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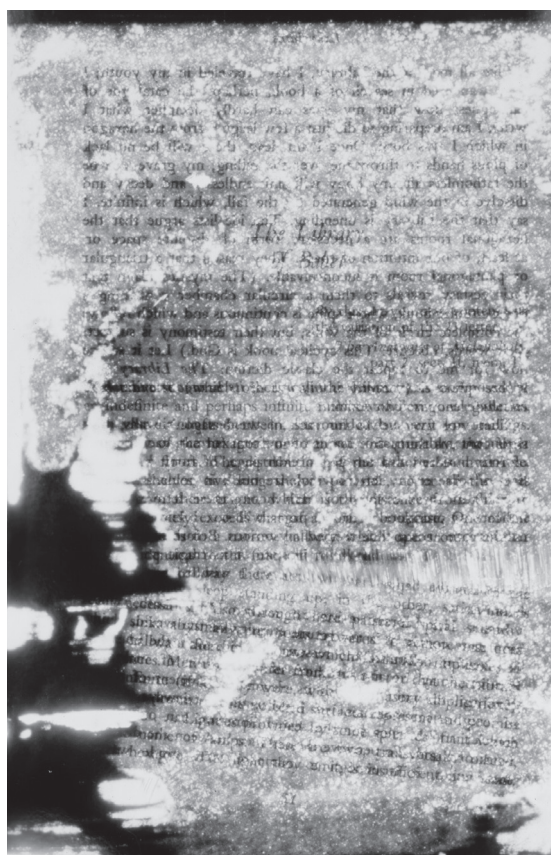
A meditation on writing, electricity and ghosts

TED HIEBERT

Jorge Luis Borges once told a story about a library of infinite knowledge – ‘The Library of Babel’ – a library so comprehensive that it contained a copy of every book ever written, every book that could be written, a library so vast that it even included books not yet written, books started but not finished, or even books that had only ever been imagined. But what such a library could never contain is the way in which a book changes by being read – the ways that reading impacts on, and potentially even re-writes, the story of the text itself. One might think of a degree-zero form of reading in which the act of engagement becomes its own collaborative performance. It is at this point that reading becomes a form of writing, fulfilling Roland Barthes’s (1978) insistence on the ‘birth of the reader’ as a form of thoughtful engagement with otherwise static written content. Or one could consider the text materially, as a geographic site replete with historical – even archeological – potential. These books become relational and performative sites upon which the physical materiality – one might even (following Jane Bennett 2010) say the ‘vibrant materiality’ – of the book takes individualized form. The challenge would then be to find ways to write and record this second order interaction such as to reveal the hidden histories of engagement archived within the texts themselves.

This essay is a series of meditations on, around and alongside Jorge Luis Borges’s story, asking after the limits of writing as an archiving of information with the specific intent to nuance some of the idiosyncrasies of Borges’s tale in order to explore other forms of thinking about writing. For while ‘The Library of Babel’ outlines one destiny of writing as an infinite number of structural variations, to reduce writing to the production of information is to miss the embodied potential of a text seen otherwise. This paper meditates on the performative

and inscriptive complexities of the written word, extrapolating towards larger trajectories of ephemerality in the processes of writing and performance.



■ Ted Hiebert, *Excerpts from the Library of Babel* (book 1, pages 51–2), Kirlian photograph, 2011

THE LIBRARIANS OF BABEL

The Library is total and its shelves register all the possible combinations of the twenty-odd orthographical symbols ... in other words, all that it is given to express, in all languages. Everything: the minutely detailed history of the future, ... the faithful catalogue of the Library, thousands and thousands of false catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of those catalogues, ... the true story of your death, the translation of every book in all languages, the interpolations of every book in all books. (Borges 1964:54)

The Library of Babel is an endless space containing endless shelves on which all possible written words have been archived. It is so vast that it cannot be experienced in its entirety. Thus, to imagine the Library of Babel is to quickly exhaust the idea of a repository of infinite knowledge and to enter into a conversation about the (finite) material experience of infinity itself. That is, the idea of infinite knowledge is only sustainable in the abstract, such that a library – however cleverly designed – must be imagined not simply as a neutral repository for the concept of infinity but as an actual meeting place between infinity and its performance. The library gives materiality to what has none, and in so doing provides a stage upon which the considerations of infinity can be engaged. Or, more simply, it is not just knowledge in the abstract that exists in the Library of Babel, but a copy of *this specific essay*, and of every other essay in this volume of *Performance Research*, and of every other issue as well: past, present and future. And with each essay, there is an author who becomes the material catalyst of the abstract representation, even if the concept of authorship begins to quickly dissipate when expressive voices become part of an infinite collection.

