

Challenging Mainstream Art

Artists' Magazines and the Production of Art

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Towards the end of the 1960s the dematerialized forms of conceptual art transformed the modes of art production. The advent of art works which could be printed and reproduced in the pages of magazines changed the nature of these publications: artists' magazines thus became an alternative space for artistic production.

Reviewed: Gwen Allen, *Artists' Magazines, an alternative space for art*, MIT Press, 2011, 376pp.

What makes magazines special? According to Gwen Allen, it is their ephemeral nature: “To publish a magazine is to enter into a heightened relationship with the present moment. Unlike books, which are intended to last for future generations, magazines are decidedly impermanent.” (p. 1) But Artists' magazines are even more unique publications. Contrary to traditional art magazines which contain mainly art reviews and advertisements for commercial galleries, artists' magazines are far more creative and offer direct participation from the artists. Since the early 19th century these publications have been very much linked to the artistic avant-garde: “[it was] here that avant-garde movements originated and gained momentum.” (p. 3) Artists then increasingly used this ephemeral format to explore and communicate their innovative ideas about art;¹ this proximity was again reinforced in the 20th century when new printing technologies made it easier for artists to print their own magazines. But what made artists' magazines different in the late 1960s and in the 1970s – and this is the main thesis of Gwen Allen's book – is the fact that the period showed a completely novel understanding of them.

Indeed, by the late 1960s, artists started to conceive conceptual artworks which could be printed on the pages of the magazines themselves. These printed artworks were called

¹ Gwen Allen identifies two of these early artists' magazines: *Propylaen* (1798-1800), created by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe & *The Germ* (1850), a pre-raphaelite magazine published in England.

“artists’ projects”² and changed the nature of the magazines which published them. Because artists’ projects could be considered as authentic, reproducible artworks, artists’ magazines were transformed from mere transmitters of information into new mediums for art.³ Gwen Allen’s book explores this transformation through the close study of seven publications, which appeared at a time when avant-garde artists were deeply influenced by conceptual art and other forms of art practices such as earth art, installations, performances, videos and films (1970s-1980s). These magazines illustrate the plurality of art forms appearing in the 1970s with the demise of high modernism. *Aspen* (1965-1971) was a three-dimensional New York magazine containing various art objects, whereas *0 to 9* (1967-1969), *Avalanche* (1970-1976), *Art-Rite* (1973-1978), and *Real-Life* (1979-1994) were also published in New York but focused on various avant-garde groups of the downtown art scene. *File* (1972-1989) and *Interfunktionen* (1968-1975) offer an international perspective of the alternative art scenes of Toronto (Canada) and Kassel (Germany).

Gwen Allen is an art historian whose recent works on artists’ publications present a neglected aspect of art history, one that focuses on what is usually considered as peripheral to the artwork: the short-lived publications that accompany and support them. Her (first) book assesses that such publications are as important as the study of the artworks themselves. Exploring the relationships between art and the new media culture of the 1960s and 1970s,⁴ the book recalls and furthers Walter Benjamin’s early writings on the reproduction and distribution of art through mass media: the loss of its aura as a unique work of art and its potential gain of political power.⁵ Through eight case studies, Gwen Allen offers a fantastic insight into the artistic changes which occurred in North America and Europe, as conceptual art became increasingly popular and formalist criticism disparaged for its elitism and its reluctance to welcome new art forms. In addition to this, the final appendix establishes a handy and very well illustrated compendium of international artists’ magazines published from 1945 to 1989.

New Artistic Mediums

² “Artists projects” can also be referred to as “magazine art” (used by Clive Phillpot in “Art Magazines or Magazine Art”, *Artforum*, February 1980), or “artists’ pages”.

³ The advent of artists’ magazines as art mediums was originally noted by Clive Phillpot in “Art Magazines or Magazine Art”, *Artforum*, February 1980

⁴ See for example David Joselit, *Feedback: Television against Democracy*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2007 & Pamela Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2004

⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, 1969.

