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## Definition of ‘Written Artefact’

### 1. The definition of written artefact, its context and its limits

The suggested definition is the result of exchanges, reflections, and discussions in the TNT working group which took place during the regular meetings in the years 2021–2022. The short paper that accompanies the definition has no pretension to a systematic coverage of the topic: it has an empirical character, reflects the development of the discourse on and around the definition of written artefact, and does not pursue any ultimate limit. It only aims to provide an agreed basis for further reflection at a still intermediate stage of the research.

The working definition suggested by TNT is the following:

**A written artefact is any artificial or natural object with visual signs applied by humans.**

### 2. The need for a definition

The Cluster of Excellence 2176 *UWA: Understanding Written Artefacts: Materiality, Interaction and Transmission in Manuscript Cultures* needed to develop a definition of written artefact for a twofold scope:

- the definition answers to the need for a theoretical reflection and awareness on the declared general *object of research* in the Cluster; it must be simple, clear, explicit, and most encompassing;
- within a large and encompassing perimeter, the definition must highlight the *objects that are central*, considering that the Cluster approach sets *written artefacts* as objects of *materiality, interaction, and transmission*, within *manuscript cultures*. This allows disposing of *written artefacts* that are at the outermost limits of the research focus, even though the heuristic potential and diagnostic value of fringes and border cases are duly taken into account.

Furthermore, the use of a system of signs (a *semasiography*) is a prerequisite of every written artefact and intrinsic to the notion of *sign*: Encoding and decoding of all sorts of material signs is common to all human societies. It is helpful to explicitly differentiate between non-written cultures and written cultures. Our general scope of research and definition covers the latter. At the same time, early visual semiotic systems (e.g. palaeolithic inscriptions) should be considered as part of the development of writing systems. From a historical/diachronic perspective, such systems are peripheral to the observable written societies, the latter being at the core of our attention. In synchronic terms, the core is a writing system available to a written society and the degree of interaction between writing and non-writing in such societies defines the status of a phenomenon on the scale from the core to the periphery.

- Extreme questions to address could be, ‘is the Sistine Chapel a written artefact?’, and ‘is an intentionally blue-painted wall in a male child’s bedroom a written artefact?’; but we should also distinguish *written artefacts* and *installation*, as is used in art history.
- We look at *written artefacts* as cultural products, which appear in specific forms and contexts; it is therefore legitimate to take into account which *written artefacts* have such status in a given manuscript culture.
- This does not exclude that there are to some extent *manuscript cultures* which we can define exactly on the basis of *written artefacts*, and we can talk of the *graffiti culture* as well as of cultures of book forms, like the *codex manuscript culture*, or even of cultures of material, like the *palm-leaf manuscript culture*.

The role of manuscript cultures is essential to get rid of the aporia caused by oppositions which have to do with the development of *written artefacts* in time:

- *diachronic versus synchronic*: different manuscript cultures (even understood as different stages or layers or strata in one single linguistic or religious culture) in the course of time develop (and lose) features; features which are originally optional later become standard or even mandatory (this aspect is related to many further aspects); exemplary is the case of *paracontent*, where what is optional can become generalised and canonised (see Ciotti et al. 2018) and of multiple-text manuscripts (see Brita and Karolewski 2021); it is reasonable to assume this under the category of *marked versus unmarked* oppositions, which are decidable exclusively on cultural grounds;
- *functional versus physical* (material) definitions: at times (see again *paracontent*) we have mentioned functions, but we do not assume that is neither a sufficient nor a necessary criterion; we empirically observe what happens, and functions are by definition culture-related;
- *polythetic* definitions were also adopted.

### 3. Definition of manuscript and definition of written artefact

In broader meaning and etymologically, we can understand as *manuscript* every object *written by hand* (*manu scriptum*), even though historically the expression is related to a *book* that is, *manu scriptus liber*.

