redressing and recontextualizing 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 cofounder Lukas Gross wrote in a mission statement, consists in "transferring late-breaking digital aesthetics into book form" (Gross 2010). The form of the book means that this aesthetics is not merely a conceptual feint—the books are actually meant to be read. Like in the case of the other groups, Traumawien's is a decidedly *literary* gesture, not one belonging to the visual arts, as J. R. Carpenter confirms, who spells out the underlying assumption: "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" (Carpenter 2011).

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, 0x0a and Traumawien tend to explain and interpret their work<sup>5</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.

### "A genre unto itself"

Some scholars, like Whitney Anne Trettien, have argued that a POD book really is a "thoroughly *digital* object." Her essay focuses on the reprints of digitized books "produced from electronic information gathered by software searching

enormous databases.” Unlike in her case, in which “only once a reader purchases a POD reprint (usually through the web) . . . the formal materiality of the electronic text [is] actualized in paper,” in the genre at hand any inclination to hierarchize the two elements—the text and the book, the immaterial and its materialization—is actively undermined by the authors. It might be more useful to call “POD” the umbrella term for both the file and the product, and to conceive of this double-structure as at once analog and digital. It is true that the finished, analog POD book has an inherent connection to the PDF; its very existence relies on the creation of a digital master from which the copies of the book are made. On the other hand, in the production cycle of Lulu and Blurb, the PDF really only makes sense as the starting point of the future book, and, as we shall see, the attributes of the file are determined by the material constraints of POD. Furthermore, as Lisa Gitelman has shown, the PDF itself possesses a certain “ontological complexity,” since it at once simulates the printed page, and falls short of it (Gitelman 2014, 128). “PDFs achieve a measure of fixity because of the ways they simultaneously compare to printed documents and contrast with other kinds of digital documents that seem less fixed—less paperlike—as they are used” (119). The platforms here discussed play with precisely this complexity. Because of the ease of production and dissemination that services like Lulu and Blurb provide, the unstable ontological status of POD can be investigated, manipulated, and thrown into crisis by artistic and literary means.<sup>6</sup> “Electronic textuality is . . . locatable, even though we are not accustomed to thinking of it in physical terms,” as Matthew Kirschenbaum points out in a discussion of a “forensic” approach to storage media (Kirschenbaum 2012, 3). This idea holds for these works, too: few things illustrate “the heterogeneity of digital data and its embodied inscriptions” (6) as well as the books on these “infrathin” platforms.

This can be illustrated by looking at two elements of this genre that seem to characterize it especially well: the influence of generative and conceptual practices, which are used to play with the status of the connection between file and object, and the turn to auto-factography, a type of writing that self-reflexively represents structural, socioeconomic, and material conditions of its production. What characterizes the literature of platforms like Gauss PDF, 0x0a, Troll Thread, and Traumawien is that it highlights and exacerbates the instability inherent in POD; what unites their various strategies and elevates their works to the level of literary genre is that they all proceed from an acute awareness of this instability in their structure, production, and dissemination.

### (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-hermeneutic books: the *jouissance* they evoke comes less from reading them, more from reflecting their underlying concepts (Goldsmith 2011, 100). Where the goal no longer is to decipher the meaning of or internal connections between words, sentences, and texts, the aesthetic experience of such works shifts from producing sense to the experience of being battered by nonsense. Sianne Ngai called the effect of this literary stratagem—still with a view to the classical avant-gardes—“stuplimity.” “Like the Kantian sublime, the stuplime points to the limits of our representational capabilities, not through the limitlessness or infinity of concepts, but through a no less exhaustive confrontation with the discrete and finite in repetition.” However, the boredom of the stuplime “paradoxically forces the reader to go on in spite of its equal enticement to surrender . . . pushing the reader to constantly formulate and reformulate new tactics for reading” (Ngai 2000). These books, then, have an immediate effect on textual hermeneutics—which now considers concept, not content—and on the practice of reading itself: they no longer require deep attention. Instead of a close reading, they demand a “hyper reading,” as N. Katherine Hayles calls it, “skimming, scanning, fragmenting, and juxtaposing texts” as modes of reception (Hayles 2012, 12).

