

Untimely Media

Subversions of obsolescence in decolonial print

Amit S. Rai

‘It will keep your secrets. Operate it yourself.’

A. B. Dick Mimeograph Company advertisement in *Life* magazine, circa 1940.

How can we decolonise technics today within, against and beyond Eurocentric teleologies that separate rational humans from savage or inert nature and technological infrastructure assumed to be a ‘standing reserve’?¹ The provocative exhibition ‘Crafting Subversion: DIY and Decolonial Print’, curated by Pragya Dhital at the Brunei Gallery, SOAS University of London from April to September 2022, suggests that there is indeed another history of the tool. The exhibition, as Dhital’s accompanying text tells us, ‘explores various attempts to forge connections between readers and writers beyond the purview of the state and the logic of the market through the medium of DIY print.’² The little magazines from 1960-70s New York and Bombay, samizdat literatures from the former Soviet bloc, anticolonial nationalist and anti-authoritarian antinationalist Indian pamphlets, and Gestetner-mimeograph publications of collective, non-normative, paracapitalist and paralinguistic cultural expression all involved ‘direct engagement with lived social antagonism’.³ In ‘Crafting Subversion’ these artefacts showcase the untimely history of supposedly obsolete media technologies and what the art collective Alt Går Bra (an inspiration for Dhital’s curation) describes as DIY or jugaad media’s nonlinear (im)mediations in collective ‘experiments with the modes of production of mimeograph publications from the 1960s and 70s’.⁴ Jugaad (pronounced ju-gaar) is a colloquial Hindi-Urdu, Marathi, Punjabi and Bengali word for ‘playful work-around’ or ‘everyday hack’. It may also have a Goan genealogy: *jugar* means play in Portuguese. In this article, I will draw

on the political and philosophical resources of this obsolescence, lingering over only a portion of the DIY assemblages that Dhital has through great effort gathered together, and highlighting the materiality of their ecology of sensation and the jugaad strategies of their composition.

The mimeograph revolution

The ‘mimeograph revolution’ found its living sociality in contemporising gossip, anecdote, assembly, encounter and conversation, in refusing the ‘waiting and pleading at the doors of big time publishing’, and in refusing the perennial contending with limited resources and obscenity laws that dampened transnational distribution networks.⁵ As Lincoln Cushing puts it, ‘Before photocopiers took over the short-run end of copy making, messy and relatively inexpensive machines called dittos, mimeographs and Gestetners ruled the earth. Virtually every school, office, and union hall had one in the back room, usually surrounded by reams of paper and the unmistakable odor of fresh solvent.’⁶ This lively cultural moment in disparate parts of the world – they were known, for instance, as mimeographs in the USA, Roneos in the UK, and Gestetners in the UK and Europe, stensilmaskin in Norway, nakala in Kenya, toshaban in Japan⁷ – saw a proliferation of experiments in artistic and political uses of the mimeograph.⁸

The subversive and at times revolutionary potential of techno-obsolescence is diagrammed today by radical archaeologists of communication and media technology as eruptions of untimely resistances to dominant political ecologies of attention and expression, which, in their very ‘figuration of the outmoded’, act counter to our

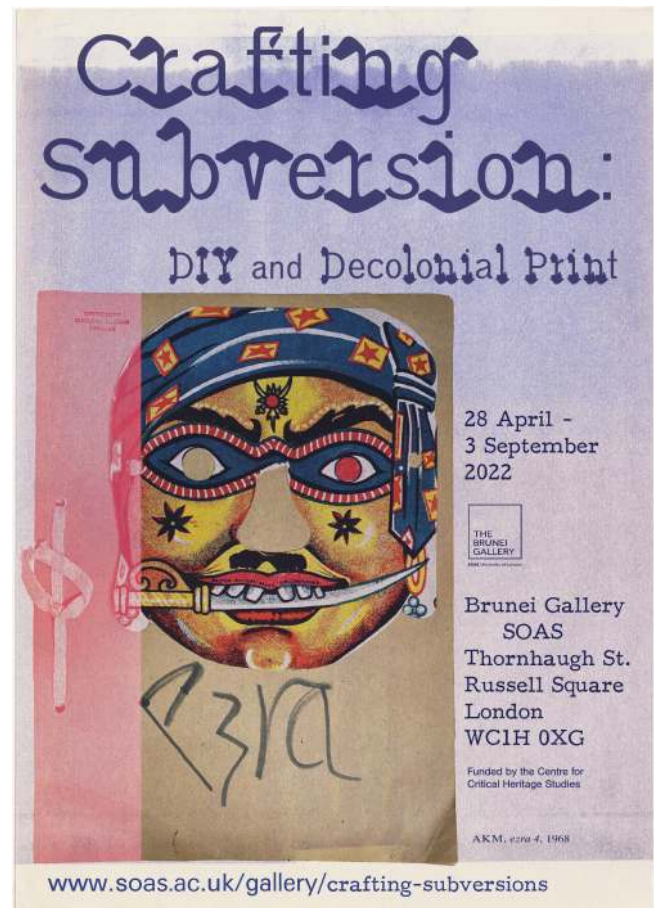
times, against our times and for the benefit of times to come.⁹ Joel Burges conceptualises the ‘figuration of the outmoded’ as a temporality that ‘tangibly constellates historical crosscurrents between a bygone modernity and a contemporary horizon as those currents have been stirred up by obsolescence, a complex process of techno-economic transformation that intercalates multiple levels of historical change.’¹⁰

Untimely and outmoded media return to question the relentless presentism of racial capital’s current division of labour, its separation of intellectual and manual labour, its treadmill-like commodification of ‘new’ media, its planned and forced obsolescence, potentialising the relations constituting classes, races, castes, genders and imperial extractivisms.¹¹ The outmoded and the untimely are contemptible, they are ‘disattendable’ objects (Thomas Hobbes).¹² This disattendability is a critical starting point to decolonise attention itself, given all the obsolete stuff that accumulates through the planned obsolescence of racial capitalist modernity.¹³ As Amy Wendling parses it,

Industrialization produces monsters with potential. In their constant revolutionizing of the received division of labour, machines have the potential to revolutionize what for Marx is the most important division of labour: the polarizing division between the two classes. Because of this, in Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*, machines themselves are key elements of developing revolutionary consciousness as well as the material foundation for the communist mode of production. Habituation to industrial life may produce not only monstrosities, but also liberations from old patriarchal norms.¹⁴

Indeed, the monstrosity of DIY media assemblages may be, and often certainly aspires to be, liberatory, as ‘Crafting Subversions’ shows to great effect. Such critical vitalisms of technological co-evolution with decolonial, revolutionary and radical movements of resistance and insurgency are not rooted in liberal ‘hope’. Rather, taking their inspiration from documenting and subverting the ‘random everyday things of the street’ – catalogues, posters, advertisements, signboards, street signs, state propaganda, calendar art, film posters and newspaper photographs, as Arvind Krishna Mehrotra of Bombay Poet’s little magazine/small press movement notes¹⁵ – DIY media practitioners give free reign to queer and monstrous experimentations with assemblages of (mis)per-

ception and affective cuts into clichéd attention, proposing ‘models for a future exertion of thought.’¹⁶



