COPIM

Combinatorial Books - Gathering Flowers - Part I

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This is the first in a series of blog posts (part II and III are to follow), which introduce one of the Pilot Projects we are conducting as part of the Experimental Publishing working group of the COPIM project. In these Pilot Projects, COPIM project members are collaborating with authors and publishers to create three or more experimental books. (For a typology of experimental books, see our previously published research report [here](#)). They are also documenting the publishing process along the way—through reflective blog posts such as this, for example. One of COPIM’s Pilot Projects is run by [Open Humanities Press](#) (OHP) in collaboration with a group of scholars, technologists, and students from the Universidad Iberoamericana Ciudad de México (including [Etelvina Bernal](#), [Sandra Hernández Reyes](#), [Sandra Loyola Guízar](#), Fernanda Rodríguez González, Yareni Monteón López, Deni Garciamoreno, [Nidia Rosales](#), [Xóchitl Arteaga Villamil](#) and Carolina Cuevas), led by Dr [Gabriela Méndez Cota](#). The Pilot, titled *Combinatorial Books: Gathering Flowers*, explores and encourages the revisiting and rewriting of books within the OHP catalogue as a means of generating radical new responses to them. To enable this, the project team is experimenting with new workflows, which will be documented and made available for others working in this space.

The book Méndez Cota et al. are rewriting is [The Chernobyl Herbarium: Fragments of an Exploded Consciousness](#), by the philosopher Michael Marder and the artist Anaïs Tondeur, published by OHP in their Critical Climate Change series. Méndez Cota and co., are producing a book-length response to *The Chernobyl Herbarium*, titled *Ecological Re-writing as Disappropriation: Situated Engagements with the Chernobyl Herbarium*. Below we will say more about the Pilot Project with OHP and how it relates to the politics of the press. In the following blog post, we will highlight some of the concepts, practices, history and thinking that guides the Pilot Project. In a third blog post, we will then explore in more detail the critical experiment Méndez Cota and her collaborators are undertaking while offering some reflections on this first stage of the *Combinatorial Books: Gathering Flower* project.

As part of the COPIM/OHP Pilot Project, we are working together with authors and publishers to stimulate the reuse of academic books. Although more and more books are being published open-access with Creative Commons licences, many academics remain hesitant when it comes to forms of rewriting, adaptation, and combinatorial creativity, seeing them as a threat, perhaps, to the ‘integrity’ of the work (see, for

example, [Mandler, 2014](#); [Grove, 2020](#)).¹ Creative Commons licences explicitly allow for derivatives, so how can we foster more engagement with such texts? This is the question we are addressing with *Combinatorial Books: Gathering Flowers*. We are doing so by 1) familiarising authors and publishers with tools and workflows that enable reuse; 2) discussing with authors and publishers what forms derivative practices can take within the humanities—including how cut-ups and remix can be applied in scholarly research, and even constitute the basis of new research. In the process, we are looking at some of the barriers and inhibitions academics face when it comes to experimental publishing and the rewriting of books. To this end, we are working closely with authors and presses to create communities of *best practice*. These communities are expressly designed to help us and them learn more about the issues above and how they can be successfully negotiated: not just by those taking part in the COPIM/OHP Pilot Project, but by other scholars and publishers, now and in the future.

To Hell with Open Humanities Press

With the *Combinatorial Books: Gathering Flowers* project we are experimenting with ways of encouraging authors and presses to collaborate on making use of the [open CC-BY license](#) a lot of open access books are now published under. [CC-BY licenses](#) allow books and the research they contain to be copied, remixed, built upon, translated and reused in any medium, so long as the author is credited. Yet, other than producing translations, few people take advantage of the possibilities for interaction, experimentation, and reuse this affords.

One of our inspirations for this Pilot Project is [Mel Jordan](#), who recently joined us in the [Centre for Postdigital Cultures](#) at Coventry University. In 2014, as part of the [Freee Art Collective](#), she collaborated on taking a pencil to art historian Herbert Read's 1941 book *To Hell with Culture*, rewriting it to produce the manifesto '[To Hell with Herbert Read](#)'.

