

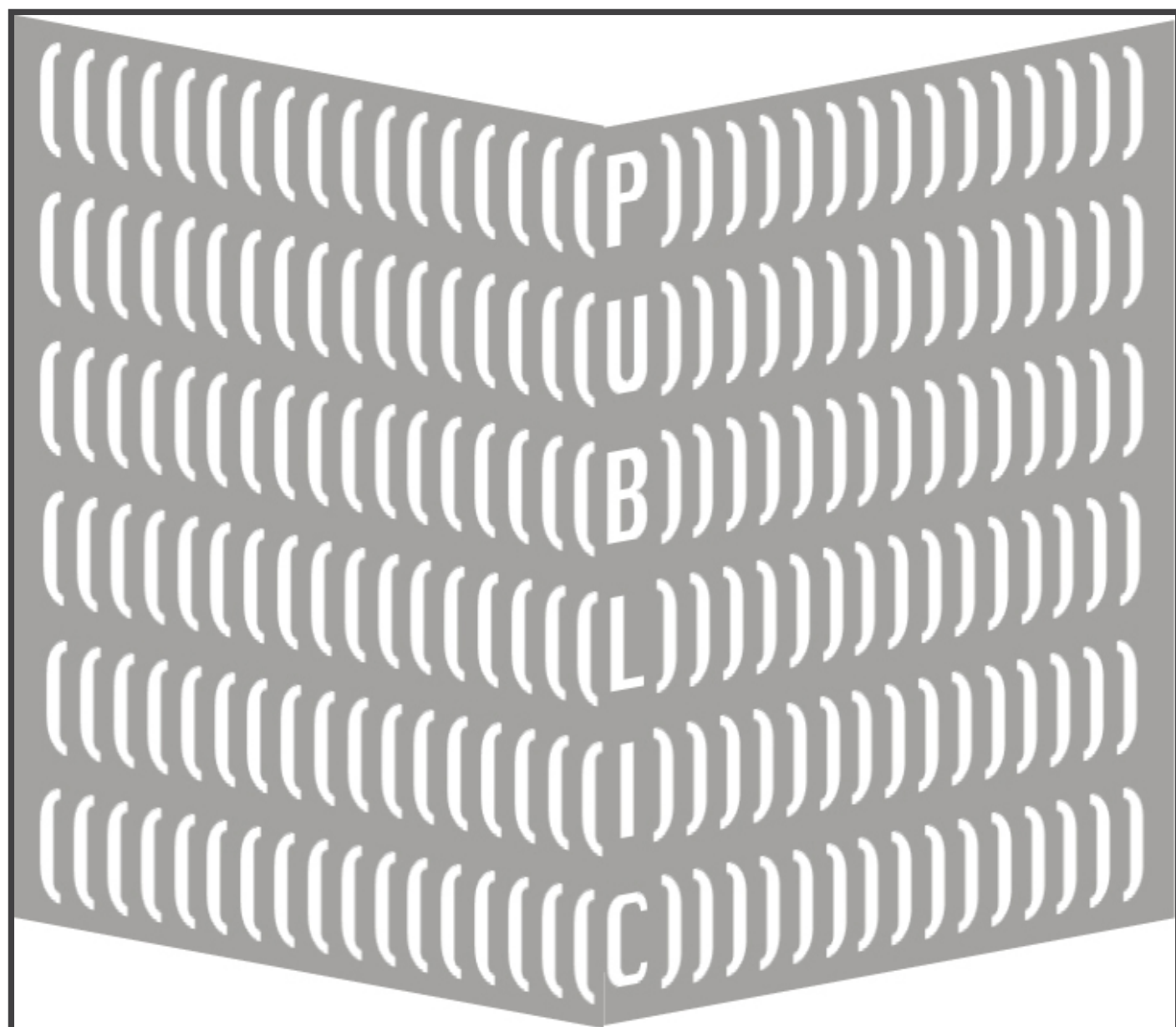


Trickle-Down Epistemology

On the Plausible Deniability of Distributional Flows

Eric Otieno Sumba

In this instalment of *What Is Critical Publishing?*, writer, editor, and magazine collector Eric Otieno Sumba challenges the assumption that art books—and the ideas they carry—travel by themselves. Pointing to the coloniality of distributional networks and global logistics—and its deniability—he proposes a rethinking of distribution: instead of invisibilizing its processes, he argues, we should understand it as a labour of social and political determination and, as such, a central part of artistic and research production.