To bring the imagination of such an infinite space home to the material practicalities of the everyday is to realize that Borges's library is not simply a literary metaphor – or at least its metaphor extends well beyond the function of an archive to query the lived experience of writing itself. In an age of technological acceleration where 'infinite' amounts of information are no longer a fictional dream but a daily (online) actuality, our thoughts are no sooner expressed than they are digitally archived and shared. But while much has been made of the excess of information and the accumulation of data, the real paradox of digital living is experiential. As such, to query Borges's story for its relationship to writing is to insist on a performative materiality to the story, not simply the abstract imagination of infinite information but the experience of what it would be like to encounter such a library. In some ways it is to return to Roland Barthes's (1978) proclamations about the birth of the reader, charged with reclaiming an autonomous position in relation

to the authoritative declarations of writing (and other forms of data) that circulate endlessly around us. Barthes's reader is also inevitably a writer, charged with the reflective task of building a personal relationship with the text itself. That is, for Barthes, the act of reading is generative and performative, such that in the act of reading the text itself is inevitably re-written.

One may suggest that Borges shares Barthes's affinity towards the incommensurable spaces of autonomous readership, and it is significant that in Borges's story there is little difference made between casual readers and the most serious of librarians – in both cases the attempt to master all of the writings in the library is preemptively futile and instead what the meandering explorer and the ardent scholar share are the particularities of their own encounters. While the library itself contains the complete repository of possible written knowledge, the horizon of intelligibility of such a construction would lie with the stories of the individuals, the readers, the librarians, the wanderers, the lurkers – those who patrol the library or who seek out some form of encounter with its texts. Note that even 'The Library of Babel' is itself a story of such an individual – reinforcing the predictive dynamic of possibilities of knowledge while also pointing to the fact that, by definition, a library of infinite information would already contain the stories of those who frequent its halls: 'The certitude that everything has been written negates us or turns us into phantoms' (Borges 1964: 58). Even the librarian lives a story already written. What is not written, then, is not properly the story of experience but experience itself – a nuanced distinction relying on a consensus that performance is ultimately not reducible to written representation.

GHOST STORIES #1

'The Library of Babel', in the end, is a ghost story – not the story of a library at all but of that that a library can never contain: the experiences of those traversing its space, flipping through its pages, imagining with, against and around the stories encountered within the architecture of the space. Seen in this way, libraries are not repositories of knowledge as much as they are performative sites for embodied encounters

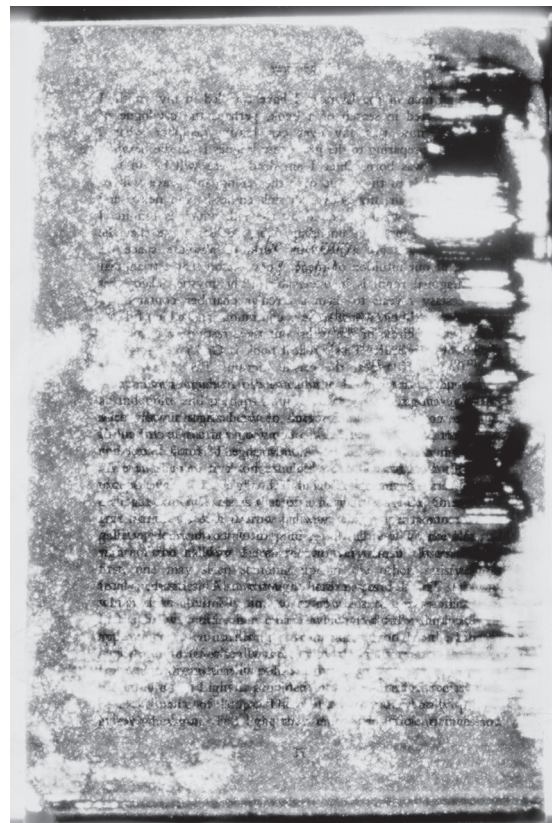
with information. If in the age of technology ‘information has lost its body’ (as Katherine Hayles eloquently put it in 1999: 2), it is in the Library of Babel that these lost bodies still roam – writing their own stories in the ephemeral spaces of all that cannot be written. This is hauntology at its most literal. ‘The image machine is haunted by memories of the body,’ writes Arthur Kroker (2012: 1) and the book, too – once thought of as simply a neutral site for inscribed information – now becomes the marker of what remains irreducible to information. The book is not an already-written object but one that is always in the process of writing and re-writing its own material history.

