Simon Sheikh

Circulation and Withdrawal, Part I: Circulation

Circulation organizes time and vice versa. Public discourse is contemporary, and it is orientated to the future, the contemporaneity and the futurity in question are those of its own circulation.
– Michael Warner[1]

Nothing is less passive than the act of fleeing, of exiting. Defection modifies the conditions within which the struggle takes place, rather than presupposing those conditions to be an unalterable horizon; it modifies the context within which a problem has arisen, rather than facing this problem by opting for one or the other of the provided alternatives. In short, *exit* consists of unrestrained invention which alters the rules of the game and throws the adversary completely off balance.
– Paolo Virno[2]

It lies in the nature of a magazine that it goes public, hence the term publication. At a certain moment, and with specific intervals, a magazine is made available to the public, whether on newsstands, in specialist bookstores, or online. It thus circulates its discourse through punctuation. But what happens in between – namely, the decisions on themes, articles, edits, graphic design, and, yes, adverts – is nonpublic. In some cases the publication of a publication may even be accompanied by a public campaign, from marketing to launch events. But in many ways, the main work of a magazine, of its production of meaning, is nonpublic – up until the moment of publication, when another circulation and production of meaning happens: that of distribution and readership.

After all, the meaning of a magazine and its discursive production is as dependent on reading as it is on writing and editing: a magazine *is* always its audience, if not one with its audience. But the fact that the production of a magazine is withdrawn from the public is not the same as an exit from the public sphere as such; it is not a withdrawal from and of discourse. Why, then, circulation *and* withdrawal? This has to do with the relation a magazine has to its objects and subjects, and how it constitutes a public as specific, and sometimes in opposition to dominant forms of publicness and official cultural policies. Sometimes withdrawal is enforced, through economy or censorship, but other times it is intentional and tactical: the withdrawal from certain public debates and arenas is what makes an alternative cultural and critical production possible. However, it is not a question of circulation *or* withdrawal, i.e., publicness *or* concealment, but of a movement between these two moments, heightening their connection. It is a question, in other words, of circulation *and* withdrawal.

The term “circulation” is usually used in a

Richard Caton Woodville, *Politics in an Oyster House*, 1848. Oil on fabric. 54.29 x 43.97 x 7.94 cm.

very specific way when employed in the context of a magazine and its culture: it indicates the number of copies of each edition distributed upon publication. This has historically been a point of pride, with certain newspapers even printing their circulation numbers on their masthead, to attest to the strength and reach of the publication in question. It is implied, naturally, that a high circulation means a high number of readers, and thus great importance and influence. In other words, the figures of circulation are indicative of the publication's actual reach – the more the merrier, whether most of these buyers actually read it, or whether, which is more likely, others than just the buyer or subscriber read the individual copy.

In any case, the key figure in this circulation debate is precisely the buyer – the buyer as indicative of the reader. Even if there is more than one person reading each purchased copy, it is the buyer or subscriber who is the primary reader, constituting the readership in terms of numbers and in terms of a constituency. Even if the mode of address of the publication is somewhat universal, it is always at the same time specific, since the readers are actualized as readers through their purchase of a single copy or of a subscription. The success and relevance of the magazine is thus, along the same lines, measurable in numbers, and in income. Buyers not only provide direct income for the publication, ensuring its survival and sustainability; they also provide access to increased revenue in the form of advertising, which in most cases will make up by far the largest part of the publication's revenue. So, circulation gives access to an economic circuit in two ways, through the income gained from direct sales and subscriptions, and through the revenue generated by placed adverts.

Circulation does not only indicate these sources of monetary income, i.e., real capital; it also indicates symbolic capital, and the movement between the two. On the one hand, the monies generated from sales, subscriptions, and advertising constitute real capital for the publication, its owners, backers, and shareholders. On the other, this real capital in the form of high circulation numbers gives the publication a symbolic capital as influential in its field, in its city, nation, or community. Real capital thus supplies a magazine with symbolic capital, that can in turn be transformed back into real capital, since the more people read it, the more sense it makes for a business to advertise in said publication.

