Under the Sign of *Semiotext(e)*:
The Story according to Sylvere Lotringer
and Chris Kraus

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"Semiotext(e) . . . was a disappearing act."
—Sylvere Lotringer

We have divided this article into two parts. The first summarizes generally the early production history of the journal and the spectacular mediated "events" that were staged to coincide with the release of special issues. The second contains parts of our interview with Sylvere Lotringer and Chris Kraus.

In attempting to document the history of *Semiotext(e)* and its role in the dissemination of avant-garde fiction (the original impetus for this project), we began by seeking interviews with Lotringer and Fleming. As events turned out, we interviewed Lotringer and Kraus first; Fleming's interview was much more delimited. What emerged from these talks was a richly nuanced narrative about the early history of *Semiotext(e)* in its journal form, as well as a fascinating personal account of those signal events that mark *Semiotext(e)*'s importance as a site of critical cultural work for the past 25 years. In the process we discovered submerged tensions around several issues: the limited influence of feminist theory, the relationship between Lotringer and other key figures, and most pointedly, the idea of "the American academy" as a *Semiotext(e)* audience. Although both Kraus and Fleming provided interview material about the later phases of *Semiotext(e)*'s development, the guiding story was set on tape by Lotringer. As he relates it, what gets placed under the sign of *Semiotext(e)* includes many tales about the introduction of French theory to American audiences, about the politics of groups who do intellectual work, and about the relationship between the academy and the at-large intelligentsia in the United States.

As we digested the interview material and publication history, the pressing question for us was how to make sense of the ways in which *Semiotext(e)* functions culturally for its audiences. Although theory serves as an input, it becomes transformed into something else when packaged for an American audience. *Semiotext(e)* is *not* a finely regulated, rationalistic machine; we prefer to describe it as an apparatus of infection—tactically productive, vigorously opportunistic, and always on the verge of disappearing.

The Big Picture

Of all the revolutions that failed in the 1970s, *Semiotext(e)*, the cultural/theoretical journal founded by Sylvere Lotringer in 1973, was a startling success. A spectacular suicide, the journal declared its academic post mortem even before its first issue. In an era when "small press" and "specialty journal" usually denote institutionally supported projects, with their readership confined almost wholly to academics and their funding coming almost exclusively through the university, *Semiotext(e)* began its publishing career with a conscious strategy to short circuit this complicity between radical culture and conservative institutions of taste. According to Lotringer, he started the journal as a vehicle for introducing French theory into the United States. Hired to teach semiotics at Columbia—a place where "no one knew anything about semiotics"—Lotringer needed primary materials, but in fact he hated semiotics. So he conceived of the journal as a means for introducing French radical thought, but not the kind then in demand in the Columbia French department. His real intent was to put French thought into circulation in the streets among artists and culture workers, not in the academy—a place regarded with some suspicion by Lotringer.

The title *Semiotext(e)* was devised from the first as a Freudian pun that would play on the American academic desire for the sexiness and scientific nature of French structuralism while subverting that desire through the very institutions that aroused and channeled it. As a student of Roland Barthes in France, Lotringer learned much about playful subversion, desire, and most of all about laziness: "Structuralism is designed for the lazy. There's no research involved, you don't have to go to the library, no fieldwork (never mind Levi-Strauss), just plug your text into the machine and see what comes out. It was perfect for America. But that was not what I wanted to do."[1]

The title can thus be seen in several ways; as referring to semiotics directly, but transforming it into just another "text," effectively questioning the authority of semiotics as a scientific methodology. Prophetic of the journal's eventual reputation, the title captures the ambiguity of how to read the semio-text: is it sign, or is it text, or some unstable hybrid of the two? For in fact, *Semiotext(e)* has become every bit as much a cultural sign in itself as a collection of texts. And

this, in the ultra-commodified, postprint world of late-twentieth century America, with its tremendous proliferation of signs, is a commentary on how meaning gets produced in postmodern society.

Far more than a journal devoted to semiotic analyses, *Semiotext(e)* itself has become a sign that symbolizes the place of critical thought in a culture based on the consumption of signs. What Lotringer and the various production staffs of *Semiotext(e)* wanted to do, as we have learned from several hours of interviews and a re-examination of the full print run of the journal and its various spin-off publications, was nothing less than re-invent the concept of revolution in America—a revolution that would not be televised, but would be conducted through a series of linked apparatuses, most eminently print.

