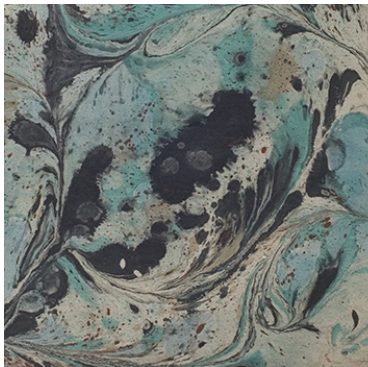# Nobody Knows What A Book Is Anymore

An excerpt from the third <u>Report from the Gutenberg Galaxy (Blaker),</u>[1] this essay forms part one of a diptych in which Matthew Fuller develops the idea of the book as diagram, and tries to imagine what new forms of readers might be bred in a book culture transfigured by computational forms

[accompanying images show double-spreads from Guttorm Guttormsgaard's *Arkiv: En bildebok* [*Archive: A Picture Book*] (Oslo: Pax, 2009).]

People say that nobody knows what a book is any more. It is observed that people sit on trains or buses, and in waiting rooms, and where a few years ago they would have been reading a book, they will instead be consoled at their phone doing some data processing. This might be the case, but perhaps no one has ever really known what a book is, because the book has always been changing. Today the book is again bursting its bounds, becoming a point of mediation, swallowing other media systems and forms of knowledge while fragmenting and migrating into new forms.

Paper is Overflowing

One of the conditions of the book in the present day is that, as a medium of information storage, it has just gotten too big to cope with itself. Amplifying this phenomenon, artists such as Aleksandra Domanovic and Übermorgen have in recent years been showing large stacks of sheets of office paper. In Übermorgen's case the stacks consist of printed out documentation of legal papers generated in the course of their projects, such as *Vote-Auction, 700 Kgs of Temporary Injunctions* (2005). Domanovic, for her part, has displayed a series of works ranging from stacks of wrapped reams of paper to stacks of ink-jet printed pages with images that bleed over the edges, aligned to create a whole image in works such as *Untitled (Happy Office)* and *Untitled (Why Can't Women Time Travel)*, both from 2013. These aren't books per se, but they illustrate the kinds of convulsions that in part map this condition: paper is overflowing. In their 2010 exhibition *Book-Machine*, The Office of Metropolitan Architecture produced a one-off book, whose spine measured several metres in length, with printed documentation from all of their projects. It was 40,000 pages long. The poet of quantity Kenneth Goldsmith has recently held a work called *Printing Out the Internet* (2013) as a meditation on the nature of digital abundance.

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1. <http://www.obs-osv.com/gutenberg>.

As digital abundance conjugates with printing and with paper, it generates other effects: hoarding, ephemerality, deforestation, but also an explosion of text
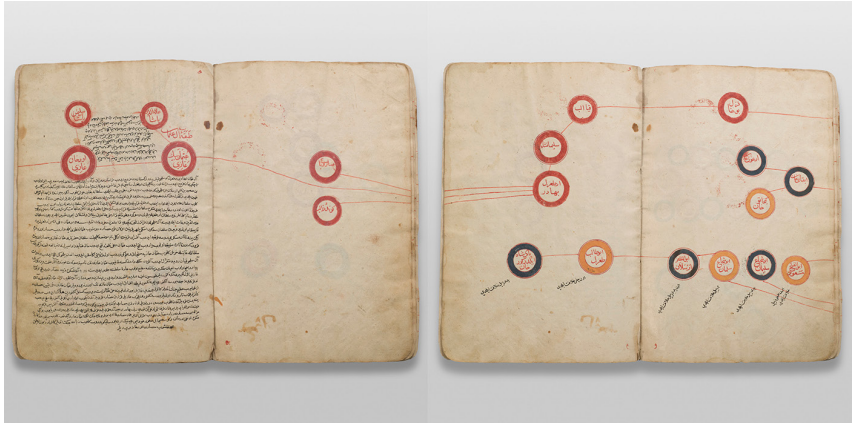
One further iteration of this project at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf (2014) consisted of 250,000 pages of pirated JSTOR documents (a massive cache of papers from the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* made available via Pirate Bay) printed in tribute to suicided information activist Aaron Swartz. What distinguishes such work from masses of paper in earlier art? In the 1970s Reiner Ruthenbeck used to make *Papierhaufen*, heaps of monotone crumpled paper. More neatly, artists such as Guy de Cointet (as part of the 1971 project ACRCIT) and later Félix González-Torres (in early 1990s works such as *Untitled (Aparición)* and *Untitled (Blue Mirror)*) placed stacks of newspapers or posters in galleries for visitors to take. One of the distinctions then is that today's paper works are often printed out on a desktop printer. It's not a one-off necessarily, nor a numbered multiple, just a print-out, something a bit more incidental to objecthood and enumeration. The state of digital abundance has its specific effects in relation to the media of music, film, and photography where conditions of super-accumulation are reflected also in numerous forms of circulation that exceed, disorder and amplify their capacities as media. As digital abundance conjugates with printing and with paper it generates other effects: hoarding, ephemerality, deforestation, but also an explosion of text, especially notable in what was only a few decades ago thought to be heading towards a post-literate condition. But equally, we see something of a reciprocal explosion of books, and a proliferation and mutation of their kind.

The Book as Diagram

One consequence of the massive amplification of symbol processing made possible by electronic computing, exemplified in its early ability to crack codes, and a quality that became a regular marvel in the era in which computers were thought of as 'electronic brains', is that the book exceeds its bindings. At the same time, as this amplification occurs, habits and media behaviours that have been inculcated and intensified by books as media, migrate into other forms and systems. Whilst certain strands of the 'Digital Humanities' have simply seen fit to work on the 'digitization' of books, making scans and text corpuses available with tools for their analysis, as if the book is essentially unchanging and originally separate from digits, others such as Andrew Piper, Lori Emerson, Amy Spencer and Hanna Kuusela are busy tracing the way in which as they come into combination, both computers and books change.[2] The deep imbrication between books and computational forms is in turn part of a wider set of fields of co-evolution that come to bear force upon and work their way into the book.

Guttorm Guttormsgaard's archive[3] is full of books that are entangled with other processes of object formation. Some are magnificent comings together of different orders of objects—like the Ethiopian Bible with its rucksack.[4] In the present day, other currents and kinds of movement intercept and re-mobilize the book's constituent forms. As we see books entangling with computational structures

2. A. Piper, *Book Was There: Reading in Electronic Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); L. Emerson, *Reading Writing Interfaces: From the Digital to the Bookbound* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2014); H. Kuusela, *What Can a Book Do? Following a Book through a Literary Controversy and a War, The Case of The Bookseller of Kabul* (Doctoral thesis: Goldsmiths, University of London, 2010); A. Spencer, *Author, Reader, Text: Collaboration and the Networked Book* (Doctoral thesis: Goldsmiths, University of London, 2010)

3. <https://guttormsgaardsarkiv.no/>.

4. See Report from the Gutenberg Galaxy, no. 1, < http://obs-osv.com/gutenberg >, 33.

The book is an essentially shifting, capacious form—there is not one aspect of its characteristics that has not been exceeded

and entities we can perhaps see them undergoing a further transition: incunabula, codex, book, stack, queue, heap. We can go on—lists, tables, interfaces, windows, fields—the shape and modus operandi of the book is mobilised as a conceptual scaffold into manifold combinations. The book is an essentially shifting, capacious form—there is not one aspect of its characteristics concerning binding, titling, authorship, typesetting, pagination, orthography, and so on, that has not been exceeded, gone beyond or done without in various and numerous cases.

Спуск цеппелина «LZ-127» в Ленинграде.
Экспедиция дала крупные научные результаты и доказала полную возможность длительного полета в полярных областях и пригодность управляемого воздушного корабля для исследований. Наибольшая опасность—обледенение оболочки корабля—была благополучно избегнута, и это доказывает, что при помощи соответствующих методов наблюдения наступление обле-

Books are also interspersed with other operations that exceed their bounds, scanning, analyzing, forming into corpuses, but they still hang together. We can say then that the book is a diagram: a schematization of parts, a way of doing things and of thinking and experiencing that manifests differently in relation to different historical, material, aesthetic and economic dynamics. This loose swarm of characteristics, each of which has their own genealogy, is massively internally differentiated, and generative. Some of these characteristics recede or come to the fore at different moments, coming into combination with others and mutating their characteristics as they do so. Others will stay remarkably resilient across times and across the different manifestations of the book.

The religious, avant-garde and popular books amongst others gathered by Guttormsgaard are beautiful examples of the way in which books combine with specific forces of material and cultural

inventiveness to achieve beautifully inventive reorganisations of the book, and in turn how the book as diagram grapples with and shapes what it gives rise to: memory, thought, orthodoxy, belief, insight, compulsion, arousal, imagination, authority. Baskerville's folio version of the Bible of 1763—included in the collection—inaugurated an era of clarity of typesetting and typeface design, but it also brought other kinds of data into the book, such as the proposed dates of specific events logged as notes in the margins. Moreover, it opened up the machinic quality of the book as a space of expressive form—the beautifully exaggerated kerning of the titles for instance.

Consider too, books made for children who can't yet read: picture books; plastic-paged books to look at and flap about with in the bath; books of thick cardboard that are good for gnawing on with sore teething gums; ugly books with plastic chains that can be attached to buggies and fiddled with until they rot; books that come with small piezo-speakers to make pleasingly unpleasant noises; or those with toy figures or puzzles in. Here, the book, as an image of a book, a substitute for books to come, contains and moves into the world, starts forming habits, couples with the need to relieve physical pain or boredom, becomes something to be attached to. Is this a recent phenomenon? The archive formed at Blaker by Guttormsgaard will inevitably have the answer to that somewhere.

Bindings
Books interfere with stories and with information as they give rise to them, shape and pummel the words, images and structures that also engender the book. In certain societies, those corners that are not marked heavily by the production of books, an index of how much power one has in the world, is how much paper you have in your dwelling. Identity papers are a basic form of document, a means of relaying obligation, evading or insisting on certain kinds of compulsion in relation to codes, titles, systems, personhood. Books too take on related roles, of being an authority to turn to, even if only in the form of a consolation. Academic books act as a condenser of referrals to other authorities via citations, bibliographic links, vague gestures towards or precise analysis of other books, other knots

The book is sometimes a barricade, something lodged in the midst of matter to constitute a specific locus that may submerge for years, intensified thickenings of substances as varied as can be brought together by structured strings of symbols

of interlinked argument.[5] David Markson's novels, thick with citation and memory, act as patchbays linking different streams of text, ideas and experience across time, turning the book as diagram into a meta-medium, one with its own idiosyncrasies and deficiencies yielding expressive texture. William Burroughs, Kathy Acker, Ronald Sukenick, Lawrence Sterne, Bill Atkinson, Isabel Waidner, John Latham, Tim Berners Lee, Ted Nelson, Karl Krauss, Oulipo, William Caxton and myriad others all do something slightly unspeakably physical with the book, forcing and enticing the diagram to rework and rebind itself in composition with other forces. Poems are written out of the concatenation of such indexes of persons as that just mentioned, poets and engineers filching and filtering the recursions of the diagram.[6] But these are big names, proper ones, we might also recall the achieved impossibility of the invention of the different marks of punctuation by anonymous operators that give birth to other operators, readers, writers and further books. Oddly, as Joseph Mazur points out, the culture of mathematics, with its different modality of reflexivity, allows for a rather more certain recall of the introduction of specific symbols.[7] Each symbol in turn becomes a point of inflection for language to crystallise around and rework clusters and tangles of relations.

This state of being a point of condensation makes some books into a treasure trove, a chamber inside a mountain of words and pages that can only be entered by a slender, pressurising aperture; other books act as open forms of gathering and assembling, of objects, of people, movements; still others trigger the gratification and curse of compulsive reading, a line out of everyday life that need only be a line here and there. Books are interwoven with computational forms, register, memory, network, code, variable, symbolic systems transposed to other symbolic systems, tangling with language, metals, electricity, imaginary, and unfolding too in systems of record and domination through which modes of evasion, suggestion and flagrancy sift, filter and form their own crucibles of language, technology and instruction. The book too is sometimes a barricade, something lodged in the midst of matter to constitute a specific locus that may submerge for years, intensified thickenings of substances as varied as can be brought together by structured strings of symbols. Each entity in such a collection acts as a potent residue for forms of life yet to come. Perhaps we will find out what a book is when it is over, when they become mysterious artefacts from another age. Until then people are in the midst of books and as such, since we also have a certain difficulty in knowing what we are any more, books might tell us something about ourselves.

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5. In their reading of Gabriel Tarde's economic theories, Latour and Lépinay note the way in which books rely on other books to work. B. Latour and V. A. Lépinay, T*he Science of Passionate Interests: An Introduction to Gabriel Tarde's Economic Anthropology* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2009).

6. A. Henri, 'Me', in A. Henri, R. McGough and B. Patten, *The Mersey Sound*, revised edition (London: Penguin, 1983)

7. J. Mazur, *Enlightening Symbols: A Short History of Mathematical Notation and Its Hidden Powers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).