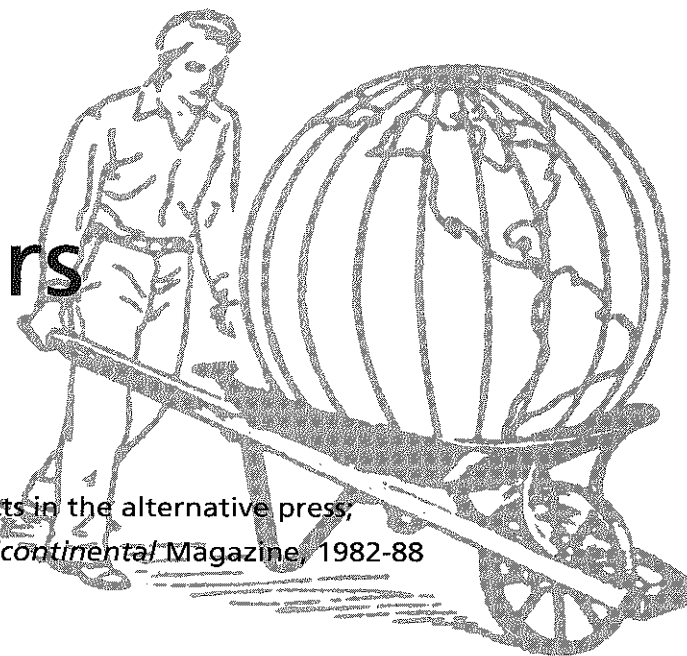


Paper Scissors Rock

Problems and prospects in the alternative press,
three readings of *Midcontinental Magazine*, 1982-88



UNCTURES

It 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 ambitious, 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 targetted 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.

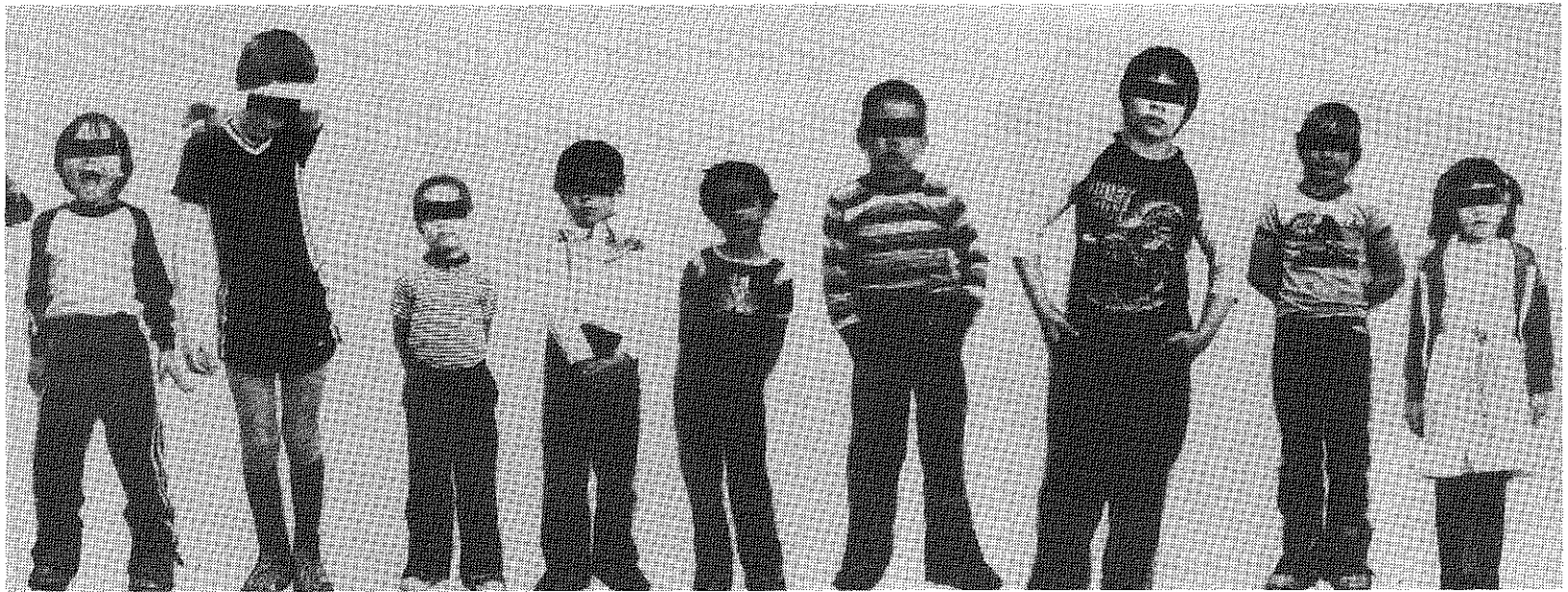
1982 in Winnipeg was the beginning of an economic recession. Al Rushton, Scott Ellis, Paul Downie and Jon Tupper, then manager of Plug-In, Winnipeg's artist-run centre, began planning *Midcontinental*. Jon brought to the venture the legitimation of an established centre and cash to cover production costs 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/commerce 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-

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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 resonated 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 Tupper when he was still hanging around with Doug Sigurdson and Suzanne Gillies 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 Tupper used to read *The Face* 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 Malreaux's gallery without walls – that extended attitudinal space that was believed to result when art categories were collapsed, as they were by conceptualism – but a portable gallery.

