

MATERIALITIES OF INDEPENDENT PUBLISHING: A CONVERSATION WITH AAAAAARG, CHTO DELAT?, I CITE, MUTE, AND NEURAL

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Abstract *This text is a conversation among practitioners of independent political media, focusing on the diverse materialities of independent publishing associated with the new media environment. The conversation concentrates on the publishing projects with which the participants are involved: the online archive and conversation platform AAAAAARG, the print and digital publications of artist and activist group Chto Delat?, the blog I Cite, and the hybrid print/digital magazines Mute and Neural. Approaching independent media as sites of political and aesthetic intervention, association, and experimentation, the conversation ranges across a number of themes, including: the technical structures of new media publishing; financial constraints in independent publishing; independence and institutions; the sensory properties of paper and the book; the politics of writing; design and the aesthetics of publishing; the relation between social media and communicative capitalism; publishing as art; publishing as self-education; and post-digital print.*

Keywords independent publishing, art publishing, activist publishing, digital archive, blog, magazine, newspaper

BETWEEN DISCOURSE AND ACT

Nicholas Thoburn (NT) In one way or another all of you have an investment in publishing as a political practice, where publishing might be understood loosely as a political ‘gesture’ located ‘between the realm of discourse and the material act’.¹ And in large measure, this takes the path of critical intervention in the form of the media with which you work - newspaper, blog, magazine, and digital archive. That is, media come forward in your publishing practice and writing as complex sets of materials, capacities, and effects, and as sites of political intervention and critical reflection.

The aim of this conversation is to concentrate on these materials, capacities, and effects of independent media (a term, ‘independent media’, that I use advisedly, given its somewhat pre-digital associations and a nagging feeling that it lacks purchase on the complexity of convergent media environments). I’m keen as much as possible to keep each of your specific

1. Nat Muller and Alessandro Ludovico, ‘Of Process and Gestures: A Publishing Act’, in Alessandro Ludovico and Natt Muller (eds) *The Mag.net Reader* 3, London, OpenMute, p6.

publishing projects at the forefront of the conversation, to convey a strong sense of their ‘materialities’: the technical and aesthetic forms and materials they mobilise; what strategies of authorship, editorship, or collectivity they employ; how they relate to publics, laws, media paradigms, financial structures; how they model or represent their media form, and so on. To start us off, I would like to invite each of you to introduce your publishing project with a few sentences: its aims, the mediums it uses, where it’s located, when established - that kind of thing.

Jodi Dean (JD) I started my blog, *I Cite*, in January 2005. It’s on the Typepad platform. I pay about 20 dollars a year for some extra features.

I first started the blog so that I could ‘talk’ to people in a format that was not an academic article or an email. Or maybe it’s better to say that I was looking for a medium in which to write, where what I was writing was not immediately constrained by the form of an academic piece, written alone, appearing once and late, if at all, or by the form of an email which is generally of a message sent to specific people, who may or may not appreciate being hailed or spammed every time something occurs to me.

There was another reason for starting the blog, though. I had already begun formulating my critique of communicative capitalism (in the book *Publicity’s Secret* and in a couple of articles).² I was critical of the way that participatory media entraps people into a media mentality, a 24/7 mindset of reaching an audience and competing with the mainstream press. I thought that if my critique is going to be worth anything, I better have more firsthand experience, from the very belly of the beast.

Alessandro Ludovico (AL) I’m the editor in chief of *Neural*, a printed and online magazine established in 1993 in Bari (Italy) dealing with new media art, electronic music and hacktivism. It’s a publication which beyond being committed to its topics, always experimented with publishing in various ways. Furthermore, I’m one of the founders (together with Simon Worthington of *Mute* and a few others) of Mag.net, electronic cultural publishers, a network of magazines related to new media art whose slogan is: ‘collaboration is better than competition’. Finally, I’m finishing a book called *Post-Digital Print*, about the historical and contemporary relationship between offline and online publishing.³

Sean Dockray (SD) About five years ago, I wrote this description:

AAAARG is a conversation platform - at different times it performs as a school, or a reading group, or a journal.

AAAARG was created with the intention of developing critical discourse outside of an institutional framework. But rather than thinking of it like a new building,

2. Jodi Dean, *Publicity’s Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy*, London, Cornell University Press, 2002.

3. Alessandro Ludovico, *Post-Digital Print: The Mutation of Publishing Since 1894*, Eindhoven, Onomatopce, 2012.

imagine scaffolding that attaches onto existing buildings and creates new architectures between them.

More straightforwardly, the project is a website where people share texts: usually PDFs, anything from a couple of inspiring pages to a book or a collection of essays. The people who use the site tend to be writers, artists, organizers, activists, curators, architects, librarians, publishers, designers, philosophers, teachers, or students themselves. Although the texts are most often in the domain of critical or political theory, there are also technical documents, legal decisions, works of fiction, government declarations, poetry collections and so on. There is no moderation.

It's hard to imagine it now as anything other than it is - which is really a library, and not a school, a reading group, or a journal! Still, AAAARG supports quite a few self-organised reading groups, it spawned a sister project called The Public School, and now produces a small online publication, 'Contents'. It's used by many people in many ways, and even when that use is 'finished,' the texts remain available on the site for others to use as a shared resource.

Dmitry Vilensky (DV) The workgroup Chto Delat? (What Is to Be Done?) has been publishing a newspaper, of the same name, since 2003. The newspaper was edited by myself and David Riff (2003-2008) in collaboration with the workgroup Chto Delat?, and since 2008 is mostly edited by me in collaboration with other members of the group.

The newspaper is bilingual (Russian and English), and appears on an irregular basis (roughly 4-5 times a year). It varies between 16 and 24 pages (A3). Its editions (1,000-9,000 copies) are distributed for free at different cultural events, exhibitions, social forums, political gatherings, and universities, but it has no fixed network of distribution. At the moment, with an on-line audience much bigger than that for the paper version of the newspaper, we concentrate more on newspapers as part of the exhibition and contextualisation of our work - a continuation of art by other means.

Each newspaper addresses a theme or problem central to the search for new political subjectivities, and their impact on art, activism, philosophy, and cultural theory. So far, the rubrics and sections of the paper have followed a free format, depending on theme at hand. There are no exhibition reviews. The focus is on the local Russian situation, which the newspaper tries to link to a broader international context. Contributors include artists, art theorists, philosophers, activists, and writers from Russia, Western Europe and the United States.

It is also important to focus on the role of publication as translation device, something that is really important in the Russian situation - to introduce different voices and languages and also to have a voice in different international debates from a local perspective.

