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Back to Front Truths

Hate Library

Nick Thurston

Montaged poster poem (English version) from Nick Thurston, Hate Library (2017). Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

'Hate' means different things to different people in different circumstances. Inevitably those different communities and their interpretations sometimes overlap and come into conflict. Even if, in theory, a general concept of hatred can be agreed, real life tends to complicate its applicability as an underwriter for anything like legal action. What exactly constitutes hate speech, or indeed a *Hate Library*, is therefore deceptively complicated. Various derivative concepts are already in use to filter the kinds of expressions and intentions we might gather under the umbrella of hate speech, to establish more specific and applicable categories like incitement or dangerous speech. For example, Susan Benesch and her team at the Dangerous Speech Project distinguish hate speech, which is hateful to some, from dangerous speech, which motivates an endangerment of that group because it inspires violence against them (Benesch 2018).

Images and ideas about activist violence have been popularly fixated on Islamic extremism in the wake of 9/11, with representations defaulting time and again to the cliché of Jihadist propaganda. The growing use of dangerous speech tactics by far-right activists has been either downplayed as a traditional conservative entitlement to free speech or ignored completely because its motives seem entangled with the disgruntlement of white customers and voters. Yet hateful rhetoric and victimization methods, charged by the positive and negative effects of the growing importance of identity politics and its offshoots like call-out culture, seem to flood the expanding archives of images and text that far-right groups are creating via public peer-to-peer networks like social media feeds and web forums. There, the evidence of hate and dangerous speech is publicly available to readers everywhere, and "to make public", from the Latin *publicare*, is the root meaning of 'publish'. Yet in that same fluid digital sphere of publishing, those expressions and their effects do not seem to have become *public knowledge* in any strong sense of that phrase. How do we learn to see it, hear it, read it and so get to know it, so that we can do something about its base causes? Making offline repositories that re-contextualize such material, making it accessible to audiences who would never enter those online bubbles, is one answer this essay explores through the case-study of my artwork *Hate Library*.

I am not going to suggest that art is the solution to the very real and current problem propelling this flood, or indeed any other real world problem. This book is testament to the fact that there are lots of amazing activists and research groups who do grounded social and policy work in the

spirit of what we might call 'language critique' or even 'counter speech' – the best of them proving well aware that the status of free speech is a contested, even gray issue. For example, in Germany there is the dedicated work done by the Amadeu Antonio Foundation's Debate-Dehate project, and in the UK there is the committed anti-fascist action group HOPE Not Hate.

In the fourth section of this essay I describe some the gestures that went in to the making of *Hate Library,* which was commissioned by Katarzyna Krysiak for the Foksal Gallery in Warsaw where it was first shown in summer 2017. In the second and third sections I explain why I think radically public forums for sociable reading – for reading together, as epitomized by libraries – are something that can be made *as art* and could be one type of space where a politics of thought and counter-thought, speech and counter-speech, can be productively held together. Underpinning that discussion is my belief that the arts might be able to make some, maybe unique, contribution to broad and collective forms of counter-action against aggressively singular visions for what the world should be, by embracing the eternal contest over the concept of what art is. Rather than prescribe that art must be a mirror as William Shakespeare did, or a hammer as Bertold Brecht declared, or a speculative act of worlding as Ernst Cassirer proposed, I am interested in the idea that it could be all of those things and more, all held together by a society as a web of productive contradictions. I am invested in the idea that art is one form of culture that can hold things open, in public, as a specific, experienceable yet contestable knot of materials and gestures and concepts.

Nonetheless, the kind of art that I find particularly interesting, and of which *Hate Library* is just one example, tends to display a certain set of commitments: First, this kind of work treats languages as contextually-specific and necessary lies – not a "noble lie" in the Platonic sense, but a present mark or utterance (a gesture) whose primary purpose is to represent something it is not. Second, this kind of work understands poetics as a committed exploration of the compositional and sociological potential of those lies when stretched to the limit of their primary purpose and acknowledged as present gestures. Third, it leans on documentary modes of art-making to deploy, at one of its extremes, the relatively simple practice of reproducing and sharing documents – effectively, of publishing or re-publishing or *making language public* – as a mode of documentary practice in itself (Thurston 2018a).

The Nearing Right

Before all that, I want to begin by borrowing an observation made to me by my collaborator on the *Hate Library* project, Matthew Feldman, who is the founding Director of the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right.[1] It is a corrective that might help us to see why and how issues of right-wing populism, ethno-nationalism and even fascism are coming back into view but are doing so out of focus. As someone who cares but is not a social scientist, I have found it a helpful way of understanding why our apprehension of these ideologies remains relatively blurry because of our out-of-date figures of speech.

