Ceci n'est pas un magazine: The politics of hybrid media in *Mute* magazine

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Abstract

What are the possibilities for a political magazine in the new media environment? This article addresses that question through a study of the London-based art and politics magazine *Mute*, an experimental publishing venture that currently exists as a 'hybrid' of Web and print platforms. The politics in question resides not only in the magazine's *content*, but throughout its *media form*. For *Mute*'s coverage of the evolving political and aesthetic capacities of new media has intersected with an insistent self-critique and remodelling of its magazine form, a reflexive orientation it set out in its 'hybrid publishing' manifesto, 'Ceci n'est pas un magazine'. Drawing on an interview with the magazine's editor and directors and employing concepts of 'media ecology' and 'embodied text', the article explores *Mute*'s hybrid media form through its publishing platforms, participatory mechanisms, aesthetic styles, commissioning practices, temporal modes, and commercial structures.

Keywords

alternative media, embodied text, hybrid media, media ecology, *Mute* magazine, political magazine

Introduction

What is a political magazine today, in this time of ubiquitous media, when the digitization and convergence of communicative mediums, user-generated content, wikis, and blogs are so thoroughly transforming the publishing environment? This article addresses

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that question through a study of the London-based art and politics magazine *Mute*, an experimental publishing venture that currently exists as a 'hybrid' of Web and print platforms.[1] The politics in question resides not only in the magazine's *content*, but, and this is where my interest lies, throughout its *media form* – its publishing platforms, participatory mechanisms, aesthetic styles, commissioning practices, temporal modes, and commercial structures. For *Mute*'s signal feature is that since inception in 1994 it 'has regarded message and medium, content and carrier as inherently linked' (Mute, n.d.: n.p.). *Mute*'s coverage of the evolving political and aesthetic capacities of new media has intersected with an insistent self-critique and remodelling of its magazine form, a reflexive orientation it announced in its 2001 'hybrid publishing' document, 'Ceci n'est pas un magazine' (Mute, 2001). It is the specific and various ways through which *Mute* has pursued the critique and development of its hybrid form that is the object of this article, though I will first situate the argument in the context of research on 'media ecology'.

Magazine ecology

In recounting his experiences in the collective publishing of the political journal *Futur Antérieur*, Antonio Negri offers a striking appraisal of the nature and purpose of this medium:

> A good journal is like an octopus, continually reaching out and pulling in the theoretical and historical happenings in the environment in which it lives. This journal had a soul – a passionate soul which tried to absorb everything in the world around it which offered theoretical interest, a political choice, an ethical dimension, or simply a joy of life. The soul of a journal is its radical determination to give meaning to everything it touches, to build it into a theoretical tendency, to embrace it within a mechanism of practical activity. (2004: n.p.)

Negri here provides us with a most useful minimum definition of the political magazine: its 'soul' resides in its *politicizing content* – in conceptual, ethical, and practical dimensions – and in a manner always *open to the environment* in which it lives. In this piece Negri also draws in a number of important if more mundane features, not least the considerable labour and cost involved in production and the theoretical and political conflict that fires editorial practice. But Negri's metaphors only take us so far: 'octopus' and 'soul' help convey the reach and passions of a political magazine, yet neither is especially helpful if one seeks to evoke the array of material properties and processes involved. Moreover, these metaphors give the impression of a centralized and integrated entity, an image of the political magazine that I seek here to move away from.

It is instead the figure of 'media ecology' that I want to draw upon to bring into focus the full material complexity of the political magazine. In a beautifully crafted essay on the 'life-cycle' of socialism, Régis Debray (2007: 5) has recently argued that we cannot grasp the nature of conscious collective life without understanding 'the material forms and processes through which its ideas are transmitted', what he calls its 'mediological' 'ecosystem'. All the components are here for a materialist ecology of nineteenth- and twentieth-century socialist media: printers, typographers, rotary

presses, print-runs, distribution circuits, text durations, books, newspapers, parties, intellectuals, temporal structures, and pedagogic styles. Yet for all the insight that Debray's method offers, his concern to produce a 'mediological periodization' of the history of ideas constitutes an excessively determinist account of the relationship between politics and media form, one that leaves socialism – as catch-all for any kind of emancipatory politics – lost to the pre-digital age:

> Behind the 're' of reformation, republic, or revolution … there is a hand flicking through the pages of a book, from the end to the beginning. Whereas the finger that presses a button, fast-forwarding a tape or disc, will never pose a danger to the establishment' (2007: 9).

Contra Debray, media function not as integrated parts of bounded political ecologies, but are themselves contingent – transformed as they enter into new external relations, new ecologies – and traversed by a multiplicity of forces and struggles (Fuller, 2005; Hayles, 2003). As such, politics cannot be circumscribed and surrendered to a particular historical instance and its associated media form (as in Debray's socialism/print conjunction), but is instead an aspect of *all* media ecologies, evident throughout their technical and social configurations. From this perspective media not only 'transmit' political ideas; they can themselves become sites or forms of political composition. This is the general framework from which I approach *Mute* magazine, a publishing project in which politics is manifest not only in its textual content but throughout its media form, its mutable media ecology.