The joy of the excessive and the willful production of boredom are tactics known from modernist literature—think Gertrude Stein—but they have in recent years been coopted both by electronic literature (Bajohr 2016a; Bootz and Funkhouser 2014) and conceptual writing (Duffy 2016; Emerson 2012). Contemporary computer-generated literature is often based on the ability to produce large amounts of text automatically, which provides it with an almost inherent 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.” Since the turn of the millennium, writers like Kenneth Goldsmith have transposed this strategy from the visual arts onto literature under the title of “conceptual” or “uncreative writing” (Goldsmith 2011; for a bibliography, see Zeltl 2017). Both modes of production, because of the rule following inherent in them, have a penchant for reducing “expression” as aesthetic determinant, displacing the author-subject, and giving the outcome



an aesthetic autonomy even as it devalues its status as “work.”<sup>7</sup> Especially literary conceptualism understands itself to be part of an extended lineage of experimental literature and carries on a (post-)modernist legacy (see especially Dworkin and Goldsmith 2011).

However, neither electronic literature nor conceptual writing seems fully to encompass this new experimental literature that plays out in POD. The “return to print” performed by these platforms stands counter to the purported genealogy of electronic literature “as a continuation of experimental print literature,” thus suggesting some kind of directional development (Hayles 2009, 17) that was frequently thought to lead to “the crisis of the codex as a cultural form” (Spoerhase 2017, 87). Instead, these platforms highlight the unstable connection between material object and digital file. Similarly, J. Gordon Faylor deems the association with conceptualism accidental,<sup>8</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” (Lin 2014b).

Certainly, self-descriptions like these 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” (Gross 2010) and published a book by Australian codeworks writer Mez Breeze, whose poetry appropriates the look and vocabulary of programming languages (Breeze 2011). An actual combination of electronic literature and conceptual writing strategies can be found in Stephen McLaughlin’s *Puniverse* (Gauss PDF, 2014). “An ingenious 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 thus:

“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.” (McLaughlin 2014, 1: 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 fifty-seven volumes of Lulu books.

This type of generative-conceptual literature—constructed, not found; written, but by code—seems to draw much of its effect from the connection with the form of the book, 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, stuplime effect. This effect, I argue, hinges upon the dual nature of POD as both material and immaterial, as the work being both a book and a file. 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 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* (0x0a/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? (Weichbrodt 2015, 4)<sup>9</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?”’ (Feldman 2015). 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?” (Weichbrodt 2015, 212) 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" (Feldman 2015). And after having jumped, in truly Latourian fashion,<sup>10</sup> 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 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. (Weichbrodt 2015, 352)

That the text closes here is almost too good to be true, and again, it raises the 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 stuplimity (quite literally the sublime of the stupid) 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 age 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 used, however, things change. Executed on a computer, a recursive function lacking a set breakpoint would either run forever or 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 enacted 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" (Giffin 2014, 13). 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 spatiotemporal 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.

## **(b) The auto-factographic element**

While relative document layouts, like Word files or epub, allow for a text to be “reflowed” responsively for every conceivable output device (Ludovico 2012, 98), a PDF, just like the page of a book, is absolute in its layout (Gitelman 2014, 114–15). The de-facto standard of commercial e-publishing, aimed at e-readers and iPads, is the epub 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>11</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 nine hundred 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 (which arguably are meant to evoke the Twin Towers). Since the dimensions of the PDF follow Lulu standards, the characters shown on each page are cut off, making the resulting text almost illegible. 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 Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*, on which both instantiations are based (Figure 5.1). The entirety of Ellis’s novel was sent back and forth “between two GMail accounts page by page.” Huff and Campbell then “saved the relational ads for each page and added them back into



**Figure 5.1** Jason Huff and Mimi Cabell, *American Psycho* (Traumawien, 2012), 3.

the text as footnotes. . . . The constellations of footnoted ads throughout these pages retell the story of *American Psycho* in absence of the original text” (Huff and Cabell 2012a). 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 on 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 *littérateurs*,” is constructed like a “conveyor belt along which a unit of raw material is moved and transformed into a useful product through human effort” (Tret’iakov 2006, 57–62, 61). Instead of *The Brothers Karamazov*, such factography could have titles like “*The Forest, Bread, Coal, Iron, Flax, Cotton, Paper, The Locomotive, and The Factory*” (63).

While Tret’iakov still had a representational, world-depicting model in mind—a realist novel for things, not persons—the literature considered here makes factography perform itself: it becomes *auto*-factography. 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, about their production but “show” it (Wittgenstein 2002: sec. 4.1212)—they do not offer a propositional description of publishing under the conditions of digital technology, but directly enact it in a nonpropositional way through their own materiality. Thus, content is secondary to objecthood, and instead of writing the biography of the thing, the thing reveals its story on its own. This material self-referentiality has of course precursors in art and literature: Rauschenberg’s white paintings and the famous black page in *Tristram Shandy* could possibly also be called works of auto-factography, although only peripherally. In the POD literature of these infrathin platforms, however, this reflexivity is so central that it has been elevated to the status of genre element.

