

## Art

## Performing Publishing: Infrathin Tales from the Printed Web



Paul Soulellis December 2, 2014



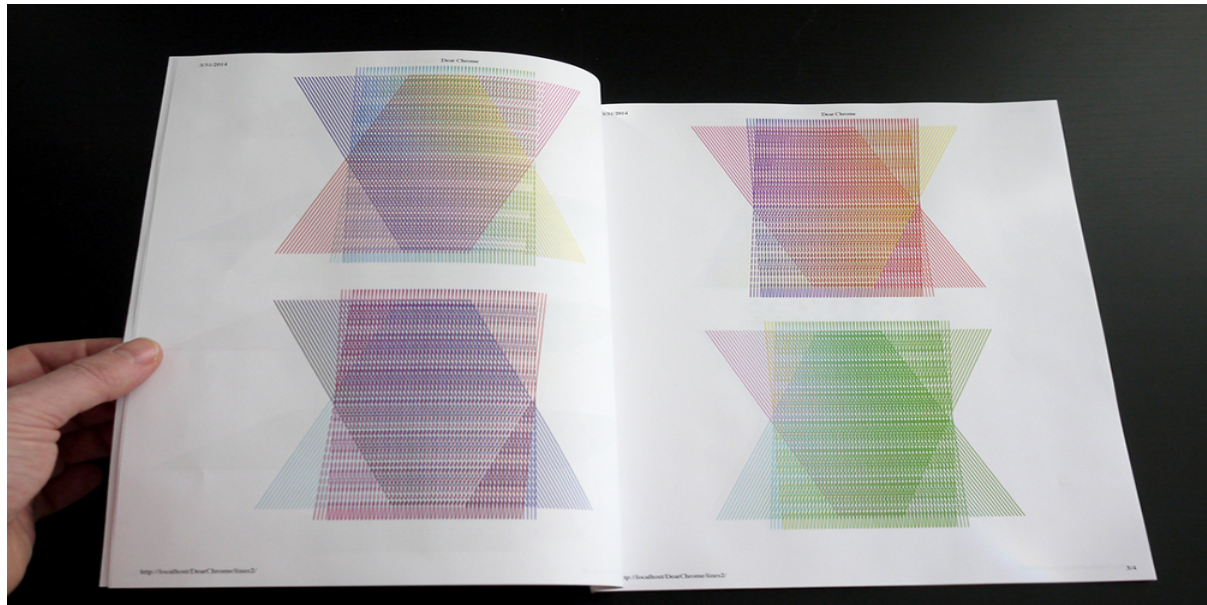
Printed Web #1 (2014) (all images courtesy the author unless otherwise noted)

*Editor's note: This is the first essay in a series of articles, images, interviews, and essays for the #hypersalon catalogue. The online publication accompanies Hypersalon, a weeklong series (December 2–7, 2014) of salon-style exhibitions, artist talks, and conversations on the conditions of networked culture in contemporary art.*

In “Search, Compile, Publish” I identify some of the tactics used by artists who make books and other printout matter in the post-digital print space: grabbing, scraping, hunting, and performing. Together with an abundance of free content and easy access to print-on-demand technology, this has now become a way to talk about an evolving artists’ web-to-print practice in the post-digital space. Alessandro Ludovico, referring to my taxonomy of techniques and approaches, characterizes this new way of working as a “transduction” between media in printed web works: mixing, lending, and embedding digital processes into traditional print, the two forming a hybrid character.

This flux between screen and the printed page is apparent in the works that I collect for Library of the Printed Web and publish in Printed Web. At Kenneth Goldsmith’s suggestion, I’ll evoke Duchamp’s concept of the *infrathin* to get at this in-between condition. Duchamp left a loose collection of 46 handwritten, unpublished notes describing what he called “inframince” (infrathin), and said that

while the notion was impossible to explain, one can give examples: the warmth of a seat that's just been left, or when the tobacco smoke also smells of the mouth which exhales it, or the difference between two forms cast from the same mold. It's the "immeasurable gap between two things as they transition or pass into one another."



Phil Cao, "Dear Chrome" (2014) (via [libraryoftheprintedweb.tumblr.com](https://libraryoftheprintedweb.tumblr.com))

I propose that this "indifferent difference" is one way to characterize the web-to-print space. In this infrathin condition we vibrate between visible difference and melding sameness. We recognize both without collapsing into either; we hover in a state between states. This is, I think, one of the reasons why these printed web works are so satisfying. We simultaneously feel traces of the network — something ephemeral and slippery — while holding the material thingness of its output in our hands.

