POST-DIGITAL PUBLISHING ARCHIVE

Projects and Artworks
at the Intersection
of Publishing
and Digital Technology

1.   A Broad Notion of Digital Publishing

Much of the discussion around publishing is informed by a model of interpretation in which digital technology acts as the natural successor of printed matter. This model fosters a narrative of linear progress among media, according to which screen will eventually take over paper. As a consequence, the relationship between the two is read as a form of rivalry and thus produces endless, often unconstructive, lists of pros and cons, improvements or worsenings.

This perspective doesn't take into account the dynamics of mutual arrangement and negotiation among media, including the various "backward" influences, so to say from screen back to paper. At the same time, it often tends not to dwell upon the specifities of the various typologies of artifacts that define the publishing field. Lastly, it is driven by an obsessive quest for future models, therefore the space where innovation is seeked frequently corresponds to the narrow ecosystem of the newest device or platform, often transitional, that does not reflect the slower, less flashy but deeper mutations. In doing so, the universe of commonly used digital tools is ofted omitted from the discussion along with the analog, traditional, even retro technologies and the role they currently play.

In order to accurately define the current condition of digital publishing and to deeply comprehend its broader scope, wondering what is the best device for e-reading or what is the fate of paperbacks could be reductive. The discourse on digital publishing should broaden its own horizons, asking whether the book itself can be considered a medium, investigating the existing relationships between the "closed" form of the printed book and the everchanging landscape of the Internet. It should find out what print has to say to digital media besides skeuomorphism, without considering digital tools as means to merely consume content. It should question how knowledge and access are affected by mass digitization initiatives.

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Actually, such questions aren't new, but they are rarely addressed by designers, developers and publishers through critical designs or theoretical reflection. On the contrary, new technologies are often blindly embraced, as the capabilities of the devices are explored with the aim of developing commercially successful products. For instance, while countless design programs are devoted to the development of iPad apps, only a few involve design and artistic strategies to analyze and communicate the implications of iTunes and its distribution model.

Whether indipendently or within institutional contexts, some artists and designers (a good number, but still a few in comparison to the creative industry of publishing) have grown a practice-based, speculative and often critical attitude toward publishing, whether digital or not. It's neither a self-aware current nor an avant-garde, since those people work in distinct disciplinary areas and with different aims. Sometimes their practice only accidentally deals with publishing. But their work deserve attention because it could be able to anticipate, comment and interpret the various issues that emerge at the intersection of publishing and digital technology. P-DPA aims to bring together those experiences.

2.   Post-Digital Publishing

The term "post-digital" was coined by composer Kim Cascone in his essay "The Aesthetics of Failure: 'Post-digital' Tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music". According to Cascone, «the revolutionary period of the digital information age has surely passed. The tendrils of digital technology have in some way touched everyone» (Cascone 2000). At least in the first world, digital technology is an integral part of our everyday life and it is consequently taken for granted. In this sense the very attribute "digital" becomes meaningless, as almost every artifact we deal with is produced, distributed, mediated or at least affected by digital means.

The notion of post-digital was borrowed by Alessandro Ludovico (Ludovico 2012) and Florian Cramer (Cramer 2012) to be specifically applied to publishing. While this field hasn't yet profoundly undergone the radical mutations implied by digital technology, neo-analog means of production, such as the risograph or letterpress printing (and the style that characterizes them) are restored both by independents artists or designers and big publishers because «they compensate for deficiencies of

digital files — deficiencies that are both aesthetic and social, since tangible media are means of face-to-face interpersonal exchange» (Cramer 2013). Frequently the resultant artifacts are deeply informed by digitality anyway, either as a source of content or as a reference model. When digital is the default, analog becomes a firm choice that, while is not necessarily a form of opposition, often derives from the awareness of the specificities of both possibilities.

The "post-digital mindset" allows a more inclusive research framework of the publishing field, in which e-books and book-apps aren't the only object of study and where "old" and "new" media are not in a natural opposition. In the field of post-digital publishing, printed matter doesn't belong to the past and digital tools are not inherently innovative. Artists and designers seamlessly shift between blogs and stapled zines. The digital enviroment is at the same time a source of inspiration, a repository of raw data to filter and organize, a channel for collaboration or dissemination, a space for exposure, a mix of communication modes to exploit, a set of tools to tweak or to autonomously build. It is not an easy task to identify and analyze the various aspects of such a broad context. Likewise,

it takes a big effort to trace back the many ways in which digital technology addresses the specificities of traditional media and processes of publishing. Through a thematic approach to collection and archiviation, P-DPA investigates experimental publishing in order to highlight aspects that specifically deal with digital technology and analog means, especially when they re not blatantly apparent.

