COPIM

On the same page/screen: Making books, making collectives.

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¹**Mattering Press**

Published on: Jan 11, 2021

DOI: 10.21428/785a6451.ea946f58

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The following notes on the making of books and collectives are reflections on the workshop [Verlage Selber Machen](#) that are informed by my work with COPIM's Experimental Publishing and Reuse Working Group. The publishing initiative [cache.ch](#) ran the event to share experiences with making, running and sustaining independent publishers. The event took place in Berlin-Zoom on 27 September 2020. I presented [mattering.press](#), in conversation with Andreas Kirchner ([meson.press](#)), Florian Lamm ([Lamm & Kirch](#)), Anna Echterhölter und Rebekka Ladewig ([ilinx](#)) and Jan Wenzel ([Spector Books](#)). I would like to thank the cache-Team – Nils Güttler, Niki Rhyner and Max Stadler for the event.

In preparation of the [Verlage Selber Machen](#) (DIY Publishers) workshop, I pitched in a lengthy Twitter thread sketching some of the connections between books and collectives.¹ Books, I tweeted, are but the visible tips of densely infrastructured knowledge-scapes; binding multitudes of pages, people, politics. I will share some tweets from the thread and build on the outline I sketched on Twitter, and my impressions from the discussions during the event, to ask how the making of books might help bring heterogeneous positions and people onto the same page.

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Given my interest in how collectives make books and how books, in turn, take part in the making of collectives, I took note when Jan Wenzel and Florian Lamm spoke about screen sharing and bookmaking. Here my notes on their presentation:

A complex book in the making is rich in materials and articulations; the graphic designer arranges images and texts in tentative constellations on the virtual page, screen sharing with several editors. On the same page/screen, together/apart, there is collaboration and friction, ideally granting all participants something like autonomy in connection. Jan and Florian note that the distance actually helps to bear the tensions that are part of the emotional labour of bringing things into conversation – on the same page – together.

Most books take a lot of people to make, so there it is, a collective that grows further still if we invite non-humans too: materials, ink, pages, glue, bytes, servers, printers, software, subscription services, paper mills, trucks, soil, water, power and trees; and there are infrastructures and standards of course that make a book a book, such as those that enable production, discovery, categorisation, distribution, archiving, and sales.² Further expanding the acknowledgements, we must not forget the few references and the many unnamed texts and sources that constitute it. What interests me here, and in my bookmaking practice, is not that collectives make books, or to consider books as networks or multiplicities, but rather how making books is making or br-e-a-k---i-n—g collectives. This shift in emphasis at once small and big might be in part, what sets scholar-led publishers apart.

I am currently exploring what books can be if they are Open Access, digital and online as part of the COPIM project's Experimental Publishing and Reuse Work Package, consisting of myself and the goodly Gary Hall, Janneke Adema, Rebekka Kiesewetter and Samuel Moore and Marcell Mars).³ The group is working on several experimental publications around reusing existing texts and the mashing of big data and text. Here I want to touch on a publishing project coming out of this group, that is looking quite explicitly at the political potential of processual publishing.

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Marcell and I have come together around a shared interest in books' power to articulate collective politics. Marcell co-runs <https://pirate.care> and is the developer of Sandpoints, the project's software backend. Pirate Care is an online publication addressing the criminalisation of solidarity, that grows through collaborative writing sessions. Pirate Care provides a network and resource for people who are getting into trouble while caring for others: from housing activists to those running rescue vessels for refugees in the Mediterranean Sea.

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Drawing on Marcell and his team's work with Pirate Care, we, as publishers, are starting a collaboration with a group of anthropologists and lawyers. They are working on the European struggle to reckon with the member states' colonial pasts and its continuing impact, for example, in the form of structural racism. The focus is on Belgium, where an official commission, endorsed by the government, is tasked with leading this process. Engaged with several diasporic communities in Belgium who take issue with this commission, our collaborators are looking to link the different groups. They aim to collate and articulate positions, concerns and claims, towards different audiences and actors in Belgium, and allied groups in other member states to call for a deeper and more daring engagement. What brought us together is the potential of publishing to articulate collectives and politics.

