



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

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

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

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

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

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

1 Stephanie Syjuco, *Phantoms* (*H_RT_F D_RKN_SS*) and related works, accessed August 10, 2015, http://www.stephaniesyjuco.com/p_phantoms.html.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

POD as Post-Digital

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

5 Alessandro Ludovico, *Post-digital Print: The Mutation of Publishing since 1894* (Eindhoven/Rotterdam: Onomatopée 77, 2012), 29.

6 *Ibid.*, 153.

7 *Ibid.*, 70.

8 Melvin L. Alexenberg, *The Future of Art in a Postdigital Age: From Hellenistic to Hebraic Consciousness*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Intellect, 2011), 10; Florian Cramer, “What is ‘Post-Digital’?” *APRJA* 3, no. 1 (2014), accessed June 22, 2015, <http://www.aprja.net/?p=1318>, now also in:

David M. Berry and Michael Dieter, eds., *Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, Computation and Design* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 12–26. One could argue that in this interpretation, “post-digital” describes a pervasive cultural mood of discontent with the digital, as testified by the increasing ennoblement of the thing in art, theory, and everyday life. The rise of thing and materiality theories would then be the academic equivalent to the auratization of the post-digital, the handcrafted and artisanal, in the kind of tweed-and-embossed-cowhide semiotics that rose to the epitome of futurist style in the 2013 film *Her*, which seems so plausible a depiction of the future precisely because it so obviously announces the longing for tangible substance.

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

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

9 Cramer, “What is ‘Post-Digital?’”

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

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

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

Technization and the Post-Digital

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“after” the digital. Rather, they operate on different categorical planes: As a concept of reality/temporality, the digital is what is disclosed by the ambiguous ontology of the post-digital. With Vilém Flusser, one could call the post-digital object an *Unding*—an object suspended between ontological states.¹⁶

A book produced by POD technology has the potential to be a post-digital

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

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

18 *Ibid.*, 6.

19 www.gauss-pdf.com; www.traumawien.at; www.trollthread.tumblr.com; 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.

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

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

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

Infrathin Platforms: Gauss PDF, Troll Thread, 0x0a, Traumawien

This heterogeneity informs both the focus of investigation and the mode of production in a recent literary current that could be called post-digital literature, whose dissemination strategy combines digital publishing and POD. Notable authors include Holly Melgard, Joey Yearous-Algozin, Steve McLaughlin, and Gregor Weichbrodt; notable publishers are Gauss PDF in the US and Traumawien in Europe. Sometimes, the term “publisher” is avoided in favor of designations like “publishing collective,” as in the case of Troll Thread, or *Textkollektiv*, as with my own project, 0x0a.¹⁹

Whatever these entities call themselves, they execute the “publishing gesture”²⁰ 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.”²¹ J. Gordon Faylor, the operator of gauss-pdf.com,

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

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

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

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

²⁵ *Ibid.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

While the presentation of these entities might differ considerably—whereas Gauss PDF and Troll Thread are often intentionally obscure, rarely offering any description of their publications, OxOa and Traumawien tend to explain and interpret their work³²—there are some basic similarities that allow for grouping these platforms together: Apart from the dual publishing strategy of PDF file and POD book, they rely on the Internet as the sole medium of distribution, and combine elements of conceptual writing and generative electronic literature.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“A Genre unto Itself”: Elements of Post-Digital Literature

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

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

A) The Generative and the Conceptual Element

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

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

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

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

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

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

rejects this teleological trajectory; as I have shown, it rather highlights the connection between object and file, insisting on the work's status as post-digital *Unding*. Similarly, J. Gordon Faylor deems the association with conceptualism accidental,³⁶ 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."³⁷