3.   The Archive

The aim of P-DPA is to systematically collect, organize and keep trace of experiences in the fields of art and design that explore the relationships between publishing and digital techonology. The archive acts as a space in which the collected projects are confronted and juxtaposed in order to highlight relevant paths, mutual themes, common perspectives, interrelations, but also oppositions and idiosyncrasies.

Among the main questions posed by P-DPA, there are:

?   How do artists and designers articulate the relationships between publishing and digital technology?

?   In which ways the role of printed matter is redefined by digital technology and what

kind of negotiation takes place between the two?

?   In the post-digital era, where does publishing cease to be publishing? What boundaries need to be drawn in terms of media, ecosystems and practices?

?   Are artists and designers able to identify issues that are not covered in the debate on the future of publishing, generally led by a straightforward, normative and often commercially-driven notion of innovation? Which strategies are they introducing to address those issues?

?   What kind of impact do experimental modes of production, intervention and dissemination of content have on publishing?

?   What sort of meaning do traditional forms of printed publishing (such as the book or the magazine) assume when immersed in a context characterized by the pervasivity of digital technology?

P-DPA is a curated archive but it's open to submissions. It allows users with backgrounds in various disciplines to develop their own paths and interact in a specific way with its contents. For instance, the archive could be useful to interface designers, literature historians, publishers, media theorists and art critics. Furthermore, P-DPA houses critical reflection and commentary on the projects and their context. In this perspective, general overviews, crytical analyzes, articles and interviews are hosted.

While the main form of the archive is as online platform, works that have a physical existence are collected through a donation model and through fundings. Each item included in P-DPA is defined by a comprehensive set of informations that, if the creator agrees, is made available for download:

• General description of the (art)work

• Bibliographic data (e.g. ISBN, page number, size, publisher)

• Photo/video documentation (e.g. screenshots)

• Source code and digital versions (e.g. ePub, PDF, EXE)

• Contextual data (e.g. artist's statement, press coverage, critical reviews)

• Technologies employed both

in the production and the fruition of the work
(e.g. InDesign or Scribus, Chrome or Firefox)

• License
(e.g. creative commons, public domain)

• Aesthetic profile
(e.g. movement, subject, community)

• Location
(e.g. institution, collection, archive code)

The development of P-DPA, which is currently not publicly accessible, is documented on p-dpa.tumblr.com. The archive also acts as a thematic aggregator of materials found in various other archives and sources (such as the Library of the Printed Web or the Rhizome's ArtBase).

4.   Preservation, Connections and Networks

Within the instability and forgetfulness that are typical of the information age, P-DPA acts as a mean of preservation, not only storing the digital versions of the single work, but also investigating and philologically addressing the context, the ecosystems and the cultural conditions in which those experiments exist.

As net art, and contemporary art in general, has shown, preservation becomes a particularly urgent and tricky issue when it's aimed at natively digital works (e.g. softwares, websites, devices): the obsolescence of devices and platforms often tangles a genuine reproduction of the experience provided by the piece. Sometimes even the specific aspects addressed by the artwork (e.g. interface designs, a function of a software, production and conversion systems) quickly disappear from the records, complicating the interpretation of its scope.

Printed matter in turn results often volatile: for instance, as several collected items are books available only in print on demand, some of them even play with the impossibility of being purchased and thus becoming physical objects (e.g. selling the book for an extremely heavy price). And even when a certain amount of physical copies does exist, it could be difficult to interpret the book's context because of the absence, so to say, of author name, publication date, etc.

Finally, while the inclusion criteria are primarily thematic, the artist's or designer's reputation is not relevant. Therefore the archive comprehends several works by students, amateurs

and outsiders of the arts and design world. In doing so, P-DPA deals with the widespread empowerment provided by "universal" access to digital tools.

The thematic focus of P-DPA aims at revealing unnoticed relationships and connections between experiences belonging to different fields. Those relationships and connections represent the starting point for a conscious critique and a history of post-digital publishing employing artworks as landmarks and critical statements. The archive is also an opportunity to create a space for dialogue and exchange between artists and designers.

5. Inclusion Criteria

The (art)works should inherently address or anticipate one or more aspects of publishing and one or more aspects of digital technology according to the following categories.

