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Marie Boivent and Giorgio Di Domenico

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Strategies of Displacement in Artists' Periodicals from the 1970s: *Neon de Suro*, *Schmuck*, *Commonpress*, and *La Città di Riga*

MARIE BOIVENT* AND GIORGIO DI DOMENICO^

*Université Rennes 2 and ^Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa

marie.boivent@univ-rennes2.fr

ABSTRACT

During the 1960s and 1970s, artists' periodicals flourished as a new artistic medium. Strikingly, artists behind these alternative publications often claimed a peripheral position, assuming a geographical anchorage far from the capitals and main artistic centres. This paper addresses how the notion of periphery manifests itself in four European artists' periodicals published during the 1970s. It will focus on their distribution strategies, their ideological positioning, the works they disseminated, and the artists' writings and statements they featured. First, the analysis of three European alternative periodicals — *Neon de Suro* (Spain, 1975–82), *Schmuck Magazine* (England, 1972–76), and *Commonpress* (Poland, 1977–91) — will highlight how a peripheral position far from the capitals and the main artistic poles could become a strength, even a real editorial strategy. Such preoccupations were not, however, reserved for artists outside the official art scene: the question of periphery also found its place, albeit in different ways, in more institutionalized periodicals. This will be evident in the case of the Italian periodical *La Città di Riga* (1976–77), the focus of the second part of this paper, which negotiated the idea of centre and periphery right from its name. Through the case studies of these four periodicals and the analysis of coeval theoretical contributions, this paper aims to shape an elastic notion of the relationship between centre and periphery, at the same time derived from and applicable to the experimental editorial strategies of artists' periodicals from the 1970s.

KEYWORDS

artists' periodicals, decentralization, alternative periodicals, Mail Art

During the 1960s and 1970s, it became obvious to many artists that the periodical should not remain a place for showing reproductions of artworks and their commentary, but could offer a space for the development of new artistic forms, themselves thought of as reproducible.¹ Reconnecting with the philosophy of certain avant-garde magazines, they no longer saw the periodical as a tool for legitimizing artworks within institutions, or for guaranteeing their market value;² rather, they envisaged it more as an experimental space, even as an artistic medium in its own right.

Numerous artists thus launched their own periodicals, individually or as members of collectives, sometimes together with theorists. Then, periodicals of a new kind appeared: hybrid projects or real artistic proposals, taking note of their reproducibility and playing with the iterative dimension inherent to periodicity.³ These artists' periodicals and the works they conveyed, understood as 'primary information', not only shook up the definition of art and its rarity as a guarantee of quality, but also questioned the conditions of its visibility.⁴ Access to art was not limited anymore in time and in space by its presentation in a gallery or a museum, and not reserved for the people likely to visit such places. Ulises Carrión, a Mexican artist who emigrated to the Netherlands, formulated early on the stakes of these new forms of printed art. While he was referring to artists' books, his remarks apply to all artists' publications:

It's not enough to confirm that the work doesn't acknowledge spatial limits anymore. But let's not forget that this has practical consequences of great importance. An artist doesn't need to live in an 'art capital' to have his voice heard, and as a matter of fact there are centres of activity where there are no galleries only a modest post-office.⁵

As multiple objects, artists' periodicals — in other words, the artworks — could be produced and shown everywhere, and, in theory, reach any recipient. It is therefore not surprising that decentralization is an issue that recurs throughout these publications. Indeed, the notions of centre and periphery appear as leitmotifs, echoing, for instance, the real and assumed situations within which they were produced, some of which were located far from artistic centres, surfacing within new distribution circuits, always international in spite of small print runs, or appearing in more symbolic ways, through particular editorial choices. The collective and collaborative dimension of most of these periodicals also made it possible to relay the practices of artists who were themselves isolated, whether for geographical, economic, cultural, or political reasons.

- 1 John Baldessari, 'Information Paintings Never Completed', in *Konzeption – Conception*, ed. by Rolf Wedever and Konrad Fischer (Leverkusen: Städtisches Museum, 1969), n.p.
- 2 Dan Graham, 'My Works for Magazine Pages: "A History of Conceptual Art"', in *Two-Way Mirror Power: Selected Writings by Dan Graham* (Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 1999), pp. 10–17.
- 3 Clive Phillpot stressed this change in an article published in 1980: 'Unlike [periodicals published during] the 60s, [the earlier periodicals] were not consciously using the production of a magazine to question the nature of artworks, nor were they making art specifically for dissemination through a mass-communication medium.' Clive Phillpot, 'Art Magazines and Magazine Art', *Artforum*, 18.6 (1980), 52–54 (p. 52). See also the account of Anne Mœglin-Delcroix on this difference: *Esthétique du livre d'artiste, 1960–1980* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1997), p. 35.
- 4 Seth Siegelaub, 'On Exhibitions and the World at Large: Seth Siegelaub in Conversation with Charles Harrison', *Studio International*, 178.917 (December 1969), 202–03 (p. 202).
- 5 Ulises Carrión, *From Bookworks to Mailworks* (Alkmaar: Stedelijk Museum, 1978), p. 12. This observation is very close in spirit to the one made a few years earlier by Kynaston McShine: 'Increasingly artists use the mail, telegrams, telex machines, etc., for transmission of works themselves [...] or of information about their activity. [...] It is no longer imperative for an artist to be in Paris or New York. Those far from the "art centres" contribute more easily, without the often artificial protocol that at one time seemed essential for recognition.' Kynaston McShine, 'Essay', in *Information* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970), p. 140.

This attention to the 'peripheral' goes, therefore, beyond the type of works that were presented, which very often did not have their place on the official art scene, because they were 'out of format' or registered only within marginalized networks. In addition to new artistic forms, and despite the withdrawn position taken by their editors, many of these periodicals were real platforms for exchanges and meetings; they were open to international contributions, and intended to circulate as widely as possible, as the multilingualism of their pages testifies. Our aim here is to study how the notion of periphery manifests itself in some of the European artists' periodicals that were published during the 1970s. Our focus will be on the distribution strategies of these periodicals, their ideological positioning, the works they disseminated, and the artists' writings and statements they featured.

We will begin by analysing three European alternative periodicals: *Neon de Suro* (Spain, 1975–82), *Schmuck Magazine* (England, 1972–76), and *Commonpress* (Poland, 1977–91).⁶ Each of these periodicals is linked to the tradition of the small press and two of them are rooted in the networks of Mail Art then in full bloom. These three case studies will highlight how a peripheral position, far from the capitals and the main artistic centres, could become a strength, even a real editorial strategy. The artists involved in these projects launched from different European countries, never ceased to question or put into perspective their own particular situations, besides those of their fellow contributors and readers; paradoxically, they sometimes found there to be a greater freedom to act and experiment, not only with forms and their distribution, but also in dealing with issues faced by the collective, within these peripheral publications.

