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Sabina Fazli

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Micro-Archives and the Survival of Print in *Momma Tried* and *Sabat*

SABINA FAZLI

Georg-August-Universität Göttingen
sabina.fazli@phil.uni-goettingen.de

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on two independently published magazine projects, *Sabat* (2016–) and *Momma Tried* (2013–). It introduces *Sabat* and *Momma Tried* in the context of the contemporary independent publishing boom and considers their engagement with the print magazine form as affording a micro-archival stance towards the near past and personal histories as well as the magazines' experiments with their material form. London-based *Sabat* appropriates the look and formula of women's fashion and lifestyle magazines but reworks these templates to create a 'lifestyle magazine for witches' in a polished minimalist design. In three themed issues, *Sabat* establishes a meta-narrative of its own death which issue four materially enacts. *Momma Tried* is rooted in the art scene of New Orleans and started out as a celebration and record of the local community of creatives before the third issue turns the magazine into a 'cyborg' combining the print object with an app to create an 'installation'. Both magazines evoke print as a way of conserving and archiving a specific moment but also engage in experiments that dissolve the magazine form, undermining its archiving function by staging the magazines' 'deaths' as transformations.

KEYWORDS

Independent magazines, artists' magazines, micro-archive, death of print, materiality, remediation, *Momma Tried*, *Sabat*

Introduction

Momma Tried (New Orleans, 2013–) and *Sabat* (London, 2016–) are initiatives steered by individuals without backing from publishers who relied on small or crowdfunded budgets, low print runs, improvisation, and content at least partly sourced through friends and personal networks. The two magazines maintain the overall forms of the women’s fashion and lifestyle magazine and the literary and art magazine, respectively, which ensures that readers are able to navigate their content, while the rules inherent in the formats may be harnessed or subverted.

Momma Tried publishes art, fiction, poetry, photography, and pieces of art and culture criticism in perfect-bound issues of 160 pages in roughly A4 format (Fig. 1). The magazine is edited by Micah Learned and Theodora Eliezer, two New Orleans-based artists who initially intended to showcase the talent of the city’s creative scene in a ‘super local newsprint-style nude zine [made] with our friends’.¹



Fig. 1 *Momma Tried*, nos 1, 2, and 3; covers as advertised in [webshop](#)

The first issue of *Momma Tried* appeared in 2013 as a glossy rather than newsprint publication; the second followed in 2014 and the third in 2018, with two more issues planned.² The printing costs were covered by Kickstarter campaigns. As a form of interaction with (potential) readers as engaged stakeholders, the use of crowdfunding in the indie segment may be described as a postdigital ‘entanglement’ of print and web. *Momma Tried* embraces and capitalizes on what Lisa Gitelman has described as ‘the eventfulness of publication [...] complicated by the scale and temporalities of the web’.³ Involving readers in the ‘event’ of publishing and punctuating the time between issues with updates expose parts of magazine production that are hidden behind mainstream titles or are professionally staged in behind-the-scenes specials. *Momma Tried* also hosts a shop on a dedicated homepage that sells copies of the magazine and various social media channels that promote the work of their contributors and announce upcoming events. Other dispersed content on video platforms, editor and contributor homepages, and online interviews provide paratext for the print publication, creating a visible online network that intersects with its pages.

- 1 Theo Eliezer, Micah Learned, and Jon Dean, ‘*Momma Tried* on Southern Identity and Becoming a Nudie Mag Cyborg’, *wussymag.com* (3 July 2017) [accessed 18 December 2019].
- 2 The print run was 1,000 each, selling for USD 25 per copy. The limited edition cover version of issue two (showing a penis and scrotum protruding from a plain pink wall) was priced at USD 35. As of December 2019, this edition was sold out.
- 3 Lisa Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 149.

On Kickstarter, *Momma Tried*'s first issue is introduced as 'a print-only conceptual nudie mag exhibiting art, writing, and non-heteronormative perspectives on sexuality', and Eliezer elaborates on her homepage that 'Issue 1 is the first chapter of a five part project examining 20th century media's decline in the 21st century. [...] Through the five part arc of *Momma Tried* magazine, we confront popular cooperative fictions and explore the adage "print is dead," examining the implications of media being subject to mortality.'⁴ This conceptualization of *Momma Tried* as an 'installation' sits beside online content that shows Eliezer and Learned's shooting editorial photography at home in an intimate and laid-back setting that frames the magazine as the product of a dedicated circle of friends.⁵ This 'making of' at the top of *Momma Tried*'s first Kickstarter page presents the magazine's claim to authenticity by staging and performing its DIY ethos.

London-based *Sabat* was launched in 2016 and came to a provisional conclusion the following year after three issues of 150 to 280 pages each in the form of 'a lifestyle magazine for witches'. This trilogy, consisting of themed issues, the *Maiden*, the *Mother*, and the *Crone*, has since been reprinted twice.⁶ (Fig. 2) Although initially limited to these three issues, *Sabat* returned in 2017 with a fourth issue titled *Elements*, which abandoned the format of the lifestyle magazine. Since then, a fifth (2018, an actual Tarot deck sold as *Sabat 5: Le Tarot de L'étoile Cachée*) and a sixth (2019, *Waiting for the Temple*, a cloth-bound exhibition catalogue) have been released, continuing the consecutive numbering begun with the 'trilogy' as well as its visual identity in the use of fonts, logo, and design, but abandoning the magazine format.



Fig. 2 *Sabat*, nos 1, 2, and 3; covers as advertised in [webshop](#)

Editor Elisabeth Krohn, in collaboration with art director Cleber Rafael de Campos, developed *Sabat* from a zine that was part of course work in fashion journalism which she then extended to the full-blown first issue.⁷ Other contributors include the founder's friends and artists active under the hashtag #witchesofinstagram, which accounts for much of the content and sensibility of the magazine and will be

4 Momma Tried, 'Momma Tried', *kickstarter.com* (last updated 6 January 2018) [accessed 20 December 2019]; Theo Eliezer, 'Momma Tried issue 1', *theoeliezer.com* (n.d.) [accessed 20 December 2019].

5 Momma Tried, 'Promotional video', *kickstarter.com* (2013) [accessed 20 December 2019].

6 The original print run was 1,000 copies, the two reprints amounted to 2,000 copies each. The cover price ranges from £9.50 for the *Maiden Issue* to £14 for the *Crone Issue*, *Elements*, and *Waiting for the Temple*.

