

The Analogue Internet: Mail Art and the Comedy of Futility

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We inhabit a world saturated with superfluous information: a superfluosity that extends beyond the vapid details of celebrity gossip or the pointless shampoo instructions that sit unread in the shower, though these examples are certainly part of the overall landfill of information glut. Our saturated information landscape also includes the mounds of books, magazines, and other printed materials that once sat on the bookshelves of our homes and libraries but now, by virtue of simply outliving the milieu and intrinsic sell-by date, are left in “free boxes” at the end of driveways or fill the deaccessioning bins of public libraries, rendered disposable by their initial stewards.

These discarded deaccessioned print material contains information that will effectively never be used again, assuming these books were ever used at all: recipe books with instructions on how impress family and friends with a colour-saturated corned beef supper; paperback medical dictionaries from 1986 that provide hand-held self-diagnoses abstracted from current medical advances; the Guinness Books of World Records from 1972 with triumphalist accounts of the most tedious achievements; and instructive technical support guides to assist one with a dot-matrix printing issues. Those kind of books. We can only hope for a future when these printed hallmarks of mundanity are found by the social historians so that they can write about inflated sodium levels, our reactive impulses to the mysteries of the human body, and our unique aptitudes for growing root vegetables to the point of inedibility. These books, inscribed with the easily forgettable, are all the quiet, pointless hallmarks of a printing and publishing reality in which presumably anything can be thrown through a press as an idea and come out the other end as a book. The book as commodity is generated with the consciousness that this new product would just as quickly made irrelevant. Is this just information at its most basic semantic understanding—that devoid of meaning?

Perhaps this is just symptomatic of generating forms of didactic knowledge and instruction: eventually the majority of the manuals and encyclopaedias, and reference materials will outgrow their intended use. Not that there is anything wrong with that. It is best to update. That said, we still must bear the fall-out of making semantic information material. That fall-out is waste. If we step back, we can see this process of materialization on our collective need to “*mechanize meaning*”, reflective of what computational and cognitive philosopher, Brian Cantwell Smith calls the “*primary dialectic of intentional sciences*” and indeed, computing(Smith, 33). This computational reality follows the trajectory of Marshal McLuhan’s wiring of print, who posits in the *The Gutenberg Galaxy* that the act of printing, and its corollary of typography “tended to alter language from a means of perception and exploration to a portable commodity” (McLuhan, 195). As a mechanized commodity, information texts are dispensable resources even for the institutions that house them. Even though the act of deaccessioning information is far from new, the act becomes magnified in an age in which information is so plainly abundant, though at times can seem so devoid of informational relevance..

The Analogue Internet (2012-present) is an on-going international mail art series made in response to over-commodified and over-materialized information that functions as a humorous challenge to the archive. It is based out of Toronto, sometimes Montreal. In part, *The Analogue Internet* is a mundane, almost trivialized rendering of Jacques Derrida’s notion of the *archiviolithic*, and the air of death that seems to hover over the archive, be it the death of the modernist archive itself or the act of deaths and eliminations that the archival processes are rooted in(Derrida). Derrida argues, “if this word or figure can be stabilized so as to take on a signification, will never be either memory or anamnesis as spontaneous, alive and internal experience” (11). Derrida’s text asks the question of what it is that motivates the desire for/to archive and contrary to what we might expect the answer does not lie in the preservation of the past but in its “eradication” (11). Much work within Archival theory has been done on the dis-

courses and power of the archive- the inclusions and exclusions and the stories that are selected to be told.