Such preoccupations were not, however, reserved for artists outside the official art scene: the question of periphery also found its place, albeit in different ways, in more institutionalized periodicals. This is evident in the case of the Italian periodical *La Città di Riga* (Italy, 1976–77), which is the focus of this article's second part. Founded by famous artists, supported by a major publishing network, *La Città di Riga* [The City of Riga] relentlessly appropriated the strategies and modes of operation of small, underground periodicals. At the same time, as suggested by its title, which referred to a city far from its actual place of publication, the periodical negotiated the idea of centre and periphery in an original manner, which itself was subject to theoretical scrutiny.

Moving the Centres, Redistributing the Roles: *Neon de Suro*, *Schmuck*, and *Commonpress*

Neon de Suro was published between 1975 and 1982, by four artists from the Spanish island of Mallorca: Bartomeu Cabot, Sara Gibert, and Andreu and Steva Terrades. Each of its twenty-one issues takes the form of a thin tabloid newspaper, with a broad headline written in a Gothic font. Images, and more particularly drawings, can be found on almost every page. There are no editorials or statements to illuminate its project.

Neon de Suro offers a paradigm of the way in which the periodical medium has enabled a lot of artists to establish links with other territories. Exchange was an essential issue for these island artists, who were doubly isolated: from the European art scene, but also from that of Spain, which was then focused around two centres, Barcelona and Madrid. At the time of their periodical's launch, the artists had not yet established a network beyond Spain, or indeed, Mallorca itself. To achieve this, they

6 We consider these periodicals 'alternative' insofar as they evolved outside the official art scene, and were economically independent. For an account of definitions of 'alternative' in relation to artists' periodicals, see Marie Boivent, *La Revue d'artiste: enjeux et spécificités d'une pratique artistique* (Rennes: Incertain Sens, 2015), pp. 207–10.

sent their periodical free of charge to a selection of addresses collected from magazines that seemed to have similar interests. This strategy enabled them to enter the emerging network of Mail Art, and to contact European artists who were also editing alternative periodicals of the same kind.

While many alternative periodicals were often distributed for free as a matter of course, the editors of *Neon de Suro* made this a real issue. In 1978, they co-signed a manifesto entitled 'Gratuitousness is an aggression'.⁷ This title suggests that they distributed their tabloid freely with combative intent, aiming not just to share ideas and to circulate artistic projects, but also to destroy. The image of a 'missile' is precisely the one used to describe the periodical by a French artists' magazine, *4 Taxis*, which devoted a special section to *Neon de Suro* in its eighth issue. The periodical is presented there as an 'independent graphic missile' likely 'to land at the four corners of the earth' in delivering its 'plastic charge', while the island of Mallorca is considered 'a platform used to smash the context junk'.⁸

Neon de Suro's attack was, of course, not aimed at the recipients of the so-called 'missile' — instead, it reflected the anger of artists whose work was not merely criticized or rejected, but ignored, an anger that birthed many such periodicals. The attack is also reminiscent of these artists' struggle against various aspects of the art world: the way in which it operates as a closed circuit, the questionable evaluation criteria used by institutions and galleries, as well as the passivity it leads to in the reception of the works of art. The artists of *Neon de Suro* contest the idea of an art that would be autonomous, detached from the context in which it appeared, and dependent on economic considerations from which it is excluded.

Neon de Suro wants to become one of these means of diffusion also an alternative opposed to the big con of market. Gratuitousness, format and daily use — voluntary, modest —, and free distribution are against the so-called unique work of art, the traditional commercial fetish meant to promote selected and prestigious merchandising. Moreover, by adopting new ways of communication, precisely those devised by mass media, a brochure is not gathering of drawings but a work, a totality made using a dynamic process.⁹

The art world is not the only target of these attacks: Mallorcan artists demonstrated an acute awareness of the excesses of the contemporary world, including those specific to the political and economic situation in Spain, and, more specifically, the island of Mallorca. If *Neon de Suro* opened up to other territories by commissioning guest artists from different countries to take part or take charge of issues, it was to spread demanding graphic and artistic research to and from the outside Mallorca.¹⁰ In doing so, the periodical also gave

7 This manifesto was prepared for, and distributed at an exhibition at Gallery St Petri in Lund (Sweden), spring 1978 (it is reproduced and translated in the catalogue edited by Reus Jaume, *A l'Entorn de Neon de Suro 1975–1982: Col·lecció Rafael Tous* [Palma de Mallorca: Fundació Pilar i Joan Miró, Ajuntament de Palma, 1999], p. 111.)

8 'Impression de Majorque, Neon de Suro', *4 Taxis*, 8 (Winter 1981–82), 5–7 (p. 5). We quote the English version as it was published in the French magazine *4 Taxis* itself. The French version of the last quote is: '[Neon de Suro] constitue une base de lancement utilisée pour rayer de la carte tout un contexte rasoir' ['(Neon de Suro) constitutes a launch pad used to wipe out an entire boring context'] (Ibid., p. 4). All quotations in English reproduced in the first part of this article are as they appear in periodicals or manifestos, with the errors that may occur when they come from non-native English-speaking artists or publishers. In our opinion, these linguistic approximations are part and parcel of those alternative artists' periodicals that developed in the 1970s with the ambition of making their art known beyond their respective countries.

9 'Gratuitousness is an aggression', p. 111.

10 As stated in their manifesto, '*Neon de Suro* is a periodical meant for spreading and, at the same time, for receiving'. Ibid.

an account of a culture and its singular history, in the midst of deep changes, including the arrival of mass tourism. As the editors remind us in their manifesto, ‘Mallorca is an island, a geographical fact involving isolation. Our language — a dialectal variation of Catalan — entailing our culture — deeply Mediterranean — that has been alienated and oppressed along the time by dictatorial regimes.’¹¹

That a reflection on identity is thus at the heart of *Neon de Suro*’s project is implied by the two words which make up its title. While ‘neon’, although in Catalan, can be universally understood, invoking ‘highly significant of the artificial and aggressive brightness of the advertising mechanism in a technological consumer society’, the second word remains obscure for those who do not master the language.¹² ‘Suro’ means ‘cork’ — a very symbolic material for the working classes of the island, since it was essential for fishing, the most widespread means of income for this demographic. The press release announcing the launch of the publication in 1975 insisted on this tension, between local awareness and the need to open up to international exchange, in its own title: ‘Deep-Rootedness and cosmopolitanism.’¹³