Dhital’s ‘Crafting Subversion’ expresses this untimely media history in ways that cause us to question the abject scripts of identity, representation and monumental memory foisted as fate onto workers, women, Dalits, indigenous, queer, neurodiverse and Black folk, people of colour, disabled, disenfranchised and young peoples through public relations firms, libraries, bookshops, publishing houses, cinemas, theatres, galleries, museums, print media (dailies and other periodicals), radio, Internet platforms, television and institutions of higher learning.¹⁷ Installed up the back staircase and across the narrow walkway of the first floor of the Brunei Gallery, as if in silent acknowledgement of the structural marginality of jugaad media assemblages, the art images, political posters, banned pamphlets and Gestetner advertising materials greet curious viewers as living artefacts of the many vibrant DIY media cultures saying (in the title of one little magazine) ‘Fuck You!’

In these grim times of creative industries boosterism

and the financialisation of art, platform and surveillance capitalism's naturalised fetishism of the quantified, self-actualising individual, and the mystifying habituations of total market relations as the earth literally burns, 'Crafting Subversion' acts as an *iskra*, in Lenin's sense: a spark that illuminates and ignites collectively organised assemblages of media, technology and desire. The exhibit highlights entangled media experimentations that wager a subversion of the coloniality of technical Being, repeatedly and perpetually displacing the closures of racial capitalist intellectual property regimes and their individualising subjectivations. This subversion doesn't happen all at once, in some sense it doesn't 'happen' at all, and in another sense is happening everywhere, autonomously and simultaneously. The subversions of *jugaad*/DIY media assemblages are often indiscernible from their technological infrastructures, in a perpetual and fuzzy reticulation of nonlinear ontological forces and historical tendencies traversing so-called 'formal' and 'informal' economies, the pre-individual and collective. Such DIY media assemblages are entangled in the fugitivity of subaltern ecologies of social reproduction and their subjugated knowledges; as we shall see, the *jugaad* dimensions of such media assemblages are felt in practices of working around the closures of corporate and private media infrastructures. The values generated through these assemblages in historically specific domains of action and potentialisation are open to neoliberal entrepreneurial capture and capitalist accumulation in the realm of affect.¹⁸ In such ecosystems of media invention and contestation, found materials, low-tech sign reproduction, heat, noise, ink, sweat, dirt, paper, wax, stencil, information and energy form the material conditions of resistance.

The heterogeneous assemblages showcased in 'Crafting Subversions' express the subversive force, sense and value of resistant DIY media cultures under different contexts of state repression, surveillance and control. The DIY publications in various ways refuse the total marketised relations of racial capitalist social reproduction. As I have argued recently in the context of contemporary South Asia, three crucial tendencies of DIY media – political autonomy, temporal untimeliness and technological pragmatism – interact in sensorial interzones that remain only unevenly integrated into digital media industry strategies for profit maximisation, financialisa-

tion, monopolisation/oligopolisation, risk management, labour standardisation and increasing value chain efficiencies.¹⁹

DIY media's ecology of sensation

It is worth focusing on the variable materiality of this eminently analogue media technology: the mimeograph, the world's 'first personal printer'.²⁰ As Elizabeth Haven Hawley usefully notes, mimeography, as distinct from spirit duplicating, involves creating a stencil from a paper covered in a waxy surface. A ribbon-less typewriter or a stylus can be used to strike or draw upon the stencil, effectively pushing the wax to either side and revealing the tissue paper substrate. Removing the wax allows ink from the machine's printing cylinder to seep through the stencil in selected areas, which forms the image to be transferred. Too much pressure in preparing the stencil can rip the tissue, resulting in ink blobs in bowls of letters where closed areas have been removed completely. Those preparing stencils avoided excessive underlines or cuts of closed circles that weakened the master copy. Complex layouts required careful preparation and handling, at the risk of producing a stencil too fragile to print. Machines printed large areas of colour poorly, as the semi-fluid ink flowed too freely through such cuts. A skilled operator could reuse a quality stencil and produce excellent results consistently, given the proper type of absorbent paper and supplies. In the global North, mimeograph paper could be procured through printers handling relief or lithographic work, and ink – though best when matched to the type of paper and stencil – might even be produced through the dilution of book printing ink with turpentine or gasoline.²¹

The process was not exactly the same everywhere. In early twentieth-century Japan the Horii's mimeograph, also known as the *toshaban*, developed a stencil duplicating method by film plate process, which does not require large-scale facilities or electrical machines. A sheet of stencil paper is placed on a film plate; the paper, a strong and thin traditional Japanese paper made from the fibre of the *Ganpi* plant (*Diplomorpha sikokiana*), is coated with paraffin wax. The wax is then removed with a metal stylus and prints made by exposing the fibres of the paper. A roller covered in ink is used to make a print; numerous gaps among the fibres of the paper allowed ink to pass

through, creating a printed copy. What was distinctive about the Horii was that it could reproduce the intricate letters of complex illustrations that came to form the art of the mimeograph in Japan. The ink was oil-based and fade resistant; it was able to print more copies than the printing devices (lithography or typography) used at the time; it was described as ‘hard to break and easy enough for anyone to use’; it could also print illustrations alongside characters.²²

In Dhital’s curation, the material specificity of each run from, say, a hand-corrected mimeographed stencil takes on a certain radical contingency, a proliferation of asignifying differences without referent. In the wall text of ‘Crafting Subversion’, the South Asian publications are contextualised in relation to a wide range of archives produced using different low-tech, sometimes jugaad printing and duplication processes. ‘The combination of handwriting and mass-produced ephemera meant that no two versions of the magazine looked the same. (The version of *ezra* held by the British Library ... and the version in the UCL Small Press library, used in the exhibition poster, are clearly non-identical.) Differences in the amount of ink used and pressure applied with each duplication meant that the stencilled text inside was also always different.’²³ This overturns any attempt at the standardisation that formed the sine qua non of the twentieth century’s total market media commodity, defetishising it through each labour-intensive blob, glitch and pen mark. What was being decolonised through these analogue processes was habituated attention itself.