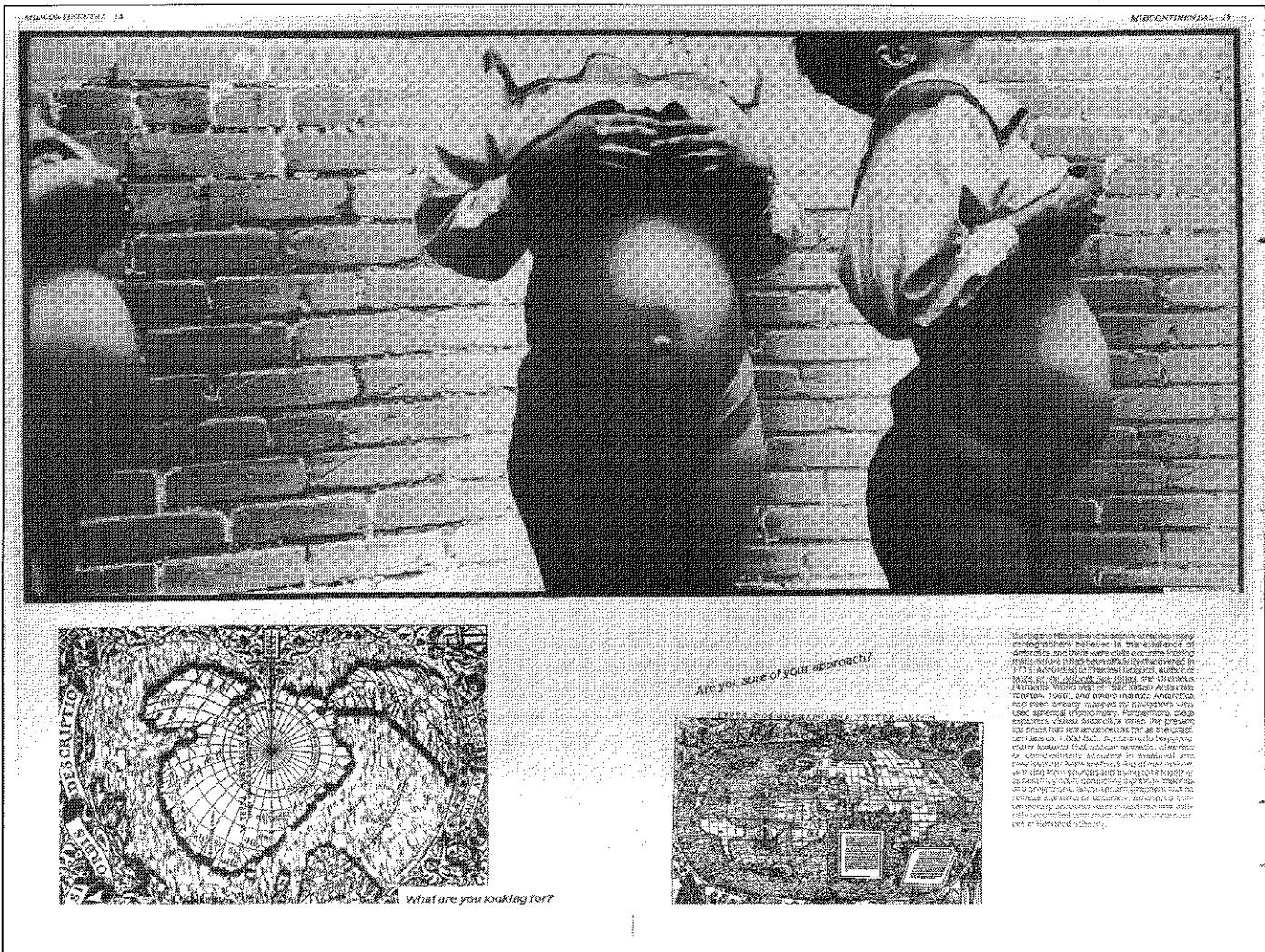
The others were less clear about their vision. It wouldn't be too far a stretch to imagine that Rushton hoped it to be a commercial success, a better mousetrap after which the world would beat a path to his ultimate technology studio on wheels. Ellis may have thought of it as a message in a bottle, practice, 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

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on formal membership or any sustained collective manifestation, but in which there is conscious association or group identification, either informally or occasionally manifested, or at times limited to immediate working or more general relations.