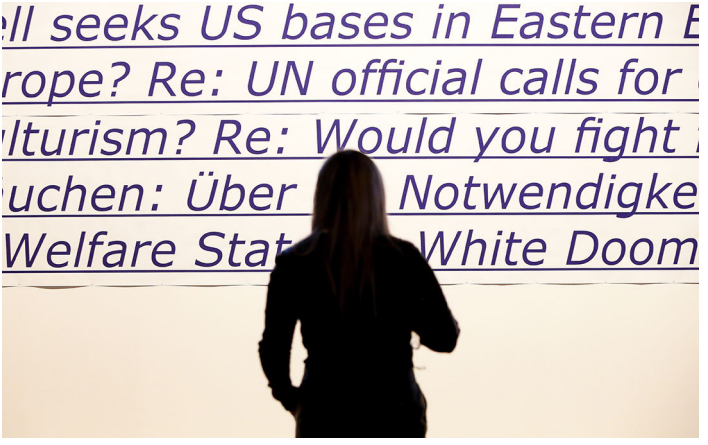
Most of us still use the spatial metaphor of a spectrum to describe political positions, stretching from a left to a right. That metaphor triangulates a center, the point between those poles, which then centers or anchors political viewpoints and discourse. All non-centrist political positions are judged by their distance from the center, left or right, from the near to the far. It is easy to forget that where the center is at any one time on that spectrum can change. The window constituting the center or mainstream is not a static point nor singular, unlike the center-point of, say, a circle. The range of ideas open for debate that a society will tolerate, what we could call the window of mainstream discourse, can move and the direction of its movement can be strategically influenced. This political center is more like the contingent concentration of power in a particular socio-historic moment and place. And if the center moves, then so too does its proximity to the spectrum's poles, left and right.

The center-ground of contemporary mainstream politics in Europe has lurched rightwards, and the radical right has become more culturally and politically active, managing to acculturate previously unacceptable extremist terms for public discourse as new norms. Simply put, the 'far right' is no longer very far away from the political center, and it is the center-ground that hedges most of our everyday experiences. We have a nearing extreme right and continuing to call it 'far' encourages a false sense

1 | Matthew Feldman has since developed this observation in *Between Alt-Right and Mainstream Conservatism: The 'Near Right' in Contemporary American Politics and Culture* (Feldman 2017) and *Islam and the Far Right: Is Bigotry Back?* (Feldman 2016).

of safe distance. I am not disputing its accuracy and value as a technical term, just flagging the risk encoded in its phrasing.

Whether the blame for that lays with a lack of liberal resilience or whatever else, we do need to adjust our metaphors. If the far right is getting closer then we should be figuring out how to see it and hear it and read it, and to say so more clearly. It should be coming into view and we should be sharpening our blurred focus. At the moment, too often, it seems we are trying to use a telescope when we really need a pair of reading glasses. We need to learn to look in appropriate ways and in the appropriate places, which means that we have to re-imagine where and how we look. This will require us to nuance a better common-sense grasp of the specific and general features of this renewed radical-right energy as well as its diverse cultures, which develop with transnational features and local differences. To do so, we need access to its manifestations, the literacies to engage with them, and for those experiences to be contextualized through informed discourses. That is a cocktail of needs that are paradoxically made both easier and harder to fulfil in our age of fluid public language and pluralized centers of power and community.



Installation detail: Nick Thurston, Hate Library (2017), Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 2018. Photo: Adam Berry, transmediale, CC BY NC-SA 4.0.

Post-Digital Publishing and Reading

We all know that the way we live is being radically transformed by the augmented interaction of digital networked technologies, which largely do their work under the surface of daily life (invisibly) while their effects and applications work on its surface (visibly or not).[2] The recent successes of the Alternative for Germany party (AfD) are a good example of how this combination works in terms of our topic: Under the surface, they have tapped in to the proliferation of user-driven online activism; and on the surface of everyday life, they have had unprecedented electoral success. I am not saying that the correlation is simple, just that digitally-led mobilization is already recognized widely enough to merit general public attention – what we might call *citizen* or even *civil* interest – on more subtle terms than those set by Cold War shock stories about Russian Fancy Bear hack attacks.

