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Thinking the Unprintable in Contemporary Post-Digital Publishing

In a recent interview, poet and publisher J. Gordon Faylor jokingly remarked that the American publishing collective *Troll Thread*, which publishes PDFs and print-on-demand (POD) versions of those PDFs, "exploit[s] Lulu's bookmaking technology in more diversely insidious ways" than his own *Gauss PDF*, another Tumblr-based project that publishes PDFs and multimedia works.[1] These contemporary uses of online or POD publishing are so "diversely insidious" not because they bypass carefully calculated and often handmade print runs, or because these presses publish work that might not otherwise appear elsewhere (which has become an avant-garde truism in itself over the last century). Rather, the artful exploitation lies in *Troll Thread*'s and *Gauss PDF*'s publication of works that seem out of place in a codex form. These are works that cannot or should not be printed but insist on printedness—even if only imagined—all the same.

What I would like to call the "imagined printedness" in the digital publishing projects of *Troll Thread* and *Gauss PDF* (with side-glances at the magazine *Triple Canopy* and Ugly Duckling Presse) allows these publishers to escalate definitions of "poetry," the "magazine," the "book," and "publishing" within their overlapping contemporary small-press and avant-garde communities. Born-digital publishing and what Lisa Gitelman terms the "near print" technology of the PDF enable new experiments with the production, distribution, and reception of a work.[2] The semblance of print in post-digital avant-garde publishing makes visible the differences and similarities between printed and digital materiality, and, I contend, this will help us understand how contemporary avant-garde and small-press writers and publishers work today.

Little magazines are usually understood to be short-lived, not widely circulating, non- or anti-commercial undertakings that publish stylistically experimental work, which is often politically radical or by authors with politically radical aspirations—a definition that finds

as many matches as it finds challengers.[3] While the little magazine is primarily theorized in relation to the modernist "period," born-digital publishing invites a more expansive understanding of the categories of the avant-garde magazine and the small press, partly because what seems like the infinitely expandable digital publishing space puts pressure on the descriptors "little" and "small" with regard to audience and geographic reach, and on "magazine" with regard to medium and genre. An online Tumblr that publishes PDFs and/or other file formats, often single-author works but also collaborations, might not immediately look like a magazine. I want to suggest, however, that *Troll Thread* and *Gauss PDF* can be considered metaphorical extensions of avant-garde little magazine communities. One reason is that they display their contributions in ways that resemble the table of contents of a slowly expanding magazine number, where content is added and distributed periodically. Aesthetically, too, there is a clear sense of seriality. Moreover, like avant-garde magazines in the twentieth century, *Troll Thread* and *Gauss PDF* have established a small community around their publications with several overlapping contributors. That means that we can indeed, as Danny Snelson has argued, read digital databases and collections (or "little databases," as he calls them) in similar ways to print magazines.[4]

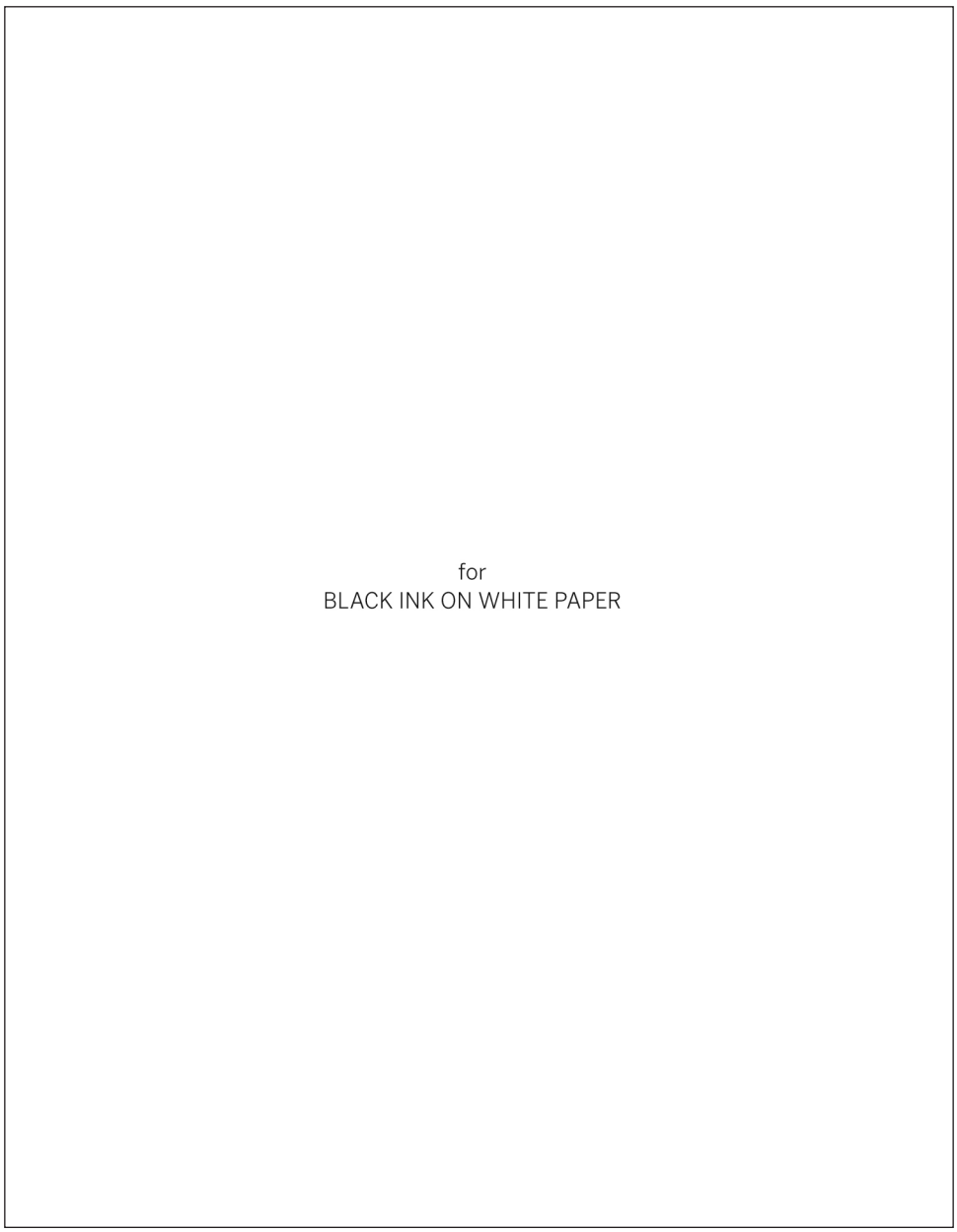
A new medium is often conceived and explained in relation to a previous one. Online publications, for example, are often produced and read as if they were print, and specifically as if they were made for a codex. Design features, too, are often skeuomorphic: they look like an analog version of a different medium (such as paper) but no longer function the same way. Unlike ominous remarks by critics that "the period between 1980 and 2015 will be seen as the end of the ascendency of print periodicals," my focus on the digital does not imply a belief in the supersession of the supposedly "obsolescent" medium of print.[5] Rather, I prefer the terms "post-digital" and "intermediation" for our contemporary moment: the first because it suggests that digitality informs the processes of production, distribution, and reception whether a work is printed or not, and the second because it accepts the ongoing coexistence and mutual transformation of print and digital technologies.[6]