Pauline van Mourik Broekman (PvMB) After so many years - we've been at it for 17! - I seem to find it harder and harder to figure out what 'Mute' is. But sticking to the basic narrative for the moment, it formed as an artist-initiated publication engaging with the question of what new technologies (read: the internet and convergent media) meant for artistic production; asking whether, or to what degree, the internet's promise of a radically democratised space, where a range of gate-keepers might be challenged, would upset the 'art system' as was (and sadly, still is). Since that founding moment in 1994, when *Mute* appeared appropriating the format of the *Financial Times*, as producers we have gradually been forced to engage much more seriously - and materially - with the realities of Publishing with a capital 'P'. Having tried out six different physical formats in an attempt to create a sustainable niche for *Mute's* critical content - which meanwhile moved far beyond its founding questions - our production apparatus now finds itself strangely distended across a variety of geographic, institutional, professional and social spaces, ranging from the German Leuphana University (with whom we have recently started an intensive collaboration), to a series of active email lists, to a small office in London's Soho. It will be interesting to see what effect this enforced virtualisation, which is predominantly a response to losing our core funding from Arts Council England, will have on the project overall.⁴ Our fantastic and long-serving editorial board are thankfully along for the ride. These are: Josephine Berry Slater, Omar El-Khairy, Matthew Hyland, Anthony Iles, Demetra Kotouza, Hari Kunzru, Stefan Szczelkun, Mira Mattar and Benedict Seymour.

4. See Pauline van Mourik Broekman (2011) 'Mute's 100% Cut by ACE - A Personal Consideration of Mute's Defunding', http://www.metamute.org/en/mute_100_per_cent_cut_by_ace

WRITING POLITICS

NT Many thanks for your introductory words; I'm very pleased - they set us off in intriguing and promising directions. I'm struck by the different capacities and aims that you've highlighted in your publishing projects. Moving now to focus on their specific features and media forms, I'd like us to consider first the question of political writing, which comes across most apparently in the descriptions from Jodi and Dmitry of *I Cite* and Chto Delat?. This conversation aims to move beyond a narrow focus on textual communication, and we will do so soon, but writing is clearly a key component of the materialities of publishing. Political writing published more or less independently of corporate media institutions has been a central aspect of the history of radical cultures. Régis Debray recently identified what he calls the 'genetic helix' of socialism as the book, the newspaper, and the school/party.⁵ He argues, not uniquely, that in our era of the screen and the image, this nexus collapses, taking radical politics with it - it's a gloomy prognosis.

Jodi and Dmitry, whether or not you have some sympathy for Debray's diagnosis, I think it is true to say that political writing still holds for you some kind of political power, albeit that the conjunction of writing and radicalism

5. Régis Debray, 'Socialism: A Life-Cycle', *New Left Review* 46 (2007): 5-28.

has become most complicated. Dmitry, you talk of the themes of *Chto Delat?* newspapers contributing to a 'search for new political subjectivities'. Can you discuss any specific examples of that practice - however tentative or precarious they may be - from the concrete experience of publishing *Chto Delat?* Also, I'm interested in the name of your group, 'What Is to Be Done?' What effect does a name with such strong associations to the Russian revolutionary tradition have in Russia - or indeed the US and elsewhere - today? I'm reminded of course that it is in Lenin's pamphlet of that title that he sets out his understanding of the party newspaper as 'collective organiser' - not only in its distribution and consumption, but in its production also. How do you relate to that model of the political press?

And Jodi, with regard to your comment about *I Cite* enabling a different mode of 'talk' or 'writing' to that of academic writing or email, is there a *political* dimension to this? Put another way, you have been exploring the theme of 'communism' in your blog, but does this link up with the communicative form of blog talk at all - or are blogs always and only in the 'belly of the beast'?

JD Is there a political dimension to *I Cite's* enabling a different mode of 'talk' or 'writing'? This is hard. My first answer is no. That is, the fact of blogging, that there are blogs and bloggers, is not in itself any more politically significant than the fact that there is television, radio, film, and newspapers. But saying this immediately suggests the opposite and I need to answer yes. Just as with any medium, blogs have political effects. Much of my academic writing is about the ways that networked communication supports and furthers communicative capitalism, helping reformat democratic ideals into means for the intensification of capitalism - and hence inequality. Media democracy, mass participation in personal media, is the political form of neoliberal capitalism. Many participate, a few profit thereby. The fact that I talk about communism on my blog is either politically insignificant or significant in a horrible way. As with the activity of any one blog or blogger, it exemplifies and furthers the hold of capitalism as it renders political activity into individual acts of participation. Politics becomes nothing but the individual's contribution to the flow of circulating media.

Well, this is a pretty unpleasant way for me to think about what I do on *I Cite*, why I have kept track of the extremes of finance capital for over five years, why I blog about Žižek's writing, why I've undertaken readings of Lenin, etc. And lately, since the Egyptian revolution, the mass protests in Greece and Spain, and the movement around Occupy Wall Street in the US, I've been wondering if I've been insufficiently dialectical or have overplayed the negative. What this amazing outpouring of revolutionary energy has made me see is the collective dimension of blogs and social media. The co-production of a left communicative common, that stretches across media and is constituted through photos and videos uploaded from the occupations,

massive reposting, forwarding, tweeting, and lots of blog commentary, and that includes mainstream journalistic outlets like the *Guardian*, Al Jazeera, and the *New York Times*, this new left communicative common seems, for now at any rate, to have an urgency and intensity irreducible to any one of its nodes. It persists as the flow between them and the way that this flow is creating something like its own media storm or front (I'm thinking in part here of some of the cool visualisations of October 15 on Twitter - the modelling of the number of tweets regarding demonstrations in Rome looks like some kind of mountain or solar flare). I like thinking of *I Cite* as one of the thousands of elements contributing to this left communicative common.

DV When I talk about a 'search for new political subjectivities' I mean, first of all, that we see our main task as an *educational* process - to research certain issues and try to open up the process of research to larger audiences who could start to undertake their own investigations. Formally, we are located in the art world, but we are trying to escape from the professional art public and address the issues that we deal with to audiences outside of the art world. We also have a very clear political identification embodied in the name of our collective. The question of 'What is to be done?' is clearly marked by the history of leftist struggle and thinking. The name of our group is an actualisation of the history of the workers' movement and revolutionary theory in Russia. The name in itself is a gesture of actualisation of the past. I was very glad when the last Documenta decided to choose the same title for their leitmotif on education, so that now a rather broad public would know that this question comes from a novel written by the Russian nineteenth century writer Nikolai Chernyshevsky, and directly refers to the first socialist workers' self-organisation cells in Russia, which Lenin later actualised in his famous 1902 pamphlet *What Is to Be Done?* Chto Delat? also sees itself as a self-organizing collective structure that works through reflections on, and redefinitions of, the political engagement of art in society.

