

“Adrenaline Pulses in the Cables of Reality”: A Brief Introduction to Italy’s Connettivisti Collective

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A number of years ago I came across a collective of brainy, articulate young sf writers called the *Connettivisti*, members of a group founded in 2004 called *Connettivismo*. It was their 2006 manifesto, elegantly presented on their website without flash or fuss, that was my entry into their fascinating world. Their ten-point statement began with the same verb the Futurists used in their opening point: *cantare* (Fig. 1).¹ While the Futurists wished to sing of “l’amor del pericolo, l’abitudine all’energia e alla temerità” [the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness²]; the *connettivisti* will sing of “la resurrezione dell’anima consumata nella tecnologia” [the resurrection of souls through technology³]. While the Futurists’ second point spoke of “il coraggio, l’audacia, la ribellione” [courage, audacity, and revolt] as the core elements of their poetry; the *Connettivisti* claim a “deraggiamento dei sensi, le corrispondenze analogiche e la rottura del controllo” [sensory derangement, analogic correspondences, breach of control] as the “strumenti fondamentali” [main instruments] in their quest. A brief introduction to the manifesto states:

Siamo i Custodi della Percezione, Guardiani degli Angeli Caduti in Fiamme dal Cielo, Lupi Siderali. Un gruppo di liberi sognatori indipendenti. Viviamo nel cyberspazio, siamo dappertutto. Non conosciamo frontiere.

[We are the Keepers of Perception, Guardians of Fallen Angels, Wolves of the Stars. A collective of free, independent dreamers. We live in cyberspace, we are everywhere. We know no frontiers...].

Upon first reading, Giordano Bruno, Galileo, Dante, Milton, and Aldous Huxley flashed through my mind; as did science fiction writers such as Philip K. Dick, Samuel Delany, Ursula Le Guin, J.G. Ballard; the noir and the gothic; and the wolf as symbol of Rome, the State, covetousness, and as the animal tamed by Saint Francis. These were not neo-Futurists.

The manifesto’s first point continues, “La notte, il sogno, la visione e la connessione. E tutto ciò che sublima le nostre anime a un ordine superiore di conoscenza” [Night, dream, vision, and connection – and everything that elevates our souls to a higher order of consciousness]. This collective is a curious admixture of mysticism (eastern and western), cyberpunk and New Wave SF sensibilities, avant-garde experimentation, interest in contemporary physics, environmentalism, classical philosophy, epistemology, cognitive science, bioethics, theories of the post/transhuman, sound, music, art, sexuality, and a quiet but earnest celebration of pop culture. Alessandro Bavari’s photo montage, included in the collective’s magazine, *NeXT*, weaves many of these inclinations into a single work (Fig. 2).

Like a number of Italy’s recent, self-abnegating literary collectives (Luther Blissett, Wu Ming, and Kai Zen), the *Connettivisti* worked often, at the beginning, under *noms de plume* and seemed to be inclined toward an erasure-of-self and the individual, as they state in Point 8, “Non abbiamo nomi. Il nostro vero nome è un sussurro nel buio, un rumore nascosto nella radiazione di fondo dell’universo, un segnale immerso nel rumore bianco della materia. Il nostro nome vaga libero nella notte” [We have no names. Our true names are whispers in the dark, a meaning hidden

in the cosmic background radiation, a signal interleaved in the white noise of matter. Our names wander free through the night]. A few of these pennames can be seen in their magazine, *NeXT: X* (Giovanni De Matteo); **Kremo** (Gianluca Cremoni Baroncini); **Zoon** (Sandro Battisti); **Pykmil** (Marco Milani) (Fig. 3).

For the most part, however, they do use their real names for their published novels and short stories, and occasionally write collaboratively (see the stories in *The Origins* of 2015⁴). And unlike Wu Ming, they celebrate the individual, and the unique connections each individual finds/creates to others, ideas, and the world around us. Further complicating the issue of their status as connected-individual-selves is how the manifesto acknowledges that its members are often lone wolves, “quelli che camminano da soli per strada, quelli sospesi tra l'illusione del mondo virtuale e l'inganno del mondo reale” [We are the ones who walk alone down the street, suspended between the illusion of the virtual and the deception of the real] (Point 7). They intentionally oscillate, it appears, between negation of the first person *io* [I] and the importance of the *io* in the web of human consciousness, communication, and survival. Between the solitary and the group. Between nothingness and everythingness, as their concluding line predictively emphasizes, “Noi saremo tutto” [We shall be all] (Fig. 4).