So what does it mean to think printedness in post-digital publishing? Jerome McGann, Matthew Kirschenbaum, and N. Katherine Hayles have long insisted on the materiality of electronic texts and on reading them as cultural and historical forms in ways that are similar to how we analyze

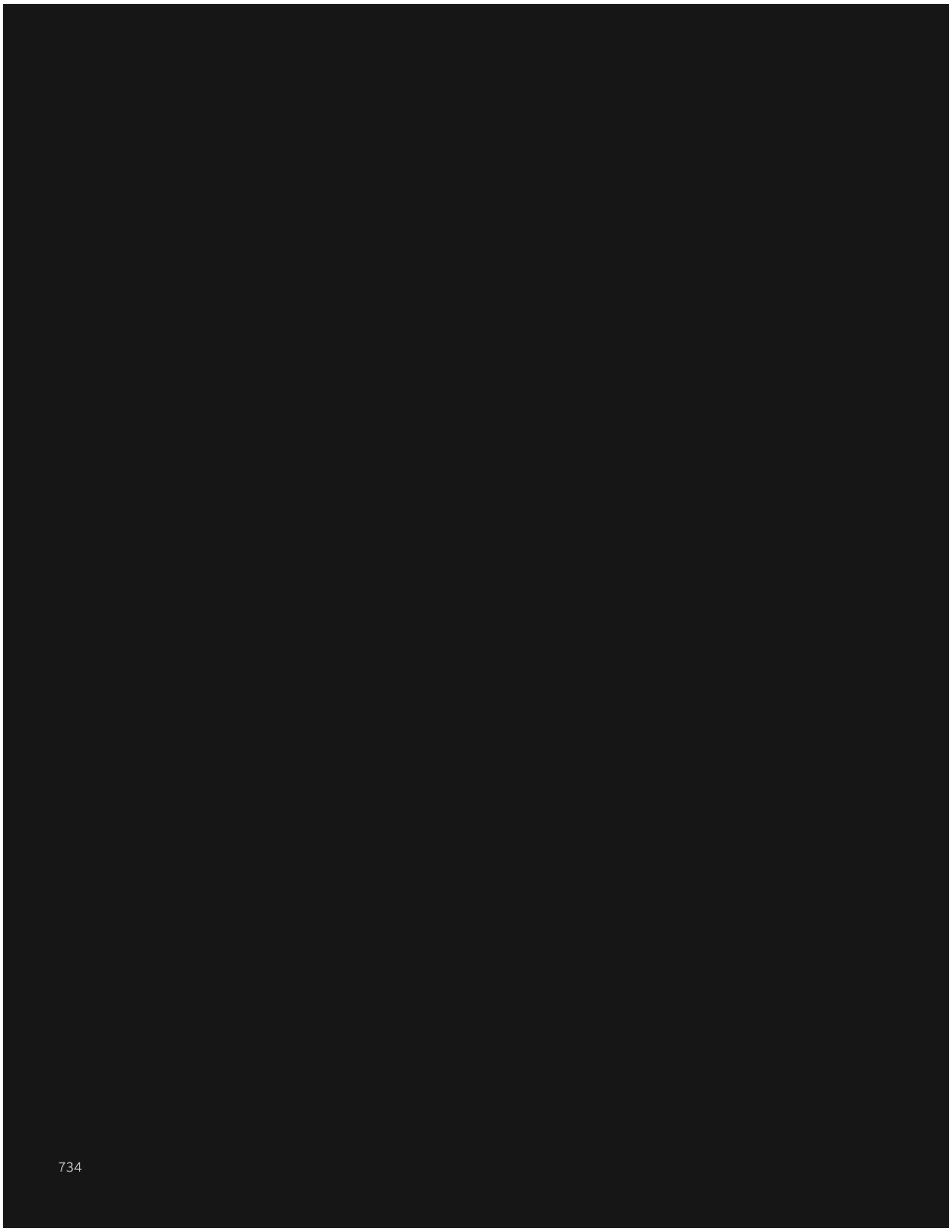
printed texts. Like Kirschenbaum in particular, I want to "track" the traces left behind by written or read objects online.[7] The publications I have selected here often highlight their media of composition and distribution (each with a specific materiality) and make processes of mediation their investigative focus. We are invited to read these digital materials *like* print at the same time as analog printedness is either only imagined or, simply, impossible. If, as McGann argues, "literary documents bear within themselves the evidence of their own making," the remainders of print in a never-printed document complicate that trajectory: they show traces they can never quite have.[8] It is to these imagined remainders that I will now turn.