This infrathin condition surrounds us. Hito Steyerl writes that the web is spilling over into other dimensions — that the socio-political implications of the internet are no longer confined solely to being "on" the network. The networked condition pushes itself offline, beyond its own boundaries, and we see evidence of this all around, as the map and the territory it refers to entangle and confuse each other. "Far from being opposites across an unbridgeable chasm, image and world are in many cases just versions of each other. They are not equivalents however, but deficient, excessive, and uneven in relation to each other. And the gap between them gives way to speculation and intense anxiety."

It's this characterization of speculation and anxiety that I'd like to tease open. Is there room for pleasure here, as well? As we copy and remix and distribute versions (of texts, of images, of our own identities) there can be an uncertain satisfaction in feeling the simultaneity of things, of seeing (and/or making) the double and sensing a difference, but not knowing for sure. Pleasure mixed with anxiety also points to another quality, that of the uncanny.





Oliver Laric, stills from *Versions* (2009–present)

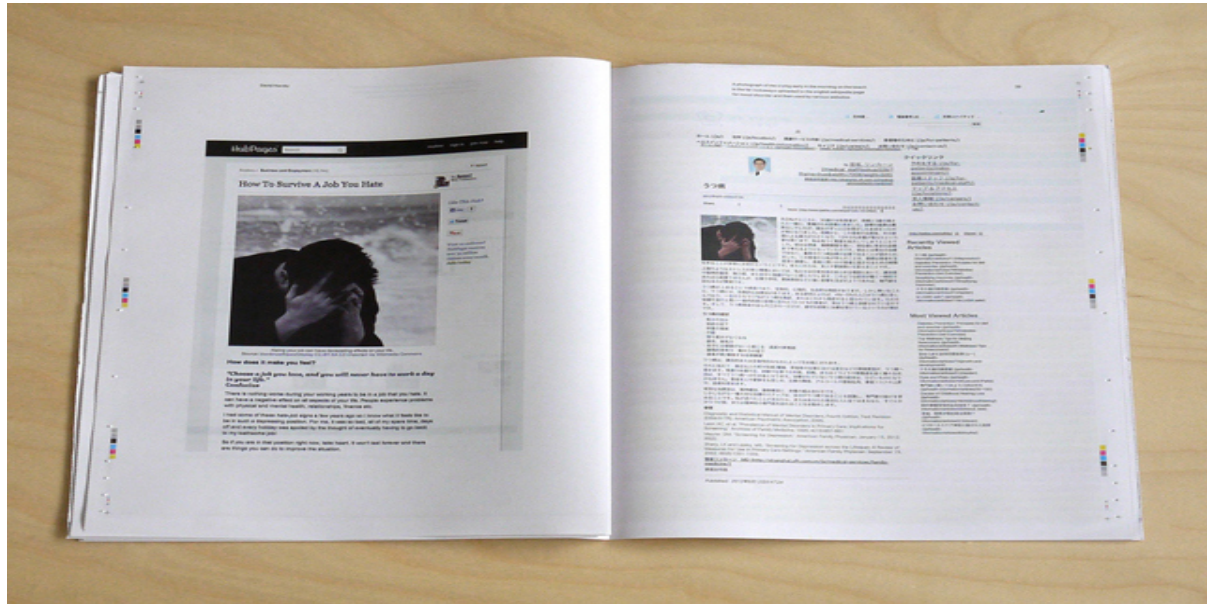
Oliver Laric's expository *Versions* videos (2009–present) explore this queasy condition of indifferent difference between copies, multiples, and versions that pass in and out of each other. "An axe that has its handle replaced five times, its head replaced four times." In the translation, one form passes into another — a profound change, and yet it's the same. He describes it more as a condition than a methodology: "Same, same but different. The multiverse is composed of a quantum superposition of infinitely many, increasingly divergent, non-communicating parallel universes or quantum worlds."

An awareness of this multiverse and of our ability, as artists, to disseminate a notion as an array of possibilities that amplifies and expands along networks, is what I've started to refer to as *performing publishing*.



Clement Valla, *Postcards from Google Earth* (2012)

Many printed web works — especially projects that materialize the network, like Clement Valla's self-published *Postcards from Google Earth* — embody (or occupy) this “quantum worlds” multiverse. The notion — in this case, a weird map, a certain depiction, a geographical place — travels along one network and is output into another, continuing to exist simultaneously in both (or more than both) places. For the viewer, there is recognition and familiarity (“I know what this is ...”) along with uncanny difference (“... or do I?”). The difference is detected, but not easily identified. It looks like Google, which looks like something familiar, but it's all wrong. It represents a physical place, right? Something is off. Which one is real? Where did it start? Where is the original?