To be engaged means for us that we practice art as a production of knowledge, as a political and economic issue - and not a solitary contemplation of the sublime or entertainment for the ruling class. It means to be involved with all the complexities of contemporary social and political life and make a claim that we, with all our efforts, are able to influence and change this condition for the better. Whatever one means by 'better', we have an historical responsibility to make the world more free, human and to fight alienation.

To openly display one's leftism in the Russian historical moment of 2003 was not only a challenge in the sense of an artistic gesture; it also meant adopting a dissident civic stance. For my generation, this was a kind of return to Soviet times, when any honest artist was incapable of having anything to do with official culture. In the same way, for us the contemporary Russian art establishment had become a grotesque likeness of late-Soviet official culture, to which it was necessary to oppose other values. So this was not a particularly

unique experience for us: we simply returned to our dissident youth. Yet at the same time, in the 2000s, we had more opportunities to realise ourselves, and we saw ourselves as part of an overall movement. Immediately after us, other new civic initiatives arose with which it was interesting to cooperate: among them, the Pyotr Alexeev Resistance Movement (2004), the Institute for Collective Action (2004), the Vpered Socialist Movement (2005), and the Russian Social Forum (2005). It was they who became our main reference group: we still draw our political legitimacy from our relationships with them and with a number of newer initiatives that have clearly arisen under our influence.

At the same time, having positioned our project as international, we began discovering new themes and areas of struggle: the theory of the multitude, immaterial labour, social forums, the movement of movements, urban studies, research into everyday life, etc. We also encountered past thinkers (such as Cornelius Castoriadis and Henri Lefebvre) who were largely absent from Russian intellectual discourse, as well as newer figures that were much discussed at that time (such as Negri, Virno, and Rancière). There was a strong sense of discovery, and this always gives one a particular energy. We consciously strove to take the position of Russian cultural leftists who were open-minded and focused on involvement in international cultural activist networks, and we have been successful in realizing this aim.

MAGAZINE PLATFORM

NT I was a little concerned that starting a conversation about the ‘materialities’ of publishing with a question about writing and text might lead us in the wrong direction, but as is clear from Jodi’s and Dmitry’s comments, writing is of course a material practice with its own technological and publishing forms, cognitive and affective patterns, temporal structures, and subjectifying powers.

With regard to the materialities of *digital* publishing, your description, Jodi, of a ‘media storm’ emerging from the Occupy movement is very suggestive of the way media flows can aggregate into a kind of quasi-autonomous entity, taking on a life of its own that has agential effects as it draws participants up into the event. In the past that might have been the function of a manifesto or slogan, but with social media, as you suggest, the contributing parts to this agential aggregate become many and various, including particular blogs, still and moving image files, analytic frameworks, slogans or memes (‘We are the 99%’), but also more abstract forms such as densities of reposting and forwarding, and, in that wonderful ‘VersuS’ social media visualisation you mention, cartographies of data flow. Here a multiplicity of social media communications, each with their particular communicative function on the day, are converted into a strange kind of collective, intensive entity, a digital ‘solar flare’ as you put it.⁶ Its creators, ‘Art is Open Source’, have made some intriguing comment about how this intensive mapping might be used

6. Art Is Open Source, ‘VersuS - Rome, October 15th, the Riots on Social Networks’, <http://www.artisopensesource.net/2011/10/16/versus-rome-october-15th-the-riots-on-social-networks/>

7. See http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/24/Chartist_meeting%2C_Kennington_Common.jpg

tactically in real time and, subsequently, as a means of rethinking the nature and representational forms of collective action - it would be interesting in this regard to compare the representational effects of this Twitter visualisation with the photograph of the 1848 'monster meeting' of the Chartists in Kennington Common, said to be the first photograph of a crowd.⁷

But returning to your own publishing projects, I'm keen to hear more from Pauline and Sean about the technical and organizational structure of *Mute* and AAAAAARG. Pauline, as *Mute* has developed from a printed magazine to the current 'distended' arrangement of different platforms and institutions, has it been accompanied by changes in the way the editorial group have characterised or imagined *Mute* as a project? And can you comment more on how *Mute's* publishing platforms and institutional structures are organised? I would be interested to hear too if you see *Mute* as having any kind of agential effects or quasi-autonomy, along the lines mentioned above - are there ways in which the magazine itself serves to draw certain relations between people, things, and events?

PvMB Reading across these questions I would say that, in *Mute's* case, a decisive role has been played by the persistently auto-didactic nature of the project; also the way we tend to see-saw between extreme stubbornness and extreme pragmatism. Overall, our desire has been, simply, to produce the editorial content that feels culturally, socially, politically 'necessary' in the present day (and of course this is historically and even personally contingent; a fundamentally embodied thing), and to find and develop the forms in which to do that. These forms range from textual and visual styles and idioms (artistic, experimental, academic, journalistic), the physical carriers for them, and then the software systems and infrastructures for which these are also converted and adapted. It bears re-stating that these need to be ones we are able to access, work with; and that grant us the largest possible audience for our work.

If you mix this 'simple' premise with the cultural and economic context in which we found ourselves in the UK, then you have to account for its interaction with a whole raft of phenomena, ranging from the dot com boom and yBa cultures of the '90s; the New Labour era (with its Creative Industries and Regeneration-centric funding programmes); the increasing corporatisation of mainstream cultural institutions and media; the explosion of cheap, digital tools and platforms; the evolution of anti-capitalist struggles and modes of activism; state incursion into/control over all areas of the social body; discourses around self-organisation; the financial crisis; and so on and so forth. In this context, which was one of easy credit and relatively generous state funding for culture, *Mute* for a long time did manage to eek out a place for its activity, adapting its working model and organisational economy in a spirit of - as I said - radical pragmatism. The complex material and organisational form that has resulted from this (which, to some people's

surprise, includes things like consultancy services in ‘digital strategy’ aimed at the cultural sector, next to broadly leftist cultural critique) may indeed have some kind of agential power, but it is really very hard to say what it is, particularly since we resist systematic analysis of, and ‘singularising’ into, homogenous categories of ‘audience’ or ‘client base’.