Schmuck Magazine also had international ambitions, despite being launched from a remote farmhouse in Devon, England. It was published between 1972 and 1976 by David Mayor, who was British, and Felipe Ehrenberg, who was Mexican, both of whom voluntarily sidelined themselves from London in order to attempt, through their publishing house Beau Geste Press, a new communitarian and artistic experience, far from the economic pressure of the art market. Their whole project, indeed, responded to a logic of decentralization and sought to establish more horizontal relationships between different participants. Each issue apart from the first was dedicated to one particular country, with a guest artist from that country gathering contributions from within his own network. This concept allowed Mayor and Ehrenberg, from their geographically remote base of operations, to give visibility to artistic practices that were often not visible on the official scene, or artistic scenes that were often less represented within Europe or more globally. As the editorial of the first issue stated: ‘In terms of the (artificial) polarity [...], the politicized artist who tries to relate what he is doing to supposed social in humanities must also come to terms with the point of view of the artist who works in isolation, who produces ART on his own terms.’¹⁴ The question of nationality was considered with flexibility:¹⁵ the publishers recall in the fifth issue that the idea to bring out one issue per country, borrowed from George Maciunas, was ‘woolly enough at the edges to enable inclusion of resident foreigners, or of non-resident nationals, in any particular case — plurinationalism?’¹⁶ These entanglements can be found even in the languages chosen for the publication: Clive Phillpot, recalling his first encounter with *Schmuck* in a bookshop in Brighton (a seaside resort in the South-East of England),

11 Ibid. The pages of *Neon de Suro* also offered the opportunity to take a stand against the Franco regime (which was collapsing at the time the periodical was published).

12 Damiá Ferrá-Ponç, ‘Arraigó y cosmopolitismo’, *Lluc magazine*, 654 (December 1975), 22. Republished in English: ‘Deep-Rootedness and Cosmopolitanism’, *Fandangos*, nos. 8–11 (1978), n.p.

13 Ibid. For a presentation of each issue of *Neon de Suro*, see Jaume. For a broader analysis of the project, see Marie Boivent, ‘Neon de Suro: The Periodical as a Graphic Missile’, in *The Territories of Artists’ Periodicals*, ed. by Marie Boivent and Stephen Perkins (Rennes: Éditions Provisoires / De Pere, Plagiarist Press, 2015), pp. 34–42.

14 David Mayor, ‘Introduction to REAL SCHMUCK’, *Schmuck*, [no. 1] (March 1972), 1–2 (p. 1).

15 Mila Waldeck, ‘Publishing Reshuffle: Fabrication and Dissemination at Beau Geste Press’, in *Beau Geste Press*, ed. by Alice Motard (Bordeaux: CAPC; Berlin: Bom Dia Boa Tarde Boa Noite, 2020), 423–32 (p. 431).

16 David Mayor, Felipe Ehrenberg, ‘Introduction – Beau Geste R(evolution)s’, *Schmuck*, [no. 5], ‘The General’, (January 1975), n.p. By choosing this process, they realized a project imagined by Maciunas for Fluxus in 1962, but never materialized: George Maciunas, ‘Tentative Plan for Contents of the First 6 [and 7] issues’, [January 1962], reproduced in Jon Hendricks, ed., *Fluxus Codex* (Detroit: The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection New York Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1998), p. 91.

reported that he had been struck by the incongruity of the second issue: an English magazine, dedicated to Iceland, and translated into Dutch.¹⁷

Schmuck also included works by artists living in countries under authoritarian regimes at that time, and confronted with censorship: *Hungarian Schmuck* (March 1973) and *Aktual Schmuck* (January 1974), which was devoted to Czechoslovakia, are examples of this. Here, the peripheral position that the artists felt they occupied was no longer so much geographical as political: authoritarian regimes led to the isolation of artists, even when they lived in a capital city. Despite a rather confusing bias at first sight, the cover of the Hungarian issue evokes this context. It reproduces a note, typed on a page torn from a notebook, with the following statement: 'Considering our special circumstances under we following authors live & work as well as our experiences we have gained about the prohibiting measures taken by the supervisory authorities in our firm belief only in lack of understanding declare hereby that we do not assent to the publikation & distribution of the hungarian SCHMUCK.' Dated 30 July (ten months before the publication of the issue), the note is followed by the signatories of this motion, which, paradoxically, are also the issue's contributors. In its introduction, László Beke, the guest editor, came back several times to the conditions within which Hungarian artists worked:

we are working in Budapest, Hungary, we have neither galleries nor any art collectors. our possibilities for exhibitions and publicity are very rare. [...] everybody is aware of the fact — that has to be underlined for not to forget it — that budapest is one of the frontier cities between west and east. but is more important for us that budapest is the capital city of a country lying in eastern europe. we want to live and work there.¹⁸

Periodicals as a medium, associated with what Beke called 'newest media', appeared to be an appropriate response to these conditions, by their operating mode and their distribution by mail, and thanks to the networks that had been built around them, as well as by their collective nature.

The Czechoslovakian issue, fourth of the series, coordinated by Milan Knížák, as explained in the editorial, narrowly escaped censorship. These circumstances of production were the occasion for the artist-publishers of the 'purely-based Devon community' — as they liked to call themselves — to remind readers that, for them, only a policy of decentralization was able to 'fight against the control of thought'.¹⁹ The editorial of this issue is a plea for self-publishing, a call for community organizations, for sharing skills and sharing networks. They made sure to apply this policy to themselves:

This is as it should be because Beau Geste is a concept, a conviction. We never quite envision ourselves growing into art-mart fat cats. To have continued our development could easily have forced us, simply because of our size, into an

17 Then a librarian at the Chelsea School of Art in London, Clive Phillpot became director of the library at MoMA in New York in 1977. There he developed the artists' books department and mapped out the field from an institutional point of view. Clive Phillpot, 'Schmuck Iceland', in *Beau Geste Press*, ed. by Alice Motard (Bordeaux: CAPC; Berlin: Bom Dia Boa Tarde Boa Noite, 2020), pp. 110–14.

18 László Beke, "Concept Art" as the possibilities of young Hungarian Artists', *Schmuck Magazine*, 'Hungarian Schmuck', [no. 3] (March 1973), 2. (We respect the lack of capitalization of the original text.)

