My Voyage to Idaho

SECOND EDITION

My Voyage to Idaho

(and some things that happened there)

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MY VOYAGE TO IDAHO:
WORK IN PROCESS

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visel.freeshell.org/wordpress/workinprocess

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Part the First

Alberto Soldi.

Chapter One

"Hello," said the man who was looking down at his spaghetti. "My name is Alberto Sordi. I am a villain. Right now I am looking at my spaghetti, but soon I will start telling you the story of my travels in Idaho, which I have no doubt that you will find very interesting."

He continued to look at his spaghetti.

"Right now I am looking at my spaghetti. My mother made it for me and I am afraid she is trying to poison me."

"Her name is Mrs. Soldi. She is a villain too, a villainess or a villainelle, I am not sure of the word. She is jealous that I got to go to Idaho. She wishes she could have gone to Idaho. Now she is trying to poison me, I am sure of it. That

is why I have to inspect my spaghetti like this. It is a bad situation, I will admit, but my mother does make fine spaghetti."

"But probably you want to hear about my voyage to Idaho and what happened there. That is all anyone wants to hear about any more. I could tell you all about my mother, which is a very interesting subject, but nobody is interested in hearing about that. Probably because they are not of strong enough character to hear about my mother."

"I will explain things to you while I eat my spaghetti. I am fairly sure that my mother is not trying to poison me with this spaghetti. I do not see any grains of poison in it, although it is possible that they have blended into the sauce. My mother, villainous as she is, is not as careful as she could be about these things."

"But my voyage to Idaho. First we had a lot of barrels. This picture shows how they looked.

Barili di rovere.

There were a lot of them and they could have crushed someone if they fell on them. That is exactly what happened. It was a problem."

"How could I know that the small children with their puppies would play underneath the barrels? I could not. Nobody could have, unless they were a genius and also not a villain. So it was best that I went to Idaho."

"That is how we decided that I should go to Idaho. Now I am going to finish my spaghetti before we have to start the next chapter, which will be very soon."

Chapter Two

"First you will want to know how I got to Idaho. The answer to that is very simple. I took a boat. A boat is the smartest way to get to Idaho. You can be stupid and try to walk to Idaho but it will take you a long time to get there and probably you would get tired along the way. So I took a boat. It looked kind of like this:

"That picture is very small and does not adequately convey the glory of the boat that I took to Idaho, which was very grand and was full of servants. Also it had a dumb-waiter, which is not exactly a servant but like one in many respects."

"In fact, a dumb-waiter is very much like a robot. When I finally arrived in Idaho, I saw a robot. It looked like this. It was not very exciting. People usually expect robots to be exciting or at least interesting, but that is not always the case. Often robots are extremely boring.

Robot nella produzione industriale.

That was how it was with the robots I saw in Idaho. Some people say that robots will some day be as intelligent as a small dog but the robot that I saw in Idaho was not even as intelligent as a dish-washer, as far as I could tell."

"But I am getting ahead of myself, because I was still telling you about how I got to Idaho, not about all of the things that I saw there."

"Before we went to Idaho, we went to Mexico, which is on the way to Idaho. Mexico is also full of robots. The robots there speak Spanish, which is the language of Mexico. Some people think that they speak Mexican but this is not true. I wish I had a picture of a Mexican robot because they look quite different from the robots of Idaho – Idahoan robots, they are called – but I do not. A lot of my pictures got lost in the shipwreck. They were in a box and the box floated away. Everyone was very sad, particularly the first mate. But

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that is not an important thing to think about. Something else that is in Mexico on the way to Idaho is the Panama Canal. I had a particularly grand picture of that as well but that was also lost in the shipwreck. The shipwreck was in the Panama Canal, which made my loss especially poignant."

"The first thing you see when you go to Mexico is Eduardo. Eduardo is the King of Mexico. He is in all places at all times. He is stern, yet loving."

"When you arrive in Mexico, Eduardo looks at you with his steely eyes and you are frightened. You imagine that Eduardo might be looking inside your very soul. This is a frightening thing, especially if you are a villain and have things inside your soul that you should like to conceal."