Listening to other small, independent publications analyse their developmental process (like I recently did with, to name one example, the journal *Collapse*), I think there are certain processes at play which recur in many different settings.⁸ For me the most interesting and important of these is the way that a journal or magazine can act as a kind of connection engine with ‘strangers’, due to its function as a space of recognition, affinity, or attractive otherness (with this I mean that it’s not just about recognising and being semi-narcissistically drawn to an image of oneself, one’s own subjectivity and proclivities; but the manner readers are drawn to ‘alien’ ideas that are nonetheless compelling, troubling, or intriguing - hence drawing them into the reader - and potentially even contributor - circle of that journal). If there’s quite an intense editorial process at the ‘centre’ of the journal - like there is, and has always been, with *Mute* - then this connection-engine draws people in, propels people out, in a continual, dynamic process, which, due to its intensity, very effectively blurs the lines of ‘professionalism’, friendship, editorial, social, political praxis.

For fear of being too waffley or *recherché* about this, I’d say this was - if any - the type of agential power *Mute* also had, and that this becomes heavily internationalised by dint of its situation on the Internet. In terms of how Editors then conjure that, each one would probably do it differently - some seeing it more like a traditional (print) journal, some getting quite swallowed up by discourses around openness/distributedness/community-participation. Aspects of that characterisation have probably also changed over time, in the sense that, circa 2006/7, we might have held onto a more strictly autonomous figure for our project, which is something I don’t think even the most hopeful are able to do now - given our partnerships with an ‘incubator’ project in a university (Leuphana), or our state funding for a commercially oriented publishing-technology project (Progressive Publishing System / PPS).⁹ Having said all that, the minute any kind of direct or indirect manipulation of content started to occur, our editors would cease to be interested, so whatever institutional affiliations we might be open to now that we would not have been several years ago, it remains a delicate balance.

8. <http://www.afterall.org/online/publications-uniaayp>; <http://urbanomic.com/index.php>

9. <http://www.metamute.org/services/r-d/progressive-publishing-system>

ARCHIVE SCAFFOLDING

NT Sean, you talk very evocatively of AAAAARG as a generative ‘scaffolding’ between institutions. Can you say more about this? Does this image of scaffolding relate to discourses of media ‘independence’ or ‘institutional critique’? And if scaffolding is the more abstract aspect of AAAAARG - its

governing image - can you talk concretely about how specific aspects of the AAAAARG platform function to further (and perhaps also obstruct) the scaffolding? It would be interesting to hear too if this manner of existence runs into any difficulties - do some institutions object to having scaffolding constructed amidst them?

SD The image of scaffolding was simply a way of describing an orientation with respect to institutions that was neither inside nor outside, dependent nor independent, reformist or oppositional, etc. At the time, the institutions I meant were specifically Universities, which seemed to have absorbed theory into closed seminar rooms, academic formalities, and rarefied publishing worlds. Especially after the momentum of the anti-globalisation movement ran into the aftermath of September 11, criticality had more or less retreated, exhausted within the well-managed circuits of the academy. 'Scaffolding' was meant to allude to both networked communication media and to prefigurative, improvisational quasi-institutions. It suggested the possibility of the office worker who shuts her door and climbs out the window.

How did AAAAARG actually function with respect to this image? For one, it circulated scans of books and essays outside of their normal paths (trajectories governed by geographic distribution, price, contracts, etc.) so that they became available for people that previously didn't have access. People eventually began to ask others for scans or copies of particular texts, and when those scans were uploaded they stayed available on the site. When a reading group uploaded a few texts as a way to distribute them among members, those texts also stayed available. Everything stayed available. The concept of 'Issues' provided a way for people to make subjective groupings of texts, from 'anti-austerity encampment movements' to 'DEPOSITORY TO POST THE WRITTEN WORKS OF AMERICAN SOCIALISM. NO SOCIAL SCIENCES PLEASE.' These groupings could be shared so that anyone might add a text into an Issue, an act of collective bibliography-making. The idea was that AAAAARG would be an infinite resource, mobilised (and nurtured) by reading groups, social movements, fringe scholars, temporary projects, students, and so on.

My history is too general to be accurate and what I'm about to write is too specific to be true, but I'll continue anyway: due in part to the seductiveness of *The Coming Insurrection* as well as the wave of student occupations beginning in 2009 (many accompanied by emphatic communiqués with a theoretical force and refusal to make demands) it felt as though a plug had been pulled. Or maybe that's just my impression. But the chain of events - from the revolution in Tunisia to Occupy Everything, but also the ongoing haemorrhaging of social wealth into the financial industry - has certainly re-oriented political discourse and one's sense of what is possible.

As regards your earlier question, I've never felt as though AAAARG has had any agential power because it's never really been an agent. It didn't speak or

make demands; it's usually been more of a site of potential or vision of what's coming (for better or worse) than a vehicle for making change. Compared to publishing bodies, it certainly never produced anything new or original, rather it actively explored and exploited the affordances of asynchronous, networked communication. But all of this is rather commonplace for what's called 'piracy,' isn't it?

Anyway, yes, some entities did object to the site - AAAARG was ultimately taken down by the publisher Macmillan over certain texts, including *Beyond Capital*.

NT AAAARG's name has varied somewhat over time. Can you comment on this? Does its variability relate at all to the structure and functionality of the web?

SD When people say or write the name they have done it in all kinds of different ways, adding (or subtracting) As, Rs, Gs, and sometimes Hs. It's had different names over time, usually adding on As as the site has had to keep moving. Since this perpetual change seems to be part of the nature of the project, my convention has been to be deliberately inconsistent with the name.

I think one part of what you're referring to about the web is the way in which data moves from place to place in two ways - one is that it is copied between directories or computers; and the other is that the addressing is changed. Although it seems fairly stable at this point, over time it changes significantly with things slipping in and out of view. We rely on search engines and the diligence of website administrators to maintain a semblance of stability (through 301 redirects, for example) but the reality is quite the opposite. I'm interested in how things (files or simply concepts) circulate within this system, making use of both visibility and invisibility. Another related dimension would be the ease of citation, the ways in which both official (executed internally) and unofficial (accomplished from the outside) copies of entire sites are produced and eventually confront one another. I've heard of people who have backed up the entirety of AAAARG, some of whom even initiate new library projects (such as Henry Warwick's Alexandria project). The inevitable consequence of all of this seems to be that the library manifests itself in new places and in new ways over time - sometimes with additional As, but not always.

EXPERIMENTING WITH MEDIA FORM

NT The expression 'independent media' may still have some tactical use to characterise a publishing space and practice in distinction from commercial media, but it's clear from what Pauline and Sean say here that *Mute* and AAAARG have moved a long way from the analytic frameworks of media 'independence' as some kind of autonomous or liberated media space. We might characterise these projects more as 'topological' media forms: neither

inside nor outside institutions, but emergent from the interaction of diverse platforms, political conjunctures, contributors, readers, concepts, and financial or legal structures. Media projects in this image of topology would be immanent to those diverse material relations, not delimited and autonomous bodies carved out from them. (Not, of course, that this kind of distributed and mutable structure in itself guarantees progressive political effects.)

