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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.

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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

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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 Revue, 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.



performance

simon Herbert: In 1982, Stephen Cripps fired rockets along wire guides to crash into and explode against wall mounted cymbals. In 1987 George Barbers' videotape showed a line-up of young hopefuls auditioning for *Taxi Driver*, intoning Bobby De Niro's lines "Are you looking at me" ten years after the original film had been released.

In 1984 Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh tied themselves together for a year by an eight foot rope. In 1982 the Hampshire media proclaimed that Mona Hatoum was "Naked in Red Slime" at the Aspects Gallery in Portsmouth. Throughout the decade Alastair MacLennan wandered around various city streets very slowly, with a stocking on his head. Performance magazine was truly a child – albeit a wailing and sleepless one – of the eighties; it was launched in June 1979, on the cusp of decadal change, and folded at the beginning of the nineties. My own experience of it is that it was the key organ for delineating the wonderful and the terrible. In their bastardised form, the words "wonderful" and "terrible" have lost the primal value that they originally were imbued with. "Wonderful" means to be replete with a sense of amazement of life. "Terrible" means a power and beauty that is truly awesome to behold. These were the potential tectonic forces sealed within each bi-monthly issue; attracting all those other angry young aspirant performance artists looking for a fight and the option of gratuitous nudity.

The role and the politics of the magazine – like the artform itself – meant and still mean radically different things to different people. No one person's perspective (and certainly not mine, either as perennial punter or occasional contributor) could be said to be authoritative or definitive – except, maybe, for Rob la Frenais', who, as founder, editor and chief proponent more than any other person embodied the energy and vitality of Performance. His editorial, in issue one, set the tone for the future: "There are still some events worth stifling a yawn for... They are difficult to pin down... to separate from the sludge of spectacle... they consist of people doing odd things in front of others. They are performances. Anyone can do one but once money changes hands their value is again under scrutiny. Sometimes they become theatre, and people sit down and get up and have drinks and sit down and clap and get up again. The performances we cover have been called fringe theatre, performance art and community art. We are responding to, and adding to, a vastly increased interest in these things, but we will be critical in our approach."

A magazine that would respond then, to the work of our time. At a time when live art was still enjoying the momentum generated by its mainstream adoption by the American visual art brigade in the seventies, at a time when public bodies such as the Arts Council was agonising over how to respond to funding demands from a bunch of respected artists who looked like extras from a Ken Russell movie, at a time when community art was at its height in terms of hippy pageantry; never was so much wicker and cheesecloth sacrificed in the search for meaningful communal congress. As the magazine evolved it had to navigate the icebergs of changing funding patterns, new feminist practice, the rise of multi-culturalism in a country which was not at the time so responsive to visible examples of hybridity and a thousand other submerged flash points.

Whilst there is no doubt that Performance craved new icebergs to crash its hull into, to monitor the compaction of snow and wailing bodies thrown from the decks and count the cost later, the idea that a series of unrelated activities, often emanating from social theories of cultural practice that were, to all intents and purposes, often oppositional to one another, implied a certain combustibility.

The resources of Performance magazine were few, and relied on the enthusiasm of contributors who were willing to submit articles without substantial "journalistic" recompense, comprised of acolytes, devotees and believers. It was not uncommon for the power relationships to shift from one issue to the next; within a small gene pool a writer would lay forth on issues of cultural decrepitude with all the authority of the chosen, only to be reviewed by another voice in the next issue, and write a letter of complaint in the following issue about how said reviewer did not understand their work in an intelligent and informed manner. Lack of travel funds meant that the magazine was often reliant on identifying contributors on the basis of their perceptive excellence and geographical proximity to a particular event in equal measures.

In many ways this status reflected the journal's mission statement of a rejection of the perceived "centre" – or at least, an avowed intent to examine the distances between generic concepts of the radical and the mainstream. The editors of Performance were privy to both the visceral experience of sitting on concrete floors witnessing confrontational actions in warehouses at two in the morning, and the cultural debate which swirled around the public funding system in board rooms.

The mainstream, as such, was not the enemy. Many of the articles printed analysed work which was made within the realms of high art and theatre. Major cross-media projects by Robert Wilson, La Furas del Baus, John Cage, Merce Cunningham and Tzadeus Kantor were reported in editorial proximity to

community art initiatives in mental institutions, or the individual performances of practitioners operating on the funding margins. For all its iconoclasm and irreverence, Performance was a deeply earnest magazine. Its constant retort was that the art forms it represented suffered from a lack of mainstream recognition and, more importantly, funding. This in itself was a double-edged sword that none of the editors pricked their fingers on; the capacity to cackle at the prospect of anarchy in one breath whilst simultaneously bemoan a lack of popular support. Performance seemed to be a bouncer standing guard at a party that one was either disdainfully excluded from or welcomed into with a chuckle of recognition. Artists probably believed that funding officers were surreptitiously reading copies of the magazine disguised between the covers of *Art In America*, brows furrowing as they attempted to second guess which proposals would be ejected from this miasma to land for bloody consideration on their desks.