These self-descriptions certainly must be taken with a grain of salt; they are more apt for some works than for others. For instance, Traumawien has professed a focus on "networked texts, algorithmic texts, interfictions, chatlogs, codeworks, software art and visual mashup prose,"³⁸ and published a book by Australian codeworks writer Mez Breeze, whose poetry appropriates the look and vocabulary of programming languages (*Human Readable Messages*, 2011). Conversely, a book like Lawrence Giffin's *Ex Tempore* (Troll Thread, 2011) seems to be what one could call an "old fashioned" conceptual writing project. Each of its 5000 lines contains nothing but the time of day, typed out manually by Giffin, over a period of 24 hours. It begins: "It is now 12:00:00 AM on October 28, 2011,"³⁹ and ends, 163 pages later: "It is now 11:59:59 PM on October 28, 2011."⁴⁰ Combining performance and self-constraint, it is written in the vein of Kenneth Goldsmith's *Soliloquy* (2001) and

Day (2003), in which Goldsmith wrote down everything he said in the span of a week, and retyped an entire edition of the New York Times, respectively.⁴¹ But simply by being published in the context of Troll Thread, the fact that *Ex Tempore* was typed—and not copied and pasted, or generated by code—is alternately highlighted and called into doubt, raising the suspicion that it was not produced in the asserted manual way (how to start exactly at 12 am? how to reach exactly 5000 lines?). This suspicion is enough to give it a post-digital status, making apparent the digital as a concept of re-ality, which *Day* did not (yet) have.

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

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

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

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

38 Gross, "Traumawien Statement."

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

40 *Ibid.*, 168.

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

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

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

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

If McLaughlin’s text achieves its expansiveness by a combinatory operation, another way to elicit such an overwhelming effect is to willingly offer only a slice of the vastness implicit in a concept. This is what is achieved by Gregor Weichbrodt’s generative work *I Don’t Know* (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?”⁴³

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?’”⁴⁴ 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?”⁴⁵ 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.”⁴⁶ And after having jumped, in truly Latourian fashion, from literature to book binding, to soccer, to architecture, and a plethora of other topics that are only connected through Wikipedia’s internal genus-species

43 Gregor Weichbrodt, *I Don’t Know* (0x0a/Frohmann Verlag, 2015), 4. 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.

44 Julia Pelta Feldman, “Gregor Weichbrodt: No Offense,” accessed November 5, 2015, <http://0x0a.li/en/gregor-weichbrodt-no-offense>.

45 Weichbrodt, *I Don’t Know*, 212.

46 Feldman, “Gregor Weichbrodt.”

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

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

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

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

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

B) The Factographic Element

⁴⁷ Ibid., 352.

⁴⁸ Lawrence Giffin, *Non Facit Saltus* (Troll Thread, 2014), 13.

⁴⁹ Ludovico, *Post-digital Print*, 98.

While relative document layouts, like Word files or epub, allow for a text to be “reflowed” responsively for every conceivable output device,⁴⁹ a PDF, just like the page of a book, is

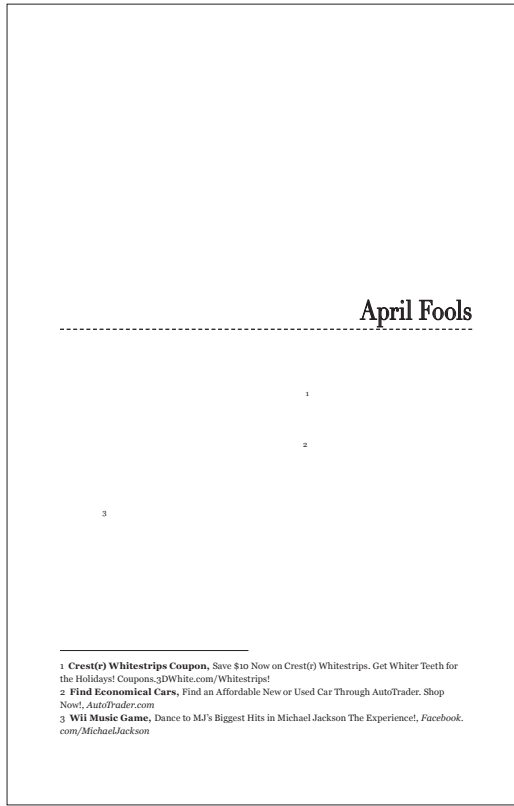


Fig. 1. Jason Huff and Mimi Cabell, *American Psycho* (Traumawien, 2012), 3.

