

# a provocation for post-digital publishing

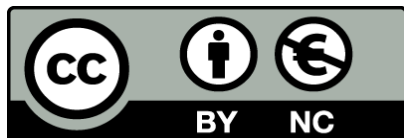
(The importance of the object. Ontological engagement with a thing)

[what does moving beyond digital offer a publisher?]

{or a writer?}

/an artist?/

\a designer?\



This work is licensed under the Creative  
Commons Attribution-NonCommercial  
4.0 International License  
Tom Abba. 2022

This is really about things, is  
about how we experience  
what we might call 'thingness'.

My intention here is to ask you to  
think about how we experience  
writing, and publishing in its  
widest sense. To remind us all  
that objects haven't gone away.

And now, following, a preface:

(because this is a book, and books get have things that you read before you read the rest of the text. In this instance, you might not read it, because I'm going to set it in a different typeface and make it smaller, to indicate that it's not included in the 'regular' book - but I think you'll want to read it. If you're coming back here after reading the next two or three pages and you skipped it first time, award me a gold★)

## Post-digitality.

We have lived with digital technology for at least a generation now. Smartphones were once a novelty and are now commonplace. Their affordances have become immured into our daily routine to the extent that only by removing them do we acknowledge their ubiquity. As an artistic and creative response to that paradigm, a post-digital approach reconsiders the role of the *human* in the creation and reception of work. It's far more complex than that, obviously, but for the purpose of this manifesto (more properly a series of ideas and provocations) that will probably suffice. Post-digital work is concerned with addressing this rehumanisation of technology through exploring the interplay between systems - cultural, technological, spiritual and biological - in order - I'd argue (and will) - to remind us of the value of our actual existence and interrelationships with technology and *things*. It's a sane response, I think, to an insane world. We cannot remove technology from our culture (short of a catastrophic collapse of society), and as such, the wiser option seems to me to be to engage critically with it, in order to make work that reflects it back on itself and to us.

This booklet - in whatever form you're reading it - is an attempt to show those ideas in practice. To give form to the conceptual.

So. To begin:

I think that in a post-digital publishing landscape, affect is everything - how do / how should we as creators consider the emotional charge that a reader feels as they open the first page? What does that charge mean, how can it be measured? Is it a thing? What is it? And while we're here, what is a .....

.....▶ page?

pages



How do we define value -  
what do we value as people, as  
individuals?

Stop, and think about a thing  
that means something to you?

I can't know that you'll do that,  
I appreciate, as this is a booklet  
(or you're reading this on a pdf,  
on a screen of some sort), but  
pause and think for a moment.



still thinking?

Ok, an aside:

Ask any publisher and they'll tell you how vital this is. The printing and selling of books exclusively to those who want to read them doesn't constitute a viable industry. It relies on the giving of vast numbers of the things to people who may not even open them. And the same principle used to apply to films and music until the internet, in its diabolical folly, developed an unwrappable delivery mechanism: streaming.

(Thanks David Mitchell and the  
Observer. 20\_03\_2022)

The future isn't digital, it's  
a thing you can gift to  
someone else.

Before we continue, go and read something else.

Read this:



It's a primer. It's helpful that we have a shared language, and understand what we think we're talking about.

And then there's this:



And we're back.

What did we do there? With those two external objects (that's a term I'm going to use quite a bit), I asked you to use digital technology to read differently. Each of them operate in a different way, and carry different affordances.

Each is a fixed thing in a changeable environment. If the first link pointed to a website I have responsibility for then I can change the content, and you have no idea whether the second link is the first file I posted, or the twenty-first. This fixed thing you're reading, which I can't alter once you have a copy of it - has a changeable, fluid thing as part of its delivery. An object that I *can* alter depending on where the world is, where my thinking is, what I want to tell you at that moment in time. And that's really really important.



Craig Mod's essay, though, will say different things to you now than it did to me in 2011. It's already over a decade old, although I think it's still valuable as a set of ideas that I believe are useful to read and reflect on in the context of publishing in (it's presently 2022, and I can't change that in the text here, but what would I do if I could?)

Next, let's have some academic writing.

Writing is, in part, the illusion of control. Control of the narrative as it becomes story, of the reaction of the reader as they are propelled through that story, and control of the form of the story itself as it conforms and manipulates the affordances of the medium in which it is presented. That summary is necessarily short, provocative, and hugely incomplete, but nevertheless does provide a structure within which to write the following. We are also, as suggested above, considering the role of Affect. If we begin with Miall's (1988) approach to affect as it responds to story, then the way in which character is construed as being informed primarily by the concerns of the self and motivated by the *anticipatory* function of affect is a firm starting point.



What did you think when that section was reduced in type size? Did you swear, grunt, reach for the magnifying glass (as a skeuomorphic signifier or, maybe, a real thing?).

Did you realise that the camera on your phone can zoom into anything it records, and you can read the text properly there? (Consider this a free tip for those of you over 30 who need to read the size number on a watch battery, by the way) Whatever method you used - and assuming you used something, then congratulations, you just became post-digital (again). You humanised your encounter with a system. You intervened and found a solution.

Okay, back to the theory.

