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Outside the Mainstream Press: Language, Materiality, and Temporality in Microzines

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ABSTRACT

This article examines aesthetic strategies employed in the modernist little magazine and contemporary independent magazines. Language, materiality, and temporality are found to be key elements for experimental multimodal expressions challenging mainstream periodical cultures. In order to emphasize parallels between precarious, noncommercial, and innovative micro-publishing practices of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we propose to use the term 'microzine'. In three case studies, we offer analyses of linguistic defamiliarization, typography and design, and the representation of temporal experiences of migrancy to highlight the entanglement of aesthetic strategies as well as their persistence over time. This comparison of the *Little Review* (1914–29), *NXS* (2017–2022), and *Burnt Roti* (2016–) opens up possibilities to view disparate non-mainstream magazine projects as potent incubatory spaces for new magazinal assemblages.

KEYWORDS

assemblage, independent magazine, language, little magazine, materiality, microzine

Introduction

Looking back on the rise of ‘small magazines’, Ezra Pound claimed in 1930 that ‘[t]he last twenty years have seen the principle of the free magazine or the impractical or fugitive magazine definitely established. It has attained its recognized right to exist by reason of work performed.’¹ Pound defines these ‘freakish’ magazines as noncommercial enterprises characterized by aesthetical and experimental values.² What is more, he also refers to the low-level production conditions of free magazines, explaining that experimentation is only possible in periodicals ‘that are either subsidized [...] or else very cheaply produced (as the penniless inventor produces in his barn or his attic)’.³ Pound thus delineates a magazine type which, despite many challenges, has survived and grown into an influential medium in today’s print market.⁴

Given the fact that the designation ‘small’ or ‘little magazine’ is very much linked to the emergence of modernism and in light of the general critique put forth with regard to the term’s imprecision, we will use the more neutral expression microzine to highlight the similarities between ‘impractical’ publishing projects over time.⁵ In the broadest sense, microzine means a time-bound print medium constituted by specific material features (paper, size, weight, design), blending aesthetic experimentation with ‘intellectual communication’ and operating on small, more often than not precarious, scales in terms of budget, staff, resources, circulation, readers, and profit (Pound’s penniless inventor in the attic turns into the hand-writing and photocopying zinester).⁶ Adopting the maverick forms of self-publishing and merging it with the do-it-yourself and countercultural practices of zinesters, microzines establish distinctive periodical voices outside the mass market, addressing a circumscribed group of readers or global, mostly anglophone micro-niche audiences.⁷ Focusing on three examples of independent publishing and editing from the early twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the *Little Review* (1914–29), *NXS* (2017–22), and *Burnt Roti* (2016–), we propose a comparative analysis that looks backward and forward. Thus, we widen the discussion in magazine studies suggesting a dialogic reading of microzines to demonstrate how they remediate avant-garde modes of communication, design, and time. However, instead of talking about a continuum that seeks to construct a progressive development from the early twentieth century to contemporary times, we propose to reconceptualize microzines on a spectrum of linguistic, material, and temporal (micro)practices and to examine their roles as active agents in cultural production.⁸ In doing so, we acknowledge the provisional character and open-endedness of remodeling the links between message and medium as well as the blurry transitions between one magazine and the other. Given the widespread scholarly focus on modernist periodicals, we wish to extend the time frame, highlighting family resemblances between microzines of different eras

1 Ezra Pound, ‘Small Magazines’, *English Journal*, 19.9 (1930), 689–704 (p. 702).

2 Ibid., p. 704.

3 Ibid., p. 702.

4 See Joy Enriquez, ‘Picking Up the Pages: Discussing the Materiality of Magazines’, *Journal of Digital Research & Publishing*, 2 (2009), 86–96.

5 See Suzanne W. Churchill and Adam McKible, ‘Introduction’, in *Little Magazines & Modernism: New Approaches*, ed. by Suzanne W. Churchill and Adam McKible (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 1–18 (pp. 6–7) as well as Evangelia Stead, *Sisyphé heureux: Les revues artistiques et littéraires – Approches et figures* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2020), pp. 60–65.

6 Pound, p. 690.

7 See Michael Jacovides, ‘Love me, hate me ... The New World of the Microzine’, in *MagCulture: New Magazine Design*, ed. by Jeremy Leslie (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2003), pp. 15–17.

8 For the little magazines’ legacy as ‘models of engagement’ and ‘technological advancement’, see Joanne Diaz and Ian Morris, ‘The Little Magazine in the Twenty-First Century’, in *The Routledge Companion to the British and North American Literary Magazine*, ed. by Tim Lanzendörfer (London: Routledge, 2022), pp. 243–51 (p. 244).

rather than showcasing their differences.⁹ Ultimately, this article is a modest first step towards analysing the art and politics of microzines, focusing on language, materiality, and temporality interlaced with the form and physicality of the magazines themselves.

Even though some microzines have crossed over into commercialism, their aesthetic and countercultural dimensions are probably best described by the following four principles: rebelliousness, permanence and scarcity, combination, and necessity. Already Pound has emphasized the iconoclastic thrust of modernist microzines opposing the monotony and void messages of the ‘better’ and ‘elder’ magazines.¹⁰ Microzines challenge the status quo. Their (micro)practices of resistance and DIY-ethic deviate from established norms and business models. They frequently break rules in terms of content, format, design, and readability. Microzines seek to embody an authentic self apart from consumer titles, using graphic and visual features to make themselves distinct.

