Introduction

By Meg Miller

We started the Are.na blog at the end of 2016, not because popular wisdom would have you believe that every company on earth needs an editorial platform, but because we felt like we already, somewhat serendipitously, had the makings of a worthwhile publication. We had a built-in community of smart, articulate, and accomplished artists, technologists, and thinkers who had ideas that were interesting to others (writers), and were alternately interested in each others' ideas (readers). We also had a platform explicitly designed for collecting references, making connections, and forming associations and assemblages of thought over time, where we could see interests overlap and ideas emerge. For an editor, this is a dream: it's like being able to peer into people's minds and see the chalky outlines of a piece of writing taking shape (even if a piece of writing was never their intent). It felt like in order to make those writings real, all I had to do was ask.

When I started emailing people to contribute in January of 2017, the idea for the blog didn't extend much further than that. I explained that if Are.na was the place where you collected your ideas and research, the blog was where you could flesh out those things into an essay or an interview—not as an end product per se, but as an extension of those ideas in written form. Blog pieces often started with an existing Are.na channel, which served as a sort of built-in outline, or at least a foundational network of thoughts from which an essay could take shape. We made a channel embed so that we could put the origin channel right into the piece, which would update as anyone on Are.na added more links, references, and reading materials, creating what I came to think of as living, evolving "footnotes." The open endedness of the subject matter paired with the initial structure that a channel provided seemed to work well: Contributors took their pieces into unexpected and well-thought out directions, propelled along by a sense of real enjoyment and palpable interest in their subject matter. When Leo Shaw started working with me on the blog a year later, we began to think of the publication as a space where writers were free to follow their innate curiosities and sleuthing interests.

We published on topics like language parades (Nat Pyper), tokenizers (Shiraz Gallab), experimental comics (Shea Fitzpatrick), gossip (Sarah Hamerman), and the ways in which we might structure knowledge and learn intentionally together online. Over time, the latter topic began to feel more like a thread that ran through much of what we published, viewed through the lens of any number of different subject matter. The very first thing published on the blog, for example, was from Learning Gardens (Lukas WP and Édouard U) about the prospect of decentralized, community-led education carried out over places like Slack and Are.na. The following year, Willa Koerner wrote a long, incredibly thoughtful essay on how to illuminate private knowledge-building in public space, and how structures, tools, and interfaces might best help us in that endeavor. Toph Tucker, Jasmine Lee, and Laurel Schwulst talked about what we lose when handmade websites succumb to Squarespace homogeneity, and Omayeli Arenyeka wrote about digital tools that are "activist" in nature. Becca Abbe penned a piece on the energy consumed by the internet's physical infrastructure, and defined a new back-to-the-land movement of the digital age.

Meanwhile, Claire Evans wrote about hypertext as a narrative form through her history of a collaboration between Cathy Marshall and Judy Malloy at Xerox PARC in the '90s. In fact, several pieces looked back at proto- and early web figures, like Vannevar Bush, Douglas Egelbart, Wendy Hall, Stuart Brand, and Ted Nelson, and their visions of a more open, equitable, and creative Internet than the one we have today. And many more showed that, even at a time when much of the Internet is controlled by big corporations like Google, Facebook, and Amazon, and when the sheer magnitude of information on the web has often proven more debilitating than liberating, there are still a lot of people invested in the creative, poetic, and personal potential of the web.

In September 2018, David Reinfurt and Eric Li reached out with a three part essay that not only fit in perfectly with the ideas that people were grappling with on the blog, it also offered some context to why. The month prior, at the same time as President Trump's former lawyer and campaign manager were being indicted and convicted, respectively, as a part of the special counsel's investigation into Russian meddling into the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, Facebook announced it had identified hundreds of fake accounts on its platform attempting to spread misinformation worldwide. Earlier that year, the Cambridge Analytica scandal revealed that Facebook had played an important role in amplifying divisive messages in the presidential election. Wondering how we had gotten to the point in which a social network had taken on such outsized importance on the global political stage, David and Eric wanted to look back at how the web had taken shape over the past two decades. But mostly, they wanted to write about what they were seeing in the present mo-

ment that gave them hope for the future of the web; in their words, they wanted to write about "what it feels like right before the moment *when it changed*."

That piece gave us the impetus to publish the *Are.na Annual*, which is a non-traditional Annual in that it's comprised of selected writings about the Internet previously published on the blog between 2017 and 2019, updated for this reissue, as well as five new essays never before published. It also gave us the structure for the book–just as the three parts of David and Eric's piece look back before they look forward, we decided to divide the book into three sections: Past, Present, and Future. The sections begin with short essays by Mimi Onuoha, Gary Zhang, Danielle Robinson, and Andy Pressman that were previously published in collaboration with the Walker Art Center as a part of a series on "reinvisioning the Internet," which Are.na edited. Each section ends with one part of David and Eric's essay, "When It Changed" (also the name of Are.na's corporate entity, When It Changed, Inc., which David discovered after investing in Are.na's crowdfunding campaign).

In between, you'll find essays and interviews written by people who are less concerned with bemoaning the current state of the web as they are lifting up the people, projects, tools, and ideas that are preserving and perpetuating its humanity, intimacy, and connectedness. Taken together, all of these pieces show the kind of meandering curiosity, deep thinking, and commitment to continued learning that I so often see in the people who use Are.na, and in all of those who I've had the pleasure of editing for the blog. You'll also find plant drawings, which we asked people to submit to help illustrate the writings, gathered in gardens throughout the book.