Moreover, if you as a reader are interested in a certain topic, where better to turn than the most widely circulated and thus most influential and important magazine in the field? In the logic of consumer capitalism, the symbolic and the real are intertwined, and surely the biggest

Lynda Benglis, *Artforum* advertisement, 1974.

magazine in a particular field must be the leading one? In this sense, power produces power, or rather, the appearance of power: if so many people read a certain magazine, and so many parties thus place ads in it, it follows that it must be important, always reinforcing its own circuit of power in a loop of meaning that mirrors the intrinsically linked logics of both consumer capitalism and electoral democracy. In this game of numbers, it is exactly the counting, or accounting if you will, that matters, and not whether the publication in question confirms the values of its readers, or tries to question them, and perhaps even undoes them. In this logic of capital, there is no discussion of the role of readership, and what it means *to read*, and thus what it means to write, to address. And location and distribution are only a matter, again, of numbers, of units, and not of barriers of language, culture, geography, and class.

Certainly, access to real capital always provides symbolic capital, but does the opposite also hold true? That is, can and must symbolic capital also always be transformed into real capital? And what would be the terms of such a transformation? When does, for example, a counterculture become an *over-the-counter culture*, and is this move inevitable, and can it be produced through the work of the magazine itself, as in the contested notion of the (counter)cultural entrepreneur? A simple answer is that symbolic capital becomes transformed when the production of meaning, both in text and image, becomes actualized as capital – paraphrasing Guy Debord, but it must be immediatedly complicated and contradicted on two points. First, this move, however intentional and well planned, is not always successful; indeed the occasions when a small publisher or cultural producer *fails* in going mainstream, fails to find a buyer for its selling out, by far out number the realizations of such lofty goals! Secondly, it is not only a matter of intentionality, but also one of incorporation, or even co-optation, of a given (counter)cultural production into the system of capital – and this integration may not even have to include the actual producers, but only their mode of production, their discourse, that can be appropriated, or, if you will, subsumed ...

The relation between real and symbolic capital, and the transformation of one into the other, is, of course, crystallized in the particular production of texts and images that is advertising, and as mentioned above, the bigger the circulation, the more prospective advertisers

Judy Chicago, name change ad, *Artforum*, Oct. 1970.

a publication is likely to have. But contrary to conventional editorial thought, these ads are not only what makes a magazine possible, insofar as they generate the income that supports the magazine's production and circulation of discourse. These ads are also part of what *makes* the magazine. In other words, the ads aren't just part of a magazine's real economy; they are also part of its symbolic economy, and, furthermore, part of its mode of address. This holds particularly true for art magazines, where the adverts from various galleries and museums are part of the information the magazine offers – indeed, they are sort of its "news" section, letting you know what is on display where. This is also why art magazines appear more and more like fashion magazines, where the adverts are part of the publication's look and its discourse – taken to its logical conclusion by a publication like *Purple*, that indeed started in critical journal format, but is now a high street fashion and art magazine. But the same applies to all magazines that include advertising. Any exegesis of one of the art world's central and hegemonic magazines – say *Artforum* or *Frieze* – would not just examine the numbered content pages, but also all the ads in the front and back, each and everyone of them being part and parcel of the image and discourse-production of the magazine.