As Pound and other critics have shown, (modernist) microzines are not simply containers for disseminating information, but idiosyncratic artworks with an enhanced print value. Periodicity engenders an archival quality, and permanence is one of the most alluring features for readers to collect microzines, which often come in small print runs and are hard to find. The self-publishing and DIY environments have certainly changed, from print and its Poundesque hardware like the editor’s static desk to virtual desktop publishing and interactive online platforms. And although networks of collaboration based on correspondences of like-minded editors in Europe and overseas have been replaced by electronic forms of communication, microzines have always served as an organ for sharing creative ideas, materializing coalitional thinking, and offering (micro)practices of resistance. However, while digital formats pose advantages in terms of reaching out to larger global audiences, continuous modifications in order to stir consumption do not provide durable form and content. The online space is also less tangible and its swipeable surfaces fail to give the reader a physical experience that is comparable to reading a paper microzine. The editors of *Hinterlands: Magazine of Rural Realities* put it this way: ‘As a print magazine, hinterlands gains presence through its visual and haptic appearance. At the same time, it functions as a continuous archive.’¹¹

Being independent from the constraints of the newsstand and its consumptive rules, microzines are able to afford ever new combinations and variations in form and presentation. Contrary to mass-circulated mainstream magazines, microzines have a higher production value. Sometimes no two issues look the same. Readers welcome the innovative assemblages and pay high cover prices or engage in grassroots and crowdfunding activities to help launch and support periodicals. This leads to the fourth defining characteristic: necessity. Microzines not only foster specific communities of taste but also address communities of change makers, as it can be currently seen by the wave of climate change microzines, for instance. Microzines are motivated by specific editorial philosophies. The visionary ideas of their founders or teams of writers and designers turn the microzine into public platforms of ideas and people. In this sense, microzines are highly self-reflective about the societal role of independent publishing using their periodical format ‘to reflect upon the constantly evolving present, and to re-evaluate and rediscover what’s gone before’.¹² This statement harks back to what Pound had to say about the microzine’s legacy predicting: ‘The new thing that is to be durable does not spring up without roots.’¹³ In what follows, this article explores a

9 See Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, eds, *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009–13).

10 Pound, pp. 689–90.

11 Hanna Döring et al., ‘Founder’s Manifesto’, *Hinterlands: Magazine for Rural Realities*, 1 (2020), 85.

12 [Stack Interview with John L. Waters](#), editor of *Eye Magazine*, 2009, n. pag.

13 Pound, p. 704.

selection of three highly innovative microzines and discusses aesthetic experimentation and rebelliousness, thus illuminating print (micro)practices outside the mainstream press.

Aesthetic Experimentation and Language in Modernist Microzines: *The Little Review*

The beginning of the twentieth century saw the foundation of literary and cultural magazines which not only sought to foster new types of writing and thus to innovate content, but which in themselves were novel artefacts addressed to small but engaged audiences. Challenging received notions of the publishing genre 'periodical' with regard to design, material quality, business model, and social function, these 'little magazines' have long been acknowledged as important institutions for the development of modernism.¹⁴ In the United States of America, magazines of national circulation like the *Atlantic Monthly* (1857–), *Harper's Monthly Magazine* (1850–), and the *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* (1870–1930) dominated the market, catering to a public which expected to find more of the familiar in the magazines' pages rather than the socially provocative or the literary experimental.¹⁵ Oftentimes, a potential contributor's own experiences with these mainstream magazines led to the decision to set up a periodical of their own, hoping to provide a publishing outlet for underserved genres or types of writing.

The Little Review, launched by Margaret C. Anderson in Chicago in March 1914, might be taken as a representative example of modernist publishing outside the mainstream press.¹⁶ Unlike *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* (1912–), another important Chicago microzine, which fostered a single literary genre, the *Little Review* had a broad scope, covering, as its subtitle indicated, literature, drama, music, and art. But it also engaged in philosophical, psychological, and social discussions, thus bringing together 'art' and 'life'.¹⁷ *The Little Review* soon became *Poetry's* competitor in the struggle for contributors and readers. Importantly, Anderson and her later coeditor Jane Heap not only tried to set their magazine apart from the wide-circulation periodicals of the time, presenting it as 'A Magazine of the Arts Making No Compromise with the Public Taste', but also sought to distinguish the *Little Review* from other microzines.¹⁸ Self-differing turned into an important marketing strategy and had a huge impact on editorial decisions.

While microzines participate in complex action networks, constantly evolving along with and against other print and media products, they try to build communities of taste by offering assemblages their readers can identify with or at least relate to. In the case of the *Little Review*, temporal orientations as well as linguistic and material practices helped to create an aesthetics of rupture and dissent thus bestowing on the

14 Andrew Thacker, 'Orientations: Introduction', in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, ed. by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009–13), II: *North America, 1894–1960*, ed. by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (2012), pp. 31–39 (p. 31).

15 Edward E. Chielens, ed., *American Literary Magazines: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (New York: Greenwood, 1986), pp. 50–57, 166–71, 364–69.

16 As Hoffman, Allen, and Ulrich explain, other modernist microzines like *Broom*, *Secession*, and *This Quarter* were in many respects patterned after the rebel, combative *Little Review*. Frederick J. Hoffman, Charles Allen, and Carolyn F. Ulrich, *The Little Magazine: A History and a Bibliography*, 2nd edn (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1947), p. 66. Consequently, Andrew Thacker calls the *Little Review* 'that classic "little magazine"'. Andrew Thacker, 'General Introduction: "Magazines, Magazines, Magazines!"', in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, ed. by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009–13), II: *North America, 1894–1960*, ed. by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (2012), pp. 1–28 (p. 16).

17 'Announcement', *Little Review*, 1.1 (1914), 1–2 (p. 1).