7 Elisabeth Krohn and Salma Haidrani, 'Sabat is the Magazine for the Modern Witch', *vice.com* (6 October 2016) [accessed 19 December 2019].

discussed below.⁸ Like *Momma Tried*, *Sabat* follows an overarching conceptualization, the incarnation of the neo-pagan triple goddess, *Maiden*, *Mother*, and *Crone*, with each issue exploring one of these archetypal figures inflected by feminist and popular cultural representations. Interviews feature heavily in all three issues (and again in issue six) and regularly begin with the interviewer asking the question, ‘What does the word Witch mean to you?’ This centring of feminine identities evokes the strategies of women’s magazines that interpellate readers through demographic determinants and feminine roles, tailoring their content to their realization in consumption. In *Sabat*’s ad-free environment, the interest in feminine roles, experiences, and perspectives remains intact, albeit organized around the image of the witch rather than conventional feminine identities. Through the trilogy’s successive biographical and metaphorical ‘ages’ and the prominence of the witch as the magazine’s proffered subject, *Sabat* reconfigures the voice of the women’s magazine around its own version of ‘dark femininity’. The trilogy looks like a professionally-made fashion and lifestyle magazine featuring recognizable genres filled with textual and visual content organized around the figure of the witch. It includes a recurring ‘events’ schedule listing astrological occurrences and pagan feasts, interviews with self-professed witches and artists, fashion photography, and shorter editorial pieces, often written by Krohn herself, that explicate and confront mythological, folkloric, and popular cultural expressions of the respective archetype and its integration with the figure of the witch.⁹ The design relies on a monochrome colour scheme, balanced, fashionably minimalist layouts, tenebrous photography, and black and white drawings and illustrations, as well as the use of unusual fonts that add to the ‘occult’ visual identity but avoid any semblance to New Age kitsch in favour of restrained minimalism and use of white space.

The trend of returning to reading and making independent print magazines has been turned into commercial businesses. In the case of the prominent, London-based scene, the online shop and subscription service Stack and the online and brick-and-mortar magCulture are commercial hubs that have grown through and facilitated indie magazine publishing and appear to be profitable despite the niche appeal of their products. Given the fragmented field and often small scale of indie publishing, these outlets are powerful gatekeepers determining which magazines receive exposure within the scene and, hence, the possibility of attracting readers and increasing sales. They thus constitute bottlenecks that promote preselected titles, filtered according to the community’s habitus and taste, which determines the visibility of particular styles and identities within the indie publishing scene and the exclusion of others. As a practice that builds on significant investment of not only economic but also cultural and ‘subcultural capital’, participating in independent magazine publishing and consumption reproduces classed and raced perspectives.¹⁰ ‘Subcultural capital’ draws attention to forms of ‘hipness’ and ‘being in the know’ as the resources mobilized by clubbers to participate in dance scenes. Sarah Thornton posits that subcultural capital is less ‘class-bound’ than cultural capital.¹¹ The term is helpful to think about the indie magazine scene as

8 Hashtags (#) are the popular filing and retrieval system used on social media platforms to categorize and interlink posts. They can be created and used by all users to highlight topics. Posting to and following the activity under a hashtag creates communities, which, however, are not closed off but remain open and visible to other users.

9 Other recognizable pieces are, for example, recipes in the *Mother Issue* (*Sabat*, no. 2, p. 175); the *Crone Issue* has a horoscope, adapted to the influence of Saturn (identified with the crone archetype) (*Sabat*, no. 3, pp. 152–55), and the *Maiden Issue* provides true ‘service journalism’ in a review and short evaluations of different tarot decks (*Sabat*, no. 1, pp. 46–47).

10 Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2013), pp. 27–28.

11 Thornton, pp. 27–28.

structured through access to capitals. The utopian classlessness of clubbing, however, certainly does not apply to indie magazine making, which, deliberately drawing on a prestigious heritage medium, requires significant financial investment both from buyers and makers in terms of skills, hardware, contacts, and money. Moreover, the nostalgic appeal of print and paper that motivates many editors and readers evinces a sensibility that may socially insulate the group both through high cover prices and socialization as an educated appreciator of print.¹² Ethnographic studies of local scenes and critical assessments of their politics are, however, still lacking. Questions of inclusion and exclusion, representation, and negotiation between commercial and indie may yield critical insights into the social organization and self-representation of practitioners.

In the following, I will consider the aesthetics of the magazines rather than the cultural politics of their production. In her overview article on the rise, success, and consolidation of contemporary independent magazine publishing, Megan Le Masurier asks: ‘Why would the younger “digital natives” not just *persist* with one of the oldest communication technologies, paper, in one of the oldest media formats, the magazine, but actively *choose* it?’¹³ When we read *Sabat* and *Momma Tried*, two themes seem to stand out: the magazine as a micro-archive addressing (initially) a small, committed community of readers and the possibility to experiment and play with its material form. Both are framed by digital media that facilitate indie print production while also providing opportunities for individual micro-archival curation on blogs and platforms with which magazines engage in terms of both content and design.

‘A Slice of Time’: Indie Magazines as Micro-Archives

Momma Tried and *Sabat* offer readers the opportunity to embrace a micro-archival stance towards the present and the past. Both target a very specific, circumscribed audience and underwrite their content with references to a shared, generational past and/or relate this to backward glances toward the magazine form itself. Although they are ad-free, *Sabat* and, especially, *Momma Tried* feature material that openly references magazine advertisements or insinuates ad-like content into the spaces between content. Rather than promoting opportunities for consumption, the magazines use these pages to stage intertextual references or quote popular past aesthetics. Under the rubric of the micro-archive, I propose to draw together some aspects of these magazine’s positionality within a web of historical references in their pages that affectively engage the reader in reflection by providing a shared horizon of allusions and tastes that establish (sub) cultural genealogies and historical mappings.

Independent magazines are generally defined by their lack of organizational and fiscal affiliation with a corporate publisher and their policy-making power affecting editorial decisions. However, they may also be grouped as ‘specialist’ magazines catering

12 A study of 194 German and international indie titles has found their median price to be €16.28 which is three times higher than the price of the average customer magazine. Christiane Dähn, ‘Junge Publisher lieben Print – wie die Independent Magazine-Szene sich für gedruckte Zeitschriften begeistert’, *Editorial Media* (2 October 2019) [accessed 21 February 2020]

13 Megan Le Masurier, ‘Independent Magazines and the Rejuvenation of Print’, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 15.4 (2011), 383–98 (p. 385), emphases in the original.

to 'a public "sphericule".¹⁴ For these, the nexus of taste, 'subcultural capital', and the sorting and appropriation of earlier styles provide a sense of historical positionality and identity.¹⁵ The two magazines under discussion are designed and presented in a way that suggests the editors' consciousness of the magazine as an archive of fluid scenes that assemble on- and offline, providing their 'sphericules' with a platform and point of reference for a community's past and present. Gwen Allen's description of magazine editing as 'enter[ing] into a heightened relationship with the present' promises the later recovery of this moment on re-reading.¹⁶ Rather than capitalizing on the ephemerality of the magazine medium, indie magazines emphasize their status as collectibles and records of very specific moments that fall outside any kind of official notation.

