Hybrid Publishing: Between Print and Electronics, Art and Research

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(Abstract)

“Research” and “publishing” have always been closely related, but are currently undergoing major changes. Informed by technological and cultural developments, their practices and their definitions are debated. For new forms of interdisciplinary and artistic research, there is a corresponding need for new forms of publishing that go beyond the traditional academic textbook.

At Willem de Kooning Academy (WdKA), a cross-departmental Hybrid Publishing lab for art and design research publications develops new, experimental forms of artistic research publications in print and digital. In the future, these forms to Rotterdam Arts and Science Lab.

# Hybridity of art and research

In the beginning was a simple question: What is the future of publishing in a time where the digital revolution has happened while print is not going away? At the conference *print / pixel*, organized by Willem de Kooning Academy in 2009, artists, designers, software developers, small and large book and newspaper publishers and media researchers from the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Italy and the United States presented new approaches to design and publishing in a hybrid digital and analog world where, among others, print-on-demand and e-books were new technologies. It became immediately clear that the future of publishing was not simply an issue of remediating traditional formats to new technologies, but of inventing new publication forms. Examples included books and magazines published in real time, generated from blogs, translating databases into typography and visuals and using Open Source forms of collaborative authoring and design.

Alessandro Ludovico, editor and publisher of the Italian new media arts magazine *Neural*, had been a fellow in WdKA’s research program (lectoraat) at that time. His research ultimately resulted in a book \_Post-Digital Print\_which WdKA published in collaboration with the contemporary art space and book publisher Onomatopee in 2012.[[1]](#footnote-22) (Shortly after, it appeared in a second edition, in French, Italian and Korean translations and has its own Wikipedia article.[[2]](#footnote-23)) Arguing that the death of print through electronic media had been predicted yet never happened for a whole century, Ludovico ultimately described “post-digital” editorial art and design that hybridizes digital and print.

Fast forwarding to 2018, hybrid media and experimental visual publishing has had little impact on the mainstream publishing industry but thrives in research-oriented art and design.[[3]](#footnote-24) In academic artistic research, however, the PhD thesis and the journal article still prevail as publication formats, in only cautiously updated forms that accommodate visual work next to writing.[[4]](#footnote-25)

After completing a *A Hybrid Publishing Toolkit for the Arts* in 2014 - the result of a two-year joint research project with Institute of Network Cultures at Hogeschool van Amsterdam 0,[[5]](#footnote-26) WdKA teachers and researchers (Kimmy Spreeuwenberg, Silvio Lorusso, Amy Wu, André Castro, Loes Sikkes, Renee Turner, Aldje van Meer, Roger Teeuwen and myself) founded a Hybrid Publishing lab and think-tank to research and experiment with combined print and digital forms of publishing. Serving the school’s design curriculum as well the development of its artistic and interdisciplinary research practice, WdKA Hybrid Publishing defines itself as a “platform for publishing research, while simultaneously conducting research through making, prototyping and incorporating iterative design processes”.[[6]](#footnote-27)

If one reads this statement carefully, then “publishing research” can both mean to *publish research* and to practice *publishing as research*. This ambiguity describes the work of WdKA Hybrid Publishing very well. As a pilot project, the lab has developed a collaboration between teachers, graduates and designers where two or more publications are made for projects that won the school’s annual award for outstanding Bachelor and Master graduation research. This award encompasses both graduation thesis and, more importantly, the research within the graduate’s art or design project. Examples include photographic research on the Dutch asylum system - with the conclusion that that it has been designed to make obtaining asylum nearly impossible (by Lou Muuse, 2015) -; the throwing away of roadkill meat as an environmental and ethical issue (by Daisy Thijssen, 2016) and the possible reconfigurations of interiors through artificial intelligence where “Form Follows Algorithm” (by Merle Flügge, 2017). The respective research publications exist both as downloadable, visual e-books (or e-brochures) and as physical books in the shapes or materials of Chinese luggage bags, supermarket flyers and interactive media objects. (A forthcoming publication, *Tingling* by Tracy Hanna, will be a vinyl LP.)

In all examples, new publishing formats were necessitated by combinations of visual and multidisciplinary research where the artists and designers ventured into the fields of investigative journalism and political science (Muuse), ecology and ethics (Thijssen) and computer science and media studies (Flügge). Other WdKA Hybrid Publishing research publications were about bio design and bio engineering.

If one considers these - rather small - publications test cases for larger, multidisciplinary research projects, then their implication is obvious: beyond merely changing the presentation of existing research, they address the forms and practices that multidisciplinary research should take as such, where artistic, visual and performative practice do neither serve as cases nor mere illustrations of academic research, but as equal partners with the humanities, social and hard sciences.