Developing that kind of sophisticated common interest – the basis for a stronger sense of what I called 'public knowledge' above – will depend in part on civil societies cultivating an appropriate level of media literacy. The ability to understand and use media, new and old, often in combination, requires a technical and conceptual understanding of how networked media work in different ways yet inter-effectively. Any such understanding would help us to realize that our literacies will only be appropriate if they are multilayered and keep tow with technological change. To take responsibility for the augmented online-offline lives we lead, we have to first accept that the "mediascapes" we inhabit are expansive and our relationships with them are active and generative (Appadurai 1990: 298–299). The concept of the 'post-digital' can be a crucial part of that toolkit because it names the socio-historical condition wherein the distinction between digital and non-digital are blurred beyond separation – after the advent of digitization yet constitutively altered by it.

To even recognize the connections between our post-digital mediascapes and contemporary far-right activism, let alone robustly critique how and why they are entwined, we have to make their interactions legible. We have to see it and hear it and read it to comprehend it. One imperfect way of doing so is to say it again yet differently, even if we disagree with its con-

2 | For further discussion of this topic, see my essay *The Mediatization of Contemporary Writing* (Thurston 2016).

tent. Saying it again is the easy bit: You repeat it, and that has never been simpler than digital capture and copy-and-paste allow. Saying it differently – so that you do not just reinforce or monumentalize its significances – is trickier: It is not, necessarily, about changing the content, but it is always about re-contextualizing both that content's legibility and the experiences of reading it that others might have. Put simply, a documentary method of saying it again yet differently hinges upon changing the mode of attention not the testimony (Weizman 2017: 80–84).

When it comes to making legible the specific interaction between networked activism under the surface of life and its effects on the surface of lived experience, I think such re-contextualizations can be relatively simple but potentially transformative. They involve shifting the manifestations of post-digital activism from the seemingly private circuits of individuals and their web-enabled devices into unavoidably social situations where the largely private mental experience of reading is done in relation to other people. Reading is, after all, a fundamentally embodied practice; and a group of readers can collectively become a (secondary and minor) body politic – a network of actors capable of developing a civil discourse based on their shared readings. We need to be reminded as we read, as Étienne Balibar so painstakingly manages, that all of our personas and avatars are anchored by our actual-world status as political subjects.[3] Reading like that keeps the content we are attending to in the same view as, in the same earshot as, in relation with, our senses of social justice, of our social contracts, and of being-with.

Reading in communal situations – what Abigail Williams calls "sociable reading" or simply "reading together" – tends to be conducive to discussing content rather than just commenting on it (Williams 2017: 3). When that content is potentially contentious, like all of the expressions that would fall under the umbrella of hate speech, those conversations may lead to civil debate, maybe even legal action, and maybe forms of counter-speech. But how and where they are read makes a significant difference. Context, form and content all matter, inter-effectively, in ways that late-modern and contemporary art can do a good job of reminding us.

3 | For the most extensive account of this connection, see Étienne Balibar's *Citizen Subject: Foundations for Philosophical Antropology* (Balibar 2016).

"Merely Civil" Libraries

Spaces for reading and discussing communally, without pressure to be a customer but with the freedom to listen and speak closely, are rare. You need a space that can hold that contentious content together and welcome competing readings – it needs to hold those ideas and people together, but also hold them open. Public libraries can be one such rare platform for doing just that, and not because of some regressive model of civic nostalgia. Rather, when it comes to the value of the civic or civil, I find Teresa Bejan's concept of "mere civility" really useful. For Bejan, "mere civility" describes a minimal and imperfect sense of respectful engagement with our conversants and what they have to say. What she calls "civility skeptics" tend to flatten the concept's range, conflating all forms of civil discussion with being polite, presuming it to be necessarily deferential or even a kind of suppression of one's right to speak freely. But what free-speech absolutists often misassume is that there is a flat equality of opportunity in public discourse, as if everyone has equal means and chance to speak freely, as if intersecting inequalities never matter and are not precoded in our languages. As Bejan points out, if there is no baseline for public discourse that can allow its participants to *sustain* an honest conversation, then those who disagree are more likely to force their position upon others and/or retreat into bubbles of the like-minded (Bejan 2017). "Merely civil" libraries could be one such space for readers where the questions of public-ness, public knowledge and shared literacies are all sustained in non-violent discourse by an open yet respectful archive of ideas – ideas that we can disagree about together.

Making temporary public libraries as artworks brings the qualities I described in the opening section – of keeping productive contradictions open – to this "merely civil" reference resource. It allows us to *compose* libraries beyond their conventional norms, focussing on the inter-connection of specific contents, specific forms of sharing and specific contextual conditions, with care for both the practical and symbolic value of our decisions. It is the speculative yet specific act of composition, of art-making, which can enable this different kind of library-making. This different kind of public library is partial, in the sense of incomplete and biased, yet open to contested engagements and readings, maybe even "merely civil" disobedience.