In the late 1960s, conceptual art appeared as a new form of art whose focus was on the idea or the concept at the origin of the work. What mattered was no longer the physical realization of the work, or its final aesthetic quality, but the idea or the concept that produced it.⁶ Conceptual art did not only change what an artwork could be, but also radically modified its display and modes of exhibition. Indeed, conceptual art no longer produced unique objects but relied on “a strange subset of documents – texts, photographs, maps, lists, and diagrams (p. 15).”⁷ Vito Acconci’s magazine, *0 to 9*, offers a good example of how language could be used to produce conceptual artworks: “the magazine soon developed a novel understanding of what the materiality of language might entail, as poets and artists pushed language beyond its two-dimensional existence on the page.” (p. 77) As a consequence, conceptual artworks were no longer attached to traditional mediums like painting or sculpture, but relied on a great variety of other two-dimensional mediums like “books, posters, catalogues, Xeroxed booklets, and magazines.” (p. 15) Gwen Allen’s objective is to show how, during this period, the art magazine became an ideal support, and thus a new medium, for artists to exhibit their work.

The greatest part of the book is hence dedicated to the new relationships established between artists’ magazines and their representation and documentation of conceptual art through original artists’ projects (artworks which could be seen nowhere else). For example, in its spring 1972 issue, the magazine *Avalanche* published Sol Lewitt’s “Page Drawings”, a work consisting in a series of printed instructions to be drawn directly on the magazine’s pages by the readers, thus using the space of the page as the support for a unique and participatory artwork. *Art-Rite*, also published in New York and documenting SoHo’s alternative art scene, opened the design of its front cover to artists: “Christo “wrapped” issue 5 with a *trompe-l’oeil* paper bag – an image that referenced the artist’s monumental architectural and landscape wrappings, but also alluded wryly to the practice of concealing porn magazines in brown paper bag wrappers” (p. 129). Artists’ projects thus used the materiality of the magazines’ pages as two-dimensional mediums. Sometimes these printed artworks even turned the magazine into a three-dimensional object, an authentic exhibition space. This was the case with *Aspen*, a magazine which was designed as a cardboard box

⁶ The artist Sol Lewitt was the first to define conceptual art in « Paragraphs on Conceptual art », June 1967, *Artforum*, vol. 10, pp. 79-83.

⁷ Lucy Lippard explained in 1968 that conceptual artworks were “dematerialized” in Lucy R Lippard, *Six years : the dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972*, 1 vol., New York: Praeger, 1973.

containing reproducible artistic materials such as pamphlets and booklets in various formats, articles, printed artists' projects, records and films.

As a new artistic medium, the magazine automatically blurred the lines between the original works of art and their reproductions. In so doing, it simultaneously questioned its own status: "Was it an art magazine? Was it an exhibition space? Was it some combination of the two?" (p. 97). The author reminds us of the intricate issues that were inherent to the new art forms of the late 1960s and 1970s, issues that simultaneously extended to the status of artists' magazines, in a kind of mirror effect. The questions of authenticity and reproduction also concerned other process and time-based art forms which were documented in these magazines (performances, installations, earth art). What was the status of the photographs documenting Vito Acconci or Gordon Matta Clark's performances? Which of the magazine's photographs or the actually performed act was the authentic artwork? According to Gwen Allen, artists' magazines could be used as artistic mediums because of their essentially flexible and ephemeral nature. As unstable publications with short life-spans, these publications could be modified from one issue to the next, responding well to the specificities of new art practices. *Aspen's* three-dimensional form was for example able to accommodate the need for a plurality of art forms: "[its] multimedia format was clearly a boon, promising not only to document but also to simulate the proliferating forms of new media art." (p. 47) In the course of two years (1967-1969), the contents of Vito Acconci's magazine (*O to 9*) changed progressively with each issue, accompanying the evolution of the artist from experimental poetry to performance.

An Alternative Space for Art

Besides paying great attention to the inner workings of artists' magazines, the scope of Gwen Allen's book extends to the political context of their publication. A rapid glance at this surrounding context shows that the contents of artists' magazines not only had an artistic impact but also carried social and political meaning.⁸ Indeed, from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, a general movement of contest developed against the racist, sexist and elitist practices of the mainstream art world, in New York, but also in Toronto and Kassel. The immediate consequence of this criticism leveled at the mainstream art world was the development of an

⁸ Gwen Allen's book therefore belongs to recent scholarly works which deal with the politicization of art practices in the late 1960s and 1970s in the United-States (Julia Bryan Wilson, *Art Workers, art practice in the Vietnam War Era*, University of California Press, 2009).

“alternative art movement”⁹, to which Gwen Allen directly links the publication of the seven magazines portrayed here. Just as alternative spaces developed against the conservative habits of museums and art galleries, so did artists’ magazines seek to emancipate themselves from the institutional and commercial art world, in order to gather new audiences and renew the genre of the art magazine itself: “Like other artist-run, independent, and non-profit exhibition spaces and collectives, magazines challenged the institutions and economies of the mainstream art world” (p. 7).