19 Felipe Ehrenberg and David Mayor, 'The Czech Schmuck: publishers' introduction', *Schmuck Magazine*, 'Aktual Schmuck', [no. 4] (January 1974), n.p.

exclusivist position; which is the same as being little big dictators much like any prestige art publisher.²⁰

Circumstances led one after the other to move away from Devon and thus physically leave the community in 1974, but this did not prevent the next four issues from appearing on the same principle. The process of decentralization set up by the artist-editors within *Schmuck Magazine* is thus doubled, or even tripled: to their position voluntarily apart from the main artistic centres, the sharing of the responsibilities, and the highlighting of less diffused artists, is added the potential of dissemination proper to the periodical, which is capable of reaching isolated readers. They thus realised the ambitions set out in their call for contributions: 'We are disseminators, our basic politics is not to make even one concession to the speculative pressures that exalt the ego and deform thought and creativity.'²¹

The principles of decentralization and shared responsibility used in *Schmuck* found an even more radical application in another project. It was in Elbląg, a medium-sized coastal town in Poland, that Paweł Petasz launched *Commonpress*, an experimental periodical that involved hundreds of artists from dozens of countries. If Devon was still a kind of pole for *Schmuck* — through which contributions passed to be organized, reproduced, and assembled before being redistributed — the concept that defined *Commonpress* renders any notion of centre and periphery deeply irrelevant. The principle was that a different artist was responsible for the conception of each issue. 'COMMONPRESS is a conception of the periodical edit by common effort. Possible realization of this conception would let to overcome such difficulties as print and distribution expens, nothing to say about the danger of commercialization.'²² As was stated in the first call for participation distributed at the end of 1977 — and then reproduced in each subsequent issue of *Commonpress* — contributing to an issue constituted a commitment to take charge of a future issue: 'each of the participants would be obliged to at least ONCE to collect materials, to edit and print as well as to distribute the edition among the other artists taking part in his edition at one's own charge.'²³ As Stephen Perkins points out: 'By December 1977 when the first issue was published, [the international Mail Art network] had already established itself as a self-sustaining community quite capable of shouldering the responsibilities required in maintaining a publication schedule.'²⁴ Indeed, more than sixty issues were published between 1977 and 1990.

Each editor could choose the design (size, binding, etc.), technique of reproduction (most of the time, the photocopier), and the theme of their issue.²⁵ These themes were extremely varied: some of them were easy to link to artistic genres or notions (self-portrait, positive-negative, nudes, drawing, light, poetry, etc.), and some referred directly to Mail Art (Post office, stamps, rubberstamps, 'Idea and communication') or questioned the place of the artist within society ('Can the artist help survive?', area of artists' activities, artist's body, 'Mail Artists live on the Edge'). Others dealt with political and

20 Ibid.

21 Call for contributions to *Schmuck America Latina*, flyer (Spanish), Winter 1973, reproduced in Motard, p. 31.

22 Paweł Petasz, Information flier for *Commonpress* #1, n.d. Quoted by Stephen Perkins, 'Commonpress', in *Revues d'artistes, une sélection*, ed. by Marie Boivent (Fougères: Arcade; Paris: Éditions provisoires; Lendroit: Rennes, 2008), pp. 120–21 (p. 120). (English version online).

23 The text remained roughly the same, but with small variations. For instance, in later issues, 'would be obliged' was changed to 'is encouraged'.

24 Stephen Perkins, 'Commonpress', in *Revues d'artistes, une sélection*, p. 121.

25 It appears from the list of editors that only four out of the sixty-six issues actually published (or the seventy-two planned) were coordinated by women, alone or in partnership with a man (for the duo G. E. Marx Vigo, formed by the Argentinians Graciela Gutierrez Marx and Edgardo Antonio Vigo).

social themes (political satire, 'Why I hate the world', ruins, zen), sexuality (eroticism, homosexuality, pornography), objects (boxes, shoes), or, more rarely, were devoted to specific countries or idioms (Italy, Hungary, 'Modern Greek, modern Turk'). (Figs 1–3) Most were, in any case, transversal and voluntary polysemic, or simply unclassifiable.

Petasz edited the first issue in December 1977, in an A5 format with no particular theme, although the subtitle declared it the 'Arrière-Garde Edition'. Seventeen contributors took part in this project, in other words, seventeen potential editors. Future issues would have more contributors: issues 18 and 23, both published in 1979, included the works of 120 and over 250 artists respectively.²⁶ The success with which the periodical attracted contributors began to pose a problem after a while. Insofar as the publishers undertook to give a copy to each contributor, it was at times impossible for financial reasons, both in terms of printing and mailing costs, to integrate each of the proposals they received, even though the credo — in accordance with the Mail Art philosophy and the logics of selection rejected by its artists — was not to make any selection; the editors apologized, but they just could not afford it.²⁷

Outside of writing the *modus operandi* and the rules of participation, and of announcing future themes, the only constraint for all the editors was that they had to contact Petasz. This rule was not intended to keep a grip on the development of the project, but only to serve as a relay to assign editors to issues and avoid any overlaps. In 1982, the only thread that still linked the periodical to its original place of production was broken: Petasz stopped coordinating *Commonpress* because the imposition of martial law in Poland led to the military censorship of the mail. As he explained later: 'The international *Commonpress* collaborations, were impossible to coordinate because of postal interference.'²⁸ Petasz thus handed over coordination of the periodical to the Canadian artist Gerald X. Jupitter-Larsen, who held this position for an undetermined number of years. In any case, Petasz stated that the network set up by Mail Art, within which *Commonpress* was able to exist and develop, and which itself was nurtured and reinforced by the periodical, had a determining role that lasted for several years:

The mail art network was useful [...] as one of many information holes punched through the Iron Curtain. Mail art itself probably had little effect in breaking down Communist oppression. In a larger sense, however, mail art helped to free Polish artists from a feeling of rejection by others in the world.²⁹

To conclude this discussion of *Neon de Suro*, *Schmuck*, and *Commonpress*, we argue that, above all, these periodicals challenge the importance of centres, or, as the editors of *Neon de Suro* put it, 'support Art decentralization.'³⁰ The strategies adopted by the artists who produced them differ, however: while some reaffirm the importance of considering new