Elisabeth Krohn talks about the *Sabat* trilogy in terms of conserving a moment, or encapsulating 'a slice of time', describing the magazine as completely steeped in the present of mid-2010, but with an eye on future readers.¹⁷ The 'slice of time' concerns the experience of a niche public, largely communing online, and set to vanish with changes to its web platforms and the passing of subcultural fashions. Inspired by the hashtag #witchesofinstagram, which collects individual users' appropriations of the aesthetics, lifestyle, and identity of the 'modern witch,' *Sabat* was published with the existing online community and virtual 'Instagram coven' in mind. Writing about fashion trends of the 2016 spring-summer season, an article at the front of the *Maiden Issue* programmatically diagnoses that 'the occult is having a pop cultural moment'.¹⁸ The hashtag brings together a taste community that is rich in visual expressions but lacking a print outlet. By moulding them into a magazine, *Sabat* lends the virtual community of witches, their personalities, aesthetics, and expressions a durable shape that inserts them into the catalogue of symbolically legitimized lifestyles, re-visitable in a trilogy of hefty volumes.

The *Maiden Issue* opens with a feature written by Krohn titled '#Witches' that surveys the landscape of the hashtagged Instagram feed and its main contributors, who are identified by their social media handles. Krohn writes that 'Moody and monochrome, the aesthetics of the eerie squares range from dark Victoriana to poetic renditions of nature [...] creating a new visual hierarchy that pushes the ancient into the instant' and hence emphasizes the close relationship of the print magazine to social media.¹⁹ The magazine reprints and exhibits these 'squares' in its pages by blowing up the Instagram images and granting them pride of place with surrounding white space instead of the clutter of social media feeds. *Sabat's* entanglement with social media continues. Krohn describes the volumes as 'keepsakes' and 'relics', highlighting their materiality.²⁰ In a recursive loop, copies of the magazine have been made the object of photography posted on Instagram, displaying 'flat-lay' arrangements of the thus 'enchanted' print object

14 Tim Holmes and Jane Bentley, 'Specialist Magazines as Communities of Taste', in *The Routledge Companion to British Media History*, ed. by Martin Conboy and John Steel (Milton Park, Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2014), 273–84 (p. 273). Holmes and Bentley borrow the term 'sphericule' from Todd Gitlin. Gitlin coined it to denote the medial fragmentation of the 'public sphere' into smaller publics defined by their own interests and identities expressed in a range of medial outlets. He argues that the model of the all-encompassing sphere (in the singular) is now increasingly made up of smaller medial sites, especially on the internet. Todd Gitlin, 'Public Sphere or Public Sphericules?', in *Media, Ritual and Identity*, ed. by Tamar Liebes and James Curran (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 168–74 (p. 173).

15 Thornton, p. 26.

16 Gwen Allen, *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011) p. 1.

17 Elisabeth Krohn and Sabina Fazli, telephone interview (9 July 2019).

18 Lucius Matthiesen, 'Black Magic Fashion', *Sabat*, no. 1 (2016), 34–37 (p. 35).

19 Elisabeth Krohn, '#Witches: #WitchesofInstagram', *Sabat*, no. 1 (2016), 16–21 (p. 17).

20 Krohn and Fazli.

among other magical objects on staged altars.²¹ As a ‘slice of time’ was constituted to some extent by preserving a ‘slice’ of a different medium in its pages, *Sabat* considers the magazine to be a durable space, as opposed to online media. Remediation hence emerges as a defining gesture, establishing *Sabat*’s aesthetics and articulating hashtagged online discourse with the magazine format.

The editor’s letter in the first issue begins with Krohn’s personal and generational positioning within multiple layers of revivals and their communities, inviting the reader to participate in the present inclusive ‘coven’ by drawing on shared past media experiences:

In my 1990s fantasy, Witches are the quintessential cool girls. Clad all in black, their makeshift covens made a variety of characters possible [...]. More hard-hitting than Buffy, I wanted them always on my team to avenge all injustice. I yearned for their sisterhood (*Charmed*). [...] Encouraging a coven of thought, [the *Maiden Issue*] preaches a fearless approach to finding the powers within. *Sabat* champions tactile creativity in this screen-oriented world.²²

Krohn’s description ironically highlights the predicament of many independent print projects. Their production, design, marketing, and distribution is crucially reliant on digital media, especially Instagram, while editorials and paratexts celebrate reading print as an ‘independent’, individually resistant practice defined as against digital. This of course erases the obvious infrastructures underlying the production, and, more often than not, acquisition of the magazines. The indie habitus is crucially tied to the medium providing a nostalgic form of sensuous, tactile experience that associates generationality with specific media. In the quotation, Krohn introduces *Sabat* through its editorial persona and a call to remember the 1990s, the editor’s and implied readers’ decade of teen age as defined by TV rather than online media, and invites them to understand the sociality of the magazine as a similarly offline ‘coven’.²³ All of these references establish a shared cultural and historical space organized around key texts (*Buffy* and *Charmed*) and affects (‘tactile creativity’ and longing to belong to a ‘sisterhood’) that delineate a specific gendered and ethnic generational experience expressed in the ‘heritage medium’ print. *Sabat*’s glance at the 1990s and its positioning of print vis-à-vis screen media establishes a particular chronotope of the audience’s pristinely imagined pre-digital teen age, shaped by the popularity of empowering images of teenage witches in movies and TV series revolving around coming-of-age narratives. Although conceived as a riposte to women’s magazines, *Sabat* still follows some mainstream glossy tenets, visible most clearly in the invariably youthful cover models on all three issues whose half-body shots illustrate the respective ‘age’ running through the issue.

Throughout the trilogy, monochrome spreads with large-lettered text are interspersed between conventional editorials. These spreads are not listed in the tables of contents. In their design, they evoke the mode of advertisements in an otherwise ad-free environment and punctuate the flow of reading. The spreads stage slogan-like text in the kind of self-assured, context-free, and space-consuming mode that visually amplifies messages, usually in a promotional manner. Here, they prominently display messages from different periods and media in a visual and textual idiom that evokes advertising: in the *Maiden Issue*, quotes from the 1996 movie *The Craft* and a critical evaluation of

21 Krohn and Fazli. ‘Flat-lay’ refers to an arrangement of objects on a flat surface photographed from a bird’s eye perspective. Originating in magazine design, flat lays, or ‘knolling’, are a popular genre on Instagram.