Holly Melgard's *Black Friday* was published by her own *Troll Thread* publishing collective on Black Friday, November 2012, as an 8 ½ × 11" POD book. Of its 740 pages, 734 are entirely black, except for their white page numbers. As the poem's dedication page specifies, it is a book "for BLACK INK ON WHITE PAPER" (see pp. 178–79). When I showed the PDF to my students, several of them exclaimed that it would be wrong to print the book; they were alarmed by the thought of waste in an environmentally precarious time. Although the ecological footprint of their smartphones and laptops is undoubtedly greater, their reaction pinpoints an important aspect of the work: *Black Friday*'s imagined excess of ink does not sit well within the boundedness of the printed book. In its evocation of the codex as equivalent to the "book," *Black Friday* is a distant relative of Aram Saroyan's untitled "book" from 1968: an unopened 500-page ream of Stationers-brand paper published by Lita Hornick's small press Kulchur as a work of book art, its only mark of "authorship" being the stamped cover showing a copyright notice and price. At the same time, a PDF like *Black Friday* also invokes the antecedent of the codex form: the scroll, a form that lends itself to compendious and sequential reading (which brings it closer to oratory and time-based media). After all, *Troll Thread* was founded in part, as co-editor Chris Sylvester puts it, "to make massive quantities of text or data or whatever available all at once and in the same place…as 'one thing.'"[9]

This generically indefinable "or whatever" is an apt rallying cry for a publishing project intent on troubling literariness and conventional book publishing. Melgard describes *Black Friday* as an experiment with her publishing medium: "poems can exploit what it is in books that makes texts appear as 'text'; how their distributions and multiple frameworks of production may play a material role in their composition, their poetics."[10]



Holly Melgard, *Black Friday*, from *Troll Thread* (2012), dedication page.



Holly Melgard, *Black Friday*, from *Troll Thread* (2012), page 734 of 740, the final black page with white numbers.

Black Friday probes its existence within a small-press print economy that in monetary terms often costs more than it returns. But in its invitation to reflect on the circulation of money, *Black Friday* can itself only circulate digitally. Ostensibly an attempt to "break an industrial printer," *Troll Thread* literalizes the conventional avant-garde trope of rupture, testing if and how poetry could actually, and not just metaphorically, break things.[11] But, judging from the Lulu error messages the author receives whenever someone attempts to purchase a copy, the breaking remains a thought-experiment only. Rather than a demonstration of the end of books, *Black Friday* demonstrates the specific possibilities of POD publishing: since Lulu charges a publisher the same for blank or black pages, at least hypothetically, and since 740 is the maximum number of pages Lulu allows for a perfect-bound book, *Black Friday* attempts, like its inadvertent twin, Jean Keller's *The Black Book* (2010/2013), "the lowest cost and maximum value for the artist."[12]

Other *Troll Thread* titles likewise thematize the economics of poetry publishing and the long history of avant-garde nonprofitability. Melgard's *REIMBUR$EMENT* (2013), subtitled on its dedication page "for work," features images of lottery and scratch tickets, the cost of the book amounting to the money Melgard lost to gambling during graduate school to make up for all her unpaid labor. *MONEY* (2012) by "Maker" publishes cut-outs of hundred-dollar bills.[13] And Joey Yearous-Algozin's recent *HOW TO STOP WORRYING ABT THE STATE OF PUBLISHING WHEN THE WORLD'S BURNING AND EVERYBODY'S BROKE ANYWAYS AND ALL YOU REALLY CARE ABT IS IF ANYONE IS EVEN READING YR WORK* (July 2016), is a half-serious, half-ironic instruction manual in the form of a two-page lineated "poem" in large type that practices the cheap DIY and POD publishing it preaches. What could be called *Troll Thread*'s POD-manifesto, *HOW TO STOP WORRYING* demystifies the publishing business by showing how easy it is to self-publish and start a small press, reminiscent of the many paeans for the small press that pervade twentieth-century avant-garde history. But Yearous-Algozin's "how-to" document lacks the utopian tinge associated with that genre of avant-garde writing and is in fact quite pragmatic:

don't worry about making it look good, gutters,
paratext, etc.

that's all just marketing

leave that to "editors" who can pay "designers", i.e.
bosses

or until you learn more about laying out books, which
you never need to learn

save yr cover as a .jpg & upload it in the cover
designer or use the default settings

whatever

set the price at zero revenue

that way you can buy more copies when lulu has coupons
for free shipping

also, this is poetry, you shouldn't be making a profit

don't be an asshole

That poets do not usually make a profit (there are far fewer "professional" poets than novelists) is a realistic assessment, but it also ironizes the widespread avant-garde imperative for poets to position themselves outside capital. It is worth noting that several *Troll Thread* authors work with default settings such as the 8 ½ × 11" format as constraints for creative production, letting the default determine the work. (In fact, *Troll Thread*'s house format borrows its look and approach to media from Vito Acconci and Bernadette Mayer's late-1960s mimeographed magazine *0 To 9*.) Within a history of print publishing dominated by an esteem for craft, manual skill, the intricacies of typographical design, and the time and expense required for the production process, *Troll Thread*'s labor and rationale for publishing the "books" in their catalog (or in Melgard's case, the labor of "composing" *Black Friday*) is much harder to determine, and deliberately so.

However, *Black Friday* is also a self-consciously aesthetic, even literary, work. In her "Statement of Poetics," Melgard inscribes her project into a tradition of black paintings and texts such as Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1915) and Francisco Goya's *Pinturas Negras* (1819–23), and a print tradition of mourning pages that includes Laurence Sterne's all-black page in *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67). In Sterne's novel, the black page is a mimetic attempt at mourning Yorick's death via the medium of the book. As scholars of Sterne's work have noted, the black page is related to an earlier section of the novel in which Phutatorius, seeking pain relief from a hot chestnut that has fallen into his "breeches," discusses the healing potential of printed paper when applied to a wound.[14] For that to be the case, the novel itself makes clear, the type must be "a very small one" so "the sanative particles" in the ink may "have the advantage of being spread so infinitely thin, and with such a mathematical equality" to be most effective. When spreading ink too thickly, however, Yorick warns Phutatorius, it "would make a very devil of it," likely a reference to so-called printer's devils, usually young apprentices who fetched the freshly inked sheets and also ran other errands.[15] Certainly an entirely black page, in *Tristram Shandy* or *Black Friday*, would qualify as such a devil. Is Holly Melgard, then, the errand boy of post-digital poetry? How many Black Fridays and their concomitant tragedies can 734 black pages heal? The book does after all commemorate "BLACK INK ON WHITE PAPER"—in the form of a serialized tombstone in pages.