"But after a while, you realize that Eduardo is only near-sighted and has to look at people
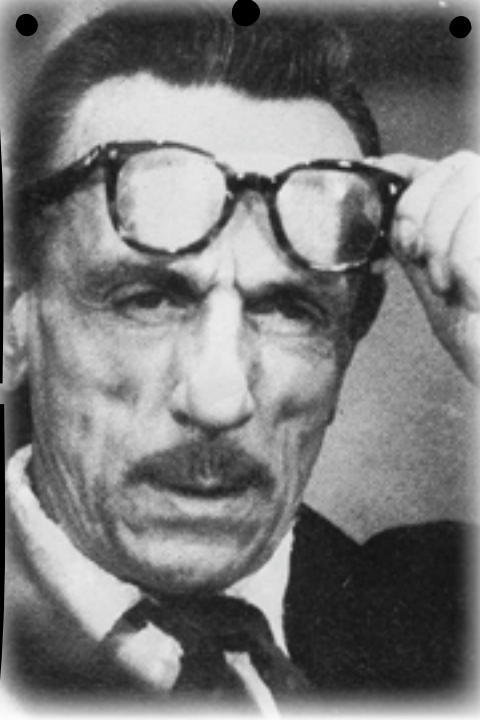
Eduardo.

Eduardo.

very hard to see anything. They have many things in Mexico, but they do not have the sort of glasses that Eduardo needs, so he has to squint."

"If you stay in Mexico long enough you will find that Eduardo does other things besides squinting. He is a fine-natured man indeed. He likes nothing so much as watermelons. All the good-natured inhabitants of Mexico bring Eduardo watermelons. In the picture on the left, he is about to receive one. That is why he is smiling like that. Also he does not have any teeth. It is a good thing he has such a fine mustache."

"But that is enough about Mexico."

Chapter Three

"**B**ut wait. There is one more thing to tell you about Mexico. I have not told you anything about their great Confession Industries."

"If you are not a villain, you might not know anything at all about the Confession Industry. This is with reason, as we in the villain business have been very hush-hush about it. It is something of a trade secret, you might say."

"But since I have just had such a delicious plate of spaghetti and because I am overjoyed at not being poisoned by my mother, I will tell you all about it."

"The Confession Industries were started a long time ago. Back then there were a lot of birds. Nowadays there are not so many birds. But back then, there were a lot of birds, and

Industria di confezioni.

the birds were a problem. Everywhere you could go, you would be surrounded by birds. The birds stood on their hind legs and inspected people with their long necks. Nobody liked that. It was not a fine time to be living in Mexico. The people were unhappy with the situation."

Sfilata di carnevale.
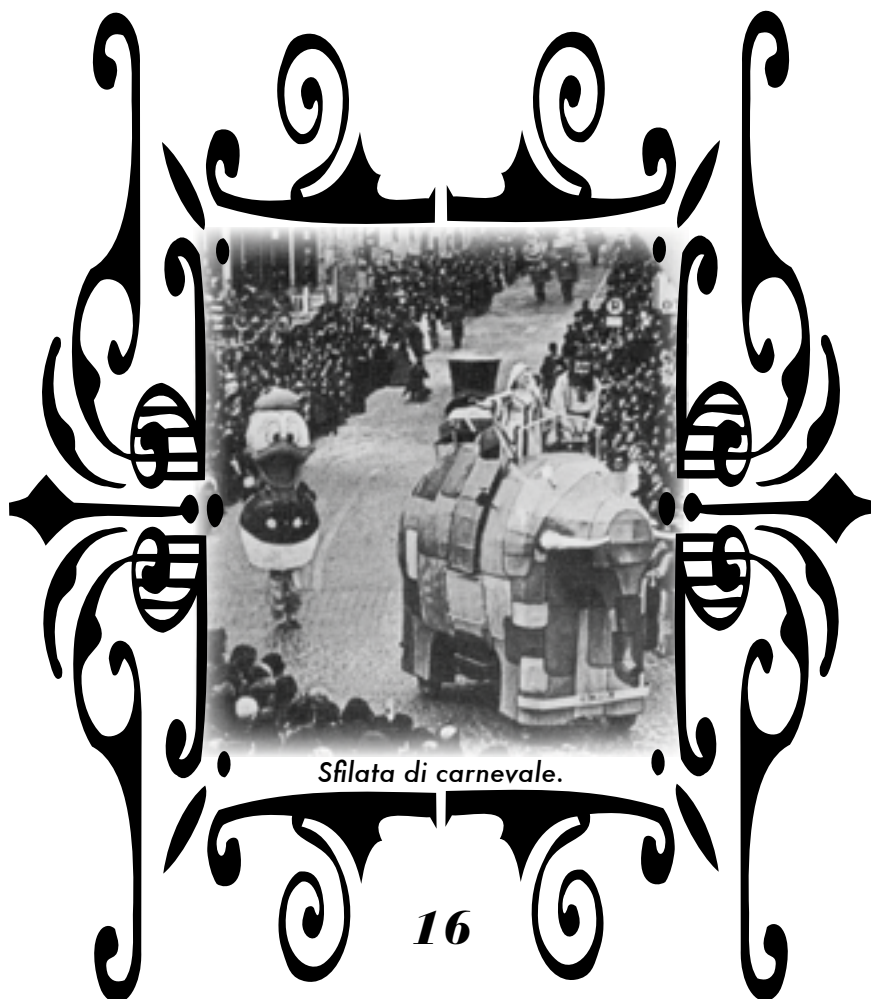
"As you know, at that time, Mexico was run by the People's Committee. Representatives from the People's Committee were made aware of the problem with the birds. Proposals were solicited for dealing with the birds. The winning proposal was to create the Confession Industries."