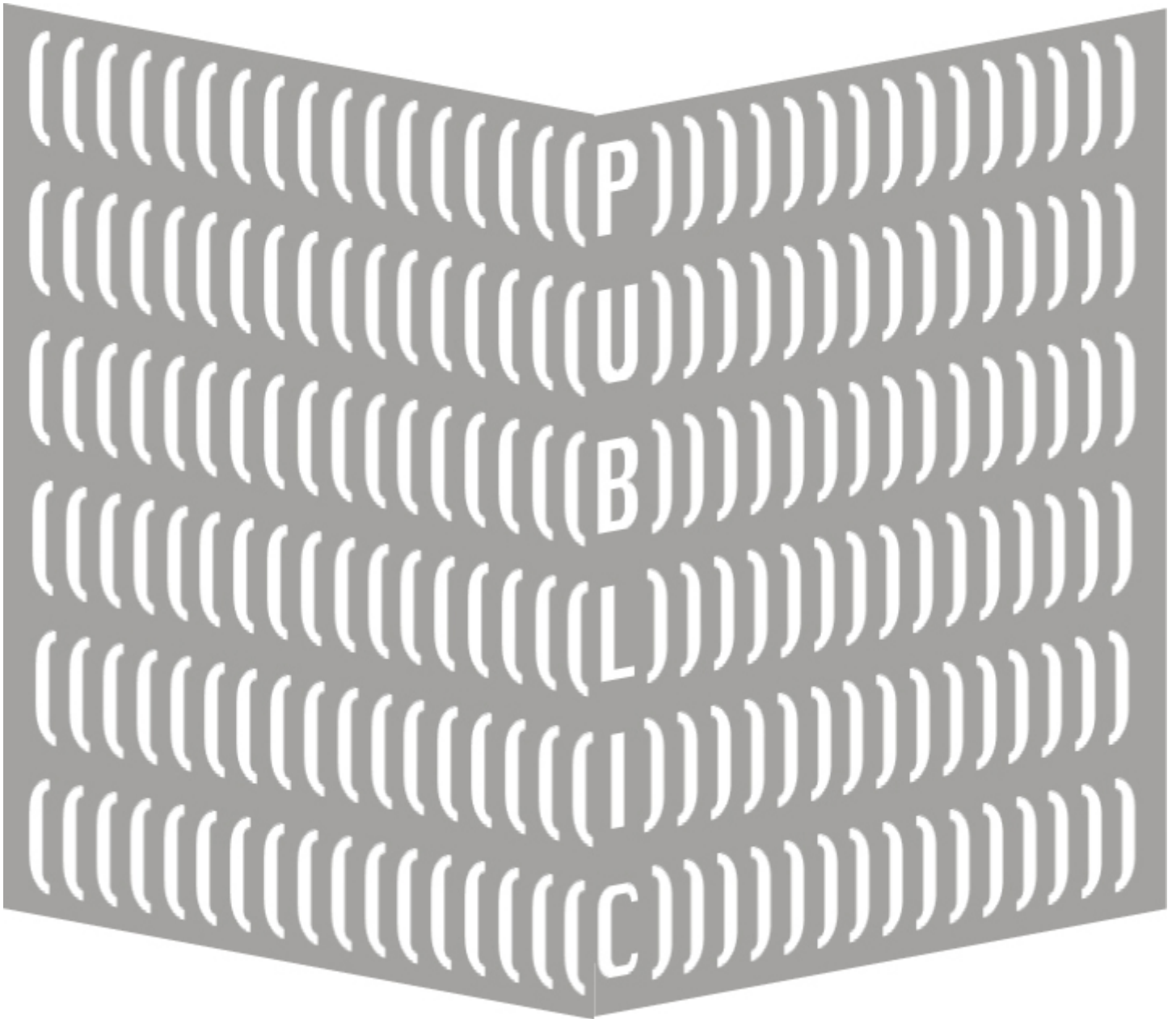


Image Max Stocklosa

In homage to surviving 14 years of catholic school, I must begin with a confession: I am a collector of rare independent art magazines, the kind that will only increase in value as time goes by because that is how these things work. You must imagine that I am running out of space to store my undeniably impressive collection of magazines, but I must disappoint you. Anybody who has been following the production and development of independent print magazines in general and art magazines in particular knows that they are an endangered species. I read somewhere that there is no third-time-lucky in the magazine business, most indie art magazines die just before or right after their third issue. I have no empirical data to support this, but I can confirm from my own collection that I have the first two to three issues of several magazines that are no longer in 'business' today.^[1]

In 2020, I was in Berlin to review the very last exhibition in the beautiful, creaking wooden-floored gallery spaces of Weiss Berlin. Under the high ceilings, I took in a solo show by Larry W. Cook, then made my way to Skalitzer Straße to find the only bookstore in Germany which

stocked a new magazine I had set my sights on.

