

# ART

Art Editor  
Duncan  
Ballantyne-Way







# “Unread books are full of promise”

Ahead of the opening of the Library of Unread Books, we spoke with founder Julius Deutschbauer about the strangest confession he’s ever heard and why the weather plays an important role.

**M**ost of us are surrounded by books we’ll probably never even open, let alone read. It’s not always a lack of time; usually we cling to the hope that one day, we’ll have the chance. Since 1997, Austrian artist Julius Deutschbauer has been transforming that familiar guilt into an ongoing installation and performance. Each publication submitted to the *Bibliothek ungelesener Bücher* (Library of Unread Books) is accompanied by a revealing, though highly abstract, interview with the non-reader. With over 750 interviews and hundreds of books collected, Deutschbauer’s project is as much a conceptual artwork as it is a monument to procrastination. Based in Vienna, Deutschbauer is a widely respected visual artist, performer, filmmaker and author. His works have been featured in numerous exhibitions, such as *Nur 100 Plakate* at the Museum für Angewandte Kunst in Vienna in 2008. In 2019, he was awarded the Grand Culture Prize of the State of Carinthia.

## What inspired you to start *The Library of Unread Books*?

I think it was an exaggerated sense of possibility. If I were to ask about a favourite book, I’d usually get a dull summary. But when I ask questions about an unread book, I’m really asking about the subjunctive – what could be really imagined!

## Was there an unread book that started it all for you?

I got a lot of my questions from *Jacques the Fatalist and His Master* by Denis Diderot (1765–1780). But it could have been any book, because unread books are full of promise, and everyone owns at least one. I always ask how many times they have not read it, because sometimes it takes as many attempts to do something as it does to not do something.

## Every recorded interview begins with a question about the weather...

The most frequently mentioned book is Robert

Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities*, which begins with a lengthy weather report, as if the author were some kind of correspondent. Weather in literature is usually more than just weather. Take the German-Jewish writer Rahel Varnhagen. If her daily weather reports weren’t included in her thousands of letters, it would be hard to tell where meteorological observation ends and emotional description begins. Over time, I’ve trained myself to be a true weather expert.

## Why do you never ask directly why someone hasn’t read a book?

Questions like “Could you get lost in your unread book?” or “How would you prepare a snack for the hero of your unread book?” try to tease out the personal stories behind the books. I’ve never been interested in ‘why’ questions – they’re too teleological for me. But every conversation about an unread book is essentially a pre-invention of that book. It’s about speculation and intuition – I’m really trying to learn more about the wishes and desires of the interviewees. After all, the unread book could just as easily be a crime scene.

“  
The stories  
behind  
unloved or  
hated unread  
books are  
the most  
compelling.

## Journalist Bill Adair talks about hero-worshipping Milan Kundera and submitted his unread novel, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. For him, the unread book has taken on new meaning as he’s gotten older...

Maybe by now he’s even read it and felt disappointed, because his imagination about the book was much more exciting than the actual content. Or maybe he still packs it every time he moves, takes it on vacation, sets it down next to the toilet.

## You encourage people to bring books they hate, which is one reason Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* is so often included.

Naming a book doesn’t necessarily mean owning it. It’s bad enough that I have to keep getting it,

# Endlich Gehirngevebeentzündung



**The interviews sometimes feel like therapy sessions. Are you surprised by how much people are willing to reveal?**

One man once withdrew his interview because he had – purely out of bravado, classic man! – admitted to an affair. I would say though, that almost every interview contains deeply personal details. Sometimes, with the right questions, I manage to get the interviewees to take on a personal role within the unread book.

**What's the strangest thing anyone has ever told you?**

Nothing is often the strangest thing someone can say. The Swiss artist Markus Geiger, after naming Günter Grass's *The Flounder* as his unread book, answered every question with the word "next".

**Which story about an unread book surprised or moved you the most?**

I'm the most inattentive interviewer you can imagine. While the other person is talking, I'm focused on flipping through my catalogue of questions.

**Was there an interview that completely changed the way you see the person?**

The question: "How would you prepare a snack for the hero of your unread book?" was answered by my ex-wife with: "I don't cook for heroes."