The form and content of *Tristram Shandy*, *Black Friday*, and *HOW TO STOP WORRYING* think of "the book" as a (failed) commodity and as a (failed) material object. While *Tristram Shandy*'s black page shows its own self-awareness as a mechanically produced book (rather than a manuscript copied by scribes), *Black Friday*'s pages show that it no longer needs to be mechanically produced in order to be a book: it can exist as a digitally imagined, even unprintable book. Black ink on white paper as *print* is *thought* but unrealized—except for the librarian who snatched a meager thirty pages that the critic Brian Reed had printed on his department's cheap printer so that "a failed partial printout will now be archived as a paper form of a digital artefact."[16] Perhaps this incomplete and imperfect print reproduction is the ideal in-between condition for *Black Friday*: instead of a slick perfect-bound book with high production values, the loose pages with their cheap and streaked

black ink flaunt (or taunt us with) the idea of the unprintable, even if or precisely when they are printed. In a stroke of bibliographic irony, Melgard has recently been able to order a hardbound copy of *Black Friday*, and in the object's failed dematerialization one could therefore say, as Melgard put it in conversation with me: "I guess the project is over."[17]

Troll Thread's awareness of printedness, publishing technology, and (supposedly) unprintable content and forms, aligns it with the many formal and generic experiments of earlier avant-gardes. While avant-garde publications across the twentieth century often mixed *genres*, digital platforms enable a mixing of *media* that was impossible to the same extent in previous print technologies. As "a publication suited to any type of media file," Faylor's *Gauss PDF* publishes PDFs but also numerous other file types, such as .mov, .rtf, .jpg, .mp4, .mp3, .zip, as well as YouTube playlists, image collections, and poems in Microsoft Word documents.[18] As such, it aligns with another largely digital publishing project, *Badlands Unlimited*, whose recent series "Files" publishes artist's editions as collector's items to download.[19] *Gauss PDF* operates primarily in a poetry and art context, but the majority of pieces cannot be categorized as poems or even as literary texts, and are simply works fascinated with digital materiality, medium specificity, and genre. Tonya St. Clair's *Cloud Storage for Everyone* (GPDF048), for example, is a PDF consisting of a link to a Dropbox folder containing all previously published *Gauss PDF* publications, the link itself blown up into large type with line breaks. Feliz Lucia Molina's *A Letter to Kim Jong-il Looking at Things* (GPDF045), in turn, repeats a letter addressed to King Jong-il in 143 Microsoft Word fonts, alongside various pictures of the dictator looking at such things as toilet paper, a tractor, "people starving, etc.," and other images trawled from a Tumblr called "Kim Jong-il Looking at Things." In both cases, digital storage, navigation, and the customizability of our computers become part of the pieces' meaning-generating mechanisms.

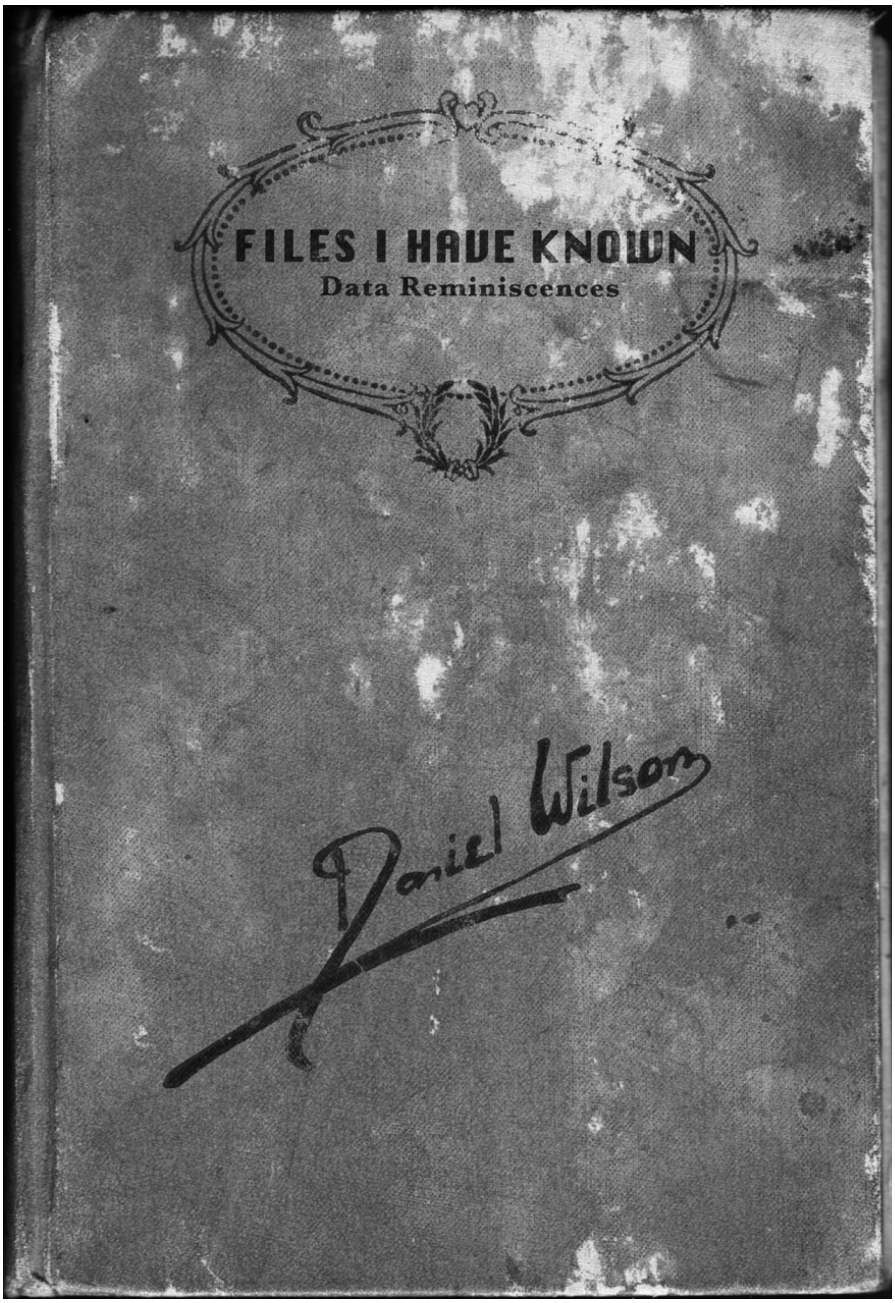
The variety of generic and medial references notwithstanding, *Gauss PDF* publications are unified in the way they are displayed on the press's website. *Gauss PDF*'s consecutive numbering of each publication as GPDF + number in its "catalog" section evokes bibliographic and archival practices usually associated with manuscripts and print, except that in this case the bibliographic reference also constitutes part of a Tumblr URL.

