

CONVERSING THE BOOK: EDITORIAL

"[The book] is the interface for the exchange of authors and readers, the re-shaper of riveting oral stories into scrawled page-turners, the transformer of conversation into records and scripts."

Lindsey Drury and
Nina Tolksdorf,
Conversing the
Book: Editorial.
Interface Critique 5
(2025): 8–18.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11588/ic.2025.1113936>

*This article is
released under a
Creative Commons
license (CC BY 4.0).*

EDITORIAL

Lindsey Drury and Nina Tolksdorf



In the summer of 2019, we started conceptualizing a workshop entitled, “What is the Digital Doing? A Workshop in the Interface,” which was supposed to take place at the Freie Universität Berlin in the summer of 2020. Little did we know that the subtitle of our workshop would gain a literal meaning. Once the pandemic hit and the University was shut down, we postponed the event, hoping we could welcome our guests in Berlin within a few months. When we realised that the pandemic was a lasting situation, and that it was impossible to predict when travel would become part of daily life again, we reconceptualized. The first thing we decided to do was to change the terms by which the workshop participants would interface with each other. We became the first workshop within our research centre – the Cluster of Excellence “Temporal Communities”¹ – to move online.

Long before our workshop moved from physical to digital space (thus changing the conditions of our engagement with ‘the interface’), the very term ‘interface’ underwent a massive transition of its own, moving from a signification describing physical points of exchange between technological equipments toward its popular usage (since the 1970s) to denote graphical user interfaces. With this transition, the ‘interface’ also moved from analogue to digital. The word ‘interface’ itself derives etymologically from Latin. It is a compound term that describes the space between a pair of beings, the place of exchange amid two bodies facing each other. As *inter-* (among, between, betwixt, in the midst of), and *-facies* (form, appearance, face), the ‘interface’ thus signifies that a fissure is also a zone in

1. The workshop and this special issue have been funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) under Germany's Excellence Strategy in the context of the Cluster of Excellence Temporal Communities: Doing Literature in a Global Perspective – EXC 2020 – Project ID 390608380.

which communication and relation might trespass borders – be these technological, embodied, social, political, or cultural. As a concept derived etymologically from the contact zone between bodies in face-to-face conversations, as well as tied, in the history of technology, to connections and conversions between discrete equipments, the interface instead became a gateway to a seemingly dematerialised data-world that was held in perpetuity behind screens and touchpads. Its visibility and tangibility, in this case, emerged as a consequence of ‘user-friendly’ designs which would emerge from the metaphorisation of the desktop.

The focus of this special issue of *Interface Critique* is the contestation of this concept of the interface as a mere threshold to a dematerialized data-world. To do so, however, we do not begin with the desktop, but with one fundamental object that lies upon its surface: the book. Within the humanities, the book holds a deeply historical place as one of the most important objects and products of research. It is the interface for the exchange of authors and readers, the re-shaper of riveting oral stories into scrawled page-turners, the transformer of conversation into records and scripts. The opportunity to digitise books – or rather the content of books – has a twofold effect: On the one hand it provides a reminder that the book itself was not needed in order to convey its content; on the other hand, it confronts readers with the absent physicality of the book, and makes it evident that the book’s mediality was and is indeed part of the content.² To look at this from a different angle: Through confrontation with digitised books, it has become evident that the

2. See, for example, Hayles, who argues that the fetishization of the physical book accelerated with digital and e-books: N. Katherine Hayles, *Print Is Flat, Code Is Deep. The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis*. *Poetics Today* 25[1] (2004), pp. 67–90.

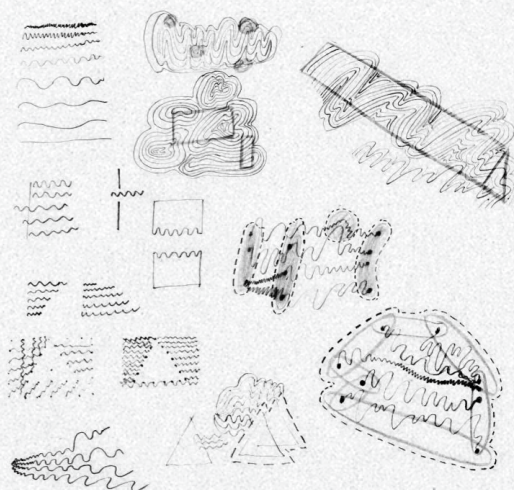
phrase “reading a book” is at the same time *both* metaphorical *and* literal. When we utter that we “read a book,” we usually mean that we are engaged in a process of decoding meaning from its text.³ The physical ‘book’ then stands in as a metaphor or metonymy of the text. At the same time, when the materiality of the book comes to the foreground, the metaphor of ‘reading a book’ turns out to be literal as well – the text is also resident in, and not extricable from, its physical engendering. A text is not a dematerialized being, it is not pure content but inextricable from its form; a text resides in the interface between content and form.