22 Elisabeth Krohn, ‘Editor’s Letter’, *Sabat*, no. 1 (2016), 11.

23 This is made clear in the title ‘Sabat’, which evokes the regular ritual gathering of witches at a specific time and place.

the teen witch are set in VujaDe (Fig. 3), a disorienting type based on different scripts and symbols that assign different characters to each letter (here incorporating the circular *Sabat* logo).²⁴ The *Mother Issue* reprints text from 1980s feminist conceptual art by Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger in bold and large-lettered Larish Alte type.²⁵ In the *Crone Issue*, three spreads are dedicated to lines from *Macbeth*, as spoken by the ‘weird sisters’, in raised print that is only legible when the page is angled towards the light as the lines run across the half-page and are in black and white, while mid-shot portrait photographs are placed on one page facing an opposite monochrome black page.²⁶ Together with double-page illustrations evoking woodcuts and etchings, and cropped reproductions from historical works, these spreads provide a foil for pieces that engage with the ‘hyper-present’, often situated in social media.²⁷

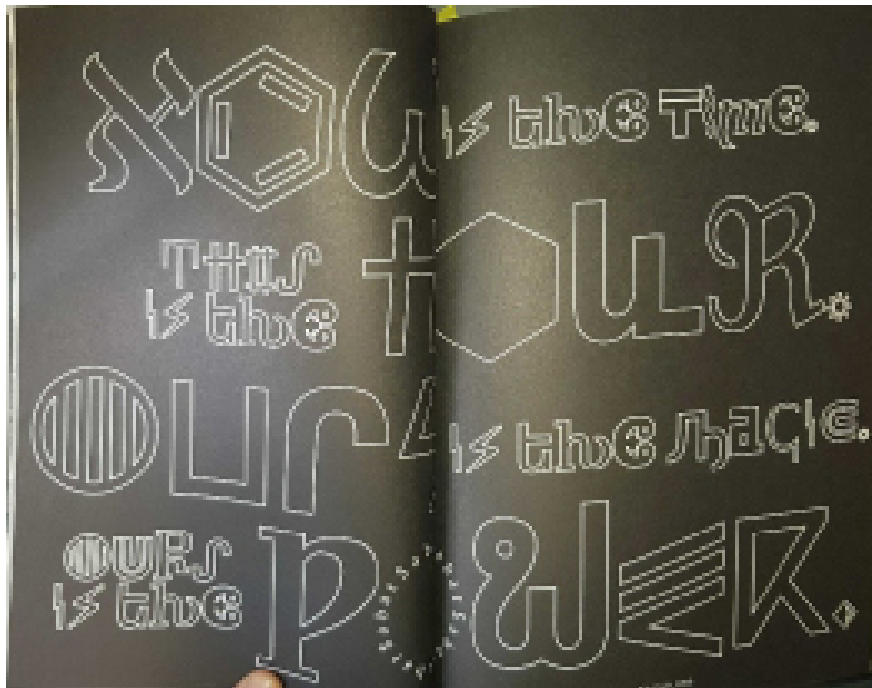


Fig. 3 Cleber Rafael de Campos, ‘Now is the Time’, *Sabat*, no. 1 (2016) 28–29

Momma Tried may be read under the same rubrics applied to *Sabat*: the sense of a micro-archive of a particular moment and a rich referential web that extends to the intermediate past of the twentieth century and its magazine culture, involving the reader in explorations of a period that was also the magazine industry’s heyday. In the promotional video on Kickstarter, Eliezer describes the experience *Momma Tried*

24 Cleber Rafael de Campos, ‘Now is the time, this is the hour, ours is the magic, ours is the power’, *Sabat*, no. 1 (2016), 28–29; ‘Exorcise your rites’, *Sabat*, no. 1 (2016) 66–67; ‘The new “Good Witch” [...]’, *Sabat*, no. 1 (2016), 106–07.

25 ‘Your body is a battleground’, *Sabat*, no. 2 (2016) 26–27; ‘It is in your self-interest to find a way to be very tender’, *Sabat*, no. 2 (2016), 128–29.

26 ‘When shall we three meet again? [...]’, *Sabat*, no. 3 (2017) 42–43; ‘When the hurlyburly’s done, when the battle’s lost and won. [...]’, *Sabat*, no. 3 (2017) 138–39; ‘Fair is foul, and foul is fair’, *Sabat*, no. 3 (2017), 160–61.

27 For example, a spread from Ernst Haeckel, *Ontogeny* (1866) in *Sabat*, no. 2, pp. 44–45, showing the development of fetuses in different species (with the *Sabat* logo circling the head of a salamander fetus) and a double page in the *Maiden Issue* from Frederick Thomas Elworthy, *The Evil Eye* (1895), displaying gestural codes. Ursula K. Heise, *Chronoschisms: Time, Narrative, and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 26.

attempts to capture in terms of the period's rediscovery: 'You are in your grandfather's basement, and you find a stack of *Playboys*', bringing back to life the curious mixture of titillating images and serious reportage dug up underground.²⁸ Micah Learned elaborates the encounter as nostalgic:

There is a there there. Print is more than just a form of media. It is an object. It is touched. It is carried. It is archived. It is forgotten. Perhaps it is found. [...] We created *Momma Tried* partly because we wanted to encapsulate a time, to store it for a future when a nostalgia for the then past would allow the truest forms of its meaning to be revealed.²⁹

Both statements introduce the notion of the magazine as a low-threshold record in a familial setting that reaches back into a generationally defined mid-distanced past from whence the pile of copies speaks of a bygone era of print through material recovery.

Momma Tried, based in New Orleans and rooted in the local art scene, was from the outset designed as a limited, intimate archival space in response to the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in August 2005 and the resulting shifts in the city's demographic:

'When we began the project, we knew that we wanted to create an archive of our community [...],' Eliezer and Learned write. 'The inspiration to document our friends came both from a fascination with the legacy of the Factory and all of the iconic people that were part of Warhol's orbit, as well as a personal sense of sentimentality and impermanence post-Katrina'.³⁰

Aiming 'to display and archive the zeitgeist [...] [Eliezer and Learned] wanted to portray the people here as legendary before anyone else knew'.³¹ These themes are brought together in the photo series *Tomorrow's Parties* (Fig. 4), modelled on Richard Avedon's 1969 portraits of Warhol and the Factory (Fig. 5).³² While Avedon's triptych suggests an impossible simultaneity, because some of the subjects appear twice, the series of spreads in *Momma Tried* depicts a temporal sequence, with the last spread marking the subjective end of the party with its blurred focus: The camera here identifies with an intoxicated or high party guest, suggesting a much more intimate set-up and homodiegetic position for the camera, while channelling and ironically refracting the legendary status of the intertext in *Momma Tried's* miniaturized and serial reinterpretation.