It is of, course, easier to construct in hindsight a coherent strategy for what began as naughtily subversive practices. From the grim perspective of the present, after a decade of Reaganomics, the decimation of labor, the spectacularization of politics and the cynical orchestration of the media, the *modus operandi* of *Semiotext(e)* seems in retrospect to have been a very sensible way of engineering a nonacademic intellectual movement, however humble its proportions. The journal seems to have been designed from the first to articulate what we now identify as a micropolitics of indistinct and shifting groups; significantly, this was a lesson learned from the European sixties, from the experience of the French May and Deleuze and Guattari rather than from the example of large-scale organized movements. In this sense, as a pointedly post-Marxist intervention into American cultural politics, *Semiotext(e)* marked the *bona fide* entrance of French theory into the belly of the postmodern American beast. It did this not so much by its genealogy of historical practice, as in its introduction of a significantly new theoretical paradigm, that of the sign and the symbol, the signifier, and eventually, simulation—elements crucial to any understanding of the new advertising-based logics of American and, indeed, global political culture since the 1960s—into the specific context where it was already so pervasive it was almost guaranteed to be ignored. What follows is a rough chronology of its first steps.

Ancient History

The first three issues were devoted to "traditional" semiotic texts and commentary, much of it generated by a *Semiotext(e)*-sponsored colloquium on "The Two Saussures" held at Columbia in May 1974, just after Lotringer's appointment to the French Department there. The early years of the journal thus largely reproduced academic work. "You have to start somewhere," Lotringer explains. But even the first issues were directed toward a non-canonical reception of major texts. The presentations at the conference were designed to paint a surrealistic mustache on the great founder of structural linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure,

by examining his lesser-known work in the *Anagrams*, a project that Jean Starobinski averred would launch "the second Saussurian revolution."

> We decided to put up a Saussure conference, "The Two Saussures," to draw a wedge between the founder of general linguistics (and of structuralism, to which the French department was wedded) and the more crazy anagrammatic, semiotextual work, which we thought then to be more "materialist" in an Althusserian fashion. We were very concerned about epistemological foundations of everything, real "radical academics," you see. That was 1973. (Lotringer, interview)

But something happened between 1975 and 1977, when "safe" (if trendy) reproduction gave way to an explosion of anticipation and experimentation. Issue number 5 (Vol. II, no. 2) on George Bataille featured an article by Jacques Derrida exploding the notion of mastery (theoretical as well as political) in Bataille's reading of Hegel. (The *Semiotext(e)* edition was published in the same year as the English translation of *Grammatology*, and two years before the essay reappeared in *Writing and Difference*.) Issue number 6, titled "Anti-Oedipus" (Vol. II, no. 3) included substantial sections from the Hurley, Lane, and Seem translation of *Anti-Oedipe*; a 1972 review of the original French edition by Jean-Francois Lyotard; several critical articles by such established gauchists as John Rajchman (a founding member of the *Semiotext(e)* efforts), Jacques Donzelot, and Guy Hocquenghem; as well as the original poems by Antonin Artaud from 1947 that first supplied to Deleuze and Guattari the vocabulary of parasitism, microbiology, and the body without organs.

"Nietzsche's Return" in the same year—1972—(Vol. III, no. 1) continued the archeology of contemporary (poststructuralist) French theory with interventions by Deleuze, Lyotard, Klossowski, Foucault, and Derrida on the importance of rethinking Nietzsche in the post-1968 period. This issue marked the first attempt by the editors to forge trans-Atlantic linkages. Where previously either American academics had exclusively commented on French philosophy or French thinkers had held unmediated sway over American readers, now the American John Cage enters, with "fragile incoherence," a debate that finally seems larger than Paris.

According to Lotringer:

> [W]e were preparing the ground with all this French theory, and especially with Nietzsche. I knew we would have to work with America, in America, because that was where we were, and also because America was where the world was. I always thought to myself, "If you want to reach 5,000 people, you have to be visible to 250 million." And American culture seemed to already embody, to live, the philosophical reality described by French theory. The problem was, no one seemed aware of it then, except maybe these extraordinarily sensitive people: like Cage, Merce Cunningham, William Burroughs. (Lotringer, interview)

From the first, then, *Semiotext(e)* was conceived as an intervention into cultural politics, not merely as an academic exercise in theoretical reproduction, and far

less as an attempt to establish academic legitimacy for some sort of below-the-horizon publishing venture. According to Lotringer, the first few issues were necessary to get the presses rolling: to assemble the production teams, acquire the contacts, and generate money and distribution lists. Accordingly, in its first few years the journal fed on its academic nesting-place, although significantly Columbia University never provided money to finance *Semiotext(e)*. Lotringer is adamant about this: "we *never* received any money from Columbia." On the contrary, when he held the Schizo-Culture convention in New York: "we found out that we had to pay for everything: security, microphones, the room . . . so we had to start charging people. When you ask people for money in New York, they become imperious. That was a problem." In fact, the Dean of Columbia once advised Lotringer that *Semiotext(e)* was not an official Columbia production: "He said I could use my office, but I couldn't advertise the journal as being affiliated with the university. As if I wanted to!"