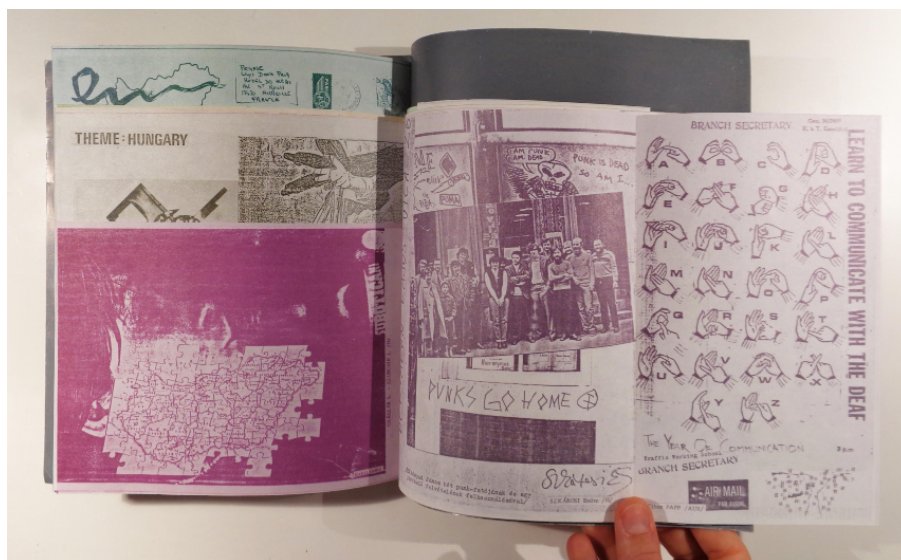
26 A first inventory was made by Guy Bleus in the issue of *Commonpress* he coordinated in 1984, entitled 'Commonpress retrospective' (which counted over five hundred participants). See also 'List of published *Commonpress* issues', *Sztuka I Dokumentacja / Art and Documentation*, in 'Paweł Petasz: livres et périodiques d'artiste / Paweł Petasz: książki I periodyki artysty', ed. by Leszek Brogowski, 22 (Gdańsk: Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk, 2020), 362–65.

27 'The Italian Mail Artist Vittore Baroni apologized in the preface of *Commonpress* 23 'Political Satire, Post Scriptum' he edited, and even though he managed to get a grant to support the costs: 'I'm grateful to every participant received in the show, and I'm really sorry that the money I received for this project didn't allow me to include all the contributions.' See also Viktor Kótun, 'A Ghost of Your Masterpiece: Correspondence Between Paweł Petasz and György Galántai (1978–2007)', *Sztuka I Dokumentacja*, 22 (2020), 334–58 (p. 334).

28 Paweł Petasz, 'Mail Art in Poland', *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology*, ed. by Chuck Welch (Alberta: Calgary Press, 1995), pp. 89–93 (p. 92).

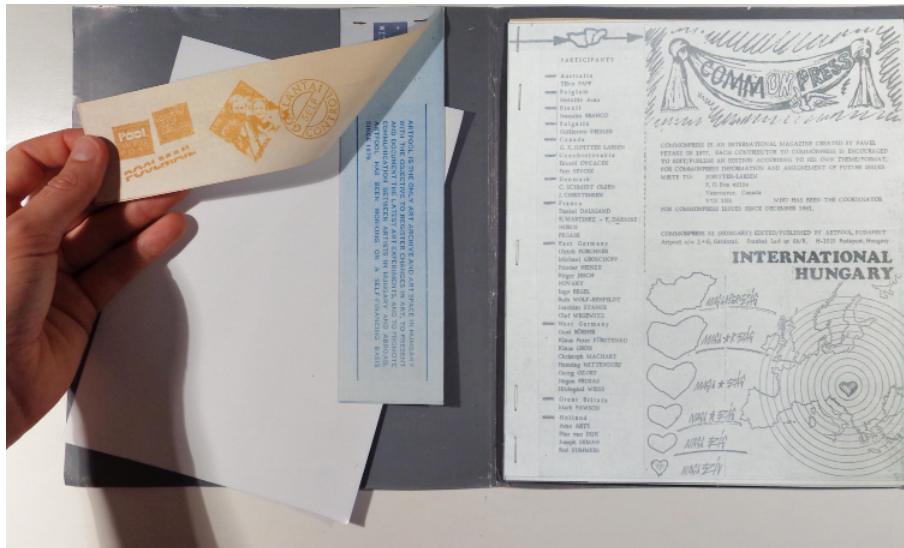
29 Ibid.

30 'Neon de Suro: a script for "Tot Art"', in Jaume, p. 113.



Figs 1–3 *Commonpress* 51: 'Hungary', ed. by György Galántai (Budapest: Artpool, 1984; new ed., Budapest: Artpool, 1989). The first version produced by photocopying in twenty-five copies (cover: silk-screened plastic foil and a colour offset tourist prospectus, inside: photocopy); a new edition colour offset printed, edition of 300. Courtesy of György Galántai.

STRATEGIES OF DISPLACEMENT IN ARTISTS' PERIODICALS FROM THE 1970S: *NEON DE SURO*, *SCHMUCK*, *COMMONPRESS*, AND *LA CITTÀ DI RIGA*



anchor points as centres — even those that, at first sight, are ‘peripheral’ or provincial — others multiply the nodes of a dense network in order to dilute the very notions of centre and periphery. *Neon de Suro* is representative of the former, *Commonpress* of the latter, while *Schmuck Magazines* experiments with an intermediate approach. Even when defending particular cultures and political situations, and despite relatively small circulations (ranging from a few hundred for *Schmuck* and *Commonpress* to 1,500 copies for the Mallorcan tabloid), international distribution was essential to achieving their goals. In this sense, the Mail Art phenomenon played a key role, enabling many 1970s artists’ periodicals to achieve their ambitions, and giving anyone who joined them, even momentarily, access to contacts all over the world.³¹ The philosophies underpinning these periodicals also reflect an important principle of the Mail Art spirit: to receive projects is often to participate in them, and vice versa. So, while it is impossible to draw up an exhaustive list of these modest periodicals’ recipients, the names of the contributors and their geographical anchorage provide a significant insight into their impressive circulation — in terms of distance covered — despite relatively small print runs.

Navigating the Archipelago: The Ambivalent Position of *La Città di Riga*

Alongside independent periodicals, several more structured and institutional artists’ magazines emerged during the 1970s. In relation to the theme of centre and periphery, one particularly relevant case is that of the little-known Italian periodical *La Città di Riga* [The City of Riga].³² Founded by a group of friends based in Rome, its two large-format issues appeared in the fall of 1976 and spring of 1977. The editorial board included the critics Alberto Boatto and Maurizio Calvesi, the artists Fabio Mauri and Jannis Kounellis, and the wide-ranging intellectual Umberto Silva. Elisabetta Rasy served as the director in charge. The periodical intended to abolish all role distinctions between artists, critics, and scholars: it was not a platform for information, had no regular

31 For accounts that consider the importance of connections between Mail Art and artists’ periodicals, see Marie Boivent, *La Revue d’artiste*, pp. 211–54.