18 This motto was adopted and printed as part of the masthead in June 1917.

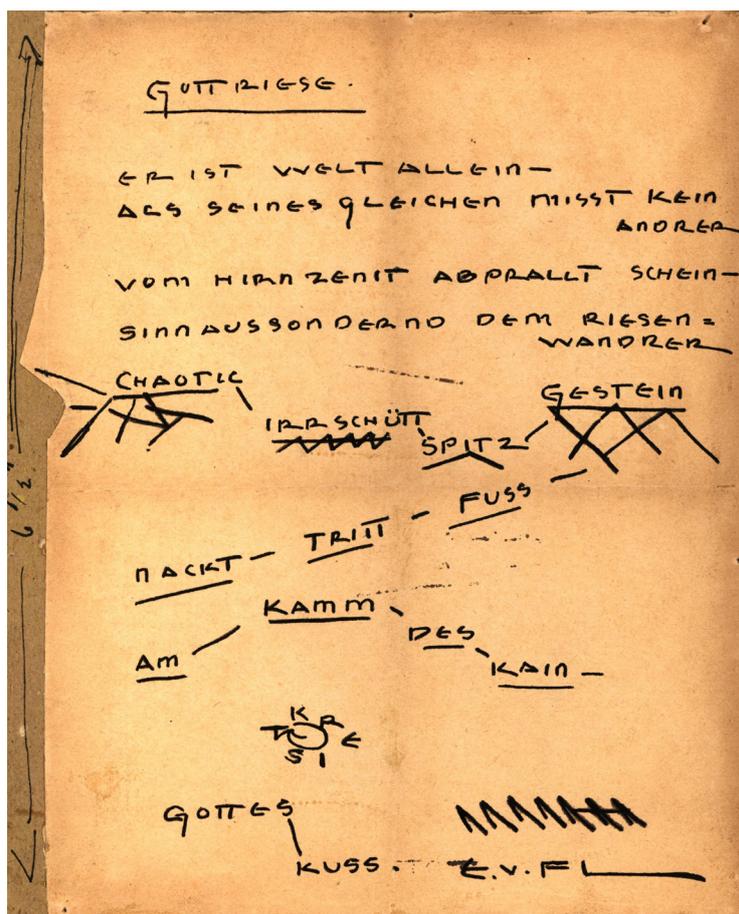


Fig. 1 Else von Freytag-Loringhoven, 'GOTTRIESE'; holograph manuscript with instructions for the facsimile reproduction; by courtesy of University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries.

microzine a unifying principle which could be associated with innovation. Interestingly, this attempt at self-differing and self-identification not only links the *Little Review* to other modernist magazines like *Blast* (1914–15), *Broom* (1921–24), or *transition* (1927–38), but suggests ties to twenty-first-century microzines like *NXS* and *Burnt Roti*.

In order to illustrate the principle of aesthetic rupture, we will focus on 'GOTTRIESE' (Fig. 1), a multilingual visual poem by German-born artist Baroness Else von Freytag-Loringhoven, which appeared in the *Little Review* in the spring of 1925. This textual example combines linguistic and material deviance from the mainstream with an intermingling of different time frames that are rather past- and future-oriented than contemporary. 'GOTTRIESE' conveys its meaning via the arrangement of the words on the page and via additional marks that are either used to underline and thus to emphasize certain words or to mirror them in pictographic fashion.¹⁹ Thus, 'GESTEIN', a rock-like formation, is visually doubled by three abstract lines with sharp angles hinting at mountain peaks. Not surprisingly, some of the word constellations allow for more than one reading: 'AM - KAMM - DES - KAIN -' might either belong to the preceding or to the following phrase. While the Biblical word field ('GOTT', 'KAIN') and the reference to a giant ('RIESE') point towards the past and evoke traditional Christian and folklore poetry, neologisms like 'GOTTRIESE', 'HIRNZENIT', or

19 Else von Freytag-Loringhoven, 'GOTTRIESE', *Little Review*, 11.1 (1925), 13.

‘IRRSCHÜTT’ enhance the foreignness of the German language and identify the poem as avant-garde. ‘CHAOTIC’, an English word, and the missing article before ‘Schein’, short for ‘sunshine’ or to be understood in the sense of ‘appearance’, likewise might have an alienating effect. Ultimately, both English- and German-speaking readers are confronted with textual features that mark a digression from more common types of writing, allowing both groups to acknowledge the innovative potential of Freytag-Loringhoven’s poem.

Instead of trying to set this idiosyncratic piece in the typographical font used in the specific number of the *Little Review*, Anderson and Heap decided to reproduce Freytag-Loringhoven’s hand-lettered version in facsimile. Although the author used block capitals rather than cursive handwriting, the poem, via its individualized script, is to a greater extent perceived as a specific author’s product than magazine contributions which have been homogenized during the printing process by the use of a commonly available and shared font. At the same time, the facsimile implicitly highlights the production process of the magazine: the poem’s nonconformity points to the usually tacit remediation of handwritten or typed submissions. Interestingly, hand lettering not only reminds of pre-Gutenberg times of reproduction. Holographs had garnered broader interest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, stimulated by the Arts and Crafts Movement and the example of William Morris.²⁰ However, while calligraphic proportionality and aesthetic beauty informed these earlier specimen, Freytag-Loringhoven’s ‘GOTTRIESE’ represents a verbal-pictorial artefact with a disruptive spatialized design.²¹ It thus foreshadows practices at the heart of 1960s and 1970s zine cultures.²² And what is more, the material affordance of the selected paper, which, no doubt, impinged on the compositional act, links Freytag-Loringhoven’s ‘GOTTRIESE’ to more recent DIY and DIWO ethics in magazine production.²³ The latter might be just as much a reaction to an oversaturated digital age as Freytag-Loringhoven’s hand-lettered text was to the machine age that was otherwise illustrated in the *Little Review* through reproductions of artworks showing machines and steel constructions.²⁴

The individual magazine number, just like the periodical at large, might thus be perceived as a modernist assemblage combining most disparate matter in surprising new ways and inviting its readers to browse and engage with it. The magazine provides a set of vectors that include the opportunity of establishing textual and visual linkages between individual contributions, linkages that exist, but are not necessarily spelled out in a programme-like fashion. According to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, an assemblage brings together ‘multiplicities’ stemming from different ‘orders’, ultimately intertwining ‘reality’, ‘representation’, and ‘subjectivity’.²⁵ An assemblage is a highly dynamic entity

20 See Anna Wager, ‘Photographs, Pens, and Print: William Morris and the Technologies of Typography’, *Book History*, 21 (2018), 245–77 (pp. 245, 247, 253, 258, 263, 267) and Lee Jolliffe, ‘The Magazine as Mentor: A Turn-of-the-Century Handwritten Magazine by St. Louis Women Artists’, *American Periodicals*, 7 (1997), 48–72 (pp. 48–51, 55–56).

21 For the *Little Review*’s ‘aggressively striking use of page space’ see also Alan Golding, ‘The *Little Review* (1914–29)’, in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, ed. by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009–13), II: *North America, 1894–1960*, ed. by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (2012), pp. 61–84 (p. 71).

22 See Teal Triggs, ‘Scissors and Glue: Punk Fanzines and the Creation of a DIY Aesthetic’, *Journal of Design History*, 19.1 (2006), 69–83 (pp. 69–71, 76, 78).

23 See Alison Piepmeier, ‘Why Zines Matter: Materiality and the Creation of Embodied Community’, *American Periodicals*, 18.2 (2008), 213–38 (pp. 222–23).