The Analogue Internet is a decontextualized compilation of books that, for the most part, will probably never make it into a state-sanctioned archive. The innate nature of the information contained in these books prevent them from passing the gatekeeper of immortality. However, they have been collected by public institutions and repositories such as the City of Toronto Public Library. So basically, these are books that are deemed worthy of state purchase and state sharing but then are stricken from the record- not worth keeping within our memory of existence. These books, testament to the mundane, are left and forgotten. As a result, *The Analogue Internet* positions the archive and its corollary houses of collection as absurd gestures of futility. It asks: ‘Why bother?’. *The Analogue Internet* is composed of discarded books and deaccessioned library materials which are salvaged, cut-up, rearranged, and repackaged as an assemblage of decontextualized information, stuffed into airmail envelopes and surrendered to the mercy of the Canadian/American/International postal systems. Each envelope contains excerpts of printed materials and curios that directly reference the Internet or broadly reflect a rich information landscape. The overwhelming potential for knowledge gleaned from thrown-away how-to guides and outdated reference materials is rendered obsolete by time and incomprehensible by volume: a tongue-in-cheek relief of the digital. *The Analogue Internet* is self-aware archival iconoclasm reflective of Robert Filliou’s creative “good-for-nothingness”[1]. The act of preservation is rendered humorous as the work memorializes the abandoned, venerates the unsolicited, and entrusts the archaic.

The project mails out collections of deaccessioned library materials taken from the trash of public and private institutions such as municipal libraries and academic collections. I go to the library bins in Toronto and collect the books that are being thrown away. I also go to private collections. I have a list

of subscribers. I collect names as I meet people. At first, the potential of gleaning any new knowledge from this mailing seems to be: 1) rendered obsolete by time, since these articles reference out-of-date information; 2) incomprehensible by volume since each mailing contains a vast assortment of decontextualized information scraps; 3) limited in scope since choice is limited to what I decided to include in each mailing. These limitations in mind, this paper-based digital relief contains some noteworthy news that is worth sharing, even though the act of preservation itself is rendered absurd in its memorialization of abandoned materials, its veneration of the unsolicited act of receiving mail, and its entrustment to the archaic method of delivery- the postal system. That said, I love the mail. As an aside, the absurdity of the project is further solidified with the Canadian postal system, under Canada's current Conservative government is undergoing major changes, ones that will put an end to home delivery in favour of neighbourhood-based PO boxes. When asked about how the elderly can be expected to get the mail, the Canada Post President and CEO (a business designation within a public institution) responded with the glib comment that the exercise would be good for senior's health (Hill). The comedy basically writes itself.

Door-to-door delivery or otherwise, the decontextualized bits of selected information, assembled in the airmail envelope go on a journey to the future, as sent by the mail, and, at least temporarily, are rescued from the fated landfill. Sources used for *The Analogue Internet* includes do-it-yourself guides, dictionaries, translation books, world almanacs, cookbooks, workout books, puzzle books and maps; in addition to other information-rich curios such as seeds, string games, and friendship bracelets. *The Analogue Internet* was mailed to an unsuspecting list of subscribers as unsolicited information gifts. Since its first mailing, *The Analogue Internet* has been sent to over sixty international subscribers and has been exhibited at Dublin's Forgotten Zine Library in Ireland, The Floating Library in Minneapolis, The Richmond Art Gallery in Canada, *Humboldt* University in Berlin, Germany, the Don Blanche Art Resi-

dency in Canada, and is now in collaboration with the LIBREAS, a Library and Information Studies open-access online digital journal based out of Berlin, in which I have been creating unreadable microfiches from their back issues and sending them to subscribers in the mail.

The Analogue Internet initially grew from a conversation with a friend. The beginning intention was to surprise people and places with an envelope of unexpected mail. At first we thought it would be funny to just send jokes to people like those old text services of ten or fifteen years ago. But then I thought I wanted to do something with all the books I was collecting from the libraries. Instead, I comprised of decontextualized excerpts from the books found in library deaccessioning bins, the contents of which were made humorous, simply based the fact the information it contained was outdated, outmoded, and detached from its intended meaning. Perhaps this is reflective of an undergraduate education in Renaissance history: comedy equals error plus time. Therefore, this is life without the immediacy of existence and action extracted from its directed emotional context. The assortment of absurd didactic excerpts also suggested that the receiver of the package could perform the humorous act of applying bits of the enclosed knowledge to his or her everyday life, through such acts as making a tapioca-based fruit mould for a dinner party or building a pine home-entertainment centre that mimicked a 1970s conception of leisure.