• Tools, modes of production, design (e.g. DTP, crowdsourcing, print on demand);

• Digital features (e.g. DRM, Internet, database);

• Devices (e.g. computer, e-reader);

• Distribution, dissemination, appropriation, intervention (e.g. remix, plagiarism, download);

• Categorization, archiviation, organization, structure (e.g. ISBN, tags, metadata, index);

• Bookness, bookform, book as object (e.g. skeuomorphism, binding, book as prop);

• Spaces and rituals related to books and publishing (e.g. online store, bookshop, library);

• Book typologies (encyclopedia, catalog, magazine).

Inherence

Not every printed book designed through digital tools or distributed via online platforms should be included in P-DPA. Here's where the "inherence" of the single project becomes crucial: in order to be included in the archive, a work, through its own nature, should actively question, highlight or reframe constitutive aspects of publishing in the post-digital age. Of course, this perspective on the works holds a level of ambiguity that is the result of the unique identity of the archive, which point of view is ultimately subjective. Inherence is a fluid criterion in a dialectic relationship with the digital environment. For instance, nowadays we consider copy-paste an

inherently digital function, but it has not always been so.

Anticipation

An experimental project that predates the universal spread of digital technology shouldn't be excluded from the archive *a priori*. P-DPA applies a "post-digital gaze" to experiences that, more or less consciously, anticipate modalities of the digital age. As an example, several "network-enabling"counterculture magazines could be considered as tangible expressions of what would later become known as the blogosphere. It is no coincidence that Steve Jobs described the Whole Earth Catalog as a sort of «Google in paperback form, 35 years before Google came along».

6.   Main Fields of Inquiry

In order to guide the research of the projects to include in the archive, three main fields of inquiry are defined:

• Critical design: the space in which graphic and interaction design intersect and act as critical tools;

• The field of artists' books and bookworks;

• The area of new media art.

In those areas, several perspectives on publishing and experimental forms of dialogue between digital and analog are embedded into more extensive inquiries regarding the impact of technology on behavior, on the dissemination of knowledge and on the very definition of culture. The confrontation with these issues often requires the development of operative strategies that allow to test the limits and potential outcomes of technologies. In doing so, artists and designers outline parallel universes in which the extreme consequences of progress are highlighted and therefore opposed to the *status quo*.

Critical Design

According to Anthony Dunne, the work of the designer can lead to «conceptual design proposals offering a critique of the present through the material embodiment of functions derived from alternative value systems» (Dunne 2005). The "critical designer" develops artifacts, prototypes or even concepts, the purpose of which is to raise questions on the implications of design itself on society. Those experimental designs are often able to provide direct and effective arguments against or in favor of a certain issue and exploit the possibilities of dissemination of new technologies.

Artists' Books and Bookworks

Johanna Drucker, book artist and historian of artists' books, states that «artists' books are almost always self-conscious about the structure and meaning of the book as a form» (Drucker 2004). In this sense artists' books are useful analytical tools of the current condition of the book as a designed artifact, as a cultural object and as a commodity. Furthermore they provide alternative reading models, often antifunctionalist, as they are «books in which the book form, a coherent sequence of pages, determines conditions of reading that are intrinsic to the work» (Carrión 1980). The proposed models, more or less viable, often represent a radicalization of the technical aspects that affect the act of reading.

New Media Art

"New media art" could be a misleading term because it seems to refer only to new media, and so to artworks that include digital technology to be developed or displayed. Frequently new media art takes into account digital tools as a cultural reference, therefore it's not unusual to encounter projects employing traditional techniques and media such as painting or printed books. The notion of "new media" itself is problematic and, in the context of this research, it will be interpreted both as digital technology and as emergent media opposed to settled ones.

7.   Related Archives

Library of the Printed Web
Rhizome Art Base
Ubu Web
Monoskop Log
AAAAARG.ORG
Artists' Books Online

8.   Picks from P-DPA

The following selection is meant to give an insight into the broad variety of projects included in P-DPA, in terms of media, adopted strategies, focus and historical periods.