In terms of Williams's analysis, *Midcontinental* was a type (ii) formation, 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 non-profit corporation with type (i) formal membership and varying modes of internal authority.

Williams goes on to discuss the countercultural values developed in small 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

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oppression, the Pre-Raphaelites championed the traditional workman-like craft base of the arts and Bloomsbury pitted intellection 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:

We have to note, first, an increasing generalization and development of the idea that the practice and values of art are neglected by, or have to be distinguished from, or are superior or hostile to the dominant values of "modern" society. This range of ideas is complex, and its social history equally so. Its social bases include: (i) the crisis, for many artists, of the transition from patronage to the market; (ii) the crisis, in certain arts, of the transition from handwork to machine production; (iii) crises within both patronage and the market, in a period of intense and general social conflict; (iv) the attachment of certain groups to a pre-capitalist and/or pre-democratic social order, in which some arts had been accorded privilege within a general privilege; (v) the attachment of other groups to the democratization of the social order, as part of the process of the general liberation and human enrichment to which the arts, if they were allowed, could

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contribute; (vi) a more general opposition, often overlapping and even seeming to unite these diverse political views, to the practices and values of a "commercial" and "mechanical" civilization, from which the practice and values of the arts could be distinguished.

Midcontinental shares certain characteristics with its forebears, enough that it could almost be cut out and pasted into the landscape of financial institutions and technology of early capitalism. This in itself is revealing. Despite the passage of time, visual artists continue to agonize over the contradiction of producing work by hand when virtually all other forms of cultural production is by machine. There is still great ambiguity about markets and patrons as recent debate over purchases by the National Gallery illustrate. And although there are few artists presently resisting democratization in the arts, there is a subcurrent of resentment surfacing against political correctness that is based on a typically 19th century nostalgia for art as a distinct and revered discipline capable of enriching our lives.

Al Rushton's "Centralization on the Prairie, Isn't That Funny or How Winnipeg Eats Its Young," also in the first issue of *Midcontinental*, schematized the dilemma of the local artist facing off against local, national and international commercial culture. It called for a new kind of artistic practice, at once populist and philosophical, and in its against-the-grain stand invokes Williams's analysis. The editors were in the grips of an economic crisis, the 82 recession. More generally they, like other artists, were faced with the collapse of standards of aesthetic appreciation through the 70s that was finally named postmodernism. They were subject to a yet more general crisis of regional isolation. They were unsure whether support should come by way of patronage or the marketplace, and found, in the alternative gallery, some hybrid. They also were investing in new publishing technology against the traditional art media. And while their gallery alliance and commitment to visual art wanted to salvage some part of the privilege associated with the high arts, the group had definite ideas about democratic, collective, collaborative participation to counter an oppressively rigid, narrowly defined and hypocritically exclusivist popular press.

Unlike most other magazines, *Midcontinental* was self-consciously aware of the contradictions it was facing and prepared to discuss them openly, perhaps to exorcise them. Indeed, Rushton used examples of art being produced in Winnipeg at the time to argue that it was incumbent on artists to do this work:

Developing an aesthetic that dissolves the distinctions between the media, corporate and personal structure appears to be the direction. Whether this includes miniature sculpture of oppressive, supportive, competitive or cooperative attitude (allowing us to see each

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other as human over them) or a flattening of an emblem of military power (equalizing us as human in front of it) or the construction outside a gallery (that entices the viewer then forces this person to look at the crossed-out members that are its internal support) we are made aware of the problem and the situation A highly general task, organization demands increasingly wide dialogue with specific aesthetics which may be on the periphery of tradition if it is to maintain any freshness or vitality If a cultural institution takes its lead from the popular media (that has a traditional investment approach) it is doomed to stasis.

Over the next three years many artists and writers joined in the experiment to work outside of the mainstream, to explore new ways of doing things. While not always successful, the magazine was well received, and had a seminal influence in developing postmodern and social critical discourse that now pervades art practices. The magazine that you are now reading is perhaps the best example of interdisciplinary publishing that is both popular in its subject matter and politically informed. The recent issue of *Canadian Art*, devoted to environmental issues, recalls *Midcontinental's* Earth issue, published in 1983.

So what happened to *Midcontinental*? Rushton's essay contains the answer. Chronic poverty due to underfunding, the lack of a conflict resolution process due to non-hierarchical organization and constant pressure to make the magazine successful in conventional terms took their toll, exhausting and frustrating the individuals in the collective. With changes in the collective membership came new ideas about how the magazine should operate, including a more commercial approach. By 1986 *Midcontinental* started to list popular entertainment events to attract a broader readership and the advertising to cater to it. Articles devolved into promotional art reviews. Artwork began to look like reproductions again instead of living works that only existed in the magazine. The local arts council gave the magazine a no-win choice – go back to the way you were or become an independent commercial venture. The choice had already been made to take its lead from the popular media and, as Rushton predicted, *Midcontinental* was doomed to stasis. ♦

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