In 2013, *Gauss PDF* began to publish Gauss Editions using the POD service Lulu, which Faylor describes, in his interview with Chris Alexander, as if it were "somehow a priori digitized; the books all have that same look and feel. It's as though the publishing wizard is somehow inscribed behind the text, like a watermark." Through Lulu's layout templates, in other words, *Gauss PDF* publications look like they were always meant to remain digital. Nevertheless, Faylor uses a term from print history—"watermark"—to explain a phenomenon rooted in digitality. Historically, a watermark indicated to readers that the paper of a book was handmade and therefore more valuable, while the watermark's specific shape functioned as a papermaker's signature. No longer handmade, *Gauss PDF*'s digital watermark imbues the digital object with the promise of a signature and with a materiality specific to its publishing technology and screen-based reading environment.

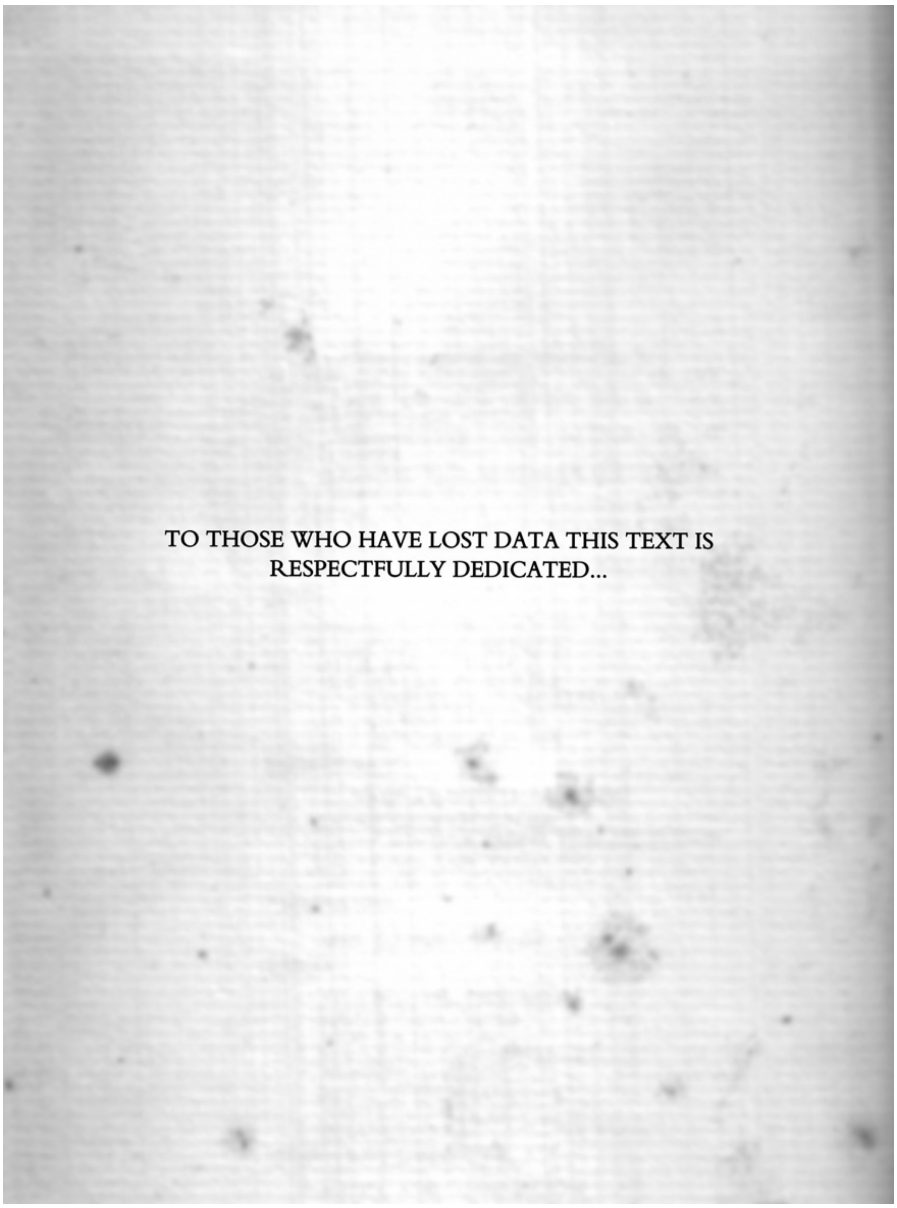
That printedness can be realized digitally is the design conceit of a recent *Gauss PDF* piece by Daniel Wilson. *Files I Have Known: Data Reminiscences* (GPDF199, 2016) is an autobiographical account of the author's memories of files that no longer exist. The imagined "book" traces Wilson's encounters with ephemeral files on his computer. Both visually and conceptually, the project exploits the disjunction between a file and its description in another medium, as Wilson explains in the foreword: "Can the original essence of a data file be recreated purely by words?" Unlike other projects published by *Gauss PDF* and *Troll Thread* that complicate close reading through the sheer quantity or illegibility of the material, *Files I Have Known* rewards sequential story-based reading. In narrativizing digital materiality, Wilson's specifications of file types, file sizes, file names ("amb1.wav," "fafda.rtf," "!A19TOP!.S3M"), and creation dates (from the 1990s to 2015) are offset by the old-fashioned "look" of the decaying page, which, we are invited to imagine, is weathered by age and bad archival conditions. The whitish, fungi-induced patches on the cover with its crumbling edges and the yellowed dedication page with its brownish stains, usually the result of light exposure and age-related deterioration ("foxing"), contradict the title's and the content's utter contemporaneity (see pp. 186–87). Or rather, the files' decomposition is represented visually by a process that is not "local" to their digital environment. Wilson does not just mirror the skeuomorphism of our digital-design inventions, but exploits it poetically. While the cover's decorative border matches the paper,

