# A Reparative Approach to Publishing

Mia Melvær

In a wide array of materials and methods, from thermal printers to talking servers and "algoliterary" poetry, many forms of publications come out of Constant's projects and networks. What they often have in common is not so much the shape of their content but the conversations that lay the groundwork of how they are negotiated into being. It is, for example, not uncommon for Constant's publications to be published several times, generally in the form of different printed editions documenting an evolving online publication. Many of the publications could be considered what one might call "executable texts," such as scripts, instructions, manuals, codes, or gitlabs: forms of publishing that have worldbuilding capacities or are a resource for collective action. The process of getting these publications together is also often showcased, alongside glitches, errors, and surprises.
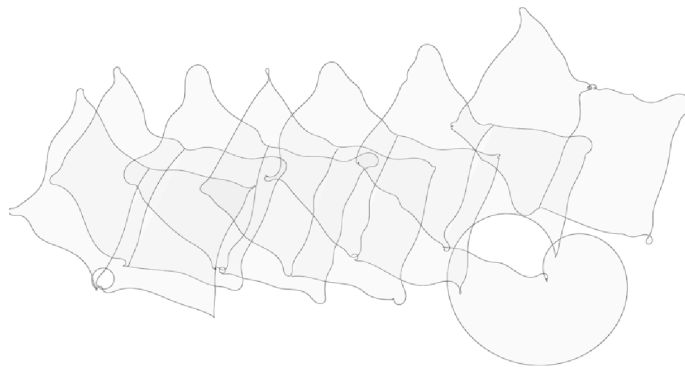
Constant's publishing platforms are Books With An Attitude and Constant Verlag. Books With An Attitude is for projects that are made with 100% free and open source software and published under open content licenses. A lot of these texts are also available as plain text files on Constant Verlag. Constant Verlag is a repository of texts from the depths of the Constant archives. Some of these texts correspond to printed books found in Books With An Attitude, others were

already available online or saved on one of our hard drives, available in multiple languages, from as early as 1997. As most texts have been published under open content licenses, everyone is invited to use, copy, modify, and redistribute the material.

Both Books With An Attitude and Constant Verlag currently live on a platform built with the forked software of Calibre-web, an example of an open source software ecosystem that started from Calibre's tools for managing a personal ebook library and got extended to a server to support a larger community's publication collections. This ecosystem is fueled by a wish to provide an alternative to proprietary forces like Amazon Kindle and DRM-based (digital rights management) (e)book stores. It is an attempt to create viable, standards-based platforms for gathering, labeling, organizing, and redistributing Constant's publishing works in a range of forms. Additionally, in conscious contrast to Facebook's infamous "go fast and break things" approach, it is an experimental platform to look for ways to collectively go slow and repair things along the way.

Constant's long engagement with open source tools for publishing was also what kicked off the start of Open Source Publishing (OSP), a now fully interdependent sister organization. Questioning the influence and affordance of digital tools, OSP uses graphic design, pedagogy, and applied research to develop publications and software. For example, in the case of developing tools for hybrid and collaborative publishing, OSP has made Ethertoff and Ether2html (that can loosely be read as "Ether to pdf" and "Ether to html") which make use of Etherpad, a collaborative text editor. Ethertoff was, for example, used for the hybrid publication *Are You Being Served?* (2013), a feminist review of servers and how ubiquitous connectivity, the data web, open technologies, intelligent applications, machine learning, and other Semantic Web related phenomena have found a place in our daily use of the web. Publishing tools like these are an intrinsic part of Constant's publishing universe as they support an approach to collectively written publications with an equal love for print and web, and provide ways to highlight the history and evolution of the work.

A document in Constant's work sphere that is frequently collectively edited and reprinted is the Constant Collaboration Guidelines. With a manifesto-like structure, the Collaboration Guidelines outline the current working conditions agreed upon by the persons operating within Constant's spaces. These conditions are collectively revisited and revised by different groups at minimum twice a year. Another versioned and editable hybrid publication is

DiVersions, which focuses on a series of collaborations and exhibitions that engaged with how the shift to online cultural heritage could bring a potential for various forms of collaborations, allowing conflicts to show up and make space for multiple narratives. In dialogue with cultural institutions and their collections, the project experimented with digitized and digital heritage to open up databases, metadata, catalogs, and digital infrastructures for other imaginations. The MediaWiki-based website was exported and printed at the end of 2020 and also still exists as an editable online publication today.

When you consider published material in a hybrid context, where it splits and branches between physical and digital formats, it becomes clear that the temporal aspects of the written word are changing. Now, published material can also be editable. An example that highlights this modifiable and shape-shifting nature can be found on one of Wikipedia's more heavily edited articles: the page that defines the word Femicide/Feminicide. The page is in constant flux, ebbing and flowing between different communities, some of whom want it to represent the gendered nature of the majority of murders of women, and others who do not want the page to exist at all or prefer it to automatically "redirect" to a gender-neutral page such as Gendercide. Since Wikipedia has a log for every version of each article, the reader can look up and compare the multitude of ways this topic has been "defined." Which version is currently served to Wikipedia's numerous daily users depends very much upon which community has most recently rewritten the article and how they would tell the story. This is, of course, an editing example full of conflict and completely devoid of trust, but it illustrates how the editable written word is, in some cases, moving closer to the dynamics of oral history.