A good example is the current RASL research project *GAmeful Music Performances for Smart, Inclusive, and Sustainable Societies* (GAMPSISS) in which music composers, visual designers, social and technological scientists investigate the potential of fusing classical music and gaming in order to foster listening culture. The Hybrid Publishing approach could help to not only document, but also integrate the auditory-musical and ludic devices developed in this project in the final research publications.

Aside from that, Hybrid Publishing not only concerns the form and media of research publications, but also their dissemination. The rule that all Hybrid Publishing projects should exist both in print and electronic form, where both are developed in one comprehensive process (as opposed to the one being made as an afterthought to the other), is strongly informed by an Open Access ethic according to which research should be freely and openly accessible to anyone. This is a particularly urgent concern for art schools all over the world. Most of them lack university-level research libraries while having much higher research ambitions than in the past. In the meantime, the Dutch government has signed a treaty according to which Open Access publication will become the norm in the country’s higher education by 2020. The respective ambitions in Hybrid Publishing are thus no longer experimental, but answering to mainstream demand.

# Looking back

Historically, hybrid or experimental publishing is not a new phenomenon, neither in the arts and design, nor in academia. Both the visual and dissemination forms of book knowledge have been debated for a whole century. In a manifesto published in Kurt Schwitters’ artist periodical *MERZ* in 1923, the Russian constructivist artist and designer El Lissitzky sketched, in eight bullet points, a program for the “new book”. Among others, this book should be designed as a “book-space” that gives “reality to a new optics”.[[7]](#footnote-29) Instead of just giving a new look to existing content, the “new book demands a new author”. Lissitzky’s manifesto concludes with the demand that the “printed sheet […] must be transcended: THE ELECTRO-LIBRARY”.[[8]](#footnote-30)

While the “electro-library” remained a purely speculative vision, Lissitzky’s book designs from that time anticipate many principles of what today is called *new media*.

Still in 1923, Lissitzky met Piet Zwart, who taught at the forerunner of today’s Willem de Kooning Academy next to his work as a commercial designer.[[9]](#footnote-31) Lissitzky’s, Schwitters’ and Zwart’s graphic designs were prominently featured in Jan Tschichold’s 1928 book *The New Typography*.[[10]](#footnote-32) Similar in format and style to the *Bauhausbücher* (Bauhaus books) - including Laszlo Moholy-Nagy’s *Painting, Photography, Film* from 1925 -, Tschichold’s book became the canonical textbook of 20th century modernist type and graphic design.

In their new form and content, the Bauhausbücher marked a high point of artistic research publications in the early 20th century. The Danish Cobra painter and Situationist Asger Jorn likely coined the term “artistic research” in his 1957 *Notes on the Formation of an Imaginist Bauhaus* when he wrote: “Artistic research is identical to ‘human science,’ which for us means ‘concerned’ [i.e. engaged] science, not purely historical science. This research should be carried out by artists with the assistance of scientists”.[[11]](#footnote-33) Jorn’s own experimental-artistic research publications include “psychogeographic” atlantes of Copenhagen and Paris created in collaboration with Guy Debord. Their city cartographies are radically subjective instead of scientific, containing collages of torn-apart maps, paint drops and glued-in materials found in the streets.

Moholy-Nagy’s books were a major influence on Marshall McLuhan’s and the formation of his media theory in the early 1960s. McLuhan remains one of the few humanities scholars who engaged in artistic research and experimental publishing as part of his scholarly work: First, with *Counterblast*, a riff on Wyndham Lewis 1915 Vorticist *BLAST* magazine produced in two versions in 1954 and 1969,[[12]](#footnote-34) secondly with *The Medium is the Massage*, his collaboration with the graphic designer Quentin Fiore from 1967, in which a typing error (“massage” instead of “message”) in the editorial process ended up becoming the title.[[13]](#footnote-35) Other historical examples of academic publishing that transgresses the boundaries of scholarship, visual art and design include Jacques Derrida’s experimentally written, non-linear, multi-column philosophical essay *Glas* (1974) and the book *Diagrammatic Writing* (2013) by Johanna Drucker who is both an accomplished contemporary artist making artists’ books and a humanities scholar.[[14]](#footnote-36)

Scholarship has conversely migrated into audiovisual media in order to be more accessible and reach wider audiences, an approach practiced in British cultural studies and American postcolonial studies, among others in John Berger’s BBC television program *Ways of Seeing* (1972) and Henry Louis Gates’ *African American Lives* (2006). The recent explosion of racist and conspiracy theory-mongering pseudo-science, and the stardom of such (not only politically, but more importantly scholarly) dubious academics as Jordan Peterson on YouTube indicates an urgent need for researchers to more seriously engage with and become visible on these channels.