the title's retro Art Nouveau font and the interior text look tagged on, unblended with the supposedly aged page. Of course, the PDF "pages" are not the deteriorated paper of a book called *Files I Have Known: Data Reminiscences*; they are either modified scans of an extant printed book, or Photoshopped pages created with a "vintage" effect. Given the range of design possibilities today (including apps that create a letterpress look), Wilson is less interested in a perfect copy of print than in a media-specific originality. *Files I Have Known* fakes printedness, but fakes it badly, in order to create its own digital printedness.

While Melgard's and Wilson's tongue-in-cheek simulation of printedness seriously considers distinctions and overlaps between print and digital, e-readers and software that displays digitized small-press material simulate print without irony or media-specific self-awareness. The online chapbook archive of Ugly Duckling Presse (UDP) hosts scans of out-of-print chapbooks in an animated Flash-based reader that enables the comparative reading across page-spreads that we are accustomed to in books or magazines. One of these documents is the scan of a damaged copy of UDP's magazine *6×6* (see p. 189).[20] The burnt edges might immediately call up associations of the underground press as subject to censorship and book burning, while its off-center and slightly diagonal title, set in wood type, nods to the typographical experiments of Dada. But unlike the knowing irony of the material traces in *Files I Have Known*, these are "real" stains and the result of a fire in the press's old storage facility, a fact unknown to readers except by word of mouth (or, in my own case, a conversation with one of the editors). These burn marks might grant the magazine a deceptively palpable materiality, but in the online viewer these are also only images of stains. In other words, the stains have been rendered digital, a process carried further by the mediation of the flip-book software in its simulation of paper reading. I can hover my cursor over a corner, which will then curl its dog-ear towards me, as if I had touched it after lightly wetting my fingers to mark my place. And when I turn the page—that is, when I "click to read" (see p. 189)—I hear a *swoosh* sound *like* the movement of paper, which suggests a pursuit of the tangibly authentic in the digital realm. This software gimmick seems simultaneously adequate *and* ludicrous for a magazine that highlights its materiality and small-press credentials. (The letterpress cover and the hand-cut edge, more visible in the intact version, pay homage to



Daniel Wilson, *Files I Have Known: Data Reminiscences*, from *Gauss PDF* (2016), cover.

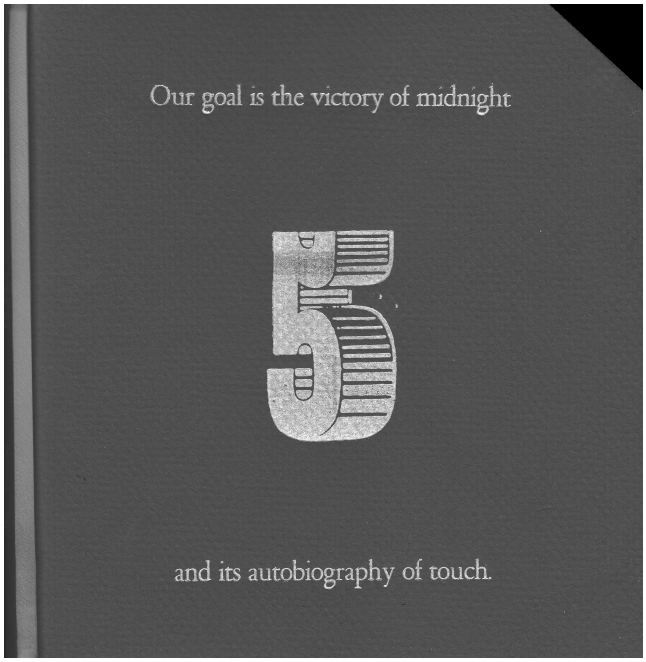


Daniel Wilson, *Files I Have Known: Data Reminiscences*, from *Gauss PDF* (2016), dedication page.

Russian Futurist Vasily Kamensky's 1914 chapbook *Tango with Cows* [see p. 189].) The pristine display creates a mismatch, making the magazine appear more precious, and even kitschier, than its print version. The text on the issue's cover—"its autobiography of touch," taken from the first poem in the issue—suddenly reads like a remark on the object's material journey: it's as if it knew it would be "touched" by fire, but not, in its digital iteration, by my readerly cursor-hand.

As with any change in print technology, digital publishing has specific affordances and a specific bibliographic code. Given that many authors now type their work, without ever copying from a handwritten draft, our notions of authorship and composition processes ought to be adjusted. An author can write, produce, and distribute a work in a single day; the chain of production, reception, and distribution, or what Robert Darnton famously called the "communications circuit," is thus radically shortened. Digital media also lend themselves to revision in ways that the letterpress, mimeograph, and photocopier did not: revision can be more invisible than the manual corrections in letterpressed text or photocopies, or the correction fluid used for mimeographed mistakes. In this way, new print and publishing technologies always adjust the labor—or at least the outward appearance of labor—involved in publishing. In the history of small-press publishing, there are many records of editors commenting on the labor of typing mimeograph stencils or setting letterpress type. Knowing which publishing technology or program poets and editors used, and knowing the affordances of InDesign, Lulu, or Tumblr, might offer a new understanding of a piece or an author's mode of working.