The simile established between artists’ magazines and alternative spaces allows the author to extend the artistic and political ideals of the alternative art scene to artists’ magazines. Like alternative spaces, alternative magazines sought to circumvent both the market (art galleries) and the institution (museums). In order to do that, magazines developed various editorial strategies that allowed them to show original artworks without the help of galleries, or to invent new discourses about art to get rid of art critics. The author thus reminds us here of the essentially alternative nature of conceptual art, whose original democratic ideal was to circumvent the art market (before it was re-appropriated by the art market in the late 1970s). In printing reproducible artworks accessible to a wider public, artists’ magazines responded well to this political goal. Artists no longer needed museums or commercial galleries to exhibit their work but could rely on the two-dimensional, sometimes even three – dimensional, space the magazine. The author keenly observes that conceptual art was hence the first way out of the traditional art gallery, out of what Brian O’Doherty soon conceptualized as the “White Cube” or “the Ideology of the gallery”¹⁰. As sites of opposition, artists’ magazines thus became alternative sites of exhibition, exclusively controlled by the artists.

Finally, artists’ magazines also came from, and intended to develop, alternative social networks. According to Gwen Allen, artists’ magazines circulated among and fostered new “counterpublics”, a term the author borrows from Oskar Negt and Alexandre Kluge¹¹ to refer

⁹ The “alternative art movement” is an expression used by Julie Ault in her recent books on alternative art groups, spaces and practices: Julie Ault, *Alternative art New York, 1965-1985*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

¹⁰ The artist, novelist and art critic Brian O’Doherty published a series of three essays in *Artforum* in 1976 entitled “Inside the White Cube, the Ideology of the Gallery Space”.

¹¹ Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung : zur Organisationsanalyse von bürgerlicher und proletarischer Öffentlichkeit*, Edition Suhrkamp, 1972. Nancy Fraser gives a clear definition of what “counterpublics” are: “[they constitute] parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinate social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and

to minor social groups developing at the margins of the dominant and homogeneous public sphere.¹² Usually conceived by more than one artist, artists' magazines found their origins in more or less constituted communities of artists, which they sought to widen in the course of regular publications. Among the examples offered here, *Avalanche* was for instance very close to SoHo's alternative art community: "*Avalanche* served as a guide to SoHo" (p. 95). On the contrary, Vito Acconci's magazine (*O to 9*) ignored its potential readership but sought "to define a community of writers and readers within which to seek out like-minded individuals and to discover an audience". (p. 72). Some magazines emanated directly from specific alternative spaces, such as *File*, published in Toronto by the artists of General Idea, a local alternative space. Although the question of the audience is never extensively discussed in the book – most probably because of a lack of primary information and data on this question – the author insists on the fact that the initial existence of such artists' communities and their progressive formation were essential to the alternative quality of artists' magazines.

In showing how artists' magazines could be used as new mediums for art and alternative sites for the exhibition of "dematerialized" art practices, Gwen Allen proves that these publications were essential to the production of art from the late 1960s to the 1980s. The book thus fills an important gap in the study of the postmodern art world in which formalist criticism was progressively replaced by a more contextual approach of the artwork, focusing on the economic, social and political context of the production and exhibition of art. Contrary to their original intent, the relatively rare issues of artists' magazines published only a few decades ago have now become precious commercial objects, whose prices can reach extravagant numbers. Thus reintegrated to the art market, one can question the success of their original democratic intentions. But their success as new mediums for art has not ceased to be proven and the recent publication of a facsimile edition¹³ of *Avalanches'* thirteen issues shows a sustained interest for the artwork they contain.

needs." Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the public sphere: a contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy", in Craig Jackson Calhoun, *Habermas and the public sphere*, Studies in contemporary German social thought, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1992.

¹² The "public sphere", as it emerged in 18th century Europe, was first defined by Jürgen Habermas Jürgen Habermas, *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*, trad par. Frederick Lawrence et Thomas Bürger, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991. Habermas defined it as a dominant and universal sphere constituted by the bourgeois class, a sphere in which a new kind of criticism developed in opposition to the ruling authority.

¹³ Willoughby Sharp and Liza Béar, editors, *Avalanche [1970-1976 Facsimile Edition]*, New York, NY: Primary Information, 2010

For Further Reading

Ault, Julie, *Alternative art New York, 1965-1985*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

Bryan Wilson, Julia, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2009.

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