David Horvitz, “Mood Disorder” (2012–ongoing) for Printed Web (via [chertberlin.wordpress.com](http://chertberlin.wordpress.com))

An uncertain or absent original seems to be a common condition in works that are pushed between environments, as qualities of one state are muddled with aspects of another. Assuming that no copy is an exact replica, when material takes this journey — passing, say, from a live Wikipedia page to captured screenshot to printed artifact, like in “Mood Disorder” for *Printed Web #1* by David Horvitz (2012–ongoing) — some kind of minimal “charge” or effect carries over along the way. Each of these frames brings its own context, with its own social and political implications.

Steyerl describes the circulating image as becoming “bruised” as it moves. “The bruises of images are its glitches and artifacts, the traces of its rips and transfers. Images are violated, ripped apart, subjected to interrogation and probing. They are stolen, cropped, edited and re-appropriated. They are bought, sold and leased. Manipulated and adulated. Reviled and revered. To participate in the image means to take part in all of this.”

A painting by Wade Guyton appears on a hardcore gay sex Tumblr blog and takes on new meaning, transformed into an entirely different project (“1 Month Ago,” 2014). As the print version points to web material, we sense that it has “traveled.” How far from the original are we? There is no way to know, but



what we understand is that there is distance. A sense of aura, an expansive “apparition of a distance, however near it may be,” stretches out into a kind of undetermined, uneasy feeling that our relationship to the primary source can’t ever be properly known. Nevertheless, we participate in shifting the transformational value of the material each time the framing changes; as the distance increase (as it circulates), it accumulates potential agency.



Wade Guyton, 1 Month Ago, Karma (2014)



Stephanie Syjuco, Re-edited texts: Heart of Darkness, 2010. Set of 10 books.

This happens clearly in web-to-print works. I understand that I’m touching something that comes from the network. The references to the web are obvious: the browser window, the grid of images, URLs, the conventions of email or Google or Twitter, the pixelation — this is the familiar “vernacular of the web.” But something is “off.” It’s tactile, it’s too large, it’s static. One kind of mobility has been traded in for another. Its thingness, of the hand, is no longer of the network. The fish is out of the water. How did it get here? Is it dead, or alive? Where does this work live?

Perhaps it's both dead and alive. The work points towards some inability to locate an original. And yet we've found a trace of it, circulating as a notion. Maybe that's all we have. And perhaps the trace isn't just a trace — it looks just like the original. All parts have been replaced.



Kenneth Goldsmith, *Printing Out the Internet* (2013) (photo Marisol Rodriguez)

I didn't visit Labor Gallery in Mexico City where Kenneth Goldsmith staged his open call for *Printing Out the Internet* in July 2013, but I didn't need to. The gallery was filled with 20,000 submissions from around the world, which I can clearly see in this "installation" photograph of the artist in hat and sunglasses, barefoot, lounging on piles of paper, obviously staged.

It's an image that went viral, published first on Tumblr and Twitter and then on countless news services and in printed newspapers, circulating Goldsmith's notion that printing is (can be) democratic, even if all that materiality eventually flattens out. The piles of paper have been output from various networks (the internet, snail mail) but they ultimately disconnect the viewer from those networks, suggesting the immensity of our collective activities on the network while being completely separated from it (the papers are presented chaotically, offline and useless — and were later recycled).

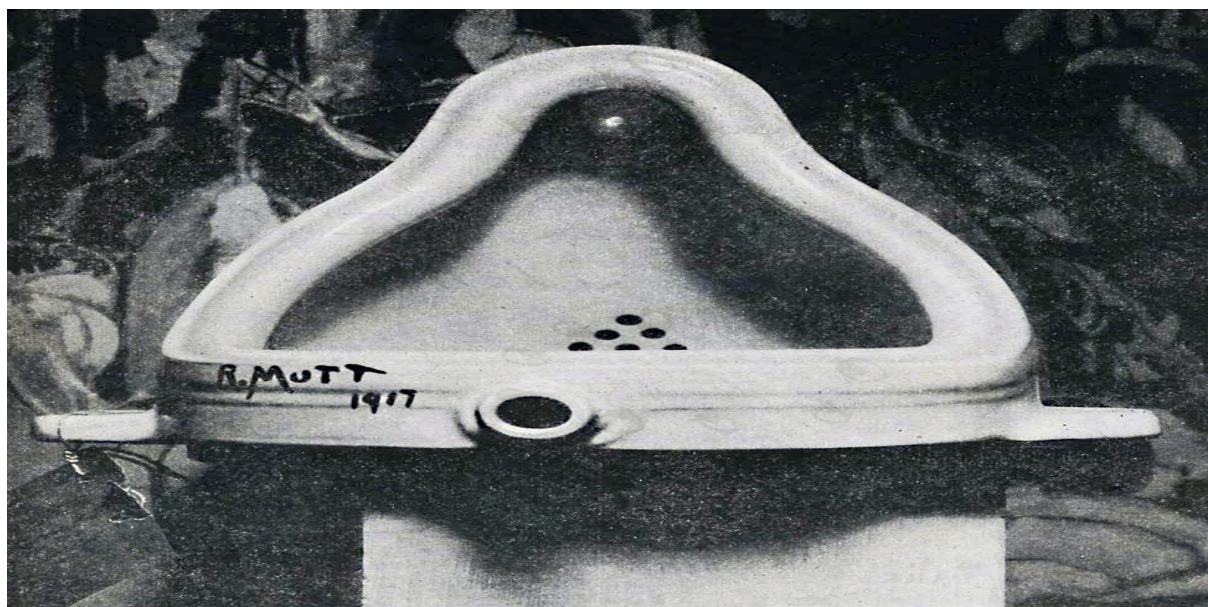
Again, we hover. *Printing Out the Internet* "adds" the internet to the gallery space while simultaneously removing it; it's both there and not there. It's an infrathin event that performs this "spilling" of the internet into a physical gallery space and then flips it back onto the network, refusing any privilege for primary objects or sources.





