

## Means of Delivery

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Smuggling Afghan heroin or women from Odessa would have been more reprehensible, but more logical. You know you're a fool when what you're doing makes even the post office seem efficient. Everything I was packing into this unwieldy, 1980s-vintage suitcase was available online. I don't mean that when I arrived in Berlin I could have ordered more Levi's 510s for next-day delivery. I mean, I was packing *books*.

Not just any books — these were all the same book, multiple copies. “Invalid Format: An Anthology of Triple Canopy, Volume 1” is published, yes, by Triple Canopy, an online magazine featuring essays, fiction, poetry and all variety of audio/visual culture, dedicated — click “About” — “to slowing down the Internet.” With their book, the first in a planned series, the editors certainly succeeded. They were slowing me down too, just fine.

“Invalid Format” collects in print the magazine's first four issues and retails, ideally, for \$25. But the 60 copies I was couriering, in exchange for a couch and coffee-press access in Kreuzberg, would be given away. For free.

Until lately the printed book changed more frequently, but less creatively, than any other medium. If you thought “The Quotable Ronald Reagan” was too expensive in hardcover, you could wait a year or less for the same content to go soft. E-books, which made their debut in the 1990s, cut costs even more for both consumer and producer, though as the Internet expanded those roles became confused. Self-published book properties began outnumbering, if not outselling, their trade equivalents by the mid-2000s, a situation further convoluted when the conglomerates started “publishing” “self-published books.” Last year, Penguin became the first major trade press to go vanity: its Book Country e-imprint will legitimize your “original genre fiction” for just under \$100. These shifts make small, D.I.Y. collectives like Triple Canopy appear more traditional than ever, if not just quixotic — a word derived from one of the first novels licensed to a publisher.

Kennedy Airport was no problem, my connection at Charles de Gaulle went fine. My luggage connected too, arriving intact at Tegel. But immediately after immigration, I was flagged. A smaller wheelie bag held the clothing. As a customs official rummaged through my Hanes, I prepared for what came next: the larger case, casters broken, handle rusted — I'm pretty sure it had already been Used when it was given to me for my bar mitzvah.

Before the official could open the clasps and start poking inside, I presented him with the document the Triple Canopy editor, Alexander Provan, had e-mailed me — the night before? two nights before already? I'd been up one of those nights scouring

New York City for a printer. No one printed anymore. The document stated, in English and German, that these books were books. They were promotional, to be given away at universities, galleries, the Miss Read art-book fair at Kunst-Werke.

“All are same?” the official asked.

“Alle gleich,” I said.

An older guard came over, prodded a spine, said something I didn’t get. The younger official laughed, translated, “He wants to know if you read every one.”

At lunch the next day with a musician friend. In New York he played twice a month, ate food stamps. In collapsing Europe he’s paid 2,000 euros a night to play a quattrocento church.

“Where are you handing the books out?” he asked.

“At an art fair.”

“Why an art fair? Why not a book fair?”

“It’s an art-book fair.”

“As opposed to a book-book fair?”

I told him that at book-book fairs, like the famous one in Frankfurt, they mostly gave out catalogs.

Taking trains and trams in Berlin, I noticed: people reading. Books, I mean, not pocket-size devices that bleep as if censorious, on which even Shakespeare scans like a spreadsheet. Americans buy more than half of all e-books sold internationally — unless Europeans fly regularly to the United States for the sole purpose of downloading reading material from an American I.P. address. As of the evening I stopped searching the Internet and actually went out to enjoy Berlin, e-books accounted for nearly 20 percent of the sales of American publishers. In Germany, however, e-books accounted for only 1 percent last year. I began asking the multilingual, multiethnic artists around me why that was. It was 2 a.m., at Soho House, a private club I’d crashed in the former Hitlerjugend headquarters. One installationist said, “Americans like e-books because they’re easier to buy.” A performance artist said, “They’re also easier not to read.” True enough: their presence doesn’t remind you of what you’re missing; they don’t take up space on shelves. The next morning, Alexander Provan and I lugged the books for distribution, gratis. Question: If books become mere art objects, do e-books become conceptual art?

Juxtaposing psychiatric case notes by the physician-novelist Rivka Galchen with a dramatically illustrated investigation into the devastation of New Orleans, “Invalid Format” is among the most artful new attempts to reinvent the Web by the codex, and the codex by the Web. Its texts “scroll”: horizontally, vertically; title pages evoke “screens,” reframing content that follows not uniformly and continuously but rather as a welter of column shifts and fonts. Its closest predecessors might be mixed-media Dada (Duchamp’s loose-leafed, shuffleable “Green Box”); or perhaps “I Can Has

Cheezburger?,” the best-selling book version of the pet-pictures-with-funny-captions Web site ICanHasCheezburger.com; or similar volumes from StuffWhitePeopleLike.com and AwkwardFamilyPhotos.com. These latter books are merely the kitschiest products of publishing’s recent enthusiasm for “back-engineering.” They’re pseudoliterature, commodities subject to the same reversing process that for over a century has paused “movies” into “stills” — into P.R. photos and dorm posters — and notated pop recordings for sheet music.

Admittedly I didn’t have much time to consider the implications of adaptive culture in Berlin. I was too busy dancing to “Ich Liebe Wie Du Lügst,” a k a “Love the Way You Lie,” by Eminem, and falling asleep during “Bis(s) zum Ende der Nacht,” a k a “The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn,” just after the dubbed Bella cries over her unlikely pregnancy, “Das ist unmöglich!” — indeed!

Translating mediums can seem just as unmöglich as translating between unrelated languages: there will be confusions, distortions, technical limitations. The Web and e-book can influence the print book only in matters of style and subject — no links, of course, just their metaphor. “The ghost in the machine” can’t be exorcised, only turned around: the machine inside the ghost.

As for me, I was haunted by my suitcase. The extra one, the empty. My last day in Kreuzberg was spent considering its fate. My wheellie bag was packed. My laptop was stowed in my carry-on. I wanted to leave the pleather immensity on the corner of Kottbusser Damm, down by the canal, but I’ve never been a waster. I brought it back. It sits in the middle of my apartment, unvertible, only improvable, hollow, its lid flopped open like the cover of a book.