Similar to their zine, their website is called *NeXT Station*. These “nexts” not only reference the idea of the future (or, as Leon Battista Alberti would put it 600 years earlier, “quid tum?” [What’s next?]), and the computer and software company founded in 1985 by Steve Jobs, NeXT (the inspiration for their capitalization of XT), after he was forced out of Apple,⁵ but science fiction author A. E. van Vogt’s neologism, *Nexialism*: a term he coined for a generalist, interdisciplinary kind of science, and best known from his 1950 novel *Voyage of the Space Beagle*. This Italian science fiction collective has, in fact, affiliated itself with powerful visionaries. Connettivismo’s platform clearly invokes inter-disciplinarity, inter-genre-arity, inter-activity, collaboration, and a celebration of *panta rei* and binaries. They consciously toggle between dualities: self and other; human and machine; order and chaos; heterogeneity and unity; edges and nodes; earth and universe; sleep and waking; reader and writer; spiritualism and materialism; immanent and transcendent; continuity and discontinuity; real and not-real; and solitude and connection.

Fascinated by what I saw in their manifesto and on their website, I began reading their work, talking with them online, and, in 2013, in person. At a science fiction convention in Bellaria, Italy, called Italcon, I interviewed five Connettivisti: two of the three founding members (Giovanni De Matteo and Sandro Battisti), and three later arrivals (Gianluca Cremoni Baroncini, Francesco Verso, and Giovanni Agnoloni). I learned that everything started with an early version of the website *Club G.Ho.S.T.* in the early 2000s, where Sandro Battisti and Marco Milani published their works. Giovanni De Matteo published his first story there, and Battisti then invited him to contribute work to his personal blog, Cybergoth (on the Italian platform Splinder, now defunct). Within a year or so, De Matteo launched his blog—Junction (also on Splinder) to offer a place for the growing collective of writers and artists with a shared vision of what science fiction could be. Milani also curated a site called Dom-mistic-on. It was on Cybergoth, Junction, and Dom-mistic-on (now Domist.net) that Connettivist ideas began forming. In 2003, De Matteo wrote the first version of the *Manifesto del Connettivismo*, the second and final version in 2005, and by 2006 the three founders inaugurated their website Next-Station. The collective’s magazine, *NeXT*, started in 2005, offers between fifty to a hundred pages per issue. Each issue is filled with columns on current science and technology, a rich poetry section, a narrative section, a visual art section, a list of Connettivist happenings (ranging from conferences, readings, podcasts, short films, music

performances, etc.). They published eighteen issues, ending the run in 2012 with the aptly titled theme of “I, Next” (evoking Asimov’s *I, Robot*). During these years, they also published an eighty-page issue in English, *NeXT International* (2009), which was co-edited by De Matteo and the Americanist scholar Salvatore Proietti; and in 2011, *NeXT* won Italy’s fanzine prize (Premio Italia).⁶

Within a few years of its founding, a number of excellent, prolific writers joined the collective, three of whom I met in 2013: the writer, musician, editor, and publisher Gianluca Cremoni Baroncini (a.k.a. Kremo or Lukha B. Kremo); writer, editor, and publisher Francesco Verso; and writer and literary translator Giovanni Agnoloni (**Kosmos**). Writer Marco Moretti (**Antare666**), who I did not meet, joined later, as did the writers and editors Alex Tonelli (**Logos**), Domenico Mastropasqua (**7di9**), Mario Gazzola (**Mark Assente** and **Black M**), and Roberto Furlani (**Ro** and **p**) and a number of other writers and artists. Tonelli organized the first NeXT convention (NeXTcon) in 2007 in Vimercate (near Monza), and became a regular columnist for *NeXT* starting Issue 11 on the topic of “Hermeticism/Hermeneutics.” In the interview in Bellaria, I could see they all had great respect for one another. At one point, someone said that Giovanni De Matteo was the collective’s brain. Clearly improvising, they decided unanimously that Kremo was the heart; Sandro the wings; Francesco the legs; and Marco Milani the skin. In speaking recently with Tonelli, Gazzola, and Moretti about this “Connettivist body,” Tonelli thought he would be the emotions, Gazzola the ear, and Moretti the liver, “inflamed, full of toxins and gall, the center of every irrational passion.”⁷ Giovanni Agnoloni I imagine as the spirit, and when I proposed this to him, he readily agreed.