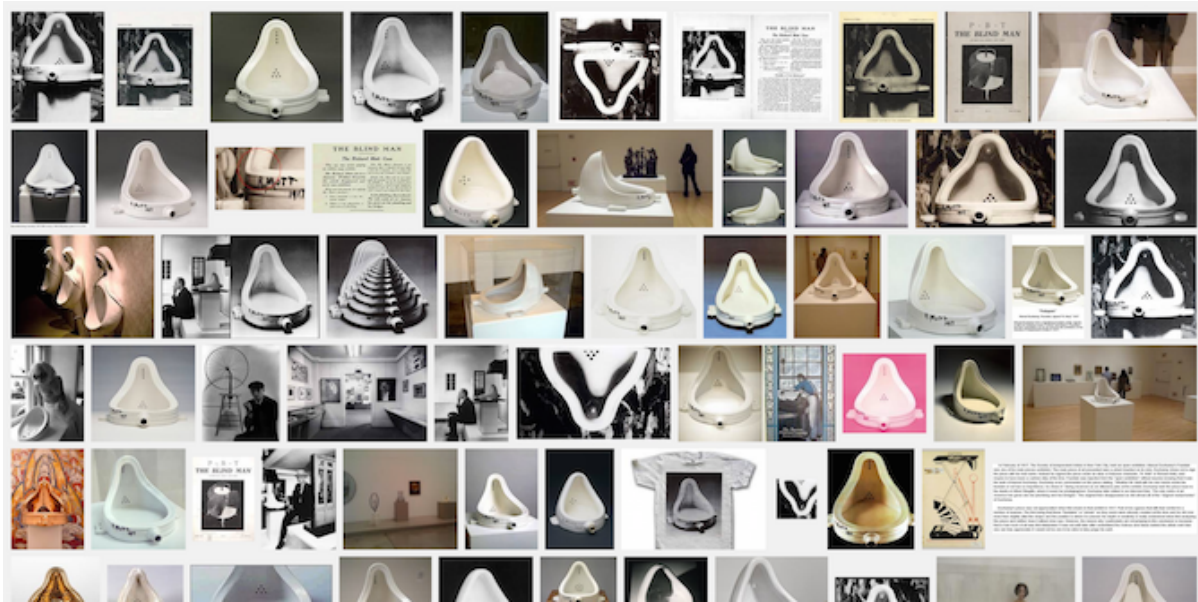
Materializing the network — manifesting it in physical space — can be a pleasurable experience (Goldsmith seems to acknowledge this with his pose). On top of his world, he's relaxed but defiant, like Duchamp's "R. Mutt" signature on "Fountain"; the artist fixes himself on "his" work, produced by the labor of others who materialize it. Goldsmith says that the project is the enactment of capital accumulated to the point that it becomes an image, so this single photo circulating on social media not only depicts the concept but *performs* it perfectly.

Duchamp played with this state between states early on. His 1917 photograph of "Fountain" (taken by Alfred Stieglitz) might be the proto-definition of performing publishing. Almost one hundred years after the readymade itself disappeared, I find myself confronting this photograph in a PDF, depicted as it was originally published in *The Blind Man*.