THE SKEUOMORPHIC LIBRARY

Chris Hamamoto

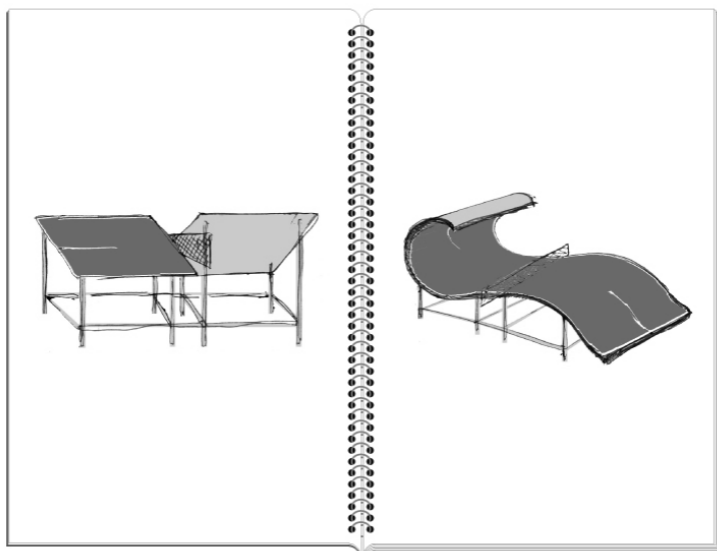|	
Description	The Skeuomorphic Library is a set of three books including every frame of page flip animations as rendered by different softwares, such as iBooks. The project addresses a series of relevant issues such as the influence of print in interface design, the way companies define and control user experience, the ergonomics of reading as reshaped by digital tools.
Medium	Series of 3 books
Date	2013
URL	www.chrishamamoto.com/#post-14
Keywords	book, page, skeuomorphism, e-reader, interface

BOEM PAUKESLAG

Megan Hoogenboom

Description	The project consists of an ePub version of *Boem Paukeslag*, an artist's book made in the 1920's. The digital version shows the limitations and the contradictions that derive from the main principle behind the ePub standard which is general compatibility. In fact the complex layout obtained is only correctly visible on the specific device in which the book was developed.
Medium	E-book
Date	2010
URL	www.meganhoogenboom.nl/media.html
Keywords	ePub, e-book, artist's book, e-reader, book

index

Description	BooksOnLine.fr is a platform that hosts photobooks shown through a minimal book-like interface. This paradoxical and ironic use of the book as a semibidimensional, iconic visual entity reinforces the digitality of the experience.
Medium	Website
Date	2009 - present
URL	www.booksonline.fr
Keywords	page, book, e-book, internet, skeuomorphism

DRM CHAIR

Les Sugus

Description	The DRM Chair is a chair that has a limited number of use before it self-destructs. Through the translation of DRM based on number of use to the physical world, the absurdity of the system becomes apparent.
Medium	Interactive piece of furniture
Date	2013
URL	thedeconstruction.org/team/les-sugus
Keywords	DRM, e-book, device, e-reader, ownership

Jason Huff

A Treatise on Anatomy, Physiology, and Hygiene

by Calvin Cutter M.D.

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THE BONES.

THE MUSCLES.

20, Spinal nerves. 12, 12, Spinal nerves. The internal muscle?

1009. FOOD. NERVE. Bones.

13, The temporal muscle.

22, 28, Interossii muscles.

5

Description	*AutoSummarize* includes the 100 most down-loaded copyright free books summarized using Microsoft Word 2008's AutoSummarize 10-sentence function and organized alphabetically. The results, often surprisingly sarcastic, aren't dissimilar from spam and reflect the contemporary tendency to compress as much as possible to capture only the necessary information.
Medium	Book, e-book
Date	2010
URL	www.jason-huff.com/projects/autosummarize/
Keywords	tools, writing, literature, language