When the Franchise Promoters Scheme was introduced at the Arts Council in 1985 (a scheme to enable a variety of regionally-based promoters to commission performance works under a national, monitored initiative), coupled with a parallel "Glory of the Garden" scheme (in which funds were made available for municipal funding institutions) many city galleries unused to presenting the work of any living artist outside of the annual rote of watercolour opens would find themselves enlisting the aid of health and safety officials to pour cold water on the aspirations of nude confrontational performance artists brandishing buckets of ammonia under the unexpectant noses of the casual gallery visitor.

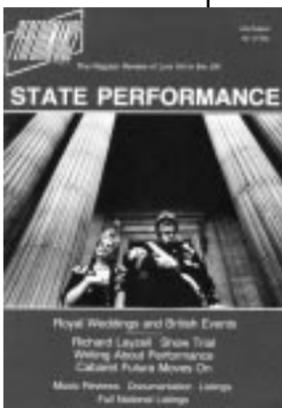
Faced with such developments Performance continued to po-facedly monitor the allocations of funding to performance art forms whilst continuing to mock the ambitions of its constituency with a series of provocative articles. Both a gadfly to the establishment and an agent provocateur to its own indigenous camp, a cursory examination of any individual issue afforded a picture of mixed issues, cultures and disciplines. There was much grandstanding and slumming, dense columns of text replete with hit signifiers such as Bataille, Psychik TV, Crowley and Rosenthal, vying with blurred and grainy photographs of bohemians, naked women with breasts painted in corn circle swirls, bald men with foreign objects up their asses, immaculately fuckable ice maidens with skirts lifted above their muscular thighs, middle-aged men screaming nonsense poetry with pints spilling from thrust glasses, inscrutable asians stood in fields of translucent flour, anally-retentive men with horn rims striding purposefully in front of their own magnified shadows, grinning women shimmying a lantern rictus as bemused parents and children looked on, protected by the envelope of audience and a particularly bright autumnal light.

Certain personalities became visible through repetition: the Stuart Brisleys and Chris Burdens, primal figures in performance art mythology, slippery and lucid both in photographic reproduction and textual response: Silvia Ziranek and Laurie Anderson, cover girls from an alternative "Hello" magazine, issuing homespun observations and willfully obscure aphorisms: Andre Stitt, charted from his mid-twenties to his mid-thirties in a series of pictures that always seemed to see him encrusted with either vomit, or ketchup, or both.

The evolution of any particular magazine can be partially discerned through changes in production values – which Performance magazine did incorporate; as a ten year old organ it advanced from its semi-Gestetner origins to become a full blown glossy black and white. In Issue 25 Rob la Frenais wrote that —

"When it comes to the crunch, even the most radical live artists have been known to dive for the safe cover of established art theory to justify their acts; likewise those on the theatre fringe have diluted experiment for the new pragmatism that requires big audiences at all costs; full houses every night with the possibility of TV appearances. We have chosen to remain outside those worlds, in a sense attempting to maintain a holding zone: a safe house in which everyone is welcome, providing they want to take the same risks as we do, sharing our crisis of identity."

This statement seems in retrospect less a shift than a reaffirmation of intent. Earlier issues were already cross-fertilising sources and mix n' matching disparate cultural phenomena. Issue 15, in February 1982 constructed a number of interesting parallels and links between Magical practice and the work of performance artists and theatrical experiment; drawing an elliptical line through Emmy Hennings and Hugo Ball at the Cabaret Voltaire, Aleister Crowley six years later at Caxton Hall, through to the circle jerks and occult posturing of Genesis P.Orridge and Cosi Fanni Tutti.



Notting Hill Carnival was also put under the performance microscope. In a precursor to later times, when artists such as Keith Khan would use the essence of Carnival as the basis of hybrid artistic research, Isobel Appio wrote that:

“Matrons and madonnas, who, the day before worried over specks of dust on their virginal white, now shriek in hysteria and abandon. Wet me. Wet me. Pelvises tilt to catch precious colour, and soak it up... When River has passed, the debris was colourful and colossal. The River people have soaked it up and spewed it forth.”



In the following twenty-five issues Performance magazine continued the task of acting as an informative expanded newsletter for performers and funders alike whilst willfully and voraciously upping the ante in challenging notions of what constituted radical cultural action and meaningful social ritual. Maybe this was the outcome of a certain burn-out that effects many guerrilla operations that have miraculously extended a shelf life beyond their initial enthusiasm and Titanic expectations, resulting in a jaded sensibility dulled by four years of reportage of events from Bracknell to Glasgow, Newcastle and Deptford. The evolution of the magazine reflected the general cycle of inspiration and malaise that effects every artistic community, desperate to retain the former and banish the latter.