I use here a methodology of the 'diagram' (as drawn loosely from Deleuze, 1988: 23–44). A diagram as I employ the term is a map of the parts and processes that comprise *Mute*'s media ecology, but it does not describe a static entity. Rather, I seek to present a *dynamic* cartography of *Mute*, to attend to the processes that the magazine enacts and undergoes. Neither does the diagram describe a unified entity, for *Mute*, as any media ecology, is a precarious arrangement of many different parts and processes with various and often divergent capacities and effects. These parts and processes can have *concrete* specificity (for example, the aesthetic qualities of 'Print on Demand', or the technical means of user-generated content) but a diagram must also attend to more *abstract* aspects that are no less part of the magazine's publishing ecology (for instance, the set of political philosophies *Mute* puts into play, or the temporal structure of magazine form). This method of mapping does not preclude theoretical reflection, and where appropriate I draw upon theories that are useful for fleshing out or speculating upon *Mute*'s media ecology. There is, however, no overarching theoretical perspective to the article; I have been keen as much as possible to be guided in my analysis by the empirical object of *Mute* itself. Indeed, it is *Mute* that suggested the very method of this article, for 'Ceci n'est pas un magazine' is itself a diagram of the magazine's hybrid form.

The European anti-*Wired*

The extent and manner of *Mute*'s interest in the politics of its media form is apparent from the title of its publishing manifesto, 'Ceci n'est pas un magazine'. *Mute is* a magazine – even in its current 'hybrid' incarnation the editorial group continue to use

this category to describe the publishing project as a whole (a convention I adopt here). The declaration 'this is not a magazine' thus signifies less a departure from that medium, than a reflexive critique and problematization of the magazine as media form. It conveys too a more general critique of identity that characterizes the magazine as a whole. I will discuss shortly the effects of this reflexive critique on *Mute*'s media form, but by way of introduction to *Mute* I come to them through some initial reflection on the critical orientations of the magazine's content and remit.

The current editor, Josephine Berry Slater, accounts for *Mute*'s rather unusual self-critical orientation by reference to the fine art backgrounds of its founders, Pauline van Mourik Broekman and Simon Worthington, an orientation she describes as a 'concerted battle against the dominant logic of specialization or static identity', a 'refusal to unconditionally embrace a genre, discipline or political position' (in Berry Slater and Van Mourik Broekman, 2009: 15, *Proud to be Flesh*, henceforth *PTBF*). But if *Mute*'s resistance to static identity is driven by a critical sensibility derived from art practice, it is also a product of the particular remit of the magazine, as expressed in its textual content. Initially focused on mid-1990s digital arts, *Mute* quickly came to concentrate on the nature and effects of new technologies across culture as a whole, an orientation apparent from the magazine's strapline, 'Culture and Politics after the Net'. Fascinated by the dramatic changes associated with pervasive computing and digitization, *Mute* distinguished itself by remaining resolutely critical of the explanatory frameworks, conceptual figures, and inflated political claims of emerging Net culture. It is as such well characterized by Berry Slater as the 'European anti-*Wired*' (*PTBF*: 25). Tracing the now familiar thematics of digital democracy, the cyborg, information commons, the creative economy, and immaterial labour, *Mute* has resisted succumbing to the seductions of identity that these cultures and concepts offer. Instead, it has positioned itself more often than not on the fault-line between the transformative communicational and associational capacities of digital technologies, and their proclivity for extending and perfecting the marketization of social relations. Indeed, the dynamics of neoliberal capital have increasingly come forward in *Mute* as a principal focus and explanatory framework. This could have produced a dogmatic or ideological orientation, but rather than a totalizing intellectual structure, the concern with neoliberal capitalism has been enmeshed with an eclectic range of empirical interests. As Van Mourik Broekman (2010: n.p.) contends, *Mute* seeks to 'treat capitalism as a governing global condition without losing out on the specificity of its manifestations'.

It is in this empirically routed focus on capitalism that *Mute*'s critique of identity is perhaps ultimately grounded. For whether concentrating on the speculative urban development of London's East End, Web 2.0 social media, the commercial deployment of 'culture', precarious labour, the financialization of the art market, or the security structures that underpin liberal models of citizenship, *Mute*'s understanding of the rapacious dynamics of capital allows for no secure point of critical identity. Indeed, any identity that these patterns of culture offer tends toward complicity (albeit often unwittingly) with structures of domination and exploitation – consider, for instance, the central place of 'the artist' in so-called urban regeneration and its class-cleansing effects, or the function of 'the citizen' in the demarcation of the national border and its 'illegal' migrant other.

It would be a mistake, however, to imagine that *Mute*'s critique of identity indicated a pristine critical position abstracted from the messiness of the social world, for it is a fully materialist configuration. If one theme has persisted through the magazine's eclectic range of inquiry it is a critique of the myths of 'immateriality' that have populated the field of techno-culture, be it in Gibsonian notions of cyberspace, Charles Leadbeater's visions of 'living on thin air', or post-autonomist formulations of cognitive labour. It is a critique that the print product of *Mute* bears on its cover, with the strapline 'Proud to be Flesh'. Flesh here is sensate matter, an association of bodies, needs, affects – not an ontological opposition to digital technology or a humanist assertion of a transcendent organism, but an open bio-social plane with which technology is irrevocably enmeshed. This, then, is the substance of the magazine, the material flux of which it is fully a part. The position is amply illustrated in the cover art to *Mute*'s 2009 anthology, *Proud to be Flesh*, with its highly mediated image of a map of the world rendered in marbled raw red meat. Confirming the radically techno-cultural nature of this image, Van Mourik Broekman (2010: n.p.) indicates that 'flesh' is a stand-in for 'material substrates' of all kinds, a move that returns us to the theme of the materiality of the magazine itself.