If, though, we begin with the suggestion that post-digital publishing can comprise an embodied narrative experience, then the first question to answer is who's body are we considering, and what are the limits of that reification? We understand that post-digital objects can place the reader as an active participant in the text. Their presence activates an experience, which prior to that presence, comprises a set of media objects or a sequence of pre-determined events. This is our first significant difference - in that a book (bound, printed and sat on your shelf) occupies a completed object (albeit 'triggered' by the act of being read), and one that cannot be subsequently altered by the author prior to that reading, a post-digital work is wholly incomplete prior to its activation. Each element is pre-determined, but the synthesis of the whole is unknown to the writer.

As proposed by Samuel Beckett:

“Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining.”

(Beckett, Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable)

Within the reception of a post-digital work - one that is malleable by its writer and publisher - it is entirely possible that midnight and rain are both present at the point of reading. Whilst it is also true that a reader of Beckett might encounter the same serendipity, the conventional text is not contingent on the time of day and weather in the same way as a post-digital work might afford. By way of example, Kate Pullinger's Ambient Literature work *Breathe* manipulates this moment synthetically, in that the API data gathered invisibly by the web app is inserted into the text, placing the reader *within* the descriptive space of the story. We dealt with this technique in *Writing Ambient Literature* as an example of Embodied Reading (DM me for a pdf copy as it turns out our book contract doesn't give us royalties on sales, so screw MacMillan, I'd rather have readers), however it is worth dwelling on the affective nature of the text too. Pullinger employs this to underscore the 'haunting' present in her work - the incursion of time and weather responsive text serves to provide a foundation for the more overt incursions from the ghost voices within the work. Her reader will, one suspects, not notice the foundational API work, rather this provides a means by which their presence within the text is established prior to an overt haunting taking place. Whilst Italo Calvino's address to his reader at the start of

*If on a winter's night a traveller* purports to describe events happening to the reader themselves, as a means to dissolve the gap between reader and text (a technique whose efficacy falls away during the novel), *Breathe* dissolves the physical distance between Pullinger's authorial voice and her reader in order to provoke an *affective response* specific to the ambient medium. The limitations of the print format (despite the best intentions of the Oulipo movement) are laid bare by Calvino's attempt to break down the space between his pen and his reader, what Pullinger can achieve though, with digital technology, is commensurate with Clute's recognition that Terror precedes Horror (terror announces the horror to come - which is the atrocity that breaks you). The *affect* here is capable of producing a counterfactual moment - that which has not taken place is underscored by something that patently has.

Before we dive down a data-driven and API-orchestrated rabbit hole, we should take pause and ask the most important question of a writer's technique.

Why?



crystal display in a metal and plastic case.

is about the world, and the world remains, framed around a pupil in the work. The work transmitted through the phone in your hand, remain as a reminder, a set of semiotic signals to ground the reader, it manifests and the device that mediates it - then might be said to reality. The frame of an embodied work - both as the world in which post-digital works can position themselves as an embodiment of that status as imitations of reality - all the way back to Aristotle - whereas the duration of the work becoming invisible. These media share a fall away. An immersed viewing experience also depends temporality; described as 'forgetting time', such that the physicality of the pages remain visible, and not disappear. Immersion within a book is often media, the function of the frame of a post-digital work can be to 'rules', their medium affords. Secondly, unlike most conventional of accurate rendition. All of these pertain to the formal grammatical a physical movement through pages; and storytelling the instability, rule, the camera as a third person perspective; the book has chapters, dictated by the object (or not) the story is told in. Film has the 180° story can be told; it informs those specific grammars of story structure text - as book, film, and story - impacts on the ways in which the of materiality, especially as it applies to form. The material form of a work. The hinge here is why, and why depends on an understanding providing qualities of experience that are specific to a post-digital effects offered by digital enhancement and placement that presence, manner quite distinct from any other storytelling frame. The potential specific control over the reader as an individual, as a human being, in a First of all, what post-digital presence, and embodiment, afford, is a what I want to stress is that why is the key to writing into any medium. Avoiding and acknowledging the cliché that is a Jurassic Park meme.

(Here's a clue - the best way to read the last page is to switch to 'selfie' on your phone camera and hold the book to it)

To understand what this means for storytelling in a medium, we have to turn to the materiality of an intangible media. Post-digital works, despite their transitory, experiential nature, afford an experience examinable through new materialism as it pertains to our performative relationship with the world. Furthermore, N.Katherine Hayles offers *Technotexts* as her shorthand for those literary works that interrogate the inscription technologies that produce them (Writing Machines. p25), and in doing so provide a way to unlock the relationship between construction and material practice. Post-digital materiality might be understood as a metaphor, a stand-in for a hybrid that is at once both embodied and reflexive. Hayles expresses her *why* as an insistent reminder that materiality is expressed by each medium differently, emerging from the ‘*interactions between physical properties and a work’s artistic strategies*’ (ibid. p33). In turn, post-digital materiality, we propose, finds itself in the interplay between presence and space, between performance and technology. The *why* for publishing post-digital content is an appreciation of those tensions, and a desire to provoke an emotional response from them.



There we are then. That all makes sense, doesn't it?

Of course it doesn't. This is a collection of thoughts and observations about what we *might* mean by post-digital publishing, wrapped around a short series of *affective* incursions into the form of the book. We've only scratched the surface here - borrowed some easy, low hanging fruit things to do with the book and digital technology. But the important thing is that you saw (or read, or heard) them. Because if post-digital practice teaches us anything, its that human beings are the means by which we reexamine our cultural dependency on pervasive technologies, and begin to actively question them.

And don't get me started on NFTs. If this book is still being read in ten years time, and those pyramid schemes are still going, then we failed as a species.

End. For now.

