



Urgent Publishing

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Urgent Publishing

Publishing can be a slow business—frustratingly so when you want to participate in societal debates that evolve ever faster. That’s especially the case when you want to elevate such debates with high-quality materials—well-researched, well-designed, sustainable publications. It gets even more tantalising when you’re after a public outside your own (academic) bubble and want to build critical and communal audiences. In the project Making Public, these experiences and ambitions were the starting point for two years of experimentations and conceptualising around the notion of ‘urgent publishing.’ Over the course of the project, our thinking about time in the publishing process shifted from an understanding of urgency as a business asset into one referring primarily to ethical context.

How can a different approach to the timeframes or tempo of publishing help in building relevant publics for content? In the language of the research question: How to achieve an optimal balance between the speed, quality and positioning of a publishing project? In a media and publishing sphere dominated by breaking news, hype cycles and metrics, how do you keep up your quality standards and care for your publics, while also being part of ongoing societal debates? How can publishing in this context be a tool for critical community building?

Funded by Regieorgaan SIA, the Making Public project ran from 2018–2020 and brought together more than a dozen partners from education and research, publishing, design, and development.¹ It led to an exploration of the concept of ‘urgent publishing’—which of course has to do with time and speed, but first and foremost views publishing through the lens of *urgency*, thus asking: *Who* is your relevant audience? *Why* do you publish (why now, in this form and for whom?)? What is your publishing *doing*? How can such urgent publishing be an act of sharing, collaborating, commoning, and care?

The research was most of all practical and experimental, so it was carried out through the *making* of publications and prototypes. The project resulted in three prototypes, each addressing a different aspect of urgent publishing. One focussed on the need for mutual support among small (online) publishers through the development of a semi-automated tool for sharing content across platforms. Another prototype aimed to involve readers in unearthing content in the publishing archives of periodicals, thus prolonging the ‘afterlife’ of publications, making content relevant again in new contexts. And finally, a manual was developed for editing non-linear narrative, which allows for less directive or steering storytelling, translating urgency to the conceptual level of narrative ordering.

Great care was put into the publishing of the results of the project itself, which, true to the rationale of urgent publishing, were disseminated in different formats and for different publics. The final publication came out in paperback form (and open access, of course) but was first published as a weekly newsletter. This way we aimed to build an intimate connection to the audience by coming straight to their inbox and by using time in a different way than usual. After signing up, the readers would receive one chapter per week, thus stimulating a non-hasty approach to the content and its promotion, while at the same time benefitting from a stretched-out momentum for the project.

A more formal experimentation was undertaken with the special issue of the Pervasive Labour Union zine, which gathered materials around the Urgent Publishing conference that took place May 15–17, 2019. Online video documentation of that event is also available. This APRIA special issue brings together peer-reviewed articles that dive deeper into the question of what urgent publishing might be and do and is the result of a reflective process that took place after the project was officially finished in 2020.

In order to answer the question of what urgent publishing is in theory and practice, Florian Cramer makes a comparison of two highly popular contemporary ‘urgent publishers’ who deal with societal

debate and critique: the author and YouTuber Jordan Peterson and Natalie Wynn of the ContraPoints YouTube channel. The two could not be more opposed ideologically, yet at the same time, both understand how to operate in the digital sphere, unlike many others. This sphere most of all values that which can be memed. So even though Peterson and Wynn distribute long-form, information-heavy online content that demands time and attention from the audience, they are also attuned to the fast and furious meme-sphere. And while academics work for years on writing the books that counter falsehoods in Peterson's rendition of theory, his hours-long videos can be uploaded and shared within an instant.

Cramer identifies five characteristics that are on display here: 'speed, reach, tapping into existing subcultures, partisanship, meme-ability.' If Jordan Peterson and Natalie Wynn both serve as examples of urgent publishing—which also goes to show that urgency in itself isn't restricted to one side of the public debate—there might be something that can be learned about why traditional publishing seems so non-urgent: 'The non-urgency of a publication can perhaps best be defined as a situation in which the urgency for the creator is not the same as for the reader; where, in other words, no communal urgency defines a publication and the act of publishing.'

In his contribution, Paul Soulellis goes deep into urgent publishing as artistic practice, and, more importantly, as communal practice. It is a lecture delivered on different occasions, most recently at the Contemporary Artists' Book Conference in New York. In this sense, it may be regarded as a form playing with urgency itself. Soulellis argues that urgent publishing should also be seen in an artistic context as primarily a tool for and of community building. Publishing is a political act and without political or communal urgency; there is no urgent publishing to speak of. He discusses different historical examples of activist publishing that took on many different forms to establish an urgent publishing tradition that we can learn from in our current times of crises and political upheaval.

Soulellis highlights how the publishing and distribution process was part of these examples of community building, even though this has often been left aside in analyses or in artistic valuations. Soulellis makes clear that urgent publishing has always been about building community, about mutual aid within a highly political context. Even if it functions strongly within capitalism, it is also empowering: 'Because while publishing can most certainly be a tool of the oppressor, the ability to circulate stories and information in public space is also one of the superpowers of the underserved.'

In that way, urgent publishing is not primarily about making a product, but should be seen as a possibility for intervention. It is not just documentation, but often a starting point, just as The Combahee River Collective's Barbara Smith's way of 'photocopying of the radical text and delivering it in person—"coming prepared" to a new audience—was both casual and urgent, and probably didn't look or feel like publishing in the moment. But it was a necessary and timely act of dissemination.'

In the non-linear essay 'A Vade Mecum of Urgent Editing,' Miriam Rasch invites the reader to pay attention to an often overlooked in the publishing process: the editor. Moreover, the reader is offered the chance to become final editor of the piece themselves by jumping through the different sections, following their intuition, and thus foregrounding editorial choices. In doing so, the form of the essay displays the need to think about editing as an act of making connections and of fabricating a story.

In traditional publishing, the ideal editor remained invisible, shying away from publicity and withdrawing from the text altogether (with a few star editor exceptions). Instead, urgent editing affirms the position of the editor and allows the editorial work to remain visible or traceable. Urgent editors play a vital part in their tending to community and the possible different positions a publication can take up within different publics. Such urgent editing doesn't

work towards a finished product, which can drop off the end of a value chain but sees the publication as a live entity that can act as an intervention, making things happen and doing something in the world.

Labor Neunzehn are a Berlin-based collective who delivered a workshop at the Urgent Publishing conference around their project ‘ASAB—All Sources Are Broken.’ It may be regarded as a case study of another important time factor in publishing, which pertains to the afterlife of publications. Urgent publishing also means caring about your publications and readers after the first celebratory book launch, and especially after the publication has been followed up by one, two or numerous others.

Labor Neunzehn focus on what could be called the network of a book, made up of the constellation of references used in the book that often remains stuffed away in footnotes or long bibliographical lists. This network that surrounds the work is further brought to life by each reader that engages with it: ‘ASAB’s editorial flow fosters the creation of parallel narratives starting from the reading and rereading paths contributed by the users.’ The different technologies used in tracing, opening and following up on references are important. By highlighting these as an articulate afterthought, the book itself appears again as a technology. In that way, the materiality of a work and how it lives

among its readers is brought to light. Urgency here also resides in the ‘cracks, leaks, drifts and open spaces,’ those places where the book opens itself and asks for a response. It challenges us to ‘rethink the margins not as cracks to be repaired but as new openings waiting to be expanded,’ demanding a slowing down of the encounter one has with a publication.

Urgent publishing is a publishing that always involves community and a tending to the network (both online and offline). It resists the one-off commodified publishing object and always asks what comes next and what came before. This journal issue may be viewed like that as well. It is a ‘cut’ that has been made in the ongoing flow of a community of thinkers and makers working in the broad field of urgent publishing. In that sense, it is part of an afterlife of a project that is still very much alive and hopefully leads to new insights, or even practices, in the time to come. Time is on our side.

Footnotes

- 1 See <https://networkcultures.org/makingpublic/> for a list of all partners, links to all publications and prototypes, and an archive of the project.

Miriam Rasch

Miriam Rasch is a writer, researcher, and lecturer, and was project lead for the two-year research project Making Public. She works as research coordinator at the Willem de Kooning Academy, after having worked at the Institute of Network Cultures (Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences) for eight years.

She's also a freelance critic and essayist. Her book on life in post-digital times, *Zwemmen in de oceaan: Berichten uit een postdigitale wereld*, was published in 2017 by De Bezige Bij. In 2018 *Shadowbook: Writing Through the Digital 2014-2018* was released, an (open-access) collection of experimental essays. In May 2020, *Frictie: Ethiek in tijden van dataïsme*, her book on data ethics and the possibilities of deautomation came out. It was awarded the Socrates Cup for the best philosophical book of the year.

A Vade Mecum of Urgent Editing

Abstract

Urgent publishing links speed and relevance, as it moves across contexts. This is asserted through a situated, relational practice—it is in the midst of things. Comparably, the editor is often understood as being an ‘intermediary,’ meaning they work in the space between author and text and reader, between publisher, production, and printed matter. They bring out the best possible realisation of the intention or goal of the publication; rationalising it, putting it in context, relating it to public debate, literary history, or stakeholders. Often, the editor and the editorial work remain invisible to the outside, and are supposed to. This invisibility even extends to discussions about (innovating, digitising) the publishing process.

There is plenty of discussion about design, revenues, marketing, software, tools, and the role of the author, but what about the intermediary between all of those? At most, we often hear that in the age of social media and self-publishing, no one needs an editor anymore. Moderators, fact-checkers, and coders are the new intermediaries, and in the end the editor will surely lose their job to automation. This too makes it urgent for the editing profession to reconsider their role. This experimental (and experiential) essay offers some ideas about what that role could be, conceived from the perspective of urgent publishing.

Download the print issue of this article [here](#)
For the article in Twine see [here](#)

What Is Urgent Publishing?

Abstract

Publishing is increasingly being challenged through instantaneous social media publishing, even in the fields of scholarship and cultural, philosophical and political debate. Memetic self-publishers, such as the right-wing 'YouTube intellectual' Jordan Peterson and his left-wing counterpart Natalie Wynn, seem to tap into urgent needs that traditional publishing fails to identify and address. Does their practice amount to a new form of urgent publishing? How is it different from non-urgent publishing on the one hand and from propaganda on the other? Which urgencies can be addressed by urgent publishing? What is the role of artists and designers in it?

Publishing as Propaganda

To begin with an example: at the end of 2020, the psychology professor and political influencer Jordan Peterson had 3.3 million YouTube subscribers and up to 6.9 million individual views of his videos.¹ Peterson's political message could be broadly characterised as traditionalist conservatism that resorts to mythology and its (controversial) use in C.G. Jung's early twentieth-century psychology² to back up its opposition to 'political correctness' and 'postmodernism' (in Peterson's own words), or, more generally, to feminism and intersectional politics respectively.³ He effectively continues a discourse that begun in the late 1980s with Allan Bloom's book *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*, using the same targets and similar arguments.