If auto-factography here addresses the medial aspects of the underlying data structures, in some works such auto-factographical showing extends to the socioeconomic conditions of their production. Jean Keller’s *The Black Book* (Lulu/self-published, 2013) (Figure 5.2) 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, as 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. (Keller 2013a)

At first appearing parasitic, even sabotaging, *The Black Book* is a reminder that POD 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



**Figure 5.2** Jean Keller, *The Black Book* (Lulu/self-published, 2013).

apparent that writers get the short end of the stick as they represent Lulu's main revenue stream.

In *Reimbur\$ement* (Troll Thread, 2013), Holly Melgard similarly, yet reversely, exhibits the limits of POD 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" (Melgard 2013, 4). 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" (ibid.). 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" (ibid.)—except the work being play, and the play being the gamble for the sustenance that makes the work possible in the first place.

Of course, the generative-conceptual and auto-factographic practices are only two of the elements this literature employs in its strategy of self-disclosure, and I 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 this genre's relevance today derives from its unique capacity to articulate an instability that is indicative of a general process of digitization—be it in its technological form, investigating the ontological slippage between page and file, book and PDF, digital and analog, or, as Melgard and Keller show, in its socioeconomic ramifications.

Indeed, it is in this context that auto-factography's self-reflexivity may offer its greatest political potential, since it is able to target even the conditions of its own existence. One could call Melgard and Keller's interventions an institutional critique of the seemingly liberating potential of POD and self-entrepreneurialism, revealing how, in the economy of the digital, the position of the writer is still dependent on the limited access to the means of production and thus as precarious as ever. And yet, this type of POD literature also shows that it is too easy to reject POD technology or companies like Lulu wholesale as exponents of a "slick neoliberal logic" that promotes "individual empowerment through self-publication," as Lisa Gitelman suggests in this book. Rather, Keller and Melgard attempt to face the restraints of this neoliberal logic head-on—as, in fact, all artists must—knowing that the escapism ostentatiously "analog" production techniques provide does not elude the aporias of labor. Instead of simply avoiding new technologies and their entanglement with capitalism, experimental POD literature hyper-reflexively exploits even its own disappointment in the inability to be unaffected by this technology/art/capital nexus. This, I would argue, gives it greater political heft than more traditional forms of content-based literature, or the, often regressive, luddism of a "post-digital" return to older printing and publishing technologies (such as are discussed in Cramer 2013).

This kind of literature is an exceptionally contemporary, or *actuel*, textual genre. None of the platforms I have discussed here are older than seven years, and it is anything but certain that they will exist seven years from now—in their current form, unlikelier still (a point made in Soullelis 2013). But this is a strength, not a weakness: as this literature reveals both POD's ontological instability and its socioeconomic conditions of emergence, it uncovers a moment that is very much our own: a period in which digitality is no longer new enough to be constantly perceptible, but still sufficiently new that the difference between the seemingly "analog" book form and a digital file is felt as peculiar, at times even as uncanny.



This is why the POD literature I have presented here acts as both reaffirmation of the book and as its destabilization. For while the decision for books printed on demand reevaluates a medium that is perpetually said to be on the brink of being outdated (Price 2009), it does not treat the book as particularly high-class but rather a conspicuously “poor” medium: Lulu’s printing quality is notoriously abysmal, and the “semiotic power of paper and binding” Anna Poletti addresses in her contribution to this book does not so much communicate the preciousness of objects from a pre-digital era, but rather their atrophied stage. POD does not convey authenticity and subjectivity, as in the case of Poletti’s zines; its material poverty rather emphasizes the anonymousness of its concepts, and its problematization of authorship. One could thus understand POD literature as the reverse of the literary trend that Jessica Pressman has called “bookishness,” the “fetishization of the book-bound nature of the codex as a reading object” (Pressman 2009). The POD book is anything but fetishizable. Rather, in POD, the book is simultaneously present and absent.

## Notes

This essay is based on an earlier version of this text published as Bajohr (2016b).

- 1 [www.gauss-pdf.com](http://www.gauss-pdf.com); [www.traumawien.at](http://www.traumawien.at); [www.Troll Thread.tumblr.com](http://www.Troll Thread.tumblr.com); [www.0x0a.li](http://www.0x0a.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.
- 2 This is *contra* Florian Cramer: “But in the 21st century, even the primal criterion of literature has become obsolete: that of being published. In the age of homepages, blogs and social networks, the classical distinction between non-published personal writing and published writing is moot, and with it the distinction between everyday communication and publishing” (Cramer 2013). 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.
- 3 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.
- 4 So far, the exhibition, cocurated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Kenneth Goldsmith, lists 131 poets.