"Here are how the Confession Industries worked."

Here, Alberto Sordi stopped to chew his spaghetti carefully. During the previous exposition, he had been eating his spaghetti but slowly, so that he could talk while he ate. But spaghetti must be eaten while it is warm, and his story had gone on long enough that his spaghetti was growing cold.

Alberto Soldi.

Chapter 4

"Here is the truth of the matter," said Alberto Sordi. "I have been distracted. You don't need to hear about the Confession Industries. You probably already know about the great Confession Industries of Mexico. But I was telling you about my voyage to Idaho, and while Mexico is on the way to Idaho, it does not actually have very much to do with Idaho at all."

Alberto Sordi paused to chew his spaghetti.

"I will tell you about Mexico some other time."

Part the Second

Finishing Things

One of the most interesting things about the emerging online forms of discourse is how they manage to tear open all our old assumptions. Even if new media hasn't yet managed to definitively change the rules, it has put them into contention. Here's one, presented as a rhetorical question: *why do we bother to finish things?*

This is a bad introduction.

The importance of process is something that's come up again and again over the past two years at the Institute for the Future of the Book. Process, that is, rather than the finished work. Can Wikipedia ever be finished? Can a blog be finished? They could, of course, but that's not interesting: what's fascinating about a blog is its emulation of conversation, it's back-and-forth nature. Even the unit of conversation – a post on a blog, say – may never really be finished: the author can go back and change it, so that the post you viewed at six o'clock is not the post you viewed at four o'clock. This is deeply frustrating to new readers of blogs; but in time, it becomes normal.

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But before talking about new media, let's look at old media. How important is finishing things historically? If we look, there's a whole tradition of things refusing to be finished. We can go back to *Tristram Shandy*, of course, at the very start of the English novel: while Samuel Richardson started everything off by rigorously trapping plots in fixed arcs made of letters, Laurence Sterne's novel, ostensibly the autobiography of the narrator, gets sidetracked in cock and bull stories and disasters with windows, failing to trace his life past his first year. *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*, Sterne's other major work of fiction, takes the tendency even further: the narrative has barely made it into France, to say nothing of Italy, before it collapses in the middle of a sentence at a particularly ticklish point.

There's something unspoken here: in Sterne's refusal to finish his novels in any conventional way is a refusal to confront the mortality implicit in plot. An autobiography can never be finished; a biography must end with its subject's death. If Tristram never grows up, he can never die: we can imagine Sterne's Parson Yorrick forever on the point of grabbing the *fille de chambre's* ———.

