Brand-New-Life
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Editorial: What Is Critical Publishing?

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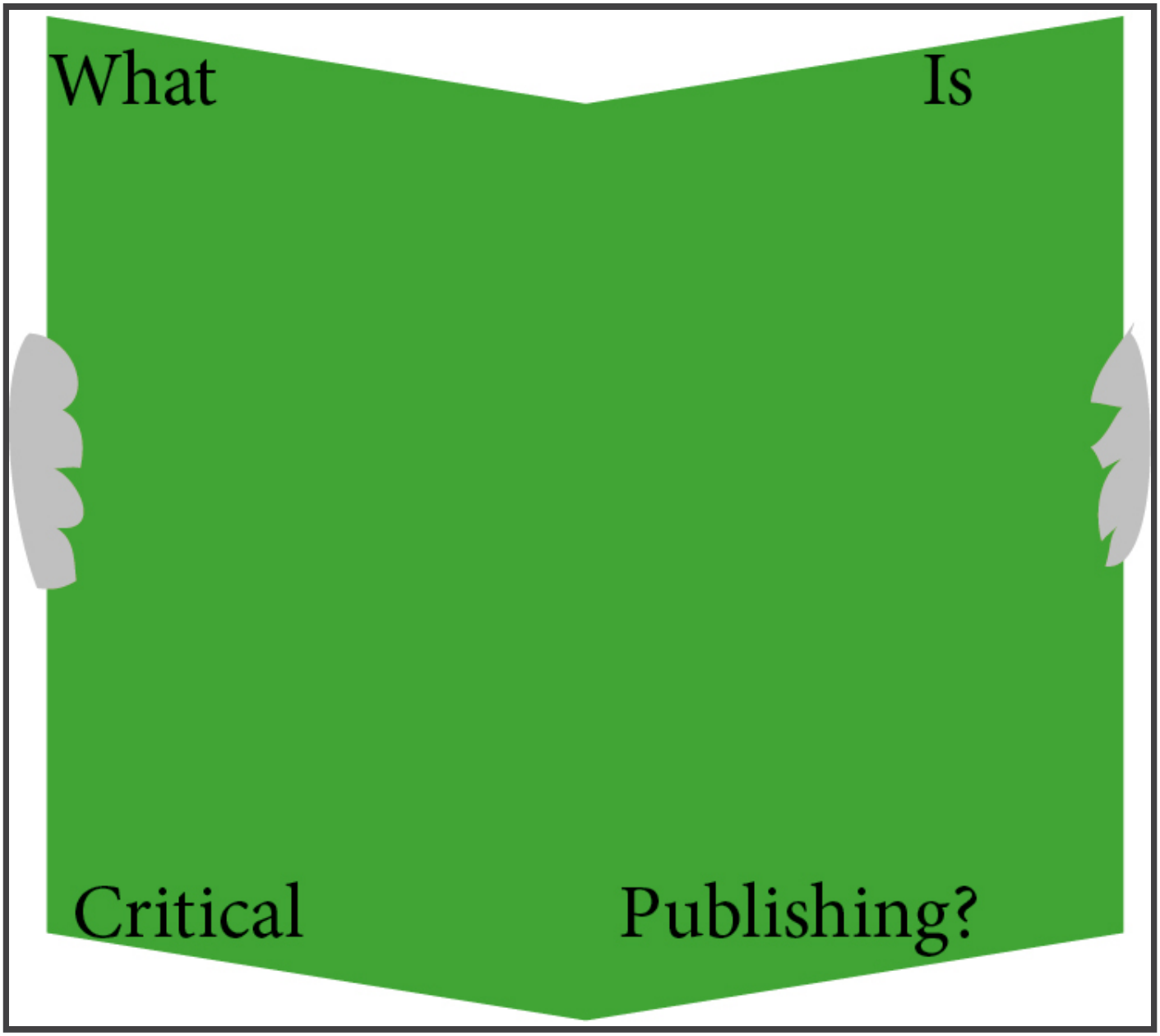
What role can publishing play in organizing critique today? This series looks at historical and contemporary practices that approach publishing as an infrastructure for political organization, collective knowledge production, and the formation of counter-publics.



Publishing practices play a crucial role in organizing political opposition. Any critique of injustice requires a medium through which it can circulate; it needs authors and recipients, and a public in which it can be received and debated. Connecting local struggles globally, raising awareness of society's contradictions, countering distorted realities, and remembering the challenges and achievements of past movements all occur through publication. Publishing means establishing relationships: between those who produce and question knowledge, between discourses, disciplines, and production techniques, and between those who constitute a public.