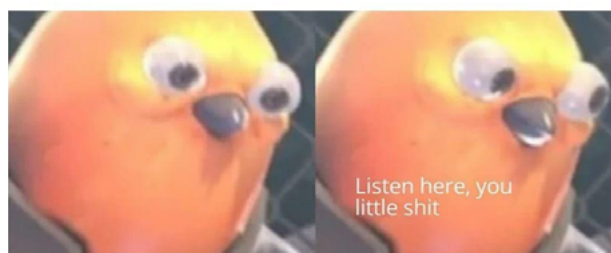
A good example is the video lecture 'Political Correctness and Postmodernism',⁴ in which he explains that 'political correctness is a paradoxical amalgam of postmodernism,

which originated as a form of philosophy and literary criticism, and Marxism or Neo-Marxism,' and—problematically—identifies Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida as postmodernism's intellectual leaders.⁵ Peterson's characterisation of postmodernism as a 'nihilistic doctrine' is largely in line with Allan Bloom's earlier remarks on 'deconstruction' and other politically conservative critiques of (what could best be characterised as) the left-wing American academic reception of French poststructuralist theory.⁶ However, Peterson reaches a much wider audience than Bloom did. *The New York Times* even called him 'the most influential public intellectual in the Western world right now.'⁷ Peterson is also popular among those art school students who reject feminist, de-colonial and intersectional curricula. This was epitomised in a meme created by a teacher at Rotterdam's Willem de Kooning Academy in May 2020:

Me: (prepares reading list and lecture and assignment on depatriarchalizing design)

Student: I think women should be subservient to men because Jordan Peterson and the Bible say so

Me: There's a teaching moment here.
Also me:



From the Instagram account
@wdka.teachermemes

Both Peterson's YouTube videos and the meme reactions to them could be characterised as forms, and ways, of publishing that meet existing popular demand. On top of that, they are built on formats and networks outside traditional publishing. Even if one

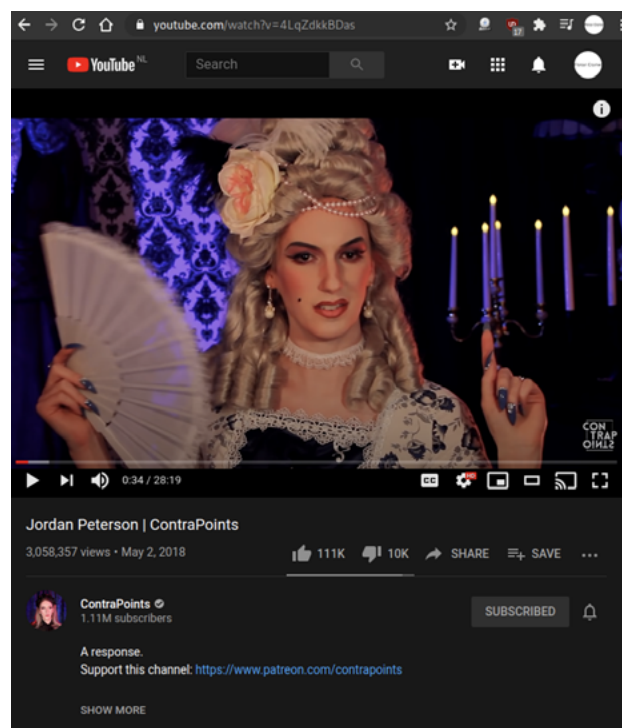
doubts Peterson's intellectual depth,⁸ he is—whether one likes it or not—the first global YouTube ‘intellectual,’ someone who rose to fame through his self-produced YouTube videos, not print publications. Peterson's YouTubing does not exist in isolation but is part of a larger ‘alt-right’ discourse and network that includes, for example, the former *VICE* journalist and founder of the militant right-wing street fight organisation Proud Boys, Gavin McInnes. (Among others, Peterson appeared in 2016 on McInnes' YouTube talk show under the headline ‘Prof. Jordan Peterson: “Bloody neo-Marxists have invaded the campuses”.’⁹) Peterson's videos take up central alt-right talking points—such as the ‘manosphere’ view of traditional gender roles, the conspiracy narrative of ‘cultural Marxism,’ and the meme Pepe the Frog—normalise them into mainstream conservative discourse, and give his social media audience the feeling that what they otherwise know only through trolling and meme subculture is scholarly sanctioned.



Jordan Peterson (in the middle). From the Twitter account @jordanbpeterson

Peterson's success factors can be summed up as follows:

- 1 Speed, thanks to the immediacy of YouTube as a publishing medium, in contrast to traditional publishing;
- 2 Reach, thanks to the ubiquity of YouTube/the internet;
- 3 Tapping into existing subcultures and popular desires, discourses and concerns (as opposed to scholars, mainstream news media, and traditional publishers who are not in touch with them);
- 4 Partisanship; dividing the audience into either followers or adversaries;
- 5 Meme-ability; where the quality of a statement lies less in its reasoning or consistency, but its potential to ‘go viral.’



Natalie Wynn, from the YouTube channel *ContraPoints*, discussing Jordan Peterson.

These success factors also apply to publishers in the opposite political camp, such as the transgender YouTuber Natalie Wynn, who posts her lavishly and elaborately produced videos on issues such as Cancel Culture, gender, and Peterson himself on her channel

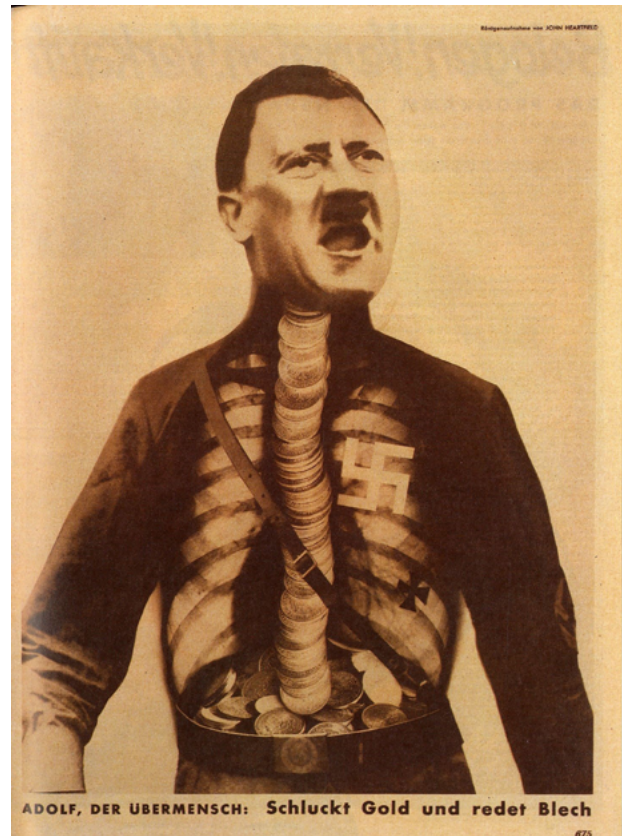
ContraPoints, where they have up to 3.8 million individual views.¹⁰ From 2017, when the channel was launched, to the end of the 2010s, ContraPoints was a rare, if not unique, case of a politically non- and anti-right-wing medium using the internet's popular visual culture of memes, subcultural slang and social media personalities, in a time when most liberal and left-wing media refused this aesthetic as being propagandistic, 'fake news,' and tainted by the extreme right. ContraPoints thus disproved the popular assumption that 'the left can't meme.'¹¹

Do the above five points—speed, reach, tapping into existing subcultures, partisanship, meme-ability—amount to criteria for, or even a definition, of urgent publishing?¹² All five points are typical characteristics of propaganda—not only the political propaganda of totalitarian regimes but also, for example, anti-Catholic propaganda in the European Reformation age and Counter-Reformation propaganda of the Catholic Church.¹³ Even visual meme propaganda pre-existed in Reformation and Counter-Reformation propaganda emblems and fly-poster caricatures.



'I am the Pope.' - Anti-Catholic meme, sixteenth century.

That the production of propaganda (or counter-propaganda) memes can be a critical publishing practice has been exemplified, among other places, in Berlin Dadaism and John Heartfield's photomontages of the 1920s:



John Heartfield, 'Adolf, the Übermensch: Swallows gold and talks garbage,' 1932. © 2019 Heartfield Community of Heirs. All Rights Reserved.

But ultimately, this discussion dates back to the political-philosophical and ethical debate on the validity of rhetoric (as a school of persuasion, seduction and propaganda) versus logic/dialectics (as a school of finding the truth through sound reasoning) that, in Western culture, was first articulated by Plato. In the *Phaedrus*, he concludes that rhetoric can only be justified when it is firmly based on dialectics; when, in other words, it helps to make a logically sound argument more persuasive. Since Plato articulated this position in the period of the decline of Athenian democracy,¹⁴ it has gained new relevance in

the present day of globally surging fascist populisms.

Is rhetoric, in its contemporary forms of memes and YouTube influencer videos, principally problematic as the language of fake news and ‘alternative facts,’ and is it only acceptable when it helps communicating the truth—a scientific truth that has been established on the basis of logical reasoning by respected authorities? Is democracy being undermined by propaganda, or is it conversely necessary to replace with a regime of experts? These questions have become even more urgent with the coronavirus crisis, and in that sense, Plato’s questions are surprisingly timely, despite having been articulated 2,400 years ago.

This old dispute between dialectics and rhetoric is now being re-enacted, as a dispute between traditional politics and publishing media on the one hand, and populist politicians and memers/influencers on the other. It also exists in academia as a dispute between analytical philosophy (which continues and radicalises Plato’s position of logic being the only valid form of argumentation) versus continental philosophy and critical theory (which, in its social-constructivist schools, has rhetoric and subjective experience as its foundations and argues that truth is never as objective as it seems, but also shaped by social powers). This extends into an opposition of scientific research paper publishing versus popular—and populist—visual culture and social media publishing.

This opposition is most clearly visible in the current societal debate on the Covid-19 pandemic. The (often alt right-affiliated) Covid-19 ‘sceptics’ alternatively claim that the virus is not real, that its harmfulness is being exaggerated, that it can be better fought with alternative remedies, and that

both quarantine measures and vaccinations are the product of a global conspiracy. Since rational scientific method and logical argumentation seem to be the only way of countering these positions, with rhetoric being—along the lines of Plato—used to support them, the Covid-19 crisis forced continental philosophy and critical theory to either align themselves with analytical and scientific discourse, or to side—like (Giorgio Agamben)—with the ‘sceptic’ camp and thereby cast doubt on its soundness.¹⁵

The corresponding question for artists, designers, cultural workers, producers of popular visual culture would be: am I just supposed to create ‘good’ propaganda for knowledge and discourses in whose development I wasn’t involved (but which were created by, among others, virologists and policymakers) in order to amplify, in line with Plato, a given, sound logical argument with persuasive visual rhetoric? Does urgency, and urgent publishing, exhaust itself in that, and thus ultimately boil down to illustration? Will the art schools that educate these visual culture workers and publishers just play their due role in the Dutch and other higher vocational/polytechnical education systems, where they are, according to government policy, supposed to (merely) receive research knowledge from traditional universities and put it into practice, but instead be involved in developing research knowledge themselves?

Rephrasing Urgent Publishing

To get out of this impasse, and out of being stuck in repeating Plato’s argument, it might help to flip the question of what urgent publishing is: if urgent publishing differs from publishing in general, there must also be non-urgent publishing. But what would be examples and a working definition of non-urgent publishing? And could we use its

characteristics to define urgent publishing ex negativo?

The difficulty in answering these questions lies in the nature of urgency: it is neither set in stone nor universal. If one chooses, for example, telephone books as a seemingly evident form of non-urgent publishing, one would overlook the fact that a telephone book may be a literal life-saver for a person in a particular situation (such as finding an emergency number while having no internet access). Conversely for visual culture producers, receiving a design commission for telephone books may be of critical financial importance.