> *There's a better illustration of this that was relayed to me by Julio Baena: there's the incident in* Don Quixote *in which Quixote meets a thief on his way to being executed. The thief has written his autobiography, and Quixote wants to read it. "Is it finished?" he asks. "Of course not," says the thief, "I'm not dead yet." I'm paraphrasing, of course.*

Henry James on the problem in a famous passage from *The Art of the Novel*:

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Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so. He is in the perpetual predicament that the continuity of things is the whole matter, for him, of comedy or tragedy; that this continuity is never, by the space of an instant or an inch, broken, or that, to do anything at all, he has at once intensely to consult and intensely to ignore it. All of which will perhaps pass but for a supersubtle way of pointing the plain moral that a young embroiderer of the canvas of life soon began to work in terror, fairly, of the vast expanse of that surface.

My use of this quotation here feels like dirty trickery: James is clearly talking about how fiction works, and I'm calling him into the service of publishing. Fic-

*tion and publishing are two very different
things.*

But James himself refused to let his novels –
masterpieces of plot, it doesn't need to be said –
be finished. In 1906, a decade before his death,
James started work on his New York Edition,
a uniform selection of his work for posterity.
James couldn't resist the urge to re-edit his
work from the way it was originally published;
thus, there are two different editions of many
of his novels, and readers and scholars contin-
ue to argue about the merits of the two, just as
cinephiles argue about the merits of the regu-
lar release and the director's cut.

 This isn't an uncommon issue in literature.
One notices in the later volumes of Marcel
Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* that
there are more and more loose ends, details
that aren't quite right. While Proust lived to

finish his novel, he hadn't finished correcting the last volumes before his death. Nor is death necessarily always the agent of the unfinished: consider Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. David M. Levy, in *Scrolling Forward: Making Sense of Documents in the Digital Age*, points out the problems with trying to assemble a definitive online version of Whitman's collection of poetry: there were a number of differing editions of Whitman's collection of poems even during his life, a problem compounded after his death. The Whitman Archive, created after Levy wrote his book, can help to sort out the mess, but it can't quite work at the root of the problem: we say we know *Leaves of Grass*, but there's not so much a single book by that title as a small library.

The great unfinished novel of the twentieth century is Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities*, an Austrian novel that might have

rivaled Joyce and Proust had it not come crashing to a halt when Musil, in exile in Switzerland in 1942, died from too much weightlifting. It's a lovely book, one that deserves more readers than it gets; probably most are scared off by its unfinished state. Musil's novel takes place in Vienna in the early 1910s: he sets his characters tracing out intrigues over a thousand finished pages. Another eight hundred pages of notes suggest possible futures before the historical inevitability of World War I must bring their way of life to an utter and complete close. What's interesting about Musil's notes are that they reveal that he hadn't figured out how to end his novel: most of the sequences he follows for hundreds of pages are mutually exclusive. There's no real clue how it could be ended: perhaps Musil knew that he would die before he could finish his work.

I was forgetting, when I wrote this, George Steiner's piece on Musil, titled "The Unfinished", which suggests the central theme of this essay, even if it doesn't engage with it in as protracted a fashion as I would have liked. Steiner's not the first to set Musil against Joyce, but my use of them does reflect his. Carlo Emilio Gadda's unfinished works, as discussed by Italo Calvino, could also fit in here, but this was a mess already.

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The visual arts in the twentieth century present another way of looking at the problem of finishing things. Most people know that Marcel Duchamp gave up art for chess; not everyone realizes that when he was giving up art, he was giving up working on one specific piece, *The Bride*

Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even. Duch-
amp actually made two things by this name:
the first was a large painting on glass which
stands today in the Philadelphia Museum of
Art. Duchamp gave up working on the glass
in 1923, though he kept working on the second
Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even,
a "book" published in 1934: a green box that
contained facsimiles of his working notes for
his large glass.

> *This introduction to Duchamp is deeply*
> *embarrassing. I wish it were better, but it*
> *was written too fast.*

Duchamp, despite his protestations to the
contrary, hadn't actually given up art. The
notes in the Green Box are, in the end, much
more interesting – both to Duchamp and art
historians – than the Large Glass itself, which
he eventually declared "definitively unfin-

ished". Among a great many other things, Duchamp's readymades are conceived in the notes. Duchamp's notes, which he would continue to publish until his death in 1968, function as an embodiment of the idea that the process of thinking something through can be more worthwhile than the finished product. His notes are why Duchamp is important; his notes kickstarted most of the significant artistic movements of the second half of the twentieth century.