With the series *What Is Critical Publishing?* we seek to conceptualize publishing as a means of political organization. In its most general sense, publishing describes the act of making information or literature available to a public, traditionally through an industrial apparatus that includes authors, editors, designers, publishing houses, printers, binders, distributors, representatives, wholesalers, booksellers, and readers. Practices of critical publishing may partly operate within the same infrastructures, but they also build and maintain their own systems of circulation that enable the articulation of marginalized debates and aesthetic experimentation. The infrastructural dimension of these practices, we believe, accounts for a significant part of their political agency.

Understanding publications as a set of social and technical relations allows us to see editorial work as an organizational form through which authorship, the means of production, and the division of labor are negotiated as part of broader struggles over the production and circulation of knowledge. It also allows us to situate the publication in relation to its context and material conditions – relations that shape its form, distribution, readership, and content. This dynamic is demonstrated, for example, in the rich history of magazines and printed matter edited by political prisoners. Such publications have been used to organize among the incarcerated – countering their isolation – and to communicate the conditions of incarceration, and its systemic dimensions, to readers outside prison walls.

As a publication about publishing, this format aims to outline a field of research that combines theoretical debate with practical experimentation. It seeks to trace a genealogy of critical publishing and to highlight methodological similarities and differences across historical examples. In his 1902 text *Where To Begin?*, Lenin compares the function of publishing in the organization of the working class to ‹«scaffolding round a building under construction, which marks the contours of the structure and facilitates communication between the builders, enabling them to distribute the work and to view the common results achieved by their organized labor.» Lenin emphasizes publishing as an organizational structure through which knowledge and political strategy can be collectively produced and disseminated.

For Sezgin Boynik, whose text on the egalitarian and politicizing potentials of bibliography is released alongside this editorial as the first contribution, Lenin's metaphor is a key reference point for describing his work as founding editor of Rab-Rab Press, a Helsinki-based publishing platform focused on marginalized left-wing avant-garde histories and counter-institutional contemporary practices. The image of scaffolding can also be applied to other examples of critical publishing, such as the Correspondence Publishing Committee, founded in 1951 by C. L. R. James, Raya Dunayevskaya, and others, in which editorial work formed the basis for political strategizing and discursive positioning.

Similarly, the term *Gegenöffentlichkeit* (counter-public) was introduced by leftist organizations in West Germany during the 1960s to describe collective practices aimed at creating alternative publics in opposition to the liberal, right-leaning ideology of the dominant

public sphere. The concept is central to our discussions, particularly in its reinvention by numerous artistic and activist initiatives in Berlin during the 1990s – from A.N.Y.P. to Copyshop to MoneyNations – which adopted the term to conceptualize methods for developing counter-narratives, aesthetics, and collaborative modes of studying, often through publication.

The study of historical cases of critical publishing provides an important context for the contemporary practices discussed in this series and those invited to contribute to it. These examples help us reflect on how publishing might function as a political practice in the present. A central question is which modes of critique remain effective today – a present marked by increasingly authoritarian censorship, fragmented perceptions of reality, and persistent colonial and imperial relations of domination. Against this backdrop, which forms of publishing are capable of redistributing knowledge, and how might they intervene effectively in contemporary political conditions? Should the relationship to institutions be strategically parasitic, or one of deliberate non-participation? Without minimizing the urgency to act in the face of our catastrophic condition, this series seeks to create space for collective reflection on the very infrastructures that enable our actions and articulations – rather than leaving us in a position of mere reaction.

These questions are also relevant to our own context of practice-based research in the Global North, more specifically Basel and Berlin, where we are situated. *What Is Critical Publishing?* is edited by Lucie Kolb and Jonas von Lenthe as an outlet of the Make/Sense PhD Program at Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW and published in the open access journal *Brand-New-Life*. In this context, open access is not simply an administrative model but is closely linked to debates around ownership, copyright, participation, and the redistribution of knowledge. With this series, we aim to explore what can be learned from past publishing practices for organizing these conditions in the present.

As this experiment unfolds, please reach out to us to let us know what you think.

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Lucie Kolb is founding member of Brand-New-Life, professor of critical publishing and head of the Make/Sense PhD program at the Basel Academy of Art and Design FHNW.

JONAS VON LENTHE

Jonas von Lenthe is the founding editor of the Berlin-based publishing house Wirklichkeit Books. Recent titles include Dagmar Herzog's *The New Fascist Body* (2025; afterword by Alberto Toscano) the German translation of Enzo Traverso's *Gaza Faces History* (2024), and *Hierarchies of Solidarity* (2024) by Moshtari Hilal and Sinthujan Varatharajah. From 2022 to 2024 he held the position of the head archivist at Kunstverein München together with Johanna Klingler.

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