

# Bibliotechnica

## Humanist Practice in Digital Times

Edited by John Tresch



San Giorgio Dialogue 2014



John Tresch, Editor

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Humanist Practice  
in Digital Times



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Photo on front cover: Holland House Library after Air Raid, 1940, by permission of Historic England Archive.

Photo on back cover: Baldassare Longhena Library, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Isola di San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice, photo by Matteo De Fina.

*Bibliotechnica: Humanist Practice in Digital Times*

Edited by John Tresch

San Giorgio Dialogue 2014

How do changing technologies of the library alter the ways we relate to knowledge, nature, and each other? What do we learn about the present and future of data storage, analysis, and retrieval by studying the machines that have made these practices possible, from ancient Greece and China, all the way to contemporary global networks? To answer these questions, historians of science, digital experts, art historians, philologists, library historians, and a poet were brought together in Venice at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini. For three days, they inquired together about how different kinds of buildings, institutions, systems and objects have collected and classified books, manuscripts, artworks, as well as those who make and use them. Linking and comparing past and present, science and humanities, West and East, analog and digital, each chapter is followed by a lively and wide-ranging debate, making surprising connections and raising new puzzles. Set in one of Europe's most remarkable libraries and cultural centers, *Bibliotechnica* explores how today's emerging digital knowledge order depends on earlier techniques of handling information, and suggests the ways in which the ideals of humanist scholarship may continue to serve as guides into strange new worlds.

VI-328 pages; 85 illustrations

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## PREFACE

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# Of Black Angels and Infinite Hexagons

*Pasquale Gagliardi*

### A SHORT HISTORY OF THE 'DIALOGUES OF SAN GIORGIO'

This is the latest in a series of books based on the *Dialoghi di San Giorgio*, organised by the Fondazione Giorgio Cini, a large research and resource centre for humanistic studies on the island of San Giorgio in Venice. These Dialogues, launched in 2004, aim to encourage interdisciplinary debates on key issues of contemporary society that are both thought-provoking and of considerable topical interest in political and cultural terms. The current volume is based on the Dialogue entitled *Bibliotechnica: Digital Arts, Philology, and Knowledge Worlds*, held on San Giorgio from 8 to 11 September 2014.<sup>1</sup>

Over the years, the format of the Dialogues—and of the books based on them—has taken on an increasingly original and distinctive aspect, distinguishing them from other more conventional forms of collective academic work. In addition to the emphasis on a) interdisciplinarity, b) an interest in furthering knowledge and c) topicality, the Dialogues have been characterized by d) the greater importance attached to 'conversations' as opposed to 'presentations', and e) a conducive emotional atmosphere created by introducing the intellectual experience through an aesthetic experience.

The Dialogues have usually involved a small and select group of twelve to fourteen experts and scholars from various cultural and professional backgrounds. Over three days, these experts meet and discuss their points of view, visions and experiences in the unique setting of the Island of San Giorgio Maggiore, a place with a



suggestive atmosphere, encouraging quiet reflection and open debate.

As we place greater emphasis on dialogue than on formal written presentations, participants were not asked to write any new papers ahead of the event. Rather, they were simply asked to bring their views to Venice and be willing to discuss them with others. In the invitation letter we always stressed this particular point: our ‘Dialogue’ is not the usual academic meeting at which people appear, give a talk, answer questions and then leave; it is a three-day ‘conversation’ enabling people from different institutions and disciplines to learn from one another. We did request, however, that each invited scholar choose a topic—within the framework proposed in the ‘introductory note’ (or ‘Manifesto’, see below)—that would provide the introduction for one of the sessions of the Dialogue, thus setting the tone of conversation and the agenda for the session.

### THE ‘MANIFESTO’

The ‘Introductory Note’ (or the ‘Manifesto’) which was sent to all the experts invited to the 2014 Dialogue, was written by the planning team, composed of John Tresch, Simon Schaffer and Pasquale Gagliardi. It ran as follows:

«Today’s systems of knowledge are undergoing profound changes in content, form and location. New fields emerge and old ones disappear or re-appear through the recombinations of disciplines. Ancient manuscripts and the most recent scholarly publications, as well as objects and artefacts from every place and time, are enriched through metadata and made searchable, crunchable and remotely accessible. Centres of learning in the global south and east stretch and reorder previously established hierarchies of research and expertise.

We propose a dialogue to be held in September 2014 on the Island of San Giorgio in Venice to explore these critical issues around knowledge organisation in the present, past and future. Our discussions will concentrate on a handful of sites in which such tensions have played out and will continue to do so: the library, the art-historical archive and the techniques of philology.