The original Fountain by Marcel Duchamp photographed by Alfred Stieglitz at the 291 (Art Gallery) after the 1917 Society of Independent Artists exhibit. Stieglitz used a backdrop of The Warriors by Marsden Hartley to photograph the urinal. The entry tag be clearly seen. (via Wikipedia)

This isn't a singular work; it's an array of views circulating on the network as thousands of JPGs and PDFs. Where is the original "Fountain"? It was dispersed — deliberately so. Duchamp said that the sculpture "was simply placed behind a partition and, for the duration of the exhibition, I didn't know where it was." After that, where it physically went continues to remain a mystery. But prior to its famous rejection for exhibition by the Society of Independent Artists, Duchamp took "Fountain" to 291 Gallery so that it could be photographed by Alfred Stieglitz. The exhibition tag, already fixed to the piece, is clearly visible in the photograph. Duchamp framed and distributed the image in a particular manner, for a public audience — that is, he published it. Seth Price describes this primal scene in "Dispersion" and says that "the fountain does not occupy a single position in space and time; rather, it is a palimpsest of gestures, presentations and positions ... Duchamp distributed the notion of the Fountain."



Duchamp Fountain, Google image search

Today, Duchamp's act seems tight and choreographed. We would label these moves — framing, image-making, writing, distribution — as a kind of post-production, or "publishing." In the public dispersion of *Fountain* as an image-notion, Duchamp staged a significant narrative and the way it would be seen, shared, and consumed.

If a static sculpture placed in a gallery space is monument-like in its fixed position (a destination for the viewer), the distributed image-notion of "Fountain" is the monument's souvenir postcard. Or rather, thousands of postcards set in motion by the artist, infinitely multiplying and liquefying as versions that travel on networks — reproductions, facsimiles, books in print, scanned books. Most notably, "Fountain" now circulates on the web in the form of image searches and feeds. The inaccessible, lost original continues to breathe as a distributed hive of reproductions (including 17 "Fountain" replicas). This hive takes on the significance of the work, strengthening the notion of "Fountain", becoming it while never becoming it (same, same but different). It's a vibrating explosion along networks that originates in the simple, radical act of pushing a work across media. The DNA — photograph, sculpture,



publication — co-mingles (and continues to co-mingle today on the internet, within digital archives and in institutional spaces).

This is performing publishing. The self-conscious act of materializing work between environments and pushing it to the network. It is the performance of an idea by distributing it to a networked audience.



Clement Valla, "The Universal Texture Recreated (46°42'3.50"N, 120°26'28.59"W)", xpo gallery

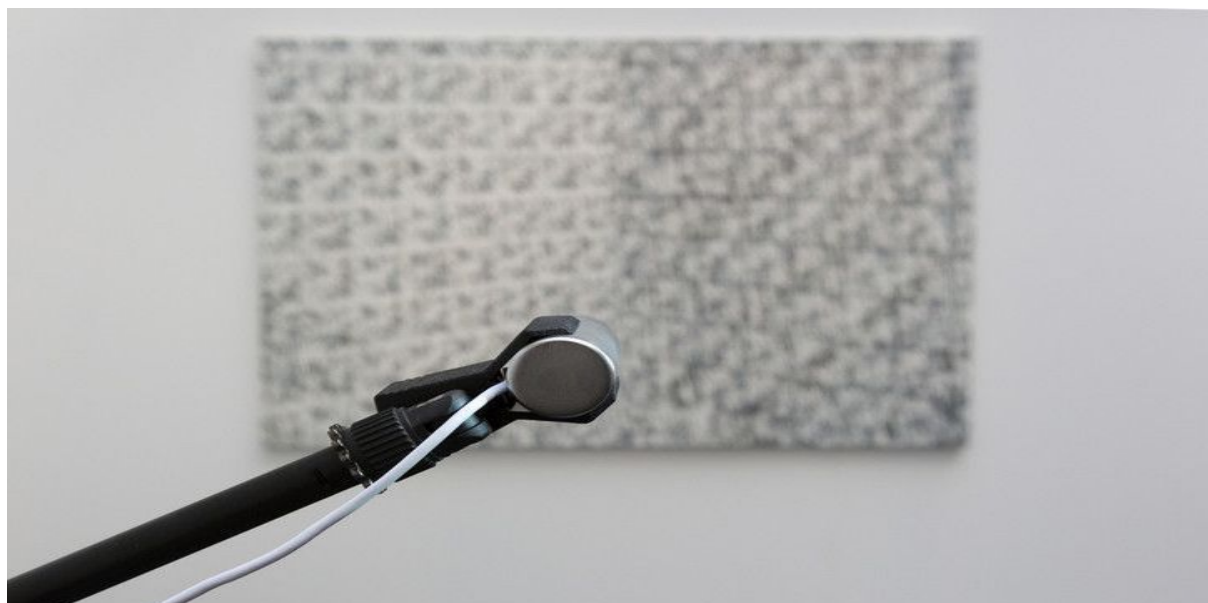
Valla's postcards do it quite literally by translating previously "unseen" images from Google Earth into a form that implies its own distribution (i.e., the cards may actually be mailed). He later transforms the work into other versions, like "The Universal Texture Recreated (46°42'3.50"N, 120°26'28.59"W)" for the exhibition *Hike, Hack / Hic et Nunc* at Xpo gallery in Paris (October–November 2014). The work — one of the Google Earth "postcards" — is larger now, and draped over a table like fabric, precariously balanced on legs that are off-kilter and propped up onto a single brick.