- 5 In the case of Troll Thread, there is not even a hint as to what it is; the “about” page offers the tautology: “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.
- 6 I have given a more detailed account of the ontology of this instability in Bajohr 2016a,b.
- 7 Especially for literary conceptualism, these arguments have become commonplace, and the backlash against them has already begun (see Perloff 2010; Dworkin 2011 for the now-classic exposition of conceptual writing; see Perlow 2015 for a discussion of the criticism leveled at Kenneth Goldsmith in particular).
- 8 “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 2014a).
- 9 For this book, Weichbrodt cooperated with ebook publisher Frohmann Verlag; while the epub can be purchased through the publisher, the POD can be ordered from Lulu.
- 10 Ian Bogost has coined the term “Latour litany” for a list of radically diverse things illustrating the possibility of considering them ontologically equal (Bogost 2012). Bogost has even written a generator that produces such lists, also by accessing Wikipedia (Bogost 2009).
- 11 See Harry Burke’s discussion, who acknowledges that “PDFs . . . gain authority by looking and functioning like a page” (Burke 2015). 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.

## Works cited

- Bajohr, Hannes. 2016a. “Das Reskilling der Literatur.” In *Code und Konzept: Literatur und das Digitale*. Edited by Hannes Bajohr, 7–21. Berlin: Frohmann.
- Bajohr, Hannes. 2016b. “Experimental Writing in Its Moment of Digital Technization: Post-Digital Literature and Print-on-Demand Publishing.” In *Publishing as Artistic Practice*. Edited by Annette Gilbert, 100–15. Berlin: Sternberg Press.
- Beckwith, Caleb. 2014. “Interview with J. Gordon Faylor.” *The Conversant*. <http://theconversant.org/?p=8426>.