Although only around thirty members at their height (and what a “member” is, is not entirely clear, as the collective is intentionally informal, open, and fluid), and down to about twenty now, their Facebook page shows a bit over two-hundred Connettivist-adjacent authors, artists, musicians, playwrights, film makers, journalists, publishers, scholars, and readers—people they call “compagni di strada” [fellow travelers]. While no women were among the early members of the group (and given the highly sexualized imagery in much of the artwork included in *NeXT*, especially in the early issues, it is not a surprise), they have worked to welcome them, an effort spearheaded by Proietti in his essay for the 2017 anthology *Nuove eterotopie: L’antologia definitiva del Connettivismo*.⁸ As of now, about 25% of the *compagni* are women. A few of these writers and artists are Ksenja Laginja, Linda De Santi, Laura Silvestri, Franci Conforti, Valeria Barbera, Federica Leonardi, Irene Drago (a.k.a. Mariasilvia Iovine), and the recently deceased Francesca Fichera, who was the only woman writer in *Nuove Eterotopie*. By 2018, however, there were nine women (out of seventeenth authors) in the award-winning anthology *NeXT – Stream: Visioni di realtà contigue* (Alessandra Cristallini, Francesca Fichera, Franci Conforti, Giulia Abbate, Irene Drago, Ksenja Laginja, Laura Silvestri, Linda De Santi, and Valeria Barbera) and five out of twenty-three in 2019 in *La prima frontiera* (Federica Leonardi, Giovanna Repetto, Irene Drago, Ksenja Laginja, and Linda De Santi). Few of the women with whom I have spoken call themselves *connettiviste*, but rather, *compagne di strada*. Laginja, an artist (designer of the mysticism-inspired cover of *Nuove eterotopie*, Fig. 7) and writer, does consider herself part of the movement, but also outside of it. She, like all the members (male and female) with whom I have spoken, do not see the collective as a dogmatic set of constraints, but rather as an invitation to be ever-exploring, ever-expanding in all directions, ever-hybrid, and ever-seeking how things connect. Much of the Connettivist work is about highlighting interstices—the glue, fibers, tissues, links that hold seemingly disparate ideas/things/people closer together than we think.

Among the *compagni di strada*, there are also internationally renowned SF authors, such as Bruce Sterling (who wrote a novella for their anthology *Nuove eterotopie* and a story for their anthology *La prima frontiera*, as well as attended a NeXTfest panel in Rome in 2012 and posted the manifesto on his blog), Ian Watson (who published a short story in their 2016 *Hai trovato orgasmi nel collettore quantico*), and some of the best-known SF writers in Italy today—Valerio Evangelisti, Luca Masali, Dario Tonani, Vittorio Catani, Alberto Cola, and the late Sergio Altieri. A number of cultural critics and scholars have found this collective to be of interest, such as the late Giuseppe Lippi, editor of the science fiction series *Urania* at Mondadori (from 1990 to 2018), and the above-mentioned Salvatore Proietti. The largest publishers of SF in Italy today, Mondadori and Delos, have not only distributed a good number of their novels and anthologies, but have awarded them prizes. A sampling of these awards is below (Figs. 8-11).