**How do you choose who gets to be part of the project? Occasionally even celebrities take part – didn't you interview the tennis player Boris Becker?**

This isn't the tennis player Boris Becker, but the photographer Boris Becker, whose photographic work engages deeply with books and libraries.

whose photographic work engages deeply with books and libraries.

**That's embarrassing – their voices sound very similar! Changing the subject: You've installed your library in many different places. Was there one that stood out for you?**

The City Library at Mailänder Platz in Stuttgart – mainly because of the extraordinary architecture by Eun Young Yi. The library was housed there inside a cube known as "The Heart." In that space, the *Library of Unread Books* looked like a carefully curated postage stamp.

**Now the library is going to be set up in the Eben-sperger Gallery's Fichtebunker – a former air-raid shelter. How will that influence the work?**

The Fichtebunker was of course originally a gasom-

“One man once withdrew his interview after he admitted to an affair!

labeling it and then filing it. At least the Institute for Contemporary History has published an annotated edition. But the stories behind unloved or hated unread books are the most compelling. I buy every book that's mentioned. But they don't leave the library and I don't accept book donations; someone might still read it. Only if someone really wants to get rid of a book will I accept it. The spine always reads: "This book has not yet been read by so-and-so."

**What comes across in the interviews is that the books carry a kind of psychological weight...**

For many people, unread books are lined up like memorials to a guilty conscience. They can be intimidating; in that, they point to the finiteness of life. It's pretty clear to me that I'll be taking a few unread books to my grave.

Julius Deutschbauer



eter, which was converted into an air-raid shelter during the Second World War – in other words, a windowless building with no way to observe the weather. So I'm pretty sure the building will influence what books are selected. In the library, which will be up for six months, the books will be ordered alphabetically according to the names of the non-readers of that specific title. Books mentioned more than once are purchased multiple times and shelved accordingly. Visitors are welcome to take books from the shelves and browse through them – just please put them back! The Library of Unread Books is a reference library.

### Have you read more or less since starting the project?

I've been dealing for several weeks with aggressive autoimmune encephalitis. When it first flared up, I temporarily lost the ability to speak and read – accompanied by the panic that it might stay that way. An unimaginable state! Not being able to read anymore! Life would no longer be worth living!

### That sounds horrific. And are you still able to do your normal round of interviews?

Yes, and I'll be doing an interview with the writer and poet Ann Cotten, who will open the reading series in the Library of Unread Books on May 3, 2025. Under the title *Reading and Handicrafts in a Circle*, there will be talks on topics such as 'Air' or 'Stitch'. Each circle will culminate in a reading by an author. I always get volunteers asking if they can tell the story of their unread book. You can bring your own text examples to the suggested topics, as well as handicraft supplies or use the ones provided.

### Doesn't conducting so many interviews eventually become exhausting?

That I haven't become bored or tired of this project after nearly 750 interviews surprises even me. When I founded the Library of Unread Books almost 30 years ago, I thought of it more as a temporary event. And now this! And it's still fun.

### Which books appear most frequently?

After Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* (22 times), James Joyce's *Ulysses* (20), *the Bible* (19), [and] Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (16). Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* and Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* share fifth place with 10 mentions each.

### Which book would you personally choose for the library?

It has to be thick so that the shrapnel sticks in it.

### It's almost as if the books become more like objects than items to be read...

I think it's more that the books become the stories of those who haven't read them.

Bibliothek ungelesener Bücher, Ebensperger Fichtebunker. Through Dec 13



VON

NACH

#odesaberlin  
www.smb.museum/odesa

# ОДЕСА → BERLIN



Europäische Malerei des 16. bis 19. Jahrhunderts **24.1.–22.6.25**  
GEMÄLDEGALERIE · KULTURFORUM · BERLIN

## VON ODESA NACH BERLIN

# Where are the BOUNDARIES?

**From the Berlin Wall to the stairwell:  
learn about the boundaries that lie  
through Berlin.**

# BERLIN GLOBAL

**The Berlin Exhibition at the Humboldt Forum**

STIFTUNG  
STADTMUSEUM  
BERLIN

KULTUR  
PROJEKTE  
BERLIN

BERLIN  
Kulturforum  
Humboldt Forum

HUMBOLDT  
FORUM

Media partner

tipBerlin

THE BERLINER