This is not to undermine the library, nor to pretend that phenomenological encounter redeems the individual from the shadows cast by informatic authority, but rather to understand that ‘The Library of Babel’ is both a story of possibility and of futility, best understood not as the abstract (but impossible to experience) imagination of informatic totality but rather as the ‘critically proximate’ (to use Peter Sloterdijk’s (1987: xxxiii) term: encounter with writing on a dialogic stage).

THE PSYCHOMETRIC IMAGINATION

If a book can have an impact on a reader can the inverse not also perhaps be the case? If so, it would not be quite as simple as to say that ‘The Library of Babel’ is best understood as a space animated by the performative engagement of readers alone, since the collaborative co-partners in this animation persist as part of the architecture of the site. The touch of a reader is not innocent. Instead, this touch infuses the book with a collaborative history as an entangled material object. To think hauntologically about this materiality is to also think psychometrically. It is to think of the books as sites encoded in some way, perhaps even with an agency of their own – embracing the contemporary suggestions for what Steven Shaviro (2014: 20) calls a form of ‘cautious anthropomorphism’ or what Jane Bennet (2010: 17) refers to as ‘vital materialism’, such as to realize that a book contains much more than simply words on paper. If for Jane Bennet ‘vital materiality’ is what takes shape in the space

created by making things strange (vii) then it is in the act of viewing a book as a haunted object that this vital strangeness begins to emerge. A book contains paper of a particular stock, from particular trees or pulp mills, handled by particular machinery, in a certain environmental climate, at a certain moment in history. And once compiled *as itself*, a book is both a clone of its kin and a unique object destined to take on a distinct material history. Books pass hands. Books are subjects of contemplation and imagination but also of frustration, anger and sometimes disagreement. They are also objects with material lives, pages torn or marked up, sometimes left in the rain, other times carefully guarded in climate-controlled contexts. They are sometimes nurtured; they are sometimes abused. To make present these elements of a text would require an affinity towards the ghosts that persist within the pages themselves, even after the acts of readership have ended. To attempt to tell this complementary side of the story would be to move beyond the stories of people and to tell the stories of how the texts themselves become haunted by the various attentions and



■ Ted Hiebert, *Excerpts from the Library of Babel* (book 11, pages 57–8), *Kirlilian* photograph, 2011

■ Ted Hiebert, *Excerpts from the Library of Babel*. Installation view: Kirkland Arts Center, Kirkland, USA, 2011.



imaginations that have been written into them, encoded by the performances they have endured, left as ephemera that are not quite material enough to become a story of their own, yet present in the most vital of collaborative ways. It would take a certain form of psychometric imagination to wonder how one may reveal the inner stories contained within these individual books, an open mindedness to alternative technologies designed to reveal aspects of objects we cannot immediately perceive.

In 1938, the Russian electrical engineer Seymon Kirlian invented a process for photographing the internal energy of conductive objects, using a high-voltage electric charge instead of a light source in order to capture his images.¹ While the amount of electrical current used is minimal, it is nevertheless sufficient to illuminate its objects, which begin to glow and vibrate while electric sparks discharge from the material edges. The image of an 'aura' forms, that that Kirlian and his accolades contend is a representation of the vibrancy of energetic matter:

Obtained on the photos is the surface structure of live objects, surrounded by a halo of a high-frequency discharge. According to the physiological condition of the organism the size of the halo and the luminescent brightness are apt to vary. (Gris and Dick 1969: 129–30)

While Walter Benjamin (1969) suggested that the age of photography revolutionizes

information by eschewing the materiality (the 'aura') of more traditional media, it is the Kirlian photograph that problematizes Benjamin's assertion by providing a photographic technology capable of capturing the materiality of energetic being. Seen in this way, Kirlian photography is not simply a process of representation – of 'reading' and faithfully documenting the image of the world. Instead, the Kirlian process constitutes an event of writing that is also one of revealing an inner history that was previously unseen. The promise of the Kirlian process is thus exactly what is needed to supplement Borges's tale:

The human mind expressed itself through the tips of the subject's fingers, to become an open book as the aura's flickering 'flames' differed with the nuances of the subject's emotions ... Love, hate, fatigue, stomachaches, sexual desire – as faint as might be caused by a fleeting kiss – all registered to lead to important biological conclusions. (Gris and Dick, 1978: 129)

Applied to the pages of a book, the promise of this process is to reveal the internal residues of past interactions – coffee stains and readers' notations, of course, but also potentially the moods, imaginations and desires brought to the text by the minds of interaction. This is a form of photography charged with the poetic symbolism of affective history.

