

Occupying Plöger's Library

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It's tempting to see the search engine's input box like a quiet ship at sea, a beacon in the infinity of the network. The potential of the search box seems to point to the immensity of all that is available. But embedded in its silence is an implicit prompt — a question (*what is...*), even if unseen, as the computer user agrees to feed, receive, and interpret. Once the button is clicked, answers appear in an instant (*this happened, he looks like this*), but to go further — to sift through the search results, to go beyond the simple satisfaction of *this is* — is to struggle with order. Search results seem to give a certain order to the world, a re-ordering that sketches out relations between things. Taxonomy, arrangement and presentation help us arrive at some kind of understanding. And with these relations come hierarchy, preference, popularity, and existence. If it doesn't appear on the first page of results, it might not exist at all.

So to use a search engine is potentially a political act, or perhaps it points to the political. At the very least, the search query reveals certain structures. Relationships are

exposed. Whether conscious or automated, decisions have been made (*this is first, this is last*). Where there is ordering, we find control, power, and bias.

In the ordering of things, similarity and equivalence seem like ways to make sense of the world. Searching “Putin,” I’m served up thousands of images of the potentate. All of these files are different, but they thread together around my inquiry; they come about, around a thing. These images are brought together (by the algorithm, the invisible mediator) to show me a resemblance of that thing, but in the uncertainty of the final connection (*which specific image do I really need?*), we’re left alone. The last step in constructing meaning is left to the computer user; here is where agency comes into play. In that heap of diverse similarity, she discerns pattern, and looks for the exception, and ultimately satisfies her own way through the array of results. In the gathering of discourse, the search itself is the context for understanding.

This heap is familiar because it resembles old-school research. Sorting through a range of search results recalls rummaging through the library, digging into the archive, content with the territory (*these images satisfy me*) while searching for new relationships (*why is this here?*). So this overflow, and workflow (the prompt, the ask, the ordering of an array) encourages a building and rebuilding of relationships. Re-search. This is active work. Never content, the user must re-stitch these crucial bonds, again and again, each time the archive is visited.

A closer look at Google’s search input bar over time suggests that this invitation is fleeting. When it launched in 1998, explicit instructions were provided: the phrase “Search the web using Google!” was accompanied by the input bar and a button. Soon after, users encountered the quantified web: “Search 1,610,476,000 web pages,” as if these pages were individual sheets of paper in file cabinets; the delivery of results became that much more incredible when drawing attention to the enormity (and specificity) of the task at hand. By 2001, this explicit call-to-action disappeared completely, trading immensity for focus: four tabs labeled Web, Images, Groups, and Directory appeared above the search input box. The tabs were live for about six years. In 2007 they were replaced with an empty input box and a single button labeled “Google Search,” which continues today; results are sorted after they’re delivered. Of course, in most web browsers, the space of the URL now also functions as search, with no prompt at all — the deliberate decision to design search directly into the location bar seems to suggest that search *is* the web.

While explicit search disappears, an even more significant shift has occurred. The blinking cursor — active, displaying — is giving way to a listening voice that delivers more pointed results outside the context of the desktop. Amazon's Alexa, Google Home, and Apple's Siri each signal a decoupling of search from the computer desktop, and with this separation we lose our wide view of the archive. Data yields a voiced, on-demand answer, rather than an array of results. We're ready to embed these assistants into any tool or surface or space, listening for needs. The novelty of the call-to-action seems quaint now; "Search the web using Google!" has dissolved into thin air, naturalized into ordinary speech. Search as a discrete operation between user and computer will soon vanish.

With this change comes a certain nostalgia. The dumb, straight-forward presentation of the archive in printed web works seems to gesture to a moment somewhere between the invention of the web and the current evaporation of web search. By 2010, artists were fetishizing the active work of search and the accumulation of search results by slowing them down; that is, they printed them into artists' publications. Library of the Printed Web, founded in 2013, attempts to construct a curatorial narrative around this kind of practice. Publications that materialized data from Google Maps, Books, Street View, or Images (as well as platforms like Flickr, Wikipedia, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) were curated into the collection. Library of the Printed Web featured artists like Jon Rafman, Clement Valla, Andrew Norman Wilson, Doug Rickard, Mishka Henner, Joachim Schmid, and Penelope Umbrico, who developed rich works of appropriation centered on searching, browsing, and accumulation. The impact of these artists on photography was tremendous, as the computer desktop became a new kind of camera for pausing big data (the screengrab). "Search, Compile, Publish" was my own attempt to parse this moment into a familiar taxonomy of artistic methods that performed data onto the printed page, like hunting, grabbing, and scraping. Similar narratives played out in literature and poetry. Kenneth Goldsmith's open call for his "Printing Out the Internet" exhibition in Mexico City was a culmination of sorts, even as it seemed to implicate us, the collective computer-user, in the over-production of digital culture as capital.