Instead, the project seems to have been designed from the first to launch something new into the interface between the globally dominant American culture industry and the French theorization of the post-1968 experience, inhabiting but not dependent upon the university. This combination was seen to be the most suggestive of a direction for future radical action.

The Autonomia Issue

According to Jim Fleming, *Semiotext(e)* publication projects took inspiration from one of the early issues of the journal that focused on the Autonomia movement in Italy (what is often referred to as The Italian Issue, "Autonomia," #9, Vol. 3, no. 3, 1980) As he explains:

> The Autonomist movement had a traditional working class component, and a very intense radical feminist movement, and a students' movement, a mental patient movement, a drug culture movement, a prisoner's movement, a racial component because of the long-standing north-south split in the country. In some ways [the Autonomia moment] was to try to assemble a collective agent of history again. There were lots of audiences it addressed. . . . The Autonomia movement was not directed from some center. People cooperated around these projects in a very decentered way. This fracturing of the movement has caused many people to think that the movement has gone away. But it is bigger and more splendid than ever, its just so multi-faceted that it is hard to see it all at once.

By all accounts, the *Autonomia* issue was a turning point. It was the first issue of *Semiotext(e)* devoted to actual practical politics, that of the Italian Autonomist movement, which had been gathering strength throughout the 1970s and "exploded" from 1975-1977 with mass demonstrations, work stoppages, closing of the universities, the rise of the radical women's movement, the spread of "free radio"

and free housing (squatting), and the autonomous price-setting of commodities (*autoreduzione*). Lotringer had been to Italy with Felix Guarttari in 1977, absorbing firsthand this reverberation of May 1968, and felt compelled to support it from the United States. *Autonomia*, with a team of about 60, was a comprehensive introduction to the far-flung movement, gathering statements from the major theorists of the "extraparliamentary" left that it juxtaposed to radio transcripts, popular histories, police reports, cartoon strips, and photographs of urban violence. The chic "downtown black" cover struck a sensitive chord among the fashionable New York art scene that inspired the basic and subversive look of the Foreign Agents book series. Significantly, *Autonomia* was conceived as a direct intervention into the American Left, where it hoped to inspire international support for a popular movement that Italian authorities were brutally suppressing in the name of "terrorism." Unfortunately, this never happened.

As events in Italy evolved, the grand intent for the *Autonomia* publication an interventionist strike into political sensibilities in the United States faded. On April 7, 1979, several months before the journal could be printed, there was a mass arrest of key members of the Autonomist movement. Consequently, as Lotringer explains, "We wanted to build a monument to the Movement. Unfortunately, what we came up with was a glorious tomb." Production schedules were frustrating realities for Lotringer—this grand mistiming of the *Autonomia* issue would have a strong impact on the future of the journal, which was redesigned from then on to allow editors to make quick "lightning strikes" into contemporary cultural issues. Gone was the notion that they were in the business of constructing beautiful, but laborious "monuments."

Publication schedules notwithstanding, the failure of the American Left to embrace the Autonomist cause completed Lotringer's disaffection with American Marxism. One consequence of his disappointement was that subsequent issues would fly in the face of any alliance with the organized Left. Each issue of the journal, says Lotringer, was designed to frustrate the audience of the previous one. If readers turned to *Semiotext(e)* expecting the radical politics and chic urban terrorism they encountered in *Autonomia*, for example, the next issue would explode their expectations by focusing on the endless fascinations of the body, sexuality, and pleasures. *Polysexuality* (#10), according to Lotringer, is a slap in the face to anyone who climbed aboard *Semiotext(e)* because of the hard "post-political politics" of *Autonomia*. The next issue, the *German Issue* (#11), is designed as a swipe at German Marxists, particularly those associated with the Frankfurt School, who still claimed that the organized Left "represented" the diversity of radical German culture. Subsequent issues embody fatal strategy even more aggressively: from *Oasis* (#12) through *Radiotext(e)* (#16). In this way, the journal ensured for itself wider (if fundamentally disloyal) audiences, and more important, the impossibility of being defined as a single project with a single point of view. This was an organized schizophrenia (or, as the semiologists might say, the "constitutive arbitrariness of the sign"); mostly it was a con-

scious attempt to avoid being pinned down: "the idea was not to be tied to a single community. . . . You could say that each issue was trying to discourage the previous constituency and open it up to another one, so there would be some overlap; you lose some, you gain some, but the idea was to keep moving." Between issues 12 and 16, Lotringer himself all but vanished from the editorial committees, preferring to devote his energies to the scattered "interventions" of the first 25 Foreign Agents books. The Autonomia events were also important because they marked the entrance of Jim Fleming into the *Semiotext(e)* fold. He later became first a managing editor in charge of finances and distribution, and then proprietor of Autonomedia, the Brooklyn publishing house that maintains a shifting relationship with *Semiotext(e)* projects.