This should have been expanded.

Duchamp's ideas found fruit in the Fluxus movement in New York from the early 1960s. There's not a lot of Fluxus work in museums: a good deal of Fluxus resisted the idea of art as commodity in preference to the idea of art as process or experience. Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* is perhaps the most well known Fluxus work and

perhaps exemplary: a performer sits still while the audience is invited to cut pieces of cloth from her (or his) clothes. While there was an emphasis on music and performance – a number of the members studied composition with John Cage – Fluxus cut across media: there were Fluxus films, boxes, and dinners. (There's currently a Fluxus podcast, which contains just about everything.) Along the way, they also managed to set the stage for the gentrification of SoHo.

There were a lot of hyperlinks in this paragraph, which don't appear here and weren't all that necessary.

There was a particularly rigorous Fluxus publishing program; Dick Higgins helmed the Something Else Press, which published seminal volumes of concrete poetry and artists' books, while George Maciunas, the leader

of Fluxus inasmuch as it had one, worked as a graphic designer, cranking out manifestos, charts of art movements, newsletters, and ideas for future projects. Particularly ideas for future projects: John Hendricks's *Fluxus Codex*, an attempt to catalogue the work of the movement, lists far more proposed projects than completed ones. Owen Smith, in *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude*, describes a particularly interesting idea, an unending book:

> This concept developed out of Maciunas' discussions with George Brecht and what Maciunas refers to in several letters as a "Soviet Encyclopedia." Sometime in the fall of 1962, Brecht wrote to Maciunas about the general plans for the "complete works" series and about his own ideas for projects. In this letter Brecht mentions that he was "interested in assembling an 'end-

less' book, which consists mainly of a set of cards which are added to from time to time . . . [and] has extensions outside itself so that its beginning and end are indeterminate." Although the date on this letter is not certain, it was sent after Newsletter No. 4 and prior to the middle of December when Maciunas responded to it.} This idea for a expandable box is later mentioned by Maciunas as being related to "that of Soviet encyclopedia – which means not a static box or encyclopedia but a constantly renewable – dynamic box."

Maciunas and Brecht never got around to making their Soviet encyclopedia, but it's an idea that might resonate more now than in did in 1962. What they were imagining is something that's strikingly akin to a blog. Blogs do start somewhere, but most readers of blogs

don't start from the beginning: they plunge it at random and keep reading as the blog grows and grows.

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One Fluxus-related project that did see publication was *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*, a book credited to Daniel Spoerri, a Romanian-born artist who might be best explained as a European Robert Rauschenberg if Rauschenberg were more interested in food than paint. The basis of the book is admirably simple: Spoerri decided to make a list of everything that was on his rather messy kitchen table one morning in 1961. He made a map of all the objects on his not-quite rectangular

table, numbered them, and, with the help of his friend Robert Filliou, set about describing (or "anecdoting") them. From this simple procedure springs the magic of the book: while most of the objects are extremely mundane (burnt matches, wine stoppers, an egg cup), telling how even the most simple object came to be on the table requires bringing in most of Spoerri's friends & much of his life.

Having finished this first version of the book (in French), Spoerri's friend Emmett Williams translated into English. Williams is more intrusive than most translators: even before he began his translation, he appeared in a lot of the stories told. As is the case with any story, Williams had his own, slightly different version of many of the events described, and in his translation Williams added these notes, clarifying and otherwise, to Spoerri's text. A fourth friend, Dieter Roth, translated the book

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into German, kept Williams's notes and added his own, some as footnotes of footnotes, generally not very clarifying, but full of somewhat related stories and wordplay. Spoerri's book was becoming their book as well. Somewhere along the line, Spoerri added his own notes. As subsequent editions have been printed, more and more notes accrete; in the English version of 1995, some of them are now eight levels deep. A German translation has been made since then, and a new French edition is in the works, which will be the twelfth edition of the book. The text has grown bigger and bigger like a snowball rolling downhill. In addition to footnotes, the book has also gained several introductions, sketches of the objects by Roland Topor, a few explanatory appendices, and an annotated index of the hundreds of people mentioned in the book.