Embodied text and hybrid form

I have noted that *Mute* sees its critical content and material form as interlaced, but how does this occur in practice? My interest here is in the ways that the conceptual and political concerns of the magazine have actively reflected upon its media form and been expressed in its transformation as artefact and publishing project. Approached in this fashion, *Mute* is akin to what Katherine Hayles (2003: 277) calls an 'embodied text', where media materiality is not an inert condition but an emergent product of the exchange between textual content and material form: '*The materiality of an embodied text is the interaction of its physical characteristics with its signifying strategies*' [italics in original]. Hayles is principally concerned with the ways that *individual* literary works foreground one or more aspects of their material conditions, but *Mute*'s 'embodied text' is a polymorphous *aggregate*, emerging as it has through the interaction of numerous political problematics and multiple publishing platforms during a 17-year time frame.

Mute began publishing as a broadsheet using the same salmon pink paper stock as the *Financial Times*, and printed on the latter's Docklands presses during the machinery's night-time test-run (Van Mourik Broekman et al., 2008: 10, *Mute Magazine Graphic Design*, henceforth *MMGD*). The immediate impression this format conveys is of a disjunction between the very 'new media' content and graphics and the 'old' and establishment media form of the broadsheet. It troubles the linear narratives of 'the new' that have dominated the field of digital technology, an effect that is accentuated by the deliberate styling (as far as mimicking the font) on one of the very earliest newspapers, *The Daily Courant* (*MMGD*: 12). In addition, the format draws attention to the socio-economic structures within which *Mute*, as any other medium, is enmeshed: it is abundantly clear that the broadsheet was only possible by piggy-backing on the capital-intensive production process of the *Financial Times*, and its proximity to such an iconic source of business information produces unsettling associations for any reader who might imagine that this artefact of new media critique had escaped from the world of capital. For all its inventive

and singular style, the *Mute* broadsheet was, then, very much enmeshed in a world not of its own making, and saw its role at a formal level to foreground the material complexities and contradictions of such an existence.

Between issue numbers 9 and 24 *Mute* took a more recognizable magazine format (saddle-stitched, then perfect bound) before becoming a lavish coffee-table book with issues 25 to 29. The aesthetic qualities, design experiments, and publishing practicalities of this period of the magazine are addressed in considerable depth in *MMGD*, so I will not discuss those here. I want instead to focus on the subsequent period from 2005, when *Mute* fully embarked upon its 'hybrid publishing model' (Mute, 2002: 6). At this point I move, following *Mute*'s lead, to a more diagrammatic presentation of the magazine's publishing ecology.

Mute's hybrid publishing model is comprised of three aspects. At its most specific, hybridity here refers first to a mix of diverse and various *media platforms*. *Mute* magazine is a composite, currently, of the 'Metamute' website, a quarterly 'Print on Demand' booklet, the 'OpenMute' consultancy and training in Open Source software, design, and publishing (with its further initiative in independent and Peer2Peer distribution and ePublishing, 'More Is More'), as well as workshops, talks, and events (a notable instance was the November 2008 'Forever Blowing Bubbles' walking tour through the financial centre of London with Peter Linebaugh and Fabian Tompsett),[2] occasional pamphlets, and *Mute* listservs. Second, hybridity refers to a strategy of *editorial practice*, one that combines traditional top-down editorship and commissioning with participatory mechanisms and user-generated content. Third, and a product of these more technical features, hybridity is also a *character* of the magazine as a whole. This character of hybridity moves us away from thinking of a magazine as something centralized and integrated, and instead suggests a more distributed and processual entity, an open-ended arrangement of diverse practices and parts, where a hybrid is 'anything derived from heterogeneous sources, or composed of elements of different or incongruous kinds' (Dictionary.com). I will explore these hybrid features in their empirical specificity, but we need first to consider *Mute*'s highly original move of cartographically modelling its turn to hybrid publishing.