I'd like to continue with this discussion of media form and consider in more detail some specific instances of experimentation with publishing practice. It seems to me that it is significant that most of you have a relation to art practice. The work that Humanities researchers and political activists generate with poststructuralist or Marxist theory should necessarily be self-critical of its textual and media form, but it frequently fails to be so. Whereas reflexive approaches would seem to be less easily avoided in art practice, at least once it engages with the same body of theory - shoot me down if that's naive! In any case, I would venture that experimentation in publishing form has a central place in the media projects we're discussing. Alessandro, you make that point, above, that *Neural* has 'always experimented with publishing in various ways'. Can you describe particular examples? It would be very interesting to hear from you about *Neural* in this regard, but also about your art projects 'Amazon Noir' and 'Face to Facebook'.

AL *Neural* started surrounded by the thrills of the rising global 'telematic' networks in 1993, reflecting an interest in intertwining culture and technology with publishing (either cyberpunk science fiction, internet artworks, or hacker technologies and practices) in both print and digital media. So, printing a magazine about digital art and culture in that historical moment meant to be surrounded by stimuli that pushed beyond the usual structural design forms and conceptual paradigms of publishing. After almost two decades we can recognise also that that time was the beginning of the most important mutation of publishing, through its new networked, screen-based and real time dimensions. And the printed page started also to have a different role in the late 2000s, but this role is still to be extensively defined.

At that time, in the mid-1990s, *Neural* tried to experiment with publishing through different perspectives. First, aesthetically: the page numbering was strictly in binary numbers, just zeros and ones, even if the printer started to complain that this was driving him crazy. But also sensorially: we referred to optical art, publishing large 'optical' artworks in the centrefold; and we published 'stereograms' apparently rude black and white images, that when viewed from a different angle revealed a three-dimensional picture, tricking the readers' eyes and drawing them into a new visual dimension for a while. And finally, politically: in issue #18 we published a hacktivist fake, a double page of fake stickers created by the Italian hacker laboratories' network. These fake stickers sarcastically simulated the real ones that are mandatory on any book or CD/DVD sold in Italy, because of the strict law supporting the

national Authors' and Musicians' Society (SIAE). On the ones we published the 'Unauthorized Duplication Prohibited' sentence was replaced by: 'Suggested Duplication on any Media'.

As another example, in issue #30 we delivered 'Notepad' to all our subscribers - an artwork by the S.W.A.M.P. duo. It was an apparently ordinary yellow legal pad, but each ruled line, when magnified, reveals itself to be 'microprinted' text enumerating the full names, dates, and locations of each Iraqi civilian death on record over the first three years of the Iraq War. And in issue #40 we've printed and will distribute in the same way a leaflet of the Newstweek project (a device which hijacks online major news websites, changing them while you're accessing internet on a wireless network) that at first glance seems to be a classic telco corporate leaflet ad. All these examples try to expand the printed page to an active role that transcends its usual mode of private reading.

With these and other experiments in publishing, we've tried to avoid the *ephemerality* that is the norm in 'augmented' content, where it exists just for the spectacular sake of it. Placing a shortcut to a video through a QR code can be effective if the connection between the printed resource and the online content is not going to disappear soon, otherwise the printed information will remain but the augmentation will be lost. And instead of augmenting the experience in terms of entertainment, I'm much more in favour of triggering specific actions (like supporting the online processes) and changes (like taking responsibility for activating new online processes) through the same smartphone-based technologies.

Another feature of our experimentation concerns the archive. The printing and distribution of paper content has become an intrinsic and passive form of archiving, when this content is preserved somewhere by magazine consumers, in contrast to the potential disposability of online content which can simply disappear at any minute if the system administrator doesn't secure enough copies. This is why I've tried to develop both theoretically and practically the concept of the 'distributed archive', a structure where people personally take the responsibility to preserve and share printed content. There are already plenty of 'archipelagos' of previously submerged archives that would emerge, if collectively and digitally indexed, and shared with those who need to access them. I'm trying to apply this to *Neural* itself in the 'Neural Archive' project, an online database with all the data about the publications received by *Neural* during the years, which should be part of a larger network of small institutions, whose final goal would be to test and then formulate a viable model to easily build and share these kind of databases.

Turning to my projects outside of *Neural*, these social and commercial aspects of the relation between the materiality of the printed page and the manipulability of its digital embodiment were foregrounded in *Amazon Noir*, an artwork which I developed with Paolo Cirio and Ubermorgen.¹⁰ This work explored the boundaries of copyrighting text, examining the intrinsic

10. <http://amazon-noir.com/>

technological paradox of protecting a digital text from unauthorised copying, especially when dealing with the monstrous amount of copyrighted content buyable from Amazon.com. Amazon features a powerful and attractive marketing tool called 'Search Inside the Book' which allows potential customers to search the entire text of a book; Amazon Noir merely exploited this mechanism by stretching it to its own logical conclusion. The software script we used obtained the entire text and then automatically saved it as a PDF file: once we had established the first sentence of the text, the software then used the last words of this sentence as a search term for retrieving the first words of the next sentence. By reiterating this process (a total of 2,000 to 3,000 queries for an average book) and automatically reconstructing the fragments, the software ended up collecting the entire text. In order to better visualise the process, we created an installation: two overhead projectors, displaying the project's logo and a diagram of the internal workings of our software, as well as a medical incubator containing one of the 'stolen' (and digitally reprinted) books. The book we chose to 'steal' was (of course) *Steal This Book*, the American 1970s counterculture classic by the activist Abbie Hoffman. In a sense, we literally 're-incarnated' the book in a new, mutated physical form. But we also put up a warning sign near the incubator:

The book inside the incubator is the physical embodiment of a complex Amazon.com hacking action. It has been obtained exploiting the Amazon 'Search Inside The Book' tool. Take care because it's an illegitimate and premature son born from the relationship between Amazon and Copyright. It's illegitimate because it's an unauthorized print of a copyright-protected book. And it's premature because the gestation of this relationship's outcome is far from being mature.

We asked ourselves: what's the difference between digitally scanning the text of a book we already own, and obtaining it through Amazon Noir? In strictly conceptual terms, there is no difference at all, other than the amount of time we spent on the project. We wished to set up our own Amazon, definitively circumventing the confusion of endless purchase-inducing stimuli. So we stole the hidden and disjointed connections between the sentences of a text, to reveal them for our own amusement and edification; we stole the digital implementation of synaptic connections between memories (both human and electronic) created by a giant online retailer in order to amuse and seduce us into compulsive consumption; we were thieves of memory (in a McLuhanian sense), stealing for the right to remember, the right to independently and freely construct our own physical memory.