The Connettivist anthologies, novels, and collections of poetry, many of which have been published by Kremo's Kipple Officina Libraria under the imprint Avatär (Genova), have a small print distribution, but do sell electronic and print versions in the hundreds. These books are well-edited with good production values, and they are also well-promoted within the Italian SF community. Here are a few (Fig. 12). The Connettivists have eclectic, far-ranging interests. Besides the inspirations already mentioned, their roots are in artistic, spiritual, and intellectual movements as diverse as Fluxus, Surrealism, Hermeticism, Transhumanism; and in scientific theories such as Karl Pribram and David Bohm's Holonomic Brain, Ray Kurzweil's technological singularity, Nick Bostrom's transhumanism, Verner Vinge's focus on the augmentations of speed in the world, String Theory, Complexity Theory, Chaos Theory, Quantum Mechanics, and various strains of posthumanism. Many of their themes intersect with the esoteric, some with the erotic, the noir, and horror. Their influences and models from SF, modernism, and postmodernism run the gamut. The poem "Proprietà emergenti" [Emergent Properties] by Marco Moretti offers a glimpse into the many avenues they travel:

*Da fibre di stringhe supercosmiche
Da quasar più antiche della nascita del tempo
Sono stato scagliato nel reame del divenire
Prigioniero della crudele gravità
Languo nell'agonia di una profondità cristallina
Circondato da onde oscure di materiale impalpabile
All'improvviso ascendo a una nuova entelechia
Rinasco in forma di organismo cibernetico
Terroro criogenico, metallo spiritual
Sovrasto le urla dell'universo moribondo
Sfreccio libero tra intermundia d'orrore.⁹*

From supercosmic string fibers
From quasars older than the birth of time
I have been flung into the realm of becoming
Prisoner of cruel gravity
Listless in the agony of a crystalline depth
Encircled by obscure waves of impalpable material
Suddenly I ascend to a new entelechy
I am reborn in the form of a cybernetic organism
Cryogenic terror, spiritual metal
Above the cries of the dying universe
I hurtle freely between multiple spaces between worlds.

As they celebrate the potentials of human intellectual, spiritual, and physical enhancements and transcendental possibilities, they offer critiques of society ranging from issues around power structures, inequity, and fear of the other. Their politics are on the left, at times quite far left of center, and at times even approaching the anarchic. While the majority of Italian science fiction since the 1950s has been written by left-leaning authors, there has been some widely circulated ultra-right-wing science fiction produced in Italy in the last few decades, such as the novels of Mario Farneti. The Connettivisti stand out clearly against this trend. Kremo is particularly politically engaged, as can be seen in his 2012 novel *Trans-Human Express* and his Situationist artistic creation of a micronation (The Neorepubblica Kaotica di Torriglia) (Fig. 13).

Given all this heterodoxy and erudition, it is not surprising that not all Italian science fiction readers are fans of Connettivismo. Although the Italian SF world is small, it is active and even rabid, and the Connettivisti have been labeled by some as pretentious, or as elitist obfuscators whose vision is not clear enough to merit an “-ism.” Harsh critique, but as Francesco Verso said, the Connettivisti are inductive, bottom up, or rather, “inverse strip-teasers”: piling layer upon layer of imagery, questions, investigations, *connections* in order to aggregate, jostle perception, implode the mind, and ultimately reach understanding of the human condition, humanity’s purpose and its future.¹⁰ Not light, “escapist” science fiction, to be sure.

That said, a careful reader of their Manifesto and their literary and artistic production as a whole will see that they are ideologically opposed to elitism and obfuscation. Giovanni De Matteo wrote an eloquent defense of Connettivismo’s openness and focus on expansion, inclusion, and connectivity in his essay “La guida galattica per non-Connettivisti” [The Galactic Guide for Non-Connettivists]¹¹ which was published on the largest science fiction website in Italy (fantascienza.com). In a 2013 interview entitled “Come scrivere storie connettiviste” [How to Write Connettivist Stories], Sandro Battisti explains that the main requirements are vertiginous flights of the imagination, and an openness to possibilities and limitlessness.¹² From anarchy and chaos, they believe, emerges harmony and order.

