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### *Yellow Pages Catacomb*

Tobias Williams

August 9 – 31, 2013

#### Thoughts on the Telephone Book

I feel uncomfortable just looking at a telephone book. They look so dry like they are going to suck all moisture out of my body. I feel like a dried-out fish. When I think about using one it makes me anxious. Too many options and not enough information. The smell and texture of the pages make my skin crawl. If I see one in my house today I'm going to throw it away.

I'm writing this on my iPad™ while playing a freemium<sup>1</sup> game on an iPhone™ while watching cartoons on Hulu™ using a television streaming device and reading Game of Thrones™<sup>2</sup> on a Kindle™. I need a high volume of entertainment to keep myself engaged. I don't have time to go through a book and look at unrelated numbers. I don't even have time to talk on the phone; I try really hard to never talk on the phone and I can easily imagine a world without telephones and telephone books.

So if we can all start from the same premise, that phone books are dying a slow public death, then we can agree that there is a kind of *death of modernity* in the public spurning of phone book technology. The telephone book is the ultimate piece of modern literature with an extravagant absurd scope that would seem fitting for a short story by Borges<sup>3</sup> and an endless bureaucratic futility that would be at home next to Kafka's *The Trial*<sup>4</sup>. Better yet a haunted phone book would have made a great *Twilight Zone* episode. People want information that makes a difference<sup>5</sup>. It's not enough to have all the telephone numbers: we have to know *what they mean*. Sure, I can find any restaurant of any type in any city, but what do I actually know about them?

I was waiting in the IRS office in Poughkeepsie, New York attending to some personal tax problems when I witnessed a man delivering the most recent copy of the local phonebook. A slightly overweight, slightly balding man in a hawaiian shirt and wrinkled beige cargo shorts walked twenty or so feet down the hallway into the the wood panelled room of the local IRS office. He handed the security guard a small yellow book. The security guarded walked over cabinet and removed last years' yellowbook, put the new

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<sup>1</sup> *Simpsons: Tapped Out*. EA Mobile. 2012. Video game.

<sup>2</sup> Martin, George R. R. *A Game of Thrones*. New York: Bantam, 1996. Print.

<sup>3</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis, and Andrew Hurley. *Collected Fictions*. New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Viking, 1998. Print.

<sup>4</sup> Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*. New York: Knopf, 1957. Print.

<sup>5</sup> To paraphrase Gregory Bateson

one in its place and threw the old one away. I wonder how long they have been doing this dance and how long it will continue.

Tobias Williams has produced a large pillar of handcrafted skulls made from telephone books for an exhibition at Xpace to be displayed in the Project Space. Tobias told me a story not unlike the one I related above, about a palette of phone books being delivered to his girlfriend's apartment building and observing them day in and day out going nearly untouched by the tenets of this building, who must somehow be getting by without them.<sup>6</sup>

In places all over the country, people are hard at work cataloging phone numbers, selling ad space, producing graphics, pulping and printing phone books and driving around the city with trucks full of them. They are delivered to every occupied building in the city and sit there waiting for the situation to arise where they might be necessary and counting down the minutes until they are replaced with the newer fresher edition that will also wait for its death.

I imagine the catacombs below Venice that hold information about the location of the holy grail. Harrison Ford as Indiana Jones lowers himself down a hole he made in the library floor. He fashions a crude torch and lights it. Ford/Jones sweeps the torch across the lens and cinematically reveals rows upon rows of human skulls. Only they aren't human or skulls; they are phone books painstakingly crafted to look like skulls. In the tomb where there once was a knight is now the artist, toiling endlessly to convert phone books to skulls. Without the phone books Indiana Jones can never find the holy grail.<sup>7</sup>

In a different time, information that has been destroyed might have been gone forever. A map to the holy grail locked up in a catacomb might only exist in one place. Yet we understand intuitively that nothing has been destroyed by the conversion of telephone books to skulls. The directory exists elsewhere and this is just a manifestation of the same information. Williams is actually rescuing these books from sitting under a desk or a lobby or an office somewhere and getting thrown out in a years' time.

While watching *The Great Gatsby 3D*<sup>8</sup> one character says to another "give me a call, I'm in the book". I can almost hear all the North American kids under 12 (and maybe older) say in unison "what book?" Phone books seem to belong to another time and place; more roaring twenties than precious twenty-teens. I used to wonder how I ever remembered all the phone numbers in my life now that I had a cellphone. I guess I never did. I had a book to do that for me.

In Seth Price's essay *Dispersion*<sup>9</sup> he discusses the legacy of conceptual art and the influence of media on contemporary art praxis. Price fantasizes about "An entire artistic program [that] could be centered on the re-release of obsolete cultural artifacts, with or without modifications", of which he cites several examples. "[R]esistance" he states "is

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<sup>6</sup> Conversation with the artist.

<sup>7</sup> *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Perf. Harrison Ford and Sean Connery. Paramount Pictures, 1989.

<sup>8</sup> *The Great Gatsby 3D*. Dir. Baz Luhrmann. Perf. Leonardo DiCaprio, Tobey Maguire, Carey Mulligan. Village Roadshow Productions, 2013. Film.

<sup>9</sup> Price, Seth. *Dispersion*. New York: 38th Street, 2002. Web. 8 Aug. 2013.

to be found at the moment of production, since it figures the moment of consumption as an act of re-use.” In spirit with this idea is Tobias Williams pulling yellow books out of the trash and forcing them into the harsh light of the present.

-Matthew Williamson