Hate Library

For about seven years I have been trying to bring together my literary and editorial work with my interests in the sociology of reading and public art by doing exactly this: Making temporary functioning public libraries as artworks. These artworks treat the gallery as a specific place with specific conventions, fill it with specific published holdings, and contextualize the audience's access to them in specific ways. It is the most boiled-down recipe for a public library, and very different from the quiet, neo-classical conventional civic model most people are more familiar with. These spaces should be noisy and temporary, and make unusual literatures available to be read and responded to on "merely civil" terms.

Installation detail: Nick Thurston, Hate Library (2017), Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 2018. Photo: Adam Berry, transmediale, CC BY NC-SA 4.0.

Hate Library is a public reference resource in this mold and has five components with a very particular choreography. In a ring in the middle are twelve blue orchestra stands, spaced according to the design of the EU flag with a diameter calculated according to the proportions of the room, but all turned inwards as communal reading lecterns. On each stand is one of twelve free-to-handle, comb-bound volumes. Each of these 500–700-page books is a tiny sample of the on-going public discussions between sup-

porters of twelve of the most significant far-right groups from European nations, which have been exported from their original digital platforms and re-materialized here as history books. Each of these unedited volumes pauses one far-right national conversation, repeating it offline by using simple data-gathering and print-on-demand processes.

Two of the three components on the walls repeat a different, lateral chain of conversation. The continuous lines of over-sized blue text are a single poem made entirely of buttressed hyperlinks. Each hyperlink or phrase included is the title of a thread from a public web forum on Stormfront, the world's largest white supremacist discussion platform, kept in the order they were found with only duplicated titles removed. Around the walls, encircling the history books, runs a frieze of paper columns. Each digitally-tiled sheet is one page of results returned by searching for the word "truth" across the European sections of Stormfront, ordered chronologically until three of those walls are full. Together, this frieze and thread-name poem are backdrops that signal the vexing growth of transnational cooperation between radical, extreme and far-right groups, as enabled by digital networked technology.

The final component is a montaged poster poem that occupies the fourth surrounding wall. It condenses the sharpening problems of civic cohesion and free speech at the heart of this project. Inside its frame – frames inside frames that brace one another conceptually to form what Walter Benjamin called a "dialectical image" (Benjamin 1999: 460–461) – from back to front and past to present yet big to small, are an iconic photograph of Oswald Mosley addressing a fascist rally in 1930s London and a screen grab of the British National Party's Twitter feed sandwiching a news media image of pro-EU liberals marching in Warsaw. The slogan printed over the top in translucent mirror writing, "BACK TO FRONT TRUTHS", remixes a pair of colloquial English wordplays with a dramaturgical metaphor famously borrowed by the sociologist Erving Goffman in his influential 1956 book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Through its combination of text and image, this poster tries to juxtapose the confusing overlap between the public 'frontstage' and online activist 'backstage' behavior by far-right groups and parties, as well as their mobilization of PR-friendly strategies to conceal and legitimate the beliefs that unify their memberships.

In ways that are blunt – maybe even too blunt – a contest over truths and truth-claims are at the heart of this library, all of which is obvious-

ly skewed by my subjective concerns as its librarian and composer. It is partial, in the sense of both incomplete and biased. The potential I see in this kind of speculative public library is that it eschews the supposed neutrality of the conventional civic model. It is *too public* or excessively public, from its catalogue to its cheaply reproduced contents: It hinges upon my personal concerns and my small portion of finds; and it amplifies the semi-discrete personal discussions of registered community members into printed testimonies – it exports them into testimonies said 'on the (old media) record'.

At the heart of the project is the idea of taking responsibility for a public language act as, in itself, an authorial act and a key gesture in contemporary poetics (Thurston 2018b). But that same idea is the basis for on-going international legal debates about liability: Are online platforms neutral hosts or responsible publishers? *Hate Library* tries to open up that central issue by very simply documenting just a few of stances adopted by nearing-right and right-wing fringe communities, in ways that are too partial to be conventionally civic but frank enough to be merely civil. Neither the dataset nor its collection are robust enough to be evidence for any kind of lazy generalizations. It is just a lumpen slice of real communication, lyrically selected in the spirit of the long history of documentary poetry as something that works by playing with an odd mix of literalism and allegory. For me, what readers do with it is what matters.

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