The archive read discursively, is an institution of power, the power of consignment. This power allows the transition from private to the public and the reversal of public to private. Derrida and Foucault discuss the power of the archive to shape and construct memory and culture in their respective *Achieve Fever* and *The Archeology of Knowledge*. *The Analogue Internet* is meant to be read as more of a nod to this literature but really wants to know: what about the matter churned out in our saturated materialism that is not consigned? *The Analogue Internet* is an *archiviolithic* assembly facilitated by a take-it-or-leave-it-style informational encounter that can be flipped through quasi-passively, in a state of wait-

ing for a piece of paper to pique interest, much like the act of clicking link after link and getting lost in the myriad of online information. As much as it seems to give these deaccessioned books new life, it relies almost entirely upon its unsuspecting recipient to give it meaning. It can just as easily be relegated to the trash within the private sphere as much as it was destined for that fate in the public sphere.

The quasi-ecological gesture of salvaging books found at the side of the road or in the deaccessioning rooms of libraries presents a confluence of the tragic and the comic, but articulated through a mundane lens of pulp paperbacks and tedious instructional guides. The project highlights the banality of our information landscape, the abandonment of the book as object, and the absurdity of commodified information set within an ever-changing world. Imagine all the time and effort that went into writing, editing, rewriting, re-editing, laying-out, designing, printing, and publicizing these sad, forgotten books and then contrast these combined efforts with the simple act of discarding an object, an action so commonplace in our day to day understanding of object-ness. Within this commodification cycle that binds production, we can pine for things, possess things and then leave things. Information, and its corollary of knowledge, are subsumed by market-place mechanisms and consumerism of meaning.

The act was not motivated by the need to save the discarded books or create another archive. Indeed, the trivial contents of these books suggest a waste in having these books printed in the first place. Instead, *The Analogue Internet* completes the gesture of discard and deaccessioning by effectively destroying the information: tearing it up, cutting it out, separating it from its intended context, ridiculing it, and then sending it out by mail. In its complete performed state, *The Analogue Internet* is a comic gesture of futility and relationship between document and act (van der Medijden, 97). The act of mailing the package of miscellany links the archival contents of *The Analogue Internet* to the future as well as its past and activates social exchange. In that sense, it carries with it the key tenants Fluxus articulated in Maciunus's manifesto- to create a mail all that can be literately grasped by all people, existing outside of

capital, valued at what the state assigns its posting and the time taken in the anti-heroic acts of ‘rescuing’ books in an overall assembly of deaestheticized art: in other words, information.

In addition to a mail intervention, I presented *The Analogue Internet* as a live interactive installation at the iConference, a meeting of international Library and Information Science, Archives, Museum Studies, Material Culture, and information studies scholars hosted by Humboldt University, Berlin in March of 2014. *The Analogue Internet: A Post Intervention* was a space to make and distribute *The Analogue Internet* for conference participants to assemble, send, read, and discuss. The alternative event mimicked the established conference practice of pamphlet distribution from academic publishers and academic resource sites in that the *command station* distributed these assembled envelopes to all the conference participants. It was intentionally positioned in this conference to see how library scholars would react to the tearing of books. A performance of destruction and the creation of a mail art piece in the conference setting in which discussions about surveillance studies in a digital age, digital curation, and the implication of metadata. Not the crowd to be nostalgic about the mail. *The Analogue Internet’s* use of decontextualized information is anchored equally on the destruction of resources as it is hinged on the recycling and reimagining of Information, encapsulating the old and the new, the random and the organized, the connected and the individualized. The underlying gesture and the mode of inquiry reflects the social turn by creating work that exists outside of institutional constructs, and open to the collective acts of sharing. My work explores everyday interactions with information and systems through quiet exchanges and expressions that hinge on gestures of connection and co-creation. Beyond mailing *the Analogue Internet*, I have conducted email exchanges with theoretical physicists to ask how they cope with the everyday; collected hand-drawn directions for neighbourhood map-making; made glass archives in demolition-slanted homes; made microfiche of open-access online journals, built bus shelters for data-gazing; planned science fairs for adults; intervened in library cataloguing; bartered off the periodic table