Political cartography is not just a means to map relations in the exterior world, it can also play a role in critical *self*-analysis, what Van Mourik Broekman (2004: 5) calls a reflexive 'autopoetic criticality'. Indeed, the two documents that most clearly set out the essence of *Mute*'s hybrid publishing model – 'Ceci n'est pas un magazine' and 'The Magazine that Mistook its Reader for a Hat!' (Mute, 2001, 2002) – are themselves cartographic entities, comprised of pictograms and diagrammatic movements as much as of text. Encouraged by *Mute*'s playful nomination of these documents as 'minifestos', it is instructive to approach them initially through the textual form of the 'manifesto'. Like the manifesto, these documents mark explicit points of radical departure, projecting into the future with a guiding intention that in turn – and this is the peculiar mode of authority of the manifesto form – reacts back upon the present of the magazine in order to force and channel transformation (Puchner, 2005). Yet while a conventional manifesto hides the cracks and instabilities of political practice with the projection of a strong and coherent group identity, *Mute*'s minifestos turn their gaze *internally*, to the normally 'invisible processes' of self-critique and development which they now bring
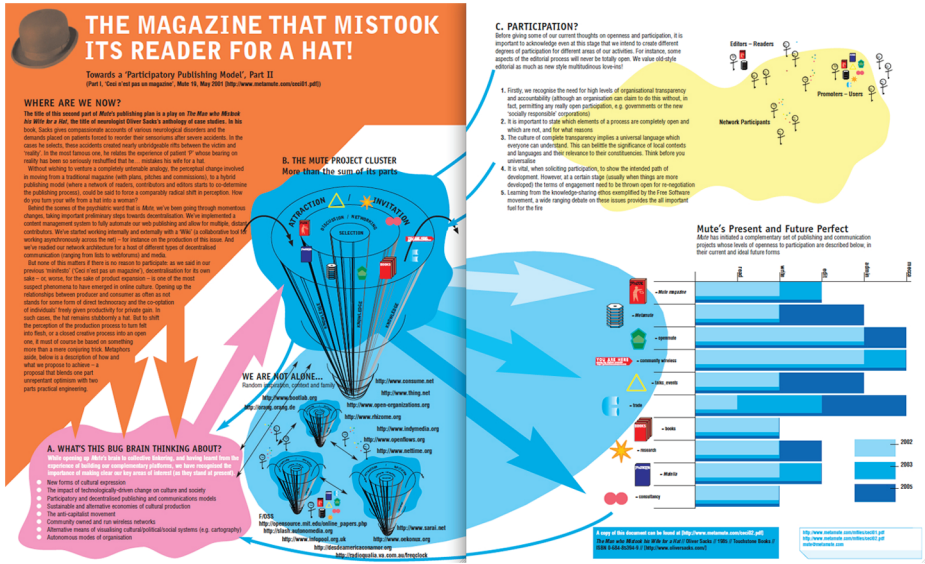
Figure 1. The magazine that mistook its reader for a hat.
Source: Mute (2002).

to the 'surface' of the project (Van Mourik Broekman, author interview). The specific problem the minifestos address is the opening of *Mute*'s previously closed editorial structure to user-participation. They do so by posing the problem as one of the media ecology of the magazine as a whole.

The particular cartographic solution is the representational device of a *vortex* – a considerably more dynamic image than Negri's octopus. If we follow the movements in Figure 1, the vortex (B) conveys a strong processual aspect to *Mute* that avoids the twin problems of the closed and bounded organization and the amorphous disorganized mass. It suggests an immersive entity whose inside is always an involution of its outside, a process operative through a permeable boundary. On the borders of the vortex we see the parameters of 'attraction' and 'invitation' that, in centripetal fashion, draw content into a point of concentration, *Mute* itself. This point of concentration is not, however, a unified body, but is comprised of the 'cluster' of distinct media platforms, represented here pictographically. These platforms both express their own particular properties (for instance, the feedback capacities of the Web forum or the slowness and portability of the print product, albeit that these exceed the representation here) and contribute to the hybrid whole of the magazine, sitting as the platforms do in the midst of the processual movement of the vortex. Importantly, the dynamic is not only centripetal, but centrifugal also, since magazine content and means of association are continually projected outwards to *Mute*'s readers and participants. This feature is displayed in part on the right of the diagram, where the distinct media platforms are represented according to their different degrees of user participation – for example, limited involvement in the commissioning of

Mute books, but a goal of participation in the editing and administration of Metamute – and this changing according to the progression of time. The bottom left quadrant (A) sets out the magazine's principal research interests, the content that the vortex surveys, develops, and challenges. And to the right of that is a selection of other vortex-like organizations with which the magazine is in intellectual and practical exchange. This, then, is the diagrammatic representation of *Mute*'s hybrid form; the point now and for the remainder of the article is to consider how it is manifest in empirical specificity.

Metamute, OpenMute, and user participation

Turning away from the 'pinnacle of print luxuriousness' that was *Mute* 29, the editorial team have framed the hybrid publishing model as a re-prioritization of *content*, a return to what was '"always already" *Mute*'s main interest' (Berry Slater in *PTBF*: 20; *MMGD*: 131). This could sound like a move away from the materialist themes that I have been pursuing, but it is actually through such re-focusing on content that *Mute* begins its *most* experimental engagement with media form. For it is characterized by a redoubled attention to the diversity of ways that content is produced, circulated, and consumed.

Of the different media platforms that comprise *Mute*'s hybrid publishing 'cluster' (listed above) I will focus primarily on the Metamute website, OpenMute, and, in the subsequent section, the printed quarterly. Running on the Open Source content management system Drupal, Metamute has moved from an adjunct to the printed magazine, to a medium that operates as an 'editorial engine' of *Mute* content as a whole, working in concert with the printed quarterly (Van Mourik Broekman, author interview). As one might expect, given the distributive capacities of new media, Metamute has been the main vehicle for *Mute*'s opening to a more participatory publishing model – through comments, news sections, and the submission of more substantial user contributions, including artworks. In this manner the Web medium enables *Mute* to enact a hybrid weave of distributed user-generated content – from various sites and political positions, in assorted argumentative modes, and at different institutional scales – with top-down editorial commissioning and research-based writing. But this participatory move does not occur without considerable self-critical reflection, taking the magazine beyond the conventional frameworks of decentralized user-generated content.