32 A short entry is devoted to it in Gwen Allen, *Artists’ Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press 2011), p. 250. A monograph in Italian about the periodical by Giorgio Di Domenico is forthcoming.

columns or editorials, and presented itself as a simple collection of visual contributions and long texts published in Italian and French. The press release announcing its first issue tried to define its role:

La Città di Riga will clearly distinguish itself from other art journals, whose purposes are principally to provide critical information. In contrast, *La Città di Riga* offers creative support by drawing on many disciplines, seeking to provide a possibly hitherto unrevealed image of the creative practice at this moment of thought and action.³³

Almost all former members of the Arte Povera group were involved. They were joined by two international artists, Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci, together with some younger Italian artists who would later become part of the Transavanguardia movement. In many cases, artists submitted visual contributions, which were designed specifically for the periodical and reflected on the nature of the medium.³⁴ A double-page spread by Paolini transformed the periodical's structure into a *mise-en-abyme* mechanism. On the last page of the first issue, Boetti published a simple drawing bearing the words 'né testa né coda — ni queue ni tête' ['neither tail nor head']. In the second issue, he published eleven pencil tracings of the covers of other popular periodicals, combined with other drawings.

La Città di Riga also hosted contributions from critics, writers, and scholars, including Giorgio Agamben, Antonio Porta, and Corrado Costa. Thanks to Elisabetta Rasy, the periodical was also a hub for feminist thinkers, publishing writings by Manuela Fraire, Stephanie Oursler, Anne-Marie Sauzeau-Boetti, and Jasmina Tešanović. Together, the composition of its editorial board, the size and pricing of each of the two issues, and the range of contributors confirmed that *La Città di Riga* was a periodical with great ambitions, part of an official and institutionalized network. Nonetheless, it resorted to some of the strategies of underground artists' periodicals: it hosted visual contributions designed specifically for the medium, refused any form of advertising, rejected any informational function, and commissioned covers by artists.

The editors of *La Città di Riga* stated that the periodical's title was intentionally ambiguous and unexplained. Nevertheless, its reference to the port capital of Latvia placed it in a peripheral and liminal position, far from any centre but still at a crossroads of people and cultures. Umberto Silva tried to explain the aim of the title and the positioning of the periodical in a short editorial that remained unpublished. Its text sheds light on the polycentric nature and ambivalent position of *La Città di Riga* suspended between the centre and periphery:

The historical avant-garde claimed to have broken the railroad tracks, but perhaps even then there was not just one main line. Now, in any case, there are many broken lines, spaced between them, scattered in a punctuated archipelago. Città

33 'La Città di Riga si presenterà sotto un profilo letteralmente diverso dalle riviste d'arte fin qui note, il cui impegno è sulla linea dell'informazione critica. *La Città di Riga* opera un affiancamento creativo e da molti livelli disciplinari, nell'intenzione di raccogliere un'immagine eventualmente non emersa dell'attività creativa di questo momento di pensiero e di operazione.' 'Comunicato stampa n. 1', [1976], private archive. English translation by Giorgio Di Domenico and Aled Gruffydd Jones.

34 An in-depth study of these kinds of contributions was offered a few months after the appearance of *La Città di Riga* at a conference organized in Tuscany: Clive Phillpot, 'Riviste e artisti / Gli anni Venti e prima, gli anni Sessanta e dopo', in *Critica O: Convegno europeo sui problemi della critica d'arte: Catalogo bibliografico: Rassegna internazionale della rivista d'arte specializzata*, ed. by John H. Liesveld, Egidio Mucci, and Pier Luigi Tazzi (Montecatini: Comune di Montecatini, 1978), loose sheet. A transcript of the lecture, first delivered in English, would later also be published in *Artforum: Clive Phillpot, 'Art Magazines and Magazine Art'*, pp. 52–54.

di Riga is a seaport, a city of passage, trade, and adventure. People of different backgrounds and crafts arrive there, all driven by the same aspirations of research, transformation, crossing; people who despise the sedentary life, the crystallization of privilege. They are also tourists with regular passports, but more often than not they are marginalized people who burst in with the force of their desire, or titled folks who arrive in disguise, seeking recognition from the dog of Poetry [...] We go to the quayside and watch the dockings: le bateau ivre, the battleship Potëmkin, the ship of fools, Ahab's whaler...³⁵

The reference to the city of Riga, the birthplace of Sergei Eisenstein, was not the only 'peripheral' feature of *La Città di Riga*. Indeed, the periodical was published by La Nuova Foglio, a small provincial publisher based in the village of Pollenza, located within the Marche region's province of Macerata. Established during the late 1960s as a traditional printer of lithographs and art editions, La Nuova Foglio started publishing avant-garde texts and artists' books. *La Città di Riga* was part of a luxury series named *Altro*, which also included a book and portfolio by the artist Fabio Mauri.³⁶ Mauri himself had probably connected the publishing house with the periodical after a first, early attempt to publish with major publishers Einaudi was unsuccessful. Instead of proposing the project to another of the many large publishing houses based in a big Italian city, the editorial board opted for a small and sophisticated publishing house located far from Italy's cultural centres but close to where some had vacation homes. Such an editorial choice can almost appear as a deliberate escape from Rome.

The correspondence in the archives of *La Città di Riga* testifies to a continuous transit of texts and images between the centre and the periphery. The over forty contributions that were featured in the magazine arrived in Rome from all over Italy and abroad. There, in the cultural and political centre of a semi-peripheral nation such as Italy, the editorial board evaluated and selected those they would publish. Then, the contributions were sent to Pollenza, where they were processed, translated into French, and printed. The printed issues then returned to Rome for international distribution. This process complicated and slowed down the editorial work, so much so that the third issue of the periodical never appeared (financial problems within the publishing house were also a factor). Despite its short and peripheral life, *La Città di Riga* managed to break into international networks: the American conceptual artist Sol LeWitt contacted Fabio Mauri to propose distributing the magazine through the New York independent art space and bookstore Printed Matter.³⁷

The positioning of the magazine and its publishing house was part of a broader Italian phenomenon of the 1970s, ironically defined by the journalist Valerio Riva as 'provinciari'. Focusing on the Marche's art scene, Riva witnessed the emergence of an alleged new artistic movement following Pop art and Op art. The main features of art produced within this supposed movement were that it was made, displayed, and sold in small provincial towns. 'Provinciari' was made possible by the fact that during the

35 'L'avanguardia storica ha preteso d'averne interrotto la strada ferrata; ma forse già allora non esisteva un'unica linea maestra. Ora in ogni caso esistono tante linee spezzate, spaziate tra di loro, disseminate in un arcipelago puntuale. Città di Riga è un porto di mare, una città di transito, di commercio e d'avventura. Vi arriva gente di diversa condizione e mestiere, tutta spinta dalle stesse istanze di ricerca, trasformazione, attraversamento; gente che detesta la vita sedentaria, la cristallizzazione del privilegio. Sono anche turisti con regolare passaporto, ma più spesso e volentieri emarginati che irrompono con la forza del loro desiderio, o titolati che arrivano sotto mentite spoglie sollecitando il riconoscimento del cane della Poesia [...] Andiamo sulla banchina ed assistiamo agli attraccaggi: le bateau ivre, la corazzata Potiomkin [sic], la nave dei folli, la baleniera di Achab...' Umberto Silva, *Editoriale*, unpublished typewritten editorial, [1976]. Rome, Studio Fabio Mauri Archives. English translation by Sofia Silva.