A brief media archaeology of DIY/jugaad media

Like all DIY and jugaad media assemblages, Gestetner and mimeograph technologies were developed from previous gadgets and materials for duplicating, evolving through a transnational network of material and intensive flow-and-capture assemblages. A predecessor to the photocopy machine, the mimeograph was invented by Thomas Edison in 1876; as it did not require specialised typesetting or printing equipment, the mimeograph, it is often said, allowed virtually anyone with a typewriter to become a printer.²⁴ As Dhital clarifies, in the case of Gestetner’s paper stencils, these printing innovations were made possible by the import of Japanese

paper following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, which had made Japan’s economy and society available for Western imperial extraction and expropriation. ‘This strong, thin and porous paper could take the impressions of a wheel pen without breaking apart. According to corporate lore, David Gestetner had learned of its properties whilst selling Japanese kites on the streets of New York, where he had fled from Austria as a teenage stockbroker after the 1873 stock market crash. Soon after arriving in London, in 1877, he launched his cyclostyle pen, and in 1885 he patented his first Japanese paper stencils.’

At a particular moment in its rise to ready-to-hand DIY media infrastructure, the Gestetner became associated with global industrial modernity itself. This was explicitly part of its marketing. Gestetner, for instance, hailed the duplicator as ‘the pictorial symbol representing the really modern organisation.’²⁵ As Dhital remarks,

Its lines are said to represent the modern spirit of industrial design – like a Rolls Royce or the Empire State Building. But the booklet also gives more modest examples of potential uses, such as a self-feeding model described as ‘specially for the Gestetner beginner’, said to be ideal for the use of schools and small organisations. And this is how the Gestetner is perhaps best remembered today – by the smell of the ink and the feel of the waxed paper used to produce school newsletters and little magazines. Rather than being the product of scientific and technical research, early duplication technology also developed as a result of its practical application by students, clerks and stationers. This is reflected in the examples given in *The Book of Ideas*, itself produced using a Gestetner: the price list, the invitation card, the information sheet, the direct mail campaign and the sales bulletin.²⁶

The Gestetner Quarterly and the *Gestetner World in Action* featured examples of Gestetner duplicators being used in various ‘exotic’ locations: carried in a horse-drawn carriage in the Philippines, sold to monks in Thailand, and demonstrated to members of the Wayana and Trio peoples near the Brazilian border of Surinam.²⁷ The technology subsequently functioned as a vector of settler colonialism, cultural domination and linguistic systematisation. In one editorial, as Dhital notes, the language of the Wayana and Trio indigenous peoples is said to have ‘never previously been put on record. The efforts of the West Indies Mission in Surinam meant that for the first time “the Indians could learn to read their own language.” A constant flow of duplicated material ... resulted: “Bible

Tracts, Song Books, Reading Primers, Calendars, instructions in hygiene ...".²⁸ While the Gestetner became a kind of portable colonial writing technology that was thought to lead to scientific and systematic thinking, or the 'domestication of the savage mind', it was also simultaneous with the emergence of the Brazilian mimeograph poets movement which used this same technology to evade state censorship and devise a new poetic language.²⁹ As Alt Går Bra points out, the mimeograph turned out to be the ideal clandestine printing device, lightweight and compact enough to be easily moved from place to place, avoiding confiscation and censorship, also suitable for producing a reasonable amount of copies with reasonable print quality.³⁰ Indeed, in many parts of the world Gestetner-produced, self-published work enabled aesthetically and politically radical collectives to escape or work around the scrutiny applied to works printed at formal production facilities.³¹ From Ukrainian prisoners of war during World War II making mimeograph newsletters, to its use among politically engaged artists in Mexico from 1968 until the 1980s, to mimeographed children's books by the Black Panthers in northern California, DIY media assemblages have consistently blurred the boundaries between intellectual and manual labour in the social production of print, developing printing techniques that were only available outside print shops.³² As Hawley argues, 'Accessible and localized, this form of self-publication connoted rejection of external control over a community's message and production of self-determined cultural content ... From the Black Arts Movement to feminist presses, mimeography linked marginalized groups to a recurring motif of independence and aided in the construction of community.'³³

The question concerning gender and the division of labour involved in DIY media is also subtly highlighted in 'Crafting Subversion'. In one photograph reproduced as a large poster-sized image that meets one at the top of the back stairs at the Brunei gallery, Joan Grand, who worked in the publicity department at the Gestetner works in Tottenham between 1934 and 1964, demonstrates a Stencil Lightbox, also known as a Gestetner Scope. 'This was used to trace clip art, drawings, or lettering on a stencil, a more complex form of duplication than the flat-bed process David Gestetner had popularised in Britain. Gestetner had first patented his cyclostyle, a wheel pen for writing on stencils, in 1881, one of several versions of

this tool and technique invented in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The most well-known of these is probably Thomas Edison's mimeograph (1880), and many works produced using Gestetners are described as mimeographed.'³⁴ What of Joan's labour? The image is telling: as she works away at the tracing, her face illuminated by the lightbox, a group of white men stand around her in judgment of her work, as if coaxing her on to better hand discipline, withholding and withdrawing approval and attention while appropriating the products of her labour. This gendering of the actual work of the mimeograph, or the Gestetner, is noted only in passing by Steven Wright in his otherwise brilliant history of militant publishing projects in Italian far-left workerist movements:

Potere Operaio was not immune from the phenomenon of the 'Gestetner angels' [*angeli del ciclostile*], an expression coined during this period to designate the comrades (typically women) 'doing behind-the-scenes support work for those (mostly men) who had a public presence as leaders, speakers, and writers'. The words of Stefania Sarsini suggest that the gender relations within Potere Operaio were then par for the course within the Italian far left as a whole: 'Lucia, despite her militancy, always remained Scalzone's woman, as I was Verità's woman, and Grazia Zermann was Daghini's woman: we were all "the woman of"'. Our identity as persons didn't exist and this made militancy all the harder. No documents were elaborated by women. And the "gratification" of cyclostyling leaflets until late at night, or of cleaning a branch office soiled by the [remnants of] sandwiches and cigarette stubs smoked by dear [male] comrades intent on staying awake so that they could elaborate revolutionary theories, was certainly rather minimal for a revolutionary militant'.³⁵

In India, this gendering would be articulated specifically with caste and class in the little magazine movements. I return to this below.