Moreover, this special issue highlights the necessity of the textual tradition to understanding interfaces, showing myriad ways that researchers understand interfaces through book culture, and vice versa, understand book culture through interfaces. Each of our contributors does more than bring books and interfaces into exchange; each shows how what we might understand as ‘books,’ or textual culture, and ‘interfaces’ or exchange between systems, are co-constructive. Drawing from the etymology of the interface concept in face-to-face exchange, the contents of this special issue are further bookended by two conversations between seminal researchers of the interface. Johanna Drucker and Roberto Simanowski open the special issue with a conversation around a conception of the interface as something that is designed to disappear from view and from conscious observation to shape the terms of exchange. Their conversation expands the concept of digital literacy toward that which is intentionally obfuscated by interface design. Katherine Bode and Alexander Galloway close the special issue with a conversation

3. Monika Schmitz-Emans, Books as Material, Virtual, and Metaphorical Entities, in: *Book – Material – Text* 1 (Bochum 2017), pp. 11–27, here p. 12.

that crosses the thresholds between the sciences and humanities to delve into the interconnected structural dynamics of interface, digitality, and textuality within research.

Essay contributions explore issues of practice, transmission, and theory. The contributions widely explore how interfaces between bodies and texts have been digitally revolutionised, from the engagement of researchers with antique Arabic literature and Greek philosophy through manuscripts, to the engagement of impoverished people with public infrastructure through the information inscribed on food ration cards in contemporary India. Our special issue shows how the digital transformation of text from analogue to digital formats conditions modes of access, thus transforming embodied experiences and – in turn – the form/content relation of the texts themselves.



Sketch by Elvia Vasconcelos. From "Process Sketches" for the Artistic Research Lab "Sketches as a Conversation Interface" held within the workshop "What is the Digital Doing? A Workshop in the Interface", November 2020.

The first three contributions explore the implications of digitality in practices of new readerships and authorships. In *Conceptual Analogues*, Marian Dörk explores how data visualisation can allow readers to approach texts at different scales and through multiple modes of engagement. Discussing the philosophical potentials of data visualisation, Dörk, for example, considers the literary figure of the flaneur as a model for exploratory visualisation approaches. Jan-Erik Stange connects reading with authorship, investigating the theoretical and practical implications of Wolfgang Iser's Reader Response Theory and Donald Schön's concept of Reflective Practice to envision a data visualisation practice in his contribution, *The Data Practitioner as Author*. Stange's approach pursues modes of critical engagement, reflective conversation, and back-talk within user interfaces instilled with the possibilities of indeterminacy and ambiguity of creative practices. Silvia Masiero's contribution explores machines that read and misread, chronicling how technological failures of a governmental machine readership shape the experience of interface between public and government within her contribution, *The Interface as a Locus of Knowledge Generation*. Taking the digitisation of food ration infrastructure as a case study, Masiero shows how knowledge of the state is generated at the physical site of the public's engagement with glitching and excluding digital interfaces that imperfectly read the bodies of registered partakers.

The following two contributions bring together digitally-informed reading practices with antique manuscript traditions, chronicling new forms of scholarship which reshape what can be understood of manuscript culture. Beatrice Gründler and Mahmoud Kozae write together in *Human Intuition and Computational Clustering* about the *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, first written in the eighth century, and how digital methods are used to experience the text not only

through its particular manuscript versions, but as a textual tradition encompassing 160 extant manuscripts. Discussing their scholarly practice as a method of juxtaposing multiple witnesses, Gründler and Kozae's analysis identifies the text through the plurality of its instantiations. In the contribution *Textual Criticism and Textual Transmission as History of Knowledge*, Philipp Hegel and Michael Krewet work with a concept of contamination in the manuscript tradition of Aristotle's *De interpretatione* to show underlying scribal practices of sense-making as interstitial to manuscript production as well as how digitality can actually revive once antiquated practices of reading and engaging with text.

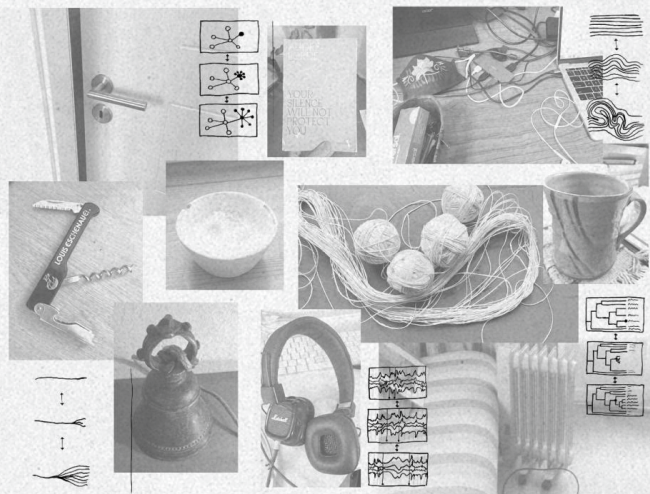
The final three contributions grapple with concepts of interface emergent from the conjunction of literary theory, art history, and media studies. Lindsey Drury's contribution highlights how histories of physiognomy, caricature, and portraiture – the transposition, in other words, of the face's expressive meaning to the page – can be understood as a subterranean force informing interface theory from the eighteenth-century silhouette to facial recognition technology. Drury's contribution further functions as a critical introduction to François Dagognet's *Faces, Surfaces, Interfaces* (1982) and its life – or afterlife – in theoretical address of analogue and digital interfaces since the publication of Alexander Galloway's influential essay *Unworkable Interface* (2008) and subsequent book *The Interface Effect* (2012)⁴. Following Drury's contribution, a chapter of Dagognet's *Faces, Surfaces, Interfaces*, titled *The Half-Error of Physiognomy*, has been translated into English by Nils Schott for this