24 Louis Lozowick, ‘Oklahoma’ [reproduction of painting], *Little Review*, 11.1 (1925), n. pag.; General Electric, ‘Giant Generator in Construction’ [photograph], *Little Review*, 11.1 (1925), n. pag.

25 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 23.



Fig. 2 Cover; *NXS*, 5 (2020). Private copy.

whose ‘variables [...] enter into constant relations, however temporarily’.²⁶ Its nexus to abstraction bears potentialities, affording productive and transformative processes and cultivating emergence and becoming.²⁷ As such, rereadings and recontextualizations remain possible. The same holds true for readers’ irritations, ultimately an effect of aesthetic distancing from the mainstream achieved in modernist microzines through linguistic deviances, innovative typography, a new page design, and the blending of different time frames.

The Materiality of Contemporary Avant-Garde Style Microzines: *NXS*

In the current field of indie publishing, avant-garde style microzines find new ways of translating pressing social and political issues onto the printed page. They offer in print innovative spaces for data, facts informing articles, and original artwork. Similar to modernist microzines, current avant-garde style periodicals emerge from charismatic editors or aspiring editorial teams and the distributed collaboration of design activists, artists, writers, and thinkers. In setting out and assembling their publications, these editor-designers serve as catalysts, coauthors, cocreators, and happeners. They curate a ‘visual-cultural language’²⁸ that advances responsiveness and identification among the magazines’ followers. Given the international workspace in which microzines are produced, they also provide loci for global Englishes from global perspectives.

The Dutch indie magazine *NXS* (it reads nexus for connection and bond), coming out of Amsterdam since 2017, has established a specific form of ‘aesthetic urgency’ in terms of technical language and material outlook (Fig. 2).²⁹ It is a microzine entirely dedicated to exploring ideas of the self in the age of digital technology with an experimental, avant-garde approach to publishing. As the editors point out, the magazine’s title ‘nexus’ refers to a contemporary web of publishing communities.³⁰ The magazine’s network is not only composed of participants who belong to multiple creative communities, but the publication’s provisionality, periodicity, multiple authorship, and heterogeneity of contents relies upon both printed matter and a printed space that links aesthetic practice, materiality, and group formation.

26 Ibid., p. 84.

27 Ibid., pp. 82, 100.

28 Florian Cramer, ‘What Is Urgent Publishing?’, *Apria*, 3 (2021), 12–22 (p. 19).

29 Cramer, p. 18.

30 For the magazine’s network of contributors and activities, see <http://nxs.world>.

NXS thinks in print about the digital. It builds upon practices of design activism and of intermediation.³¹ The magazine's avant-garde design vision invites editors to present each issue's theme by both creating a specific print aesthetics and a physical space to experience the theme going beyond print.³² Each magazine differs in graphic and visual design in order to answer an overarching challenge that is — as the editorial states — 'the self in the digital age'.³³ Besides, taking into account that *NXS World* presents itself as a 'collaborative research project [...] a shape shifting art world', the editorial team composes what Deleuze and Guattari call a 'plateau'.³⁴ In their introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, they write:

We call a 'plateau' any multiplicity connected to other multiplicities [...]. We are writing this book as a rhizome. It is composed of plateaus. We have given it a circular form [...]. We had hallucinatory experiences, we watched lines leave one plateau and proceed to another like columns of tiny ants.³⁵

They also point out that '[t]ypographical, lexical, or syntactic creations [...] become themselves dimensions of the multiplicity' bringing forth an 'assemblage [...] act[ing] on semiotic flows, material flows, and social flows'.³⁶ Likewise, *NXS* manufactures its editorial content in terms of proliferations, ruptures, and modifications to be adapted and reworked by the magazine's followers. The magazine appears like a 'map' that is 'open and connectable in all of its dimensions'.³⁷ It offers multiple entryways and performances; the magazine allows the reader to make their own thread out of it. Even the editorial process triggers a spatializing activity embedding a network of distributed collaboration. The editors explain this rhizomatic way of assembling content as an open and experimental process which sees contributors receiving a previous contribution and reacting to it. In that sense producing content in *NXS* is as unpredictable as it is varied.

A good case in point for the magazine's rhizomatic editorial practice is issue 5, titled 'Virtual Vertigo' (2020). The vertigo the magazine causes is closely linked to its material presence and its physical format. Holding the magazine in one's hand, one is struck by the magazine's enlarged mobile phone-like angularity and its haptic appearance. The heavy cardboard paper with its matte finish used for the cover builds a strong contrast to the smooth paper inside the magazine with its glossy finish that feels like touching the surface of a screen. The cover as the magazine's face reenacts the different material intensities of print and digital objects by printing plastic layers on the cover's rough cardboard paper to replicate the smooth screen surface of digital devices. Since these layers are printed on the front and back of the cover, the magazine's paperish appearance and distinguished surface gloss invites the reader to turn it upside down or to turn it over and around, simulating a vertigo in print by avoiding any orientation toward a beginning and an end or any kind of linearity. Not only the cover page, but

31 According to Sophie Seita, intermediation is 'a better description of contemporary creative engagement with materials and techniques than post-print, because it accepts the ongoing coexistence and mutual transformations of print and digital technologies'. Sophie Seita, *Provisional Avant-Gardes: Little Magazine Communities from Dada to Digital* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), p. 163.

32 The editorial team conceived *NXS* as a limited project of six issues: *Cyber Sensuality* (Spring 2017); *Synthetic Selves* (Fall 2017); *Viral Bodies* (Spring 2018); *Algorithmic Anxiety* (Spring 2019); *Virtual Vertigo* (Winter 2020); *Phygital Fashioning* (Summer 2022).

33 'Editorial', *NXS*, 5 (2020), n. pag.; see the magazine's 2020 [launch ad](#) on *It's Nice That*.

34 'Editorial', n. pag.

