is now ten years since Midcontinental magazine began production. Despite pitifully low budgets and production in Winnipeg, away from the more established art centres, it nevertheless became well known nationally and internationally within a short two or three years. Conceptually audacious, it cultivated a specialized readership, particularly in the alternative arts community while some of its issues found their way into the collection of the Museum of Modern Art.

Midcontinental belongs to a long history of independent, counterculture publishing. It also belongs to a general movement in publishing of the early eighties; fanzines, tabloid community newspapers and politically targeted magazines. It also belongs to a developing interdisciplinary discourse where a more general, popular, cultural criticism emerges out of postmodern political, social and economic analysis.

Midcontinental was an unusual experiment whose rise and fall reveals problems that were recurrent and are endemic to the alternative press. The alternative press is always both burdened and liberated by organizational structures and publishing procedures that, while designed to be progressive in relation to business and in relation to publishing, are economically perilous.

1982 in Winnipeg was the beginning of an economic recession. Al Rashon, Scott Ellis, Paul Downie and Jon Tipper, then manager of Plug-In, Winnipeg's artist-run centre, began planning Midcontinental. Jon brought to the venture the legitimation of an established centre and cash to cover production costs for the first few issues after which the magazine would qualify for arts council funding. His interest in it stemmed from his interest in punk, ska and reggae music and the fanzines that had sprouted up around the music scene after 1978. Al had been a successful entrepreneur before he went to university and discovered philosophy. His creative skills were harnessed to his enthusiasm for the marketplace. For him the social/cultural artifact needed to reflect commercial conditions and publishing represented a promising and affordable (as opposed to TV) art/business blend. Ellis could write as well as the writers he liked, something that is harder than it looks. For him, the publication presented an opportunity to publish. Scott was perhaps the most erudite member of the group and brought with him a demand for high quality. I had met Paul several years earlier when I worked in tabloid newspaper production. He had the knowledge and skills to put the thing together. He also had an aesthetic approach to materials that was rigorous. I'm not sure this was appreciated at the time but he kept everyone aware how form itself is a kind of content.

In this group there were all the necessary tools for a successful publishing venture, capital and management skills, marketing savvy, and writing and production skills. What was unusual was that they were put to use not in a specialized, compartmentalized way but creatively, each contributor being expected to be involved in every step of production from editing to assembly to distribution. This required a fusing of personalities and principles.

This biography which I have begun, and to which I will return, precipitates one kind of reading of Midcontinental. Motives, talents and personalities are seen to drive events. The narrative promises insight into human nature while also confirming belief in humankind as a moving force. Another reading of Midcontinental might start with history and social analy-
For Williams, the social critic, the printed object is only the beginning of an analysis into the totality of the social conditions within which it operates and the social relations it produces/reproduces. The small publication bears the imprint of capitalist relations but also provides a critical alternative. Following Williams, it is possible to read *Midcontinental* critically against the standard operating modes of commercial publishing.

Even the most modest publishing venture is complex. There is always a play between convention and invention, between the editorial master and the rebellious subject, between the authority of the writer and the demands of the reader. It is the struggle between these that colours the mainstream press...the more that appears in the mainstream press, the more that appears in the underground press. The mainstream press harnesses these forces through ownership, hierarchies of administrators, technicians and employees, through target marketing and through rules of editing and production based on assumptions about objectivity and readability. But in the alternative press hierarchical structures are to be avoided, goals are often more general and elastic, economics is often absent, replaced by notions of commitment, anti-authority and progressive criticality.

The *Midcontinental* Media Group, as the editorial collective formally became known, took an experimental view of the relations of production as much as of content. The result was an editorial organization verging on the anarchic. It was as if production relations had been skinned alive. And if the nerves so exposed were excruciatingly sensitive, so too the magazine represented extremes. But this was also the magazine's strength, lending diversity and novelty but also introducing, conspicuously and in contradiction to the popular press, editorial, literary and artistic creativity as specific objectives.

There is yet another way of reading *Midcontinental*, through the examination of its substance, its layout and content. Here we find that *Midcontinental* self-consciously offers up its own analysis. Take for example the seminal editorial by Scott Ellis on the derivation of the name *Midcontinental*.

In the USSR the theory of continental drift is only slowly being accepted. Continental drift is the idea that the earth's continents are massive plates of rock which move slowly over the still denser magma that makes up the earth's core. Most of the world's geologists accept this theory because it seems to explain why there are so many volcanoes and earthquakes around the edges of these plates, and in cracks like the San Andreas fault, places you would expect to find under a great deal of stress... Many Russian scientists, however, cleave to an earlier concept, one that holds that the earth's magma center is like a gigantic heart whose contractions and expansions force lava up through weak sections of the surface crust. This seems to be an inadequate metaphor to many other geologists, because it doesn't convincingly explain, for example, how certain land masses can sink while others adjacent to them are rising. One of the attractions to this theory to the Soviets is that it offers a peculiarly Marxist view of vulcanism. The periodic expansions and contractions correspond very well with a cyclic view of history. The magma is classically proletarian: a massive undifferentiated mass, full of submerged power. When the magma expands, the fluid, elite Leninist revolutionary lava pushes through the earth's crust. The crust could be seen as bourgeois, stratified, resistant to change, the upper crust indeed. Eruption is revolution and synthesis, carrying cities and creating islands. Just another case of mistaken metaphor. And when was the last time you listened to a "born again" conservative, loved, nurtured, schooled, vaccinated, subsidized, and advised, speak of "the law of the jungle" as if he'd hatched from a snake egg, ready to be milk or be killed?

