

VARIANT: A Review for the Director, Scottish Arts Council, Summer 2002

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Report

A) Production and Distribution

Variant has been running in its present format since October 1996. An earlier version started in Glasgow School of Art had become a for-sale colour art magazine on glossy paper. Occasioned by a succession of Scottish Arts Council funding, Variant became entirely black and white, printed on newsprint and free. It resembles the London or New York Review of Books. Its visual style is spare and uncluttered.

Black and white on newsprint is an important editorial decision for a visual arts magazine. It gives priority to text over visual reproduction. A number of art magazine have started on newsprint, for example, the Arts Review in London in the 1950s and The New Art Examiner in Chicago the 1970s, but both went glossy as advertising and circulation income grew. It was Art Monthly, begun in the 1970s and still extant, that pioneered art magazines as a medium primarily for critical journalism. It took the 'weeklies of opinion' - The New Statements and The Spectator - as its print model. This re-interpretation of the art magazine came from and was part of an international movement in art practise and critical and academic writing now known as 'institutional critique'. This tradition has continues, for example, as 'art beyond the gallery', 'socially engaged art' and 'post-institution art'. Variant is part of that tradition.

Variant is free. It is posted to visual arts and other spaces throughout the United Kingdom and Ire and to some Europe and North America. Some 10,000 copies are printed and distributed; by this means it must be the largest non-subscription circulation of any visual arts magazine in the UK. Each issue is published on the web. Approximately 8,500 people are e-mailed a synopsis with links to the full articles on the web site. Producing books, magazines and newspapers is relatively easy. Distribution is much more difficult and it costs. Typically, a distributor takes a third of the cover price, the retailer takes another third and the publisher gets the remaining third. By foregoing a publisher's return and distributing to venues with a commitment to visual culture willing to give shelf space to a free publication, Variant gets a wide and highly targeted distribution.

'Free' newspapers and magazines are normally sustained financially by selling advertising; an example of a culturally ambitious free publication relying on selling advertisements is the Village Voice in New York. For Variant, advertising has raised a significant part of its income plus a small grant from Glasgow City Council. Its primary source of support, however, is the time and labour given by its staff. This is typical in the visual arts; the unpaid or minimally financially rewarded work of the majority artists is the major source of support for art practice in the UK (followed by the art market and then as a fraction of that, the public sector support).

Measured against the criterion of circulation, Variant's mode of production and distribution has made it one of the most successful UK art magazines.

B) Editorial Policy and Performance

The two editors of the magazine are artists. The production, editing and contributions to the magazine are their primary form of art practice. Artists producing magazines as part their work was and is wide spread and goes back at least to the beginning of the twentieth century, for instance, Der Blaue Reiter in Munich or Blast in London. A contemporary example is Peter Haley's Index Magazine in New York. That the artwork takes the form of a cultural intervention in a non-traditional art medium does, however, have precedent, William Furlong's Audio Art for example. Artist as publisher, editor and journalist has some resemblance to artist as sociologist as in the

case of Stephen Willats or artist as investigative journalist might characterise Hans Hacke's work for a period. Both are part of the tradition of institutional critique.

The tradition of institutional critique has much of its origins in the idea of cultural hegemony. The idea that in the first instance it is through cultural institutions, schools, the law, universities, museums and so on that a dominant class and its interests are perpetuated. In such a view any form of dependence on cultural institutions, be it on commercial or public sector, will come to determine cultural practise, it will structure perception. In these circumstances, critique, in the sense of questioning the conditions of cultural production, including one's own, becomes complicit, inhibited or impossible. Alternatively, existing at the interstices of institutions, holds at bay settled conditions of practice. A different critical space is opened up in an otherwise homogenising culture. While not attributing to Variant these specific origins or views, Variant has constituted itself at the interstices of institutions; the practise is sustained between the social security system, advertising income, a municipal grant and arts institutional support (if only in the form of free shelf space in arts venues).

In describing Variant's editorial performance, it follows that the primary questions are: Does it offer a particular critical space compared to other publicly or commercially supported visual arts magazines? Is the style and scope of the magazine significantly different from those magazines and if so, how well does it perform in the space it has established for itself? However, these questions should be inflected by Variant's own stated intentions. These can be extracted concisely from the editorial for the second edition in its present format in 1997.

What you have in your hands is an independently produced 'art' magazine, which is distributed free in the UK and abroad. We take art to mean culture and how culture is formed, Variant makes a contribution to this through the work of its writers. *"The writing in the magazine is 'critical'; we see this as meaning that it should function as a forum for writers to document, report, explore, analyse and express their ideas and arguments."*

Variant is neither an academic journal nor an art magazine. It offers a kind of feral scholarship. The length of the articles and the inclusion of citations and bibliographies do give it some resemblance to conventional academic journals. However, its characteristic style is serious, if at times vituperative journalism. So for instance, while sharing with the New York published October a debt to the tradition of institutional critique, it does not publish work using the vocabulary of academic theory. To an extent rare in academic or art magazines, there is an editorial commitment to plain language. Variant differs from art magazines even those with similar production values such as Art Monthly, in the spread and range of writing, in the length of its articles, in the emphasis on book rather than exhibition reviews. Its cultural articles include writing on jazz, rock, film, comics and fanzines, stand-up-comedy, art education, conference reports, contemporary literature, art and technology.