35 Deleuze and Guattari, p. 22.

36 *Ibid.*, pp. 22–23.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

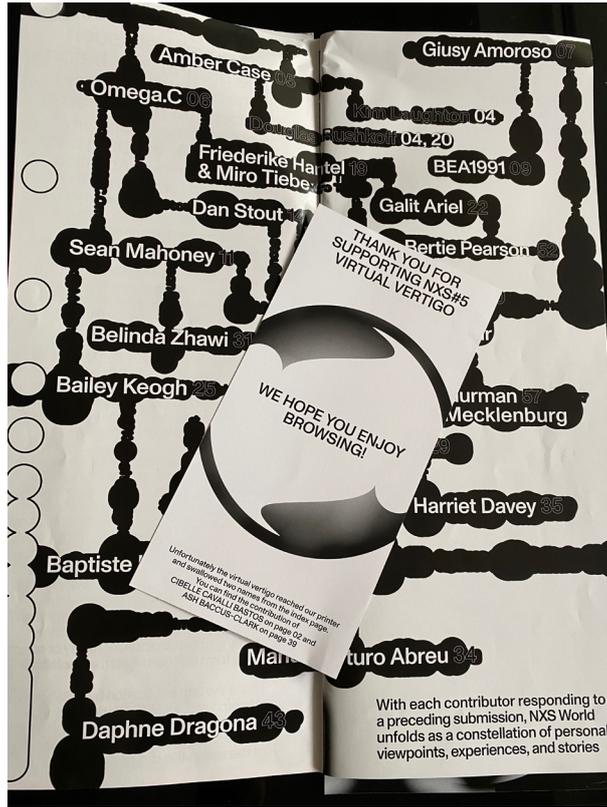


Fig. 3 Opening Spread; *NXS 5* (2020), n. pag. Private copy.

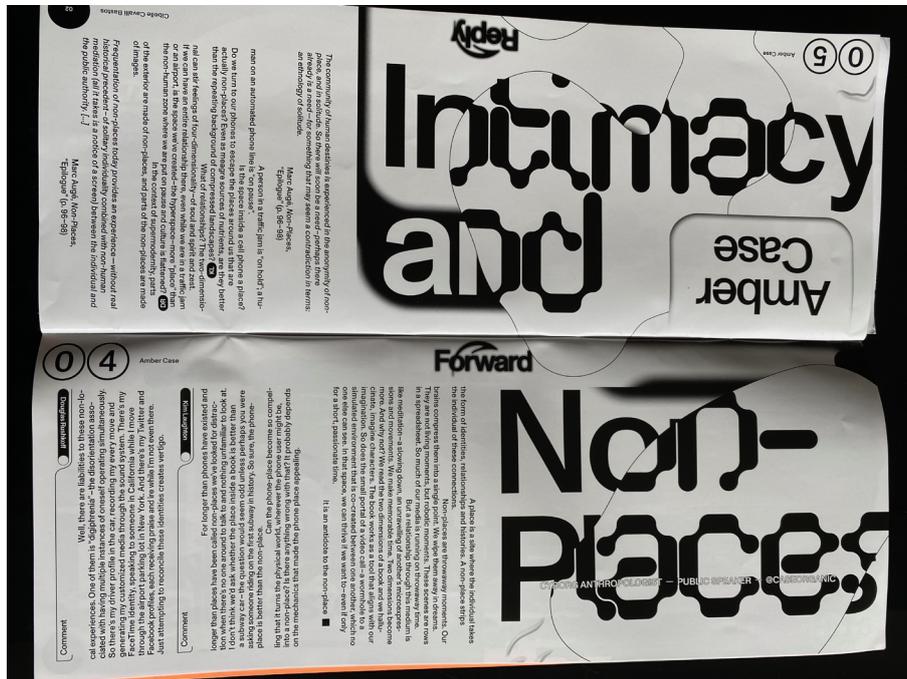


Fig. 4 Spread; Amber Case, 'Intimacy and Non-Places', *NXS 5* (2020), 4-5. Private copy.

the magazine's whole architecture violates the anatomy of a conventional magazine layout with its consistent periodical design.

Although the magazine's front section offers an opening spread (Fig. 3) that looks like a table of contents, its elements — the contributor's names and page numbers — are not oriented toward headlines or to content rooted in the feature well. Instead, what you get is a rhizomatic arrangement of names and page numbers avoiding culmination or termination points. The index spread also contains a special insert that functions as a disclaimer stating: 'Unfortunately the virtual vertigo reached our printer and swallowed two names from the index page. You can find the contributions of Cibelle Cavalli Bastos on page 02 and Ash Baccus-Clark on page 39.' In order to read page '02' or Cibelle's contribution the reader has to locate it first among the magazine's dizzying content flow. Cibelle's opening piece is included at the very end of the magazine. In doing so, the magazine reverses the order of how we usually read a magazine and challenges habitualized reading norms and meaning-making processes. Instead of the frequently random hoppings on mobile devices and a networking controlled by algorithms, reading back into the magazine from its very end and the continuous content jumps map out, however, unexpected subject-related links, interactions, and topics.

The reader may journey along the threads offered by the index page or make a reading plan of her own as suggested in Amber Case's essay on Marc Augé's book *Non-Places* (Fig. 4). Case is an American cyborg anthropologist and designer who studies the interaction between humans and technology. Her contribution serves as a self-reflexive piece on *NXS* magazine's architecture and its spatializing content networking. Distinguishing the 'robotic moments' and 'throwaway time' of 'non-places' from a print medium, she writes that the magazine medium is 'like meditation — a slowing down [...]. We make memorable time. Two dimensions become more. And why not? [...] We hallucinate, imagine characters.'³⁸ Following this particular thread on place, time, and imagining characters, the reader encounters Sean Mahoney's 'Finsta origin story', a reflection on a current trend on Instagram, where the real account is a fake of oneself, and the Finsta functions as the less edited and authentic version of a person.³⁹ Mahoney's contribution contains a direct link to Bailey Keogh's short story 'Politician James: A Politician for the Future'.⁴⁰ In her stories, Keogh, an American writer who is based in Berlin, deals with internet culture, human connection, and oppressive forces in society. 'Politician James' is about the creation of a digital politician to be purchased by any political party. The short story that is printed in the middle of the magazine branches out into numerous directions. The magazine's spatializing activity builds a Deleuzian 'milieu from which it grows and which it overspills [...] a continuous, self-vibrating region of intensities'.⁴¹

The magazine's identity not only relies on a rhizomatic editorial policy with its call-and-response activities among contributors and readers alike, but also on *NXS* magazine's specific layout design, or its typographic vertigo. The hallucinatory touch of the letterforms used for printing 'Virtual Vertigo' emerges from a mix of old and new typefaces highlighting the magazine as a space for a socially and politically driven graphic design. Blending the typefaces *Serous Stream* and *Monument Grotesk* (Fig. 5) not only creates a loud and aggressive layout that is difficult to read, but it also draws upon typeface that matters. *Serous Stream* is a typeface developed by the Australian Mark Growing, founder of *Formist*, a type foundry and design studio that specializes in

38 Amber Case, 'Intimacy and Non-Places', *NXS*, 5 (2020), 4–5 (p. 4); see Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. by John Howe (London: Verso, 1992).