Those Beautiful Black Books

In the mid-1990s, *Semiotext(e)* is perhaps better known in its "little-black-book" form, which serves as an affordable print-based source of postmodern thought. These books have become fetish-objects for a generation of graduate students trained in postmodern theory. First published as the "Foreign Agents" series, the black books were actually a pragmatic response to the increasing pressure to produce the journal according to a regular publication cycle.[2] As Fleming recalls, "We were facing the auto-dissolution of the journal. We didn't want to abandon the journal, but it wasn't being produced on a regular basis. The book format allowed us to put something out without being tied to a regular production/issue schedule." Foreign Agents in fact takes both its look and expediency from *Autonomia*. In terms of the larger project of *Semiotext(e)*, it is designed as its interventionist flank. Books are much less expensive to produce than the glorious collage of the journals, and can be finished in as little as three or four months, as opposed to the three or four year cycles of the journals. Because they are cheap and fast, they can be directed to particular issues and scenarios, whereas the journals must in a sense predict and even "invent" the context they will be launched into several years hence. In this sense, the political context surrounding *Autonomia*, and particularly its "failure" to capture the intended moment, produced its own quiet revolution in the new philosophy of production at *Semiotext(e)*. Fleming especially sees the spirit of the Authomist Movement and of the *Italian Issue* as very much a part of *Semiotext(e)*'s publishing efforts and suggests that *Semiotext(e)* exists in a similar cultural moment: "In some ways, this kind of splendid and multi-faceted subject of history is there again. . . . We're trying to shake it a little more. . . to create a ruckus."

A similar principal animates the seemingly haphazard collection of books published in several series under the sign of *Semiotext(e)*, which Lotringer seems to envision as an immense, spreading chestnut tree. Skeptical of self-criticism as being overly psychologistic, he prefers the method of expansion to

correct errors or oversights that may have occurred in the past. "Instead of criticizing, we start going the other way. So that basically we balance things out and go on." An important, if symptomatic, challenge for this strategy of correction by expansion was *Semiotext(e)*'s attempt to deal retroactively with the women's movement, and feminism more broadly. The almost complete absence of this topic from the first 15 years of the project marks a glaring blindspot in its ambitions to promote radical cultural theory or to "reach 250 million." In the late 1980s, when Lotringer began associating with New York-based filmmaker Chris Kraus, he became aware of the severe imbalance of women's representation within both the journal and the Foreign Agents series. Kraus calls it a "huge embarrassment . . . that all 25 Foreign Agents authors were white males!" Accordingly, Kraus launched her own book series called "Native Agents" that has published to date eight books exclusively by women and gay male authors.

Although it is disappointing for a feminist reader to witness the lack of women's writing in the early history of *Semiotext(e)*, the more recent publication efforts suggest a transformation of sorts in the sensibility of the guiding editoral agents. The decision to publish fiction by women and gay authors was not a move to support avant-garde literature for its own sake—a posture that, in keeping with the *Semiotext(e)* tradition, Fleming hotly criticizes. Rather it was a move that is understood to be entirely consistent with the guiding *Semiotext(e)* philosophy. As Kraus explains, the legacy of French theory is reinvented in this fiction—in the United States, gay and women's writing was the "place" in which those theoretical issues were being worked on or over.

Philosophically this seems to accord with the larger *Semiotext(e)* project: although Lotringer shied away from publishing feminist theory because of its psychoanalytic bent, all the Native Agents fiction books show a Guattari/Deleuzean influence in the sense that these books use the first person as a very public form of address. As Kraus suggests, the personal form manifests "a polemical, not an introspective, I." The eight books published so far, despite their differences, share a point of view. "They're aggressive and funny and they don't see the personal as a final, closed destination. Everything is in flux." In this sense, Kraus claims they're different from both American academic and underground fiction as well: both genres dead-end into the self.

The Interview

The following interview discusses the kind of cultural work *Semiotext(e)* does in the United States. Throughout its history it has served to introduce cultural theory to different audiences; thus its productive labor is tied to the expression and circulation of cultural knowledge. Although it is politically informed, it works mostly by disseminating theoretical material.