The non-urgency of a publication can perhaps best be defined as a situation in which the urgency for the creator is not the same as for the reader; where, in other words, no communal urgency defines a publication and the act of publishing. A PhD thesis, for example, always has individual urgency—that of gaining an academic title and qualification—but not necessarily communal urgency, i.e., if the urgency of the thesis exhausts itself in obtaining the title, but it otherwise remains virtually ignored in some university archive. On the other hand, a zine written out of personal urgency (such as, for example, struggling with a queer coming out) and published in an edition of five copies with the hope of finding only one person who shares the publisher's feelings is defined by communal urgency.

In art and research publishing, most forms of ritualistic publishing are non-urgent in the above sense: while they are urgent for individuals or a project group to retroactively legitimise their work, that urgency is rarely communal in the sense of being shared outside their own project. Publications that are made out of institutional logic and

legitimation, but for which there is no wider community urgency, include the majority of catalogues, research papers, conference proceedings, academic journals that primarily serve scholars' needs to meet ranking and evaluation criteria, as well as showcase, prestige and other PR publications, no matter if these are books, periodicals, blogs, podcasts or YouTube videos.

In unsubsidised commercial publishing, any book or periodical that is primarily a coffee table publication, or any other publication to be shelved away after, at best, a superficial reading, is by definition non-urgent. While non-urgent publications of any kind may still gain urgency in future contexts and circumstances, in most cases they were not developed from and with a larger community and its self-defined urgent issues and articulations.

Therefore, successful propaganda is always urgent publishing; but not all forms of urgent publishing are propaganda.

When revisiting the previous five criteria of speed, reach, tapping into existing subcultures, partisanship and meme-ability with a focus on communal urgency, the picture—and definitions—become more nuanced:

- 1 While urgency always somehow implies speed, or at least timeliness, the corresponding criterion for communal urgency cannot be quantitative but needs to be qualitatively measured (and could, in some cases and situations, even entail intentional slowdown and delay). In other words, the criterion is *responsiveness*, rather than merely speed.
- 2 Likewise, reach needs to be a qualitative, rather than quantitative, criterion when applied to communal urgency, in the sense of a publication (or an act of

- publishing) that actually reaches the community for which it is meaningful.
- 3 Instead of merely tapping into existing subcultures and their desires, the publication and the act of publishing emerges from communities and their needs.
 - 4 While partisanship is not necessarily the criterion or intended effect of a publication in its intended community—or, put differently: reaching a community does not need to mean alienating others—but *identification* remains crucial.
 - 5 Meme-ability, while being helpful as urgency metrics, depends on the particular community and discourse for which the act of publishing and the publication is meant. While a meme that goes viral is urgent publishing by definition, not all forms and acts of urgent publishing are viral memes; but at least they spread ‘peer-to-peer’ within their communities.¹⁶

To avoid misunderstandings: these five modified criteria do *not* amount to criteria of ethically ‘good’ communal urgent publishing versus ‘bad’ propaganda publishing. For example, both Jordan Peterson’s and Natalie Wynn’s/ContraPoints’ YouTube videos fulfil not only the five criteria of propagandistic urgent publishing but also those of communal urgent publishing through their combination of propaganda-style meme tactics and psychological self-help. Even a crass Neo-Nazi propaganda website such as The Daily Stormer ticks all the above boxes, which may explain why it has been more successful than more traditional Neo-Nazi websites; the same, of course, is true for image boards such as 4chan and 8chan/8kun and the ‘QAnon’ conspiracy myth that emerged on them.¹⁷ All these examples fulfil all five criteria of propaganda urgent publishing as well as at least two of the five criteria of communal urgent publishing; or,

more precisely, they work as propaganda catalysts for communities which further elaborate those stories, visuals and memes in communal acts of urgent publishing.

The Larger Picture

In all the above examples, the notion and definition of ‘publishing’ was kept deliberately broad. This is, in my opinion, necessary for opening up space for radical imaginations and re-imaginings of publishing in times of fundamental changes in media, communication and visual culture; re-imaginings in which artists and designers need to play a role. The urgent publishing of the Berlin Dadaists broke with fine art and materially engaged with the urgent publishing media of their time—newspapers and tabloids, which, in the 1920s, often appeared with three issues per day, and political leaflets—re-imagining these both in form and content. ContraPoints is doing (structurally) the same with today’s YouTube propaganda.

Publishing, then, includes any act of making something public—including street interventions and performances and low-resolution meme images, for example¹⁸—but one that, in most cases, travels over a distance and can be archived. Aside from these technical characteristics, publishing has informational and educational aspects. This includes the use of internet meme images and YouTube videos as educational resources for self-study,¹⁹ which explains Jordan Peterson’s and Natalie Wynn’s respective success. Major intellectuals and philosophers of the twentieth century, including Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt, published mainly in journalistic periodicals after their academic careers had been cut off, which was unfortunate for them personally, but not for their readership and for the public role of the humanities. Other philosophers (from Adorno and Heidegger to Slavoj Žižek and Judith Butler) followed

suit by lecturing on radio and television and publishing in newspapers, but to date have remained stuck in these classical editorial mass media.

An early example of memetic urgent propaganda publishing was the controversial ‘Zeitgeist’ videos published on YouTube from 2007 to 2011 by the designer and activist Peter Joseph. Originally produced in close neighbourhood to the later alt-right personality Alex Jones’ Infowars (by reusing entire segments from Jones’ documentary *Terrorstorm*), they spun a conspiracy narrative and ‘post-scarcity’ economic vision that instigated a homonymous ‘Zeitgeist movement.’ In 2011 and 2012, Zeitgeist activists played central roles in the Occupy movement, both in New York and Europe. Zeitgeist may, therefore, be called an early (or perhaps even, the first) example of internet-based theory construction in which memetics and viral success acted as editorial filters and thus replaced peer review.

This form of urgent publishing has created a problem for academics, artists, designers and journalists who have not been educated or trained in this system and logic, but in peer reviews, group critiques, editorial boards and institutional curatorship. The political takeaway of the 2016 Trump elections, that ‘the left can’t meme,’ could at that time be rephrased as ‘artists, designers and academics can’t meme.’ Both are no longer true if one looks at contemporary political activism—with ContraPoints being just one example—or, in the Netherlands, at the anonymous meme accounts run by students and teachers of particular art schools, such as ‘wdkamemes’ and ‘wdka.teachermemes’ for the Willem de Kooning Academy Rotterdam (the first picture in this article was taken from the latter) and ‘kabkmemes’ for the Royal Academy of Art, The Hague.

The examples and definitions of urgency I used to this point included societal and political urgency, personal urgency and (in the case of Zeitgeist and Occupy) economic urgency; but they should also include—among others—aesthetic urgency (for which tattoo culture is a good example of an urgent publishing practice) and technological urgency (with, among others, free/open-source software as a form of urgent publishing).



Still from René van Zundert’s documentary *Thuisprikkers* (‘Home Tattooers’), showing a self-taught, unlicensed discount tattoo artist running his home studio in Rotterdam’s Tarwewijk.

In both arts and design and in academic research, there is a lack of courage for *not* doing something because it either lacks urgency or addresses an issue in a structurally wrong way. A good example for such courage is, in my opinion, the 2012 social design project ‘WIJkonomie’ (a pun on ‘we-conomy’ and ‘neighbourhood economy’) in Rotterdam’s economically disadvantaged neighbourhood Tarwewijk. The architects Theo Deutinger, Stefanos Filippas, Elisa Mante and Ana Rita Marques had been hired to improve local conditions, but gave up after having researched the area:

Four architects spending two months of thinking about Tarwewijk and spending three weeks physically in Tarwewijk does not make any difference.

The people of Tarwewijk have seen a lot of people like us come and go. Well-educated groups with high-flying plans, spreading hope for a prosperous future. When they are gone, life in Tarwewijk is more miserable than before. All expectations and trust by the people of Tarwewijk did disappear with the people foreign to the place.

Tarwewijk does not need us to know what to do; Tarwewijk knows exactly what to do. Do it yourself Tarwewijk! We propose a project stop, a concept stop and a subsidy stop for initiatives from outside of Tarwewijk. The people of Tarwewijk know how to do things; they know how to start a business, they know how to work around regulations. We trust in the power of the people in Tarwewijk.²⁰

This example shows how urgency, and one's true capability of living up to it, is an important self-evaluation criterion. For less experienced people, however, it could also be suffocating. Art and design educators are faced with the dilemma that they want and need to foster urgent work (as opposed to art and design that is, for example, just complacent and decorative), but at the same time need to give room, especially in undergraduate education, for 'pre-urgency': the opportunity for students to develop their voice and experiment without urgency as a hard requirement. Correspondingly, there can be 'post-urgency' in works of artists and designers. Examples could include Andy Warhol, who—after enabling a queer and underground community in his Factory period and surviving Valerie Solanas' gun assault—became a high-society artist who factually printed his celebrity portraits as money; or Nam June Paik, who resorted, after having radically deconstructed and

re-imagined electronic mass media in the 1960s and 1970s, to building decorative video sculptures, which allowed him a better lifestyle than the unheated lofts that had ruined his health.

The crisis of traditional publishing and media industries may be explained with the high amount of non-urgent publishing it involves, while urgent publishing conversely moved on to other channels (including memes, YouTube, zines). And, to clarify again, 'urgent publishing' by itself does not say anything about the quality, let alone the ethics, of a publication or act of publishing; it only describes its performativity.²¹ The subject matters and visual-cultural language of YouTube 'truthers,' Covid-19 deniers and trolls of any kind are urgent, otherwise they would not find their audiences—and the subscriber numbers of even semi-obscure YouTubers would not exceed those of large newspapers by a factor of ten and more.

When I moved to the Netherlands in 2006, before the financial crisis and the slashing of Dutch public art funding, I subjectively experienced most contemporary Dutch art—particularly what could be seen at art schools graduation shows—as lacking urgency and tending to be visually decorative.²² The unfortunate and perhaps perverse logic of social, economic and political crisis and divides is that they re-instill urgency into arts and publishing practices, as the aforementioned examples from the Weimar Republic to Trumpist America demonstrate. In these times, the criteria I proposed for a working definition of urgent publishing—responsiveness, reaching intended communities, emerging from communities and their needs, fostering identification, and (to some extent) spreading virally—will hopefully become subject to discussions, critique, improvement and alternatives.