4. See: Alexander Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Cambridge 2012) and *The Unworkable Interface*, *New Literary History* 39[4] (2008), pp. 931-955; see also: François Dagognet, *Faces, Surfaces, Interfaces* (Paris 1982).

special issue. The translation marks only the second time a chapter of Dagognet's important book has been translated to English. The concept of interface in Dagognet's text emerges from his pursuit of a theoretical basis for reading faces. Dagognet's work shows how the historical entanglement of books and bodies surfaces, as well, through the mutual problem of legibility. Further, Dagognet is an important theorist to Alexander Galloway's concept of interface, and is discussed by Galloway, as well, in his conversation with Kath Bode in this special issue. Schott's translation and Drury's address of Dagognet's ideas aim to contribute to greater understanding of the theorist and his concepts of embodiment and readability.⁵

As our special issue engages with interface critique through the problems and possibilities in the exchange between textuality and embodiment, we have also endeavoured to physically surface the materiality of the interface within this publication. The work of graphic designer Nada Ezzeldin draws attention to the layers of materialities in book culture and its reproduction by presenting the contents in a way that reminds us of the materiality of the book and the almost outdated cultural technique of photocopying. The photocopy, as textual reproduction, degrades the text by participating in its dissemination. Digital copies of texts aim to undermine this, instead keeping the text's pristine state intact. Introducing the materiality of the photocopied text into our special issue, by consequence, represents the material traces of the photocopy within the digital one, signalling hands that have imperfectly pressed books into machines precisely within the digital medium that undermines such an act.

5. The translation is published with permission from the editor, © Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, Paris. Special thanks for their kind authorization. For more information, visit www.vrin.fr.



Artwork by Elvia Vasconcelos. From the Artistic Research Lab “Sketches as a Conversation Interface” held within the workshop “What is the Digital Doing? A Workshop in the Interface,” November 2020. Vasconcelos created the image using photographs sent by participants in response to the prompt: “Take a picture of a thing in the room you are in that relates to the word CONVERSATION. Share it with me and tell why you have chosen it.”

The layered meaning of the term ‘interface’ is reflected by sketch notes from Elvia Vasconcelos. Throughout the workshop which initiated this project, she took visual notes of the talks and discussions, and by doing so investigated artistic methods by which research discourse might be practiced. She continued expanding upon her initial experiments through a Dorothea Schlegel Artist-in-Residence Fellowship at the Cluster of Excellence “Temporal Communities,” with a project titled *Sketchnotes as a Conversation Interface*. Along the way, Vasconcelos examined the interface of arts and humanities, and explored sketching as an analytical and critical tool within design research processes. Since we did not share a physical space during the workshop, Elvia asked the participants to take pictures or sketch things or spaces surrounding them in their lockdown. By making collages out of these contributions, Elvia created new shared spaces within the remoteness of the workshop-

meetings, and highlighted how our abstract thinking about interfaces remains rooted in our physical engagement with the material world around us – doors, wires, corkscrews, eggs – things that interface and that index interfaces. Vasconcelos's sketchnotes and explorations of thinking-in-images are interspersed throughout the text and brought into poetic exchange with the contributions.⁶

By including diverse modes of representation and exploring different formats of presenting research – sketches, a translation, conversations, more traditional double-blind reviewed research papers, and an intermedial layout – this special issue explores these different notions of the interface in both content and form. It was a pleasure to co-edit, and we wish you enjoyment in reading.

6. Vasconcelos's artistic interventions resonate with a text groundbreaking to debates on the interface, see: James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Perception* (Boston 1979).

<END>

References

- Dagognet, François, *Faces, Surfaces, Interfaces* (Paris: Vrin, 1982).
- Galloway, Alexander, *The Interface Effect* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).
- Galloway, Alexander, The Unworkable Interface. *New Literary History* 39[4] (2008), pp. 931-955.
- Gibson, James J. *The Ecological Approach to Perception* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979).
- Hayles, N. Katherine, Print Is Flat, Code Is Deep. The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis. *Poetics Today* 25[1] (2004), pp. 67-90.
- Schmitz-Emans, Monika, Books as Material, Virtual, and Metaphorical Entities. *Book – Material – Text* (2017), pp. 11-27.