Their goal, as stated in Point 3 of the Manifesto, is to “scavare a fondo nelle carni dell’universo, penetrare sotto l’epidermide del mondo e raggiungerne il midollo pulsante” [dig deep into the flesh of the universe, under the skin of the world, and reach its pulsating marrow], and subsequently to “infect” others through a “virus” of “la parola, l’immagine e l’equazione” [words, images, and equations] that describe what truths they find there. The “mistero dell’universo,” as they say in Point 4, is like the hologram, “inafferrabile e indistruttibile” [ungraspable and indestructible]. As all our perceptions of the universe and its vicissitudes are subject to indeterminacy, they attempt (Point 6) to listen carefully to “la voce dei morti e la musica che emerge da tutte le cose del mondo” [the voice of the dead and the music that emerges from all things on the world].

The final point of the Manifesto, like that of the Futurists, sings again, but of

...le strade deserte della notte, i monumenti congelati nel silenzio, le luci al neon della metropolitana, le periferie spettrali, i cimiteri di campagna, i reperti dell’archeologia postindustriale, le autostrade abbandonate, le città rase al suolo dai bombardamenti, le strade dei briganti, la morbida geometria dei corpi, il silenzio attinico di stanze d’albergo abbandonate, la carica sensuale della promiscuità tecnologica, il caos, le stelle, i pianeti deserti, le sonde lanciate verso la notte, la musica radiante di quasar morte, la tenebra metafisica di un orizzonte degli eventi, la connessione neurale. Il respiro della notte, il ruggito delle *novae* e i sospiri di stanze che deformano la nostra comprensione dei sogni.

[...deserted nighttime streets, monuments frozen in silence, neon subway lights, spooky outskirts, rural cemeteries, post-industrial archaeologies, lost highways, bombed-out cities, brigands' trails, soft geometries of bodies, the actinic silence of abandoned hotel rooms, promiscuous technologies; of chaos, stars, desolate planets, space probes launched toward the night, the music of dead quasars, the metaphysical darkness of event horizons, neural links; of the breath of night, the roaring of nova suns, and the sighs of rooms that deform our comprehension of dreams.]

The closing words of the manifesto offer a final insight into who these writers see themselves to be: “antenne puntate nel vuoto, variabili impazzite, violini male accordati, cronoscopi fuori fuoco” [antennae aimed into the void, crazed variables, badly-tuned violins, out-of-sync chronoscopes]. Their identification with guardians of fallen angels, lone wolves of the stars, and adrenaline pulses in the cables of reality becomes more clear (Fig. 14). They are champions of the maverick, out-of-the-box, shadow side, and the “other” as means to reach harmony, truth, unity, and understanding. The last line in the manifesto says that they are living “nella connessione” and are “protesi verso il futuro” [in connection/connectively ... reaching toward the future] in order to become everything, a node emanating from and part of the Kabbalist sephirot tree (see Fig. 4) in which the Divine reveals Itself and creates the various levels of reality.

The Connettivisti are erudite, eloquent, powerful visionaries blazing paths into higher orders of consciousness, welcoming those willing to join the posthuman. In this time of global crises, and globalism, their work shows the value of making meaningful connections within the chaos of the physical, and metaphysical, worlds.

Images

Permissions

Photograph: Antonini, Annalisa. Untitled. *NeXT*, vol. 10, 2008. 33.

Photograph: Bavari, Alessandro. "Le Visioni di Lot: La Porta di Minosse," 2011. *NeXT*, no. 17, 2012. 25.

Poem: Moretti, Marco. "Proprietà emergenti." *Concetti spaziali, oltre. Silloge connettivista*. Edited by Alex Tonelli. Kipple Officina Libraria, 2010. 102.