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Footnotes

- 1 According to the view numbers on Jordan B Peterson, YouTube Channel, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCL_f53ZEJxp8TtL0kHwMV9Q. More than three million copies of his self-help book *12 Rules for Life* were sold, according to Jordan Peterson, 'Q & A 2019 01 January,' YouTube, January 13, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mXPmLZRAPSo>.
- 2 I.e., Jungian archetypes. For a comprehensive critique of Jung, see Don McGowan, *What Is Wrong with Jung?* (New York: Prometheus, 1994.)
- 3 Intersectionality is a form of politics that considers racism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination and suppression being not as isolated from each other but as interrelated. The term was coined and explicated by Crenshaw.
- 4 Jordan Peterson, 'Jordan Peterson—Political Correctness and Postmodernism,' YouTube, September 12, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f5rUPatnXSE>.
- 5 This is a questionable characterisation, since philosophical postmodernism began in 1979 with Jean-François Lyotard, with Wittgenstein (rather than structuralism) as a

- theoretical foundation. Conversely, neither Derrida nor Foucault used the term 'postmodern' in or for their philosophies.
- 6 Characterised by Allan Bloom as follows: 'The interpreter's creative activity is more important than the text; there is no text, only interpretation.' *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1988), p. 235. Curiously, this describes hermeneutics, in its modern schools, better than deconstruction (which was often seen as anti-hermeneutical). Peterson characterises 'postmodernism' in the same way, as a philosophy that considers meaning infinitely interpretable, although Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) is not about this subject. Peterson thus conflates poststructuralism and postmodernism.
- 7 See David Brooks, 'Opinion: The Jordan Peterson Moment,' *The New York Times*, January 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/25/opinion/jordan-peterson-moment.html>.
- 8 Since, for example, his take on Jacques Derrida's deconstruction appears to be superficial at best, at worst not even based on first-hand reading. (See footnotes five and six above.)
- 9 Gavin McInnes, 'Rebel News. Prof. Jordan Peterson: "Bloody Neo-Marxists Have Invaded the Campuses",' YouTube, November 5, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_Kfm_qWpN0.
- 10 According to the view numbers on Wynn's YouTube page.
- 11 According to knowyourmeme.com, 'The Left Can't Meme [...] is believed to have been created on /pol/ [a subforum of the website 4chan] and rose to prominence during the 2016 United States Presidential Election.'
- 12 An historical footnote: in all these five points, Peterson follows in the footsteps of another Canadian scholar and political conservative, Marshall McLuhan (only that McLuhan's electronic medium was television, not the internet).
- 13 Cross-reference to the previous footnote: not only was McLuhan a devout Catholic, his 'global village' was a literal riff, via James Joyce, on the Pope's annual prayer 'Urbi et Orbi' ('for the city and the globe').
- 14 Leaving aside the issue of Athenian democracy not being a democracy, but an oligarchy, by today's political standards.
- 15 Agamben is a prominent contemporary philosopher whose works—building on Michel Foucault—analyse how human life is controlled by political powers. From this background, he argued in 2020 that '[i]t is almost as if with terrorism exhausted as a cause for exceptional measures, the invention of an epidemic offered the ideal pretext for scaling them up beyond any limitation.'
- 16 A good example being El Paquete in Cuba, a 1TB hard drive of popular movies, TV shows and music that is updated every week and gets copied and distributed across Cuba because of the absence of broadband internet.
- 17 Covered in more detail in Florian Cramer and Wu Ming 1, 'Blank Space QAnon. On the Success of a Conspiracy Fantasy as a Collective Text Interpretation Game,' *GIAP*, November 2020, <https://www.wumingfoundation.com/giap/blank-space-qanon>.
- 18 For an early reflection on the digital 'poor image' as visual culture production, see Hito Steyerl, 'In Defense of the Poor Image,' *E-Flux Journal*, vol. 10 (2009), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.
- 19 Years ago, a theory curriculum coordinator of a Dutch art school told me that she prefers learning cultural theory from YouTube videos to reading books.
- 20 Quoted in Theo Deutinger, 'We Don't Trust You Architects—Review on the WIJkonomie Project for Tarwewijk in Rotterdam,' *TD Architects*, August 14, 2012, <http://td-architects.eu>.
- 21 Or, to borrow from Peirce, via Diedrich Diederichsen's theory of 'post-popular arts,' its indexicality.

- 22 On the popular contemporary Dutch art blog Trendbeheer, many examples of such art can still be found.

Reframe the Network: *Parallel Narratives and Media Obsolescence as Post-Digital Publishing Practice*

Abstract

In this article, we try to outline the philosophical and technical background that informs the architecture of our web-based project ‘All Sources Are Broken,’ an online publishing platform that enables cross-referencing media, as well as an artistic experiment about the archive and hyperlink obsolescence.¹ We also address the artistic practices that contribute to defining the project as a decelerated post-digital strategy, in order to frame it within the context of what we feel like is the main urgency in the scope of information systems today: media and self-education and cultural activism.

‘A book read by a thousand
different people is a
thousand different books.’

Andrei Tarkovsky

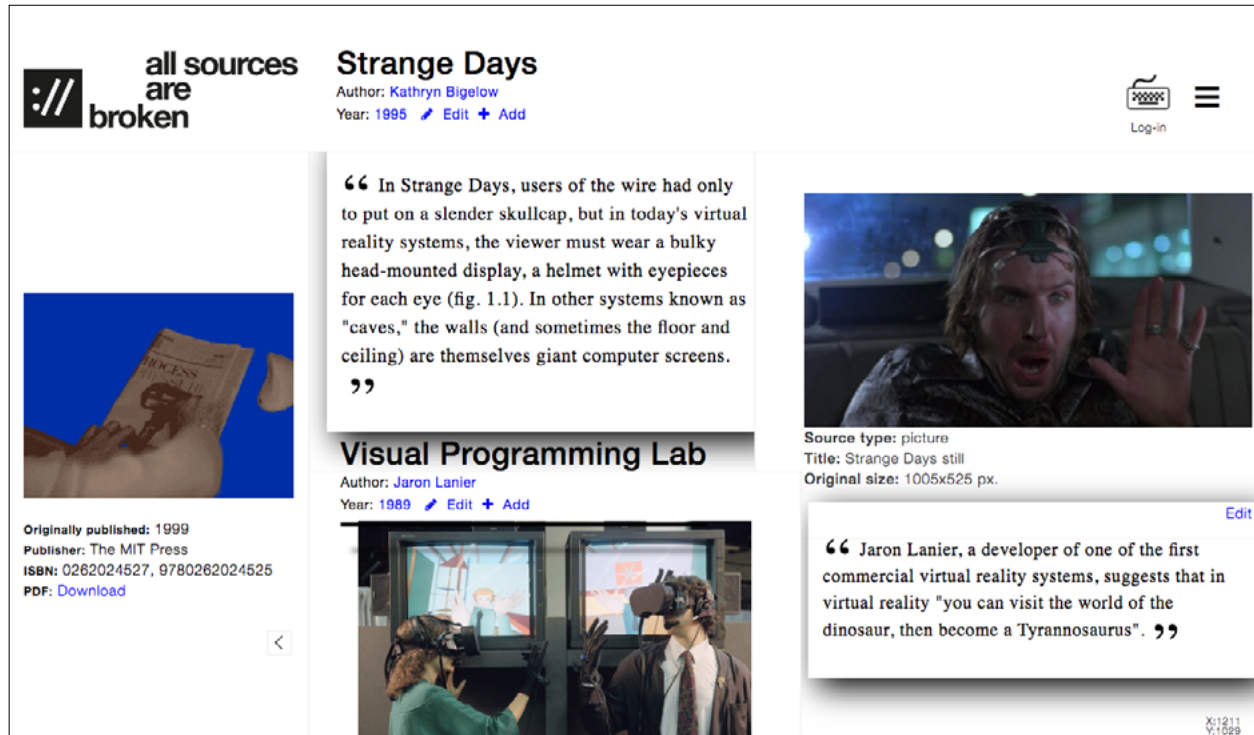
In May 2019, we presented our project ‘ASAB—All Sources Are Broken’ in Arnhem, in the context of the conference Urgent Publishing, organised by the Institute of Network Cultures (INC) and in collaboration with ArtEZ University of the Arts and the Willem De Kooning Academy. The opportunity came then from a call for work to which we responded with a proposal for a workshop: the official conceptual framework of the three-day meeting—New Strategies in Post-Truth Time—was the right opportunity for us at that time to explore the project in a different light. In our application, we decided to propose the formation of a Post-Digital Reading Group, whose aim would be to use our online platform to explore what we call the Online Media Source (OMS), starting

from a few fragments of text—we would bring along books as working material—and practising archiving using the web on that basis. That experience was a particularly positive circumstance for us to try to temporarily localise a networked process that is otherwise distributed on geographically scattered hosts, and to observe it happening in a technologically non-mediated context, sitting physically present side-by-side with the possibility to talk to and listen to each other.



Image of the homepage
<https://allsourcesarebroken.net/>
©Valentina Besegher

Participants were initially given a rather trivial task to perform via the ASAB user interface, namely a typical content authoring workflow to create records and populate the ASAB database. Along with a set of basic instructions on how to access and use the platform, they were provided with a few selected book snippets and asked to search the web for any OMS cited or mentioned in the chosen text. An OMS is the minimum unit of the ASAB system, which is constituted by a little fragment of digital information, such as an image, an audio-video file, or a



hyperlink publicly available on the internet. The task of ASAB is to retrace the never-ending chain of remediations that starts at some point offline, in the margin notes of a book, all the way 'up' to the OMS and 'down' again to the books, while rooting this very process in the authors' words.

In addition to these re-archiving and re-reading tasks, and to showing our project, we would have liked to open up the discussion about the quality of the correspondence that elapses in-between the spaces of the online media and the text, but for reasons of time, we were not able to reach this moment of analysis and unfold the full potential of the reading group—ideally through a philosophical symposium, or perhaps the more intimate and animated drift of the discussion, during which we imagined having recourse to alcohol and tobacco with the participants. Nevertheless, from a prepared, responsive and highly specialised audience of academics, artists and graphic designers we obtained passionate comments on the UX staged by our online platform, as well as on the proximity of reading and writing, or even updates on the semantic web¹ and notes

Example of a page with drag and drop
<https://allsourcesarebroken.net/>
 ©Valentina Besegher

on how far ASAB's information architecture deviates from that standard.

One of the most valuable results of that experience was certainly the confirmation of the limits of the application, although in the current context, we would prefer to use the term 'edges' to refer more precisely to the perimeter within which the project as a whole defines its true potential. We observed how the attempt to play with predefined, well-recognisable models of presentation and content organisation—the platform presents itself as a participative online archive—can easily distract from the original experimental core of the project. And it is precisely in this sense that the edges are not simply perimeter-based limits to define a general scope but become real trigger points of a process that the participants are invited to interact with and respond to.

The web-based project ASAB was born as a cross-disciplinary artistic investigation that draws on multiple areas of interest

explored over years of practice carried out independently by Labor Neunzehn in the fields of moving image and sound, and later consolidated in the curatorial activity of our common Berlin experience at Labor Neunzehn. This is a crossroads of professional work and self-taught knowledge, concentrated around the theme of language (understood here more as a *recording tool* than as expressive or communication ability), ranging from experimental cinema to musical notation, passing through philosophy, media theory, web design and coding. ASAB stages an editorial flow in which the technologies of the book, our brain and the worldwide web are invited (provoked) to interact on multiple levels; a post-digital network whose three main actors are the text (and with it, inevitably, always the author), the reader, and the internet. Somehow, the scene prepared by ASAB alludes to an ontological character of the network—that is to say, the idea that nowadays the categorical essence of the entities is basically established by dynamics of networking. But this is a topic that cannot be explored in the context of the current text and should be addressed separately.

ASAB's editorial flow fosters the creation of parallel narratives starting from the reading and rereading paths contributed by the users. It starts OFFLINE with the reading of a book, an ancient *technology*, and continues ONLINE, with the aid of the browser and a few bare editorial steps to reorganise what the citations and endnotes suggest, or intend to suggest. The interaction of these two states in the networking process—apparently simultaneous and yet immeasurable in space and time—gives life to a database of cross-references between texts and non-written sources (at least not in the traditional sense), such as film, sound, image, spoken word. This procedure—which

is partly experimental and partly already widely consolidated in the Web 2.0 paradigm²—feeds a dataset, on the one hand, the content of which can potentially be explored and extended without end. On the other hand, it also lays the foundations for a pragmatic investigation into the structural availability of the online resources and the rules that dominate their usage; into the advantages and limits of digital preservation; into the *deferral* that accumulates in the process of online data migration; and into how the latter acts on the perception of meaning. The cracks, leaks, drifts and open spaces left by these issues are at the core of the ASAB experiment.