Lotringer: I started getting involved in the artworld only recently, not just because it was the end of the French period, and suddenly I became the veteran of French theory. I wasn't very interested in that, but I started seeing that French theory was being used in a way I thought antithetical to what I had hoped or expected it to do. It had been absorbed by universities, and by the artworld, it had become a discipline. So I thought, well, knowing exactly how things operate here, something gets picked up, taken as a badge, as an identification, as a means of intimidation, exclusion, the whole gamut—everyone talks about it, and immediately you know it's going to be trashed. That's why three or four years ago, when I began seeing that French theory started to become a *lingua franca*, we decided to start something else, and that's where Chris came in. We began publishing American writers; we had concentrated too heavily on theorists, and it was time to get back to the original producers.

Schwarz/Balsamo (S/B): So you think it will come back in some new and different form?

Lotringer: No, what I expect is that it will come back like a patchwork, to be used whenever necessary. I am not fetishizing French theory, but there are a number of ideas there that help to explain the tendencies of our society and raise certain questions that haven't been answered yet. French theory will continue to be involved in these questions because they haven't been confronted by another major mode of thinking to this point. So to reduce it to a trend is really a bit of a waste. I wouldn't care if it disappeared entirely if someone got the seeds of it.

S/B: How then do the books grow out of the journal? Jim Fleming has said that you didn't consciously seek out "avant-garde" fiction for the series. How then would you characterize this fiction?

Lotringer: One thing we can agree on: you asked why we didn't pick up on the Feminist movement: because we had missed out on it. It happened and I wasn't aware of it. I guess meeting Chris opened my eyes to it. Really, most of the books we published from Europe were written by white males, right? And even though I started with a generous idea of richness and multiplicity and all that, I don't want to get down to the numbers, it was obvious that there was something happening. So I became very aware through Chris that something needed to be done.

Kraus: When I started the Native Agents series, I had just heard Cookie Mueller read at the Poetry project. Cookie was this great, legendary New York figure: she'd been a star of the early John Waters movies, this great Baltimore new age biker girl who "took notes" on her life by writing these perfect stories. Everyone loved Cookie, and the readings that she gave in New York for five or ten years before that were real high points. So it seemed incredible that no one had done a book of Cookie's work. Obviously her book should have been done by Random House or Harper Collins, but it seemed all the major publishers she'd seen wanted so many changes that Cookie couldn't be bothered. So we published her book, *Walking through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black* (1990), verba-

tim, as the first in the series and it's sold out several editions. Luckily Hanuman and High Risk are now publishing Cookie as well.

Around that time, a few of the writers from this loose lower Manhattan writing scene did publish books with larger publishers, but many others who were equally important and accessible still hadn't. Since I had access to this mechanism, *Semiotext(e)*, publishing their books seemed like the right thing to do. It was right for *Semiotext(e)* too—a huge embarrassment, at that point, that all 25 Foreign Agents authors were white males!

We've published Ann Rower's *If You're a Girl*—deadpan and Talmudic true confessions; *Sick Burn Cut*, a tranvestite punk girl gan novel by Deran Ludd; David Rattray's amazing outlaw scholarship, *How I became One of the Invisible*; stories by rock musician Barbara Barg, sort of an East Village Carson McCullers; Lynne Tillman's essays, and many more. It's not strictly a female series, though the bias is certainly that way. The first eight books are also by a group of people who by and large knew each other, and that's finished now. The next book, Romy Ashby's, *The Cutmouth Lady*—schoolgirl lesbian eroticism set in Japan—starts a new, more eclectic phase in the series. "Inclusiveness" isn't really an issue because the series isn't curatorial: I don't go *looking* for books. It's an amateur operation, I publish what feels right out of what comes our way.

Lotringer: So the idea was instead of criticizing or being criticized, [quietly we issued the point of view series], and we start going the other way. So that basically we balance things out and go on.

Kraus: Sylvere's idea about this was that it was acceptable in the fiction series to publish only women, but he never wanted women in the theory series because the only women he knew writing theory were doing psychoanalytic theory, which he wasn't so interested in. And then the fiction series wasn't introspective or psychoanalytic at all in that way. It was a very public "I." The same public "I" that gets expressed in these other French theories.

Lotringer: It's very personal but it's not indulgent. It works and looks outward.

Kraus: Well, it's like this personal "I" that is constantly bouncing up against the world—that isn't just existing for itself.

Sylvere, you should answer the question of why you started the book (Foreign Agents) series.

Lotringer: Part of it was laziness. Each issue took me three, four, five years . . . and it was frustrating. . . . So after three or four years I decided to do a fast one. I got the idea from publishers in Berlin. It was a side-effect of the German Issue. And that's when I hooked up with Jim Fleming. He came after the *Autonomia* issue and was interested in Negri. He became the manager of *Semiotext(e)*, and started dealing more and more with distribution and printing, business aspects which I wasn't good at. I don't deny there was a lack of continuity there. *Semiotext(e)* takes a long time, and then the run is very short and it disappears quickly from the shelf. In the meantime, you need a sense of continuity, and the books stay on the shelf.