Finally, in *Face to Facebook* (developed again with Paolo Cirio and part of the 'Hacking Monopolism' trilogy together with Amazon Noir and Google Will Eat Itself) we 'stole' 1 million Facebook profiles' public data, filtering them through their profile pictures with face-recognition software, and then

posted all the filtered data on a custom-made dating website, sorted by their facial expression characteristics.¹¹ In the installation we produced, we glued more than 1,700 profile pictures on white-painted square wood panels, and projected also the software diagram and an introductory video. Here the 'printed' part deals more with materializing 'stolen' personal online information. The 'profile pictures' treated as public data by Facebook, and scraped with a script by Paolo and me, once properly printed are a terrific proof of our online fragility and at the same time of how 'printing' is becoming a contemporary form of 'validation'. In fact we decided to print them on the type of photographic paper once used for passport pictures (the 'silk' finish). The amazing effect of all these faces together was completely different when visualised in a video ('overwhelming' when zooming in and out), printed with ink-jet printers ('a huge amount of recognisable faces'), and on its proper 'validating' medium, photographic paper (giving the instant impression that 'all those people are real'). What does it mean when the picture (with your face) with which you choose to represent yourself in the potential arena of 700 Millions Facebook users is printed, re-contextualised, and exhibited somewhere else, with absolutely no user control? Probably, it reinforces the concept that print still has a strong role in giving information a specific status, because more than five centuries of the social use of print have developed a powerful instinctive attitude towards it.

POST-DIGITAL PRINT AND THE FUTURE OF THE BOOK

NT What you say here Alessandro about *Neural's* concern to 'expand the printed page' is very suggestive of the possibilities of print in new media environments. Could you comment more on this theme by telling us how you understand 'post-digital print', the topic of your current book project?

AL *Post-Digital Print: the Mutation of Publishing since 1894* is the outcome of quite extensive research that I carried out at the Willem De Kooning Academy as guest researcher in the Communication Design program run by Florian Cramer. The concept behind it is to understand both historically and strategically the new role of print in the 2010s, dealing with the prophets of its death and its digital competitors, but also its history as something of a perfect medium, the oldest still in use and the protagonist of countless media experiments, not to mention its possible evolution and further mutations. The concept of post-digital print can be better explained through a description of a few of its chapters. In the first chapter, I analyze ten different moments in history when the death of paper was announced (before the digital); of course, it never happened, proving that perhaps even current pronouncements will prove to be mistaken (by the way, the first one I've found dates back to 1894, which explains the subtitle). In the second chapter I've tried to track a history of how avant-garde and underground movements have used print

tactically or strategically, reflecting or anticipating its evolutions. In the third chapter I go deeper in analyzing the ‘mutation’ of paper in recent years, and what ‘material paper represents in immaterial times’. And the sixth chapter addresses the basis on which print can survive as an infrastructure and a medium for sharing content and experience, and also as a way of generating collective practice and alliances. Beyond this book, I’m continuing to research the relationship between print and online in various forms, especially artistic ones. Personally, I think this relationship will be one of the pivotal media arenas of change (and so of new potential territories for experimentation and innovation) in the coming years.

NT Taking a lead from some of these points, I’d like to turn to the material forms of the book and the archive. Sensory form has historically played a key role in constituting the body, experience, and metaphors of the book and the archive. For both Adorno and Mallarmé, the physical and sensory properties of the book are key to its promise, which lies to a large degree in its existence as a kind of ‘monad’. For Adorno, the book is ‘something self-contained, lasting, hermetic - something that absorbs the reader and closes the lid over him, as it were, the way the cover of the book closes on the text’.¹² And for Mallarmé, ‘The foldings of a book, in comparison with the large-sized, open newspaper, have an almost religious significance. But an even greater significance lies in their thickness when they are piled together; for then they form a tomb in miniature for our souls’.¹³ I find these to be very appealing characterisations of the book, but today they come with a sense of nostalgia, and the strong emphasis they place on the material form and physical characteristics of the printed book appears to leave little room for a digital future of this medium. Sean, I want to ask you two related questions on this theme. What happens to the sensory properties of paper in AAAARG - are they lost, reconfigured, replaced with other sensory experiences? And what happens to the book in AAAARG, once it is digitised and becomes less a self-enclosed and autonomous object than, as you put it, part of an ‘infinite resource’?

SD It is a romantic way of thinking about books - and a way that I also find appealing - but of course it’s a characterisation that comes after the fact of the book; it’s a way that Adorno, Mallarmé, and others have described and generalised their own experiences with these objects. I see no reason why future readers’ experiences with various forms of digital publishing won’t cohere into something similar, feelings of attachment, enclosure, impenetrability, and so on.

AAAARG is stuck in between both worlds. So many of the files on the site are images of paper (usually taken with a scanner, but occasionally a camera) packaged in a PDF. You can see it in the underlines, binding gradients, folds, stains, and tears; and you can often, but not always, see the labour and technology involved in making the transformation from physical to digital.

12. Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Bibliographical Musings’ in *Notes to Literature Volume 2*, Shierry Weber Nicholsen (trans), Rolf Tiedemann (ed), New York, Columbia University Press, 1992, p20.

13. Stéphane Mallarmé, ‘The Book: A Spiritual Instrument’, Bradford Cook (trans), in Hazard Adams (ed), *Critical Theory Since Plato*, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1971, p691.

So one's experience is often to be perhaps more aware of the paper that is not there. Of course, there are other files which have completely divorced themselves from any sense of the paper, whether because they are texts that are native to the digital - or because of a particularly virtuosic scanning job.

There are problems with the nostalgia for books - a nostalgia that I am most certainly stricken with. We can't take the book object out of the political economy of the book, and our attempts to recreate 'the book' in the digital will very likely also import legal and economic structures that ought to be radically reformulated or overthrown. In this context, as in others, there seem to be a few ways that this is playing out, simultaneously: one is the replication of existing territories and power structures by extending them into the digital; another, in the spirit of the California Ideology, would be that attempt to use the digital as a leading edge in reshaping the public, of subsuming it into the market; and a third could be trying to make the best of this situation, with access to tools and each other, in order to build new structures that are more connected to those contesting the established and emerging forces of control.

And what's more, it seems like the physical book itself is becoming something else - material is recombined and re-published and re-packaged from the web, such that we now have many more books being published each year than ever before - perhaps not as self-enclosed as it was for Adorno. I don't want to make equivalences between the digital and physical book - there are very real physiological and psychical differences between holding ink on paper versus holding a manufactured hard drive, coursing with radio waves and emitting some frequency of light - but I think the break is really staggered and imperfect. We'll never really lose the book and the digital isn't confined to pixels on a screen.