Parallel Narratives

Let's come to the first point. The main effort of an artist's creative process takes place at the submerged level of the research. It is undeclared work that can last for hours or years, often inaugurating a trail with an unguaranteed destination. The work of art in the age of its infinite digital remediation³ originates from an intermediary relation with fragments, clippings, disconnected resources, fresh and sedimented readings, journeys, traumatic events, memories, visions, and so on. It is a search in the sense of *finding* and *letting oneself be found*—namely, an empathic encounter of subjects, which at a given moment of searching find themselves involved in the same event and creating a contact, a new presence.

An example of this ongoing creative exchange between things (to the extent that the *seeker* and the *sought* become objects for one another) is the artistic and amateur practices (in the Brakhagian sense of the term⁴) of found footage and field recording. Here, the original context to which the intentional object belongs (that is to say, how a particular fragment of moving image, a photograph,

a sequence of sounds, an *objet trouvé* happen in space and time) is completely secondary because the action takes place entirely on the level of consciousness, where simultaneous reading and writing processes are in place and both object and subject are somehow reabsorbed in a process that escapes any binary logic. In the emphasis of *finding* and *letting oneself be found*, the subject listens to the thing and loses its illusory central status. In order to visualise these relations, let us try to imagine an Observer and an Observed: the point-of-view of the one and the other can define infinite trajectories but will never be able to grasp its own origin, which is a part of the mutual observing event that inhabits the space of the gaze. To this extent, directionality is only a blind spot with no dimension. Who is observing, then?

In the artistic practices mentioned above, the direction does not count that much because what really counts is precisely the opening of the gaze and the temporality that it holds; focussing on the trajectory of the gaze—on the point-of-view of the author and so on—is equivalent to not observing at all. This is like dealing with a multidimensional space with two-dimensional tools, exchanging surfaces for volumes. As opposed to scientific research, where objects need to be abstracted, formalised and replicated in order to be confirmed, there is no expected response to the research activity in the lesson of the *objet trouvé*. In the end, it is not a question of finding, but rather of tuning into an *event*.

These very principles and dynamics could be applied, without forcing, to the practice of ‘web searching.’ In the current phase of the ASAB project, we are actively working to build an API (Application Programming Interface) capable of exposing an abstraction of the OMS in an online publishing-oriented data structure. This step, announced a long

time ago and prepared since the first development of ASAB, aims to offer online DTP (Desktop Publishing), draft management and client-side PDF printing capabilities. At the moment, our efforts are focussed on the development of a virtual canvas, a decoupled application that allows each user to store and sort their own OMS collections and generate custom, paper-based outputs from them. It was a matter for us, so to speak, to harvest online where possible, what authors sow at the margins of their text—a URL, the title of a film or a painting, the name of a project—while maintaining the reference of these data with their source text. This was done to open up a cross-referenced editorial space whose remediation starts from the offline media and expands beyond it. (That is, instead of getting stuck, in the self-referential circle of the discourse generated on and by social media, which happens online on a daily basis.) We like to think of these PDFs as hybrid outputs generated from the OMS, like amateur appendices to the original text that generate a continuous exegesis and an infinite extension of the citations.

This is a way to rewind the cycle started with the offline text and return back to paper after the passage through the OMS, but also to decelerate the digital by means of reconnecting it to a larger background that contains both books and hypertexts. We wanted to force nonlinear narrative paradigms in web search, and to us, it seemed that the best way to do so was to reduce the distance between the book and the browser, somehow connecting back the technological elements shared by these two objects, such as endnotes and citations (precursors of hyperlinks) in order to let them fall back into a decelerated post-digital context.

Obsolescence and Acceleration

Before highlighting how ASAB seeks to encourage post-digital deceleration practices, we still need to touch on the second point made in the first part of this contribution, which called to mind the topics of digital obsolescence and offline/online migration. According to Jacques Derrida,⁵ existence takes place on a deferred basis; it is, therefore, in a state of essential divergence that affects all levels of reality. For Derrida, this ontological dissonance and its resulting flickering would be the constitutive trait of every space of being, the reasons for which ultimately lie in the physical nature of time: that is, everything is always decentralised with respect to itself and, hence, largely unspeakable by language. As media artists, we believe that cyberspace, and the web in particular, does not escape this logic of *delay* and *decay*. Rather, it amplifies it. If the technology of hypertext is not dissimilar to that of the book, then by extension, the web is equivalent in cyberspace to the library, thus a structured archive for the cataloguing and consultation of written resources that we access through the browser. Books and hypertexts are just some of the cornerstones that govern contemporary individual and collective cognitive activity.

But if as Derrida teaches us the gap between language and mind, and beyond, the mind and the world, is constitutive of existence, we can count on a propagation of the ontological qualities of this gap on a digital level, such as to reposition the space of the difference (the deferral) in cyberspace. By searching the web for links cited in a book, it is not difficult to come across some discrepancies: not infrequently, hyperlinks are broken, but even when the resource is available, the endless reversibility of the hypertext makes it elusive in its temporal dimension. And it is very difficult to retrace

its changes—even if, on the contrary, modifications can be much more persistent than in offline media, as shown by versioning tools, such as Git,⁶ or large digital archives, such as the Wayback Machine.⁷ In other cases, hyperlinks can lose reference to any context forever: the domain name changes and one gets redirected to misleading resources.

Now, if we were to see obsolescence as a merely technical topic, it would not be difficult to understand why it is mostly considered a temporary obstacle to a linear ever-improving path—that is to say, a symptom for an outdated status not yet upgraded. Among others, the current research on the Digital Object Identifier (DOI) defines a standard for the persistence of hyperlinks in the digital network system that already offers a concrete way to successfully deal with hyperlinks obsolescence, although this seems for now to be targeted to a precise consumer audience, mainly academics, and often ends up justifying the subsequent implementation of paywalls and closed membership procedures by the web masters and the administrators of online resources. Similarly, digital preservation processes are mostly oriented towards the creative industries, such as museums, with the disadvantage of leaving out all online resources that do not fall under one of these economic activities.

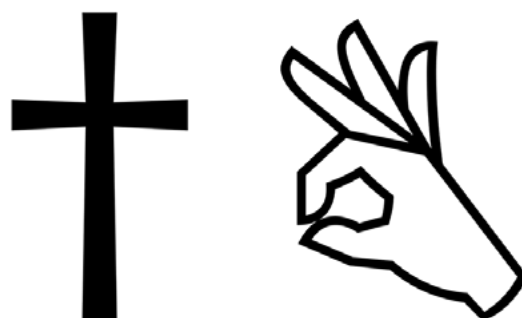
The financial effort needed to ensure the implementation and maintenance of these online archives and their offline legal entities is such that it inevitably generates a business-oriented production cycle, the achievements of which are not in question here. However, their venture goals (in the end, it will be necessary to justify the costs) open up important questions about the infrastructural context in which the contemporary web is developed and the space of autonomy, if any, left to billions of web users

involved in the dynamics set in motion by these investments. Again, we don't want to get into a discussion of issues that would go far beyond the limited purpose of this article, which is to outline our urgency for an online art practice of rearchiving and publishing. However, and this is the point we are most concerned about, today's technological research on the subject shows very little interest in approaches that see obsolescence as a resource, ending up restricting spaces for autonomy. There is no real possibility for the user/citizen to choose whether to upgrade or to remain outdated, as it is forcibly subjected to a modality of updating that overwrites and replaces the old instead of preserving it.

Beyond what the future of the internet will actually be (if future can still be considered as a subject from the perspective of a post-historical perception constantly undergoing acceleration), it seems to us that the current race to release the next online service largely embodies, possibly at an even more pervasive level, what Paul Virilio described in terms of a claustrophobic saturation of the world.⁸ And this logic of speed becomes even more pervasive and terrifying when accompanied by the idea that digital networks occupy a sort of immaterial and ahistorical level—opinion that seems to be mainly shared uncritically by the most part of users-citizens. On the contrary, digital media and online technologies prove to be a very much concrete and effective intervention space, which is potentially capable of driving not only the productive but also the information, art, and education life cycles of big cities, which are in turn refactored according to the model of the Digital Factory.

Media obsolescence, the digital decay of online resources, the irremediable inconsistency of the global archive, its deferrals and its own temporality—all this can be thus

transformed into opportunities for existential decentralisation, deceleration, inclusion and experimentation, precisely because these disruptions are taking place online with greater force and are capable of bringing out the edges, to rethink the margins not as cracks to be repaired but as new openings waiting to be expanded, to conceive asynchronicity, redundancy, error. Not as weak points of a centralised technology but for their authentic differential content. Rather than reducing all of this richness and variety to the commercial aspect alone, reporting it as a technical debt to be recovered, media obsolescence should be recognised for its content as the bearer of that difference, of that time, and of that history, which the ideology of acceleration does not admit and does not tolerate, and is thus valued as a legitimate source of truth.



Icons of the website / save link + broken link - ©Valentina Besegher

The specious flattening imposed by the ideology of acceleration is easily perceptible in everyone's daily experience on the web by paying attention to the widening of the scope of application in UX design over the last five to ten years. The gradual and increasingly widespread use of start-up design patterns that are congenitally instrumental to a corporate logic—like, among others, the implementation of CI/CD pipelines,⁹ the reframing of traditional development life-cycles within agile containers, Guerilla Research strategies—has emerged over

the last few decades as a standard source for usability and consumption. And that has essentially shaped the majority of the online products and services developed at every scale, with a considerable impact on the citizen-user-consumer state of mind. If we wanted to compare the Information Architecture (IA) in which hypertext operates today with urban planning, the recent development of the web would lead back more to the experience of the shopping centre, rather than to that of the city. Just as in a shopping mall, IA can work to create paths and barriers to guide the user's choice at the expense of strategies that support discovery and sharing activities, and force a space entirely oriented towards consumption.

The incredible speed with which mobile device softwares such as car sharing, voice AI assistants, socialising, food and goods delivery, and healthcare applications keep spreading in large metropolitan areas—encouraged by the presence of cultural and linguistic barriers, a wider dislocation of services, and an ever-changing, wide base of new consumers—has helped to install an 'app-like' digital mind-set in the user-citizen, whose acceptance is as widespread as it is unconscious.¹⁰ And this is not to mention that the migration from offline to online does not take place in a unidirectional way, but is active out of natural sympathy between the structure of our mind and that of the digital networks: a cycle that is self-feeding and retroactively re-enters the individual experience, acting on the contents, the social coordinates and priorities of the subject, and operating in a significant way on the emotional universe, on the perception of the body, on the relationship with power, life and death, which continue to manifest themselves within our individual and collective experience and shape us as humans.



Video still of the ASAB lecture performance - ©Valentina Besegher

By fostering decelerated web-search practices—should we call them obsolete?—as well as pointing out web browsing in itself as an art practice, our online platform tries to encourage a post-digital approach to the archive that takes into account failure and deferral as a constitutive multifaceted trait of digital networking technologies. We believe that the latest development of the online networking infrastructure towards a centralised, service-oriented¹¹ hub has added new layers of complexity to the language transforming our perception of meaning and the ability to read and contextualise the sources. When it comes to the digital, words such as speed, present, communication, reversibility, and synchronicity should be considered ambivalently for their dual effect (online/offline) on our relationship with time.