Fuck you to damn you to Unfuck you

Another historically significant example of DIY print featured in the exhibition is *Fuck You/A Journal of the Arts*, edited, published and printed from 1962–65 by Ed Sanders, from what he described as 'a secret location' in New York's Lower East Side. Gwen Allen, in 'The Poetics and Politics of the Mimeograph', helps us to contextualise these DIY and jugaad media assemblages in 1960s

America. These assemblages created 8.5-by-11 inch mimeographed, stapled publications, a low-fidelity format that was nearly identical to that of dozens, if not hundreds, of similar poetry magazines that sprung up in New York and elsewhere at the time. ‘The dizzying proliferation of small-circulation presses and mimeographed magazines – including *C: A Literary Review*, *Poems from the Floating World*, *Umbra*, and *Fuck You: A Magazine of the Arts*, to name just a few – were central to both the aesthetic innovations and the social world of second-generation New York School poetry.’³⁶ These magazines were deeply embedded in unofficial networks of friends, interlocutors and acquaintances constituting both their contributors and readers, thus placing their ecology of practice within a social context of chance meetings, conversations and other publications.³⁷ As Allen argues persuasively, through the rapid, low-cost dissemination of poetry, these publications also shaped the social milieu in which this poetry was written and read; indeed, the relative speed and spontaneity of the mimeograph encouraged experiments in styles of spontaneity, collaboration, appropriation and cut-up methods of composition.³⁸ Daniel Kane notes how rapidly and inexpensively produced mimeographed publications brought the experience of the printed page – DIY media’s immanent ecology of sensation – ‘closer to the impromptu nature of the live poetry reading itself, capturing something of the informal, social atmosphere of these gatherings ... Rexograph sheets were passed out at readings, to be drawn or written on, or taken home and typed on, and then submitted, and the resulting magazine would be brought back and distributed the following week.’³⁹

Allen and other media archaeologists help us to appreciate what I have been calling the jugaad aspects of DIY media assemblages. Anderson notes how mimeograph magazine production was frequently completed at night and on the sly with available office and church mimeographs, linking its ecology of practice to protest press and underground newspaper production.⁴⁰ Vito Acconci and Bernadette Mayer printed a poetry magazine called *0 to 9*, which, in the words of Caroline Reagan, was ‘jarring in its resistance to readability. Pictures, with a few exceptions, are notably absent. Text assumes eccentric forms, resembling encoded maps. Oftentimes, words coalesce into intimidating, rambling chunks.’⁴¹ In a fine example of a jugaad, Acconci and Mayer would ‘drive

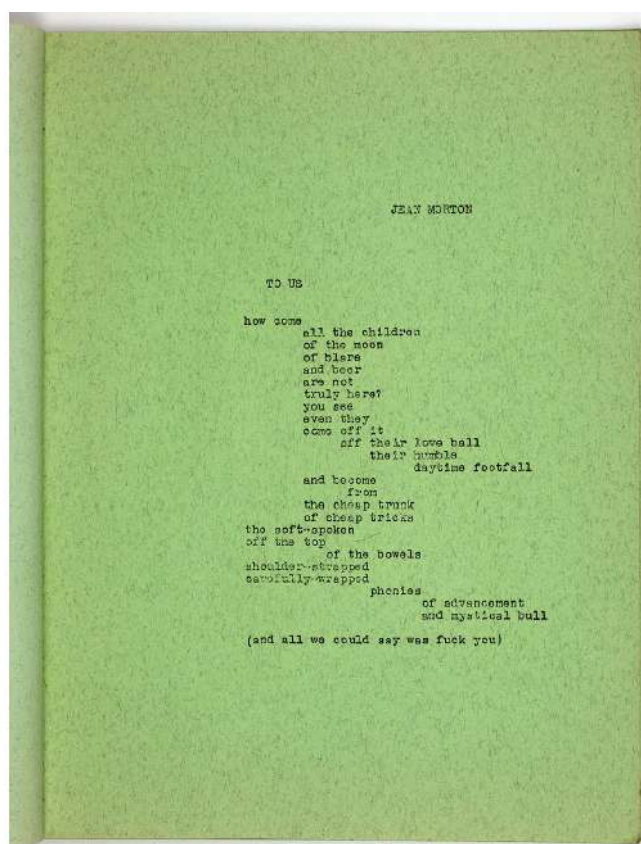
to a friend’s father’s office in New Jersey, arriving after closing at 5 pm, and work until dawn, typing the stencils and running off and collating the magazine, sometimes with the help of friends or relatives.’⁴² As Allen notes, the rough analogue quality of the mimeograph process, its resonant ecology of sensation, lent the publication a ‘distinct materiality, rife with smudges and blobs, incompletely formed letters, uneven ink distribution, and other flaws due to imprecision in the stencil-cutting and printing process.’⁴³ These de-habituating sensations of reading experimental printed matter stirred up associations with political broadsides and other radical publishing practices, and the ‘unrefined appearance’ gave language a kind of ‘weight and corporeality’ in keeping with the poetic investigations published in the magazine.⁴⁴ ‘Nothing was perfect about the *0 to 9* in its mimeograph form’, Mayer observed. ‘We were trying to get far away from the idea, so promulgated, of the perfection of the poem with white space around it, set off from other things.’⁴⁵ Bringing poetic sense to its unrefined infrastructure of sensation, *0 to 9* creates events of poetic language not as pristine or idealised, but as messy, unruly, untimely vectors that disregard ‘conventional spacing and margins, to say nothing of proper grammar and syntax. Words do not remain well-behaved and silent couriers of meaning, but seem to make noise, to act things out.’⁴⁶ The magazine’s messy materiality references its printing process. More, *0 to 9* also made the subscribers of the magazine into potential contributors, ‘since the stencil could, in theory, be removed, typed on, and sent back to the editors for publication in the next issue.’ While this possibility remained largely symbolic, it expressed a certain reciprocity between the production of the magazine and its reception and the participatory community *0 to 9* strove to create among its readers.⁴⁷

Sanders stencilled the *Fuck You* journal in the offices of the *Catholic Worker*, where many contributors also worked. Sanders printed around 500 copies of each issue on flecked, coloured Granitex paper ‘borrowed’ from the *Catholic Worker* and gave them away for free. He also mailed out copies to Pablo Picasso, Samuel Beckett, Jean Paul Sartre and Fidel Castro.⁴⁸ The second issue (April 1962) was dedicated in all caps to:

PACIFISM, UNILATERAL DISARMAMENT, NATIONAL DEFENSE THRU NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE, MULTILATERAL INDISCRIMINATE APERTURAL CONJUGATION,

ANARCHISM, WORLD FEDERALISM CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE, PROJECT MERCURY, PEACE EYE, THE MARGARET SANGER INSTITUTE, OBSTRUCTERS & SUBMARINE BOARDERS, AND ALL THOSE GROPED BY J. EDGAR HOOVER IN THE SILENT HALLS OF CONGRESS.