It's an unstable image. The potential movement of the postcard as mailed material has been replaced by an object that threatens to collapse. The potential to fall to the floor, either as it slips off the table or as the table crashes down, instills a new anxiety to the work that wasn't present in the postcards. It seems as though we may "lose" the image.



"Hike, Hack / Hic et Nunc" (2014) at Xpo gallery, Paris. Installation view.

Valla's work is one of nine in the gallery, which is closed to the public for the duration of the exhibition. A special wall constructed at the front of the space on Rue Notre Dame de Nazareth blocks the works from view. In front of the wall, which contains a door leading to the blocked-off gallery, is the gallery director's work desk, visible to the public through the glass storefront. A single amateur painting of a mountain view hangs on the barrier wall ("traditional image"). By appointment only, the viewer may enter the gallery space. (The gallery is normally open to the public). Once inside the hidden space, nine cameras are seen positioned on the individual works; the cams stream the artwork to the gallery's website. An **exhibition statement** from the curators (**NonPrintingCharacter**) says that "the works are as if in a television studio: filmed, mediatized, transmitted to the vast public by another channel, of which appreciation by people is not subject to the value of things, but as wrote André Rouillé, to the 'network-value' ... Forget the exhibition, then? No! Rather make a flow out of it than a thing because 'it is information, and not things, which are endowed with value. (Flusser)'"



Hike, Hack / Hic et Nunc (2014) at Xpo gallery, Paris. Installation view.



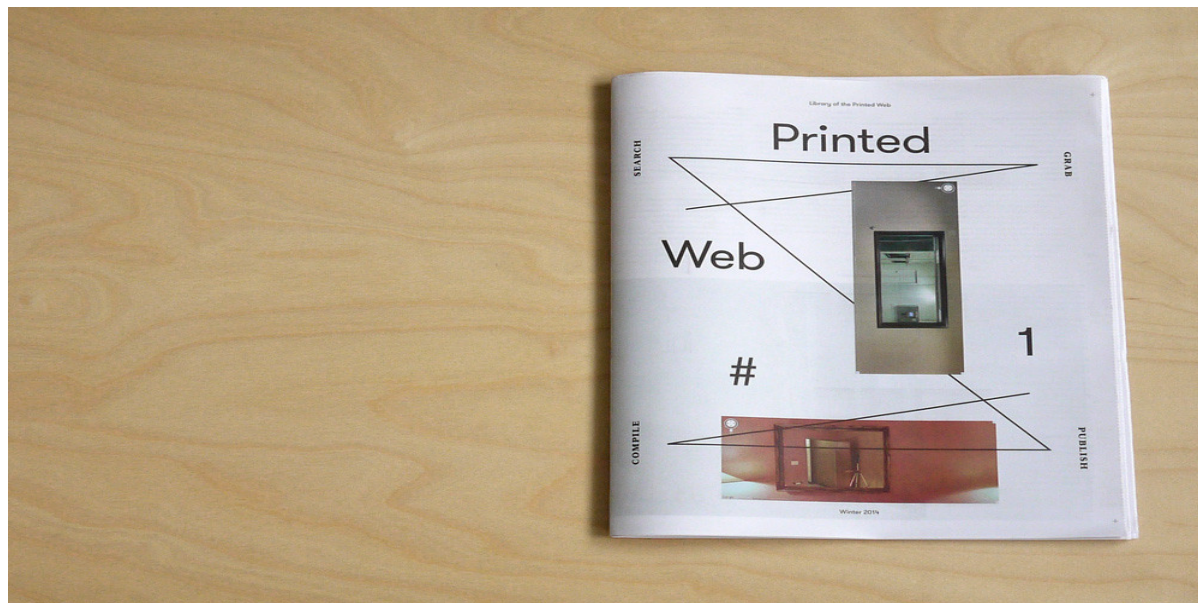
*Hike, Hack / Hic et Nunc* is significant because it attempts to reconcile physical space with the conditions of the network. The exhibition's "eyes" see for us and continuously transmit the works as technical images, circulating them (publishing them) to the web for our view. The show exists in this infrathin state, neither entirely physical or strictly virtual. The show's works vibrate between visible and invisible, both dead and alive, like Schrödinger's Cat. My assumptions about the value of the work are questioned, as is my own privilege as subject — is it preferable to consume the works as pure, networked images, or to arrange for a visit to the physical space? Which is more real? Which is primary? Do the versions collapse into each other at some point, or do they remain distinct? Both are mediated, both are framed, both are ways of engaging with the work.

