I want to write a book.

I want to write a book, because I never did. I have written notes, essays, letters, editorials and so on, but I never wrote a book. Writing a book should be different, it should be about developing an idea in a constructed manner and sticking with it, regardless of how long and difficult the process. However, this idea must evolve, and grow, as the book is a living organism. The idea that is important to me at this point, and that I want to develop here, is something that I’ve been experimenting with for quite a while now, it is very simple and fits in two words: Making books.
This idea contains a lot of interrogations. First what is a book? Why making books and not book making? What is the purpose of making books? To whom does this address? Why books and not carrots? Who are you? Who am I?

First, I have to say that making a book isn’t quite the same thing as writing a book. Making a book is bringing a new object to the world, whereas writing a book is just creating content. I have made a lot of books thus far, and the process of bringing a couple of new pages to life is what interests me the most. Making a book is a social and political act, as Matthew Stadler, co-founder of Publication Studio, says: “Publication is the creation of a public. It is an essentially political act.” I am attached to the term book, even though
people would call what I publish zines or pamphlets. These terms refer to a formal construction rather than referring to the content, which takes priority in my project.

*Spathiphyllum cochlearispathum*

By the way, my name is Antoine Lefebvre, and I’m an artist publisher. meaning that I’m not an artist and a publisher, but an artist whose practice is to publish. Some of the books I publish are authored by myself and some of the books I publish are authored by others.

The books that I create, publish, and love are called artists’ books, and the definition that suits me the most is made by Anne Mœglin-Delcroix in her *Esthétique du livre d’artiste*. In this book, which is also the catalogue of an exhibition at the French National Library, and the dissertation of her PhD, she gives her personal definition of what an artist’s book should be. She writes that artists’ books should be original artworks that shouldn’t be reproductions of works existing in other forms. To her, these books should be cheap, for several reasons: First, so everybody can be able to buy them if they want. This is a very democratic way of envisaging art. Also because books should be books. If it is a sculpture shaped in a form a book, it is not a book, it is a sculpture because you can’t read it. At last, it excludes a lot of books that are printed with very fancy techniques, on pretty paper, which are signed and numbered and cost the price of a small car, because those books do not evolve on the market of books, but in the art market. Books shall be
books she says. This is important, because the book is one of the most democratic objects. Everybody knows how a book works, no need for a manual. They can be read for free in libraries. They don’t cost much and everybody can acquire a book if they want. The paradigm of her definition is *Twenty-six gasoline stations* by Ed Ruscha.

I started making books in my very first class at the university. Eric Rondepierre, who held this class, started by asking a blunt question: “What is a book?” The entire student body was afraid to say something stupid and stayed silent. When Rondepierre asked a student to give an answer, she said: “it has pages”.

Indeed, we have few certainties about the book, even though it is a very familiar object for everyone. It might be because it often changes its form throughout time: from the roll of wood or parchment called *volumen*, to the codex, which is the book as we now know it, with pages and a binding, and more recently in digital form.

*Opuntia fragilis*

My project is called *La Bibliothèque Fantastique*, after the text of the same title by Michel Foucault. The most significant quote to me is in a text printed at the end of this book. This text is about the writing of Gustave Flaubert, on how intertextuality in *The Temptation of Saint Antoine* reveals a new kind of imaginary, specific to the 19th century. *The temptation* is a clear example of how books relate to each other forming an invisible net of knowledge. In this book,
Flaubert describes the temptations that Saint Antoine had to face in order to fortify his faith. All of his temptations are inspired by myths from across the world and Flaubert is dissecting and reconstructing them to make a book, out of books. For Foucault, “Flaubert produced the first literary work whose exclusive domain is that of books”.

La Bibliothèque Fantastique is a publishing structure for artists’ books whose books are free and downloadable from the Internet so that everyone can print them at home. Most of these books are exclusive productions. The others are reprints of works that are important
to me. The purpose of LBF is to offer a perspective on books expressed by books themselves. Its works are made of excerpts of other works, through pages, sentences and words meeting in a stroke of good fortune.

*La Bibliothèque Fantastique* is a minimalist publisher in the sense that all the superfluousness has been removed. Indeed, the books of LBF have no predetermined physical existence, they exist in a state of potentiality on the web, waiting to become. They cost nothing; you can get them
without spending a penny. They have no ISBN either, because they are works of art. They have no color, so that they can be printed in any printer. That is what LBF books do not have, which is almost more important than what they do. My approach is conceived of as a negative versus that which is habitually proposed by the market spectacular society. The purpose of LBF is to show various poetic singularities, as opposed to the flashy commodities that feed our society.

What the LBF books do have is above all a great freedom of content, revealing an expansive and global conception of art. They contain all forms of expression usually found in print, i.e., drawing and photographs, as well as essays, novels, journalistic investigations and so on.

