

This got me thinking about the idea of a library and what it may mean, in its classical sense and its digital sense. An encounter with any library, especially when it manifests itself physically, is one where you encounter your own finitude in the face of what seems like the infinity of knowledge. But personally this sense of awe has also been tinged with an immense excitement and possibility. The head rush of wanting to jump from a book on forgotten swear words to an intellectual biography of Benjamin, and the tingling anticipation as you walk out of the library with ten books, captures for me more than any other experience the essence of the word potential.

I have a modest personal library of around four thousand books, which I know will be kind of difficult for me to finish in my lifetime even if I stop adding any new books, and yet the impulse to add books to our unending list never fades. And if you think about this in terms of the number of books that reside on our computers, then the idea of using numbers becomes a little pointless, and we need some other way or measure to make sense of our experience.

Lawrence



Book I, Chapter VII: The Sovereign

Every individual can, as a man, have a particular will contrary to, or divergent from, the general will which he has as a citizen; his private interest may appear to him quite different from the common interest; his absolute and naturally independent existence may make him envisage what he owes to the common cause as a gratuitous contribution, the loss of which would be less harmful to others than the payment of it would be onerous to him.

July 12, 2015

Hi Sean,

There is no symbol that to my mind captures the regulated nature of the library more than that of the board that hushes you with its capitalized SILENCE. Marianne Constable says, "One can acknowledge the figure of silence in the library and its persistence, even as one may wonder what a silent library would be, whether libraries ever are silent, and what the various silences – if any – in a library could be."

If I had to think about the nature of the social contract and the possibilities of its rewriting from the site of the library one encounters another set of silent rules and norms. If social contracts are narrative compacts that establish a political community under the sign of a sovereign collective called the people, libraries also aspire to establish an authority in the name of the readers and to that extent they share a common constitutive character. But just as there

is a foundational scandal of absence at the heart of the social contract that presumes our collective consent (what Derrida describes as the absence of the people and the presence of their signature) there seems to be a similar silence in the world of libraries where readers rarely determine the architecture, the logic, or the rules of the library.

So libraries have often mirrored, rather than inverted, power relations that underlie the social contracts that they almost underwrite. In contrast I am wondering if the various shadow libraries that have burgeoned online, the portable personal libraries that are shared offline: Whether all of them reimagine the social contract of libraries, and try to create a more insurgent imagination of the library?

Lawrence

July 13, 2015

Hi Lawrence,

As you know, I'm very interested in structures that allow the people within ways to meaningfully reconfigure them. This is distinct from participation or interaction, where the structures are inquisitive or responsive, but not fundamentally changeable.

I appreciate the idea that a library might have, not just a collection of books or a system of organizing, but its own social contract. In the case of Aaaaarg, as you noticed, it is not explicit. Not only is there no statement as such, there was never a process prior to the library in which something like a social contract was designed.

I did ask users to write out a short statement of their reason for joining Aaaaarg and have around fifty thousand of these expressions of intention. I think it's more interesting to think of the social contract, or at least a "general will," in terms of those. If Rousseau distinguished between the will of all and the general will, in a way that could be illustrated by the catalog of reasons for joining Aaaaarg. Whereas the will of all might be a sum of all the reasons, the general will would be the sum of what remains after you "take away the pluses and minuses that cancel one another." I haven't done the math, but I don't think the general will, the general reason, goes beyond a desire for access.

To summarize a few significant groupings:

- To think outside institutions;*
- To find things that one cannot find;*
- To have a place to share things;*
- To act out a position against intellectual property;*
- A love of books (in whatever form).*

What I do see as common across these groupings is that the desire for access is, more specifically, a desire to have a relationship with texts and others that is not mediated by market

04/07

e-flux journal #65 SUPERCOMMUNITY — may–august 2015 Sean Dockray, Lawrence Liang
Sharing Instinct: An Annotation of the Social Contract Through Shadow Libraries

relations.

In my original conception of the site, it would be something like a collective commonplace. Like commonplacing, the excerpts that people would keep were those parts of texts that seemed particularly useful, that produced a spark that one wanted to share. This is important: that it was the experience of being electrified in some way that people were sharing and not a book as such. Over time, things changed and the shared objects became more complete so to say, and less “subjective,” but I hope that there is still that spark. But, at this point, I realize that I am just another one of the many wills, and just one designer of whatever social contract is underlying the library.

So, again – What is the social contract? It wasn’t determined in advance and it is not written in any about section or FAQ. I would say that it is, like the library itself, something that is growing and evolving over time, wouldn’t you?

Sean

Book II, Chapter VIII : The People

As an architect, before erecting a large edifice, examines and tests the soil in order to see whether it can support the weight, so a wise lawgiver does not begin by drawing up laws that are good in themselves, but considers first whether the people for whom he designs them are fit to maintain them.