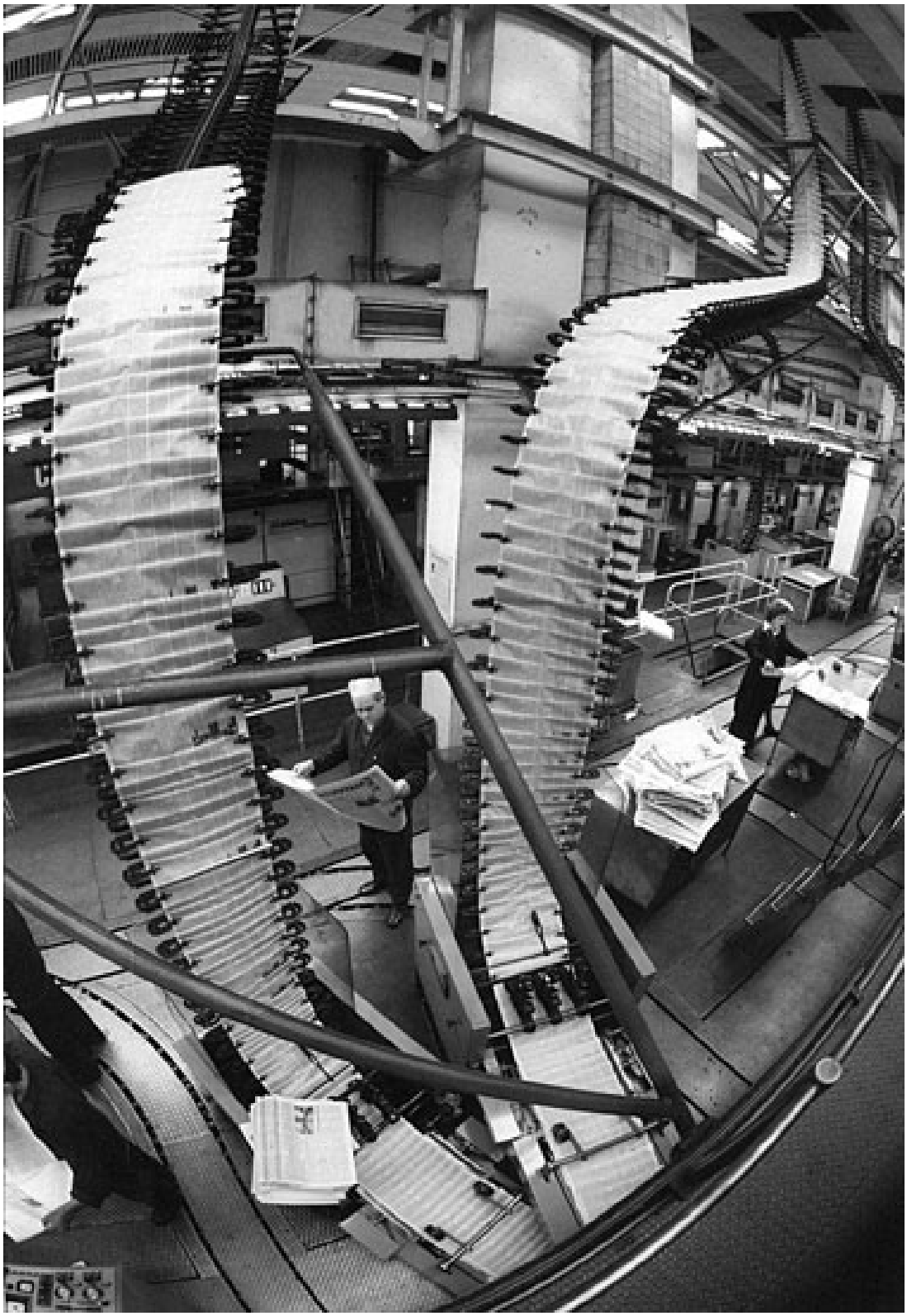
The notion of a magazine as a mode of address recalls Michael Warner's eminent description of the production and formation of publics and counterpublics, both, significantly, spelled in the plural: not one, but many. Not only are dominant and marginal publics structured similarly, namely, through self-organization rather than state-operated forms of communication and communion. They are also connected in the overall establishment of the public sphere. Warner implies that there is an oscillation possible between publics and counterpublics, depending on their historical, economic, and political context. In order words, what operates at the margins – whether counter-hegemonic or not – in one context, society, or period may be dominant in another. So a specific type of cultural production is not inherently critical or affirmative, but gains such properties within a context, within its circulation as discourse. For Warner, a public is precisely constituted through its reflexive circulation of discourse as that which makes a social space, i.e., a space shared by producers and readers alike. Significantly, both play an active part in the circuit of recognition and meaning, as opposed to the semiotic model of sender and receiver:

> No single text can create a public. Nor can a single voice, a single genre, even a single medium. All are insufficient to create the kind of reflexivity that we call a public, since a public is understood to be an ongoing space of encounter for discourse. Not texts themselves create publics, but the concatenation of texts through time. Only when a previously existing discourse can be supposed, and when a responding discourse can be postulated, can a text address a public.[3]

In this way, a magazine's discourse lies in its continuity and circulation – in the fact that it is not only read, but reread over time. Reading, and thus the importance of a particular contribution to a critical discourse – say, a given issue of magazine – is not only imminent and actual; it can also take place long after publication, and in another context, another country. So even when a critical essay is directed to an actuality – a specific event, debate, or exhibition – it is nonetheless directed towards the future, and to the imaginary in the shape of possible readers. Even if a magazine has a number of subscribers, and thus has given rather than potential readers, they nonetheless remain fictitious: one can only hope that they will read the essay, now or later, and one can only hope that they will find it useful, whether as information, instruction, or provocation.

It is through this imaginary address that a magazine produces its culture and its sense of community, always a potential one, even when the magazine is relatively well known (critical journals will often feel a certain familiarity with their readers, who tend to be mostly subscribers from a certain field or milieu). At the same time, the community of readers is constantly actualized at every moment of publication, at the instance of punctuation, where the coming community is now the becoming, and the inoperative hopefully operative. Certainly, in terms of numbers there is a counting of heads going on – how many bought the issue, how many renewed their subscription, but also how many institutions and individuals placed or continued their ads.

Every writer of critique in the arts, in theory, or elsewhere attempts to contribute to existing discourse, expanding it, bending it, transforming it, or negating it. But this depends wholly on circulation – on the distribution, language, location, and powers of enunciation of the magazine the text is published in. It is not just a matter of the text itself, but also the boat it sails in on, with individual magazines having a very different reach and brief. An essay may be extremely insightful and groundbreaking, but it may not circulate widely or become influential due to its very place of publication. We can be



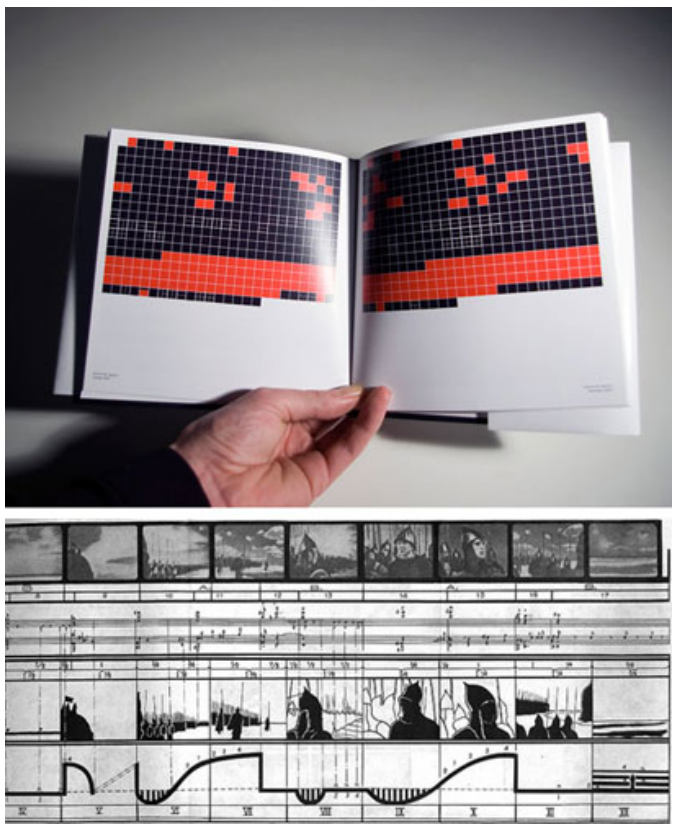
The rotary shop routine at the printing press of *Pravda*, a leading Soviet daily, as seen on Jan. 8, 1982.

constructive and call this an ecosystem of writers and magazines within the arts, or we can take a more sinister view and simply state that it is a hierarchy. Furthermore, it not only matters where a text is published, but also *when*: a text can be extremely insightful and groundbreaking, but it may not circulate widely or become influential due to its exact time of publication. Even if many great texts have been rediscovered later, the undiscovered must surely outnumber the discovered?