In times of crisis, interconnexions between the content of knowledge and the ways it is produced and organised come under unusual scrutiny and pressure. Diagnoses and prognoses of today’s crises are widely disputed. Some claim that innovative and experimental knowledge forms are unprecedentedly hampered by rigid and insular insistence on disciplinary specialisation, while others argue that disciplinary training and expertise are under major threat from loose notions of inter-

disciplinarity and extramural populism. This argument is evidenced as much in the unruly comments pages of online publications as in concerns about commercial pressures and monopolistic practices within academic publishing.

It is also widely held that established western models of knowledge and their institutions—academies, universities, museums and archives—are now entirely inadequate as sources of novel knowledge and must be at least complemented, perhaps entirely replaced, by unprecedented forms of experimental organisation. These may be transnational, transdisciplinary, open-sourced or open-ended, and range from participatory web-based platforms to poles of excellence or institutes for advanced study. Simultaneously, it is urged that traditional knowledge forms—many of which, scholars increasingly recognise, have been drawn from precedents outside the western cultural sphere, or from a range of different classical precedents—will be reinforced, if not redeemed, by the newest forms of knowledge storage, retrieval and organisation. It is often predicted that digital technologies, for instance, will resuscitate the library, museum and archive as viable systems of knowledge.

The institution of the library and the disciplines of philology and of art history are illuminating examples through which to explore these general themes. The library's history in different cultural spheres and traditions is entirely linked with the knowledge forms of those cultures and their development. We ask how libraries have embodied, or instead transformed, disciplinary organisation, how they have rendered knowledge systems rigid or provided resources for their mutual exchange and radical subversion. Disciplines such as philology, characterised by close attention to the recovery of original sources and identification of authorship, and art history, traditionally involved in questions of attribution as well as of connoisseurship and conservation, have long been intimately associated with the institution of the library. Both have deployed elaborate material apparatus and highly skilled disciplines, employing multiple sensory modalities, to reconstruct lost and distant worlds. Both are currently being transformed and re-invented. This dialogue will ask how new knowledge technologies, such as digital access and archiving, and new geographies of knowledge, such as those involved in institutional forms from outside the western tradition or the revival of forms from earlier knowledge systems, now affect these library-based disciplines and how they may affect their future development.

The Cini Foundation on the island of San Giorgio is an ideal site at which to explore these questions. At once a splendid retreat for intense and wide-ranging inquiry, as well as a library, art museum, and global academic hub, San Giorgio holds close links with museology, curatorship, and the many disciplines of art history and of cultural studies. It also continues Venice's traditional role as publisher and broker among diverse cultures and centre for the innovation, circulation and preservation of objects and ideas.»

### THE OPENING EVENT

Following an established tradition of the Dialogues, on the late afternoon before the first day of the seminar there was a formal opening event, aimed at promoting the Dialogue to the public opinion and the press, and introducing the intellectual experience with an aesthetic experience able to convey our emotions alongside our thoughts. For the 2014 Dialogue we proposed two events intertwined: a performance of *Black Angels*, a string quartet by George Crumb, and the reading of excerpts from “The Library of Babel” by Jorge Luis Borges. Both events took place in the New Manica Lunga, the fifteenth century dormitory of the monks of San Giorgio, recently transformed into a huge library (see illustration).



The reason for the choice and the connections between the two aesthetic experiences and the theme of the Dialogue were explained by myself in a short preliminary speech, which ran as follows:

«In tonight's event two paths intertwine: one literary, that of the Universal Library imagined by Jorge Luis Borges ("The Library of Babel"); and one musical, the Black Angels Quartet of the American composer George Crumb. They are two worlds that communicate in unpredictable ways and that bring us closer, with the power of a responsive image and of pure fantastic models, to the reflections that will occupy us in the coming days.

We will hear, on the one hand, the description of a library whose rooms multiply infinitely, as in a game of mirrors; on the other hand, a musical architecture composed of thirteen "images" that draw a symmetrical design in time and which correspond to a precise numerical plan.

Like mirrors and the infinite, mazes and libraries are some of the symbols of Borges's work. In "The Library of Babel," a story of 1941 later inserted into the famous collection *Ficciones*, the writer imagines a library made in the image and model of the universe. It comprises, he writes, "an indefinite number, and perhaps infinite, of hexagonal galleries, with large ventilation shafts in the middle, hemmed by low railings." "From any hexagon," he continues, "one sees the upper and lower floors, endlessly." The library is thus also a labyrinth, a symbol of puzzlement, an oppressive and hallucinatory construction that recalls—as Mario Praz already mentioned—Piranesi's *Prisons of the Imagination*. But the fundamental fact is that it is a total library and, somehow, definitive, because it contains all the books that can be written. It represents, that is, the sum of the knowledge and experience of men, foreshadowed in a huge final work—the library itself—which encompasses all possible permutations of the alphabet, whether sensate or absurd. Hence the formless and chaotic nature of almost all of his books: "for one reasonable line," explains the protagonist of the story, "there are leagues of senseless cacophonies." The total library is thus a Babel of books, in whose corridors melancholy librarians roam looking for a complete sentence or the catalogue of catalogues, that is, the Truth.