[<https://www.weartsomething.com/something-we-africans-got>]*Something We Africans Got* [<https://www.instagram.com/somethingweafricansgot.arts/?hl=de>] was an English and French magazine, published from somewhere between Paris and Abidjan^[2]. Their first issue, published in 2017 and largely in French, featured a portrait of Nelson Mandela on the cover and an essay from Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, who would become my boss at Berlin's HKW in 2022. There were also images of artworks, interviews, and essays exploring what some insist on calling African art. I want to take this opportunity to offer a reminder that African art does not exist—art made by Africans, however, does.



SOME THING WE AFRICANS GOT

africa
arts
critical
thought

#2

€25
£25
\$30 USD
FCFA
25 000

QUARTERLY
TRIMESTRIEL
WITH ENGLISH TEXTS
COVER PAUL KODJO

The second issue had more texts in English, so I read more of it than I did of the first issue. It also featured an interview with the late Koyo Kouoh about the fifth anniversary of the 1:54 Contemporary African Art fair. Kouoh would later join Cape Town's Zeitz MOCAA and was due to announce her concept for the 61st Venice Biennale to the public before her untimely demise in May 2025. I had known about the first two issues of *SWAG*, and I had travelled a few hours by train to Berlin for them, but I also found the third issue while browsing the shelves of Motto Books. A piece profiling eight artists of African descent living and working in Germany was an important education for me in those early days of writing about art.

Drippin'

Another word for swag—an assured confidence about one's own style and taste that stops just short of arrogance—is drip. A drip is also that thing that hospitals use for intravenous delivery of fluids, nutrients or medication directly into a patient's bloodstream via a liquid falling in slow individual drops.

The distribution of printed matter, especially printed matter that is not a novel or a perfectly timed-and-themed work of non-fiction, is opaque at best, if not chaotic. Consider the thousands of titles that are churned out every year. Catalogues are often heavy, and if they sell at all, they don't move very fast. Artist monographs are almost always too niche for the mass market, but particularly trendy artists can sell out within months. Some catalogues and art books become popular many years after the fact and start circulating on eBay for horrendous prices, but this, again, is rare. This means that the general overproduction of books occurs alongside the relative scarcity of those same books. Sometimes the scarcity is not because the books sell out, but rather because the books didn't sell at all, and are quietly removed from circulation: I once received a 'sold-out' catalogue by writing an email to the respective museum and requesting a copy. Language such as 'sold out' or 'out of print'—which mean different things every time they are used by different actors in the field—form part of the general narrative of inadvertent scarcity that underlies book distribution.

Let us for a moment think about the content of catalogues and artist books, and here is where it gets uncomfortable. Making them demands incredible amounts of time, emails, and euros, and it helps if more than a pair of hands are on deck because art books especially are always late by weeks if not months (sometimes years). The content of these books has pride of place in my considerations because I have found that art publications offer some of the most interesting platforms for inter-, intra-, multi-, pluri- and anti-disciplinary thought. In other words, they are the best examples we have for what 'thinking out of the box' can actually look like. Some of the most exciting things I have read have been in very niche, often conceptual limited-edition art books, or some obscure catalogue from, say, 2001 that only thirty people in the world have read.

I find this reality unsettling for many reasons, the most obvious is because I am currently an editor who is responsible for editing, publishing and distributing art books. It also disproves one of the ideals held stubbornly by many—the notion that good ideas, especially if they are in an art book will find their way to their readers in the same way a liquid moves when it is exposed to the force of gravity. This idealism is all part of a mystification of material conditions in art contexts. The truth of the matter is that, in market terms, art books are almost completely irrelevant outside of a few countries in Europe and North America, and as described earlier, even within Europe, the genre is hanging on for dear life. According to 2024 numbers by the *Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels*, only 3.4% of revenues were generated from the sale of books from the category of humanities, art, and music in Germany.