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We sold out all the issues of *Semiotext(e)*. Some took five years, others took one year. We could rely on the market for 5,000, so why not make them into books?

Kraus: And they are very cheap to produce . . . about 3,000 bucks for a run of 3,000; 5,000 for the big guys, 3,000 for the little guys. Baudrillard has sold 25,000 copies of *Simulations*. They are much quicker than the journal because we don't have all the layouts.

Lotringer: The very first book was the Cage book. Since I was a bit reluctant to get into books, I did it with [Marian Boyers], but she ended up making it disappear. I mean *Semiotext(e)* was right there inside the cover, but it was like another of these sharp, corporate operations. I looked around for other publishers to do it, and in exchange they could have *Semiotext(e)*. But no one wanted to do it. No one thought French theory would work! The major publishers said, "no, this is too specialized." I've been looking for a publisher since 1975. So we decided OK, we'll do it ourselves. We have the audience, it doesn't cost much. And it worked immediately. Fortunately, the art world wasn't yet into simulation, which was all about these kinds of thematics. Baudrillard played right into that. Baudrillard himself had been picked up by the School of Frankfurt, had a very committed audience as a neo-Marxist, etc., and when he came here, I thought he might possibly go over well in the art world. But I wasn't yet connected enough to the art world to know there was a coup to be made. It just happened. It was a bet, if you like. But we had nothing much to lose.

Kraus: With the journal, Sylvere never had that small press mindset. He used to say, if you want to reach 5,000 people, you have to try and reach the whole of America.

Lotringer: Right, 250 million was what I had in mind!

Kraus: True small presses really only expect to reach 5,000.

Lotringer: Lots of the little books are spin-offs from the magazine. The magazine extends itself in many different ways . . . Things are connected in strange ways.

I guess the moment that was so dramatic was when French theory became so popular. I knew how to deal with working in the underground, but I didn't know how to deal with this monster, the media. I thought there was a time in the mid-eighties when they were just about to get taken up by the mass media, and I was very worried about it. We never sent books for review. It was too much of a hassle. It was just boring. And then it became a policy. The policy was that we would not review it until it had circulated hand to hand, mouth to mouth, and so the readers would constitute the first level of review. It is like chance and laziness. In that I agree directly with Roland Barthes—he was very lazy. "Ah, I can't go to the library, I have to do something." That's how he invented Structuralism: not so much because he didn't want to go to the library, but because he said, French libraries are bad.

S/B: How do you stand in relationship to the project now? At times there has been such an urgency to intervene, and at others to set trends and introduce movements, mobilizing people in certain ways. But at the same time—and don't

take this the wrong way—it's so much you. What's the larger picture? I mean the groups form, then they disappear . . . where's it going?

Lotringer: But the groups never disappear completely. They disappear as a group, but they can all still be mobilized. I mean I go to Los Angeles, and I find Sandra Gilmartin. That's the reason we can continue to exist. I mean, if you have one group, then you stay very small. I can go any place, any place in New York, and I can find people willing to work for nothing for *Semiotext(e)*. They like the project, they like to be involved, and then they disappear, because we all have our lives. I mean, I am not *Semiotext(e)*—I do other things, write books, travel. . . . Somehow, things get reactivated. It is like a gigantic network, and I'm not at the center at all. [There really are] multiple centers. But I can penetrate the network, tap in here or there, but it is not as if I'm in charge at all.

When I started *Semiotext(e)* I made sure there was a patchwork of people: French, Italians, Germans, Americans, Chinese. Americans especially are difficult to work with in a group. Because, as I said, their subjectivity is such that they have this impossible division: the request of the culture that people stand on their own as individuals, when in fact it is impossible to be an individual because it is the most socialized culture I know in the world. But without any code that sustains it. Everyone has to reinvent themselves in relation to the others to get acceptance and definition from others. It's very difficult to live on an experiential, individual level. And when you have a group it multiplies. The main focus of the group is to become an individual within the group, not to work on the project; the project becomes the excuse. You have to create a patchwork that de-emphasizes the coherence of the group, to make holes so that there is air coming in, so the group doesn't fold into itself.