39 Sean Mahoney, 'Finsta origin story', *NXS*, 5 (2020), 10–11.

40 Bailey Keogh, 'Politician James: A Politician for the Future', *NXS*, 5 (2020), 24–25.

41 Deleuze and Guattari, p. 20.



Fig. 5 Screenshot, Formist Foundry, display of typeface Serous. <https://formistfoundry.co/products/serous>

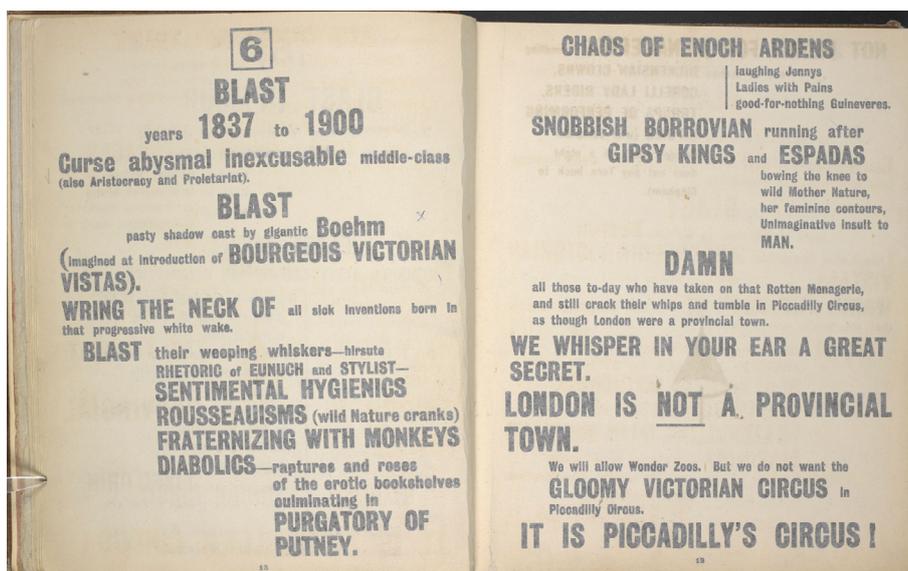


Fig. 6 Spread, *Blast*, 1 (1914), 18–19; By permission the Wyndham Lewis Memorial Trust (a registered charity).

cultural communication. The typeface ‘Serous’ is a liquid-styled type family consisting of four different weights: Brook, Creek, Stream, and River. Serous comes from the Latin ‘serosus’ referring to substances of watery nature and has been designed to embody the feeling of liquid. Serous’s characters are drawn on a geometric grid, giving the type a rhythmic uniform nature containing no right angles. On the page, the liquid letterforms spill over into Monument Grotesk, a typeface created by the American foundry Palmer & Rey’s in 1884 and reinterpreted by a Swiss design studio over the last decade. Its current update is widely used in screen printing and for digital print on textile and the

electronic screen.⁴² Moreover, the mixture of natural letterforms and sans-serif typefaces can also be read as a carefully curated link between *NXS* magazine's design activism and the history of avant-garde printing — especially when you think of modernist avant-garde magazines like *Blast* (Fig. 6) and its iconoclastic graphic space that was designed in Grotesque No. 9.

In the context of the digital age, *NXS* follows a provocative and dissenting graphic design providing a unique visual and tactile feedback for engaging readerly interactions. In doing so, the magazine's different material textures encapsulate the tension between print and digital culture. The magazine's affordance lies in merging the two separate spheres, blessing new ways of perceiving a computer-communicated reality through the periodical's materiality. Holding the magazine in one's hands, touching the thick cardboard cover and skimming through its glossy and screen-like pages and feeling its mixed printness not only immerses the reader in the magazine's semantic-semiotic environment, but draws attention to the magazine's status as a material space as well as its avant-garde style and norm-breaking (micro)practices.

Migrant Time and Ethnic Microzines: *Burnt Roti*

Starting in the 2010s, microzines have turned (back) to a zine-like preoccupation with activism and politics as well as adopting the zine's intimate mode of address. In this context, British microzine *Burnt Roti* is an interesting case in point: it addresses young women of the South Asian diaspora in Britain, filtering political issues and activism through lifestyle and culture journalism. So far five issues have been published between 2016 and 2022. Its sole founder and editor Sharan Dhaliwal was joined by Reeta Loi in 2018. Sharan Dhaliwal also curates a website under the same name, with the additional tagline 'South Asian lifestyle' and, in interviews and profiles, it is not always entirely clear whether the name *Burnt Roti* refers to the web or print platform. The website not only offers content on lifestyle but also directories of 'WoC therapists' listing therapists including their ethnicity and languages spoken, and of 'South Asian creatives, available for hire'. In the header, links to sections titled 'LGBTQ+', 'Women', 'Mental health', and 'Identity' let viewers navigate to articles by contributors on gender and sexuality within the South Asian community. Dhaliwal writes in the site's 'About' section that *Burnt Roti* 'is a platform for young creatives to showcase their talent, find safe spaces and destigmatise topics around mental health and sexuality, amongst others.'⁴³ Currently, the [homepage](#) prominently advertises the latest print issue of the magazine at the top and relegates links to original digital content to the less exposed bottom. *Burnt Roti* engages with and relies on digital media using them in a more conventional way than *NXS* or other design-led avant-gardist magazine projects.