Personally, we experience the present modality of interacting online as predominantly ruled by a widespread economy of speed that is then sublimated and reabsorbed in our bodies. This urgency for velocity and immediacy is and wants to be predominant precisely because it is fuelled by a dream of progressivism and an unlimited growth of desire. ASAB's art practice instead uses the browser as an online catalogue for re-connecting the cycle of remediations that propagates from offline texts into online media. And it generates concrete physical

outputs (appendices) from the chain of deferrals that accumulate in the space of this very migration of language and meaning, in order to support asynchronicity and address disruption as a unique opportunity for experimentation and observation.

Labor Neunzehn

Labor Neunzehn is an artist duo composed of Valentina Besegher (1976, Milan), an avant-garde filmmaker, live video performer and visual artist, and Alessandro Massobrio (1974, Turin), a composer, musician and sound artist. Their research addresses a cross-disciplinary discourse on time-based art, involving expanded cinema, modern music, publishing and critical reflection on new media art, with a specific focus on the migration of these languages between the online and offline domains. The duo operates in the namesake project space in Berlin, which acts as a research and curatorial platform for the production of exhibitions, performances and workshops, and is committed to the presentation of collaborative outcomes and hybrid formats.

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Footnotes

- 1 On the topic, see the Semantic Web Activity Statement and the WC3 Data Activity.
- 2 For a brief history of Web 2.0 and its main features, see here.
- 3 See Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.'
- 4 Stan Brakhage, 'In Defense of Amateur,' in *Filmmakers Newsletter* 4 (1971): 9-10.
- 5 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).
- 6 Read more about Git here.
- 7 See the Wayback Machine here.

- 8 Paul Virilio, *The Administration of Fear* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012).
- 9 Read more about continuous delivery here.
- 10 It is enough to think about how many digital contracts we sign—more or less deliberately—on a daily basis when installing or updating mobile applications. What it is presented here in legal terms, i.e., the contract, is incommensurable with the purpose of the software, its use, and the amount of work requested to the user to subscribe to it. The misalignment of these two times, the time of the law (offline) and the time of the software (online), puts the user in an antithetical condition that promotes a gamified and fundamentally dissociated mind-set.
- 11 Web 2.0 is currently upgrading to 3.0. Part of this migration consists of the extension of some of the main features that identify the Web 2.0, such as the user-oriented interaction client/server, towards a service-oriented approach. That is to say, the vision of the internet as a centralised database made up of services and communication protocols to make them interact with each other. The Service Oriented Architecture (SOA) standard is largely used already at enterprise level in order to enable complex request/consumer chains between web services, hence enabling a higher level of data abstraction, cross-compatibility between programming languages, and expanding the network far beyond the control of the end user. If SOA per se is neutral, and can actually offer several positive improvements in term of communication technology, the idea of versioning WWW is disturbing insofar as it confirms the effort that is being made to gradually abandon network decentralisation (web as collection) in favour of the development of a gigantic global relational database (web as software), with its own centralised architecture and functionalities. To read more about SOA, see here.

Urgent Publishing After the Artist's Book: *Making Public in Movements Towards Liberation*

'Urgent Publishing After the Artist's Book' was originally delivered as a talk on February 27, 2021, at the 2021 Contemporary Artists' Book Conference, organised by the Center for Book Arts in New York. This conference has a long history of taking place during and within Printed Matter's NY Art Book Fair at MoMA PS1. For the first time, both the fair and the conference were held online, due to Covid-19 pandemic. This fair is considered by many to be one of the ultimate destinations for artists who publish, and the conference was framed as an effort to examine 'the temperature of art book criticism and scholarship,' as the title of the event stated. We were taking the temperature during a pandemic during the radical turbulence of racial injustice, police brutality, political turmoil, and climate emergency; this was the feverish backdrop for the task at hand. At several points, I refer directly to these highly charged conditions surrounding the conference and the fair, so it seems necessary to clearly acknowledge that the talk was presented within this very specific, very real context of multiple, overlapping, and intersecting crises.

You can find a video of the original talk [here](#).

Let's begin by examining one of the more foundational statements about artistic publishing, written in 1976, the same year Printed Matter was founded. It's from writer and curator Lucy Lippard, one of its co-founders, and it appeared in this issue of *Art-Rite*, a periodical that was founded and edited by some of her Printed Matter colleagues.

Spreading the word at the supermarket

In this statement, she expresses optimism around the politics of publishing as an artistic practice. She's writing about the potential for artists' books to act like propaganda, specifically around feminism:

One of the reasons artists' books are important to me is their value as a means of spreading information—content, not just esthetics. In particular they open up a way for women artists to get their work out without depending on the undependable museum and gallery system (still especially undependable for women). They also serve as an inexpensive vehicle for feminist ideas. I'm talking about communication but I guess I'm also talking about propaganda. Artists' books spread the word—whatever that word may be. So far the content of most of them hasn't caught up to the accessibility of the form. The next step is to get the books out into the supermarkets, where they'll be browsed by women who wouldn't darken the door of Printed Matter or read *Heresies* and usually have to depend on Hallmark for their gifts. I have this vision of feminist artists' books in school libraries (or being passed around under the desks), in hairdressers, in gynecologists' waiting rooms, in Girl Scout Cookies ...¹

Almost 50 years later, I think we can say that Lucy Lippard's vision of artists' books ensconced in supermarkets has finally arrived, although not in the form she anticipated.

Today, rather than finding *Heresies* at the Stop 'n Shop, we download it and carry it with us while running our errands. We find artists getting the word out about feminism and race and politics there in our feeds. But this works so well not because the zines are for sale, but because we are. We are the product—or rather, our behaviour and data are. Lippard's vision has been turned inside-out—instead of artists taking over public space with publishing, we have algorithmically sorted feeds acting like vast publishing machines that engulf us, watch us, and listen in while we post, shop and consume. And of course, there's no need to actually go to the supermarket—we can do that right there in the feed.

Who controls the narrative, then, in this distorted version of the empowered artist, who has so-called 'free' access to these unlimited tools? These feeds that we care for and nurture and consume are precisely engineered by Big Tech companies to manipulate our attention, while at the same time claiming that their publishing platforms have finally democratised the dissemination of information, lol. We know this isn't true, and that these tools are far from perfect, far from pure. Yet still, we fight to protect and consume and occupy them. It really is a surreal thing to think about, this inside-out, disembodied version of Lucy Lippard's dream of spreading the artistic word.

All publishing is political

I'm also thinking about Lippard's famous quote in relation to urgent publishing because there is an undeniable sense of urgency right there in her language. She's expressing the political potential for artistic publishing, art as propaganda, publishing as a way to shift or change perspective.

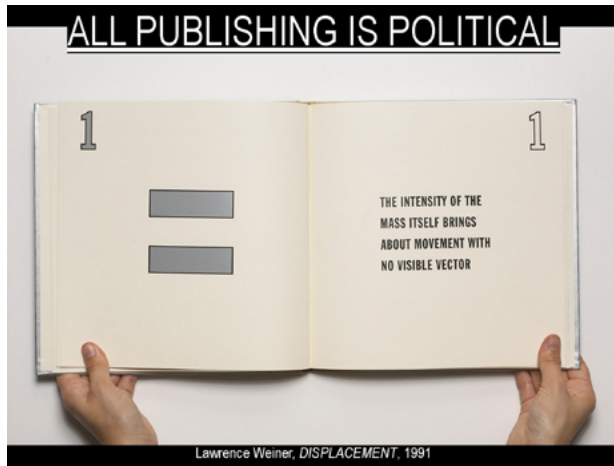
There is some truth to this in our current reality, which complicates my simplified read of Big Tech publishing. Artists are pushing

art to the masses like propaganda, alongside everyone else and their messages, including and perhaps especially her Hallmark moms. Her awkward characterisation of those women who wouldn't 'darken the door of Printed Matter' sounds misguided or even offensive today, and for me it brings up questions about Lippard's own position in writing her statement, around class, race, and feminism in the mid-1970s.

Lippard's statement, and our connection to her through this fair, sets the stage for us to take the temperature today. She dreamed of a politicised, maybe radicalised, publishing future through artistic means. But publishing has always been political—artistic, academic, commercial, or otherwise. Publishing compels, persuades, informs, attracts, confuses, scripts, and manipulates. To publish is, fundamentally, a political act.

In moments of crisis, as we've experienced so deeply in the last year, we see not only artists, but community organisers, scholars, poets, and activists collectively engaging with different modes of publishing to urgently document and communicate what's happening, in real time. They're not at the supermarket—they're in the street. And they're at home with us. Today, the artist's propaganda that Lippard hoped for is right there in our feeds when we wake up in the morning, making the distinction between what is or isn't right for us, or radical enough, or too political, or not artistic enough—or what is or isn't publishing, even—an overwhelming condition, and much more difficult to navigate.

Here's an artist's book by Lawrence Weiner, solidly regarded within the artistic publishing canon, and whose work has been featured at Printed Matter since the day it opened.



©Lawrence Weiner, *Displacement*, 1991

Here's his most recent work—a collaboration with Virgil Abloh for Louis Vuitton. For their Fall-Winter 2021 collection, they 'plastered his statements across accessories,'² which we can see in these stills from a highly stylised film that was released online just a few weeks ago to introduce the work. Dramaturgy and scenography is credited to Kandis Williams of CASSANDRA Press, one of the exhibitors here at this fair.



Louis Vuitton, Men's Fall-Winter 2021 show, video screen capture by author

They're just part of a vast team of highly creative and sought-after artists, poets, musicians, and cultural producers, coming together to sell four thousand dollar bags. How do we approach artistic publishing now, in relation to a project like this? In relation to this economic reality? How do we reconcile the artist, the propaganda, and the supermarket here?

I'm purposefully creating confusion with this example in order to question some of the terms we're using here at this conference, such as artist's book, artistic publishing, and publishing as artistic practice. I'm well aware of where this language comes from, and what it means in a classic sense. But rather than control and cement these terms into a kind of self-reassuring certainty, I think it's crucial that we problematise this language. And these images. Especially here at this conference, at this fair. Who gets to use the word artist? What qualifies as artistic publishing, when this kind of commercial and cultural production is the context that we're working in—selling \$250 photobooks, or \$14,000 artists' portfolios, or tabling next to a \$10.5 billion corporation at the art book fair? Why look at artists' books at all, right now, in crisis?

Like the rest of the art world, artists' books have been absorbed into every corner of corporate, commercial, and institutional politics. AA Bronson noted this in an interview in 2015 and talks about an interest in things that are done less institutionally, on the fly. 'Artists are using different technologies; books like this can occur and be printed in a more casual way.'³ I propose that we examine this more casual way of publishing, stretching beyond books and beyond the artist's practice even, and open up this space to a broader understanding of how folks shift our view by disseminating urgent, creative material.

Writing about queer publishing in this context of cultural capitalism and institutionalisation, Darian Razdar says that '... subsuming radical practices into dominant structures perpetrates more harm than it reduces. Non-profits, museums, cultural corporations, style magazines, chic developers, and governmental arts councils are all complicit (to varying degrees) in the

exploitation of transgressive art for capital accumulation.⁴

Instead of focussing on these institutions and the exceptional artist publisher as solo producer, let's think about publishing below, outside of, against, or after capitalism. And acknowledge the complex reality of how it is that artists who make books are even able to survive today, under enormous precarity.

Publishing and power

Publishing has always been used to dominate and exert control, as one of the principal tools of hegemonic power and colonisation. Treaties, tracts, maps, executive orders, regulations, laws, textbooks, branding guidelines, entire libraries, algorithmic feeds—these are just some of the ways in which the construction and distribution of knowledge through acts of printing, publishing, and archiving have been used to control the narrative. And in so doing, to marginalise, authorise, police, harm, and erase. Especially in today's special blend of accelerated surveillance capitalism.