The tone of the Velvet Underground's 'All Tomorrow's Parties' evoked in the title of *Momma Tried's* editorial, however, is diametrically opposed to the sense of happy, fun, and flirtatious socializing depicted in Joshua Smith's photographs. Instead, the Velvet Underground song is hypnotically repetitive with a pulsating rhythm underlying Nico's double-tracked vocals and solemn delivery. In the lyrics, a 'poor girl' considers her dismal choices of 'costumes' for an apparently amorphous and infinite number of future parties, a prospect that seems anything but happy.³³ The words pivot on the possibility of donning different outfits, made from different materials in different states of repair.

28 *Momma Tried*, Promotional video, 01:26.

29 Theo Eliezer, Micah Learned, and Fazli, email interview (31 December 2019).

30 Alex Rawls, 'Momma Tried needs your help going Cyborg', *Myspilmilk.com* (11 July 2017).

31 Eliezer, Learned, and Fazli.

32 'Tomorrow's Parties', photographed by Joshua Smith, creative direction by Theo Eliezer, *Momma Tried*, no. 2 (2014), 116–31.

33 The Velvet Underground and Nico, 'All Tomorrow's Parties', *The Velvet Underground & Nico*, Verve (1967), track 6, 05:55.



Fig. 4 Spread from ‘Tomorrow’s Parties’, photographed by Joshua Smith, creative direction by Theo Eliezer, *Momma Tried*, no. 2 (2014), 122–23



Fig. 5 Richard Avedon, *Andy Warhol and Members of the Factory*, 30 October 1969, Tate Collections, London

Together with the question of where to go and what to do, the lyrics tie the girl’s despair to more fundamental questions of adopting and discarding identities. In *Momma Tried*, the free and playful display of happy, posing, nude, clothed, and half-clothed bodies reinterprets this predicament in a positive exploration of identities.

The title, *Momma Tried*, provides a similar synesthetic link between music and print. ‘Mama Tried’ is the title of Merle Haggard’s 1968 country song in which a convict recounts how his mother desperately tried, and failed, to turn him into a law-abiding citizen.³⁴ The adoption of the title is not only a reference to popular culture, but also exhibits the same kind of appropriation as the photo series. The change from ‘mama’ to ‘momma’ adds a colloquial and even more affectionate inflection that signals the adaptation of Haggard’s song title along intimate lines. The generational aspect, ‘mama’s’ admonishments and the son’s contrition, underlines this constellation of a rebellion against conventions, which, while framed in affectionate rather than confrontational terms, nevertheless illuminates *Momma Tried*’s self-positioning as an outsider.

34 Merle Haggard and The Strangers, ‘Mama Tried’, *Mama Tried*, Capitol (1968), track 1, 02:12.

This pose of rebelliousness and subversion, highlighted by the paratextual claim to publish a queer-allied ‘nudie mag’ and implied in intertextual references, has been criticized as complaisant and hollow. A review of *Momma Tried* (based, however, on only issue one) challenges this alleged rebelliousness, arguing that the magazine falls short of the editors’ stated aim to depict intersectional approaches to gender and sexuality, instead merely delivering straight nudity and a gratuitous mixture of themes. Although *Momma Tried* is reviewed here as a magazine, criticism of its thematically incoherent and uneven contents seems to evoke the stand-alone, single-authored monograph as the ideal: too closely governed by their editors’ personal tastes, ‘the magazine’s creators lost their handle on the aesthetics and ideology of the magazine as a whole’.³⁵ The resulting lack of curation resembles ‘more of a Tumblr than a magazine’, and within this mixture, the review continues, binary representations of gender predominate, where nudity has to stand in for ‘subversion’. While for the reviewer *Momma Tried*’s first issue fails to deliver as a queer nudie mag, it draws out an implicit comparison of different media. Compared to a chaotic Tumblr feed, the magazine is judged against an ideal of almost monographic coherence, establishing the book and social media as the brackets to understanding its organization.

However, *Momma Tried* embraces the print magazine and further engages with its past through ‘disruptive content’, such as elaborate spoof magazine advertisements whose exuberance also sets the tone for other items. Learned explains in an interview: ‘Disruptive Content is a term I coined for the content in *Momma Tried* that occupies the physical and symbolic space typically taken up by adverts in mainstream magazines.’³⁶ Based on fashion, cosmetics, lifestyle, and home electronics advertisements, the spoof advertisements evoke the spectacular consumer culture of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. These are intertwined with popular magazine titles of the period, which *Momma Tried* mines for inspiration.³⁷ The fact that fake advertisements appear familiar rather than strange attests to how magazine reading relies on the rhythmic disruption of editorial by the visual and textual snippets of advertising that influence how readers perceive a double page or flight of pages. This combines the protocols of magazine reading with today’s readers’ passing familiarity with the advertising conventions of the last third of the twentieth century. These are often reproduced and cited as ironic, retro images of obsolete gender roles or outdated consumer dreams.³⁸ Yet rather than engaging in culture jamming and offering often raw and scathing critiques of capitalist consumption, *Momma Tried*’s appropriation of earlier idioms of promotional and editorial design are ‘friendlier’ and more in line with the policy of periodical precursors like the art magazine *File* (1972–89), which skilfully spoofed *Life* magazine, than contemporaries like *Adbusters* (1989–).³⁹ Thus, a familiar print environment with inbuilt dissonance and ‘disruption’ draws on the readers’ familiarity with ‘the medium we all know from doctor’s offices, bathroom racks, and drug-store check-out lines’. These commercial and familiar titles, Learned intimates in the Editor’s Letter of the first issue, serve as

35 Ari Braverman, ‘Skin is Not Subversion: *Momma Tried* (and Failed)’, *New Orleans Review* (2016) [accessed 24 March 2020].

36 Theo Eliezer, Micah Learned, and Laine Kaplan-Levenson, ‘*Momma Tried* talks Disruptive Content’, *vianolavie.com* (15 November 2013) [accessed 21 December 2019].

37 This can be seen in the layout references to *Playboy* magazines of the 1960s and 70s and the spoof classifieds at the back that evoke ‘fetish magazines from the 1970s’ (Eliezer, Learned, and Fazli).