absolute in its layout. The de-facto standard of commercial e-publishing, aimed at Kindles and iPads, is the 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.⁵⁰

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

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

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

American Psycho by Jason Huff and Mimi Cabell (Traumawien, 2012) plays on the relationship between three materializations of the text: The PDF and the POD book, and also the original layout of Brett Easton Ellis’s

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

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

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

54 *Ibid.*, 62.

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

American Psycho, on which both instantiations are based [fig. 1]. The entirety of Ellis’s novel was sent back and forth “between two Gmail accounts page by page.” Huff and Campbell then “saved the relational ads for each page and added them back into the text as footnotes. [...] The constellations of footnoted ads throughout these pages retell the story of *American Psycho* in absence of the original text.”⁵² While the main aim of their work is the privacy-encroaching advertising model that fuels the Google empire, *American Psycho*’s conceptual framework requires the closest possible resemblance between source and outcome, book, file, and POD.

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

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

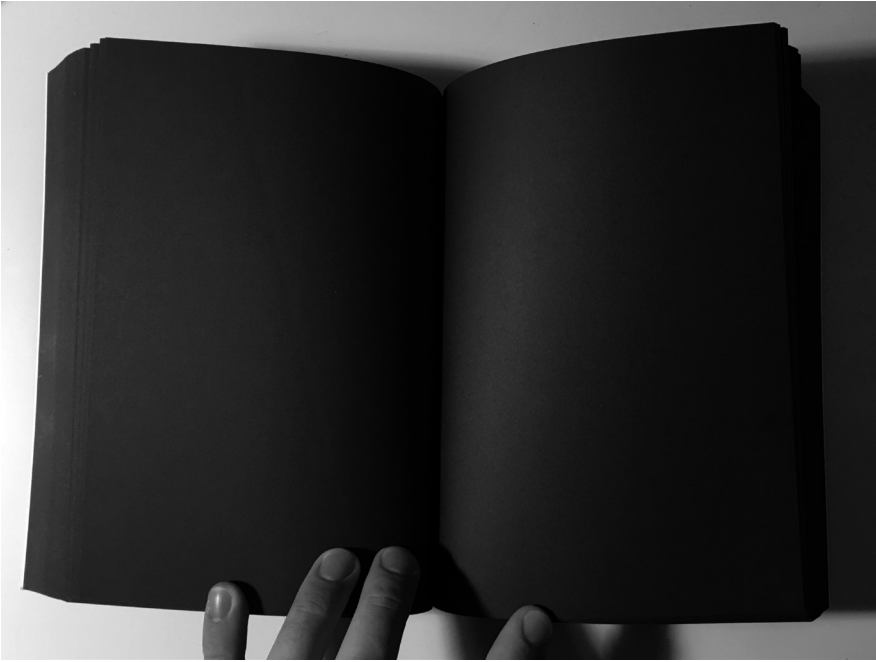


Fig. 2. Jean Keller, *The Black Book* (Lulu, 2013). Photo: Hannes Bajohr.

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

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

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

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

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

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.”⁵⁷

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.”⁵⁸ 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”⁵⁹—except the work being play, and the play being the gamble for the sustenance that makes the work possible in the first place. Both Melgard and Keller, then, employ an internal—institutional—critique of the seemingly liberating potential of POD; in the economy of the digital, the position of the writer is as precarious as ever, and just as dependent on access to the means of production.

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

57 Holly Melgard, *Reimbur\$ement* (Troll Thread, 2015), 4.

58 *Ibid.*

59 *Ibid.*