Yet on closer inspection, and with the single exception of Drucker’s *Diagrammatic Writing*, the aforementioned books and television programs rather qualify as ‘creative scholarship’ than as ‘artistic research’ in Jorn’s sense: The hierarchy and the respective roles of writer/scholar and visual designer/artist are not really removed, but just softened through intensified collaboration.

In the take-up of 1920s avant-garde concepts into experimental forms of humanities publishing after the Second World War, Lissitzky’s vision of the “electro-library” was initially not taken up at all. Instead, it continued - likely without any awareness of Lissitzky’s manifesto and initially without involving artists and visual designers - in information science and computer engineering, such as in the 1940s “Memex” architecture of interlinked microfilm documents by American presidential advisor Vannevar Bush which influenced Theodor Holm Nelson’s 1963 concept of electronic “hypertext”.[[15]](#footnote-37) In recent years, extensive “electro-libraries” in Lissitzky’s spirit have been realized in non-profit projects like the Internet Archive (archive.org) and the artist-run UbuWeb, Aaaaarg and Monoskop (the latter being founded and maintained by Piet Zwart Institute graduate Dušan Barok).[[16]](#footnote-38) They are vast repositories of digitized, freely downloadable modern and contemporary art and philosophy books plus audiovisual media, serving as the unofficial research libraries of art schools around the globe - and thus proving the need for rethinking the forms and dissemination modes of published research.

# Perspectives

A future ambition for WdKA’s Hybrid Publishing lab is to interweave artistic research within RASL with experimental and hybrid publications. Doing so, it should not act as a design bureau, but as a research partner. Contemporary art that transgresses the boundaries between visual art, visual culture research, essayism and critical theory has gained prominence in the last couple of years: example include the video works of John Akomfrah and Hito Steyerl, Adrian Piper’s work in between conceptual art, academic philosophy and social critique, and the design research of the Metahaven design collective (consisting of WdKA alumni Daniel van der Velden and Vinca Kruk).

The question remains whether such work will conversely inspire new forms and non-traditional media in academic scholarship, continuing where McLuhan, Derrida and others left off. New partnerships between art and scholarship could also be forged for empirical research with its increasing reliance on complex (often also interactive and real-time) visualizations for which traditional paper and textbook formats are no longer adequate.

New collaborative, audiovisual and Open Access forms of research publishing question radically question the current status quo of academic book and journal production. Clearly, the renewal of publishing has to come from art and critical scholarship, as it can no longer be expected from a conservative publishing industry that, for the most part, is preoccupied with guarding its territory.

Conversely, there is a question for the arts: If they can no longer be legitimized through the Western cultural canon, if contemporary art becomes too corrupted by art market speculation to still be credible as a critical practice, if visual culture from outside the art and design field becomes more influential for culture at large, what will remain of the arts? Could one rethink them as publishing, in the literal sense of the word?

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1. (Ludovico). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
2. (‘Post-Digital Print’). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
3. For examples, see (Lorusso) and the inventory of any contemporary artists’ book store such as PrintRoom in Rotterdam and San Seriffe in Amsterdam. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
4. Such as in the *Journal of Artistic Research*, http://jar-online.net [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
5. (Bruijn et al.. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
6. (Willem de Kooning Academy, ‘Hybrid Publishing’). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
7. (Lissitzky), 359. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
9. Zwart became controversial at the school for his demand to shut down “the fine art painting program” in favor of “synthetic and visual drawing, advertising, modern reproduction technologies, typography, photography and its visual possibilities, film, and the use of colour in architecture and in the urban space” (Zwart). This lead to the school ending his contract in 1930. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
10. (Tschichold). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
11. (Jorn). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
12. (McLuhan and Gordon), (Parker and McLuhan). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
13. (McLuhan and Fiore). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
14. (Derrida), (Drucker). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
15. With Paul Otlet’s index card-based information systems created in Belgium between 1895 to 1934 as forerunners of modern search engines. Bush’s and Nelson’s key texts are included in (Wardrip-Fruin and Montfort). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
16. (Internet Archive: Digital Library of Free & Borrowable Books, Movies, Music & Wayback Machine), (‘UbuWeb’), (‘Aaaaarg’), (‘Monoskop Log’). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)