

## pavel Büchler:

Since I have the doubtful privilege of having to start, I may just as well try and set the tone by proposing a working definition of the art magazine as a vehicle by which art maintains its contemporaneity in the currents of culture.

I want to pick up this theme where I signed off the last time I had the opportunity to elaborate publicly on the subject. In 1993, I wrote an article on artists' uses of the magazine page as an 'alternative space' for the 25th anniversary issue of Creative Camera. I concluded the short piece with the example of one of the most insightful 'magazine interventions' by an artist, Ad Reinhardt's series of 'timeless political' cartoons, which appeared fortnightly in 1946-47 in the liberal New York magazine P.M., and continued sporadically in various publications until the early 1960s. Throughout the series, Reinhardt's polemic concerns the critical reception of art governed by a tension between the supposedly 'timeless' and the ostensibly 'political', and indicates the political currency of the 'timeless' questions that art should ceaselessly ask by putting its own history on trial.

# studio

The political is of course never timeless, but historical and temporal. Ad Reinhardt, who held that "art is art and everything else is everything else," understood the challenge that the time-bound space of the magazine page poses to art. Magazines are not only storehouses for ideas or containers of ammunition for critical battles – they are also, and much more importantly, the means by which our culture reflects our feeble attempts to keep pace with its rapidly disintegrating time and to postpone an immediate collapse of our times into history. And this is perhaps the most important "alternative" that the magazine page can offer to the work of art: a realignment of the timeless with the temporal, a synchronicity with the world – and with everything else.

In my mother tongue, Czech, 'magazine' is 'časopis', literally 'the script of time' or 'time-script' (as in the German 'Zeitschrift'). The expression resonates with chronology (writing about time), and chronography (writing by time); with the sense of the passage of time (as in the word 'journal') and with the sense of 'the times' as the momentary state of culture. Time and the times, as recorded and reflected by the magazine, 'the script of time', are then the denominators of the discussions that shape our sense of where we are.

This does not mean, of course, that magazines and other periodical media in their plurality reflect, register and record something like an ideal time, a common standard in a given culture. Quite on the contrary, with their diverse allegiances, constituencies, agendas and interests, magazines play a major part in our perceptions of our time as fragmented, uncertain and volatile, and somehow always running ahead of itself. Each magazine turns events and cultural phenomena into 'issues' and 'topics', releases them into or places them in time, according to its own editorial, political and commercial priorities. Even within a single field and a narrow geography, such as contemporary Western art, for example, the sense of time that magazines reflect collectively is held together by nothing more substantial than the continuity of advertising or the chronology of exhibition listings, but collapses into diverse strata the moment we consider the relationship between an individual magazine's content and coverage and its respective claims to temporary relevance, expressed not only in its overt point of view but also in its editorial style, design and production values, or its distribution. In other words, every magazine has a stake in time, but what is at stake through magazines is the identity of the time we, the readers call 'ours'.

Time has a geography. I studied at an art school in the first half of the 1970s in Prague, a place which was then haunted by a very different sense of 'local time' than the metropolises and regions of western Europe or the US. Our time was exemplified for us, for my generation of students and artists, by a sense of temporality as something quite absent from our collective experience. While time was perhaps flowing elsewhere, our actuality appeared to us dismally moribund and disconnected from both the past and any feasible image of the future. What we saw around us was the absence of anything that would facilitate any sense of contemporaneity, nothing that would be tangibly of 'now' – everything that ever happened seemed somehow as much out of place as out of time. There seemed to be no co-ordinates in the present by which to measure or even guess where we were going and how far we had got from those who came before us.

The previous two decades of the post-war centralist-bureaucratic rule were marked by an almost constant crisis and perpetual turmoil, and conflict, and struggle. Although little was changing, a lot was happening. But in the aftermath of 1968, the prevalent sense of cultural time for our generation was a sense of living in a kind of temporal void or being too late, as if everything that could happen had already happened. True, we had historical role models, both from among the leftist avant-garde of the inter-war years and from among the small number of artists and intellectuals who had refused to compromise with the ideological demands of Stalinist and post-Stalinist propaganda, but we had no contemporary perspective and could hardly see any contemporary role for what we were trying to do. We felt, instinctively, that it was important to keep art alive in the present, but we also felt that by doing so we were at best contributing to a future history.

There was nowhere to show and nowhere to publish, at least not in such a way as to make any meaningful public impact. There was no public forum, particularly for those of us who rejected the option of 'moderate progress' through a selective involvement with the institutions of the centralist-bureaucratic state. But if many of us withdrew from the compromising power-struggles that were the price to be paid for an 'official' existence as artists and choose instead, for want of a better term, to work 'underground', it was, quite ironically, because what we really wanted was to claim our place in a mainstream. And, as we saw it, there was no dynamism in anything that was taking place on the surface, no stream at all.