of elements; promoted auditory safety at rock concerts; and played with parachutes in city parks. She has contributed to projects in such familiar cities as Toronto, Calgary, Berlin, Minneapolis, Dublin, and Skagaströnd.

What I find most humorous about recent trends in mail art is its emerging existence in digital and online space. *The Analogue Internet* is also guilty of this need to digitize and present online as well, and I have seen this true of other projects such as the Richmond Art Gallery in British Columbia entitled *Memory: International Mail Art Exhibition*, which *The Analogue Internet* was part of. The act of representation of paper-based mail in online images is that it reduces some of the intended temporality. What was once unique and private can now be reproduced again and again, unchanged and static, taking a private gesture into a public forum. Again. Perhaps that is the ultimate futility: the surrender to the digital.

The other side of the joke is the potential for its undocumented performativity. Indeed, the reality of mail art hinges on the participation of unsuspecting players, namely those processing, carrying, and delivering the mail. This process is documented through stamp and record but the documentation we are used to, the seeing of the act, is never really seen. Even, probably by those who receive it. To that end, the process of mail art hinges on trust. Indeed, the mail may not be delivered. It might not be properly marked or incorrect postage, or moved person. That is part of it. And indeed, there have been cases of undelivered *Analogue Internets*. The fate of these we can only muse about. But the event of receiving mail, is itself, a tenuous event.

The Analogue Internet is not meant as a critique of institutional deaccessioning practices, and is created with the understanding that libraries are forced to work on minimal budgets, occupy finite spaces, with a limited staff stretched to fulfill an incomprehensible number of tasks. Instead, *The Analogue Internet* is the product print culture's mechanization of meaning and its corollary commodification of

knowledge is the reality of the information landscape and by attaching landscape. We produce a great volumes of work, most of which will eventually outdate itself. Nor does *The Analogue Internet* does not suggest a paralysis of information output that would somehow avoid the fated irrelevance through a non-mechanized, unformulated, mess of ideas forever existing in a metaphysical flux. The intention of *The Analogue Internet* is to suggest an awareness of the on-going information turnover we produce as a society, asking simply, what does the information waste say about our commoditized information landscape? *The Analogue Internet* is neither criticism nor solution but a means to make a joke out of mechanized information through an ephemeral, performative gesture of futile archival practices.

Perhaps that now that the joke is explained, it fails at being funny anymore. But this sentiment is at the heart of the comedy: it is the futility of making it be anything. Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, Coyote and Roadrunner the humour is suspended in its inevitability to fail. This is the same tension between comic incident and tragic fate that Jörg Heiser writes of in reference to Bas Jan Ader's slapstick, such as *Fall I*, *Fall II*, and *Broken Fall*. The idea of consciously taking on a task, one that seems inconsequential at best, be it hanging from a tree or rearchiving deaccessioned library book, that will inevitably lead to failure. The grip will loosen and the book is cut destroyed, threatened to loss in the mail system, and disinterest from those who receive it. This archival iconoclasm can be read as slapstick. Unlike the works of Keaton, Chaplin, and Ader, *The Analogue Internet* is an austere tragedy since there lacks the emotional connection, because, at the end of the day, these "rescued" books are absurd underpinnings of consumerist culture. The only emotion that can be felt is one of nostalgia: a nostalgia for the printed book or the mail system. At the same time, it is hard to be sentimental about the unmade ambrosia salad: more a relief.

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