

SPELL

ORGANIZED BY SIMIAN

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Spell is an exhibition organized by the artist-run exhibition space Simian in Copenhagen, following *Painting-as-prop*, presented by Etablissement d'en face at Simian in 2024.

The exhibition features sculpture, installation, photography and painting, bringing together works by invited artists alongside those of Simian's founders.

Spell

There is a wish that everything could somehow be held in one sentence, a few words, one word, or no words at all, just something felt. Around it move interiority, prescription and monstrosity, words becoming things, things staying opaque, a blurry condition of trial, and the rules and laws around us. Power keeps inventing language for what it was already going to do, giving its own desires the shape of law.

The exhibition takes place opposite the Palais de Justice, the overwhelming nineteenth-century courthouse, often described as the largest in the world, whose architecture was admired by Hitler and studied by Albert Speer. History is not linear, it goes and comes around, not exactly repeating, not exactly released. There is something almost Escher-esque in the staircases and halls of the building, a particular kind of vertigo.

Some sentences begin in law, others in private perception, attempting to find language, written or spoken. Something is almost always left outside the sentence. The final sentence of this paragraph has six identical words in a row, and still makes grammatical sense. Whether it makes sense to speak or write this way is more a matter of subjective judgement. If someone says, "I think that that was a good exhibition", you could answer, "I think that that that that that that comes after is unnecessary".

There are sentences that seem pleased with themselves. Oscar Wilde is perhaps the most obvious name for the polished inversion, the sentence turning itself into something quotable, more as form than as authorship: "I can resist everything except temptation" or "Every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future". Maybe these are not even really from Wilde. Maybe they have been synthesized, detached, polished again, and passed around in that strange condition where a name is still attached, but the words no longer really belong to anyone. It doesn't really matter. Quotes like these become bouillon cubes, small compressed stocks of existential flavor, ready to dissolve into almost any conversation. Like a you-get-what-you-deserve, judgement-awaits-you kind of saying, passing between philosophy, justice, law and atmosphere, waiting to be invoked in support of any claim, lowercased by common use over time: "an eye for an eye" or the karmic-sounding "what goes around comes around".

So perhaps the name is only a handle before the sentence travels away from it. An aphorism wants to be authorless in the end, or more than authored, like law. At a certain point the sentence is no longer just something someone said, but something you're inside, reality beginning to shift around what it names.

At that point, excess changes character and becomes arithmetic, or pretends to: what is the estimated total number of written characters on Earth, as of 2026, in humanity's normative and prescriptive texts, across all languages, printed and digital media, archives, official documents, books, and websites?

By normative and prescriptive texts are meant texts that prescribe, regulate, justify, or teach human behavior, including what people may or may not do, what is permitted or forbidden, what duties, rights, obligations, virtues, and social roles they have, what counts as right or wrong, and how individual or collective life should be organized.

This includes legal, religious, moral, ethical, social, political, professional, educational, institutional, cultural, and philosophical texts, such as constitutions, legislation, regulations, court rulings, treaties, declarations of rights, religious scriptures and rules, military doctrines, political ideologies, royal decrees, institutional codes, professional standards, medical ethics, school rules and teachings, child-rearing guidance, workplace regulations, customs, etiquette guides, cultural norms, platform policies and community guidelines.

The best answer is probably this. Not a precise, countable fact, but an order-of-magnitude estimate of humanity's written rule layer.

2026: Around 10^{13} – 10^{14} written characters, meaning 10 trillion to 100 trillion. Estimate: 30 trillion characters / 30.000.000.000.000.

The range is plausible based on Google's earlier estimate of approximately 129.9 million books by 2010 and Google Books containing roughly 2 trillion words, or about 10 trillion characters, before adding all websites, archives, PDFs, legal databases, institutional documents, and everything written since.

If all these characters were set in 11-point type, as on this paper, with standard letter spacing, and placed in one continuous line, and if that line were wrapped around the Equator, circling Earth like history coming around again and again, how many times would it wrap around? Or, otherwise, if the letters began arranging themselves into a single sentence, how far into space would the text extend, and could that sentence make sense and remain relevant to everyone on Earth?

Using the earlier estimate of 30 trillion characters, and assuming 11-point type with ordinary letter spacing, an average character width might be 2 millimeters.

Then, 30.000.000.000.000 characters $\times$ 2 mm = 60.000.000 km.

The Equator is about 40.075 km, so the line would circle Earth about 1500 times, keeping its hold.

Sent outward, it would extend about 60 million kilometers into space, a different dizziness, no longer contained, easier to write than to imagine.

For the letters to form a single sentence that made sense and was relevant to everyone on Earth, it would probably not work in any ordinary linguistic way. It might exist instead as something conceptual or poetic, a fantasy, a total sentence of law, care, fear, permission, duty, punishment, hope, instruction and control. But to be relevant to everyone, across all languages and lives, it would have to become so abstract that it stopped being a sentence.

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