WHATEVER BLOGGING

NT Turning to social media, I want to ask Jodi to comment more on the technical structures of the blog. In *Blog Theory* you propose an intriguing concept of 'whatever blogging' to describe the association of blogs with the decline of symbolic efficiency, as expressions are severed from their content and converted into quantitative values and graphic representations of communication flow.¹⁴ The more we communicate, it seems, the more *what* is communicated tends toward abstraction, and the evacuation of consequence save for the perpetuation of communication. Can you describe the technical features and affective qualities of this process, how the field of 'whatever blogging' is constituted? And how might we oppose these tendencies? Can we reaffirm writing as deliberation and meaning? Are there any ways to make progressive use of the 'whatever' field?

14. Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2010.

JD The basic features of blogs include posts (which are time-stamped,

permalinked, and archived), comments, and links. These features aren't necessarily separate insofar as posts have permalinks and can themselves be comments; for example, that a specific blog has disabled its comment feature doesn't preclude the possibility of a discussion arising about that blog elsewhere. Two further features of blogs arise from their settings: hits (that is, viewers, visitors) and a kind of generic legibility, or, what we might call the blog form (the standard visual features associated with but not exclusive to popular platforms like Blogger and Typepad). I bring up the latter point since so much of online content is now time-stamped, permalinked, and archived, yet we would not call it a blog (the *New York Times* website has blogs but these are sub-features of the site, not the site itself). All these features enable certain kinds of quantification: bloggers can know how many hits we get on a given day (even minute by minute), we can track which posts get the most hits, which sites send us the most visitors, who has linked to us or re-blogged our content, how popular we are compared to other blogs, etc.

Now, this quantification is interesting because it accentuates the way that, regardless of its content, any post, comment, or link is a contribution; it is an addition to a communicative field. Half the visitors to my blog could be right-wing bad guys looking for examples of left-wing lunacy - but each visitor counts the same. Likewise, quantitatively speaking, there is no difference between comments that are spam, from trolls, or seriously thoughtful engagements. Each comment counts the same (as in post A got 25 comments; post B didn't get any). Each post counts the same (an assumption repeated in surveys of bloggers - we are asked how many times we post a day). Most bloggers who blog for pay are paid on the basis of the two numbers: how many posts and how many comments per post. Whether the content is inane or profound is irrelevant.

The standardisation and quantification of blogging induce a kind of contradictory sensibility in some bloggers. On the one hand, our opinion counts. We are commenting on matters of significance (at least to someone - see, look, people are reading what we write! We can prove it; we've got the numbers!). Without this promise or lure of someone, somewhere, hearing our voice, reading our words, registering that we think, opine, and feel, there wouldn't be blogging (or any writing for another). On the other hand, knowing that our blog is one among hundreds of millions, that we have very few readers, and we can prove it - look, only 100 hits today and that was to the kitty picture - provides a cover of anonymity, the feeling that one could write absolutely anything and it would be okay, that we are free to express what we want without repercussion. So bloggers (and obviously I don't have in mind celebrity bloggers or old-school 'A-list bloggers') persist in this affective interzone of unique importance and liberated anonymity. It's like we can expose what we want without having to deal with any consequences - exposure without exposure. Thus, a few years ago there were all sorts of stories about people losing their jobs because of what they wrote on their

blogs. Incidentally, the same phenomenon occurs in other social media - the repercussions of indiscrimination that made their way to Facebook.

The overall field of social media, then, relies on this double sense of exposing without being exposed, of being unique but indistinguishable. What registers is the addition to the communicative field, the contribution, not the content, not the meaning. Word clouds are great examples here - they are graphic representations of word frequency. They can say how many times a word is used, but not the context or purpose or intent or connotation of its use. So a preacher could use the word 'God' as many times as the profaner; the only difference is that the latter also uses the words 'damn it.'

Can this field where whatever is said counts the same as any other thing that is said be used progressively? Not really; I mean only in a very limited way. Sure, there are spam operations and ways to try to manipulate search engine results. But if you think about it, most critical work relies on a level of meaning. Satire, irony, comedy, deconstruction, *détournement* all invoke a prior meaningful setting into which they intervene. Rather than 'progressive use of the whatever field' I would urge a more direct and decisive assertion of collective political will, something that cuts through the bland whateverness without commitments to recognise that this is nothing but the maintenance of the malleable inhabitants of capitalism when what is really needed is the discipline of communist collectives.

NEWSPAPER AS PEDAGOGY AND MONUMENT

NT Dmitry, the Chto Delat? group produces work across a range of media - film, radio, performance, installation, website, blog - but the media form of the 'newspaper' has an especially significant place for you: Chto Delat? began its collective work through the production of a newspaper and has continued to produce newspapers as a key part of its exhibitions and interventions. Many will argue that the newspaper is now a redundant or 'retro' media form, given the superior distributive and interactive capacities of digital media. But such assessments fail to appreciate the complex form and functionality of the newspaper, which is not merely a means of information distribution. It is noteworthy in this regard that the Occupy movement (which has been a constant throughout this conversation) has been producing regular printed newspapers from the precarious sites of occupation, when an exclusive focus on new media might have been more practical.

So, I would like to ask you some questions about the appeal of the media form of the newspaper. First, Chto Delat?'s emphasis on self-education is influenced by Paulo Freire, but on this theme of the newspaper it is the pedagogical practice of Jean Oury and Félix Guattari that comes to my mind. For Oury and Guattari (building on work by Célestin Freinet on 'institutional pedagogy') the collectively produced publication works as a therapeutic 'third object', a mediator to draw out, problematise, and transversalise social and

libidinal relations among groups, be they psychiatric associations or political collectives. Gary Genosko has published some fascinating work on this aspect of Guattari's praxis, and it comes across clearly in the Dosse biography of Deleuze and Guattari.¹⁵ With this question of group pedagogy in mind, what is the role of the newspaper in the self-organisation and self-education practice of Chto Delat?

15. Gary Genosko, *Félix Guattari: A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge, Pluto Press, 2009; Genosko, 'Busted: Félix Guattari and the *Grande Encyclopédie des Homosexualités*', *Rhizomes* 11/12 (2005/6), <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue11/genosko.html>; François Dosse, *Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: Intersecting Lives*, D. Glassman (trans), New York, Columbia University Press, 2010.

DV The interrelations between all forms of our activity is very important, Chto Delat? is conceived as an integral composition: we do research on a film project and some materials of this research get published in the newspaper and in our on-line journal (which is on-line extension of the newspaper); we start to work on the publication and its outcomes inspire work on a new installation; we plan an action and build a collaboration with new actors and it triggers a new publication and so on. But in general, the newspaper is used as a medium of contextualisation and communication with the broader community, and as an interventionist pressure on mainstream cultural production.