Fuck You became one of the most famous magazines of the North American 'Mimeograph Revolution', infused with the spirit of iskra, the spark talked about by early Russian revolutionaries, which for Sanders could burst 'out of a poetry café on Second Avenue' to 'inspire a network of minds and sweep America to Great Change'.⁴⁹



Sanders's *Fuck You* also resonated with DIY/jugaad media cultures across the world, such as that of the Indian poet Arvind Krishna Mehrotra in Allahabad, north India. As Dhital observes, news of *Fuck You* reached Mehrotra in the early 1960s through a write up in the *Village Voice* sent by an uncle of two of his friends studying in New York. With these two friends, the brothers Alok and Amit Rai (no relation to the author), Mehrotra was inspired to set up his own journal, *damn you/ a magazine of the arts*. Their first issue was published in September 1965 using a dusty Gestetner in the office of

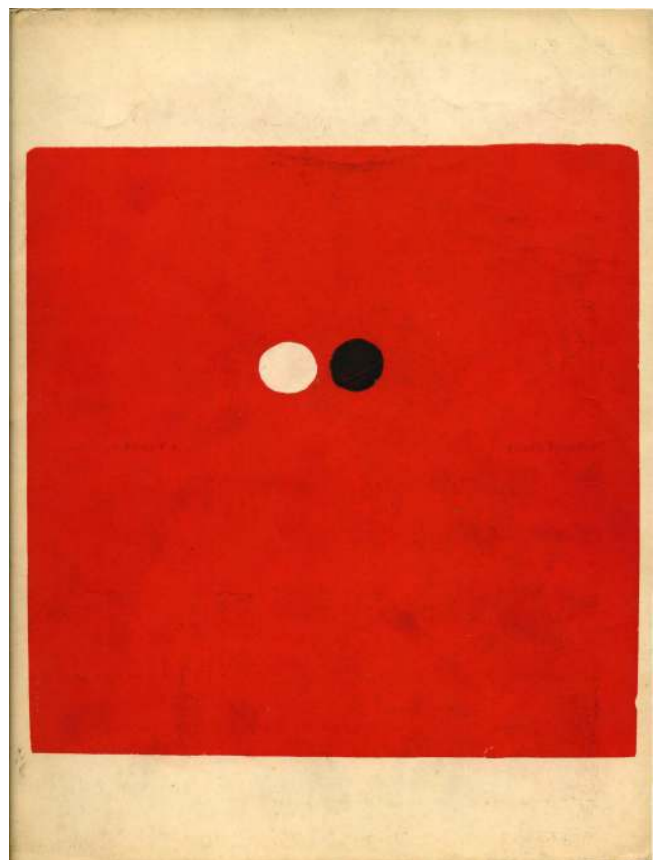
the Rais' father, a publisher. 'One hundred copies were printed to be sold at a price "commensurate with your dignity and ours."' Subsequent editorials discussed the difficulties the editors faced producing and distributing their work, and celebrated achievements such as the inclusion of illustrations in the second edition of *damn you*, following the discovery of stencilling pencils in a local stationery shop.⁵⁰ Sanders and his collective had incorporated Egyptian hieroglyphics into the design of *Fuck You*. In a resonant line of flight, Mehrotra drew upon an 'eclectic range of sources, spanning regions and epochs'.⁵¹ In an editorial statement in the sixth and final issue of *damn you* published in 1968, Mehrotra situated his media assemblage in the ancient town of Allahabad, 'far from the "skyscraping" places of the world. Specifically, from 18 Hastings Road, home of the Rai family and office of the *damn you* press.'⁵² Sonal Khullar has argued that instead of the rupture of pictorial space pursued by artists in Brazil and Japan, the Bombay poets and painters of this time sought its 'enrichment and intensification through careful attention to process, material, bodily presence, and detailed description, and they chose aesthetic contemplation as the means to a social and political critique'.⁵³ They developed media assemblages of 'lifting – documenting and defamiliarizing – their environment by citing and subverting street signs, advertisements, state propaganda, calendar art, film posters, and newspaper photographs, and took to loafing – a mode of critical observation and analysis and the pursuit of committed deprofessionalization and translation across spaces – by mobilizing the ordinary, yet extraordinary, spaces of the paan shop and the Irani restaurant in order to reinvent artistic sociability and subjectivity'.⁵⁴ We can certainly question the gendered, sexual and caste dimensions of these 'ordinary' spaces, their accessibility to only a narrow segment of upper-caste, homosocial male Indian society.⁵⁵ Clearly, the figure of the loafer, as a social type distinct from the flaneur of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Paris (the hero of Baudelaire and Benjamin), served as a model and norm for (classed) creativity and (caste-based) citizenship in the work of the Bombay painters and poets. In this work, even as it reinscribed normative gender, heterosexual, class and caste power, the city became a 'resource to rethink the relationship of art and politics, experience and imagination, power and marginality in modern India, and to link visual

and literary worlds through a translation between spaces, media, languages, and forms.⁵⁶

In my interview with him, Mehrotra stressed the transnational, trans-temporal dimensions of what the three, and later himself with the Bombay-based magazine *ezra*, were doing. This was immediately tied to the material quality of DIY/jugaad publishing. Looking over a page from *damn you* (6) reproduced on the writing archaeology website 'Artefacts of Writing', one gets a feeling for what Mehrotra and the Rais had to learn to publish *damn you*:⁵⁷

Each issue was improvised depending on what was available ... or depending on what one felt like or one's finances. You know sometimes it was determined by ... We might have found a stack of green paper somewhere in some stationery shop, in Bombay I'd pick up paper from the raddiwala (waste paper seller), sometimes they would have a whole stack of green paper or blue paper lying around, and you know you just picked up fifty sheets very cheaply for a few annas, and that was why the cover of *ezra* 1 was pink, they must have been cut offs from something else ... they were sold by weight ... I would just walk into those lanes behind what used to be Wayside Inn, Rhythm House [the Kala Ghoda area of Fort, Mumbai], and buy a rupee worth of foolscap paper and that would give me fifty sheets, which didn't weigh very much, and you could make two covers from one sheet ... And I would buy stencils ... from one of the shops and then take them to where I was staying, to Mulund, in Deep Mandap, far from central Bombay ... I would work on an ancient Royal Typewriter bought by my mother's father in the late 1940s in Simla, I always had it and carried it around so that's how I started writing using the typewriter ... I would type up these poems, and then take them back to the cyclostyling shop, ask them to run the stencils. [When we worked on *damn you*] Amit Rai had his typewriter, and I had my own typewriter in my room in Hastings Road. So we would divide what we had to type, I would bring home a stencil, and take it back and print it out on the machine in the Rais' home. The cost was only the cost of paper and the purchase of stencils, you could get ten stencils for a rupee. So it didn't cost very much. If you were to go to a professional typist then they charge you per page. They were cutting stencils all the time, either typing or cutting stencils. If I had gone to a professional I'm sure the images would have come out more clearly, but since I was doing it at home ... and because the round of the letters would clog with the ribbon, so they had to be cleaned. So you were always there with a safety pin, you went on removing [the ink] ... [laughing] I remember

doing that ... when you type the letter 'g' the top half of the 'g' would just be a black blob ... this is crazy. People don't believe this, you went with a pin removing the flint from the d, c, g ... A lot of time went into cleaning the keys. Which partly accounted for the less than perfect ... Whatever was completely illegible those pages we had to throw away. When we were doing it ourselves we didn't know how to ink the thing so the page would just come out black, completely black. Or we got bits of ink somewhere or the other ... We tried to be as neat and as clean as we could. But they were slightly illegible ... You mean even *Fuck You* had that problem? Oh, I'm pleased [laughing] ... I thought they'd be doing it better in New York than we were in Allahabad!⁵⁸