- Bogost, Ian. 2009. "Latour Litanizer: Generate Your Own Latour Litanies." [http://bogost.com/writing/blog/latour\\_litanizer](http://bogost.com/writing/blog/latour_litanizer).
- Bogost, Ian. 2012. *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bootz, Philippe and Funkhouser, Christopher. 2014. "Combinatory and Automatic Text Generation." In *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Digital Media*. Edited by Marie-Laure Ryan, Lori Emerson, and Benjamin J. Robertson, 83–85. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Breeze, Mez. 2011. *Human Readable Messages*. Vienna: Traumawien.
- Burke, Harry. 2015. "Page Break." *Texte zur Kunst*. <https://www.textezurkunst.de/98/burke-page-break>.
- Carpenter, J. R. 2011. "Paradoxical Print Publishers TRAUMAWIEN." *Jacket2*. <http://jacket2.org/commentary/paradoxical-print-publishers-traumawien>.
- Cramer, Florian. 2013. "Post-Digital Writing." *Electronic Book Review*. <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/electropoetics/postal>.
- Duchamp, Marcel. 2008. *Duchamp Du Signe, Suivi de Notes*. Edited by Michael Sanouille and Paul Matisse. Paris: Flammarion.
- Duffy, Nikolai. 2016. "Reading the Unreadable: Kenneth Goldsmith, Conceptual Writing and the Art of Boredom." *Journal of American Studies* 50 (3): 679–98. doi:10.1017/S0021875814001248.
- Dworkin, Craig. 2011. "The Fate of Echo." In *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*. Edited by Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith, xxiii–liv. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Emerson, Lori. 2012. "Conceptual Poetry." In *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Edited by Roland Greene, 292–93. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Emerson, Lori. 2014. *Reading Writing Interfaces: From the Digital to the Bookbound*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Faylor, J. Gordon. 2016. "Lulu Freundlich." In *Code und Konzept: Literatur und das Digitale*. Edited by Hannes Bajohr, 217–19. Berlin: Frohmann.
- Feldman, Julia Pelta. 2015. "Gregor Weichbrodt: No Offense." <http://0x0a.li/de/gregor-weichbrodt-no-offense/>.
- Gallagher, Kelly. 2014. "Print-on-Demand: New Models and Value Creation." *Publishing Research Quarterly* 30 (2): 244–48. doi:10.1007/s12109-014-9367-2
- Gallagher, Kristen. 2013. "The Gauss Interview: Chris Alexander Talks to J. Gordon Faylor." *Jacket2*. <http://jacket2.org/commentary/gauss-interview>.
- Giffin, Lawrence. 2014. *Non Facit Saltus*. Oakland, CA: Gauss PDF.
- Gilbert, Annette. 2016. "Publishing as Artistic Practice." In *Publishing as Artistic Practice*. Edited by Annette Gilbert, 6–39. Berlin: Sternberg Press.
- Gitelman, Lisa. 2014. *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Goldsmith, Kenneth. 2011. *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Gross, Lukas. 2010. "Traumawien Statement February 2010." <http://traumawien.at/about/statement-february-2010.rtf>.
- Haugland, Ann. 2006. "Opening the Gates: Print On-Demand Publishing as Cultural Production." *Publishing Research Quarterly* 22 (3): 3–16. doi:10.1007/s12109-006-0019-z
- Hayles, N. Katherine. 2009. *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. 2012. *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Huff, Jason and Cabell, Mimi. 2012a. "American Psycho." [traumawien.at/prints/american-psycho](http://traumawien.at/prints/american-psycho).
- Huff, Jason and Cabell, Mimi. 2012b. *American Psycho*. Vienna: Traumawien.
- Keller, Jean. 2013a. "The Black Book." [www.lulu.com/shop/jean-keller/the-black-book/paperback/product-21008894.html](http://www.lulu.com/shop/jean-keller/the-black-book/paperback/product-21008894.html).
- Keller, Jean. 2013b. *The Black Book*. Morrisville, NC: Lulu Press.
- Kirschenbaum, Matthew G. 2012. *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Lin, Tan. 2014a. "Gauss PDF Interview with J. Gordon Faylor." *Harriet Blog*. May 4. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2014/05/gauss-pdf-interview-with-j-gordon-faylor>.
- Lin, Tan. 2014b. "Troll Thread Interview." *Harriet Blog*. May 4. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2014/05/troll-thread-interview>.
- Ludovico, Alessandro. 2012. *Post-Digital Print: The Mutation of Publishing since 1894*. Eindhoven/Rotterdam: Onomatopée 77.
- Luma Foundation. 2014. "Poetry Will Be Made by All" <http://poetrywillbemadebyall.com>.
- McLaughlin, Stephen. 2014. *Puniverse*. Vol. 1. Oakland, CA: Gauss PDF.
- Melgard, Holly. 2013. *Reimbursement*. Troll Thread.
- Ngai, Sianne. 2000. "Stuplimity: Shock and Boredom in Twentieth-Century Aesthetics." *Postmodern Culture* 10 (2). doi:10.1353/pmc.2000.0013.
- Perloff, Marjorie. 2010. *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Perlow, Seth. 2015. "The Conceptual War Machine: Agonism and the Avant-Garde." *Criticism* 57 (4): 659–83. doi:10.13110/criticism.57.4.0659
- Pressman, Jessica. 2009. "The Aesthetic of Bookishness in Twenty-First-Century Literature." *Michigan Quarterly Review* 48 (4): 465–82. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.act2080.0048.402>
- Price, Leah. 2009. "Reading as if for Life." *Michigan Quarterly Review* 48 (4): 1–10. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.act2080.0048.403>
- Rapp, David. 2011. "Print-on-Demand Meets Public Libraries." *Library Journal* 136 (22): 22.

- Soullelis, Paul. 2013. "Search, Compile, Publish." <http://soulellis.com/2013/05/search-compile-publish>.
- Spoerhase, Carlos. 2017. "Beyond the Book?" *New Left Review* 103 (1): 87–99.
- Tret'iakov, Sergei. 2006. "The Biography of the Object." *October* 118: 57–62.
- Trettien, Whitney Anne. 2013. "A Deep History of Electronic Textuality: The Case of *English Reprints Jhon Milton Areopagitica*." *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 7 (1). <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/7/1/000150/000150.html>
- Urbons, Klaus. 1993. *Copy Art: Kunst und Design mit dem Fotokopierer*. 2nd ed. Cologne: DuMont.
- Weichbrodt, Gregor. 2014a. "On the Road." <http://0x0a.li/en/text/on-the-road/>.
- Weichbrodt, Gregor. 2014b. *On the Road*. 0x0a.
- Weichbrodt, Gregor. 2015. *I Don't Know*. Berlin: Frohmann.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 2002. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Translated by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness, introduction by Bertrand Russell. London: Routledge.
- Yearous-Algozin, Joey. 2012. *9/11 911 Calls in 911 Pt. Font*. Troll Thread.
- Zeltil, Yigru. 2017. *A Bibliography of Conceptual Writing*. Bucharest: khora impex.