GOOGLE IMAGE SEARCH

Wolfgang Plöger
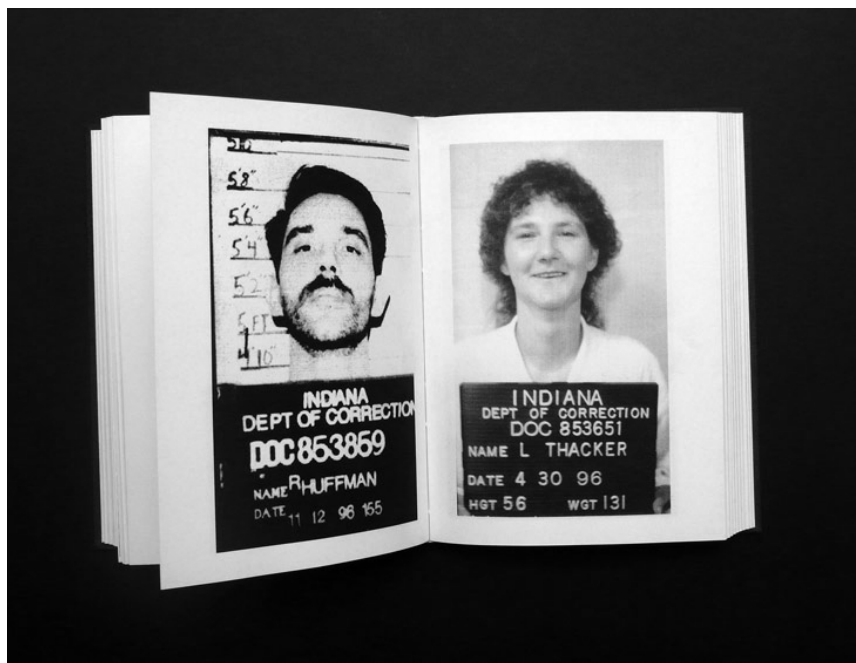
| Description	*«Google Image Search* is a series of books that are comprised of all the images provided by Google in response to a certain term. Sources are not provided, yet the order of all the images is retained. In addition to the search results, the books also include the point in time when the search was undertaken». The printed form act as a strategic archival tool that provides a "physical snapshot" of a certain moment captured on the web.
Medium	Series of books
Date	2003 - 2011
URL	www.wolfgang-ploeger.com/books/books.html
Keywords	internet, google, book, archive, collection

ANONYMOUS PRESS

Karolis Kosas
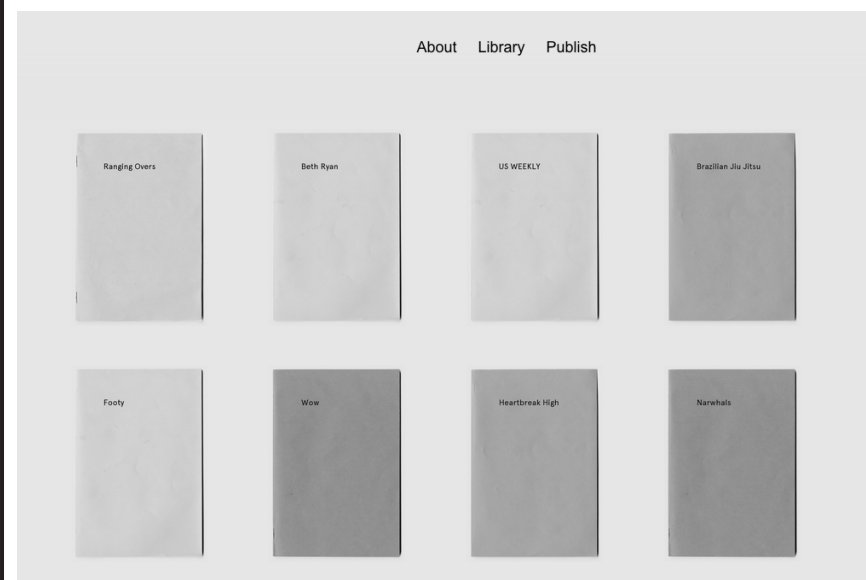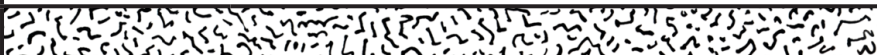
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Description	Anonymous Press is «an experimental publishing platform streamlining the process of zine making. Feeding in a set of keywords, a user defines the topic upon which the content and the form of the publication is generated from the content found on Google Images. Publications are stored in a public library, where every item is printed on-demand».
Medium	Online platform, stapled zines
Date	2013
URL	www.anonymous-press.com
Keywords	internet, google, tools, zine, library
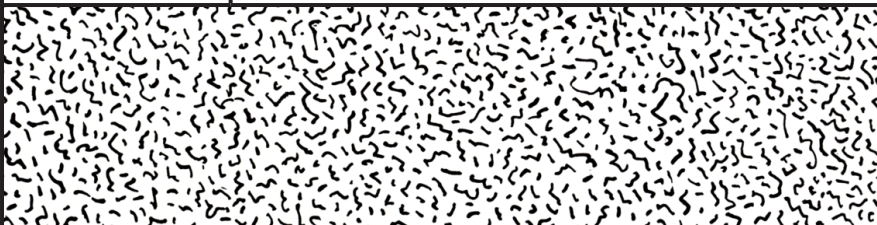
9.   Essential
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