Within the culture of magazines, we are thus dealing with several, if interconnected, forms of circulation. The critical and theoretical discourse of a magazine is circulated among its writers and readers, creating an imaginary community brought together by certain texts and images. This shared discourse is continuous, and is dependent on being recurrent – a magazine needs some sort of reliability in its cycles of publication to sustain its community and position. A magazine also needs objectives in terms of how it imagines its contribution to the overall permeable discourse that is contemporary art – as addition, modification, criticism, or even social change. And of course, there is circulation in the economic sense; even in the most romantic notion of a magazine as a republic of letters, there is an inherent connection to capital. This goes for virtually all forms of cultural production, whether critical of capital or not.

A magazine thus circulates discourse, and is circulated as a commodity of knowledge. It does this through punctuality. The question thus arises of which punctuation it makes – since it is, after all, not just the release date we are thinking of, but the critical contribution to a discourse on art. We must thus now turn the page, and begin to peer inside the magazine. As already mentioned, the content and thus discursive production of a magazine can be found in all its texts and images – not just in the essays and reviews, but also in the announcements and ads. Seen as a totality, a magazine is a collection of texts and images of various kinds, and this collection involves both difference and repetition, making each issue distinct but simultaneously recognizable as part of a series. A magazine is never just one issue, one article, or one illustration, but one after the other, in a basic principle of addition, of this one *and* that one, and so on. A magazine is, in other words, a form of assemblage that can be described as montage.

From the communist film forms of Sergei



Top: Michael Maranda, *ARTFORUMx*, 2012. Bottom: Sergei Eisenstein, montage structure of a sequence from *Alexander Nevsky*, 1939.

Eisenstein, to Hollywood's capitalization of pictures, to Jean-Luc Godard's political deconstructions, montage has been a fixture of filmmaking, whether to create continuity or discontinuity, dialectics or antagonisms. However, montage can also be used to describe modern as well as postmodern artistic usages of collage, and of word and image, from Heartfield to Rosler, Kruger, and beyond. Indeed, silent cinema always juxtaposed images with text, and Godard of course made words into, or at least equal to, images (that is, as neither supportive nor narrativizing). Jacques Rancière has called this type of work *sentence-images*: "By sentence-image I intend the combination of two functions that are to be defined aesthetically – that is, by the way in which they undo the representable relationship between text and image."[4]

Now, in an art magazine, the relationship between text and image is supposedly fixed: there are images, even if these are mostly textual, as in works of conceptual art; and then there are texts about these images, these works of art. Even if the primary discourse-production of a magazine occurs through the texts it publishes, it is the images and artworks that are primary, suggesting a hierarchical relationship.

We can even say that a magazine performs a service for its readers, for art, and arguably for its advertisers, even if the latter is undisclosed and unacknowledged. Certainly the relation of power between writers and artists is highly contested, with many critics seeing themselves as mediators and facilitators, but many artists seeing critics as privileged and too powerful.

Even if the economics of these relations are complicated and somewhat invisible, this is not the only complication – indeed, there are phenomenological aspects of magazine-making that disrupt and contradict this traditional, and dare I say clichéd, relationship between a primary and a secondary production of meaning. A magazine may review artistic production, but in doing so it always presents *newly produced* texts alongside *reproduced* images – making the texts primary and the artworks secondary. And then there is the absence of images – some journals may have very few or no images at all, even when writing about image production. Whereas this may at first glance appear to be a gesture of disrespect toward artists and the making of art, this is not necessarily the case: the text may still posit itself as being in service to certain types of art-making, and may perhaps add power to the image through its absence – after all, isn't any

Johann Peter Hasenclever, *The Reading Room*, 1843. Oil on canvas. 71 x 100 cm.

reproduction a disservice to the aura of the original? Could we not, overtly polemically, perhaps, claim that *r*eproduction is always already a *mis*representation? In other words, the relationship between texts and images in magazines is not a stable one; it is always done and undone by the particular combination that is presented by a publication. A magazine is, in this sense, a sort of sentence-image, a form of montage.