Long before this nostalgia would ever be identified, Wolfgang Plöger began printing the web; Plöger is the very first "printed web" artist. Using Google Image search, he started to transform individual words, phrases, names and dates into book objects in 2003. He constructs his narratives by gathering large collections of images, assembling them

onto printed pages, and binding them into limited editions of books. He made a few books each year, for ten years. Then in 2013, he made 42 books. Now, there are 78.

What is this project? Is it an archive? Perhaps, but then it's also a timeline, a library, a collage, an encyclopedia, an atlas, a network, and a performance. It might be a kind of publishing; it traces Plöger's artistic practice over a period of 13 years. This collection is like a mirror, and it sometimes appears to be a space. Plöger's Library is a heterotopian place that indexes the real. The haecceity ("this-ness") of the Google search book object suggests that Plöger's Library is both real and unreal, both a space of specific meaning as well as an open territory for remixing authors, events, and places outside the library.

Plöger's Library comprises five sections, and four of them contain the phrase *this is* in their titles. As a collection of collections, his library seems to point directly to the presentation of materiality. Plöger's Library is a self-reflexive system that constructs meaning as an accumulation within the digital archive – this collection of images and pages *is* Mubarek (or Mao or Malcom or Mobutu). This collection of books – *this is / the right hand up* – is a perfect mesh of relationships, an index of powerful figures (dictators, politicians, activists) that creates a new space for understanding in the physical form of the library itself. Still, while the search query is elevated here, it remains unresolved.

Putin, Eagle, Nasser. Obama, Kennedy, Atatürk. Like a weird encyclopedia, Plöger's Library sketches out heterotopian space, an unstable counter-site that mirrors our world while disturbing a normal understanding of relationships between concepts and images. As an "other space," the heterotopian library transposes one space onto another. Plöger's Library is curious in this way – it transfers the politics of web search (ordering, hierarchy) into a poetic index, located in physical space. It's a library of limitless relations. The potentates are here, and they point not only to some real-world understanding of them, but to each other, and to us. They confound us.

How are these images ordered? The books preserve the order of the search results on a specific date; Plöger's Library is mystifying and dumb in its severity (and beautiful in its simplicity). It invites us to re-order: rational algorithms of the web give way to poetry in physical space. We recognize familiar structures of order collapsed into the book container, but the modularity of the books as units in a collection suggests reshuffling, new pairings, and the randomness of web browsing itself. We see our own reflection in

Plöger's Library, but it's inverted — an impossible reconciliation between the familiarity of this image (*this is, this happened*) and the unrealness (and nowness) of the library as an unknowable machine-human collaboration, a fabrication. An endless construction and deconstruction of language as order and organization collapse.

In his latest series, Plöger's search queries are calendar dates (*January 4, 1966; March 10, 1978; November 16, 1982*). The twelve books are like inside-out On Kawara paintings, simultaneously exposing the matter-of-factness of the newspaper (information) with the abstract construction of time (painted image); they visualize and materialize an idea about time through the network's accumulation of connected images. By choosing to isolate the images and present them singularly, one to a page, Plöger invites us to reconsider context. The meaning of each image vibrates in its own white space, while resonating together as pairs on each spread, and in the gutter space between them, page to page. From book to book, these images speak across the library, like a transitory network of voiced relations that is only accessed in the collective, curatorial presentation of web search objects.

The value of the printed web is no longer in any one individual artist's work. The printed web is now a historical archive within the archive, a set of relationships between publications that conserves some kind of rhizomatic mesh of the early web, with its openness and far-reaching roots and connections. The printed web is now a suspended view of a moment before the disappearance of search into thin air, recalling a specific time when we first lost touch with the tactility of the archive, but still enjoyed its visualization.

It is no easy task to slow down the consumption of images or concepts in digital space, printed or not. In Plöger's Library, the search input box is (still) material, an open question inviting the user back to the space of the array, the wide view. In Plöger's Library, the computer is still a machine, operated by a user. These works were developed out of the newness of the web search, and as search evolves, these book objects continue to maintain a patient fixity, a stubborn presentation of a space that exists outside the paradigm of perfectly designed instantaneity. Searches set up relationships. In the printing of these relationships, the narratives become fixed and more complex, even poetic. Poetic agency is transferred back to the user of these books, to the reader who occupies Plöger's Library.

End

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