Fiction, by contrast, accounted for well over 36.6 % of the market share, while non-fiction claimed 11%. The notion that ideas in the form of (art)books will travel by themselves is also Eurocentric, because it ignores the coloniality of distributional networks and global logistics: harbours, roads and railways, airports, post offices, etc. It fails to account for the fact that even in places where these things are present outside of the imperial core, their default mode is to facilitate extraction, not to facilitate the circulation of ideas. The average VAT for print books globally is 5.5%. In Germany books have a 7% VAT rate, whereas in Kenya, for example, imported books have a 14% VAT rate, and that is before import duty and tariffs. This policy framework makes sense. It protects local publishing activity, assuming local publishers are producing books for the local market. Indeed they do, but the most profitable of those books, arguably, are pirated copies of international bestsellers.

Art and Knowledge

There is a tacit relationship between art and knowledge. Art can be a way of knowing, seeing or thinking. Artists and artworkers often see themselves as producers of ‘alternative’ knowledge, and many artists would subscribe to the idea that they are committed to ways of being and knowing that are outside the disciplinary norm. Often, when I talk to artists for a profile or a review, they eagerly share a set of their most important references, mostly books or research conducted by themselves or others. The implication here is that to understand their practice, one must understand the references with which their work is in conversation. To quote Jonas Kellermeyer, ‘Art thus has a share in the way cognition is constituted; it is an epistemologically valuable agent in its own right.’ If so, I suppose that an art book is also an epistemological agent. It is after all carrying the art, and the research that went into work.

The interpretivist nature of most artistic research often presupposes an existing audience that, if not necessarily eager to engage, will at the very least pause and pay attention when they encounter the art book. Then, they will commit a few hours of their busy lives to engaging with the book at length. The author’s assumption is often of an innate importance of the undertaking and the project, or alternatively, anxiety about the relevance of the work. In either case very little effort is expended on figuring out how and where the book will ‘fall into the imaginary reader’s lap’. Sometimes these books are imagined as collectors’ items waiting to be discovered. But don’t at least some people have to know about a book for them to discover it? Art books and the knowledge contained in them do not trickle down. It is a zero-sum game, either the book is there, or it isn’t at all. Simply knowing about a book’s existence is of little epistemological value if one cannot access it.

I’ll give an example to illustrate the above, but also to show how plausible deniability plays a role in the assumption that ideas travel on their own, and that book distribution ‘just works’. This deniability plays into how we imagine infrastructure to always already be complete, leaving the work of its development to a handful of people who spend their days optimising the broken/failing infrastructures we already have rather than developing anything substantially new for an ever-changing publishing landscape.

In January 2020, a German publisher quietly released a photography book. I had been writing about photography for about two years by that time, and regularly monitored new releases, but I missed this one. In June 2021, one and a half years and a COVID vaccine later, I saw the book for the first time in the slush pile of an art bookstore for 50% of its original price. I was both excited and irritated. I took a picture and wrote an email to the publisher. Would they send me a copy for review? I asked. About two weeks later, it arrived. I read it and wrote my review that same week and it was published in German and English. I took great care in my review to do justice to the alleged magnitude of the project it was about, but I also took the

liberty to address glaring distribution issues. This is what I wrote:

[...] the most important part of the target audience might never get to hold the book in their hands. African photographers, unless they already know the programme, will struggle to access this book. The publisher's distribution network in Africa is feeble (7 out of 54 countries are catered for). On the very last pages, readers learn that 'Our publications are distributed Worldwide: in Europe, Asia, South and North America'. Africa simply isn't mentioned. This sums up a perennial structural paradox in how contemporary culture from the African continent is consumed. As with agricultural value chains (for example, cocoa or coffee), one gets the impression that Africans are only foreseen in the production stage and are not taken seriously as consumers. One wishes it were otherwise, because *The Book* holds enormous potential both for African photographers and for local creative scenes on the continent. These latter spaces are an underestimated nurturing environment for the refreshing, promising work that fills the book's pages.