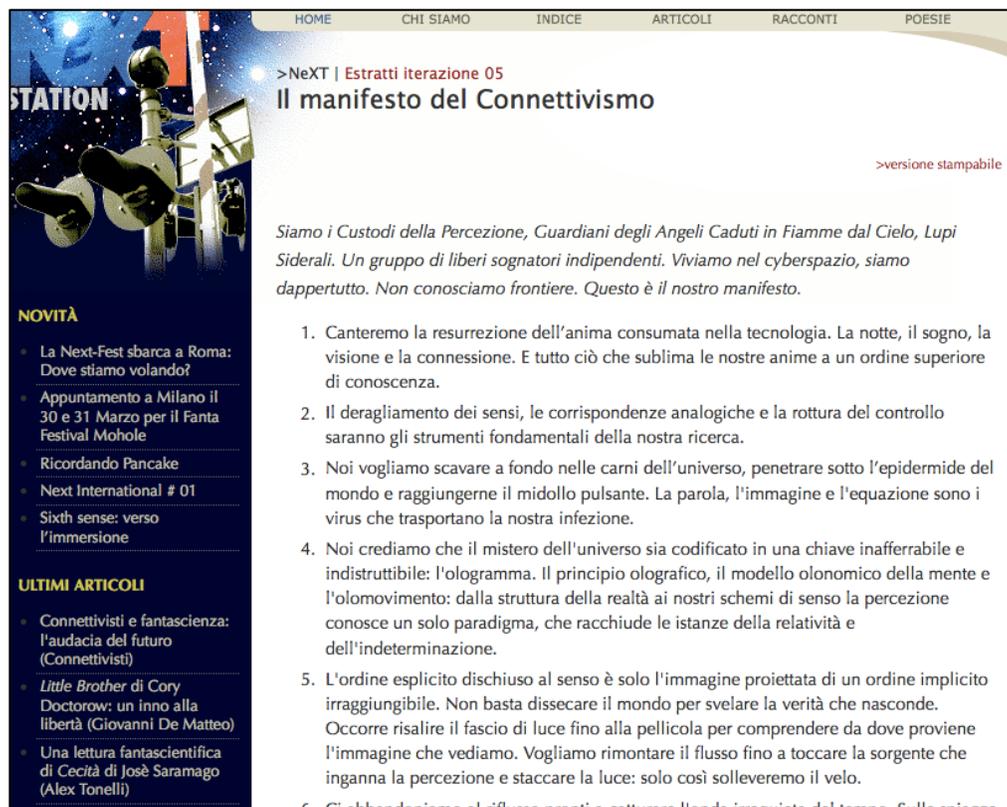


Fig. 1: *Il manifesto del Connettivismo*, excerpt. The whole manifesto can be found at *NeXT Station* (online), along with a full English translation.



Fig. 4: Figure 3: *NeXT*, no. 8. 2007. 8; cover of *The Origins*, an anthology edited by Battisti, De Matteo, Milani, and Kremo (2014). Note the Kabbalist sephiroth tree in both images.



Fig. 5: *From left*: Sandro Battisti, Mario Gazzola, Gianluca Cremoni Baroncini, Alex Tonelli, Marco Moretti, Domenico Mastropasqua. Usmate Velate (Monza-Brianza), 2007. With permission.



Fig. 6: *From left*, Giovanni De Matteo, Marco Moretti, Sandro Battisti, Francesco Verso, Gianluca Cremoni Baroncini, Giovanni Agnoloni. Missing, Marco Milani. Milan, 2011. With permission.

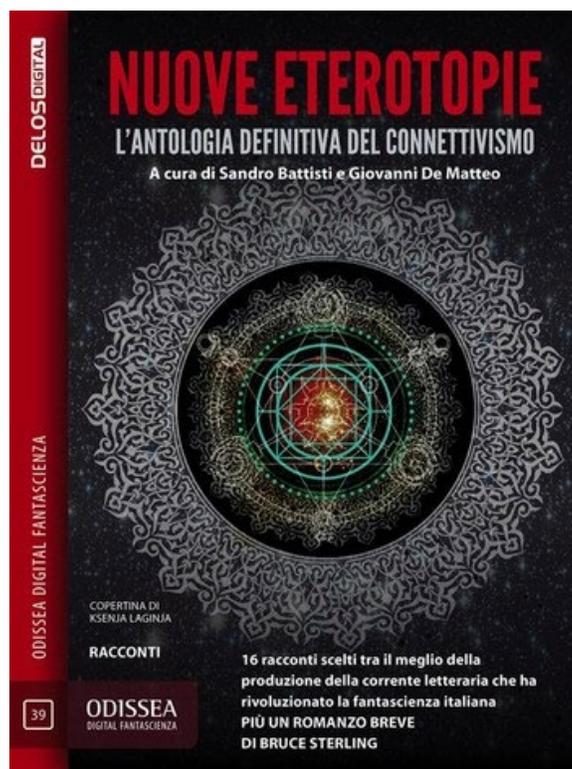


Fig. 7: Ksenja Laginja's cover for *Nuove eterotopie* (Delos, 2017).