38 For example, in *Momma Tried 2*, an ad for shaving foam by Crazy Legs carries the copy: ‘She might have been crazy, but her legs were smooth’ (p. 74), and a moisturizer is promoted, exhorting the reader to ‘Be beautiful forever with the youthful look of ennui. From the makers of Malaise, Futilité, and Nihiliste, a new breakthrough product to erase years of damage caused by facial expressions. Because you’re worth it’ (p. 101).

39 Diedrich Diedrichsen, ‘An Alternative to the Alternative Press’, in *General Idea: Editions 1967–1995*, ed. by Barbara Fischer (Mississauga, ON: Blackwood Gallery, 2003), pp. 179–82 (p. 180).

the basis for *Momma Tried's* disruptions of the form in 'a mash-up' of mainstream and niche aesthetics.⁴⁰

Ellen MacCracken suggests that advertisements are read 'in montage' with surrounding items and become part of the flow of reading.⁴¹ This flow also glosses over the nonsensical combinations of text and image that *Momma Tried's* ads remix so smoothly that they may only become apparent on a second reading. And, read in montage, the 'ads' concur with concerns articulated in other pieces of text and image. In issue two, for example, a preponderance of cosmetic- and fashion-themed advertisements highlight bodies and body parts, their representation and malleability, and hence build upon issues raised in the central photo editorials, among them *Tomorrow's Parties*.⁴²

This recourse to the 1960s and subsequent decades is multilayered and extends from layout and visual quotes, to the magazine's voice (through the title), to the admixture of content modelled on *Playboy*, to the planting of an aware, ironic, and nostalgic reading position that incorporates both recognition and disruption. In issue three, ads for a Commodore computer, landline phone, and Omnibot toy robot signal a shift in theme. In interviews and on *Momma Tried's* website, Learned and Eliezer announce that *Momma Tried* has gained 'sentience' and has turned 'herself' into a 'cyborg' to avoid her 'obsolescence' with the encroaching 'death of print'.⁴³

'To Update Our Own Code': Magazine Transformations

Both *Sabat* and *Momma Tried* craft narratives that cast the magazines as, eventually, sentient and materially evolving. Eliezer and Learned cite Marshall McLuhan and Takashi Murakami as inspirations for their version of a print magazine that gains cyborgian sentience through infection by a virus to avoid obsolescence.⁴⁴ This viral transformation may be followed by reading issue three in conjunction with a free, downloadable augmented reality app, Program Synthesis. Using the app to view print pages through a phone's or tablet's camera reveals additional content like sound and videos. For example, the classifieds page viewed through the app vanishes behind spam pop-up adverts (Fig. 6).⁴⁵ The visual and aural augmentation of the magazine page that Program Synthesis enables adds up to a multitude of medial crossings that turn reading into an interactive performance in which the reader takes part with her phone in a 'site-specific installation [...] enacting the form and message of *magazine*', as Eliezer describes the conceptual underpinnings of the project.⁴⁶ This magazine 'installation' explores the pyramiding of media by making them overtly visible, with the magazine as their nested background. In J. David Bolter and Richard A. Grusin's terminology, *Momma Tried's* sentience translates into an awareness of the print medium and its place in the medial ecology, expressed in a form of 'hypermediacy': 'Hypermediacy offers a heterogeneous space, in which representation is conceived of not as a window onto the world, but rather as "windowed" itself — with windows that open onto other representations or other media.'⁴⁷

40 Micah Learned, 'Editor's Letter', *Momma Tried*, no. 1 (2013), p. 16.

41 Ellen MacCracken, *Decoding Women's Magazines: From 'Mademoiselle' to 'Ms'* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), p. 8.

42 'Hubba Bubba' shows men in nylons handling, chewing, and blowing chewing gum and letting its viscous filaments run over their naked bodies in front of a pink studio screen (pp. 36–45). 'Wyrld Sisters' mobilizes the witch as an image for solidarity and empowerment (pp. 76–89).

43 Theo Eliezer, 'Momma Tried Issue 3', *theeliezer.com* (2018) [accessed 20 December 2019].

44 Eliezer, Learned, and Dean.

45 'Classifieds & Personals', *Momma Tried*, no. 3 (2017/2018), 150–51; EyeJack, *Program Synthesis* (4 March 2018), mobile application, version 1.4. *GooglePlay*.

46 Eliezer, Learned, and Fazli. Emphasis in the original.

47 J. David Bolter and Richard A. Grusin, 'Remediation', *Configurations*, 4.3 (1996), 311–58 (p. 329).

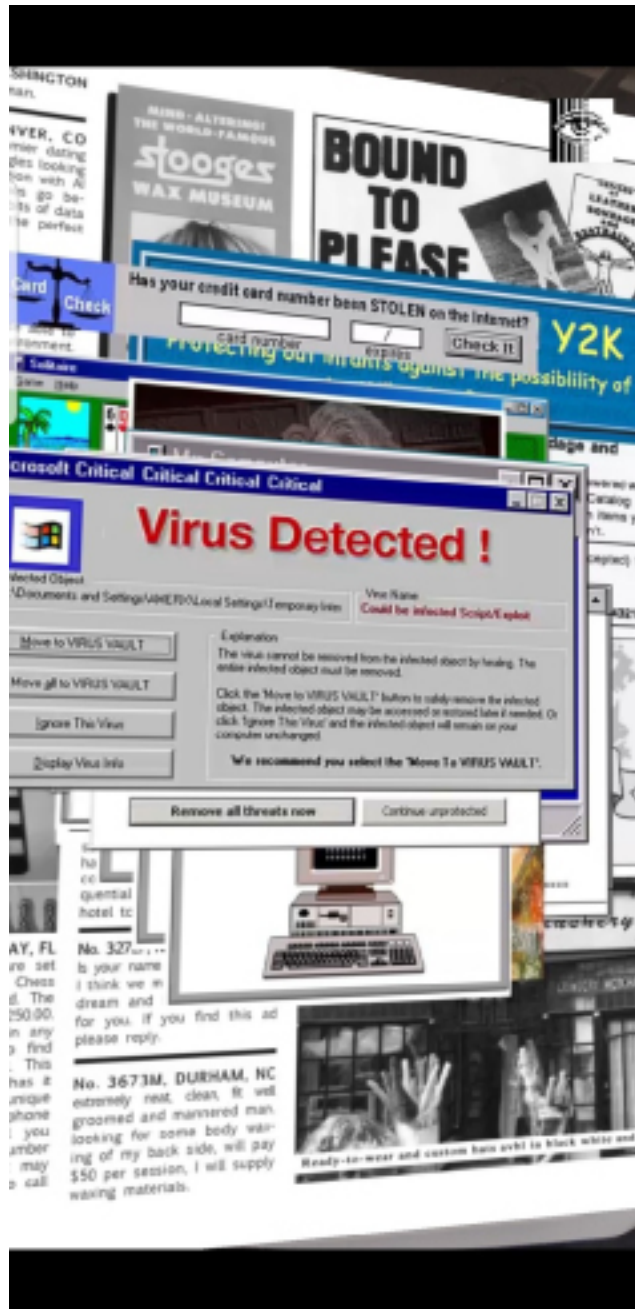


Fig. 6 ‘Classifieds & Personals’, *Momma Tried*, no. 3 (2017/2018), 151, viewed in Program Synthesis (2018)