It is impossible to think of a magazine as montage without considering its graphic design. In a sense, we could say that the historical form of layout, with its clear separations between pages and categories, texts and images, is an attempt to stabilize and fix the unruly combinatory logics of Rancière's sentence-image, with its potential undoing of the relation of representation between word and picture. In the mode of address of a magazine, it is not just the writing style that indicates the situating of subjects and objects, and their interrelation, but also the design, as both are a matter of style *and* discourse simultaneously, or what we could call *a discursive style*. Discourse not only circulates as language, as linguistic meaning, but also as signs of discursivity, signs of a specific discourse, which place the addressor, and, it is hoped, the addressee within a circuit of recognition. Style positions the magazine, and thus its subjects and objects, from writers to readers and all the positions in between, always making a claim for plurality, for addition: another text, another artist, another reader. This is the principle of the "and."

Montage is, then, also a form of the circulation of texts and images, as Georges Didi-Huberman has noted in the case of the latter. In his historiography of images, Didi-Huberman consistently discusses montage as a technique for dealing with the essentially dual system of images, which are both fact and fetish, archive and appearance. Interestingly, the image as montage – as in a sequence, dialectic, or clash – is an ethical and political way of dealing with images, as opposed to the idea of the image as a manipulative lie that we find in discussions of the ethics of not showing or not looking at things that must remain unrepresentable (as Didi-Huberman writes in relation to the four surviving photographs from Auschwitz).[5] Instead of the route of negation, Didi-Huberman locates ethics in the ability to circulate and compare, in the way that an image can never stand alone, but is always preceded and followed by other images that it stands in dialogue with – as in the case of montage: "The image is neither nothing, nor all, nor is it one – it is not even two. It is deployed according to the minimum complexity supposed by two points of view that confront each other under the gaze of a third."[6]

And this notion of montage, as an ethical response to moments of crisis and the writing of history, can be illustrative for the work of a magazine – its role, too, is that of a continuous montage where you can contribute, contrast, critique, and circulate information and discourse. A critical magazine is always the politics of the *and*, positioning itself in regards to a number of confrontations and comings-together, always placing one or more things and ideas in relation to one another. But a relation is more than placing one thing after another; it is also the *and* itself. A magazine is a connector as well as a producer, and how it connects one or more points is central to its work, to the connection of its connection. Indeed, Gilles Deleuze – also referencing Godard's montage work, as both Rancière and Didi-Huberman do – makes an interesting observation about the *and*: "What counts … isn't two or three or however many, it's AND, the conjunction AND."[7] In Deleuze, the *and* is not merely a component part of a collection of images; rather, it marks a separate, if wholly dependent, connection that is the in-between and the border, an almost imperceptible line around which revolutions and something new can take place. It is this entity – the line, the connector – that montage makes visible. However, this interstice "is not an operation of association, but of differentiation" or "disappearance."[8] The images – or for that matter texts, as well as texts and images – that are conjoined and juxtaposed by montage are thus not purely associative or random. Instead, precision is required so that the "difference of potential is established," which will then, hopefully, "be productive of a third [image] or of something new."[9] In this sense, editing is montage, but of a particular kind: namely, montage that makes new connections and brings forth hidden potentials of meaning about art, theory, and its place in the world. Paraphrasing Deleuze's definition of the politics of montage in Godard, the magazine as montage does not merely illustrate the world. It also somehow restores our belief in it.