As it circulates the images, the entire exhibition performs publishing, actively spilling itself onto and off the network.

"The more images, mediations, intermediaries, icons are multiplied and overtly fabricated, explicitly and publicly constructed, the more respect I have for their capacities to welcome, to gather, to recollect meaning and sanctity."<sup>\*</sup>

Versioning happens on Tumblr, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Lulu, Blurb, Buzzfeed, Yelp, Snapchat, New Hive, blogs, ebooks, PDFs, and stand-alone websites. Versioning happens on television, dump.fm, YouTube, in SMS and on Amazon. We've learned to entangle copies, versions and remixes and remove the privilege of the primary object. Image-making into a networked condition releases its own explosion of souvenir postcards.

Emerging out of the idea of "self-publishing," there is now an expectation that an artist's practice can (must) extend these techniques of production beyond the studio and gallery, onto and off the network. We use these platforms to find material, to circulate work and to engage with audiences, critically or otherwise. Most of this activity is exposed and public; all of it is publishing. "Performing publishing" is ongoing, continuous dissemination to the network.



Printed Web #1 (2014)

**Printed Web** is my attempt to document performing publishing as well as to enact it. I offer artists who work in a networked context a separate space to present work outside of update cycles, diffused attention, constant refreshes, and endless scrolls. It's an invitation to interrupt their own performing publishing to the paused space of print, in the context of a group show. In *Printed Web*, artists have an opportunity to create a new version — to perform their work “off network” in the material context of the printed page.

In the **second issue** of *Printed Web*, Olia Lialina's “Summer” (2013) is staged in this infrathin way. Her work, originally created for a web browser, is a self-portrait that is already performative. Every time “Summer” is loaded online, individual frames of a looping animation are pulled from different servers at locations around the world. Together, they portray Olia swinging forward and back over a blue-to-white gradient background. These 18 frames sit on 18 separate servers associated with the websites of Olia's artist friends; each frame has its own URL that corresponds to the friend's website (i.e., <http://www.newrafael.com/olia/summer/>).

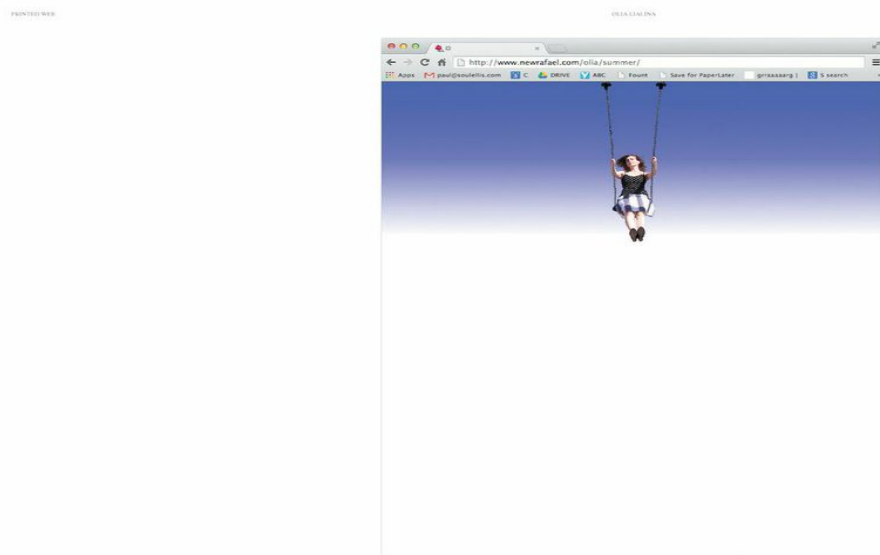




Printed Web #2 (2014)

Each visit to “Summer” produces a fresh performance, pulling the frames from her network to deliver the satisfying animation. In “Summer,” Olia’s identity (her portrait) manifests as an apparition on “her” web, a network constructed by the artist; the URLs are offered up as evidence, like shipping receipts. The self-portrait circulates in public as performing publishing through the close community of her own personal network, again and again. In title and in spirit, it’s a joyful work.