The definition of *manuscript* developed by the SFB 950 is as follows:

*A MS is an artefact planned and realised to provide surfaces on which visible signs are applied by hand; it is portable, self-contained, and unique* (see Lorusso et al. 2015).

This definition has worked well, even though border cases have challenged it and already opened the way to the broader consideration of objects or artefacts, still *portable* and hand-made, like the *quipu*, which are capable of carrying out encoding (of a language or numbers), without actually 1) being *written* in the narrow meaning, and 2) without offering *surfaces*. The same definitely happens with objects which *represent* or *are* writing (for example being modelled in the forms of letters or any other elements of a script) which (literally) are not *artefacts which are written*, so even extending the definition to include the property of being *movable and immovable* (obvious is here the case of monumental inscribed stelae or rock inscriptions), *planned and unplanned surfaces*, and removing *self-containedness* (rock inscriptions and graffiti, for example) might not be enough.

### 4. Towards a definition

Likewise, we have proposed to define a *written artefact* in a series of approximation attempts:

- a) *any artificial or natural object that has pictorial signs or representation thereof;*
- b) *any artificial or natural object that has visual signs* (keeping with the definition of manuscript), meaning that the *visual signs* or even simply *the display of visual signs* are the result of a human intention (the juxtaposition of natural objects to form a new artefact that displays visual signs also belongs in this definition), or even
- c) *a natural or artificial object with visual signs applied by humans.*

There can be little doubt that besides the material consistency of the artefact, what really counts is the result: in understanding written artefacts, therefore, one should stress that what is essential is the final effect of *evidence of visual signs* (for example, but not only, in terms of *readability*) as a culturally and anthropologically recognisable activity, beyond any consideration of whatever the material process of its production and realisation is (this also includes the case of tattoos on human beings), still remaining essential that the *signs* must be directly produced by humans.

This solves the issue of defining a *written artefact* (being an artefact ‘An object made or modified by human workmanship, as opposed to one formed by natural processes’, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*) in terms of a single object, with its own physical borders defining a single human artefact, to the exclusion of a written artefact that is the result of the juxtaposition/composition of more than one objects or single components (for example in the case of a large inscription on a monumental building composed of several distinct elements), or to the exclusion of an object where signs were applied on the material remains of a previous artefact (for example in the case of an ostrakon out of a jar fragment).

## 5. The meaning of written

We can take the *written* predicate in narrow meaning, restricting thus the definition to every artefact that has received *writing on it*: this definition includes whatever object that exhibits *writing*, in whatever form, at different levels of surfaces and in the three dimensions; but we can also narrow down the definition focussing artefacts which are *usually and commonly* written in a given culture and context, according to the *settings and patterns* of that manuscript culture (see for these concepts Wimmer et al. 2015).

The Heidelberg SFB 933 MTK: Materiale Textkulturen takes into account the German term *schrifttragendes Artefakt* (literally ‘script/writing-bearing artefact’), for an object that was already man-made before bearing writing: this definition does not work, for example, for inscriptions on mountain cliffs, as well as for other cases in which (mainly) the writing itself would be considered the artefact (like for example graffiti).

## 6. The written artefact in its making

Concerning the question of whether anything with (hand)writing on it is a *written artefact* (regardless of whether the writing is constitutive, essential, expected, or foreseen, at the moment of its creation or later) the answer cannot be but *yes*.

Yet, we cannot ignore the degree of relationship of the writing or its display (script can be displayed by subtracting material, even with a series of holes on a page) and the artefact, and establish degrees (as many as we like along a continuum) of relationship between the artefact and writing, based on the function attributed to the artefact in a given manuscript culture. It must be clear, however, that this degree is strictly and culturally determined, although it can be worthwhile to explore the presence of universal trends which determine the way in which this relationship is realised.

