*Evolution = the action of reading*

“Quid poetarum *evolutio* [...] voluptatis affert?”

This is Cicero asking what pleasure the reading of the poets offers.\(^1\) The term evolution comes from the Latin infinitive *evolvere* which means ‘to unfold’ or ‘disclose’ and its substantive form as in Cicero’s quote, *evolutio*, refers to the unfolding and reading of a scroll: not the act, but the action of reading.

**the turn of events in reverse**

One of the earliest descriptions of the bookscroll is by Catullus (XXII), when he criticises the poet Suffenus for using “but princely papyri, new books, new roller ends, new red ties for the parchment”, when he, according to Catullus’ poetic voice, should have used an erased sheet instead. In the online version of *Evolution*, Heldén’s poetry is continuously erased when the already written is reused in infinite constellations. But the digital *Evolution* also points towards its other manifestations, such as this book that you are holding in your hands, as well as to the live performances of the work. This use of various media manifestations where each artwork is entangled in an elaborated root system is characteristic of Heldén’s work. By tracking a dynamic relationship of materiality and meaning in different media manifestations of his *oeuvre* two features emerge: *evolutio* and *silva*. The action of reading and ‘the forest’ will here be traced in reverse.

**the pages transformed into one**

As early as the fourth century B.C. papyrus sheets were pasted together to form a bookroll. To be able to read from it one had to use two hands or let one end hang down on to the floor. The ends tended to want to roll back up so, obviously, it was not quite like today when we more or less passively scroll up or down the computer screen. No, you had to be actively engaged rolling and unrolling. To manage taking notes the text was dictated to a scribe and if one wanted to

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\(^1\) “Quid tibi, Torquate, quid huic Triario litterae, quid historiae cognitioque rerum, quid poetarum evolutio, quid tanta tot versuum memoria voluptatis affert?”, See Cicero, *De Finibus bonorum et malorum* 1.7.25. 
compare texts, a group of people read the same text aloud.² Reading events were a communal and shared activity. Naturally, the scroll had no paratextual markers as of today and reading it was a challenge even for educated people: “The bookroll was, in short, an egregiously elite product, designed to signal a high-status, educated, *cultured* register.”³ Coming from print poetry to digital poetry, there is indeed a mutual or similar point of resistance that has to be overcome. *Evolution* is not only difficult to read and grasp in its entirety, experiencing Heldén’s artworks involves the action of reading since they are often manifested in several different medial expressions: the printed book, the online version and a performance or installation. You, as a reader, are put in motion just as *evolutio* indicates and to some extent you are – metaphorically as well as physically – encouraged to move and act with and within the total manifestations of the same piece. But, Heldén’s works not only stage deeply social and shared experiences, they are also metapoetical and media historical reflections on the conditions for writing poetry.

**forming forests when in bloom**

In the Vergilian woods we find an ancient metaphor for the ‘poet’s workshop’ and this Latin word for forest, *silva*, was also used to describe a particular kind of literary composition:

“No one moves through the woods quickly, or in a straight line; something always happens here. But let us also remember – and this point is not unrelated – that for ancient poets, the woods (*silva* in Latin, *buxē* in Greek) also figured the very stuff of literary production, the timber of which poems were made, including everything from subject ‘matter’ to literary models to rough notes to the waxed wooden tablets on which most poets composed.”⁴

Heldén’s entire work can be situated in this ancient metapoetical tradition. One does not move through his work quickly. Experiencing the exhibition of *Terraforming* implicates by necessity a detour to the book and reading in straight lines is never an option. In Heldén’s work, *silva* functions not only as a metaphor for writing but his writings also derive its nourishment as well as its poetic complication from forest vegetation. In the fragments of *Evolution* that appear on the

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screen a vegetative setting slowly emerges: “woven grass, rising trees, treehouse a rain, weed, sprout, plant, moss luminous, oak tree, night blooming”. The presence of Nature is common also in Heldén’s visual installations. In the sculpture First Contact (2011) verdure grows from the book and in Terraforming (2013) the twenty-one pages displayed in an exhibition case, are perhaps soon to be overtaken by a vegetative growth that eventually will complete nature’s recycling process. A similar approach is found in The Factory (2013) where a leaf is glued to the first page of the book. In his entire oeuvre the books take over the role as nature’s undergrowth. And furthermore, Heldén’s digital works invoke the printed book – or perhaps rather its manifestation on paper – through images of vegetation. His digital works remind us of the beginnings of the evolution of the poetic medium – from stone via paper to the digital – and his oeuvre puts focus on screen vs. paper and materiality vs. immateriality. Whether print is flat and code is deep is of course significant here. But is the page really flat? Perhaps we may say yes at first but if we look, touch and feel it closely enough we sense the fibers and pores “that give every page both the texture and the depth into which the ink must sink without penetrating.” In Heldén’s work the page is never flat. Here it matters, claims a space and a particular presence. It forces us to reconsider our habituated view of paper. The page is perhaps not always what we think it is.

*and at the end of every page it should say:*
*this
also
will disappear*

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