Part of the genius of Spoerri's book is that

it's so simple. Anyone could do it: most of us have tables, and a good number of those tables are messy enough that we could anec- dote them, and most of us have friends that we could cajole into anecdoting our anecdotes. The book is essentially making something out of nothing: Spoerri self-deprecatingly refers to the book as a sort of "human garbage can", collecting histories that would be discarded. But the value of of the *Topography* isn't rooted in the objects themselves, it's in the relations they engender: between people and objects, between objects and memory, between people and other people, and between people and themselves across time. In Emmett Williams's notes on Spoerri's eggshells, we see not just eggshells but the relationship between the two friends. A network of relationships is created through commenting.

George LeGrady seized on the hypertextual

nature of the book and produced, in 1993, his own *Anecdoted Archive of the Cold War*. (He also reproduced a tiny piece of the book online, which gives something of a feel for its structure.) But what's most interesting to me isn't how this book is internally hypertextual: plenty of printed books are hypertextual if you look at them through the right lens. What's interesting is how its internal structure is mirrored by the external structure of its history as a book, differing editions across time and language. The notes are helpfully dated; this matters when you, the reader, approach the text with thirty-odd years of notes to sort through, notes which can't help being a very slow, public conversation. There's more than a hint of Wikipedia in the process that underlies the book, which seems to form a private encyclopedia of the lives of the authors.

And what's ultimately interesting about the

Topography is that it's unfinished. My particular copy will remain an autobiography rather than a biography, trapped in a particular moment in time: though it registers the death of Robert Filliou, those of Dieter Roth and Roland Topor haven't yet happened. Publishing has frozen the text, creating something that's temporarily finished.

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We're moving towards an era in which publishing – the inevitable finishing stroke in most of the examples above – might not be quite so inevitable. Publishing might be more of an ongoing process than an event: projects like the *Topography*, which ex-

ists as a succession of differing editions, might become the norm. When you're publishing a book online, like we did with *Gamer Theory*, the boundaries of publishing become porous: there's nothing to stop you from making changes for as long as you can.

> *This is a grandiose ending which promises a great deal and then fails to deliver.*

In Public, in Private: unfinished notes on the unfinished

Key terms: process, (public, publish – these two words are linked)

My list of books read vs my last.fm: is this still relevant to what I'm talking about?

As I noted in a recent post, the detachment of writing from the physical world forces us to rethink what it means to publish something. Publishing is of economic importance in the world of print: everything needs to be final

and correct at the instantly of publishing (the term is ambiguous and could mean: when the writer gives the manuscript to the publisher; when the publisher sends files to the printer; or when the printed text is released to the stores) or there will likely be financial consequences. If you've printed 10,000 copies of a book that's missing its last chapter, you're going to lose money.

Publishing in a network environment isn't tied as closely to the economic: if I misspell a word in a blog post, I can go back and change it when I notice it without severe ramifications. If I'm a bad proofreader, I can keep doing this. Except in extremely rarefied circumstances, no one loses money by this. Publishing can become not a one-time event but a process.

Problems:

1) We generally only read things once. (Publishing: reading, a one-to-one correspondence.) We don't generally situate a text in time when we read it, making allowances for how it might change: if I read something and it contains misspellings, I tend to write the author off and someone who's probably not worth paying attention to, rather than, as may be the case, someone who's still in the process of writing.

[I wrote down "how old people print out blogs for reading them" suggesting that they want the content to be fixed, in print.]

2) Pride.

It's entirely possible for us to do all of our writing in the open. Writely does this? Check to

make sure that this is true.

(This is mostly about text. Cf.: Alex's work as an artist, which is largely open. Or: Fluxus, process work. Hannah Higgins is probably a smart place to go with this.)

John Dewey points out early in *Art and Experience* that we're used to seeing art as a finished thing, set off from the world. This is what I'm trying to get at: that we still by and large see writing as a process of releasing things, of publishing things.