Publishing as empowerment

So, there's good reason to try to understand the political potential of publishing right now, especially when it can be used to loosen or push back against the grip of hegemonic power. Because while publishing can most certainly be a tool of the oppressor, the ability to circulate stories and information in public space is also one of the superpowers of the underserved.

As a means towards the empowerment of those who suffer most under oppression, independent publishing enables truly alternative ideas to be seen and heard, outside of corporate, state, and institutional values. Sometimes it's happening right there in the open, on the same exact platforms where others are doing the most harm. Sometimes it's elsewhere, in less visible spaces. So while we're here to think through and examine

and question the form of the book, I would like to suggest that we also put that safe word aside, and instead, think platform. With so many ways to 'make public,' and an endless range of publishing technologies and platforms becoming available, publishing as empowerment is now more possible than ever, but I'm going to have to leave the artist's book behind to go further with this thought.

Publishing as interference

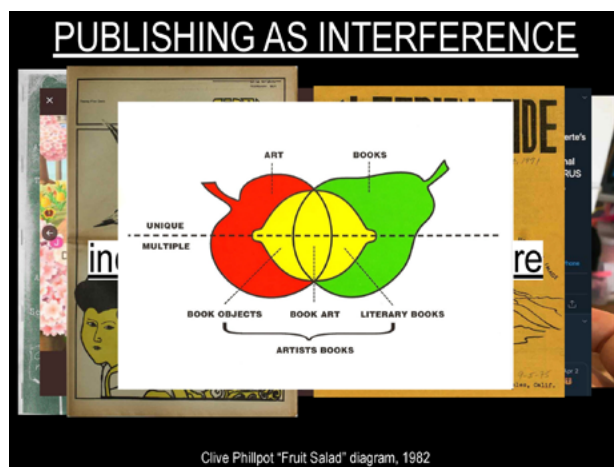
Which brings me to the title of my talk—'Urgent Publishing After the Artist's Book.' The radical potential of publishing, artistic or otherwise, is the part of Lippard's quote that I'm most hopeful about. How we might share stories, legitimise thought, propose alternatives, and collectively imagine other futures—by, with, and for oppressed communities, especially Black, Indigenous, people of colour, queer and trans folks, disabled folks, immigrants, and everyone else left out of normative history-writing and speculative future visioning.

From live-streaming to animal crossing protests to community organising on discord, today's independent publishing culture enables those with access to basic tools so many options for creatively disseminating radical ideas. And to use the circulation of published material as a way to gather in communion against oppression. This happens at every scale, from individual empowerment to global coalition building. Urgent, radical publishing is one of our most powerful tools in the movement towards liberation.

Yes, let's leave the traditional form of the artist's book aside for now. Instead, we'll draw upon decades of radical, anti-capitalist thought and collective action, focussing on specific moments of 'publishing as interference' produced within the Black Radical Tradition, feminism, abolition, co-operative organising, queer and trans liberation, and

queer theory. This other history of publishing is sometimes approached through an art or design or poetry lens, but it's almost never the primary focus when telling that story.

By looking closely at the interference, and at the specific gestures and acts of publishing that interrupt and agitate, I want to shift our attention away from the commodified, supermarket-view of publishing as the production of objects. What if this most famous diagram by Clive Phillpot had been drawn to depict actions or gestures, rather than consumable pieces of fruit?



©Clive Phillpot, 'Fruit Salad' diagram, 1982

Looking closely at specific acts of radical publishing as interference enables us to see the labour involved, and the values that emerge from social publishing ecosystems that depend upon collaboration, participation, communal care, and mutual aid networks. Values that encompass a new ethics and a politics of making public, rather than endless variations on old publishing models.

Let's look at a few examples.

Mutual aid publishing

Much has been written about the visual impact of *The Black Panther* newspaper, and Emory Douglas's legacy as the party's Minister of Culture and the newspaper's art

director, designer, and main illustrator. As well as the political content published in the more than 500 issues of the newspaper, which was the most widely read Black newspaper in the United States from 1968–1971.

How the newspaper was distributed is less discussed.

'Wednesday night was when the paper came out. Every Panther in the Bay Area came to help "get the paper out."' ⁵

Black Panther Party members themselves were responsible for dispersing the news and would sell the paper in laundromats, street corners, and other public spaces. Sounds familiar! This is the radical publishing future Lucy Lippard dreamed of, years before she wrote those words.

The cost of the paper was 25 cents, and sellers would keep a dime from each sale. As a co-operative model of publishing, the dissemination of radical thought was closely dependent upon each member's participation as a distribution point in a peer-to-peer network. I propose that we see *The Black Panther* newspaper model as an early example of urgent, mutual aid publishing. It's the radical labour here that's often overlooked, in favour of the end product. Participation in *The Black Panther* publishing ecosystem was supported by the act of delivering it. Each distribution point also becomes an opportunity for conversation—to learn, interact, and engage between people.

As a shared practice, *The Black Panther* newspaper was not just a published product, but an alternative publishing economy that prioritised care and community need, and this was negotiated and fulfilled communally through acts of mutual aid. The exchange of money enabled the newspaper to continue printing but it also directly benefited those who laboured in its distribution. The act of

publishing itself was intimately tied up in the values and politics of its content.

The form was conventional—it's a newspaper—but every other aspect challenged expectations, from its politics to its design to its method of delivery to its economic model to its social impact. It was urgent publishing in the physical timeliness of its delivery in public space, and in the necessity to gather and engage in the exact moment of exchange. This was radical publishing because it interfered with the conventions of white-controlled, white supremacist mainstream media, by amplifying the conversation around racial injustice. It gave voice to Black communities in crisis.

Radical publishing as resistance and survival

Later in the seventies, The Combahee River Collective emerged in Boston. The Collective was a Black feminist lesbian organisation, and it published what would become a groundbreaking text: 'The Combahee River Collective: A Black Feminist Statement.' The Statement announced their politics as separate from and more radical than the group they emerged from, the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO).

The Statement announced their politics as separate from and more radical than the NBFO:

We are a collective of black feminists who have been meeting together since 1974. During that time we have been involved in the process of defining and clarifying our politics, while at the same time doing political work within our own group and in coalition with other progressive organizations and movements. The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual,

heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As black women we see black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.⁶

Barbara Smith was one of the co-founders of the Collective, as well as of Kitchen Table Women of Color Press. In an incredibly detailed oral history from 2003, she describes the formation of the group and the writing of the Statement:

And people know about the Combahee River Collective because of the statement and because I was committed even before becoming a publisher to have that appear in as many places as possible around the country and the world.⁷

The Combahee Collective Statement was first published in Zillah Eisenstein's book *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*. Later in the interview, Smith describes making photocopies of the text, after it was published for the first time, in order to distribute it at a conference:

And then, as I said, after it went into that book and at the conference we were talking about earlier, the Kenya UN Women's Conference, the preparatory conference that happened in the early 80s—it was going to that conference and coming prepared with copies of the Collective statement that we had xeroxed, that's what gave me the idea to do the Kitchen Table Women of Color Press Freedom Organizing Pamphlet Series. Because I said, I'm never going to another conference again where it would be appropriate to

have the Combahee River Collective statement and xerox it when I am a publisher involved in publishing.⁸

Smith's photocopying of the radical text and delivering it in person—'coming prepared' to a new audience—was both casual and urgent, and probably didn't look or feel like publishing in the moment. But it was a necessary and timely act of dissemination.

She speaks of preparation, a readiness to 'spread the word' with the Statement, photocopies in hand. It was an urgent intervention (within the time and space of the conference), more a quick gesture than formal 'publishing,' but without question the distribution of a radical text. She used modest, available tools (a Xerox machine), and her own labour, to spread the word. It was a timely re-distribution, a quick re-publishing on top of a slower one, entirely outside the academic, commercial, or alternative publishing worlds. She did what had to be done.

It was around this time that Smith founded Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, after a phone conversation with Audre Lorde in October 1980, where Lorde said to her, 'You know, Barbara, we really need to do something about publishing.' Smith goes on to say:

'As feminist and lesbian of color writers, we knew that we had no options for getting published, except at the mercy or whim of others, whether in the context of alternative or commercial publishing, since both are white-dominated.'⁹

From the urgent need to write and publish the Combahee Statement, to the Xeroxing and hand-delivery to new audiences, to the necessity of starting a press that would work towards a new Black feminist publishing—the extended moment described by Smith suggests enormous labour and determination.

These acts and artefacts are the result of a powerful commitment to communal care through the distribution of radical ideas.

Along with *The Black Panther* newspaper and Kitchen Table, many other activist publishers emerged from crisis, resistance, and liberation in the late sixties and into the nineties, from Fredy and Lorraine Perlman and their Black & Red press at the Detroit Printing Co-op, to the early queer publishing collective Come!Unity Press in NYC in the seventies, with taglines such as 'Survival by Sharing,' and 'Press for a Sharing Culture,' to Gran Fury and ACT UP, Queer Nation, and the queer and trans zines and newsletters of the eighties and nineties, such as *Gendertrash* (1993–95).

I'd like to bring one more moment into this timeline. It's an image that attracted wide attention in the context of the AIDS pandemic, and the necropolitics of the Reagan administration in the US, which targeted gay men and intravenous drug users. On October 11, 1988, artist David Wojnarowicz attended an ACT UP action at the FDA in Washington, DC, wearing a denim jacket with lettering that spelled out the following message on his back:

*'IF I DIE OF AIDS—FORGET BURIAL
JUST DROP MY BODY ON THE STEPS
OF THE F.D.A.'*

I see this jacket (as well as this photograph of Wojnarowicz wearing it) first as an act of protest. It speaks within and on behalf of the collective—the ACT UP activists assembled at this particular moment, and the vast community they represented. It speaks as an urgent gesture of publishing, manifesting dire language in public space. The wearing of the jacket uses the very body that is the subject of its message, the body that will die four years later from this disease, as the platform for its dispersion.

This jacket is many things—it is performance, it's graphic design, it is a shared plea, it is a political protest. It's an urgent artefact charged with meaning and power in the specific context for which it was crafted. It exists as a fleeting performance in that moment, an urgent message that announces a call for refusal (FORGET BURIAL), and the potential for radical action (JUST DROP MY BODY). It continues to deliver these messages as a specific photograph that documents the event, circulating more than 30 years into the future and speaking to us today, in relation to other pandemics.

It's the artist's labour that needs to be noted here—an urgent call to interfere, against acceptance and cooperation. As we trace an incomplete history of urgent acts of publishing, I propose that we identify the labour surrounding this jacket, created and worn at this protest, and the photograph that recorded it, now travelling through time and across networks, as a powerful example of publishing's radical potential to interfere with and loosen power. It does so defiantly, outside of any commercial model, outside the supermarket, standing far away from capitalist, heteronormative definitions of artistic success.

Urgent formation

The Black Panther newspaper spreading the word, Barbara Smith spreading the word, David Wojnarowicz spreading the word. We should resist seeing these moments of interference as singular, disconnected events in the history of independent publishing. Instead, let's consider them as one extended moment of urgent formation. A formation that connects those acts to each other and to many other acts and gestures in an ongoing, liberatory movement, a movement that expands into our present and beyond, spreading the word. This is a different history of artists getting the word out, as propaganda and as interference, far removed

from Ed Ruscha, Sol LeWitt, Seth Siegelau, and the Printed Matter origin story.