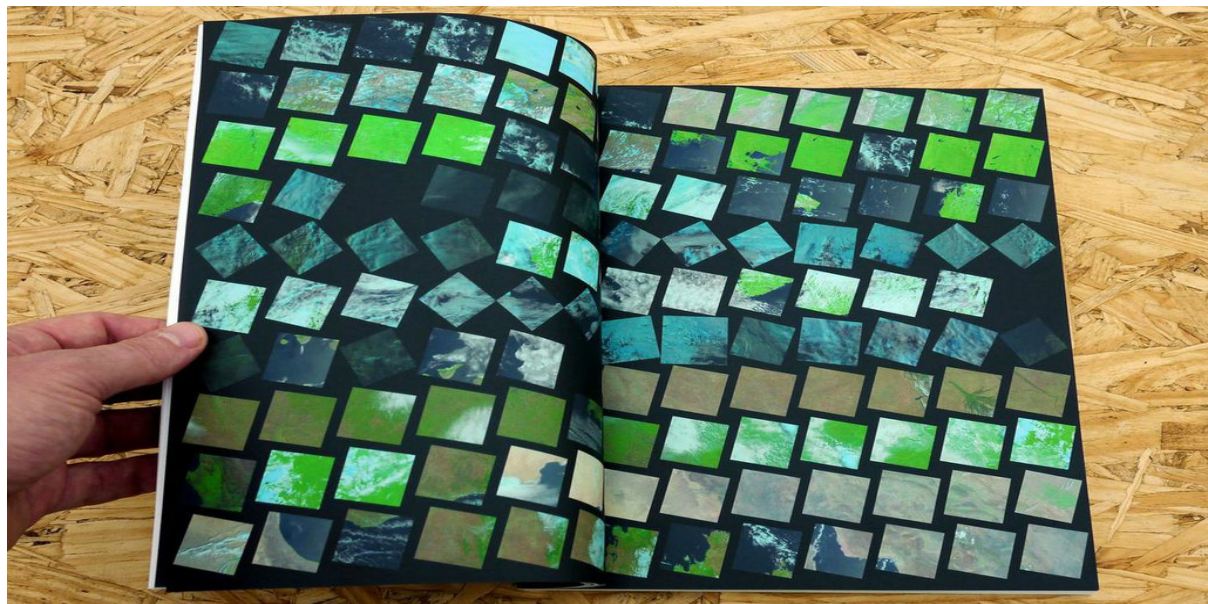
With the help of Dragan Espenschied, I grabbed screenshots of “Summer” at the exact proportions of Printed Web’s dimensions (8.5”x11”). Each image is inset on a right-hand page with a thin grey line marking the boundary of the depicted browser window; the corresponding left-hand pages are blank, except for a header that says “Printed Web.” The artist’s name sits above the screengrabs.



Olia Lialina, “Summer” (2014) for Printed Web.

While it is possible for the viewer to flip through to get a sense of the animation, “Summer” for *Printed Web* is deliberately too large to replicate the smooth looping or the rapid fire of the loading URLs. Not easily “thumbed,” the illusion is broken. The clunky, not-quite-right paper version of the piece points to the other one online by embedding a depiction of the browser window itself, with bookmarks, the URLs and the vernacular of Google Chrome; it’s unmistakably a browser-based work. But the magazine-like quality of the page, the thin grey line, the texture and “thingness” of the printout matter in the hand — these are clues that this work isn’t quite “on.” Perceptually, it vibrates in a lenticular fashion. The indifferent difference between the work as a digital performance and as a printed manifestation in the hand is infrathin (and exciting).

As a print-on-demand publication, *Printed Web* itself enacts the infrathin condition, pushing itself from one state to another without fully committing. It’s digitally produced, from the research that I do to the email correspondence with the artists to the receipt of their work in Dropbox — to the content itself. Each issue is designed entirely on a screen. Just before I publish, the print-ready PDF is uploaded to the print-on-demand service, and it is only at this moment that something physical materializes. The finished publication is shipped, one-at-a-time, along more analogue networks. As a print-on-demand object, each issue of *Printed Web* is an extension of the web itself, and yet clearly not.



James Bridle, “<http://laaaaaaandsat.tumblr.com/>” (2014) for Printed Web.

*Printed Web* is a digital work disguised as printout material; it performs the web offline. It’s a hybrid, transductional creature that mixes screen-based practice with physical thingness. *Printed Web* builds upon a trajectory of artists who push material between contexts, publishing work continuously and publicly.

These places where materiality spills off and onto networks reveal current conditions, but also provide a glimpse of something yet to come, some kind of intense, slippery state where hybrid works replicate



continuously, translate automatically, and move seamlessly between media, beyond the frames of printed page, web page, or physical space. A “neverending becoming.” Brian Droitcour describes art’s current disposition as more “proto-” than post(-internet) — that the proto- points to the future, to multiplicity and transformative potential. As image and world become increasingly entangled, I expect we’ll see more self-aware, *proto* spaces like *Hike, Hack / Hic et Nunc* and *Printed Web* blown open for artists to mix, embed, circulate, and perform publishing to the network.

“The possible, implying the becoming — the passage from one to the other takes place in the infrathin.”

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