Vrishchik (Year 1, No. 11–12), reproduced with permission of Gulammohammed Sheikh and Asia Art Archive

One can conjecture about the caste and class background of these cyclostyle shopwalas – were they India's version of Italy's Gestetner Angels? The breakdown of the division of intellectual and manual labour, and by extension the assumption of a certain able-bodiedness, also returns here to question the usefulness of a phrase that appears often in DIY media discourse: anyone could operate one. For Mehrotra and his friends, connecting up with and then featuring an unknown poet from Fort Lauderdale, or with the not-so-distant Ezra Pound, was a thrill and a spark of inspiration for a kind of undercommons

movement of avant-garde aesthetics and DIY/jugaad media assemblages.⁵⁹

The DIY movement continues

We can say without hyperbole that what was at stake in several of the DIY/jugaad media assemblages gathered together by Dhital in 'Crafting Subversion' was the potentiality of a people-to-come to express a revolutionary becoming in and for itself. For example, in a moment of 'Great Change' in India, from, say, 1967 to 1977 (from the onset of the Maoist Naxalite insurgency to the 'end' of the Emergency) – which was certainly marked by betrayals and great failures of solidarity – when this potentiality hinged on the collective construction of a revolutionary conjuncture precariously relating rural militants, the industrial working classes, Dalits, a refashioned Hindu right, and minorities of all stripes, Indira Gandhi's authoritarian state literally turned out the lights. About a decade after Mehrotra was publishing *damn you*, as Dhital reminds us, Indian political activists, such as the Lok Nayak (People's Leader) Jayaprakash Narayan and, earlier, socialist leader Rammanohar Lohia were deeply involved in anti-Congress agitation and a perhaps too facile practice of *lokniti* (people's politics).⁶⁰ Narayan's movement for 'Total Revolution', which some on the far left in India today consider symptomatic bourgeois upper-caste eyewash, covering over the dangerous compromises with the Hindu right at the time in forging an anti-Congress movement, generated their own DIY media assemblages, which some continue to believe sought to produce resistant knowledge and a transformed sense of social practice.⁶¹ A fascinating part of the exhibition in this respect is from the collection of Ram Dutt Tripathi (born 1950), a former-BBC journalist imprisoned for his role in the resistance to the Indian Emergency of 1975-77 (and digitised by the University of Göttingen).

As Dhital's wall-text reminds us, one of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's first acts on seizing state power on 25 June 1975 was to completely shut off electricity for the newspaper district in New Delhi and take control of the national radio station, 'leaving Indians to look for alternative sources of news'.⁶² One of Tripathi's first acts of resistance after the Emergency was imposed was to buy a flatbed cyclostyle duplicator and produce newssheets containing information about what was happening in

Delhi and the locality. He and his friends in the Yuva Sangharsh Samiti (Youth Struggle Association) would then sell these for a small profit to support themselves whilst underground. In the exhibition, Dhital carefully juxtaposes Tripathi's archive and a selection of nationalist literature from the British Library's collection of publications proscribed in colonial India. As she notes, the Narayan-led anti-Congress movement for 'Total Revolution' styled itself as the second independence struggle, and Indira Gandhi's autocratic actions seemed to prove that a change of leadership was insufficient to bring about decolonisation.

A more thoroughgoing transformation of society and decentralisation of power was required. Much of the visual and verbal rhetoric of this movement also drew upon earlier periods of protest. The image of Mahatma Gandhi, prominent in Congress literature produced during the colonial period, recurs in anti-Congress publications distributed during the Emergency. During the Independence struggle various groups had also issued 'calls' for Indians to refuse to cooperate with the government.

The exhibition displays two such pleas. In one (in English) the Hindustan Seva Dal (Indian Service Party, Meerut), a grassroots wing of the Congress Party, urges Hindu and Muslim government workers to remember the anti-British uprising of 1857 and unite in opposing the Government machinery. In another (in Hindi), Indumati Goyanka of the Rashtriya Mahila Samiti (National Women's Association) calls on Indian 'brothers' working in the police force to quit, or at least vow not to inflict violence on their 'mothers and sisters'. Dhital highlights that a similar plea for the 'police and army to revolt by hero of the Independence struggle and leader of the movement for Total Revolution, J.P. Narayan, was the immediate context for proclamation of Emergency in 1975'.⁶³

The movement continues. Recently, an artist collective calling itself the Bombay Underground started publishing a zine with the title *a5*, its first issue cover reading UNFUCKYOU, in seemingly explicit dialogue with both Sanders and Mehrotra. I was able to buy a copy for a few rupees at the extraordinary People's Freedom 75 event on 7 August 2022, 'somewhere in Mumbai'. The brilliant gathering/event/exhibition showcased art self-curated by a collective of artists who had come together in resistance to and refusal of Hindu totalitarianism.⁶⁴ While not much can be said about the event (to protect

those whose data-identity is being tracked, quantified, and cross-referenced quite meticulously by the Hindutva surveillance state),⁶⁵ the zine and its DIY publication process bears witness to an *iskra* that has not dimmed in its revolutionary becoming.

Untimely subversions of obsolete media

Today, it is difficult to imagine a smart phone company advertising its neuro-fetish cum portable data mine with the tagline: 'It will keep your secrets. Operate it yourself.' But this was precisely what made the mimeograph and the Gestetner valuable, indeed forceful in DIY media assemblages across the globe. The mimeograph revolution reverberates today in *jugaad* and DIY assemblages in radical undercommons, in revolutionary energies and becomings that break down the binary between intellectual and manual labour – the mimeograph, and by extension the DIY revolution, is a continuation of class war by other means, intimately tied to class/caste/gender-/racial struggles for emancipation.⁶⁶ As Hawley puts it more modestly,

Mimeography captured the imagination of potential self-publishers. Advertised as simple in design and operation, the equipment proved accessible to nonprofessional printers. Writers, activists, and other amateurs learned printing skills or gained access to friendly machine owners through the widespread presence of these machines in offices around the country. The skills to run a machine were readily gained through programs run by the A. B. Dick Company or training on the job. These low-cost, reliable machines for duplicating one's own original material have been associated closely in fact and public perception with publishing undertaken outside commercial printing channels, as well as through mainstream printers and business offices.⁶⁷

Today, this assumed accessibility must be put under erasure through subaltern histories and subjugated knowledges of norms of able-bodiedness in DIY media cultures globally.