The people that interested me were pluralistic, but they didn't introduce this element overtly, and I think [the postcolonial moment] was an important update that could only have come from the States. It was a different jump, which doesn't necessarily contradict anything in French theory, but I think [the French] didn't address it in specific terms. And that's fine. But as soon as I realized there was an element which I hadn't addressed in my work, and my own work has gone increasingly in that direction—in ethnography, in art with Indian and black artists, and then I started this book with the Black Panthers—the idea has been that's it's kind of useless to do an autocritique. The idea has always been, when the balance isn't right, don't stop to criticize it, but keep adding to it. So when I became aware of that I began systematically looking for things. So we have a new [book] series called "Active Agents," and I want to start doing more with the Puerto Rican Liberation Front; I have plans to do things with people in Chiapas; I have a seven volume project with Michael Taussig, not written by anthropologists, but to find the people, to work with them, and then to find what they are about. So again, I don't want to offer commentary on the thing, but present the thing itself.

S/B: In some way, at least academically, *Semiotext(e)* has really committed

suicide, or indulged in a "fatal strategy," by steering clear of the big issues that have animated the academy. After postmodernism in the mid-eighties—which seems an implicit subtext of the *German* Issue, at least—the next big boom industries have attracted less attention. Especially the postcolonial debates that followed postmodernism, and now the huge increase over the last five years or so in gay and lesbian sexualities and gender issues.

Lotringer: Well, you've seen the *Oasis* issue. That's a fourth world issue, most of the authors are African, colonial, etc., and that came much before that talk was in vogue in the academy. I think it's true that some of French theory is pretty . . . it's European, it's white, futuristic, but from a European tradition—it's not multicultural at all. In that sense it's not even European, but accurate enough about the tone of European society: Germany has its Turks, France its Algerians, but they are not multicultural societies, and that's one of the reasons I left. I mean I'm Jewish—I didn't feel good in Europe. Too much hatred, too much discrimination.

A Conclusion of Sorts

S/B: One of the things we would like to talk about in the essay is what kind of cultural work *Semiotext(e)* does in the United States. Throughout its history it has served to introduce theory to different audiences; thus its productive labor is of a cultural sort. Although it is politically informed, it works mostly on disseminating the theoretical material.

Lotringer: Theory is a document like any other; it is a document of the mind at work. An artist producing a work is equivalent. I like the idea of putting that work side by side. That is why I don't like academic writing. An academic takes someone else's ideas, and applies them, or responds to them, or deconstructs them. Some of that is intelligent. But I wanted to go straight to the source and capture the direct, creative mode. Theory could be anything else. Burroughs is a theorist; he has this patterned mind that creates paranoid connections, making everything relevant. Even schizophrenia has a streak of paranoia running through it; it is powerfully organized. I thought theory could be used in that way, without a sense of extraneousness, that it is a privileged discourse. People would not have to be put in a position of power. Unfortunately, that is what happened with theory—it was put into a cultural position of power. I know artists who abandoned art for ten years trying to make sense of theory. The idea should be that people use theory like they would a work of art or something like that. To connect with, read one page . . . an infusion of creative thought, then integrate it into what they were doing, shape it and respond to it, and not produce specialists in Derrida . . . integrated in your life. I don't especially like reading theory, but I realize that I can find a lot of answers to my questions. I don't fall into as many traps because I think. Theory is like a zooming thing: it gets you closer to the problem so you do

not have to waste as much time. Then you are on your own. It won't give you the answer. It doesn't tell you in advance.

S/B: What happens when you look at *Semiotext(e)* from the outside. The sign "Semiotext(e)" means something in and of itself, separate from its publication history. The question is, how can we make sense of the way in which it functions culturally to its audiences: the people who took it up, were seduced by it, who got turned on by Baudrillard, primarily coming through these little, black, beautiful books? I've been thinking in different metaphors and theoretical constructs: one was a "cultural technology," or a technology of culture. In this sense, *Semiotext(e)*, includes all of its practices of production, is a technology of sorts that produces a very specific cultural discourse that gets disseminated, taken up, resisted or whatever; in the process theory may be an input, pure theory coming out of France, but it gets transformed into something else when it gets packaged for an American audience—whoever that audience is. Its output, to keep expanding the cultural technology metaphor, is how it shows up on course syllabi, in papers, or citations, or underground issues of xerox-art 'zines. Can it be described as an apparatus?

Or, to put another metaphor in the mix, maybe *Semiotext(e)* functions more like an agent of infection. What we really need then is an epidemiological framework in which to think about its cultural work. Viruses and vectors—viruses of influence and vectors of infection. In this sense, its cultural work is not so systematic, or finely regulated as the product of a more technological, mechanistic apparatus, with a set of well-worn practices and patterns, but much more dependent on opportunity, tactics, and "host" characteristics.