In the light of this approach, we can therefore definitely include a not yet-written notebook among the *written artefacts*, since it represents the first stage of the *to-be-written artefact* and statistically this most of the time happens; depending on the context (whether we want to opt for a *manuscript culture approach* or for a *single written artefact approach*), we can include it in the category of *written artefacts* or not; obviously, describing a single blank notebook, we will predicate it as *not written*; looking at it among a multitude of written notebooks will easily allow us to include it in the class of *written artefacts* in the broader meaning (whether it bears only a title or not, it makes no difference and it only stresses that the definition is gradual).

## 7. Digital written artefacts

Concerning the plausibility of the concept of *digital written artefacts*, for example a personal note created with the help of an app supporting handwriting input on a tablet computer, the note itself can maybe not be considered to be a physical object (to what extent digital data in general has/can have a physical form is another question); however, it is comparable to a ‘real’ written artefact in many ways, including, for example, visual organisation; and this can only be subsumed under the concept of *surrogate*. Yet, at variance with the surrogates like (even 3D-) images of manuscripts, inscriptions or graffiti, the essential aspect to be analysed is the way in which through *digital devices*, *analogical ways* of producing electronic data, records, and displays, are made possible and favoured by some users and applications, which reproduce effects and results of real *written artefacts*.

## 8. Cast written artefacts

Vivid discussion has also raised the case of cast objects:

In this connection, problematic is the case of ancient Chinese bronze weapons, against the threefold taxonomy of writing-object relationship developed by Simon Franklin,<sup>1</sup> which can be paraphrased as 1) objects created for writing, 2) objects created with writing, and 3) other objects that nevertheless carry writing, although this terminology is somewhat misleading because the principle of the categorisation is the function of an object as a writing support and not the act of writing, whereas it is questionable whether we are focusing more on either of the two; but let’s take the case of Chinese bronzes:

- Chinese bronze weapons had to be by law inscribed with the information about the producer. In some workshops, they imprinted a seal into the clay

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<sup>1</sup> See Franklin 2002, 16–82, ‘The Graphic environment, 1: The written remains’; see also his later developed concept of *graphosphere*, Franklin 2019.

mould from which the weapon was cast, and the weapon was thus produced already with the inscription. Yet in other workshops, these inscriptions were chiselled, meaning they were done only with a certain temporal gap from the moment of production of the actual object. But suppose we can categorise this object as ‘secondary writing’. Now when the weapon was delivered to its destination, let’s say a local government’s warehouse, it was inscribed with the name of the city or administrative unit where it was stored. This would probably fall into the category of ‘tertiary writing’. But thanks to legal manuscripts from that time, we learn that it was in fact required by law that these ‘tertiary’ inscriptions are made by the local government. This means that the object was deemed to carry additional writing from its very inception, and the artisans had to be aware of this, yet at the same time they did not have to shape the weapons in a special way to facilitate the writing process. Does this fall into the category of primary writing then? Or is it still tertiary? And how do we assess this for objects for which we lack this explicit information?

While the subsequent interventions on the artefacts can always be adequately described in terms of *multilayered written artefacts* (see Maksimczuk et al. 2023) even in the presence of complex processes of production carried out in different times, phases, and places, the case of such artefacts (typically, bronzes, but we could have a much broader set, with woodcuts, engravings, and etchings), where a once unique (hand-made) shape or mould that to some extent includes *writing*, is (or can be) serially used to form (even print) a series of artefacts, *determines a well-known case of its own*, along a continuum, at the outer limits of which we find seals, dies, and cast or minted coins.

## 9. Towards a quantum definition of written artefact?

The definition suggested by TNT:

**A written artefact is any artificial or natural object with visual signs applied by humans,** can certainly stimulate further reflections.

As a way out of a thorny question, where it appears very difficult to move beyond a very general and vague notion without a long commentary, it may be fruitful not to keep apart the definition of *written artefact* from the role that *materiality*, *interaction*, and *transmission* always play in it.