Minutes after my review went live in German, the publisher of the book sent me an email insisting that the books are distributed in Africa and asking me to correct the article. Her evidence for this claim was little more than their implicit yet passive intention to have it available in Africa (but not to actively *make it* available in Africa). I had never read the word *Africa* that many times in an email. In my response, I requested the publisher to send a list of stockists in at least 20 African countries to substantiate their conviction that the book was indeed 'available in Africa'. Their response disregarded my request and offered to explain to me how distribution *actually* works: as publishers they had no influence over which bookshops ended up ordering the books, their role as publishers was to make sure bookshops were aware of the book's existence and how they could order it. The publishers could not prove beyond reasonable doubt that African bookshops indeed knew about the book (or had it in stock), yet they insisted—in threatening German legalese—that it was 'available in Africa', that my review was slanderous and should be 'corrected' or taken down, even post-publication.

To their credit, the magazine that carried my review refused to change the article, but added the following disclaimer by the publisher at the end of my article:

The publisher has an established distribution network in Africa. Furthermore, all books are available worldwide via the publisher's website and major online retailers. The project's initiator has also ensured that the books are available in libraries in eleven African countries (Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, Ethiopia, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Senegal, Sudan, Togo, Kenya and Cameroon).

I have been to several bookshops in 'Africa' and Europe since 2021. At the time of writing, the only place I have seen that book since I bought it in the bookshop has been my own bookshelf. Months after this exchange, the book was out of print.

Kellermeyer again: 'In my view, what singles out the methodological repertoire of artistic research is an *emancipatory* quality that allows it to tackle a subject meaningfully on the basis of a profane interest—indeed, by and large naively—and by doing so, to produce new forms of knowledge that expand the range of what can be said and thought.' This description is already loosely related to the definition of artistic research as what Peter Tepe calls a genuinely 'independent cognitive enterprise'.^[3] As I have mentioned above, I think this is true of art books as well, which can be extensions or sites of enactment or documentation for the epistemologically valuable agent that art is or can be.

JABU GOES TO JOBURG



A CHIMURENCA FOTONOVELA

Recall that the German publisher above told me that they cannot influence the availability of books either in Berlin or in 'Africa', that they can only publish them, and yet they *insisted* that the books were available in 'Africa'. Distributional flows are plausibly deniable (especially when they fail). This denial fractures the emancipatory intent of artistic research in the book form and renders the epistemic agency of art null and void. I am proposing a rethinking of distribution as part of art and artistic research. Notions of and how ideas travel should be part and parcel of artmaking and artistic research. Here, one could think of the mail art of artists like Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt, or more contemporary forms such as Studio Zweifel's '[Krisenbriefe](https://zweifel.jetzt/krisenbriefe/)' [https://zweifel.jetzt/krisenbriefe/] (crisis letters) between 2020 and 2021, a good example of an experimental format between mail-art and publication. Not to forget the legendary '[Chimurenganya](https://chimurengachronic.co.za/)' [https://chimurengachronic.co.za/], my all-time favourite 'pavement literature' series featuring pocket-sized out of print essays by Cape Town-based publisher Chimurenga. While the latter is not primarily an art publication, questions around distribution fundamentally inform the series concept. Inspired by these examples, I am curious about how we can infuse low-cost mobility and minimum-effort multilocality into the practice of art, artistic research and its publication?

Dippin'

We tend not to think of the capitalist form of books. We imagine books to be transcendent intellectual, moral, and aesthetic goods unsullied by commerce, just as we perceive our own individual encounters with these quintessential objects of culture to confirm and augment only our intellect, taste, or political commitments, the textual object greeting and flattering its reading subject as if the two meet outside social determination.^[4]

I return to my magazine collection, especially the two to three issues I have of each, and what they signify for the erratic, unstable and unreliable distributional flows I have discussed. Apart from magazines such as the aforementioned SWAG, my collection includes titles such as [Signatures](https://www.okayafrica.com/signatures-magazine-is-proudly-putting-ghanaian-creatives-on-the-map/1349784/) [https://www.okayafrica.com/signatures-magazine-is-proudly-putting-ghanaian-creatives-on-the-map/1349784/], [Afrikadaa](http://www.afrikadaa.com/) [http://www.afrikadaa.com/], [Waithood](https://www.weareahome.com/work/waithood/) [https://www.weareahome.com/work/waithood/], [Nice](http://b-n-l-de/nice-nice-nicer/) [b-n-l-de/nice-nice-nicer/], and others. These magazines did not trickle down to me. A majority of them 'trickled up', they defied gravity—by which I mean all the ways in which global distribution is structured today. They went against the supposed distributional flows that are defining for the commerce side of publishing because of a strong use value, a key characteristic of critical publishing [articulated at length](http://b-n-l-editorial-what-is-critical-publishing/) [b-n-l/editorial-what-is-critical-publishing/] by the editors of this series of essays.