For several years, there was not even a single contemporary art magazine being published in Czechoslovakia. The many publications brought into existence during the reformist political experiment of 1967 and '68 were almost all banned within the next couple of years, and the two or three established older titles from the beginning of the decade ceased publication one-by-one following the post-1968 purges in publishing houses, artists and writers unions and educational institutions. Under the banner of 'normalisation' (or 'consolidation' – a policy of a systematic denial of the system's disruptions), the regime succeeded in creating a complete publishing vacuum.

### present/past Tense

the following three articles are variously edited versions of talks given at a symposium organised by Street Level Photoworks and hosted by the CCA – both in Glasgow in November of 1997. The purpose of Street Level's symposia is to stimulate discussion within a public forum on topics and issues which we identify as pivotal to the current climate and development of art practice in Scotland. It is not considered to be an isolated event, but part of a continuum of critical debate which recognises the necessity of recording histories and ideas. It coincided with the exhibition **TOWER OF BABBLE: INVENTION AND CONVENTION IN ART MAGAZINES 1960 TO THE PRESENT** held at Street Level and other venues in Glasgow in late '97. The exhibition toured to Stirling and accumulated more material on its exhibition at the Norwich Art Gallery in May of '98.

THE WORK PRECEDING THIS and the one 7 pages on are part of a series of 10 artists magazine covers commissioned for the **TOWER OF BABBLE** exhibition. The first is by Pavel Büchler whose article of the same name features here, and the latter by Glasgow Women's Library.

THE SECOND INSTALLMENT of pieces from the symposium will be available this October. It will include pieces by Rhonda Wilson on Ten-8, an article on AND magazine, Linda Morris in discussion with Peter Townsend, and Peter Kravitz on fanzine and magazine culture. For a copy please send an A4 SAE to —

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malcolm Dickson



The academia, which in the late 1960s accounted for much of the publishing excitement, was hit particularly hard as progressive professors and lecturers were replaced by those whose only ambition was their political survival or who had been frightened into passive compliance with the new bureaucracy and played brain-dead to save their academic skins. Despite this, libraries in art colleges and certain other organisations seemed to escape the deadliest excesses of the 'normalising' mentality. The purge in their collections concentrated on exorcising the ghost of the previous era and, after an array of 'counter-revolutionary' or 'ideologically harmful' late-1960s titles was discreetly removed, a trickle of foreign magazines kept slowly filling the gaps on the shelves. In the Institute of Applied Arts, where I studied, it was Studio International, Art and Artists, Art in America, the Swiss design magazine Graphis and one or two others.

In the absence of anything else, these – together with miscellaneous publications brought sporadically into the country by visitors from abroad – became for us the messengers of contemporaneity. The picture of the times that they presented was inevitably a limited one. It was also hugely distorted by our uncertainty as to what was 'wrong', as it were, with those publications that were allowed to circulate in the otherwise vehemently censored environment. From the sceptical perspective of my generation, any sign of official benevolence was viewed with suspicion when all that we could trust was the consistency of the thoroughly paranoid mental

# irrational

disposition of anti-intellectual intolerance which permeated the officially sanctioned domains of cultural life. Yet, we could see no pattern in the apparently random operations of censorship. There was no obvious reason why some magazines made it through the net while others were banned (except, perhaps, that bureaucracy's appetite for paper equips it with powers of discrimination quite lost on the crude mental palates of students hungry for information). So Flash Art, for example, was relatively freely if not frequently available, while Creative Camera – the editor of the magazine present here will be pleased to know – was on the black list. It seemed as if the censors' primary task was to disseminate confusion.

Another difficulty for the formation of a coherent image of a contemporaneity with what was going on elsewhere was posed by the language and cultural barrier which made our deciphering of the 'script of time' look like an exercise in cryptology. Even though our misreadings and misunderstandings were often creative and always inspirational, they did little for our sense of engagement with what we thought of as a living culture. The awareness of our semi-comprehension (which, in fact, is no comprehension at all) left us feeling lagging behind, disconnected from both the active participation in, and the passive reception of, those exchanges through which the sense of contemporary artistic identity is collectively and individually negotiated and confirmed. We developed a dependency on that elusive standard of contemporaneity set by our pondering over the pages of black-and-white reproductions free of any context but their own apparent self-certainty, and we aspired to it, but the more we tried to make our self-perceptions conform to our impressions of contemporary (Western) art as we knew it from magazines, the more excluded and discouraged we felt. As we were struggling with texts and images whose relevance seemed as deeply puzzling as the mysteries of the Talmud, we saw (or imagined to see) our experience following an already formed itinerary.

Finally (and with hindsight), we literally couldn't see ourselves as part of the picture. The very materiality and the seductive magic of the printed page, the unattainable mechanical perfection of print, down to the smooth texture of the paper and the smell of the printing ink, became emblems of our exclusion. 'In the last analysis', the presence of the imported magazines belonged to the same dysfunctional culture as the mind-numbing party propaganda, the perverse disciplinarian 'benevolence' of the bureaucracy, and even the 'happy ghetto of the underground' where independent publishing took a refuge.