In an essay written shortly before the story "The Library of Babel," Borges traced the history of the idea of this total library from Democritus to Kurd Lasswitz, one of the fathers of science fiction, through Tullio Cicerone and Lewis Carroll: "One of the habits of the mind," he wrote, "is the invention of horrible imaginings. The mind has invented Hell, it has invented predestination to Hell, it has imagined Platonic ideas, the chimera, the Sphinx, abnormal transfinite numbers (whose parts are no smaller than the whole), masks, mirrors, operas, the teratological Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Unresolvable Ghost, articulated into a single organism ... I have tried to rescue from oblivion a subaltern horror: the vast, contradictory Library, whose vertical wildernesses of books run the in-

cessant risk of changing into others that affirm, deny and confuse everything like a delirious god.” (“The Total Library,” *Sur*, no. 59, 1939.)

Steeped in erudition and irony, the writing of Borges is a laboratory of intertextuality and hybridization, two qualities that are certainly in harmony with the music of George Crumb—also studded with citations, stylistic allusions and references to distant sound worlds in space and time. The musical and cultural spectrum of *Black Angels* is in fact extremely vast: from the medieval reminiscences of the macabre dance to the indications to imitate on the violin the Tibetan prayer stones, passing through that “Night of the electric insects” that opens and closes the composition, evoking the war of Vietnam. *Black Angels* is also a micro-library of musical citations on the theme of death and the fall: from Tartini’s *The Devil’s Trill* to Schubert’s *Death and the Maiden* to the medieval sequence of the *Dies irae*. It includes, at last, an echo of the Babelian confusion, since the musicians are required, in some sections, to count up to seven or thirteen in German, French, Russian, Hungarian, Japanese and Swahili.

Worth mentioning is another aspect in close relationship with the topics that this year will be addressed in the *Dialoghi di San Giorgio*: the new modalities of use made possible by technology. The score of *Black Angels* is destined for an “Electric String Quartet”, a quartet of amplified bowed instruments. The recourse to microphones is frequent in Crumb’s music, that uses them to modify the sonorous equilibria of traditional instruments, to bring the listener closer to the micro structure of the sound, through an effect similar to that of the telephoto lens of the camera.

The artificial projection of sound in space, the expansion of the range of the acoustic instruments and the consequent transformation of the perception of the sound create a situation that we can perhaps compare to that produced by digital technology in accessing the traditional sources of knowledge. The interaction between various means and the proliferation of the channels of communication are in fact modifying the classic models of reading and listening, multiplying the connections incredibly and amplifying, in ways heretofore unknown, the perception of every single detail.

The first evening’s readings and technically-enhanced musical performances resonated throughout the discussions of subsequent days. The questions raised in those debates, now preserved in this book—sparked by the diverse histories and uncertain fates of humanistic libraries and scholarship under the pressure of new communications technologies—will continue to echo for all of us who are engaged in the passionate study, preservation, and continuation of the world’s traditions of knowledge.

## NOTES

1. The previous Dialogues (*Atmospheres of Freedom: For an Ecology of Good Government* (2004); *The Architectures of Babel: Creations, Extinctions and Intercessions in the Languages of the Global World* (2005); *Inheriting the Past. Tradition, Translation, Betrayal, Innovation* (2007); *Protecting Nature or Saving Creation? Ecological Conflicts and Religious Passions* (2010); *Revisoning the World. Myths of Universal Knowledge and Aesthetics of Global Imaging* (2012)) led to the publication of the following books, respectively: Latour, B. and P. Gagliardi, eds., *Les atmosphères de la politique. Dialogue pour un monde commun*. Paris: Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond/Le Seuil, 2006; Gagliardi, P., B. Latour and P. Memelsdorff, eds., *Coping with the Past. Creative Perspectives on Conservation and Restoration*. Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2010; Fabbri, P. and T. Migliore, eds., *The Architectures of Babel. Creation, Extinctions and Intercessions in the Language of the Global World*. Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2011); Gagliardi, P., A.M. Reijnen and Philippe Valentini, eds., *Protecting Nature, Saving Creation. Ecological Conflicts, Religious Passions, and Political Quandaries*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013; Schaffer, S., J. Tresch and P. Gagliardi, eds., *Aesthetics of Universal Knowledge*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Excerpts from the Dialogue held in 2006 (*Martyrdoms. Witnesses to Faith, Cultures of Death, and New Forms of Political Action*) were published as ‘Martiri. Testimonianze di fede, culture della morte, nuove forme di azione politica’ in *Studi Veneziani*, n.s. LIX (2010), pp. 17–69.