Not purely technologies for printing like the letterpress or mimeograph, our computers fulfil multiple functions in addition to "printing to the screen," to use Gitelman's phrase: we might type a poem, then reply to an email, then upload a photograph to social media, then plan our day in a calendar application, then edit the poem, saving yet another draft, while listening to downloaded music. In this respect, it is apt that the platform which hosts *Gauss PDF* and *Troll Thread* is the multimedia-based Tumblr. Although both projects use a template that reflects a minimalist Swiss design, Tumblr is not a static website and does not usually have the look of other more literary and professional blogs or websites: as a hosting site it is primarily a platform for sharing that foregrounds its blogging aspect, and one of its defaults presents the dashboard as a true hodgepodge of images and notes. While the printed book is a discrete



Above: *6×6*, no. 5 (December 2001), Ugly Duckling Presse Online Chapbook Archive. Below: *6×6*, no. 5, print edition, front cover. Fore-edge is corner-cut in original.

unit with a starting point and an end point, the borders of the sometimes multimedia, sometimes non-literary, and sometimes long and sprawling work published by *Gauss PDF* are less clearly defined.

Similarly, the born-digital *Triple Canopy* veers inquisitively towards print, digital, and something else entirely. It expands the traditional magazine issue generically, temporally, and spatially by defining it as "includ[ing] digital works of art and literature, public conversations, books, editions, performances, and exhibitions," "published over the course of several months, often concurrently."[21] In this regard, *Triple Canopy* resembles earlier media-spanning magazines such as *Aspen*, the magazine-in-a-box with its flexi discs, flip-books, and foldouts, but *Triple Canopy*'s temporally unbounded nature is a particular affordance of its online environment. While *Aspen* featured a variety of media as separate items in a box, *Triple Canopy*—like *Gauss PDF* and other digital publishers—can blend these media and undo the hierarchies among them. To include public events in the definition of an "issue" (or a "book," as UDP did with its "paperless books") is then only the logical extension of a field already broadened by the distributive and material multiplicity of the web.[22]

Displaying its links to the print tradition, *Triple Canopy* experiments with its online environment by tilting the scroll model of websites to a sideways click or swipe, akin to flip-books and the flip-book software used in UDP's chapbook archive. It does so in the hope that such an experiment, as Colby Chamberlain puts it, would "provide subtle cues that a proper reading experience was under way," but its design also invokes the smooth elegance of Apple products.[23] While there were indeed earlier, often commercial, websites with clickable content that proceeded frame by frame, for a literary magazine the design remains unusual. Reminiscent of such websites, but also of turning pages in a print magazine, *Triple Canopy* combines an imagined resemblance to each of the technologies it intermediates, which the editors relish with their reference to the page as a "metaphor."[24] *Triple Canopy* is a highly self-conscious enterprise precisely in this regard: its slogan is to "slow down the internet."[25]

All the aforementioned publishing projects participate in the contemporary trend Jessica Pressman calls an "aesthetic of bookishness," which, she argues, is not "merely another form of postmodern reflexivity" but rather "a serious reflection on the book—and the

literary book in particular—through experimentation with the media-specific properties of print illuminated by the light of the digital." Unlike the novels Pressman studies, the projects I have considered do not experiment with bookishness or printedness for fear of the "death of the book" or magazine; their aim is not to inject "vigor" into the print medium in order to "remain innovative."[26] Instead, these works incorporate print technology and its concomitant materiality, reading habits, and literariness into the digital realm in order to create printedness digitally without being attached to paper.

While *Triple Canopy* uses HTML, a publishing technology well-suited to multimedia projects, it is not surprising that *Gauss PDF*, *Troll Thread*, and peer projects such as *SOd*, *Hysterically Real*, and *Badlands Unlimited* use PDFs. Such a capacious file format—it is either an index of a once printed object, or a digital object that is only imagined to be printed—appeals to projects that explore alternative models of printedness and the codex. As we have seen, *Troll Thread*, for instance, still designs its PDFs in recto-verso pages for printing a codex but does not necessarily expect users to purchase physical copies. For this reason, Hannes Bajohr suggests that *Troll Thread*, *Gauss PDF*, and his own *0x0a* are using "POD as [an] artistic practice."[27] More broadly, to understand "Publishing as Artistic Practice," as Annette Gilbert's title would suggest, might offer a conceptual category for the media-blending and indeterminate work that I have discussed in this essay.

The printed book, as Kirschenbaum has recently argued, is only one possible outcome of the distributive and receptive infrastructure it shares with other media, which can equally function as a "book."[28] The situation is similar, I would argue, for what I call the "magazine-ly" media published by *Troll Thread*, *Gauss PDF*, UDP's "paperless book department," and *Triple Canopy*, which are all print-ish; they invite a redefinition of print as the inscription and impression on a surface that need not be paper. They look like print or pretend they work like print and thus uphold for us what Derrida calls "the spectral model of the book," at the same time as they transform that very model. In other words, they "think print" even if they remain or must remain unprinted. Whether it is the sound effect of rustling paper and the burnt pages in UDP's Online Chapbook Archive, or the little white hand in PDF readers mimicking a tactile material interaction, or Daniel Wilson's handwritten signature and faded paper imitation, or the economic and

symbolic value of print in various *Troll Thread* titles, there are different ways in which printedness, the "paper-form of thinking," or the "order of the page," enters post-digital publishing—not all of which make these engagements automatically avant-garde.[29]

Counter to conventional definitions, I see the meaning of "avant-gardeness" as a discursive act decided on by a community of practitioners and readers, who do, importantly, usually disagree. These post-digital projects allow us to witness a shift away from defining avant-gardeness in our current moment on the basis of either formal innovation (on, say, the level of language) or social efficacy. Instead, these projects are thought experiments in contemporaneity, where innovation is no longer the primary motivating factor for an avant-garde, and where revolutionary change is no longer connected to aesthetic form per se. As the Poetic Research Bureau posits in their contribution to *Triple Canopy*'s anthology *Invalid Format*: "'make new' is of less import than make now."[30] What better way to test such nowness than with the instantaneous allure of the digital? Digital magazines and other magazine-ly publishing projects make this nowness—technologically possible now more than ever—the probe for their experiments and poetics. What's more, for avant-garde post-digital publishing, the distinctions between individual work, book, small press, and magazine become less clear-cut, which affects how avant-garde communities work inside and outside this differently networked online environment. Unlike earlier avant-garde projects, today's publishing experiments in—and realities of—form, politics, and sociality are available for much larger networks to see. The avant-garde magazine has become a vivarium: the reader (or "user") can observe a small ecosystem as it takes place. It is all about visibility. Avant-garde magazine-ly projects in the post-digital age become multimedia containers, data generators, distributors, and consumers—sometimes simultaneously. The availability of historical and contemporary data side-by-side *in the same medium* (because of digitization or new digital production) requires rethinking what it means to make literature "now," where the imperative to make "new" might be more of an encumbrance than the liberating battle cry it once was.[31] And that may well be a welcome development.