We can place these three components or points of view along an axis and measure along it their respective weight, as well as the *manuscript culture quantum* therein involved. A *material quantum* and an *interaction quantum* (inseparable from a

*cultural quantum*) are always present by definition in the creation by a human of a written artefact (*creation* presupposes *interaction*), but while *expression* (without *transmission*) is included in the *interaction*, a *communication* that goes beyond the *expression* (either as *transmission* or as *tradition* in the sense of *Überlieferung*) requires a stronger cultural component.

From this point of view, kids' written walls have their own features and they are deeply different from other written walls (in theatres, schools, toilets, prisons, brothels, and wherever we find them).

For the comparative approach, also taking advantage of the reflection carried out in the meetings of the 'Permanent Seminar on Forms of Manuscripts and Their Description',<sup>2</sup> it appears essential to have a fresh look at the forms of *written artefacts* disposing of predetermined oppositions (typically, *manuscript* vs *inscription*), exactly as one can have at book forms, and start rethinking each of them in other terms – and, from this vantage point, to have also a look at the functional distribution of each of them across cultures.

For an implementation of a definition of *written artefact* it might be useful to start to think in terms of the respective features that each of our heuristic categories requires:

- *material*: considering its physical and technological properties: surfaces, dimensions, exposures, and technical devices in places, like binding, opening and closing by rolling or folding (*'scrolling'*), and the like; portability; movability;
- *interaction*: there is for example a completely different degree of *interaction* in bronze weapons and a study notebook;
- *transmission*: related to movability, but not only, there is an almost infinite range of possibilities along which we can pose a *written artefact*: from absolute ephemerality (writing on sand) to preservation forever; from temporary use, as in the case of a school book, to the archival preservation for occasional consultation; and examples can be multiplied. Yet, the degree of *transmissibility* is correlated to the degree of readability, encoding, and copiability as well.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See now Andrist et al. 2023.

<sup>3</sup> The issue of the encoding is not new as is evident from William Boltz's book, *The origin and early development of the Chinese writing system* (= Boltz 1994), where at the beginning of chapter 1, Boltz enters into a broader discussion of a 'definition of writing' (in his view simply 'the graphic representation of speech') and provides an illustrative example of what he does NOT consider writing: 'The skull and crossbones is, to be sure, a visual sign that communicates a very specific meaning. But in that act of communication there is no unambiguous and automatic linguistic value necessarily associated with the visual sign. The same picture of the skull and crossbones could be 'read' variously, as 'poison,' 'poisonous,' 'hazardous,' 'pirate,' or even 'skull and crossbones.' Because of this linguistic variability, the skull and crossbones graph is an example of the communication of an idea directly rather than one governed or mediated by language. On this basis we would

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deny it the status of writing. To do otherwise leads to chaos: we would have to admit as writing every image, painting, graphic symbol or icon that evoked a meaningful association in the mind of the beholder.' William Boltz's definition of 'writing' can be reconnected to Aristoteles' conception, in the second treatise of the *Organon, On Interpretation* (Περὶ ἑρμηνείας), 1 (16a): "Ἔστι μὲν οὖν τὰ ἐν τῇ φωνῇ τῶν ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ παθημάτων σύμβολα, καὶ τὰ γραφόμενα τῶν ἐν τῇ φωνῇ, καὶ ὥσπερ οὐδὲ γράμματα πᾶσι τὰ αὐτά, οὐδὲ φωναὶ αἱ αὐταί· ὧν μέντοι ταῦτα σημεῖα πρώτων, ταῦτα πᾶσι παθήματα τῆς ψυχῆς, καὶ ὧν ταῦτα ὁμοιώματα πράγματα ἤδη ταῦτά. ('Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words. Just as all men have not the same writing, so all men have not the same speech sounds, but the mental experiences, which these directly symbolize, are the same for all, as also are those things of which our experiences are the images', tr. M. E. Edghill). To this can be added the issue of logocentrism (cf. Jacques Derrida's *De la grammatologie* = Derrida 1967), in particular Aristotle's quotation is discussed at pp. 21–22; see English translation: Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology. Corrected Edition*, tr. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press–London, 1997) (= Derrida 1997), 11).



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