Fig. 8: Giovanni De Matteo won the Premio Robot for his novelette, *Viaggio ai confini della notte* in 2005; Mondadori's Premio Urania for his *Sezione π^2* in 2006, and Deepcon's Premio Cassiopea in 2016 for *Corpi Spenti*.



Fig. 9: Lukha B. Kreomo (Baroncini)'s *Pulphagus®: Fango dei cieli* won Mondadori's 2016 Premio Urania, the World SF Association's Premio Vegetti, and the Premio Cassiopea; and the Premio Robot for his short story "Invertito" in 2018.



Fig. 10: Francesco Verso won the Premio Urania for *E-Doll* in 2008; Delos Book's Premio Odissea, Deepcon's Premio Cassiopea, and Italcon's Premio Italia for *Livido* in 2013.



Fig. 11: Sandro Battisti and Francesco Verso won Mondadori's Premio Urania for *Il sangue* (*Bloodbusters*, Verso) e *L'impero* (*L'impero restaurato*, Battisti, 2014); and Giulia Abbate and Lukha B. Kremo (Baroncini) won Italcon's Premio Italia for best anthology in 2019 for *NeXT-Stream: Visioni di realtà contingue*.



Fig. 12: A few publications of Connettivist writing by Kipple Officina Libraria. See the bibliography for full references.



Fig. 13: Kremo's (Baroncini) "mail art" passport for the micronation Neorepubblica Kaotica di Torrighia (2004). With permission.



Fig. 1: Fig. 14: Photo by Annalisa Antonini, *NeXT*, no. 10, 2008. 33. With permission.

¹ The first incarnation of the manifesto had thirteen points, as can be seen in the collective's magazine, *NeXT* 0 (2005), v-vii. The new manifesto begins with *NeXT* 5 (2006) and is also printed at the beginning of the next two issues (issues 6 and 7).

² All translations of the “Futurist Manifesto” by Robert Brain, R.W. Flint, J.C. Higgitt, and Caroline Tisdall in Umbro Apollonio, ed., *Documents of 20th Century Art: Futurist Manifestos* (New York: Viking Press, 1973).

³ All translations of the “Connettivist Manifesto” are mine in collaboration with Giovanni De Matteo and Salvatore Proietti (February 23, 2014), available on next-station.org.

⁴ Sandro Battisti, Giovanni De Matteo, Marco Milani, and Lukha B. Kremo, ed. *The Origins* (Genova: Kipple Officina Libraria, 2014).

⁵ The “NeXT” also was inspired by Jobs’s object-oriented, multitasking UNIX-based operating system, NextStep. The NeXT computer was the world’s first web server and ran the world’s first web browser in 1990. See also George Siemens’s digital learning network theory, “Connectivism: A Learning Theory for the Digital Age,” *elearnspace* (December 12, 2004).

⁶ Italcon is a fan con that has been running since 1972, with prizes that are member-voted, like the Hugo Awards at Worldcon.

⁷ Personal communications with author, July 2020.

⁸ See Salvatore Proietti, “Introduzione alla prossima fantascienza,” *Nuove eterotopie: L’antologia definitiva del Connettivismo*, ed. Sandro Battisti and Giovanni De Matteo (Milan: Delos Books, 2017): pp. 331-334.

⁹ Marco Moretti, “Proprietà emergenti,” *Concetti spaziali, oltre. Silloge connettivista*, ed. Alex Tonelli (Genova: Kipple, 2010), p. 102. Poem published with permission of Marco Moretti. Translation mine.

¹⁰ Francesco Verso, in conversation with author, May 2013.

¹¹ Giovanni De Matteo, “La guida galattica per non-connettivisti,” October 30, 2012, *Fantascienza.com*, online.

¹² Battisti interviewed by Daniele Imperi on *Penna blu.it* January 16, 2013.

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