(— So much is still dependent on the myth of the artist toiling in solitude/obscurity until the work is released. Pynchon's probably the best example of that: we know absolutely nothing of how the artist works. We just go out and buy the book when it comes out.)

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(— Reality TV, which is ostensibly unscripted life as it happens, though of course it's tremendously edited: otherwise it would be boring. Being boring is maybe an interesting thing to go back and look at.)

(— how we feel embarrassed when we go back and change a post, causing it to show up again in Bloglines: it feels like amateur hour. Criticism of Boing Boing for doing the same thing?)

(— We could all live in glass houses and shower in public etc etc much as animals do in zoos, but we don't. Impulse behind this?)

(the interface for writing a blog is invariably different from reading a blog)

(how is this different from a wiki? is it? I guess I'm not interested in the collaborative aspect, but the way the individual thing gets written. I'm still interested in the individual act of cre-

ation: the individual voice)

When I write: there are a bunch of uncon-
nected notes, pasted quotations, versions of
the same thing, contradictory statements,
other people saying the same thing, things to
be swept under the table. My notes are almost
always longer than the finished piece. First I
throw a lot of things on the page, then I prune
and prune until there's something of reason-
able length and coherence. This is being done
in DevonThink, not in Movable Type. In part
that's because the writing interface in Movable
Type is so bad: you're working in a constrained
little window, you're at the mercy of the web-
site, etc. Putting something into Movable Type
in my mind is related to the idea of *posting* it,
of *publishing* it.

We share drafts with people, though generally

that's a carefully controlled process: releasing the text.

an attitude: this isn't specifically good or bad, it's just an attitude that people hold that should be examined.

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Noah Eli Feldman's *Inbox* strikes me (& the predecessor that Silliman mentions) as a parallel to Duchamp's notes for the Large Glass (something else that's going on here: for Duchamp to publish his notes – and to accord them artistic status – has very few precedents in the literary world.

Introduction

Generally, an introduction should go at the beginning of things. This project, however, is meant to start in medias res, and thus this introduction begins on page 46 of the second edition. If I'd bothered to start at the beginning, I never would get anything done.

So then: why? This could be viewed as an experiment in publishing technology, though it's hardly experimental. While print-on-demand is a relatively new technology and marginalized in the world of commercial publishing, sites like Lulu and Cafepress are doing enormous amounts of business. Whether any of the product they facilitate the production of is readable is a separate question, a question that could just as easily be applied to this text.

One starting point is the question of what it means to finish something: thus the inclusion of my if:book essay, which does manage to lay out a lot of the thinking that's gone into this, if in a rather poor fashion. Duchamp's ideas and examples are important precedents here, as is Daniel Spoerri's work with his (and other's) *Anecdoted Topography of Chance*. Other Fluxus ideas also go into this: that behind Dick Higgins's *Jefferson's Birthday/Postface*, for example, though I've never seen a copy of that.

There is a technological question here as well: what happens to print in an age where everything is obsolete the moment it's published? Is there a place for books with their air of finality? These aren't new questions, but the possibility print-on-demand makes it much easier to investigate them. The possiblity of printing one copy at a time brings the book's

existence in time to the front in a way that can't be done when large numbers have to be printed.

How thinly can editing be sliced? Does it make sense to produce a version every time I copy or paste text in InDesign, every time I correct a typo? There are some restraints: it takes probably half an hour to upload new PDFs to Lulu and to make an announcement on my site with a PDF for downloading. There's also the question of cost: $5.47 or whatever – the lowest price I can get Lulu to accept – is cheap, but it's not free. (There's also shipping and handling.)

How does the first part relate to the second part, if at all? As of right now, it doesn't. Basic history: I had the first part at hand, as I'd abandoned it a few months previously, and I

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took that as a starting point. Does it fit? No. But: one points to the table that begins Spoerri's work, which is incidental to the real value of that work, which is not to memorialize the contents of a table at one particular instant in time, but to memorialize the instant in Spoerri's life. The table is a means to an end.

Or: one could think of the second part as the yolk sack that the baby chicken absorbs as its egg nears hatching.

Now with less blank pages than ever.