I did not know about Guattari's ideas here, but I totally agree. Yes, for us the newspaper is also a 'third object' which carries a therapeutic function - when it is printed despite all the impossibilities of making it happen, after all the struggle around content, finance, and so on, the collective gets a mirror which confirms its own fragile and crisis-ridden existence.

NT If we turn to the more physical and formal qualities, does the existence of the newspaper as an 'object' have any value or significance to you? Chto Delat? has made enticing engagements with the Constructivist project - you talk of 'actualising' Constructivism in new circumstances. To that end, I wonder if the newspaper may be a way of actualising the Constructivist theme of the object as 'comrade', as Rodchenko put it, where the revolution is the liberation of the human *and* the object, what Arvatov called the 'intensive expressiveness' of matter?¹⁶ Another way of thinking this theme of the newspaper as a political object is through what Deleuze and Guattari call a 'monument', a compound of matter and sensation that 'stands up by itself', independent of its creator, as a product of the event and a projection into the future:

the monument is not something commemorating a past, it is a bloc of present sensations that owe their preservation only to themselves and that provide the event with the compound that celebrates it. The monument's action is not memory but fabulation ... [I]t confides to the ear of the future the persistent sensations that embody the event: the constantly renewed suffering of men and women, their recreated protestations, their constantly resumed struggle.¹⁷

DV Yes, the materiality (the 'weight') of newspaper is really important. You should carry it for distribution, pass it from hand to hand, there is an

16. Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism*, London, The MIT Press, 2005; Nicholas Thoburn, 'Communist Objects and the Values of Printed Matter', *Social Text* 28, 2 (2010): 1-30.

17. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* G. Burchell and H. Tomlinson (trans), London, Verso, 1994, pp167-8, pp176-7.

important *pressure* of piles of newspapers stocked in the exhibition halls as take-away artifacts (really monumental), or used as a wallpaper for installations. We love these qualities, and the way they organise a routine communication inside the group: ‘Hi there! Do you have newspapers to distribute at the rally tomorrow? How many? Should we post a new batch?’ At a more subjective level, I love to get the freshly printed newspaper in my hands; yes, it is a drug, particularly in my case, when all the processes of production come through my hands - first the idea, then editorial communication, lay-out, graphics, finance, and then print.

PRINT/ONLINE

NT On this theme, I want to ask Pauline if you can comment on the place of printed paper in the history and future of *Mute*? I have in mind your experiments with paper stock, the way paper interfaces with digital publishing platforms (or fails to), the pleasures, pains, and constraints of producing a printed product in the digital environment.

PvMB All this talk of newspapers is making me very nostalgic. It was the first print format that we experimented with, and I agree it’s one of the most powerful - both in terms of the historical resonances it can provoke, and in terms of what you can practically do with it (which includes distributing editorial to many people for quite low costs, being experimental with lay-out, type, images; and yes, working through this ‘third object’, with all that that might imply). The Scottish free-circulation newspaper, *Variant*, is testimony to this, having hung onto the format much more doggedly than *Mute* did, and continuing to go strong, in spite of all the difficult conditions for production that all of us face.¹⁸ There again, where *Variant* has shown the potential power and longevity of freely distributed critical content (which they also archive fully on the web), the rise and rise of free newspapers - wherein editorial functions as nothing more than a hook for advertising, targeted at different ‘segments’ of the market – shouldn’t be forgotten either, since this might represent the dominant function this media form presently holds.

I shouldn’t take too much time talking about the specifics here, but the shelf-display-and-sale model of distribution which *Mute* chose for its printed matter - on the eve of the assault this suffered from free online editorial - landed us in some kind of Catch-22 which, nearly two decades later, we still can’t quite figure the exit to. Important coordinates here are: the costs involved in developing high quality editorial (research, commissioning, layout, proofing, printing; but also the maintenance of an organisation with - apart from staff - reliable systems for admin, finance, legal, a constitutional apparatus); the low returns you get on ‘specialist’ editorial via shelf-sales (particularly if you can’t afford sustained Marketing/Distribution, and the offline distribution infrastructure itself starts to crumble under the weight of

18. Since this conversation took place, *Variant* has lost its Creative Scotland funding and has (temporarily, one hopes) suspended publication. See <http://www.variant.org.uk/publication>

online behemoths like Amazon); and then finally the lure to publish online, borne of promises of a global audience and the transcendence of a lot of those difficulties.

Mute's original newspaper format constituted an art-like gesture: it encapsulated many things we wanted to speak about, but in 'mute', visual, encoded form - epitomised by the flesh tones of the FT-style newspaper, which insisted on the corporeal substrate of the digital revolution, as well as its intimate relationship to speculation and investment finance (a condition, we sought to infer, that it shared with all prior communications and infrastructural revolutions). Thereafter, our experiments with paper were an engagement with the 'Catch-22' described above, whose negative effects we nevertheless perceived as mere obstacles to be negotiated, as we continued hopefully, stubbornly, to project a global community of readers we might connect with and solidarities we might forge - as everyone does, I guess.

We didn't want to change our editorial to suit the market, so instead focused on the small degrees of freedom and change afforded to us by its carrier, i.e. the varying magazine formats at our disposal (quarterly/biannual, small/large, full colour/mono, lush/ziney). In retrospect, we may have overplayed the part played by desire in reading and purchasing habits (in the sense that we thought we could sway potential purchasers to support *Mute* by plying them with ever more 'appealing' objects). Be that as it may, it did push us to mine this liminal zone between paper and pixel that Sean evokes so well - particularly, I'd say, in the late '90s/early 2000s, when questions over the relationship between the 'real' and 'virtual' raged to nigh obsessive levels, and magazines' visual languages also grappled with their representation, or integration.

Where we stand now, things are supposed to have stabilised somewhat. The medial and conceptual hyper experimentation triggered by projected 'digital futures' has notionally died down, as mature social media and digital publishing platforms are incorporated into our everyday lives, and the behaviours associated with them normalised (the finger flicks associated with the mobile or tablet touch screen, for example). Somewhere along the line you asked about ePublishing. Well, things are very much up in the air on this front currently, as independent publishers test the parameters and possibilities of ePublishing while struggling to maintain commercial sustainability. Indeed, I think the independent ePublishing situation, exciting though it undoubtedly is, actually proves that this whole narrative of normalisation and integration is a complete fiction; that, if there is any kind of 'monument' under collective construction right now, it is one built under the sign of panic and distraction.

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