This able-bodied norm in the relationship of humans to technology is legible all the way back to at least Hegel. For instance, in Alt Går Bra's tribute to the subaltern mimeograph cultures that proliferated throughout the world in the twentieth century, the art collective confesses to a Hegelian inspiration, citing the philosopher reflecting on the tool: 'In the tool the subject makes a

middle term between himself and the object, and this middle term is the real rationality of labour ... On account of this rationality of the tool it stands as the middle term, higher than labour, higher than the object (fashioned for enjoyment, which is what is in question here), and higher than enjoyment or the end aimed at. This is why all peoples living on the natural level have honoured the tool.'⁶⁸ Hegel articulates a classical Eurocentric teleology of the relation of human practice to technology, and in the romanticism of the peoples without history 'living on the natural level', in the insistence on the role of technical mediation between the unhappy subject-supposed-to-know and 'his' bad object choices, in the supposed discovery/recovery of the real rationality of labour in the 'honoured' tool – an entire, if ambivalent program of instrumental reason lies in wait. 'In this humanism', writes Wendling, 'objectification is the foundational moment of human subjectivity, and human beings are set over against nature rather than viewed in continuity with it.'⁶⁹ This is the still unfolding history of what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten call the white science of logistics in racial capitalism: technology as congealed dead labour, fixed capital, a crucial part of the technical, organic and value compositions of capital for Marx, and yielding for Heidegger the ready-to-hand standing reserve, the essence of which is nothing technological.

This intersects with projects that would decolonise racial formations in and through DIY media. In Adorno's (anti-)Hegelian yet thoroughly Eurocentric aphorisms in *Minima Moralia*, he writes that

Progress and barbarism are today so matted together in mass culture that only barbaric asceticism towards the latter, and towards progress in technical means, could restore an unbarbaric condition. No work of art, no thought, has a chance of survival, unless it bear within it repudiation of false riches and high-class production, of colour films and television, millionaire's magazines and Toscanini. The older media, not designed for mass-production, take on a new timeliness: that of exemption and improvisation. They alone could outflank the united front of trusts and technology. In a world where books have long lost all likeness to books, the real book can no longer be one. If the invention of the printing press inaugurated the bourgeois era, the time is at hand for its repeal by the mimeograph, the only fitting ... unobtrusive means of dissemination.⁷⁰

As in most of Adorno's writings, there is something

profoundly repugnant and no less compelling here (a few pages later, he will go on to argue why ‘Savages are not more noble’).⁷¹ Ambivalently refusing both (racialised) barbarism (which one?) and progress (Euro-capitalism’s own), he celebrates the soon-to-be obsolete, humble mimeograph. In Joel Burges’s gloss on this jarring passage, he notes that mimeographs were hardly obsolete in the late 1940s, enjoying extensive currency in businesses and schools as a copying technology, yet it must have seemed outdated almost since its inception in the late nineteenth century, ‘as if it were a stopgap solution on the road to a better copying technology for the masses.’ Adorno attempts to turn the mimeograph untimely in a utopian fashion, to become strategically nonsynchronous with the techno-economic interests of (racial) capitalist modernity, refusing its total market culture, and offering up a ‘critical temporality of outmoded media ... a figuration of the outmoded is a temporal constellation in which past and present are agonistically juxtaposed by crisscrossing ... “transient elements within an accelerating sequence of displacements and obsolescences”.’⁷² The agons proliferate as Dhital’s ‘Crafting Subversion’ documents so well. Untimely questions of gender, ability, race and caste will have returned to push DIY media assemblages toward other ecologies of attention in revolutionary becomings yet to come.

Amit Rai is Reader in Creative Industries and Arts Organisation at Queen Mary University of London, and the author of *Jugaad Time: Ecologies of Everyday Hacking in India* (2019).

Notes

1. Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays* (New York: Harper Collins, 2013).
2. Pragya Dhital, ‘Crafting Subversion’ Exhibition Wall Text, 1.
3. Stephanie Anderson, “‘Crowded Air’: Previous Modernisms in some 1964 New York Little Magazines’, in *The Mimeograph: A Tool for Radical Art and Political Contestation*, ed. Alt Går Bra (Bergen: Alt Går Bra, 2016), 111.
4. Alt Går Bra ed., *Mimeograph*, 9.
5. Anderson, “‘Crowded Air’”, 111.
6. Lincoln Cushing, ‘Cranking it out, Old-School Style: Art of the Gestetner’, in *Mimeograph*, ed. Alt Går Bra, 120. Cf. Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (London: Continuum, 2004), 14; Ari Jerrems, “‘An Opening Toward the Possible’: Assembly Politics and Henri Lefebvre’s Theory of the Event’, *Global Society* 34:2 (2020), 233.
7. Elizabeth Haven Hawley, ‘Revaluing Mimeographs and Other Obsolete Things: An Introduction to Media Archaeology’, in

Mimeograph, ed. Alt Går Bra, 23, 63.

8. Alt Går Bra ed., *Mimeograph*, 11. For instance, the pioneering LGBT publication *The Ladder*, whose audience was mostly lesbian identified, was published using mimeography. Cf. Hawley, ‘Revaluing Mimeographs’, 23.

9. For a spatial interpretation of technological obsolescence in Hindi cinema see Ranjani Mazumdar, ‘Technological Obsolescence and Space in Bombay Cinema’, in *A Companion to Indian Cinema*, eds. Neepa Majumdar and Ranjani Mazumdar (Chichester: Wiley, 2022), 540–568.

10. Joel Burges, ‘Adorno’s Mimeograph: The Uses of Obsolescence in *Minima Moralia*’, in *Mimeograph*, ed. Alt Går Bra, 33–39.

11. Amy Wendling, *Karl Marx on Technology and Alienation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 196. See Wendling’s gloss on Postone’s notion of capitalism’s treadmill effect: ‘Because the means of production are constantly being transformed and machinery improved, articles are produced with constantly increasing rapidity. This leads to a dialectic between the labour accomplished in, say, one hour and the socially necessary labour time that determines this same hour. The effect of this dialectic is to constantly increase the intensive magnitudes of the abstract units. This year’s hour is socially determined to be more labour-intensive than last year’s, and this year’s hour becomes the new baseline for determining what an hour means. Postone calls this “the treadmill effect”. In capitalism, this effect constantly ratchets up the intensity of labour that is socially expected to be performed in a given unit of abstract time. One must run for twenty minutes, just as before, but at a faster pace, because “twenty minutes” has come to be more intensively determined by social necessity.’

12. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 336–337; quoted in Burges, ‘Adorno’s Mimeograph’, 36.

13. Burges, ‘Adorno’s Mimeograph’, 36.

14. Wendling, *Karl Marx*, 172.

15. Laetitia Zecchini, “‘We were like cartographers, mapping the city’: An interview with Arvind Krishna Mehrotra’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 53:1–2 (2017), 199. Cf. Sonal Khullar, “‘We Were Looking for Our Violins’: The Bombay Painters and Poets, ca. 1965–76’, *Archives of Asian Art* 68:2 (2018), 113–15.

16. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*; quoted in Alt Går Bra ed., *Mimeograph*, 34.