There is a tendency in contemporary discourses of decentralization and participation to treat them solely as *technological* issues and ignore the wider socio-economic relations within which new media are embedded, what *Mute* calls the 'mode of … social inscription' (Prug, 2002: 9). When attention is paid to the social inscription of participatory media, one sees how its apparently democratic aspects can actually serve to *mask* and *entrench* inequalities of access and power. For user participation and its discourses of empowerment are in fact central to the emerging business paradigms and valued subjective dispositions of commercial media. This is evident, for example, in the way that participation and decentralization function in Web 2.0 social media, with public production incited, channeled, formatted, data-mined, and monetized for private gain (Goldberg, 2010; Kleiner and Wyrick, 2007). *Mute* is thus clear that 'decentralisation for its own sake – or, worse, for the sake of product expansion – is one of the most suspect phenomena to have emerged in online culture' (Mute, 2002: 6). *Mute* resists such

tendencies by displacing the problem of participation from an exclusive concern with user-generated content onto a broad critical assessment (in the minifestos and elsewhere) of relations between the magazine and its users, and in a fashion that seeks to transform both terms.

OpenMute is especially interesting in this regard, a 'network resources project' that provides Web tools, training, and publishing resources to cultural and community groups at low or no cost (Prug, 2002). A project that began with *Mute*'s efforts to share its own experience of automating its Web publishing activity, OpenMute displays again the magazine's centrifugal practice of 'pushing … outwards' its internal organizational dynamics and infrastructures into the wider social arena, now to the extent of them becoming public resource (*MMGD*: 102). Crucially, the public domain is posed here not as a distinct social body, but rather as a question of *infrastructure*, of 'public knowledge architectures'. So framed, *Mute*'s formulation of public participation is an attempt to breach the divide between the often utopian political claims for new media and the less impressive reality of its use, given the common skills gap that prevents full utilization of Open Source and other Web and publishing resources. But in keeping with the magazine's keen sense of the social inscription of technology, OpenMute formulates its infrastructural provision not only as a *technical* problem, but as a *social* question also, making persistent reflection on the principle of participation and transparency central to the project. This has taken the form of collaboration with the 'Open Organizations' initiative, a Web platform that offers a set of analytic tools for organizational self-analysis.[3] And *Mute* has also engaged significantly with contemporary trends in organizational 'openness', challenging horizontal and collaborative modes of organization much as Jo Freeman's 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness' did for the politics of the 1970s, though now with special attention to the new media environment, enterprise culture, and critical psychology (King, 2004; Slater, 2004).

Print on Demand

I want at this stage to bring in the print product of *Mute*'s hybrid publishing ecology, the 'Print on Demand' (POD) quarterly booklet. Known as 'Volume 2' to mark the extent of the departure from previous formats, the POD booklet arose as a solution to two problems. First, POD helped overcome a persistent 'Web/Print dichotomy' in *Mute*'s publishing practice, facilitating the magazine's re-prioritization of content in a publishing platform that itself is something of a hybrid of print and digital technologies (*MMGD*: 130). Flexible and cheap, POD is a publishing platform somewhat in the mode of the post-Fordist mainstay of Just-in-Time production. It combines high-speed photostatic print with full colour covers in book editions of any size, from one copy upwards. Importantly for a small press with limited resources, POD holds the promise of a large degree of automation in the publishing process, with design and content management tools allowing for easy to-and-fro movement between Web and print platforms (a platform convergence capacity that OpenMute has since been developing through its speculative initiatives 'Web2POD' and 'Participatory Publishing System').

The product of POD technology in Volume 2 is a rather stripped-down printed object, it has a 'simplicity' and 'sobriety' that could not be more different to the rich design

qualities of its immediate print predecessor of *Mute* 29 (Van Mourik Broekman and Berry Slater, author interview). This could be a problem, given that a 'heightened sense' of experiment with magazine format and design has been a fundamental characteristic of *Mute* since inception (Van Mourik Broekman, author interview). Yet this characteristic of the magazine can result in a 'format-fetishism' that tasks the medium alone with the magazine's political agendas (Van Mourik Broekman and Berry Slater in Hinderer, 2009: n.p.). From this perspective the POD booklet offered a solution to a second problem, a situation where certain format and design preferences had gained an agential autonomy that risked distorting the project as a whole, while burdening its precarious ecology with the unsustainable labour- and design-intensive values of the coffee-table format.

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to interpret Volume 2 as characterized by the excision of interest in format and design. However much *Mute* by issue 29 had come to be a highly aestheticized print artefact, as the POD quarterly pushes at the limits of Web/print hybridity it may be handling a more *experimental* aesthetic than its print predecessor. Its strange yet seductive combination of book format and magazine page structure contains echoes of the Xerox styling of 1970s self-publishing, with its stark photostatic ink, pared-back urban and landscape photography, and the simple line-drawings and vector graphics of its page design. This is not, however, a backward-looking repetition, but an aesthetic product of the socio-technical relations of contemporary digital publishing, as the benefits of decentralization, automation, and low cost that came with the photocopier are found again in the new technological form of POD.