July 15, 2015

Lawrence,

There are many different ways of organizing a library, of structuring it, and it’s the same for online libraries. I think the most interesting conversation would not be to bemoan the digital for overloading our ability to be discerning, or to criticize it for not conforming to the kind of economy that we expected publishing to have, or become nostalgic for book smells; but to actually really wonder what it is that could make these libraries great, places that will be missed in the future if they go away. To me, this is the most depressing thing about the unfortunate fact that digital shadow libraries have to operate somewhat below the radar: it introduces a precariousness that doesn’t allow imagination to really expand, as it becomes stuck on techniques of evasion, distribution, and redundancy. But what does it mean when a library functions transnationally? When its contents can be searched? When reading interfaces aren’t bound by the book form? When its contents can be referenced from anywhere?

What I wanted when building Aaaaarg.org the first time was to make it useful, in the absolute fullest sense of the word, something for people who saw books not just as things you buy

to read because they’re enjoyable, but as things you need to have a sense of self, of orientation in the world, to learn your language and join in the conversation you are a part of – a library for people who related to books like that.

Sean

July 17, 2015

Hi Sean,

To pick up on the reasons that people give for joining Aaaaarg.org: even though Aaaaarg.org is not bound by a social contract, we do see the outlines – through common interests and motivations – of a fuzzy sense of a community. And the thing with fuzzy communities is that they don’t necessarily need to be defined with the same clarity as enumerated communities, like nations, do. Sudipta Kaviraj, who used the term fuzzy communities, also speaks of a “narrative contract” – perhaps a useful way to think about how to make sense of the bibliophilic motivations and intentions, or what you describe as the “desire to have a relationship with texts and others that is not mediated by market relations.”

This seems a perfectly reasonable motivation except that it is one that would be deemed impossible at the very least, and absurd at worst by those for whom the world of books and ideas can only be mediated by the market. And it’s this idea of the absurd and the illogical that I would like to think a little bit about via the idea of the ludic, a term that I think might be useful to deploy while thinking of ways of rewriting the social contract: a ludic contract, if you will, entered into through routes allowed by ludic libraries.

If we trace the word ludic back to its French and Latin roots, we find it going back to the idea of playing (from Latin ludere “to play” or ludique “spontaneously playful”), but today it has mutated into most popular usage (ludicrous) generally used in relation to an idea that is so impossible it seems absurd. And more often than not the term conveys an absurdity associated with a deviation from well-established norms including utility, seriousness, purpose, and property.

But what if our participation in various forms of book sharing was less like an invitation to enter a social contract, and more like an invitation to play? But play what, you may ask, since the term play has childish and sometimes frivolous connotation to it? And we are talking here about serious business. Gadamer proposes that rather than the idea of fun and games, we can think with the analogy of a cycle, suggesting that it was important not to tighten the nuts on the axle too much, or else the wheel could not turn. “It has to have some play in it ... and not too much play, or the wheel will fall off. It was all about spielraum,

05/07

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‘play-room,’ some room for play. It needs space.”

The ludic, or the invitation to the ludic in this account, is first and foremost a necessary relief – just as playing is – from constraining situations and circumstances. They could be physical, monetary, or out of sheer nonavailability (thus the desire for access could be thought of as a tactical maneuver to create openings). They could be philosophical constraints (epistemological, disciplinary), social constraints (divisions of class, work, and leisure time). At any rate all efforts at participating in shadow libraries seem propelled by an instinct to exceed the boundaries of the self however defined, and to make some room for play or to create a “ludic spaciousness,” as it were.

The spatial metaphor is also related to the bounded/unbounded (another name for freedom I guess) and to the extent that the unbounded allows us a way into our impossible selves; they share a space with dreams, but rarely do we think of the violation of the right to access as fundamentally being a violation of our right to dream. Your compilation of the reasons that people wanted to join Aaaaarg may well be thought of as an archive of one-sentence-long dreams of the ludic library.

If for Bachelard the house protects the dreamer, the library for me is a ludic shelter, which brings me back to an interesting coincidence. I don’t know what it is that prompted you to choose the name Aaaaarg.org; I don’t know if you are aware it binds you irrevocably (to use the legal language of contracts) with one of the very few theorists of the ludic, the Dutch philosopher Johan Huizinga, who coined the word homo ludens (as against the more functional, scientific homo sapiens or functional homo faber). In his 1938 text Huizinga observes that “the fun of playing, resists all analysis, all logical interpretation,” and as a concept it cannot be reduced to any other mental category. He feels that no language really has an exact equivalent to the word fun but the closest he comes in his own language is the Dutch word aardigheid, so the line between aaaarg and aard may have well have been dreamt of before Aaaaarg.org even started.

More soon,
Lawrence
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06/07

e-flux journal #65 SUPERCOMMUNITY — may–august 2015 Sean Dockray, Lawrence Liang
Sharing Instinct: An Annotation of the Social Contract Through Shadow Libraries

All excerpts from *The Social Contract* are from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract: And, The First and Second Discourses*, ed. Susan Dunn and Gita May (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

e-flux journal #65 SUPERCOMMUNITY — may–august 2015 Sean Dockray, Lawrence Liang
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07/07