NOTES

1/ Chris Alexander, "The Gauss Interview: Chris Alexander Talks to J. Gordon Faylor," *Jacket2*, 5 March 2013, http://jacket2.org/commentary/gauss-interview. *Gauss PDF* was founded by Faylor in 2010. Its name is a pun on the Gaussian Probability Distribution Function. *Troll Thread* was founded in 2010 by Chris Sylvester, soon joined by Joey Yearous-Algozin, Holly Melgard, and Divya Victor (who has now left the project). Both projects use Lulu—an online print-on-demand platform.

2/ Lisa Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), passim.

3/ For recent accounts, see Suzanne Churchill and Adam McKible, "Introduction," in *Little Magazines and Modernism: New Approaches*, eds. Churchill and McKible (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 3–18, and Robert Scholes and Clifford Wulfman, *Modernism in the Magazines: An Introduction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

4/ Danny Snelson, "Live Vinyl MP3: Mutant Sounds, PennSound, UbuWeb, SpokenWeb," *Amodern* 4 (March 2015), http://amodern.net/article/live-vinyl-mp3.

5/ Ian Morris and Joanne Diaz, "Preface," in *The Little Magazine in Contemporary America*, eds. Morris and Diaz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), vii. Brian Reed, *Twenty-First Century Avant-Garde Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 1.

6/ The term "intermediation" comes from Ted Striphas, who prefers it over "remediation." See Ted Striphas, *The Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 15–16.

7/ Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, *Track Changes: A Literary History of Word Processing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

8/ Jerome McGann, *A New Republic of Letters: Memory and Scholarship in the Age of Digital Reproduction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 84.

9/ Melgard, Yearous-Algozin, and Sylvester, "Troll Thread Interview, by Tan Lin," *Harriet: A Poetry Blog*, 4 May 2014, http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2014/05/troll-thread-interview.

10/ Melgard, "Statement of Poetics," *Revista Laboratorio* 8 (May 2013), http://www.laboratoriodeescrituras.cl/holly-melgard.

11/ Melgard, Yearous-Algozin, and Sylvester, "Troll Thread Interview, by Tan Lin."

12/ Jean Keller, *The Black Book*, http://www.lulu.com/shop/jean-keller/the-black-book/paperback/product-21008894.html.

13/ A short preface to *MONEY* explains why *Troll Thread* believes it does not break counterfeit law: ultimately any responsibility lies with "the document's printer," who is described here as the work's "maker."

14/ Alex Wetmore, *Men of Feeling in Eighteenth-Century Literature: Touching Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 113; Christopher Flint, *The Appearance of Print*

in Eighteenth-Century Fiction (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 37.
15/ Flint, *The Appearance of Print*, 37.
16/ Reed and Craig Dworkin, "Untitled Conversation," in *Affect and Audience in the Digital Age*, ed. Amaranth Borsuk (Athens, OH: Essay Press, 2014), 5.
17/ Conversation with the author, 28 March 2017.
18/ Alexander, "The Gauss Interview."
19/ "Announcing Files 2.0," *Badlands Unlimited*, 21 March 2017, https://badlandsunlimited.com/news/announcing-files-2-0. The files, which can be downloaded for about $150–300 to support contemporary artists, take the shape of PDFs, a powerpoint presentation, code in the form of a Perl script, or a newly designed typeface.
20/ "6×6, no. 5," from *Ugly Duckling Presse Online Chapbook Archive*, http://www.uglyducklingpresse.org/archive/online-reading-old/6x6-5-our-goal-is-the-victory-of-midnight-and-its-autobiography-of-touch-by-6x6-poets.
21/ "Issues," *Triple Canopy*, https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/issues.
22/ "The Paperless Book Department," *Ugly Duckling Presse*, http://www.uglyducklingpresse.org/catalog/browse/paperless-book-department. For a while, UDP published performance-based "paperless books" which it defined as "books which escape attempts to keep them in one place" and which "address the basic assumptions and structures of book distribution and its relationship to how we read." One such paperless book, for example, was a work written to be performed and received over the phone.
23/ Colby Chamberlain, "The Binder and the Server," *Art Journal*, 18 February 2012, http://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=2644.
24/ The Editors, "A Note on Invalid Format," in *Invalid Format: An Anthology of Triple Canopy*, *Volume 1* (New York: Triple Canopy, 2011), 3.
25/ Chamberlain, "The Binder and the Server."
26/ Jessica Pressman, "The Aesthetic of Bookishness in Twenty-First Century Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 48.4 (Fall 2009): 466, 469.
27/ Hannes Bajohr, "Experimental Writing in Its Moment of Digital Technization: Post-Digital Literature and Print-on-Demand Publishing," in *Publishing as Artistic Practice*, ed. Annette Gilbert (Berlin: Sternberg, 2016), 101.
28/ Kirschenbaum, "The RESTful Book: Bibliography and Bookish Media" (lecture, The A. S. W. Rosenbach Lectures in Bibliography, Philadelphia, PA, 17 March 2016), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wm_DuhVrhGM.
29/ Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 30, 48, 46.
30/ Poetic Research Bureau, "For an Unoriginal Literature: 'Novelty is Suicide': An Introduction to and Dispatch from a Literary Service in the Public Domain," in *Invalid Format*, 155. The PRB is a small Los Angeles–based collective run by Ara Shirinyan, Andrew Maxwell, and Joseph Mosconi.
31/ Here I am alluding to the title of Amy Hungerford's *Making Literature Now* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).