Clandestine publishing had always been an aspect of the centralist-bureaucratic condition and after 1968 it proliferated. In a dissertation on Czechoslovak underground publications from 1991, the Viennese Bohemist Joanna Posset listed some 150 unofficial periodicals published between 1968 and 1983. Another, more recent, study estimates the number of titles at almost twice as many. In almost all instances, though, these publications were extremely short-lived and produced in minuscule editions. Most of them appeared erratically and drew upon small circles of contributors/readers. They were published through a method known as 'samizdat' – strictly, a system of distribution rather than production which relied on the subsequent copying by the readers of manuscripts released into circulation in numbers which were too small to bring the authors into conflict with censorship and the law.

The participation of the readers in the circulation of samizdat literature helped to maintain a spirit of resistance against intellectual stagnation and generated a sense of commonality and purpose. But if these publications were the means of 'getting on with it', they were also a part of a widely adopted strategy among the intelligentsia of 'letting it pass by'. The hope they sheltered was a hope in one's strength to resist hopelessness as much as one's ability to live without expectations. In the main, samizdat publishing was less an alternative to 'press' than a distinct mode of interpersonal communication, close perhaps to rumour;

and while it had borrowed some of the press terminology – there were 'magazines', 'bulletins', 'newsletters' and so on – it had little of the temporary urgency that makes the free-circulation magazines and papers what they are.

Because of the modest means of production – a typewriter and, occasionally, a mimeograph – very few of these publications featured visual art (or indeed any images), and those that did were difficult to copy and distribute beyond their original editions. Although some artists did manage to exploit the self-replicating nature of samizdat, and the inevitable process of mutation engendered in its Chinese-whispers-like passage among the readers/participants, for most this method proved inadequate and many tried to find, via the black market and various legal loopholes, their way into print. Where they succeeded, the results were often compromised by self-censorship, the unspoken bargain between the individual and the bureaucracy for gaining private access to any kind of printing or distribution service, or by the need to disguise the purpose of the publications (as, for instance, when the work would be published in a promotional calendar by an approved organisation in order to provide the artist with a 'catalogue'). But the (somewhat desperate) need to negotiate the often high-risk compromises did help to maintain a visibility 'above the ground', as it were, for some of the private publications featuring art and gave them a certain authority.

In this climate (so rich in ironies which owed more to the Good Soldier Schweik than to Kafka), someone seemed to have thought of disguising an art magazine as ... precisely, a magazine. And so, in the second half of the 1970s, the arguably most significant of the Czech semi-official cultural publications emerged: the journal Jazz Bulletin, published under the auspices of an amateur jazz musicians' association from 1976 to 1983. It was a well edited and well designed publication, overtly published for the enthusiasts of improvised jazz and experimental music, bringing together music with visual art, poetry, theatre and literature. With its strong visual bias it soon became above all an 'art magazine'. (Indeed, after the censors finally caught up with the magazine in 1983 and the publication was banned, the editors continued to bring out for several years the magazine's art supplement, *Situace*, as a series of self-contained monographs with no texts.) With print runs of around 5,000 copies, which compare per capita very favourably with pretty much any art magazine published anywhere in Europe today, the magazine had a considerable influence. It also had a considerable responsibility.

It had to try and help to restore the damaged faith in the contemporary relevance of what we read and talked about. And the way it went about it was to claim a contemporary relevance for work which had been already partly consigned to the history of the 1968 political experiment. Rather than trying to keep up with the debates and practices of our late 70s and early 80s peers in the West, it insisted that those 'issues' and 'topics' that contemporary artists elsewhere had drawn upon or reacted against should not be made into a history in our absence, as it were. This was not merely to compensate for a loss of continuity with the immediate past. Much more importantly, this was to demonstrate that the debates that magazines facilitate by maintaining that continuity also contain the potential for keeping the notions of the past open to questioning. This is something quite different from fabricating history as a tactic for disarming contemporary ideas, as was characteristic of the centralist bureaucratic publishing and propaganda, or from the constant stream of 'revivals' which is an aspect of the built-in obsolescence as the editorial norm in many Western contemporary art magazines.

By proposing that the most relevant Czech art magazine of the 1970s and 80s was in fact a 'historical' one, I do not wish to confirm the largely technocentric prejudices of those who see everything Eastern European as, almost by definition, lacking in advancement, enterprise and 'progress'. Rather, I would like to suggest that to call our attention back to where we have just been could be a way in which art magazines help us to work out where we are and where we think we are going.

I have seen recently couple of issues of the Czech 'independent' magazine *Revolver*, one of several progenies of the *Jazz Bulletin*, published 1987 and devoted to 'contemporary culture'. The 'international scene' is represented in this publication by the work of Witold Gombrowicz, J R R Tolkien, Charles Bukowski, Andy Warhol, John Updike, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Susan Sontag and George Orwell, among a very few others. If many of these names fail to strike us as particularly 'contemporary' (in the late 1980s terms), it may well be because the kind of contemporaneity that we far too often adopt as ours is a contemporaneity defined by the names in the next issue of an influential magazine.