In each edition there will be between nine and thirteen articles of varying lengths between 500 to the 10,000 words. Below, I characterise the content strands within the magazine since 2000 and give examples of articles within strands. Where the title of the essay did not convey the content, I have composed a descriptive phrase.

Accounts or exposés of some aspect of cultural policy or institutional politics:

SAC and its policies; Artist run spaces and Asian artist; Artist initiatives in Moscow; Community art; Film and video in Scotland.

Interviews with writers and/or artists:

Paul McCarthy (American artist); Mark Thomas (English (?) comic); James Kelman (Scottish writer); David Chandler (Canadian critic of NATO policy in Yugoslavia); Bob Holman (Scottish social activist).

Short stories:

Tales of The Great Unwashed

Articles on international politics or economics:

Asylum; A Critique of the Dayton Agreement; The assumptions of current economic policy; The politics of drugs; Kurds in Turkey; Workers rights in Mexico; The New Terrorism Act; The Arms Trade; Social Inclusion; Space and psychiatric institutions; Muslims in the West after September 11.

Arguments and Ideas:

Copenhagen Free University; Against the use of science borrowed analogies such as 'chaos theory'; Collective Cultural Action.

Essays on some aspect of the history avant-garde practice:

Catherine Drier and the Soci t Anonyme; The Artist Placement Group; the Sixties and Counter Culture; Raymond Roussel; Robert Fraser

I have described the magazine as un-academic but this spread of subjects is reminiscent of at least one academic context; that eclectic tradition of 'general studies' that used to flourish in art schools.

The characteristic style of writing in Variant is, as I have indicated, plain un-jargonised and un-literary English. It is content-driven writing, presenting evidenced argument. It is a serious rather than an easy read. Some of the articles are authoritative, others less so. In the absence of biographical notes on contributors, judging by their content, I take some of the less authoritative pieces to be by younger art professionals. They have been required to construct their arguments within the limits of their knowledge, but those limits are not hard to see. Variant would seem to be a context in which younger writers can find a platform. The range of subjects covered and the names of contributors also suggest contributors of diverse geographic and cultural origin. This is not a parochial magazine.

C) Conclusion: strengths, weaknesses and potential for development

Variant is not dependent on any single outside source for its survival. The magazine will continue for as long as the editors are willing to make it happen. Being free emerges as a very business like choice and is backed by a business-like pursuit of advertising. Its very particular economy gives it a wide circulation and an editorial independence, which it pursues with intransigence.

A fundamental point is that the editors are artists; the magazine is their practice and is within a continuing tradition of contemporary art. That the magazine is an art practice is acknowledged tacitly by art venues' willingness to give the magazine free shelf space. It is within that context that the editorial choices should be seen. The magazine is about art, institutions, culture and what of significance and interest socially and politically to art and artists in the view of the two artist editors. I have tried to give some indications of the precedence for this mode of practice in both the tradition of institutional critique and in art education.

What Variant offers is a unique publication. While the quality and character of the articles vary, there is at core a wide-ranging commitment to serious, clearly-written, critical argument. A commitment that gives circulation to essays of a kind and/or length that would sometimes not get space in mainstream art, academic or news and politics magazines. Some of these are very good and important.

Variant is a major asset within visual arts culture in the UK. I knew of Variant before writing this review and I have asked other arts professionals in London about the magazine after been commissioned to write this report. The number of people who know the magazine has surprised me. I know of no other publication from Scotland in the visual arts that is as well known and respected as Variant.

'Strengths, weaknesses and potential for development' are, of course, terms of management. In particular, 'potential for development' clearly implies a raft of inappropriate assumptions when applied to an art practice as opposed to a business. (What could be the answer, for example, if

the Spanish Government had asked Picasso in 1937 what was the 'potential for development' of his painting for the Spanish Pavilion?) There is coherence about Variant, its mode of production, distribution and editorial character that means that any change would not be a development, it would be a transformation. For good or ill, it would be the loss of what Variant is now.

It would suggest failure if an art practice in the tradition of institutional critique did not give institutions problems. It would suggest failure if such a practice did not have a clear view of its own political economy. The editors make their own recommendations at the end of Appendix II. **Both literally and metaphorically anybody who wants to support Variant, should support it to be Variant.**

Report complete with appendices is available on the Variant web site: www.variant.org.uk

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