The print magazine speaks to a circumscribed constituency and develops its tone and scope from the personal experiences of its editor and her network, effectively mobilizing her 'subcultural' as 'editorial' capital.⁴⁴ As a microzine made by and geared towards second- and third-generation queer South Asian women in Britain, *Burnt Roti* is invested in complex representations of 'migrant times' to mediate affective modes of

42 See John J. Palmer and Valentine J. A. Rey's *New Specimen Book*, Second Compact Edition (San Francisco, CA: Foundry and Warehouse, 405–7 Sansome Street, 1884); for the remediation of letters and types see Oliver Scheiding, 'Materiality in Twentieth and Twenty-First-Century Literary Magazines', in *The Routledge Companion to the British and North American Literary Magazine*, ed. by Tim Lanzendörfer (New York: Routledge, 2022), pp. 80–92.

43 Sharan Dhaliwal, 'About', *Burnt Roti* [accessed 23 February 2022].

44 Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2013), pp. 26–30; Ben Crewe, *Representing Men: Cultural Production and Producers in the Men's Magazine Market* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), p. 97.

belonging and filiation. In the following, we will consider the linguistic and material representations of such times and temporalities.

Migrancy is usually only conceived in spatial terms shaped by movements across distances and the crossing of borders. However, it may be equally understood as a complex constellation of timescapes and temporalities that organize belongingness and effect ruptures and disalignments which are perpetuated over generations. Saulo B. Cwerner has proposed a heuristic of 'migrant times' as 'particular cultures of time, that is, complex clusters or articulations of a diversity of temporal perceptions, representations, rhythms and organisation.'⁴⁵ These range from 'strange times', denoting the jarring of individual embodied everyday routines with those of the host country, to 'heteronomous times' as temporal regimes imposed by immigration laws and the flexibility of precarious labour conditions, to the 'asynchronous times', 'remembered times', and 'diasporic times' which address differently configured relationships between an immigrant community and the real and imaginary tethers it maintains with the homeland. The crucial operations in these trajectories concern successful and failed attempts at synchronization. When thinking about migrancy and migrant identities, temporal and spatial crossings, alignments, and ruptures should hence be considered as enmeshed.

The problem of a/synchronous times are already inscribed in the magazine's title. 'Burnt roti' evokes the domestic and alimentary negotiation of diasporic identities. Indexing ethnic difference in terms of culinary otherness is a common strategy to manage multiculturalism by making it 'palatable' and consumable.⁴⁶ Food plays a crucial role in the private and communal transmission of cultural allegiance to the home country through taste and memory, a connection that the title disrupts, because the implied agent fails to live up to gendered and cultural expectations. This failure is due to misjudging the bread's cooking time and thus correctly estimating or 'feeling' the appropriate duration of time. In its title *Burnt Roti* hence already highlights the complexities of living between different times and their embodiment and synchronization.

The editor's note in the first issue (issue #0, 2016) together with the facing page offer a visual and textual combination that introduces the discordant temporality of 'diasporic time' and elaborates on the significance of the title.⁴⁷ Dhaliwal's note pinpoints biographical moments and their significance in her struggle with her South Asian heritage and her parents' expectations shaped by it: 'At a young age, I burned rotis all the time. My mum grew concerned that I would learn how to make them. [...] I never wanted to be a "good wife", [...] being forced into trying to be wife material caused my instant rejection of my parents and, in turn, my culture.' This private confession is reformulated as a collective concern, continuing 'When something collectively upsets people (expectations of women, homophobia, and so on) we work together to teach those who don't understand and we also fight together.'⁴⁸ Biographical time is knotted into the generational conflict with Dhaliwal's parents and extended to the inclusive 'we' of like-minded readers.

Below the editor's note, a faded photograph of the Taj Mahal viewed through the arched mosque doorway offers a popular subject representing a timeless India for the 'tourist gaze'. The arch framing the monument in the photograph takes up the outline

45 Saulo B. Cwerner, 'The Times of Migration', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 27.1 (2001), 7–36 (p. 17).

46 Anita Mannur, *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2009), p. 7. *Clove* magazine does the same, as does the US-based *Kajal* with its podcast, the *Cardamom Pod*.

47 *Burnt Roti's* first issue in 2016 was published as 'issue #0'. We follow this numbering in the bibliographic references (see footnote 59 below) and add it in the text in parenthesis.

48 Sharan Dhaliwal, 'Editor's Note', *Burnt Roti*, 0 (2016), [1].

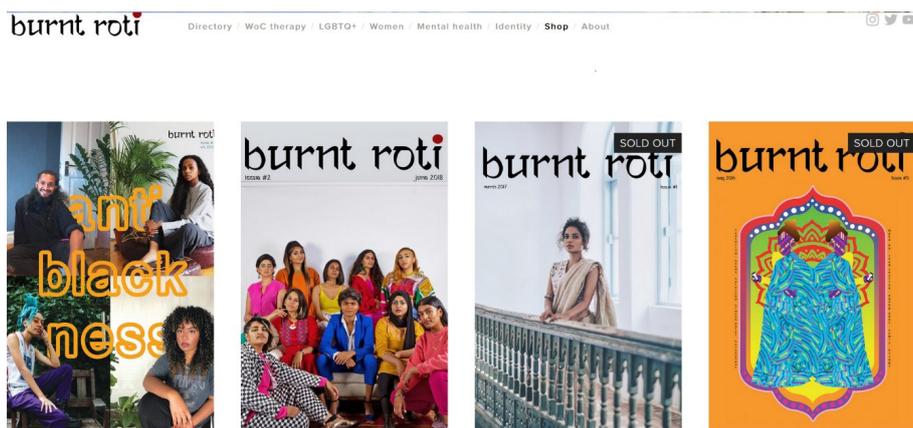


Fig. 7 Screenshot of *Burnt Roti* webshop showing covers of issues #0–#4.