36 Fabio Mauri, *Manipolazione di cultura* (Pollenza: La Nuova Foglio, 1976).

37 Sol LeWitt, handwritten letter to Fabio Mauri, undated. Rome, Studio Fabio Mauri Archives.

summer, galleries opened or relocated to small tourist towns, which, thanks to lower costs and a fun and informal atmosphere, hosted critics and artists, events, and festivals. 'Milan no longer buys, Hamburg is stingy, New York is too expensive! Jetsetters have betrayed Panam and turned to the arms of Itavia: discover Italy and its provincial galleries!'³⁸ This new centrality of the provinces, fostered by new administrative laws, also resulted in a shift in the focus of Italian art history. Major artistic centres such as Rome and Florence, once the main subjects of studies, were gradually joined by a constellation of smaller peripheral centres. This contributed to a major theoretical breakthrough, resulting in Enrico Castelnuovo and Carlo Ginzburg's seminal essay *Centro e periferia*.³⁹

Some of the artists' textual contributions to *La Città di Riga* highlighted another aspect of the periodical's peripheral positioning. Indeed, many contributors proudly claimed their distance from the American art system, which was perceived as the true centre of the 1970s art world. This artistic and political consciousness probably prompted the texts to be translated into French rather than English. In his long, untitled text, Kounellis made one of his characters exclaim: 'What a distance between Jasper Johns' America and Fabro's Italy!' The text concluded with a clear stance: 'I will go to America, to Florida, meet Weiner and tell him why I cannot accept an invitation to collaborate on his conceptual magazine.'⁴⁰ Pier Paolo Calzolari was even more radical in his attack on the penetration of American art in Italy, which he defined as 'strong colonialist invasions (that here we import bananas of dubious ripeness, the meat of ancient cut, and art of questionable standard).'⁴¹ In the second issue, critic and scholar Jole De Sanna replied vehemently to this attack, pointing out its contradictions: 'So let's see: who are you first, an Italian, Peruvian, or American artist? From which country are you speaking while using such a tone? Where else would you like to be? Would you mind telling us why you live in Italy?'⁴² These brief quotations testify to a systemic crisis that afflicted the Italian art system in the late 1970s. Deprived of any centrality, having recognized the failure of the political utopias of the late 1960s, Italian artists needed to find a new balance. *La Città di Riga* did not offer solutions, but it was instrumental in highlighting the problem and starting the discussion.⁴³ As Germano Celant notes, '*La Città di Riga*

38 'Milano non compra più, Amburgo è arcigna, New York costa troppo. Il jet-set ha tradito la Panam e s'è dato in braccio all'Itavia: vedi l'Italia e le sue gallerie di provincia.' Valerio Riva, 'La Provinciarit', *L'Espresso*, 21.43 (26 October 1975), 66–72 (p. 69). English translation by Giorgio Di Domenico. Itavia was a private Italian airline that operated a domestic network.

39 Enrico Castelnuovo and Carlo Ginzburg, 'Centro e periferia', in *Storia dell'arte italiana, I. Materiali e problemi, I. Questioni e metodi*, ed. by Giovanni Previtali (Torino: Einaudi, 1979), pp. 285–352.

40 'Che distanza c'è, fra l'America di Jasper Johns e l'Italia di Fabro! Andrò in America, in Florida, incontrerò Wiener e gli dirò perché non posso accettare di collaborare alla sua rivista concettuale.' Jannis Kounellis, *La Città di Riga*, 1 (Autumn 1976), 43–49 (pp. 43, 48). English translation by Giorgio Di Domenico. The first quote hints at Johns's *Map* paintings and Fabro's Italy-shaped sculptures.

41 'Forti invasioni colonialistiche (che qui si importa banane di dubbia maturazione, carne di antico taglio e arte di discutibile livello).' Pier Paolo Calzolari, 'Buon esempio di uso del linguaggio italiano, il che', *La Città di Riga*, 1 (Autumn 1976), 182–87 (p. 186). English translation by Giorgio Di Domenico.

42 'Allora vediamo: chi sei tu innanzi tutto, un artista italiano, peruviano o americano? Da quale nazione stai parlando mentre adoperi siffatto tono? O altrimenti dove vorresti essere? Ti dispiacerebbe dirci perché abiti in Italia?' Jole De Sanna, *La Città di Riga*, 2 (Spring 1977), 179–181 (p. 180). English translation by Giorgio Di Domenico.

43 A common centre to turn against (in this case the United States) often served to bring distant peripheries closer together. Indeed, similar concepts resonate in the words that AA Bronson, founding member of the group General Idea, used to explain what led him to create the mythical, Toronto-based magazine *FILE*: 'The pattern of inhabited Canada nestling innocently against the belly of the American border, nurtured by the aggressive foreplay of American magazines, American radio, American television [...] In 1968, especially, we felt the closeness, and the divisiveness of the American border. We felt the lack of feeling ourselves as part of an art scene.' AA Bronson, 'The Humiliation of the Bureaucrat: Artist-Run Centres as Museums by Artists', in *Museums by Artists*, ed. by AA Bronson and Peggy Gale (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983), 29–37 (p. 30).

ended up being, rather than a prelude to, the ultimate projection of this tension, a closing circle, the possible consequences of which are located outside the magazine.⁴⁴

Even in the choice of its models, *La Città di Riga* opted for an ambivalent position, suspended between the centre and periphery. When Kounellis wrote to Joseph Beuys to invite him to contribute to the periodical, he pointed out that *La Città di Riga's* models included two surrealist periodicals, *Minotaure* and *La Révolution surréaliste*. The clearest sign of their legacy lies in the cover of the first issue, which was designed by Kounellis and depicted Guillaume Apollinaire (Fig. 4), as he had been posthumously portrayed by Alberto Savinio in 1927. The Rome-born noble father of Surrealism and one of the inventors of the avant-garde periodical form ended up watching over the short adventure of Riga, the city, that far from being Rome's provincial alter ego or a peripheral surrogate for Paris, ended up representing the symbolic, peripheric centre of a historical and geographical network of connections, artistic practices, and thoughts.