Now, it may seem ridiculous to place such high hopes on magazine culture. How can one possibly expect art magazines to restore our faith in the world, when their world is increasingly the art world, with its strange confluence of symbolic and real capital, where the market, not criticism, sets the agenda, and where most reviews and essays in art magazines are indistinguishable from press releases and catalogue essays? There are, in my view, two ways of dealing with this issue. One is to reframe the question. If a text is a statement towards, within, and through a discourse – as in Michel

Foucault's notion of a discursive formation – then this text always already exists within a circulation of texts and images.[10] In other words, a theoretical or critical essay is a statement that does not stand in a hierarchical relation to artworks per se, but rather in parallel to them: the works state one thing, and the texts another. Sometimes the works and the texts occupy the same position, and sometimes they are in conflict, creating a polemical relationship. There is thus no principal separation between the critical and the polemic, and no inherent hierarchy or function of service. Rather, any possible superiority or subordination is dependent on the position of the speaker and the institutional inscription. The power of enunciation does not lie only in the statement, but also in the position from which it is uttered, and, indeed, in how and where it circulates.

The most wide-ranging attempt at creating a discursive formation of art-related magazines that was both formalized and continuous through addition and montage was the Documenta 12 magazine project of 2007. The central ideas of the project were exchange and circulation, in the shape of a server where all of the hundreds of participating magazines were able to upload essays that could, in turn, be downloaded and reprinted free of charge by the other magazines. Here, like in montage, a technical device provided the actual interstice, while the "montaging" was to be done by the magazines themselves. This would, it was hoped, create a global network of collaborating and exchanging magazines that would circulate discourses together, well beyond the event of Documenta itself. This promise was never fulfilled, partly because Documenta scandalously would not allow the magazines to use the server after the event ended, and partly because of a perceived hierarchy of knowledge, influence, and distribution. Whereas certain magazines, mainly in Southeast Asia, circulated texts and exchanged methods of dealing with language, circulation, economics, and politics, others (particularly in Europe) did not. Some of the latter were wary of Documenta itself as a hegemonic mega-institution and feared co-optation, while others were mostly concerned with their degree of representation within Documenta and felt a certain competitiveness towards the other participating magazines. In either case, they felt the need to be protective of their contributions to discourse, to their own production of knowledge. So people pulled back from the project. They exited. They *withdrew*. This is the second way of dealing with the diminishing role of magazines in relation to the art market, and it will be taken up in the second part of this essay.

Simon Sheikh is a curator and writer who researches practices of exhibition-making and political imaginaries. He is Reader in Art and Programme Director of the MFA in Curating at Goldsmiths, University of London, London. Sheikh was coordinator of the Critical Studies Program at Malmö Art Academy, Malmö from 2002 to 2009. He was also curator at NIFCA, Helsinki, 2003–2004 and, prior to that, director of Overgaden – Institute for Contemporary Art, Copenhagen from 1999–2002. Between 1996 and 2000, he was editor of the magazine *Øjeblikket* and a member of the project group GLOBE from 1993–2000. His recent curatorial work includes: *Reading / Capital (for Althusser)*, DEPO, Istanbul, 2014; *Unauthorized*, Inter Arts Lab, Malmö, 2012; *All That Fits: The Aesthetics of Journalism*, QUAD, Derby, 2011 (with Alfredo Cramerotti); *Do You Remember the Future?*, TOK / Project Loft Etagi, Saint Petersburg, 2011; *Vectors of the Possible*, BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, 2010; and *Capital (It Fails Us Now)*, UKS, Oslo, 2005 and Kunstihoone, Tallinn, 2006. Sheikh's writings can also be found in such periodicals as *Afterall*, *an architecture*, *Open*, *Springerin*, and *Texte zur Kunst*. He has edited and authored several publications, including: *On Horizons: A Critical Reader on Contemporary Art* (with Maria Hlavajova and Jill Winder) (2011); *Capital (it fails us now)* (2006); *In the Place of the Public Sphere?* (2005); *Knut Åsdam. Speech. Living. Sexualities. Struggle.* (2004); and *We are all Normal* (with Katya Sander) (2001).

1
Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 94.

2
Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (New York: Semiotexte), 2004, 70.

3
Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 90.

4
Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image* (London: Verso, 2007), 46.

5
Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

6
Ibid., 151.

7
Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 44.

8
Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 179.

9
Ibid.

10
Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), 31–39 and 88–117.