Distributed commissioning

Alongside user participation, a principal means by which *Mute* constitutes its vortex-like relations with its environment is through its commissioning practices. *Mute* has gathered a number of regular contributors more or less closely associated with the editorial group, but the vast majority of content is commissioned from new or occasional writers. The commissioning structure has two main aspects. First, it is dependent on an immersion in distributed communication networks. Web-based mailing lists have been central: 'for a long time Nettime supplied a large proportion of our writers. So we're on the list, we might be participating, we might be lurking, but we're logging, you know, voices and research agendas and so on' (Berry Slater, author interview). Second, such everyday tracking of communication networks is complemented by the effect of atypical events (for instance, the 2008 financial crisis or the current UK movement against public service cuts and student fees) that throw up fresh and various sets of writers as they allow the magazine to encounter a new 'density of social relations': 'then there are also these wonderful, kind of, events that come down and you don't see happening, and that really alter things again' (Van Mourik Broekman and Berry Slater, author interview).

This brings into view a dimension of *Mute*'s 'vortex' that is not so apparent in the cartographic representation discussed above. If *Mute*-as-vortex is a product of distributed networks and events, then it is less an entity located in one place, than a process that occurs across social space, constituted simultaneously at the different points in which a network or event is enfolded in *Mute*'s publishing practices and platforms. That is not to suggest that the magazine is an extensive survey of social space – with its limited

resources it could never be that. The multiple, layered, and contingent relations of *Mute*'s commissioning structure are better seen as constituting an *intensive* experience of social space, an experience apparent in this comment on the theme from Berry Slater: 'I don't think any of us believe that we are inhabiting our locality as a point or place in a simple way – we have a very fragmented and multiple way of being in the world' (author interview).

As a result of its distributed commissioning, *Mute* goes some way toward breaching the divide between professional and non-professional writer, assembling content from a mix of artists, activists, research students, academics, musicians, independent researchers, and novelists who are not confined to a particular sector or school but are selected by the adequacy of their relation to the problem or event at issue. It is not of course a fully inclusive 'global forum', but in *Mute*'s keen self-awareness of the barriers to participation (linguistic, technological, financial) and the relative privilege of its still predominantly first world contributors one can again observe the magazine's self-critical sensibility, its refusal to accrue satisfactions of identity from its current media form.

Magazine time and the archive

I have thus far approached *Mute*'s hybrid media form in predominantly spatial terms, but the magazine also has an important *temporal* dimension. Serial publication has of course been a central feature of the modern political newspaper and magazine, orchestrating the time of writing, the labour of production, and the patterns of consumption, just as these in turn impart a temporal pacing to the generation and circulation of political ideas. It is in reference to this temporal structure that *Mute*, with all its anomalous qualities, could most convincingly ground its claim to be a 'magazine', albeit that its regularity has been somewhat elastic: initially a quarterly, a one-year period of the saddle-stitched magazine reached a six-issue target, while in its coffee-table format it slowed to a bi-annual. But the political magazine has a more profound temporal dimension, as can be seen in the way that time is inflected in *Mute*'s magazine form.

Mute's hybrid form holds together both 'fast' and 'slow' publishing platforms. Metamute allows for turnaround from commissioning to publication in sometimes as little as two weeks, in a 'stream of content', as compared to up to six months with the coffee-table format, where articles would be 'banked' for simultaneous release (Worthington, author interview). However, the obvious benefit the Web provides of fast responsiveness to events is not given absolute priority. The nature of *Mute*'s distributed commissioning is such that it has shown a tenacious ability to stay at the leading edge of cultural developments, but the magazine's singularity lies elsewhere:

> We don't have the resources to be the first at the scene of the crime, so to speak – we don't have that kind of facility. What we can do is to come at something with an analysis that tries to shape the thing harder, or drive further under the surface of appearances of what is happening. And maybe that's the sort of thing that we do slightly pride ourselves on, and the ability also to be long range. I think the pieces that we've published by people like Anthony Davies on the neoliberalisation of culture in cultural institutions, for example, are almost future-casting. (Berry Slater, author interview)

This formulation of critically 'shaping' the world can be productively approached through the theme of time, where it is possible to discern a Bergsonian temporal sensibility. Unlike simple forms of life which react to perception with immediate action, in complex nervous systems a pause – a 'zone of indetermination' – is inserted between perception and action as perception forces a recall of memory, of past perceptions, which combine with the current perception to modulate action, to expand its possibilities and so act upon the future (Bergson, 1991: 32). It is not an overly metaphorical reading of this formulation to suggest that a political magazine operates in much the same way. The magazine is a forum, a zone of indetermination, where perception of the world is channelled through political memory – memory of the contributing author, of the reader, of the magazine's archive – in writing that critically shapes that perception and wrenches it from the narrow frameworks and automatic responses of the immediate present. In this way, the magazine's politicizing content (as we saw in Negri, this medium's central purpose) is combined with the unfurling of a poly-temporality. It is a temporality that operates in the midst of, and in opposition to, the flattened temporal structure of late capitalism, with its obsession with the 'now' – a structure that, for all its apparent modernity, actually impedes the truly new, for it isolates the present from the resources necessary to open it to anything other than a repetition of the same (Berry Slater, 2010).