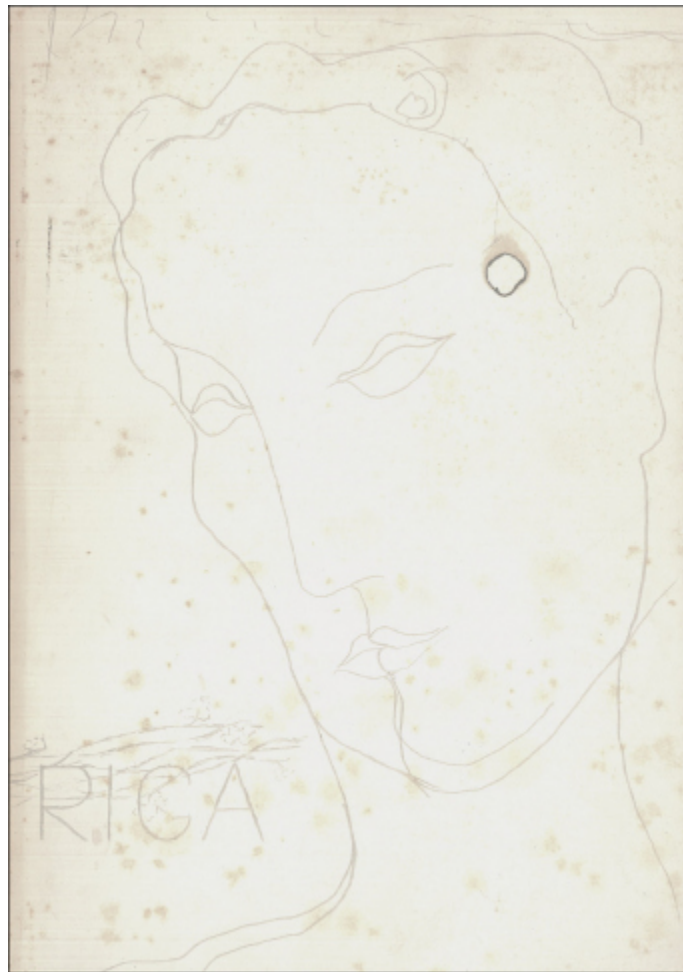


Fig. 4 *La Città di Riga*, 1 (Autumn 1976), cover by Jannis Kounellis © KOUNELLIS, by SIAE 2023.

44 'La Città di Riga, plutôt qu'un préambule, finit par être la projection ultime de cette tension, un cercle qui se ferme, dont les conséquences éventuelles sont à rechercher en dehors de la revue.' Germano Celant, *Identité italienne: L'Art en Italie depuis 1959* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée National d'Art moderne; Florence: Centro Di, 1981), p. 523. English translation by Giorgio Di Domenico.

The notions of centre and periphery are both opposed and interdependent: their relationship evokes inequality and domination between two spaces, whatever the scale. These notions are relative, evolving, and diffuse. Recently, Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel proved how the very study of periodicals can challenge our perception of artistic centres between the 1860s and 1960s.⁴⁵ As the cases of *Neon de Suro*, *Schmuck Magazine*, *Commonpress*, and *La Città di Riga* hopefully reveal, during the 1970s artists' periodicals of different natures and backgrounds managed to overcome the opposition between them. This breakthrough paved the way for many similar publications, some of which are being created and distributed today, that conflict with the act of centralization usually required for publishing.

Undertaking to produce a periodical as a place of artistic practices, a process that involved creating or participating within a network, was the occasion for artists to weave a moving web that displaced the notions of centre and periphery to the point of making them inoperative. Indeed, the artists who engaged in these practices were committed to defending and experimenting with other principles and logic, including the 'punctuated archipelago' described by Umberto Silva in 1976. These could join the 'Territoire Mimétique de la République Géniale' ['Mimetic Territory of the Genial Republic']: an independent territory with variable geometry that Robert Filliou placed above the floor, following a subjective cartography.⁴⁶ The artists' periodicals proved to be the ideal place to rethink the relationships of domination and, therefore, the legitimacy of anyone, wherever they were, to take part in the art scene and join the 'Eternal Network', another concept developed by Filliou.

Precisely because they challenged them, the editors of *Neon de Suro*, *Schmuck Magazine*, *Commonpress*, and *La Città di Riga* had explicit concepts of centre and periphery. These periodicals testify to an unfolding paradigm shift: the notions of centre and periphery served as catalysts for a broader reflection on the meaning, mechanisms, and issues of periodical publishing. By deliberately adopting a peripheral point of view, the editors, contributors, and readers of *Neon de Suro*, *Schmuck Magazine*, *Commonpress*, and *La Città di Riga* succeeded in gaining a central perspective on the coeval art system and a central position in the periodical publishing practices of the 1970s.

Marie Boivent is Associate Professor of Visual Art at University Rennes 2, France. Her research focuses on artists' periodicals since the 1960s. She published *La Revue d'artiste: Enjeux et spécificité d'une pratique artistique* (Rennes: Éditions Incertain Sens, 2015). She has written many chapters for books and articles about 'modest' artists' publications — periodicals, postcards, calendars — and curated many exhibitions devoted to them, among others in the Cabinet du livre d'artiste, a library and exhibition space located in Rennes.

Giorgio Di Domenico is a PhD student at the Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa. His research focuses on the Italian reception of Surrealism between 1959 and 1977. He was a visiting student at New York University's Casa Italiana, a research fellow of the Center for Italian Modern Art, New York, and a researcher in residence of the Marea

45 Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, 'Internationalization through the Lens: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Art Periodicals and Decentred Circulation', *Journal of European Periodical Studies*, 4.2 (Winter 2019), 48–69.

46 Robert Filliou, 'Territoire Mimétique de la république Géniale', manuscript text reproduced in *La Fête permanente présente Robert Filliou / The Eternal Network Presents / Das immerwährende Ereignis zeigt* (Hanover: Sprengel Museum; Paris: Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville, ARC; Bern: Kunsthalle, 1984), p. 146.

Art Project, Praiano. His publications include essays on Jannis Kounellis, Alberto Burri, Robert Rauschenberg, and Diego Marcon, and a forthcoming monograph on the artists' periodical *La Città di Riga*.

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