Lotringer: And that means difficult to locate. You happen to know John Johnson, who was one of my translating students. When he quotes Baudrillard, he doesn't quote *Semiotext(e)*! He goes back to the French, or he goes back to Hal Foster, "The Ecstasy of Communication." We have a whole book by that title, and he quotes Hal Foster! It's very characteristic. Because he is also an academic. There is great reluctance to quote *Semiotext(e)*. You know these little books . . . they're not reliable. There are no notes, no introduction, no hardcover edition. We're double agents. I remember when in France there was a lot of talk about Deleuze, and there was a special issue on Deleuze, and they asked an American to talk about Deleuze in the States, and he said: "*Semiotext(e)* introduced Deleuze in America, but after awhile academicians were turned off by these strange graphics and other things. . . ." So, in other words, we fucked it up. But that was exactly the idea. Because we are between two worlds. I don't have to go out of my way to find writers, and we all live between two worlds. But it never quite satisfied any preordained set-up. And that's enough! You know academics use it, but then they go to the "authoritative source," *The Deleuze Reader* and all that. My idea is to keep this kind of foreignness which occurs naturally between two worlds, where everything also is of something else, but not referential to it. It is of the art world, but not referring to it. It is from the university, but not refer-

ring to it. It is French, but the French do not recognize themselves in it. They do not see the connection, they do not see why we do this, why we put these people together, why we connect it to other things.

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NOTES

1. All quotations are from interviews that took place in May 1994 and from many telephone conversations and fax exchanges. Some quotations have been modified to reflect the tone of the conversation rather than the verbatim participation of individuals. Please do not quote without permission.

2. The basic material conditions of the books' production are underwhelming: Sylvere Lotringer, Jim Fleming, and Chris Kraus, as primary editors, are responsible for soliciting manuscripts; although a fair amount of material comes in unsolicited. A team of volunteer laborers—who are mostly FOS (friends of *Semiotext(e)*, or of Sylvere, Chris, and Jim)—do the translation, lay out, and proofreading. Currently, there is no formal institutional support for the production costs, which run about $3,000 per book (depending upon number of pages and the size of the print run). Production cost are recuperated through the sales of the print runs of 3,000 to 5,000 books. The books are distributed through regional distributors and the more radical bookstores across the United States. As Fleming notes, there have been literally hundreds of people who have worked on *Semiotext(e)* projects over the years; some have shared editorial responsibilities.

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Semiotext(e)

#1. *Alternative Semiotics*, 1.1 (1974).
#2. *The Two Saussures*, 1.2 (1974).
#3. *Ego Traps*, 1.3 (1975).
#4. *Saussure's Anagrams*, 2.1 (1975).
#5. *Georges Bataille*, 2.2 (1976).
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#8. *Schizo-Culture*, 3.2 (1978).
#9. *Autonomia*, 3.3 (1980).
    Special Issue: "Loving Boy" (large type), 1980.
#10. *PolySexuality*, 4.1 (1981).
#11. *The German Issue*, 4.2 (1982).
#12. *Oasis*, 4.3
#13. *Semiotext(e) USA*. Eds. Jim Fleming and Peter Lamborn Wilson. (1987) .
#14. *Semiotext(e) SF*. Eds. Rudy Rucker, Robert Anton Wilson, and Peter Lamborn Wilson. (1987).
#15. *Semiotext(e) Architecture*. Ed. Hraztan Zeitlian. (1992).
#16. *Radiotext(e)*, (1994).

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1983
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Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *On the Line.*
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1985
Bolo, P. M. *Bolo.*
Yurich, Sol. *Behold Metatron, The Recording Angel.*

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Muller, Heiner. *Germania.*
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1991
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1993
Wahad, Dhoruba Bin, Mumia Abu-Jamal, and Assata Shakur. *The New Panther Papers.*

No Date
Foucault, Michel. *Interventions.*
Negri, Toni and Mario Tronti. *The Social Factory.*

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Acker, Kathy. *Hannibal Lecter, My Father,* 1991.
Barg, Barbara. *Origin of the Species,* 1992.
Ludd, Deran. *Sick Burn Cut,* 1992.
Mueller, Cookie. *Walking through Clear Water in a Pool Painted Black,* 1990.
Myles, Eileen. *Not Me,* 1991.
Tillman, Lynne. *The Madame Realism Complex,* 1992.
Rattray, David. *How I became One of the Invisible,* 1992.
Rower, Ann. *If You're a Girl,* 1990.

Double Agents Series

Baudrillard, Jean. *Fatal Strategies.*
Clastres, Pierre. *The Archeology of Violence.*
Lotringer, Sylvere, ed. *Collected Interviews of William Burroughs.*
Virilio, Paul. *Aesthetics of Disappearance.*
Virilio, Paul. *The Lost Dimension* (Fall, 1990).