Yet memory is not in itself enough, for it can have a decidedly conservative function, swamping the current perception with the past:

> With the immediate and present data of our senses, we mingle a thousand details out of our past experience. In most cases these memories supplant our actual perceptions, of which we then retain only a few hints, thus using them merely as 'signs' that recall to us former images. (Bergson, 1991: 33)

It is this possibility that concerns Van Mourik Broekman when she comments on the risk of an 'elephantine memory problem', where the editorial voice, political orientations, or aesthetic styles of *Mute* can be constrained by the magazine's 'sediment of history' (author interview). If *Mute* is to stay vital, then, the archive must itself be treated as an arena of the magazine's self-critique and structural remodeling, a practice exemplified by *Mute*'s recently published anthologies. These books in many ways replay the publishing transformation of Volume 2. One book, *MMGD*, assembles the magazine's image, page, and graphic design – along with a history of *Mute*'s publishing models – while the other, *PTBF*, compiles eighty-one articles from the magazine's history, each stripped of all images and overt design features. At close to six hundred pages *PTBF* is a hulk of a book, with an austerity that its sumptuous covers and glossy inserts only confirm by their stark contrast to all those words. And yet it is this anthology that is the truly inventive of the two. *MMGD* has the air of a swan song to *Mute* as a lavish print work, whereas *PTBF* is fully part of *Mute*'s hybrid publishing ecology, something of an agential object in its own right. Not a 'Best of *Mute*', *PTBF* is a critical treatment of the archive, putting accumulated text back into motion, drawing out the themes that have 'crystallized' from the magazine's multiple voices, and projecting possible routes of future inquiry (Van Mourik Broekman and Worthington, *PTBF*: 11).

PTBF was compiled by *Mute*'s editorial group: a second initiative toward the repurposing of *Mute*'s archive places more emphasis on the participation of the *user*. An

important aspect of the Metamute rationale is maximization of the data storage and retrieval capacities of the Web, so that it can transform the archive sedimented in linear fashion – the strata, if you will, of magazine issues – into a more horizontal or immanent plane, a disaggregated dataset ever leaning into the present. Using 300 plus 'tags', users can assemble multiple pathways through Metamute on topics ranging from Sound Art to Oil or Border Activism. As this metadata function is rolled out, the promise is that Metamute can act not only as a medium of the 'now', as the Web is commonly experienced, but as a membrane that multiplies the critical resources of the past in the present toward an expanded future.

Media independence and money

Given *Mute*'s critical credentials it may come as a surprise that the editorial group is explicit in describing *Mute* as a 'business', though they are clearly not the first radical publishing venture to do so. The case for the adoption of business practices in radical publishing was most influentially made by the Comedia group in the 1980s. The argument in essence is that if alternative media are to achieve longevity and escape the activist ghetto, they need to transform their organizational structures along capitalist lines, with a professionalization of management, marketing, and accountancy, and the development of an entrepreneurial attitude (Comedia, 1984). It is true, as Van Mourik Broekman and Worthington wryly note, that from a certain angle *Mute*'s story could indeed appear to resemble the 'clichéd image' of the creative 'do-it-yourself entrepreneurial venture' lionized in the neoliberal imaginary (*PTBF*: 12). And yet *Mute*'s standing as a business is located in relation to a somewhat different set of concerns to those propounded by Comedia, containing none of the latter's sense of the organizational superiority of business forms.

The politics of *Mute*'s commercial structure is best considered through the magazine's critique of the much-touted radical publishing principle of 'independence'. If independence is defined as economic self-sufficiency in a negative relation to state and corporate bodies, *Mute* as recipient of an Arts Council England grant (£68,912 in 2011/2012) is not an independent entity. Yet it is questionable whether 'independence' on this axis really is so progressive. The reach of contemporary capitalism is such that very little stands outside its powers of mobilization and capture; the linguistic structures and subjective habits by which we experience text, let alone modern publishing technologies and communication architectures, are all thoroughly permeated by money. To proudly declare media independence under such conditions is to be at best naive, and at worst to disguise (however unintentionally) the real structures of capital and power. The point is clear in Van Mourik Broekman's rhetorical question:

> beyond the funding debate, if the price of a Western European country's culture is disguised by social welfare, mature technological infrastructures and a history of imperialism, does this elevate its 'independence' over global production cultures that appear more compromised? (2004: 4)

In this light, *Mute*'s self-designation as a 'business' is a recognition and public display of its thorough implication in capitalist relations, a condition that requires not

declarations of independence but an ever compromised 'choreography of situation': 'the only viable methodology is to be alert and totally engaged in the contradictions of our position/ing, never presuming an organisational innocence' (Van Mourik Broekman, 2004: 5; Van Mourik Broekman and Berry Slater in Hinderer, 2009: n.p.). There are also more practical considerations: the 'business' form is the means of orchestrating the magazine's financial relations. Central to *Mute*'s experimental publishing ecology has been a concern at each stage of its transformation to find an economic model that allows the magazine to endure and staff and authors to be paid. *Mute* here shares with Comedia an interest in prioritizing financial viability and avoiding the self-exploitation of 'free labour' that plagues independent media initiatives (Comedia, 1984: 97; *MMGD*: 130). But there is an important, if subtle, difference. The Comedia model is predicated on a decidedly uncritical notion that business structures and commercial media practices are neutral sets of tools that can be repurposed for leftist content. It is an approach that jettisons the politics of media form in an accommodation with commercial norms on the wager that this can result in relative success for left wing media. Experience suggests that it is actually far from clear that commercial success in these terms is so readily achievable (Khiabany, 2000). Regardless, *Mute*'s attitude is somewhat different, characterized not by accommodation with commerce, but by a struggle *against* it.

