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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."¹ 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*². 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 Foucault³. 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 détournement⁴ 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 License⁵ 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 deadline: 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.”⁶



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.



1 Matthew Stadler at Richard Hugo House's writer's conference, "Finding Your Audience in the 21st Century," on May 22, 2010.

2 A. Moeglin Delcroix, *Esthétique du livre d'artiste*, Paris, Jean Michel Place & Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 1997.

3 M. Foucault, "Fantasia of the library" in *Language, counter-memory, practice*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1977.

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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6 Beuys statement dated 1973, first published in English in Caroline Tisdall: *Art into Society, Society into Art* (ICA, London, 1974), p.48. Capitals in original.

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