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We decided to use Sandpoints, because it offers a non-cloud, collaborative writing environment that provides automated output to HTML/website, print quality PDFs, and exhibition ready large format prints. Automating the usually labour-intensive translation of content to a specific format enables low-budget processual publishing. There is no fixed point of publication, but different versions and outputs for different times, audiences and tactical needs. It is worth noting that one-content, many-forms, messes with assumptions about what a book is, and how it might be shaped, copyrighted,

versioned, and packaged. For this text, I want to stay with how processual publishing shapes the becoming of collectives and books.

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The exploratory conversations between Marcell and I, as publishers, and our collaborators, as editors, made me think about the roles of books and publishers. As publishers we offer tools, craft and infrastructures that, if it works, provide space for engagement and a publication in the making serving as a shared object, catalysing, or giving form to viable constellations.⁴ The notion of the book, in these very first conversations, already had power. Still wholly unformed, it served as a constraint perhaps, that allowed us to express, share, and start to make sense of wide-open possibilities, concerns, and imaginaries.⁵

Far from putting final touches to pages the emotional labour of bringing people onto the same page in constellations that always also contain difference, had already begun. The publication here is not merely a medium. Far from only allowing a collective to announce itself or to author its politics the publication participates in articulating new collectivities.⁶

Image credit: Lindgren, Paul, [Sundsvall Museum](#) , [CC BY NC 4.0](#) .

Footnotes

1. Janneke Adema kindly commented on this post, pushing to say a bit more about the kinds of collectives I was considering here. Collectives of academics, publishers? And is there a difference between collectives/communities/publics (publishing/publics) here, she asks? These are good questions. For now, I just want to say that it is the blurring of boundaries between collectives/communities/publics that interests me. ↩

2.

See also Tahani Nadim, “Friends With Books” (2018) in *The Commons and Care*, edited by Samuel Moore, Joe Deville and Tahani Nadim

<https://hcommons.org/deposits/objects/hc:19818/datastreams/CONTENT/content> where she explores books as Books as affiliative objects.

“Friends with Books” was published in The Open Access Pamphlet series published in the framework of the [Radical Open Access Collective](#). The Radical Open Access collective provides another example of the kinds of publishing collectives I am interested in here.

The emphasis in infrastructures comes from the insight that digital books without infrastructures are just files online, and the urgent conclusion that scholar-led, independent publishing is not possible without infrastructures for book making, publishing, and distribution that provide alternatives to the monopolistic, commercial solutions that dominate the industry. We founded the association of scholar-led publishers <https://scholarled.org> to address this need. [↪](#)

3. Our work is part of the project *Community-led Open Publication Infrastructures for Monographs (COPIM)*. [↪](#)

4.

Susan Lee Star gave Science and Technology studies the term boundary objects, to think of the ways in which infrastructured objects bridge the boundaries between different regimes of knowledge and practice. Following this stream of work, we can think of books as boundary objects. All books might be considered this way, but the move to processual publishing does offer book objects that speak quite explicitly to boundary making work.

(Susan Lee Star and James Griesemer, "Institutional Ecology, 'Translations' and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907-39," *Social Studies of Science*. 19 (3): 387–420. [doi:10.1177/030631289019003001](https://doi.org/10.1177/030631289019003001) [↪](#)

5. In a different context Kat Jungnickel have made *Enquiry Machines*; objects to think with. We are interested in how making things changes the trajectory of knowledge production, radically questioning divisions of knowledge production and distribution, thinking instead of knowledge transmission. You can download our *Enquiry Machine* chapter on the MIT website of the [Transmissions: Critical tactics for making & communicating research](#) book that Kat edited. [↪](#)

6. Janneke Adema and Gary Hall have argued elsewhere that “The medium of the book plays a double role in art and academia, functioning not only as a material object but also as a concept-laden metaphor. Since it is a medium through which an alternative future for art, academia and even society can be enacted and imagined, *materially* and *conceptually*, we can even go so far as to say that, in its ontological instability with regard to *what it is* and *what it conveys*, the book serves a

political function.” Citing Johanna Drucker’s *The Century of Artists’ Books*, they conclude that, “[...] the book can be ‘rethought to serve new ends’. Janneke and Gary here speak about all books, and it is important to note that processual and experimental books are not more open, ontologically. What sets them apart is the deliberate effort to make this inherent instability productive. Adema, J. and Hall, G. (2013). The political nature of the book: on artists’ books and radical open access. *New Formations*, volume 78 (1): 138-156 <http://dx.doi.org/10.3898/NewF.78.07.2013>←