17. See Stephen Wright, *The Weight of the Printed Word: Text, Context and Militancy in Operaismo* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 109.

18. Patricia Ticineto Clough, Karen Gregory, Benjamin Haber and R. Joshua Scannell, ‘The Datalogical Turn’, in *Non-Representational Methodologies: Re-envisioning Research*, ed. Phillip Vannini (London: Routledge, 2015), 156–174; Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *All Incomplete* (London: Minor Compositions, 2021).

19. Amit S. Rai, ‘DIY Media in South Asia’, *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 12:1–2 (2021), 64–67; cf. Amit S. Rai, *Jugaad Time: Ecologies of Everyday Hacking in India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

20. Excerpt from Alessandro Ludovico, *Post-Digital Print: The Mutation of Publishing since 1894*, in Alt Går Bra ed., *Mimeograph*, 18.

21. Elizabeth Haven Hawley, 'Revaluing Mimeographs as Historical Sources', in *Mimeograph*, ed. Alt Går Bra, 24.
22. Ueno Hisami, 'Toshaban: On the Development of the Mimeograph between Printing and Art in Modern Japan', in *Mimeograph*, ed. Alt Går Bra, 71
23. Dhital, 'Crafting Subversion', 2.
24. Excerpt from Gwen Allen, *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), in Alt Går Bra ed., *Mimeograph*, 104.
25. Dhital, 'Crafting Subversion', 4.
26. Dhital, 'Crafting Subversion', 4.
27. Dhital, 'Crafting Subversion', 5.
28. Dhital, 'Crafting Subversion', 5.
29. Dhital, 'Crafting Subversion', 5.
30. Alt Går Bra ed., *Mimeograph*, 18.
31. Hawley, 'Revaluing Mimeographs', 23.
32. Nicolas Pradilla, 'A Ubiquitous and Feared Tool: Collective Editorial Practice by a Generation of the Crisis', in *Mimeograph*, ed. Alt Går Bra, 12.
33. Hawley, 'Revaluing Mimeographs', 23.
34. Dhital, 'Crafting Subversion', 2.
35. Wright, *The Weight*, 33.
36. Allen, *Artists' Magazines* excerpt, 104–105.
37. Allen, *Artists' Magazines* excerpt, 106.
38. Allen, *Artists' Magazines* excerpt, 106; Anderson, "'Crowded Air'", 111.
39. Daniel Kane quoted in Gwen Allen, 'The Poetics and Politics of the Mimeograph', in *Mimeograph*, ed. Alt Går Bra, 105.
40. Anderson, "'Crowded Air'", 111.
41. Caroline Reagan, 'The lost '60s magazine that gave artists Sol Lewitt and Adrian Piper true conceptual freedom', accessed 3 September 2022, <https://www.documentjournal.com/2020/03/look-inside-0-9-the-radically-experimental-magazine-that-broke-all-the-rules-of-language/>.
42. Allen, *Artists' Magazines* excerpt, 105.
43. Allen, *Artists' Magazines* excerpt, 105.
44. Allen, *Artists' Magazines* excerpt, 105.
45. Bernadette Mayer quoted in Allen, *Artists' Magazines* excerpt, 105.
46. Allen, *Artists' Magazines* excerpt, 105
47. Allen, *Artists' Magazines* excerpt, 105
48. Dhital, 'Crafting Subversion', 5–6.
49. Dhital, 'Crafting Subversion', 6.
50. Dhital, 'Crafting Subversion', 6. Cf. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *Partial Recall: Essays on Literature and Literary History* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2012), 59–62.
51. Dhital, 'Crafting Subversion', 7.
52. Dhital, 'Crafting Subversion', 7.
53. Khullar, "'We Were Looking for Our Violins'", 112.
54. Khullar, "'We Were Looking for Our Violins'", 113.
55. Cf. Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan and Shilpa Ranade, *Why Loiter?: Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2011).
56. Khullar, "'We Were Looking for Our Violins'", 113.
57. See Artefacts of Writing, 'Webnotes', accessed 5 September 2022, <https://artefactsofwriting.com/webnotes/>.
58. Interview with Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, 5 September 2022. Cf. Mehrotra, *Partial Recall*, 65.
59. Interview with Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, 5 September 2022.
60. After the early 1950s, Narayan opposed lokniti (people's politics) to rajniti (party politics). Cf. Daniel Kent-Carrasco, 'A Battle Over Meanings: Jayaprakash Narayan, Rammanohar Lohia and the Trajectories of Socialism in Early Independent India', *Janata Weekly*, 20 October 2019, <https://janataweekly.org/a-battle-over-meanings-jayaprakash-narayan-rammanohar-lohia-and-the-trajectories-of-socialism-in-early-independent-india/>.
61. Anderson "'Crowded Air'", 112.
62. Dhital, 'Crafting Subversion', 9.
63. Dhital, 'Crafting Subversion', 10.
64. I use this word advisedly: in conversations with Indians from different backgrounds in three different cities recently 'totalitarian' (in English) was the word they used to describe Narendra Modi's authoritarian state. Many if not most of the poems published in the little magazines of the era would not be circulated today for fear of censorship and legal prosecution, harassment and, increasingly, arrest.
65. A postcolonial genealogy of this uniquely South Asian relation to surveillance and identification technology is staged in the Raqs Media Collective's installation 'Untold Intimacy of Digits' (2011) at the 'Crafting Subversion' exhibition. In it they animate an artefact from the Francis Galton Collection (University College London), a handprint taken in 1858 in lieu of a signature, to affix the identity of a Bengal peasant, Raj Konai, to a document. In their animated facsimile, Konai's blue handprint is made to gesture at how counting numbers is taught to children throughout much of India. Their concept brings together the invention of fingerprinting in Bengal (which only later went to England) with a critique of Modi's Aadhaar identification program, itself based on fingerprinting. The authoritarian aspiration to quantify biometric identity has remained constant from Konai's handprint to Aadhaar's biometrics. Interview with Shuddha Sengupta of the Raqs Media Collective, 29 August 2022.
66. Wendling, *Karl Marx*, 68; cf. the discussion of Walter Benjamin's encounters with avant-garde aesthetics and technological reproducibility in the 1920s and 1930s and his notion of 'the revolutionary energies that appear in the "outmoded"' in Burges, 'Adorno's Mimeograph', 33.
67. Hawley, 'Revaluing Mimeographs', 23
68. G. W. F. Hegel, *System of Ethical Life and First Philosophy of Spirit* [1802–04], quoted in Alt Går Bra ed., *Mimeograph*, 9.
69. Wendling, *Karl Marx*, 65.
70. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 1978), 50–51; Cf. Burges, 'Adorno's Mimeograph', 34. Adorno's method was 'schooled' by Hegel's dialecticism, but he remains quite critical of the master.
71. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 52–53.
72. Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*, quoted in Burges, 'Adorno's Mimeograph', 34–35.