In 1966, Rajat Neogy published a text titled *Do Magazines Culture?*, an editorial manifesto for magazine publishing, and a startlingly current text even today. Neogy published it in [Transition](https://transitionmagazine.fas.harvard.edu/our-story/) [https://transitionmagazine.fas.harvard.edu/our-story/], a magazine he had founded in Kampala in 1961 and edited until 1973. Every generation of African writers and editors discovers, then blissfully dances at this ancestral altar, before ultimately being disillusioned by the vagaries of the day. In 1967, it was revealed that Transition had been funded by the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), initially a Euro-American cold-war institution founded in 1950 and partly funded by the CIA. I read the text again from the perspective of this essay's concerns, particularly to understand why exactly the stakes of distribution go beyond commercial and infrastructural considerations and why they should be firmly located in the epistemological realm. On the role of the magazine, Neogy wrote:

TRANS



Does it reflect, through its pages, what is really happening or not happening (this latter is sometimes more important) in a country or continent? True cultural activity is a subterranean process, with the main activity below the visible surface. A literary magazine in that sense must plumb those depths, cast its net deep and wide, and then exhibit the net with its writhing catch to the world outside. Once exhibited, the fish is cast back into the waters to grow until the next time. So the magazine, like a good fisherman, must know where to cast its net.

Two ‘side-ideas’ or ‘trailing-issues’—to borrow Neogy’s characterisations—from Thoburn and Neogy’s quotes above remain with me in this ongoing exploration of the material realities shaping global distribution today: the idea of meeting ‘outside social determination’ as if that were an actual place, and the idea that ‘cultural activity is a subterranean process’. I find both essential in my consideration of the plausible deniability of the failures of distribution as an act that carries forward the work that inspires publishing in its most radical or critical forms. The remedy, from this vantage point, would involve at least two things. Firstly, understanding distribution as a labour of social and political determination, and second, to highlight the dynamics through which distribution becomes an invisible yet defining part of the infrastructures of publication. If these remedies sound paltry, it is because I am not offering a solution (yet). I am merely trying to describe the problem properly.

[1] *Signatures* published by Jason and Julian Nicco Annan (AKA Juls) was first published in 2017 and was discontinued after the second issue. *Plantain Papers* was first published in 2018, while its website still offers a good amount of the articles, its online shop was closed after the third, crowdsourced issue in 2020. CARICOM, a football magazine that borrowed the name of the eponymous Caribbean intergovernmental organization, also froze in 2022, after its founder Calum Jacobs published a book on the same subject. Of the three aforementioned magazines, only *Signatures* engaged with art (widely defined) and creativity.

[2] At the time of writing, they had published nine issues and had transitioned into an Abidjan-based curatorial platform that runs Something Art Apace in Abidjan.

[3] Peter Tepe, ‘Über Konzepte der künstlerischen Forschung 4. Zu Janet Rittnerman/Gerald Bast/Jürgen Mittelstraß (Hg.): Kunst und Forschung. Können Künstler Forscher sein?’, *Mythos-Magazin* (März 2022), https://mythos-magazin.de/erklaerendehermeneutik/pt_kuenstlerische-forschung4.pdf [https://mythos-magazin.de/erklaerendehermeneutik/pt_kuenstlerische-forschung4.pdf].

[4] Nicholas Thoburn, *Anti-Book: On the Art and Politics of Radical Publishing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), p. X.

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Eric Otieno Sumba is a writer, independent researcher and the editor of several books, including 'Global Fascisms' (2025), 'Destination Tashkent: Experiences of Cinematic Internationalism' (2024), and 'Echos of the Brother Countries: Visions and Illusions of Anti-Imperialist Solidarity' (2024) (all HKW/Archive Books). Curatorial projects (with SPAZIO GRIOT) include annual exhibitions and public programmes (2022-2025), and an artist residency inspired by the Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists (since 2024), both in Rome. His cultural criticism and essays have appeared in Contemporary And (C&), Camera Austria, Berlin Review, frieze, The Guardian, Griotmag, London Review of Books, The Public Review, Texte zur Kunst, and the Catalogue of the Dutch Pavillion at the 61st Venice Biennale (2026), among others. He lives in Berlin, and is editor (publication practices) at Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW).