

*“I have my own way  
of doing things.*

How the  
uncompromisingly  
cerebral direction of  
**Zones  
Sensibles**  
is paying off

With the academic publishing sector dominated as it is by university presses and corporate heavyweights, a small tribe of micro-publishers manages to operate on the fringes, uncompromising in their belief that there still is a market for specialised texts and topics. Amongst these, Brussels-based imprint Zones Sensibles stands out as a beacon of independent thinking, its catalogue of releases reading like a roll-call of some of the world's most forward-thinking authors, mirroring founder Alexandre Laumonier's (1975) wide range of interests. Here, in an extended interview, he discusses the publishing house's commitment to editorial design, working exclusively with local suppliers and why he finds it interesting to correlate the geographical provenance of sales with voting numbers in recent French elections.

Writer EMI VERGELS  
Photographer MILES FISCHLER



“I would have never become a book publisher, if publishing was just about selling books to those who expect it.” It’s hard to place a definitive finger on Alexandre Laumonier, founder of Zones Sensibles. In a time of large-scale, corporate publishing houses and institutional university presses, small grassroots alternatives have been popping up since the turn of the century. While the conventional, commercial printing houses are arguably more profit-driven, the independent “alternative” micro-publishers often reject these priorities, taking on a staunchly political, even militant stance. And yet, Alexandre makes a stern point of distinguishing himself from both poles of book publishing. “I’m not a fan of capitalism per se, but I don’t want to fall into this caricatural anti-capitalist, anti-establishment discourse either.” In fact, when pressed to explain how he understands Zones Sensibles’ position within the general publishing industry, he simply replied, “I’ll be honest, I don’t know and I don’t care. I have my own way of doing things.”

After moving to Paris from Nancy, Alexandre was just 22 when he had his first go

at publishing in the form of his music review *Nomad’s Land* in 1997, after dropping out of modern languages studies. This spurred a flurry of activity in the publishing sector, launching the independent press Éditions Kargo and the book series *Terra Cognita*, running several niche departments within already-established printing houses and collectives such as Les Presses du réel and Les Belles Lettres, and co-founding Vies parallèles. Yet, despite having published numerous complex and highly academic texts – Gilles Deleuze, Paul Gilroy, Ira Cohen, Marshall Sahlins and Donna Haraway, just to name a few – alongside music reviews and cultural studies for over two decades, he’s essentially self-taught through personal experience and trial and error.

In 2007, Éditions Kargo went bankrupt. “Living in Paris, I was extremely broke, sleeping on a couch in an office that I shared with a filmmaker. The office itself was part of a sort of business incubator, and our neighbouring office was occupied by a hip-hop music label. One day, I guess one of the guys next door must’ve forgotten to put his joint out properly, because our floor was burnt down. All of my books were ruined, not only from the fire but also the smoke. I spent one night in this burnt office, and resolved to move out of the city, once and for all. Brussels was a prime option, seeing as I knew the city from back when I was living in nearby Lille and had friends there. I liked it, and it’s also affordable – at least compared to Paris. And so in 2007 I packed up my things for Brussels. But this time I was determined to do things ‘properly,’ not only bringing in all that I’d learnt on book publishing and graphic design but also paying close attention to how I print and distribute the books, and what my overall aim was to be,” he recalls. And with that, Zones Sensibles was founded in 2011, with Belgium becoming Alexandre’s new centre of production, working exclusively with local suppliers and services. “It would be hypocritical of me to print books on political ecology 2,000km away from here. Outsourcing certain aspects of the publishing chain would be just as polluting, undermining local economies and, in the end, isn’t necessarily that cost-efficient anyways.” Zones Sensibles’ catalogue perfectly exemplifies Alexandre’s limitless tastes and wide-ranging interests: anthropology, history, ecology, and even graphic design are all covered here within a wide range of geographical locations. It all started with the simple aim of publishing classic texts and landmark publications that were yet to be translated in French. “France has a very strong tradition of anthropology and sociology, ranging from Claude Lévi-Strauss to Philippe Descola, which I started to

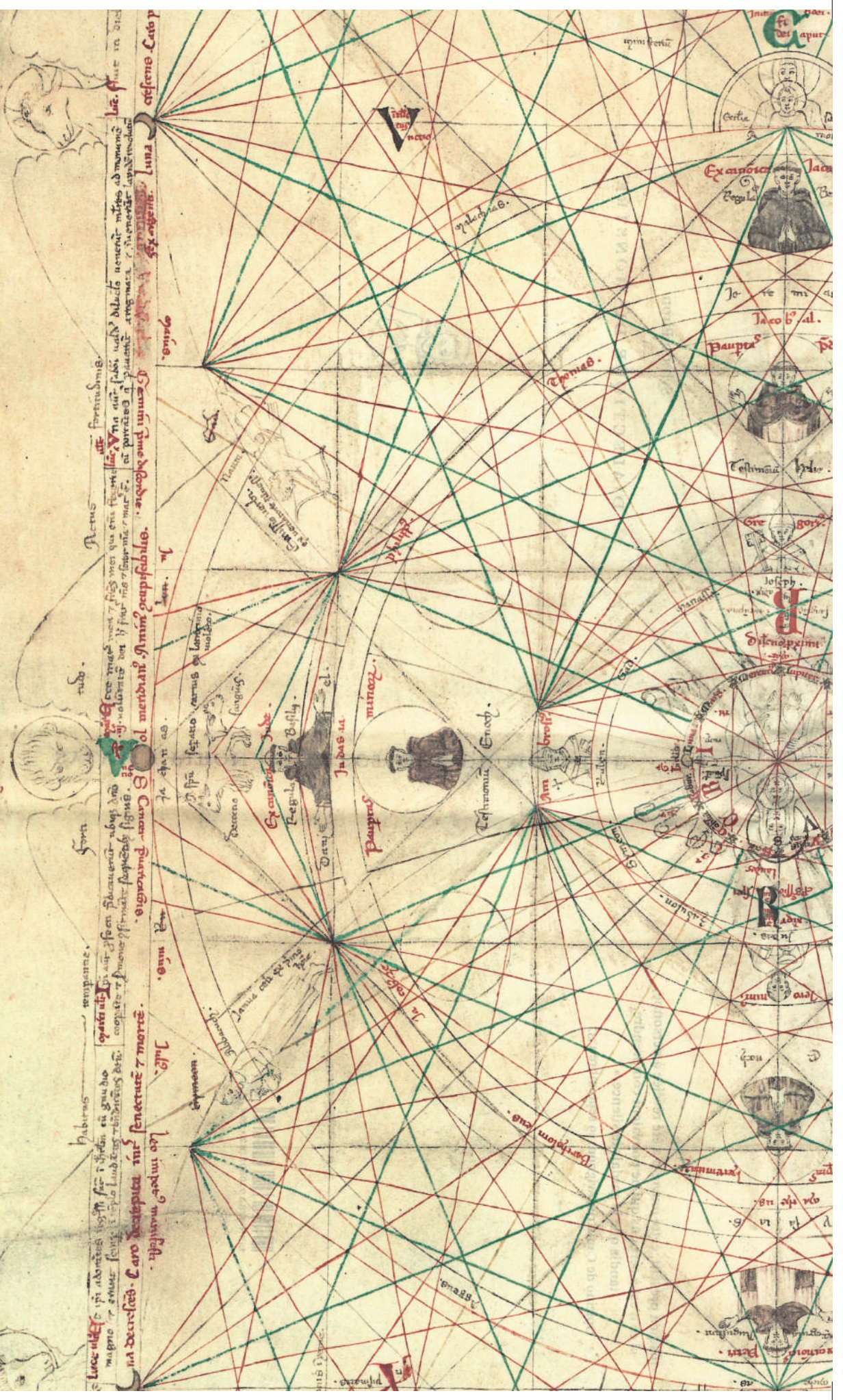


Gregorius. August.

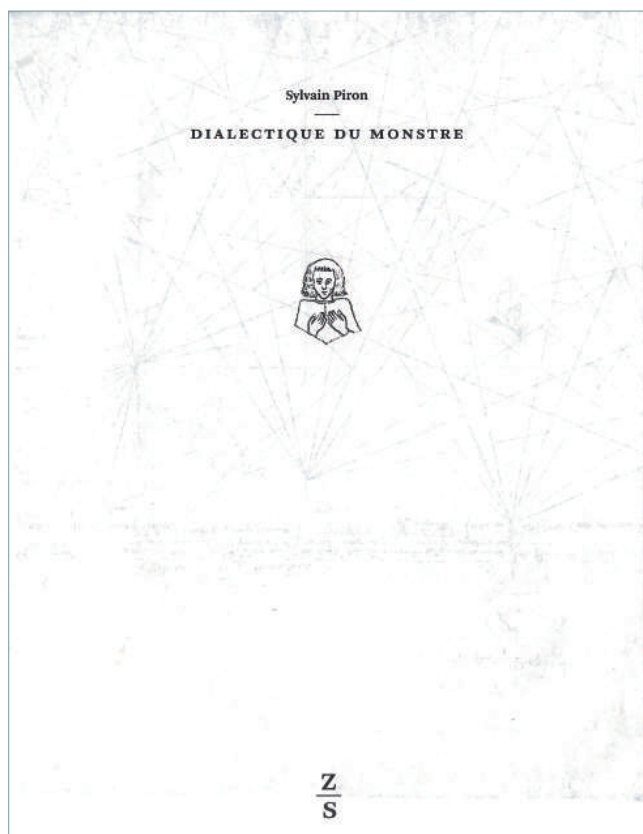
namque dicitur in libro de civitate dei

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August. Raphael.







*“I’m a small publisher, essentially a one-man show. I only published around five books these last few years.”*

get into in the early noughties. Yet it’s also a very small, niche community, unlike that of French historians or philosophers,” Alexandre explains. “And in terms of publishing, I don’t know why, but the big printing houses for social sciences – like Gallimard or Éditions du Seuil – stopped translating books, and also directed their focus more on philosophy and sociology rather than anthropology. It was only later that I started discovering English texts such as Roy Wagner’s classic 1975 text *The Invention of Culture*, which I later translated into French as *L’Invention de la culture* in 2014. French speakers had to wait 40 years before they could read a translated version. And it was a success – we sold over 1,000 copies, which is huge for anthropology. And that was when I decided to focus on anthropology. In fact, Zones Sensibles is one of the very few non-academic French or Belgian publishers to mainly publish

anthropology today,” he continues. A rare alternative in the world of academic publishing, which is largely dominated by university presses and large-scale corporations. A fact that’s increasingly being recognised by the global academic community of social scientists itself, as Alexandre is increasingly receiving manuscript submissions from academics in the hopes of getting their work published in French. Over the years, his catalogue has grown to include original publications too, like medieval scholastic economy specialist Sylvain Piron’s *Dialectique du monstre* (2015), or even Alexandre’s own research on high-frequency trading (HFT). In fact, he envisions that starting in 2018, a third of Zones Sensibles’ publications will be made up of original manuscripts, commissioned by Alexandre himself, alongside the usual French translations.

Yet despite his forward-thinking ambitions, he also remains realistic and grounded. “I’m a small publisher, essentially a one-man show. I only published around five books these last few years, and it’s only because things have been going well that I’ve decided to increase it to eight this year,” he explains. And despite Zones Sensibles’ recent success – notably thanks to Canada-based anthropologist Eduardo Kohn’s landmark text *Comment pensent les forêts*’ (2017) huge popularity and its consequent reprints – he remains immensely humble about his wins and ambitions. Reluctant to even claim a career in publishing despite two decades in the trade (“By all means, my life’s aim isn’t to end up the main editor of social science books for Gallimard!”), Alexandre adheres to a simple life of working on what he likes, as he likes. Of course, he not only seeks to collaborate with the best translators, distributors, printers or binders, but also appreciates the importance of upholding friendly working relationships and is pleased to be able to call many of his partners and providers his friends. That being said, maintaining his independence is paramount – which explains why Zones Sensibles is registered as a non-profit organisation. “Sure, I could have built a proper firm, but I don’t want to have to deal with shareholders who might compromise my work.” He pauses. “If for whatever reason Zones Sensibles were to come to an end tomorrow, I wouldn’t want the rights of the books to fall under external shareholders.” Above and beyond bringing pertinent content and research to the French-speaking world, Alexandre also puts a lot of attention into his book’s design aesthetics in the belief that, in the end, they too are products, objects in themselves. Perhaps the most famous example of this is the previously mentioned *Dialectique du*

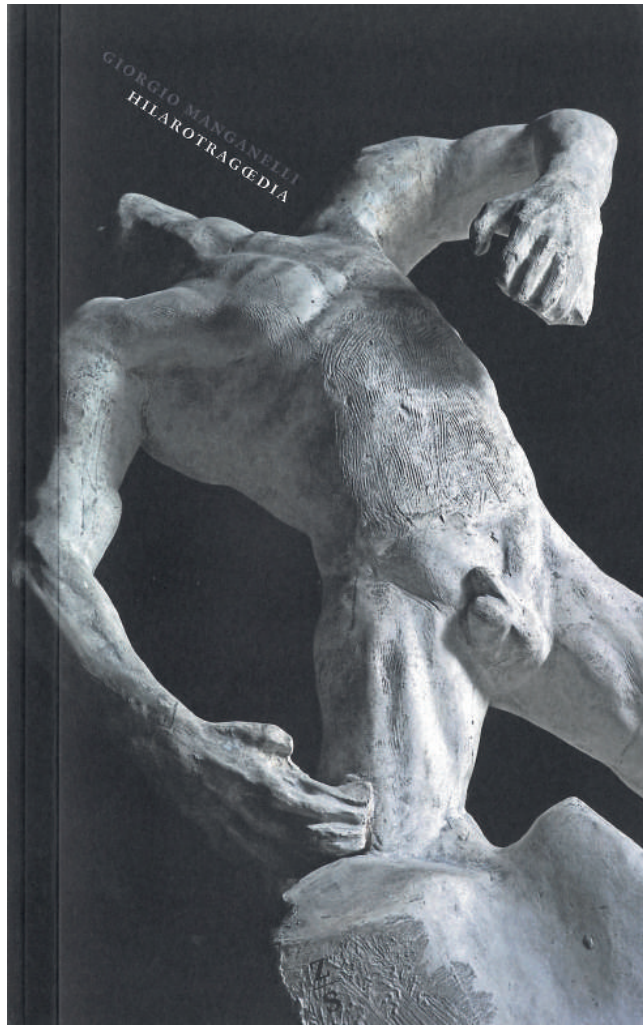
↑  
Sylvain Piron  
*Dialectique du monstre* (cover)  
2015

↙  
Sylvain Piron  
*Dialectique du monstre* (inside cover detail)  
2015

*monstre: Enquête sur Opicino de Canistris*, which bagged two design awards – the Best Dutch Book Designs 2015, and Grand-Prix des Rendez-vous de l'histoire de Blois 2016 – precisely due to the strength of its cover. A white, simple jacket cover made out of scritta bible-paper with a self-portrait of Opicino, it unfolds into a large-scale reproduction of one of his maps.

Truth is, academic literature tends to be so content-driven that little thought is given to the overall look or design of the product. Stale books with little to no imagination, as operated under the mantra, “It’s what’s inside that counts.” And even that often gets overlooked, as Alexandre laments: “The first edition publication of *How Forests Think* (2013) – the original manuscript for *Zones Sensibles’ Comment pensent les forêts* – came with some terrible, monochrome reproductions of Eduardo’s Kodak fieldwork photographs from the Amazon, mostly in colour. When I started working on the translated edition, I got in touch with him myself and received all the pictures he took. They were so beautiful, that I wanted to keep them as they were and make sure they were done justice.” Alexandre’s attention to not only the visual details but also the nature of the content and product in its entirety is made clear by certain design choices he takes. For instance, one of *Zones Sensibles’* most recent publications is *Attentats-suicides: Questions anthropologiques* (2018), a translation of Talal Asad’s provocative post-9/11 text *On Suicide Bombing* (2007). Here, he decided to keep the content extremely simple, with a mere black and white typeface, due to the sensitive nature of its topics. As a publisher with an eye for design, Alexandre is obviously interested in the overall look of his products – yet as an editor, he also knows how to respect the nature of each and every book’s content in its own right.

Again, Alexandre never received any official training in design: “My parents were both teachers, so I grew up with the first Macintoshes. By the time I was 14, I was already coding and playing around with different software. So when I quit my studies in Paris and decided to try my hand at publishing, I knew I wanted to incorporate graphic design in my work too. It quickly became clear though that I still had a lot to learn and decided to improve myself by reading books on graphic design and its history,” he recalls. In fact, Alexandre is reluctant to call himself a graphic designer at all, despite his former role as *Art Press’* art director, in founding his own studio The Theatre of Operations, or as a graphic design teacher on the side. “My interests in graphic design are limited to typography, editorial



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layouts and the likes. I don’t even know how to use Photoshop! If I quit book publishing one day, I would quit graphic design too – it’s a tool for me to publish books, if you will.”

*Zones Sensibles’* actual audience is undiscernible, for the simple reason that *Zones Sensibles’* catalogue is directly distributed to a set list of bookstores. So despite being able to follow the bookstores’ sales through a distribution monitor, it’s unclear who’s actually buying the books. One thing that can be known for sure is that 95% of sales are based

in France, with only a dozen or so Belgium-based bookshops serving as distribution points. Nothing personal, as Alexandre explains: “Most of my sales are in France because that’s where the francophone market is. Belgium is small and has two linguistic communities – that obviously has an impact.” It’s evident though that the academic community – from lecturers and researchers to students – are an obvious readership. What’s more, he’s also taking time to use the little information he does have to make other conclusions. Indeed, he’s been working on maps which explore the relationship between the geographical spread of Zones Sensibles’ sales, and voting results from the recent presidential elections in France. “You can see that in areas that predominantly voted for the Front National, I’ve barely sold any books. You could say it’s obvious – but you have to do the research first before you can make any grand statements,” he hums. A clear sign of Alexandre’s ever-inquisitive and restless mind, always on the hunt for connections and correlations.

That being said, he does remain confident that at least some of his books have reached a more general audience: “If you sell 6,000 copies of an anthropological book, you can be sure that it’s gone beyond the small world of anthropologists.” Which is precisely where the importance of Zones Sensibles’ product aesthetics and graphic design comes into play – the simple fact of making something look appealing can go a long way, far beyond any fancy sales or marketing strategy, as Alexandre explains that he does little to none of such. The social sciences have been increasingly internally criticised for its exclusive nature, niche language and even superiority complex. To put it simply, the recent public anthropology and sociology debates argue that academic research and content are “held hostage” by its small-knit community, when really it should be made accessible to everyone, and introduced into the public arena and everyday discourse. Something Alexandre identifies his work with: “Sometimes you have these extremely complex and technical issues in anthropology, as was the case with Wagner’s *L’Invention de la culture*. And yet we still sold 1,000 copies! That many copies for an already well-known book within French-speaking academic circles implies that a lot of the buyers must be from *outside* of these circles. If someone enters a bookshop looking to buy some new literature, comes across my books and buys it simply because they like the cover and it’s at an affordable price, I win. We win. That’s the only thing that interests me, that’s what’s so fun about printing.”

He pauses. “I sometimes hear complaints from within the industry that nobody reads anymore, that book sales are suffering. But I don’t have that problem. Maybe we just need to rethink the way we publish books?”

Despite his many successes, Alexandre is also extremely forthcoming about his shortcomings and occasional failures. Case in point, some publications are resolutely too niche, too complex and “out there” to be able to break through into the general audience, regardless of how strong the design or cover was. And, with that in mind, he’s planning on making all of Zones Sensibles’ sales records public this May, alongside the aforementioned sales maps, in a bid to better inform the public on the realities of book publishing, especially in regards to small, independent presses. This is also meant to coincide with Zones Sensibles’ unofficial series on economy, which is set to be launched in May and includes three publications in 2018: Sylvain Piron’s *L’Occupation du monde*, followed by theological law specialist Wim Decock’s *Le marché du mérite: Penser l’économie et le droit avec Leonardus Lessius* as well as Alexandre’s HFT sequel 4/3, which was originally part of his own anthropological PhD research. “I think it’s important to discuss economy without economists,” Alexandre notes, pointedly.

These upcoming publications couldn’t be coming at a more optimal time. A decade on from the 2007 global financial crisis, and amidst a flurry of political turmoil with people seemingly either becoming completely disillusioned by politics or turning to the extreme Left or Right, it’s becoming increasingly apparent that we’re “currently heading towards a wall,” as Alexandre puts it. “The question for me is, are we going to break down this wall violently, or softly, little by little? Clearly, it’s in our best interest to understand what’s going on. And I think we’re at a crucial point in history, where we’re beginning to realise this – it’s happening all around us, we can’t ignore it anymore. The times to come are going to be very trying. If we want to change the economy, we need to start by changing how we talk about economy, by studying the fundamental and ambivalent roots of what economists call economy.”

↖  
Giorgio Manganelli  
*Hilarotragœdia*  
2017

↘ ZONES SENSIBLES’ next publication is Sylvain Piron’s *L’Occupation du monde*, which comes out this May with a book launch in the presence of the author on 15<sup>th</sup> June at Brussels bookshop Par chemins.  
∞ [zones-sensibles.org](http://zones-sensibles.org)





Published 10 years ago, in our second edition (March-April 2008), this was an idea that our then designers DELPHINE DUPONT, PIERRE SMEETS and DAMIEN ARESTA came up with and which ended up making quite a few appearances in editions to come. We'd call it the Post-it page.