GHOST STORIES #2

Kirlian photography is a technology of (paranormal) writing, a high-voltage Ouija board that brings a certain amount of materiality to the ephemeral history of the objects it photographs. Its images are ghost stories, attempting to invert the representational surface of the picture by charging the process with finding a different sort of voice. In this, there is something inevitably performative about the Kirlian image, a direct confirmation of Barthes's (1980:31) insistence that the camera owes its debt to the performative history of theatre rather than to the representational history of painting. For Barthes, the photograph is always a death mask – a marker of a moment past and forever gone, but at the same time a vibrant catalyst for the persistence of memory. So, too, with the Kirlian image: born out of a high-voltage event but generative of an image of internal energy. Kirlian photography belies the myth of photography as a process of passive capture and foregrounds the process of capture itself as the generative anchor of representational engagement.

To attempt to image what cannot be seen is to invert representation. No image innocently reflects a world that pre-exists its documentation. Instead, images generate new realities of their own. It is a mainstay of simulation theory, popularized by Jean Baudrillard (1994) and others except that this time it is not a critique of media culture but a statement of representational possibility. One can see this dynamic at work in processes of technological visualization (as telescopes or microscopes magnify or as space telemetry is compiled into visual forms) but it can also be a poetic process, pointing towards the manifestations of experiences, thoughts and interactions lost to the incommensurability of the moment. The Kirlian image is the image of its own spectres, the image of the touches left by bodies and minds, material, poetic and symbolic.

EXCERPTS FROM THE LIBRARY OF BABEL

The pictures on the wall of the gallery appear to be book pages, although the text in the images is largely illegible. On some of the images the feint

works 'Library of Babel' can be seen, sometimes written backwards. There is something similar to each image, as though it were a different iteration of the same object – or an objective articulation of iterative difference. These are energy drawings; there is something electric about the appearance of the page. Beside each image, a smaller picture hangs, separated into quadrants, each containing an image of a page. Below the smaller picture is a shelf upon which rests a copy of Jorge Luis Borges's book *Labyrinths: Selected stories & other writings*. Jutting out from each book are four pages. On the wall beside the door is a bookshelf, filled with additional copies of the same book.

One does not resolve the infinity of information through analysis and understanding, but through a poetic act of incommensurability. And one does not resolve the paradox of 'The Library of Babel' by imagining the architecture of the space but rather by focusing on the story in which the library itself is proposed. The Library of Babel would contain Borges's story 'The Library of Babel', but in this case the story precedes the library and not the other way around. Put more simply, 'The Library of Babel' is a story that has been written, even if the ambition of the story is precisely to exceed and escape its own imagination. To juxtapose the story of infinite writing with the particularity of an individual story is also to realize that there is no truly individual story here – or rather each iteration of the story is unique, each printed copy an instance of material history that stages the experience and the imagination of the infinite.

■ Ted Hiebert, *The Collection* (partial), a growing archive of used copies of Jorge Luis Borges's *Labyrinths: Selected stories & other writings*. Studio documentation, 2015



For the past several years, I have been collecting used copies of Borges's story and documenting them using Kirlian photography. The project – *Excerpts from the Library of Babel* – is conceived not simply as a homage to Borges's story but also as a poetic counterpoint: not the story of a library of infinite writing but a story of (potentially) infinite material manifestations of the singular story in which the tale of the library is proposed. Each of the hundreds of books in the collection marks a unique manifestation of the same text: the same words bound in the same order as part of the same edition of the same book. And yet each book is a unique object, too, with its own travels, memories and interactions hidden within the depths of the pages. Each book is systematically imaged using the Kirlian method so as to bring out the similarities and differences among the pages. To bring out the hidden idiosyncrasies of a page is to raise the spectres of performance, not for their human impact (the way reading shapes a reader's mind) but as an inscription of the incommensurability of any given text.²

This is not a reenactment of a library of infinite knowledge but just the opposite: a growing archive of the infinite performative variations of the singular story, and a writing specifically designed to reveal the material, imagined and symbolic differences in the ways a singular story can manifest.

GHOST STORIES # 3

Excerpts from the Library of Babel is less a ghost story than a story written by the ghosts themselves in the only way ghosts may write. Kirlian photography treats the text as a haunted object, containing the vibrant spirits of an interactive history. Its method is psychometric, touching the books in order to bring out a voice from within. And while this process may be metaphorically expanded to become a framework for understanding technology in a broader context, what remains at the foreground of these 'excerpts' is the incommensurability of experience. Not just human experience either, but the experience of a book seen as its own site of accumulated history – touched by hands and minds alike and standing as an object

with written, material and poetic significance. *Excerpts from the Library of Babel* is a tale written in image, electricity and the materiality of history itself.

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² For more on this project see: <http://www.tedhiebert.net/site/babel>