This approach is well framed by Deleuze in discussion of the relation between money and cinema. Cinema is an 'industrial art' not because of its technological form but its 'internalized relation with money', subject as cinema is to money's harsh law that a minute of image costs a day of collective work (1989: 77). There is no accommodation here. For any cinema worthy of the name, this is a relation of struggle: money is cinema's 'most intimate and most indispensable enemy' (1989: 77). Now, the struggle that characterizes *Mute*'s production is not dissimilar. The magazine's efforts toward a financially sustainable publishing model are not premised on achieving a point of happy accommodation with money – how could they be, when the structural antagonism of capital is such a persistent theme of *Mute*'s content? The effort, rather, is to *wrench* sustainability from the essentially hostile structure of commerce, a task with an ever-receding horizon of success. Accommodation would of course make things easier (as it does in the bulk of banal industrial art) but that would be to refute the magazine's singularity, since a condition for commercial success is to make any number of changes to form and content. One thus sees in *Mute* the paradoxical and contradictory combination of efforts to pursue commercial sustainability – subscriptions, advertising, micro-payment structures, devolved sales, grant moneys, consultancy – with the decidedly non-commercial practices of refusing to build a stable profile or court a market niche, the adoption of free content and anti-copyright mechanisms, and direct critique of the governance agendas of funding bodies.[4] As a 'business', *Mute* is a strange commercial and anti-commercial hybrid; in the struggle against money it could not be otherwise.

Conclusion

I will close by returning to the minimum definition of the political magazine that I drew from Negri. Just as in Negri's description of *Futur Antérieur*, *Mute* is driven by its politicizing content, its critique of neoliberal capitalism across the latter's myriad empirical

manifestations. And in accord with Negri again, *Mute* is radically open to its environment, the social field within which it exists and to which it seeks to contribute political insight and association. There is a resolute materialism to *Mute*'s understanding of the social field, a materialism that foregrounds the techno-cultural character of human life and sociality. Indeed, it is a materialism that sweeps up even the medium by which the critique is made, for *Mute*'s very *form* as a magazine becomes subject to political critique and experimentation, a reflexive process that goes by the slogan, 'Ceci n'est pas un magazine'. In this, *Mute* moves our understanding of the political magazine beyond the definition found in Negri. For politics is no longer located only in the magazine's politicizing content, but in its media form as a whole, a form *Mute* characterizes as a processual and distributed 'vortex', a hybrid mix of diverse and various media platforms and processes.

This is what makes *Mute* such an intriguing and exciting venture for those interested in the future of political media. *Mute* offers not another example of uncritical fixation on the technical capacities of new media, but an 'embodied text' that weaves together content and form across the very diverse possibilities of expression and association that media can offer, 'old' and 'new' alike. *Mute*'s hybrid publishing ecology is, of course, somewhat precarious, for while each of its parts contributes to the magazine as a whole, they also pull in various directions with competing capacities and effects. The risk is that the magazine 'go entropic', as the editorial group have evocatively put it, losing coherence and collapsing into its environment (*MMGD*: 130). But *Mute*'s precarious character is also a sign and source of its vitality, for it is self-critical experimentation at the limits of each aspect of its media ecology that drives change in the magazine's hybrid form.

A number of avenues for future research are indicated by this article, of which I will note three. The material form of *art* publishing has become a site of challenging critical analysis (Allen, 2011; Drucker, 2004), but the same cannot be said of political publishing, the rich material culture of which is too often lost to an over-concentration on the informational aspects of media. Empirical research in this direction can learn much, as I have here, from work in literature, art, and media theory on embodied text, media form, and digital capacity, but it would also benefit from bringing issues in political theory to bear on the practice of political publishing. I have indicated some of these issues, but, as any diagram of a complex media ecology, this map is incomplete, and I have left for future research consideration of the important political issues of editorial voice, collective subjectivity, and 'the public', all of which are reframed by *Mute* and the distributive capacities of new media. Second, I have mentioned *Mute*'s relation to art practice and its initiatives in Open Source content management systems, but there is more to learn here from the experimental way that *Mute* brings information design into relation with graphic design. This is an especially promising conjunction for further empirical investigation, since *Mute*'s experiments on this front are tested against a diverse range of publishing constraints and political agendas. Last, I have employed a methodology of the 'diagram' to map the parts and processes of *Mute*'s publishing ecology, but it remains a largely textual endeavour here. Learning from *Mute*'s minifestos, it is an enticing thought that the methodology of the diagram could be expanded with the use of visual methods, so as to draw out further the material qualities and dynamics of experimental media forms.

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Notes

1. This article draws on an interview I held with the founders and directors of *Mute*, Pauline van Mourik Broekman and Simon Worthington, and the editor, Josephine Berry Slater, in London on 7 September 2010.
2. See www.metamute.org/en/content/video_forever_blowing_bubbles_a_walking_tour_with_ peter_linebaugh_and_fabian_tompsett_2008
3. See www.open-organizations.org
4. For the latter, see Van Mourik Broekman's (2011) response to the recently announced 100% cut in *Mute*'s ACE grant (an experience *Mute* shares with a disproportionately large slice of the digital arts sector). This text draws on ten years of *Mute* research into the governance agendas of arts funding and opens a new front on the politics of new media, as regards ACE's conservative reframing of new media merely as a resource for extending the reach of conventional art practice.

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