Ellis casts the supposed objectivity of plate tectonics into doubt by showing how theory reflects local ideology. This produces...
duces an emancipatory effect in the reader — an illusion of experience beyond ideology, founded on scepticism and pragmatic in scope. Neither left nor right scientific views are endorsed. Rather, the mutability of metaphor is used to base a strategic attack against the emerging neo-conservatism of the early 80s. The surprise ending follows short story convention, but the story also has a critical moral, one that resonates at the time with personal experience: it is the story of the artist adrift in a sea of unemployed workers and confronted by a marketplace ideology that narcissistically suppresses knowledge of the very social support mechanisms that made it possible in the first place.

Ellis' editorial signalled themes which were to dominate *Midcontinental*. It was cross-disciplinary — any form of activity, cultural, political or scientific could be discussed, creative — writers and artists consistently surprised readers with the range of their interests and innovative approaches to presentation; and critical — the purpose of appropriating work of other disciplines or in creating new hybridized works was both to gain perspective on built-in ideological assumptions and to bend the conventions of art and journalism toward a more outward looking socially useful critique. The material process was writing, editing and printing. But the strategies were appropriation, fragmentation and juxtaposition, in a word, postmodern. And the effect was radical — the magazine at once appeared fresh, sophisticated and socially progressive.

I met Jon Tapper when he was still hanging around with Doug Sigurdson and Suzanne Gillespie who dropped out of art school to start the Plug-In Gallery in 1970. Plug-In was one of the first alternative space galleries. Doug and Suzanne were exceptional people, intelligent and outspoken. They single-handedly introduced the 70s avant garde to Winnipeg. Hanging out with them was an education in itself. When Doug and Suzanne finally
tired of splitting the single salary the Canada Council held them to, they decided to leave the gallery and Jon was the only person qualified enough to succeed them. Younger than Doug and Suzanne, Jon wasn't so interested in the visual art scene. This was also the late 70s and concept art, performance, video and installation had been stagnating for several years. Music had taken over. Punk was really new. I remember Tapper used to read *The New* *Yorker* all the time. I think he thought *Midcontinental* would be like that.

Downie had a more conservative and workmanlike approach. He thought the magazine would function as a kind of portfolio of art, not Mal renaud's gallery without walls — that extended antipodal space that was believed to result when art categories were collapsed, as they were by conceptualism — but a portable gallery.

The others were less clear about their vision. It wouldn't be too far a stretch to imagine that Rushdon hoped it to be a commercial success, a better mousetrap after which the world would beat a path to his ultimate technology studio on wheels. Ellis may have thought of it as a message in a bottle, practice, or his ticket to the mainstream press. I don't know. All agreed that a magazine could be produced relatively cheaply, include many kinds of work, and get wide distribution. It promised to be an economical and effective vehicle.

The group was thrown together ad hoc at first and though the loose structure seemed to be a perennial stumbling block to establishing a program for the publication, as Williams points out, organizational difference can be distinguished from simple disorganization:

We ... can now provisionally classify [the internal organization of small formations] as follows: (i) those based on formal membership, with varying modes of internal authority or decision, and of constitution and election; (ii) those not based on formal membership, but organized around some collective public manifestation, such as an exhibition, a group press or periodical, or an explicit manifesto; (iii) those not based

The purpose of appropriating work of other disciplines or in creating new hybridized works was both to gain perspective on built-in ideological assumptions and to bend the conventions of art and journalism toward a more outward-looking, socially useful critique.
on formal membership or any sustained collective manifestation, but in which there is a conscious association or group identification, either informally or occasionally manifested, or at times linked to immediate working or more general relations.

In terms of William's analysis, Midcontinental was a type (ii), a group organized around a collective public manifestation—the magazine. Although not explicitly articulated as such, the articles in the first issue had the tone of a manifesto. But as Williams points out, his categories overlap. Midcontinental also created type (iii) group identification over time, not with a particular style of work so much as through working and more general relations. Later on, it became a nonprofit corporation with type (i) formal membership and varying modes of internal authority.

Williams goes on to discuss the countercultural values developed in such formations. He uses as examples William Godwin's circle, the English Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood with its periodical The Germ, and the Bloomsbury group, the paradigmatic vanity press. Each identified itself differently in terms of organization but each had an alternative, reform agenda. Godwin promoted open, rational enquiry and education in opposition to oppression, the Pre-Raphaelites championed the traditional workman-like craft base of the arts and Bloomsbury pitted intellectual against dominant militarism, colonialism, unbridled capitalism, sexual inequality and social hypocrisy. To understand these formations, Williams suggests that their practices be considered in the social context of each group:

Unlike most other magazines, Midcontinental was self-consciously aware of the contradictions it was facing and prepared to discuss them openly, perhaps to exorcize them.
The group had definite ideas about democratic, collective, collaborative participation to counter an oppressively rigid, narrowly defined and hypocritically exclusivist popular press.

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