

## Not A Book: Locating Material Traces of Collaborative Print and Digital Technologies in the Archive

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As a project that is situated between “the print” and “the digital” and as one that places print-based artifacts in conversation with digital artifacts, “not a book” is a project concerned with the histories, presents, and futures of books and the technologies of reproduction and replication used to make them. Created from digital images of the traces left from the original copper engraved botanical prints on the interleaved blank pages of a digitized edition of one printed copy of an 1844 issue of “Flora Batava,” the project reflects on and raises questions regarding just what a book is and was by delving into the history of “the” book as a collection of historically contingent technologies and social processes. Seeking to document and understand how the material traces of bookmaking and distribution processes, histories, and technologies become legible in new ways once they are reframed and accessed in the context of new technologies of replication and reproduction, this project offers viewers an opportunity to reflect on the ways in which histories of print technologies are embedded in digital technologies and how the “not a book” image functions both literally and metaphorically as a “digital negative” of the printed original.

I began this project in 2014 as a result of spending an ever increasing amount of time doing research using online archives, including those managed by Archive.org, Hathi Trust, Google Books, and Gallica.fr. As part of my research into the history of books and printing technologies, I came across a digitized copy of a publication entitled “Flora Batava” on the <http://www.biolib.de/> archive that I at first assumed was a rather old book of botanical prints. I would later find out that the “Flora Batava” is neither all that old (the copy I was looking at was published in 1844) and that it was not a book, but a botanical journal published annually in print form from 1800 - 1934. The many layers of histories embedded in the print and digital pages of the issues of “Flora Batava” is a lengthy story, a short version of which you can read about below.

In addition to the beautiful botanic illustrations reproduced via copper engravings in the 1844 edition I was looking at, I noticed that traces of the printed images were visible on the blank interleaved pages. While these would have been visible even in a printed edition, they would not have become pages in the book in quite the same way they were in the digitized copy. These pages with the traces of the printed images seemed to me to be somewhat symbolic of the many connections and differences that exist amongst print and digital technologies. What is more, I would never have seen these material traces in such a manner without the process of digitization, which relies on a set of technologies that reflect and refract those which made the production of the “Flora Batava” as print object possible.

“Not a Book” is a project about excavating histories and making connections between the past and the present and between virtual and real objects and worlds. As a publishing project, “Flora Batava” is fascinating from a number of different perspectives: first, published from 1800 - 1934, a period representative of many important changes in technologies of reproduction, replication, and bookmaking, each of the issues of the journal present a visual documentation of this 134 year span in the histories of print; second, entitled “Flora Batava” by the botanist Jan Kops, the magazine’s title and contents connect it to numerous periods in Dutch religious and commercial history and to its colonial past. In selecting the title “Flora Batava,” Kops was at once paying homage to Agnes Block, a 17th c. artist and botanist, who is said to have been the first person to successfully cultivate the pineapple in Europe, and who, in addition to naming her garden at Vijverhof “Flora Batava,” had herself depicted as “Flora Batava” in an engraved portrait. Batavia is also the historic name given in Roman times to what is now the Netherlands and the name given to the Indonesian city Jakarta when it was the capital of the Dutch East Indies from 1619 - 1949. Bringing together the histories and presents of textiles, agriculture, printing, shipping, and communications industries, “Flora Batava” in both its print and digital editions offers a unique space for reflecting on connections between the local and global across different time periods, as well as on continuities existing amongst old and new technologies. As is the case with many of the topics and objects that my documentary art practice focuses on, the “Flora Batava” is a unique palimpsest of stories and information.

Digital tools are quite powerful both in terms of enabling greater access to printed materials in library collections but also in terms of changing our relationships to printed objects and the collections that house them. They also require the re-thinking of certain key terms of textual scholarship and book history. These include terms as basic and fundamental as author, publisher, printer, reader, critic, and bookseller. In this project, I consider what the remediation of print-books enables us to see and understand about print-based books and reading practices that might have remained otherwise invisible or undetectable without the advent and widespread use of digital technologies. In other words, there are histories embedded in digital technologies and in the objects we access through them. “Not a Book” seeks to make some of these legible.

Some questions that I consider with this project include:

How do books signify as objects when they can no longer be accessed as physical objects?

How is authorship as a collaborative activity evident in the material traces that books as objects leave behind in print and in digital form?

How does the versioning of books (copies of copies) give us access to things we might not have seen traces of otherwise?

How do changes in how we access, relate to, and interact with printed books change our frame of reference and understanding of what they are?

As with all digital remixes, this project has many authors and contributors, including Kurt Steuber ([www.kurtsteuber.de](http://www.kurtsteuber.de)), whose work preparing and publishing the digital scanned images of the "Flora Batava" at [www.biolib.de](http://www.biolib.de) made this project possible, the publisher and engraver J. C. Sepp, the botanist Jan Kops, Georg Jacob von Os and the many other illustrators, and Agnes Block, whose garden at Vijverhof, was where many of the botanical specimens documented in the book were planted. While the digital technology providers who contributed to this project are too numerous to name individually, as are the humans who created and manage the digital technologies employed, I am grateful to them for their contributions to this project.

Links to "Flora Batava" Related Resources

Flora Batava: <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433031342672;view=1up;seq=9>

[https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wageningen\\_\(Nederland\)](https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wageningen_(Nederland))

Netherlands Institute for Ecology: <https://nioo.knaw.nl/>

Botanic Guardians: <https://www.botanischetuinen.nl/nl/agenda>

Powell, Catherine: <https://www.emlc-journal.org/articles/10.18352/emlc.147/>

National Library of the Netherlands:  
<https://www.kb.nl/en/themes/book-art-and-illustrated-books/flora-batava>