Momma Tried couches this evolution in its own editorial fiction. In the editor’s letter, Learned writes that ‘outdated technology becomes defective [...]. We peel back the surface to discover more glitches below. Corrupted files are infecting the printed page and old media is networked in.’⁴⁸ However, in the text, ‘glitches’ indicate that we might as well be following the thoughts of sentient *Momma Tried*, who slips into placeholder copy (‘We wind lorem ipsum’) and linguistic creations like the indeterminate tense of ‘see saw’ and ‘this iis sn’t’, explaining in ‘her’ own voice rather than the editor’s persona:

48 Micah Learned, ‘Editor’s Letter’, *Momma Tried*, no. 3 (2017/2018), 18.

‘We have been left unattended to update our own code’, implying that *Momma Tried*’s voice is percolating through the conventional genre of the (human) editor’s letter.

In the third issue, the unsigned article ‘The Uncanny Other’, probably authored by the editors themselves, addresses ideas central to the concept of the magazine. The heavily footnoted feature explores the perception of Otherness in both humans and robots through their perceived uncanniness. It opens with the model of the ‘uncanny valley’, that is, the finding that robots designed to increasingly better imitate human bodies and speech eventually reach a point of anthropomorphic perfection where a small flaw may tip their perception into the ‘uncanny’, while cruder, less humanlike, designs do not run this risk.⁴⁹ From this, the feature associatively proceeds to other similar instances in which deviation from a perceived perfect norm provokes censure and rejection. The uncanniness of an Other who visibly deviates from the ‘familiar’, as in Freud’s definition of the (un)canny, serves as the feature’s springboard to discuss the more general ‘aesthetic bias’ that privileges the easily classifiable and aesthetically acceptable, a fate that humans and robots share. The article takes detours through the cultural history and psychology of dealing with and, more often than not, rejecting Otherness. Returning to their point of departure, the authors close with a glimpse of a future in which humans and AIs, robots, and androids will live and work together and the perception of Otherness as uncanny must be overcome. The essay is interrupted by a spread and a half-page vintage advertisement for Tomy’s toy robot, Omnibot 2000, shown pouring and serving drinks. Originally published in the mid-seventies and eighties, the reprinted advertisements juxtapose the article’s future-oriented conclusion with the brownish hues and promotional copy of the vintage ads. As ‘disruptive content’, they create the effect of an unfamiliar reading experience in a familiar media environment. This treatment of uncanniness and the disruptive effect of Otherness underlines *Momma Tried*’s editorial project of creating a magazine that is familiar yet different from what readers would expect, formulated initially in the ‘Editor’s Letter’ of the first issue.⁵⁰

In contrast to ‘The Uncanny Other’s’ prediction that increasing cooperation between humans and robots will lead to the disappearance of their perception as uncanny, *Momma Tried* collects different versions of medial uncanniness. Variations of the idea of disembodied voices and their eerie potential when run through machines are the focus of the short story ‘The Platform’ by Rae Faust.⁵¹ In Faust’s story, a group of friends sign up to regularly phone into ‘LDCC Experimental Platform’, a company that develops ‘human voices for robots’ and randomly connects and records callers. After casual conversations with strangers through the Platform, the main protagonist Katie’s encounters through the Platform become more and more disquieting. She is plunged into what seems to be an emergency call, a psychological experiment, and is connected to her friends, who later deny that they spoke to her. The fragmentary conversations lacking context make it increasingly unclear what or who is being studied and to whom she is talking. Familiar and unfamiliar at the same time, while on the phone Katie is unable to distinguish her friends’ voices from those of a learning robot. When the Platform connects her to Henry, who tries to initiate phone sex, Katie ‘knew it was him. She knew it wasn’t him, too’, reiterating the dilemma of distinguishing Henry’s voice, as used by the Platform, and that of ‘regular Henry’, her friend. Katie’s experiences with the Platform became more and more dreamlike, and its strangeness seeps into her everyday life in the form of slight shifts in sound and light. The suspicion that human voices are used by a machine to simulate humanlike characteristics in a Turing Test-like scenario

49 ‘The Uncanny Other’, *Momma Tried*, no. 3 (2017/2018), 100–08 (p. 100).

50 Micah Learned, ‘Editor’s Letter’, *Momma Tried*, no. 1 (2013), 16.

51 Rae Faust, ‘The Platform’, *Momma Tried*, no. 3 (2017/2018), 34–41.

leads to the same sense of eeriness discussed in ‘The Uncanny Valley’ that results from this undecidability: ‘Something had wormed itself between the yes and the no, or was the backdrop behind them.’⁵²

The Platform also suggests a media-historical dimension: the first users and listeners of phonograms, telephones, and radios experienced these media as equally disturbing as Katie’s changed relationship with her mobile phone since it connects her to the obscure voices of the Platform.⁵³ *Momma Tried* evokes these connections with sound installations through the Program Synthesis app which overlays spreads with different noises, including the sounds of a ringing telephone and phone call, as well as a radio playing over a vintage print advertisement for a compact system.⁵⁴ Circling back to the editor’s letter in issue three, these displaced, mediated voices represent ‘glitches’ in the cyborg magazine that indicate its emerging, composite cyborg body.

Issue three offers many more axes to read the magazine’s budding sentience, which reflect on the central questions of the obsolescence and continuing survival of media nested in hypermedial forms. As a result, reading *Momma Tried*’s third issue includes a search for meaning not only in individual pieces of text and photography but in their integration into the overarching narrative of the cyborg magazine. This includes the act of scanning pages through the phone’s camera and finding correspondences among text, sounds, and images on both screen and paper.