**Strelitzia nicolai**

The covers of LBF books are appropriated from existing sources; the published artists select and use that image as a cover for their book. The author’s name is deleted and replaced by the name of the artist; the name of the original publisher is also cleared since the new book is no longer its property. The artist can also change the title of the book to enhance it. The content of the book is completely open; the artist develops it through the pages to meet his or her project. The books are produced with bits and pieces of other books, developing a discourse on the ontology of the book. This project seeks to examine the nature of the book by submitting similar approaches to those used by
a minimalist artist testing the limits of painting and art. The purpose of LBF is to explore the boundaries of what is a book and what is not. This détournement° is important because it creates a connection between this newly constituted book and its previous iterations. It creates as Foucault says in his text, an “interstice of repetitions of commentaries” in which lies the imaginary.

Every book published by LBF is protected by a copyleft license called Free Art License° that was inspired by the GNU GPL license of Linux and the free software. I did that because I cannot stand the idea that access to these works would not be granted for everyone. To me access to art and the knowledge that it bears is a human right, and not a privilege for a happy few. Therefore, when I sell the books that I publish, I’m selling a printing service that anyone can provide, as the Free Art License authorizes everyone to reproduce, transform and sell the books of LBF.

**Dracaena fragrans**

The characteristics of my press is what I explain to people that I meet in book fairs, or to artists that I want to work with. The fair is, for the moment, the best way I found to display my work. This model allows me to embody the project, and to present myself working as an artist publisher in a live and performative way; and also because these books are very difficult to show in an exhibition space. I try to make it work as a dialectic proposition. To participate in the Fair is a way to put myself in question. It really is a
social sculpture, as Beuys defined it: “Only on condition of a radical widening of definitions will it be possible for art and activities related to art [to] provide evidence that art is now the only evolutionary-revolutionary power. Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the deathline: to dismantle in order to build ‘A SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART’… EVERY HUMAN BEING IS AN ARTIST who – from his state of freedom – the position of freedom that he experiences at first-hand – learns to determine the other positions of the TOTAL ART WORK OF THE FUTURE SOCIAL ORDER.”

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The fair is also a way for me to continue this project, because even immaterial art needs money to be produced, to pay for the website, to communicate about the project. It is also important that there is a lot of printed copies of the LBF books, as the website could disappear in an instant, they exist as the only witness that this project ever existed. It is of the utmost importance to print as much copies as I can and spread them around, because they will live their own lives as long as the paper lasts. The fair is also a great way to meet people: artists to publish, have discussions about the projects, or finding readers. Some people who have very similar projects do not participate in fairs; they find them too big, too impersonal. I think the real issue is the risk to display their projects to the public, because it is a genuine risk, putting all of one’s work on a table, offering it up to rejection or ambivalence. Another risk of the fair is being compared to others, it can be very painful. But if you take the chance, it is also very rewarding to invite people in your work, guiding them through your own exhibition. In this sense, it is also a very democratic and pedagogic experience to explain your work in words that everybody can understand.

**Ficus benjamina**

You might wonder why this text is illustrated with photos of plants. These photos are documents witnessing an ongoing project by the artist Joseph Imhauser. I chose this project to illustrate a text about my work because his project has a quality that I would like to embody in my
work: generosity. For this project, which doesn’t have a name, and that simultaneously exists as art and not art, Imhauser takes in abandoned plants found on the street and takes care of them. As they are often in bad shape, he heals and nourishes them with individualized and collective efforts. You might see in the pictures there are often small pieces of trash embedded in the beach-sand-lined pots, but the plants don’t mind, they are garbage too after all. I guess that what I found very interesting and moving about this work is that Imhauser takes care of these plants, and he cares for them at a moment when nobody does. To me, caring about something that no one cares about is one of the missions of the artist.

As this text is coming to an end, I must review my original goal, and admit that I failed. This text is just a text, otherwise I would call it a book. It might be a statement at best, but not a book.


4 A détournement is a technique developed in the 1950s by the Situationist International, and consists in “turning expressions of the capitalist system against itself.” (Wikipedia)

5 Preamble of the Free Art License 1.3 (FAL 1.3) readable at http://artlibre.org/licence/lal/en

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The imaginary now resides between the book and the lamp. The fantastic is no longer a property of the heart, nor is it found among the incongruities of nature; it evolves from the accuracy of knowledge, and its treasures lie dormant in the documents. Dreams are no longer summoned with closed eyes, but in reading; and a true image is now a product of learning: it derives from words spoken in the past, exact recensions, the amassing of minute facts, monuments reduced to infinitesimal fragments, and the reproductions of reproductions. In the modern experience, these elements contain the power of the impossible. Only the assiduous clamor created by repetition can transmit to us what only happened once. The imaginary is not formed in opposition to reality as its denial or compensation; it grows among signs, from book to book, in the interstice of repetitions and commentaries; it is born and takes shape in the interval between books. It is a phenomenon of the library.

Michel Foucault, 1967.

www.labibliothequefantastique.net