It might even be advantageous if we let oral history traditions remind us that the written word, too, is temporary and, in essence, about keeping something fleeting alive in our collective memory. The two traditions might just be working at a slightly different pace. Where oral histories have long been anchored in practices of repetition, versioning, and ignoring fantasies about singular authorship, systems of publishing are still learning to trust and fully incorporate these dynamics, finding room for changes that are not based in the singular but in the collective – spongy and networked. We are supporting a publishing practice that can let go of illusions of singular genius, copyright, and permanence while nurturing trust, which means that we need to find tools and tactics for versioned and community-driven publication practices.

One of the recent publications coming from Constant that directly speaks to these conditions takes the form of a new version of the Creative Commons license, the Collective Conditions for Re-Use (CC4r), recently discussed in an eponymous essay on MARCH. Oriented by a feminist and intersectional understanding of authorship, it considers cultural expressions as always already situated within the communities with which we exist:

The CC4r favors re-use and generous access conditions. It considers hands-on circulation as a necessary and generative activation of current, historical and future authored materials. While you are free to (re-)use them, you are not free from taking the implications from (re-)use into account.

The context in which CC4r was developed offers a path to the larger picture of how we think of publishing: as a way to intervene in the conditions and premises in which publications can exist. Through negotiating these conditions, we can address the space they occupy and review how that space is furnished. Stepping away from the lonely reality of a sole author genius surrounded by passive readers, it shows us there are ways of vibrating together. The CC4r license is written from a generous relational stance, specifically one that is not trying to control the future. Instead, it trusts people to take responsible actions.

In the essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky writes about reparative reading as a practice that embraces not knowing what the future might bring.[1] Her definition of paranoid reading and its hold on communities of critical thinkers could perhaps be summarized by "the universally widespread way in which enlightened people see to it that they are not taken for suckers."[2] But it also touches on the perils of putting too much faith and energy into the power of exposure. Translating this from a practice of reading to a practice of publishing can perhaps help us address some of the pushback that collective and copyleft culture and movements are facing. By shedding light on the limitations of paranoid practices, it shows a way to counter messaging that will have you believe that only a fool trusts someone they don't know, someone who comes after:

The unidirectionally future-oriented vigilance of paranoia generates, paradoxically, a complex relation to temporality that burrows both backward and forward: because there must be no bad surprises, and because learning of the possibility of a bad surprise would itself constitute a bad surprise, paranoia requires that bad news be always already known.[3]

I would argue that a copyrighted publishing practice focused on the genius of one individual is a paranoid one, and although paranoia knows some things well, it knows and does others very poorly. At a later point in the same essay, Kosofsky quotes some private correspondence:

It seems to me that the importance of ''mistakes'' in queer reading and writing . . . has a lot to do with loosening the traumatic, inevitable-seeming connection between mistakes and humiliation. What I mean is that, if a lot of queer energy, say around adolescence, goes into what Barthes calles ''*le vouloir-être-intelligent*'' (as in ''If I have to be miserable, at least let me be brainier than everybody else''), accounting in large part for paranoia's enormous prestige as the very signature of smartness (a smartness that smarts), a lot of queer energy, later on, goes into . . . practices aimed at taking the terror out of error, at making the making of mistakes sexy, creative, even cognitively powerful. Doesn't reading queer mean learning, among other things, that mistakes can be good rather than bad surprises?[4]

A reparative, intersectional, and feminist approach to publishing means a networked approach, set up for working best when it is cared for by one or many communities. If we encourage reparative publishing then it could be not only through offering resources and comfort but, perhaps most importantly, through understanding that working with a generous amount of trust throughout the community's trials and/or errors with various materials does not mean that we will get duped. A reparative publishing practice could be developing tools that don't try to avoid surprises but let us embrace the fact that, as humans, we are limited in timespace. This should urge us to take in and use relational systems that acknowledge the large benefits of complex interdependence. From this place, digital structures do not have to push us closer to macho fantasies of disembodied immortality and centralized power.[5] It could be a soil where versioned and community-driven practices unpack, disentangle, and publish as communities trembling and troubling together, unconcerned whether someone's paranoia thinks you got taken for a sucker in the process.

Footnotes

1. Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This

Essay Is About You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

2. Kosofsky, "Paranoid Reading," 141.
3. Kosofsky, "Paranoid Reading," 130.
4. Kosofsky, "Paranoid Reading," 147.
5. "If my nightmare is a culture inhabited by posthumans who regard their bodies as fashion accessories rather than the ground of being, my dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival." N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 192.

Mia Melvær is a Norwegian visual artist and artistic researcher working with questions around materiality, technology, and processes of recording. She is a member of Constant Association for Arts and Media, among other collective structures, and has a special interest in tools for collective work and archives of queer and feminist ephemera. Her practice oscillates between sculptural installations, writing, and assembling scraps from archival deep-dives to create narrative patchworks.