Antifa, abolitionist, anarchist, activist, queer, mutual aid, and other types of liberatory publishing—made by artists and non-artists alike—continue this extended moment of urgent formation today, moving it towards a queer, never-arriving utopian horizon. This extended moment produces artefacts that might seem unremarkable in form. But the photocopies, PDFs, spreadsheets, tweets, GIFs, memes, zines, banners, flyers, and pamphlets are only a part of the story. We must also understand the enormous labour and risk involved in their making, in their collective sharing, and in their ability to agitate. This is urgent publishing that's local, peer-to-peer, and decentralised, whether for an audience of five or five thousand.

I propose that we locate the future of independent publishing right here in this continuous trajectory that emerges from the long fight for justice. Let's widen our view to include communal care, potentiality, and liberation beyond the horizon—through the distribution and amplification of radical ideas in the public sphere.

After the artist's book

To follow this trajectory into the present moment—let's pause and step away from our hyper-focussed view on exclusive gate-keeping institutions, such as academic and commercial publishing, art book fairs, the artist's book, book art, and the legacy of artistic publishing in a traditional sense. I propose that we look away from the idea of 'alternative' art world spaces altogether, away from commercial spaces and heteronormative, market-based success, and refuse to locate the future of urgent, radical publishing in relation to these structures at all.

It's a difficult proposal, I'll be the first to admit. We certainly can't blame ourselves

for wanting to bring our books and zines to market, and perhaps to make a profit. I'm not suggesting that we never sell our work. But to what end? Who profits, and how? What does it really mean to participate in the art book fair economy? Is it sustainable? At what cost? Who does this economy favour and serve—and who does it exclude?

Hustle space

While admission to Printed Matter's fairs remains free to the public, the application process for exhibitors is extremely competitive. More than a thousand vendors applied for 350 spots at the last in-person fair, in 2019.

Once accepted, participants paid fees ranging from \$150 for a small table in the 'zine tent' to more than \$1,200 for premium indoor tables, to more than \$10,000 for larger project spaces. In 2019, Printed Matter hosted exhibitors from 28 countries, and attracted 35,000 visitors in a single weekend. If there was ever a global 'circuit' for independent, artistic publishing, it is undoubtedly these art book fairs, especially in terms of audience and potential for sales. Images of crowded art book fairs are used again and again to demonstrate the popularity of zines and artists' books, and as evidence of the resurgence of print and physical media. The fairs host a vibrant community of vendors and participants who discover, socialise, and connect.

At the same time, and this needs to be said clearly: this is primarily a space of commerce. Unit sales and movement of product are not only desirable but crucial in order to maintain one's position in the art book fair economy. The art book fair is not separate from the art market—it is an alternative extension of it that requires and depends upon the same activities like branding, marketing, and selling, even if at a different scale. Instead of infiltrating the supermarket, we've set up our own, inside a museum.

While no one expects to become wealthy selling zines at art book fairs, the pressure to 'break even' in order to recoup what are often tremendous expenses is enormous. There is little room for failure in this model, something many of us know all too well from experience.

The year-round scheduling of the fairs establishes a steady, seasonal rhythm for artistic publishers that discourages urgent or disruptive acts, in favour of planned, well-organised projects that have the potential to sell, marketed and approved well in advance.

All of the good energy and support generated by and for the independent publishing community at these events is enormous and undeniable—they've changed my life and my work. Still, the art book fair is a hustle space, often at the expense of mental and physical health, which suffers for many under the enormous pressure to remain visible and viable, and to perform successfully at the market.

I can't overstate this enough: this is especially true for historically marginalised and minoritised participants, who must negotiate enormous issues around visibility and self-care in public space on top of everything else. The hustle space of independent, artistic publishing, centred firmly on the art book fair, leaves little room for un-profitability, experimentation, or failure. There is only so much tolerance for radicality or disruption, here at the art book fair, before the economics become untenable.

We need a new language

I've already asked you to put aside the two words that have brought us together at this conference: artist and book. It's not because I'm trying to avoid something, but because we desperately need to widen our view. By we, I mean our community of folks who

publish, as well as the critics and scholars and students and collectors and anyone else who believes in the power of, as Lippard put it, ‘spreading the word.’ I’m asking us to shift, maybe uncomfortably so, from taking the temperature of art book criticism and scholarship, to considering the future of independent publishing during crisis, against and beyond capitalism.

To do this, we desperately need new language. We need new forms of discourse to get at what it means to create and share today. We need to examine images of protest and performance and social media and zines, at a conference devoted to the artist’s book, and connect them to the larger moments of urgent formation I’ve sketched out, extending from way behind us, far into the future. To do so, we need to depart from the familiar. We need to approach this culture of making on other terms. Terms that aren’t grounded in the values of art world commerce, like accumulation, exceptionalism, and individualism.

Writer and poet Fred Moten, with Stefano Harney, offer us a way through this. They call for the abolition of both the individual scholar and the lone artist as sovereign figures. They ask us to focus instead on collective work—as Moten puts it, from the I to the we—and the notion of shared practice as a way to satisfy the wealth of communal needs.¹⁰ In a sermon Moten delivered last year, just before the pandemic, he spoke about gathering in call and response as a ‘radical turbulence’ which has a tendency to overturn the order of things, which must be honoured and unleashed and cultivated. He says that ‘gathering makes a grammar all its own.’¹¹

Evidence of this gathering, this grammar all its own, is vivid and plentiful all around us, in our recent periods of deep and overlapping, intersecting crises. The evidence is in

the urgent, radical messages shared in public space, acts of publishing that are far removed from traditional definitions of artistic practice found here at the art book fair, or in specialty bookshops; often not looking like publishing at all. Rather, it is the invisible, illegible, or undervalued labour of organising and activism by historically marginalised people and underserved communities that now fuels a new ethics and politics of urgent, collective making.

As Covid spread to the US in March 2020, and then during the late spring uprisings around racial injustice and the murder of George Floyd, digital platforms such as Google Docs, Instagram, and TikTok exploded with urgent acts of writing, organising, protest, performance, and sharing.

Mutual aid spreadsheets, toolkits, petitions, letters, manifestos, livestreams, funding directories, testimonial archives, poetry, murals, reading lists, multi-panel narratives, and educational guides flooded and nourished our feeds. Along with printed newspapers, newsletters, zines, memes, pamphlets, hand-written signs, articles of clothing, and risograph prints, we need to acknowledge the power of these urgent artefacts of conflict and liberation, circulating radical messages on behalf of communal aims, across all kinds of networks, new and old.

Urgent publishing today is queer, non-cooperative publishing

Some of these artefacts are made by artists but also by writers, activists, abolitionists, students, organisers, and community leaders. These urgent acts and artefacts confuse the traditional boundaries between artist, publisher, and audience. Urgent publishing against and beyond twenty-first century hyper-capitalism continues this trajectory against the ‘acceptable’ and against institutional ‘rules of cooperation.’ Urgent publishing today is queer, non-cooperative

publishing in that it interferes with and explicitly refuses to play by heteronormative definitions of success.

At this year's fair, happening as we speak, these are some of the small presses and collectives and projects that embody this important work of gathering in call and response, doing the slow work of community building, organising networks, and queer, anti-racist, non-cooperative, publishing. This year, the fair feels different. Overnight, we've set up e-commerce websites and become mail-order businesses. But there's a beautiful intimacy to the fair that's taking place right now that I didn't quite anticipate, and it has something to do with network culture, and networks of support. It reminds me of early internet days, not exactly in a nostalgic way, but very hopeful, of-the-moment and of-the-future. There are so many options for navigating this year's fair, and I feel like we're seeing each other and looking out for each other, here in the market, in the midst of crisis.

I'm here with this new, informal, but very intentional community of queer makers that gathers around the non-profit publishing space that I direct, *Queer.Archive.Work*, here in Providence, and online. And we've put some of what I'm discussing today into practice with a new publication that we're releasing right now at the fair. Half of the edition is being distributed by the contributors themselves, the other half distributed for free or trade to Queer, Trans, and BIPoC folks. Institutions, however, pay.

Elsewhere, I'm enormously inspired by the work of Binch Press, here in Providence, Ocean State Ass, American Artist, Demi-an DinéYazhi 'nat pyper, Brown Recluse Zine Distribution, Unity Press, Authentic Creations Artistic Apothecary, Nafis White, BUFU—By Us For Us, Kenneth Reveiz,

and Indigenous Action Media. Among many others.

But also, maybe most importantly, we need to acknowledge all of the folks who are gathering, making, and sharing from positions that aren't necessarily in our familiar spaces. These are artists and students and activists you may never hear of, who work and labour and continue to make out of necessity. For them, spreading the word isn't safe. It isn't a choice, or a career move, but a matter of survival.

A call to action

Neo-fascism and neo-liberalism are consuming everything in their paths, including 'resistance.' The idea that graphic design, book arts, or 'publishing as artistic practice' can be radical is no longer an option. I reject these efforts. Instead, let's create and circulate radical messages, and form new kinds of publics, far away from traditional institutions of knowledge production and disciplinarity. These messages will be illegible to some. Urgent artefacts are not easily digestible and they resist canons and containers.

This 3D scan of the defaced Robert E. Lee monument in Richmond turns a powerful moment of embodied resistance and protest in public space into something else. It's strange to call this OBJ file from June 2020 a publication.



'Robert E. Lee Monument: 6.15.20,' ©Terry Kilby, 2020, screen capture by author

But this file, posted to Sketchfab, is a compelling, creative act that can be read, downloaded, studied, shared, copied, archived, and spread. It is a powerful act of publishing, an urgent artefact that needs to be studied, protected, and preserved. Why aren't we looking closely at the thousands of contributions to this unlikely, unfamiliar, but timely publication, and this digital file that assembles them, and how it circulates on an open source platform, in order to better understand how and why we share today?

Let's gather as we are right now at this conference, and shift from the I to the we, to the communal work of shared practice. We'll find new energy and motivation by stepping away from traditional notions of publishing as an individual artistic practice. Away from the market-facing domination of the artist's book as it's evolved during the last 50 years.

Let's find hope and inspiration in the messy, slow work of artists' collectives, activists, poets, and organisers working today, engaged in the principles of urgentcraft.¹² And in the multiple histories of publishing that are yet to be written, choosing to focus specifically on those who are left out, those who work outside of art world whiteness, those who devote themselves to making public as an ongoing, urgent formation towards justice and liberation.

This is an ethics and a politics of urgent making that I've sketched out, and this is our call to shape, evolve, share, and manifest these ideas within our everyday work.

Disclaimer: all images used in this article were slides part of a bigger presentation used in education by the author.

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Paul Soulellis is an artist and educator based in Providence, RI. His practice includes teaching, writing, and experimental publishing, with a focus on queer methodologies and network culture. He is founder/director of Queer.Archive.Work, a non-profit reading room, publishing studio, and community space, and is Associate Professor of Graphic Design at the Rhode Island School of Design. Paul writes and speaks about art, design, and experimental publishing internationally, was a Design Insights speaker at the Walker Art Center in 2018, and was a featured speaker at the Eyeo Festival in 2019. Paul is also the founder of Library of the Printed Web, a physical archive devoted to web-to-print artists' books, zines, and printout matter, now housed at MoMA Library in NYC.

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Footnotes

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 - 11 Fred Moten, 'Sunday Sermon,' YouTube, January 19, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VevVQ9xeUNC&t=7s>.
 - 12 [Read more here.](#)

Colophon

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