Usually, the Freee Art Collective write their manifestos by going through a book 'word by word, phrase by phrase', and asking themselves whether they agree with the author(s). If they do agree then they see 'no need to update the language or examples', and so leave 'that passage as it stands since it is disagreement that triggers action' for them. When it came to Read's statement 'To Hell With Culture', however, they 'disagreed with it so violently that [they] couldn't leave it intact. Indeed, they were so angry with Read's book that the Freee Art Collective worked on it a different way to their other manifestos: not just 'by modifying the text but by confronting it.' This is the reason the '[To Hell With Herbert Read](#)' manifesto reads, in their words, 'as a long series of accusations, complaints and denouncements.'

Those of us working on the OHP Pilot Project as part of COPIM's Experimental Publishing working group thought the Freee Art Collective's work on 'To Hell With Herbert Read' might offer one potential and inspiring way of moving people past feeling too respectful and timid to engage in revisiting and reworking already published non-experimental books. As a test case, we invited groups to collaborate on rereading/rewriting/reworking a single book from the Open Humanities Press (OHP) [catalogue](#)—or several books if they wished—by:

- asking themselves if they agree with the authors(s)
- updating the language and examples

- crossing out words, phrases, points
- rewriting them
- replacing them with new ones
- adding annotations, comments and post-publication reviews
- even confronting the text with accusations, complaints and denouncements

The Politics of Scaling Small

Combinatorial Books - Gathering Flowers is very much in keeping with our general approach at [Open Humanities Press](#) (OHP). It has never been our ambition to simply increase our output or expand our community, its activities and mode of production. If anything, rather than what's known in the common parlance as 'scaling what works,' we prefer [nonscaling](#) as Anna Tsing calls it—what, following Janneke Adema, some of our ScholarLed and COPIM colleagues have taken to thinking of as [scaling small](#).

To explain: Open Humanities Press consists of a network of interlacing scholarly communities whose various activities make up the publishing collective. While all of these communities are relatively small in size, each operates according to its own scale and schedule, retaining its particular intellectual identity, approach and manner of working. OHP is not simply about enlarging our community of communities, however, by encouraging more and more editors of journals and book series to adopt our particular model of publishing open access—possibly with a view to becoming part of OHP (what's called scaling-out). Nor is OHP focused on publishing an ever-growing number of journals and books according to the same model of open access (scaling-up). In other words, OHP's chief concern is neither with flipping as many book series and journals as it can to its version of open access, nor with trying to grow ever larger as an entity until it comes to rival or otherwise disrupt for-profit, closed-access, legacy publishers. For us, scaling small involves those journals, book series, and communities of authors and editors that are part of OHP opening themselves to what Tsing refers to as the kind of '[meaningful diversity](#)' that might actually '[change things](#)' that comes with being part of such a distributed collective.

What forms does this scaling small take in practice? Well, since OHP launched in 2008, we have been offered—either by existing or prospective members of the collective—a number of experimental books that were so radically heterogeneous to our work at the time that they were not considered appropriate for inclusion in any of our existing series. Now we could have just left it there. We could have just forgotten about these somewhat unconventional projects and continued to add more and more books and

book series that *do* operate according to our already established priorities and standards. That would perhaps have been the usual thing to do. At OHP, however, we took a deliberate decision not to simply expand in this uniform, stable manner.

Instead, we decided to create both the [Living/Liquid Books](#) series and [OHP Labs](#) as experimental spaces that *are* capable of hosting and publishing such projects. This is what scaling small is for us. The idea is not to accumulate ever more straightforward elements (i.e., regular open access journals and books). It's to add *distorting* elements like [after.video](#) and [PhotoMediations](#) that have the potential to push us to rethink OHP as a project. And the

inclusion of such non-standard series and spaces *has* led to a change in OHP's programme. Among other things, they have challenged many of our guiding assumptions as to what an open access book is and can be. Consequently, while we continue to make OHP's texts, software and infrastructure openly available, we're now, with the exception of anything special coming our way, less focused on incorporating more conventional book series, projects or even journals within our network of entwined communities. If we are going to add a new element at this stage, it's more likely to be something experimental; something that provides us with an opportunity to open OHP's community of communities to the kind of (biblio)diversity that may indeed transform us and our ways of doing things.

Something like the *Combinatorial Books - Gathering Flowers* Pilot Project, in fact.

Footnotes

1. Some of the socio-cultural inhibitions towards reuse practices within the HSS and in particular with respect to books will be further discussed in the Reuse and Engagement report we are due to release at the end of the summer. ↵