As a speaker at the ModMag convention in 2018, organized by magCulture, Elisabeth Krohn commented on the conclusion of her magazine trilogy, stating ‘*Sabat* must die’. This ‘mortality’, as framed by Krohn, may be read as more than a strategy to rhetorically capture the ModMag audience of magazine enthusiasts. As a narrative woven around the publishing project, *Sabat*’s ‘death’ implies a previous embodied ‘life’. And the formulation evokes the shibboleth of ‘the death of print’ that accentuates many of the indie publishing scene’s expressions and statements. When I interviewed Elisabeth Krohn about changes over the progression of the three *Sabat* issues making up the lifestyle magazine-shaped trilogy of *Maiden*, *Mother*, and *Crone*, she described the last issue as the magazine ‘becoming self-aware of its mortality’.⁵⁵ This self-awareness follows the thematic set-up of the trilogy oriented around the mythical feminine ages personified in the maiden, mother, and crone and their biographical and aesthetic interpretation in interviews, essays, fashion photography, and art. Biography, growth, and aging are thus written into *Sabat* and materially realized by periodical publication, another temporal extension that, with each issue, promises change over time. At the back of the *Crone Issue*, a piece titled ‘The Omen’ sets the tone for the trilogy’s conclusion, coinciding with the crone’s premonition of death, discussing occurrences that folklore regards as portents of death.⁵⁶ The subsequent spread then urges readers to ‘let it go’, illustrated by an image of a woman slipping off a cliff and into a river, which carries her away over the edge of the page.

While *Sabat* suggests that death should also be interpreted as rebirth, analogous to the phases of the moon associated with the three feminine archetypes, the magazine materially ‘dies’ with the following, fourth issue, *Elements*. Abandoning the format of the lifestyle magazine with its interviews and fashion pages, *Elements*’ short, meditative

52 Faust, 40–41.

53 David Hendy, ‘Listening in the Dark: Night-Time Radio and a “Deep History” of Media’, *Media History*, 16.2 (2010), 215–32 (pp. 226–27).

54 Theo Eliezer, ‘Goodbye Horses’, *Momma Tried*, no. 3 (2017/2018), 7–8 and Theo Eliezer, ‘Star Mall’, *Momma Tried*, no. 3 (2017/2018), 58–59. See also Eliezer’s comments on her [website](#).

55 Krohn and Fazli.

56 Jenny Opsahl, ‘The Omen’, *Sabat*, no. 3 (2017), 140–43. The photographs accompanying the text seem to reference the protagonist Death from Ingmar Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal*.

essays and art explore spirit, water, air, fire, and earth without the organizing and hitherto central subject of the witch. Instead of a perfect-bound volume, *Elements* consists of nine folded sheets, sized A3 to A1, and a sturdier, folder-like cover, loosely held together by an elastic string, resembling a posterzine. Thus, it has to be taken apart to fully appreciate the artwork. In this, readers become agents in the story of the magazine's death and rebirth because they necessarily destroy, repurpose, and potentially recombine its elements, for example, by making them part of their home wall decorations (Fig. 7). *Sabat* extends reading to doing and co-opts the reader in a performance of its own death: its explosion into individual, differently sized papers. Unlike *Momma Tried's* orchestrated narrative of her sentience as a response to her imminent 'death', reading *Elements* as a concluding death and re-birth of *Sabat* is nowhere proffered by Krohn or de Campos. Nevertheless, the trilogy's investment in 'papery surprises' that are literally 'occult', that is, 'hidden', like differently sized inserts, different paper stock (glossy and translucent alongside matte), die-cuts, raised and varnished print, and sprayed edges, run the gamut of what the conventional print magazine format may offer readers in terms of tactility.⁵⁷ *Elements* seems to expand on this before issues five and six leave the magazine form behind for good.



Fig. 7 *Sabat*, no. 4 (*Elements*, 2017), pages disassembled

Conclusion

In this article, I have introduced two independently published magazines. *Momma Tried* and *Sabat* draw on the generic models and formats of the contemporary women's lifestyle and fashion magazine and the literary and artist's magazine inspired by and playing with the design, layout, and content of the 60s and 70s. I have aimed to show how the niche 'micro archive' may be read as a pervasive concern. Both publications

⁵⁷ Cleber de Campos, Elisabeth Krohn, and Grace Wang, 'Uncovering *Sabat* magazine's hidden occult designs', *stackmagazines.com* (2016) [accessed 01 June 2019].

exhibit an awareness of a social ‘sphericule’s’ depth, choosing different aesthetic and print-specific strategies to articulate this allegiance with past styles and references. In this, advertising plays a significant role. As ad-free publications, both magazines draw on the unclaimed spaces that would normally be given over to promotional material in mainstream magazines and fill them with their own messages. As micro-archives, both magazines are framed as somewhat stable records, as opposed to a community and style initially formed on social media, in the case of *Sabat*, or the changing city and mobility of its inhabitants after Katrina, in *Momma Tried’s* New Orleans.

The magazines operate on micro-scales in terms of print runs, affiliation with specific places and circles, and the specificity of tastes prevalent in cultural scenes. However, selling through webshops, both their own and those specializing in indie publication or art books, *Momma Tried* and *Sabat*, like many other independent magazines, reach a small but global audience. The same holds true for their production. *Momma Tried* is printed in Iceland and shipped to New Orleans in order to not have to compromise on its sex-positive content; *Sabat’s* art director de Campos started on the otherwise London-based project while still living in Brazil. However, the deliberate (re)turn to print when measures to curb the waste of resources and energy are becoming increasingly widespread and accepted under the impression of the climate emergency raises problems that these magazines, as well as the independent publishing scene as a whole, rarely address. This may go together with an emphasis on design, curation, and visual appeal which, in the eyes of some observers, sacrifices commitment to serious journalism for style.⁵⁸

Encountering *Sabat* and *Momma Tried* far outside their cultural niches promises a vicarious glimpse into their specific milieus, allowing for a play on notions of withholding and providing access which digital media cannot. This affective pleasure sits beside cerebral engagements with the magazine form. The narrative of *Momma Tried’s* sentience and *Sabat’s* ‘biographical’ progress towards ‘death’ explores how magazines may communicate meanings interactively, turning the scene of reading into an experience of the materiality of the magazine.

Sabina Fazli is a Postdoctoral Researcher and Lecturer in Anglophone Literature and Culture at Göttingen University (Germany) and she is affiliated with the [Transnational Periodical Cultures](#) project at Mainz University. Her research interests are contemporary Anglophone independent magazines, magazines and affect, and the British style press of the 1980s and 90s. She is co-editing an introduction to magazine studies. Her PhD was in Victorian literature and material culture and was published in 2019.

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58 For example, the German newspaper *taz*, reviewed the 2016 Hamburg Indiecon festival, dedicated to independent publishing, criticizing how the art direction disregards any concern for content and readability, while the narrow selection of topics mirrors privileged urban lifestyles and a retreat from politics and critique. Robert Hoffmann, ‘[Engagierte LiebhaberInnen](#)’, *taz.de* (6 September 2016) [accessed 6 April 2020].

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