of the first issue's cover (Fig. 7) showing an illustration of two stylized sari-clad women holding mobile phones in front of a mehndi pattern framing their heads and upper bodies. The cover illustration is flipped across a vertical axis and effectively constitutes a doubling of the figure suggesting the different images and metaphors of doubleness and splitting in the popular and academic discourses on migrancy, hinging on the assumed opposition between modernity and tradition. The inside back cover of the same issue shows a photograph of the Lake Palace, which parallels the opening image of the Taj Mahal in the same position on the page and in the same visual idiom suggesting a hazy, timeless past and impersonal, idealized photographic composition. This stylized temporality of the tourist gaze contrasts with the autobiographical narratives and generationally transmitted 'remembered time' dominating columns written by Dhaliwal, her friends and collaborators, and her parents. *Burnt Roti* telescopes the broad appeal of the themes and voices familiar from the mainstream glossy to a miniaturized circle of family and friends. Recurring rubrics such as recipes, film and TV reviews, beauty tutorials, fashion, and advice columns imitate the genres of weekly and monthly mass market lifestyle magazines. The involvement of Dhaliwal's parents as contributors in the features 'Lunchbox' and 'Father's Lament' recurring in the first three issues ironically miniaturizes and subverts this format. Both pass on advice and rebuke to their daughter, and the reader, recreating the generational dynamic of migrancy that Dhaliwal problematizes and celebrates in the editorial of the first issue. Contributions generally take a confessional, intimate tone, like Dhaliwal's own coming.⁴⁹ Pieces like these are 'performance[s] of personal transitional moments, when unspoken experience is made explicit'.⁵⁰ The accumulation of first-person narratives that recount short biographical episodes probing what belonging or unbelonging 'feels like' create an 'intimate public sphere' in which the contributing writers perform very similar, almost parallel gestures of remembering and reflection that effect retrospective synchronizations of life experiences, which include the readers.⁵¹

These individual narratives are held together by the communally inhabited 'timescape' of Bollywood which is particularly significant for the diasporic experience of synchronized time. Bollywood has been studied as a central terrain on which the diasporic audience negotiates connections to the 'homeland' through 'shared "structures

49 Sharan Dhaliwal, 'I'm Bisexual and Scared to Come Out', *Burnt Roti*, 2 (2018), 14–15.

50 Clara Keating, 'Biographizing Migrant Experience', *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 257 (2019), 49–75 (p. 53).

51 Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 4–24.

of feeling” which in turn produce a transnational sense of communal solidarity’.⁵² Moreover, Bollywood not only provides versions of India for transnational consumption, but also mediates between generations in the diaspora by providing a shared focal point for family members of different generations.⁵³ In *Burnt Roti*, Bollywood appears on different levels of content. Most prominently, Priyanka Bose is the cover star of the second issue (#1, 2017) and interviewed by Dhaliwal in the magazine.⁵⁴ The column titled ‘Teebee aur film’ is tentatively established as a regular feature (in issues #1 and #2) and then abandoned.⁵⁵ More importantly, however, Bollywood imbricates the magazine’s infrastructure, or furniture, that is, parts that serve as signposts through the contents and as visual identity. The recurring columns ‘Lunchbox’ (recipes), ‘Sangeet’ (interviews with musicians), and ‘Khoobsurat’ (beauty) are Bollywood film titles, as is the title of a short Q&A with model Marietta Valsan, ‘Ek ladki ko dekha’. These draw on implicit knowledge of Bollywood movies since the 1990s, which the implied or ideal reader of the magazine would be familiar with, and more generally, mark the magazine as a space of linguistic pop-cultural fusion.

This preoccupation carries over into the materiality of the publication in its use of typography. The first and second issue (issues #0 and #1) use a typeface with a layered letterform evoking hand-painted posters, reminiscent of vintage Bollywood art that was part of South Asian urban promotional landscapes from the 50s to the 90s. The third issue (issue #2, 2018) introduces Jasmin Sehra, an artist who has taken up the hand-painted movie poster in her work. She uses its visual quirks in a fusion of styles and applies it to contemporary Black music and film. Her work appears in a sequence titled ‘BollyHood’, consisting of four spreads that depict black artists as Bollywood stars combined with the distinctive lettering of Bollywood poster art.⁵⁶ *Burnt Roti*’s overt and oblique evocations of Bollywood and the typographical reference to its past in the headlines of articles devise belonging through synchronicity as shared nostalgia for a specific medial and actual place in the past. In one of the personal accounts of diasporic experiences this is made explicit as the author opens the text by claiming: ‘If you’d asked me at 14 what my favourite song was, I’d have said Good Charlotte’s “The Anthem”. [...] But deep down it was and still is RD Burnam’s “Ek Ladki ko dekha” from *1942: A Lovestory*, the first Bollywood movie I’d ever seen.’⁵⁷ *Burnt Roti* thus recreates the textures of ‘migrant times’ in linguistic, visual, and material fusions and variations to address readers through their identities as young South Asian women and their experiences of aligned and discordant diasporic temporalities of media, biography, and family.

Conclusion

The three examples discussed here highlight visual and graphic recombinations translated onto the magazine’s pages whose rhizomatic nature can also be read as carefully curated links between contemporary microzine’s design activism and the history of avant-garde printing. Like a plant that sends out roots and shoots as it spreads, the magazine’s rhizomatic flow of graphic and visual configurations facilitates a periodical environment of resemblances and transcodings over time and space that are multivectoral, polysensual, ever surprising, and travelling to other media. As the exemplary readings show, the art and politics of microzines focusing on language,

52 Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire* (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 2013), p. 238.

53 Ibid., p. 247.

54 Sharan Dhaliwal, ‘Mumbai with Priyanka Bose’, *Burnt Roti*, 1 (2017), 30–35.

55 ‘Teebee aur film’ is an anglicized transliteration of Hindi for ‘TV and film’.

56 Jasmin Sehra, ‘BollyHood Series’, *Burnt Roti*, 2 (2018), 76–81.

57 Rumnique Nannar, ‘The Soundtrack to my Diasporic Roots’, *Burnt Roti*, 1 (2017), 28–29 (p. 28).

materiality, and temporality are interlaced with the form and physicality of the magazines themselves. The magazine space provides a multimodal assemblage linking message and medium: it allows for arrangements and rearrangements of elements on the page and periodically shifting orderings across issues, creating potentially estranging compositions that warrant rereadings or a second and third look. Moreover, the magazinal assemblage is wrapped up in the historical moment in which the issue is produced as well as its own periodical temporality of repetitions, non-linear telescoping time frames, and irregular periods of waiting for the next release. In light of their function as incubator spaces of aesthetic experiments and design activism, close readings of microzines as (rhizomatic) assemblages remain a desirable and fruitful direction for further research to explore the vital role they play in creating an awareness of the times we live in.

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