The envelope was pushed in a number of different ways, principally by the contention that social conventions and gatherings normally considered as “non-art” could be dragged kicking and screaming into the pages of the magazine. Part affirmation of Joseph Beuys’ oft misquoted truism that everyone could be an artist, part two fingers up to the earnest, Performance magazine was proposing models for the interaction of “Art” and “Life” a decade before the yBa’s were trumpeting a similar tune. In issue 28 the Crufts Dog Show was examined, by Steve Rogers and Mark Stevens as a suitable case for treatment:

“The English obsession with dogs is well known, an integral part of stereotypical English eccentricity... one of the talismanic fetishes of baronial life that still lingers nostalgically in more favoured parts of rural Britain. The rigorous and technically incomprehensible rules of entry, the extraordinary and baffling range of doggy paraphernalia on sale, and the sheer blind passion on the faces of competing breeders confirm that Crufts has a significance far beyond the the paltry £100 Best in Show prize money.”

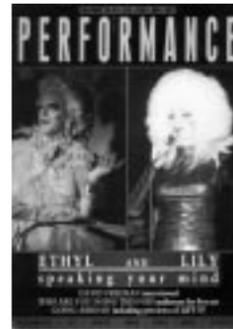
Substitute a performance artist for a dog, often paid less than £100 a gig, and the parallel become clear. Iwona Blazwick and Chris Rodley similarly wrote about the Ideal Home Show that —

“Looking out of the double glazed windows... we can just see past the romantic woodland clearing where exotic birds bob alongside the glistening polystyrene of discarded hamburger cartons, to our neighbours.” Jeff Koons anybody?

The possibilities for mixing lampoon and serious commentary were endless, and many of these topics have since moved into the mainstream as a source of phenomenological obsession. David Briers, writing in issue 28 in 1984, anticipated the current X-Files and millennial frenzy with an article neatly titled “The Reality Game”, which delved into the murky world of the UFO spotter. Witnesses’ drawings of their memories of contact with supposed alien visitors was accompanied by the sub-heading “Performance Artists from Outer Space?” This “floating margin” meant that Performance magazine never let its constituency forget its position in the greater scheme of things, and further implied that to operate from the margins was essentially an ethical and political stance.

This manifested itself in two ways. Firstly articles on non-art protest and activism relating to the ecological and anti-nuclear movements threaded their way through the history of the magazine. Greenham Common was a flash point returned to on several occasions. Artists such as Richard Layzell who had become heavily involved with eco-activism within their own live work presented articles on the peace movement. In the introductory banner to his “Peace Moves” article, he wrote that: “Images from recent peace protests make performance art look redundant.” And this indeed was the question raised constantly. The magic margin is shifted, and suddenly all the monologists with fish on their head look stupid and narcissistic when faced with a camp of women undertaking a long term protest with no end in sight.

Secondly, in order to instigate dialogue with its audience Performance regularly ran a series of overviews that prompted extended debate in the letters pages of the issues that followed. Roland Miller’s question “Is Performance Art dead?” was revived on numerous occasions to appear Banquo-like at the hedonist feast. Questionnaires intermittently appeared in which artists talked of their influences and desires in response to a series of bullet questions sent out into the ether by the magazine.



The mission of Performance was in part aimed at the funding system, as way of endorsing increased resources for performers. As the magazine evolved over its ten plus years shifts became apparent that reflected the move towards mainstream artworld validation. The English eccentrics such as Forkbeard Fantasy faded into the seventies land of Avalon, sitting on straw bales and disporting themselves in the aspic of documentation. Artists who had started out at the fringe were recorded moving incrementally to the centre. Richard Wilson was still doing his thing, but he was now representing his country in the Apperto section of the 1986 Venice Biennale. Stephen Taylor-Woodrow’s living paintings were breaking attendance records in Southampton City Art Gallery in 1987, before touring to packed houses in New York. Mona Hatoum, no longer Naked In Red Slime, was diversifying her artistic activities on a road that would one day lead to a Turner prize nomination. In issue 46, in 1987, when long time contributor Steve Rogers took over from Rob la Frenais as editor, the cover personality was no less than Anthony D’Offay; a central London commercial gallery dealer, the type of person who would once have decorated dart boards in radical artist’s studios throughout the land. It was perhaps uncomfortable for some to realise that the links between the commercial world and the cutting edge were more comprehensive and fundamental than some romantics would have liked.

This pattern in many ways prefigured a prophesy made flesh and formaldehyde in the current phenomena of the yBa. Performance art on a plinth, Hermann Nitsch in a glass case, genitalia as a kebab, acid house music played by brass bands, intimate confessions made on videotape, the mid-nineties has seen the shocking and the cutting edge appropriated by the private sector as a virtual monopoly. The public sector meanwhile faces the advent of central funding disappearing as lottery money becomes the new funding talisman; ironically, the community art and fringe theatre practice that disappeared from the pages of Performance in the late eighties is probably best placed to take advantage of lottery criteria that favours a generic soup of accessibility and happy smiley participation.

It is curious to ponder what Performance would have made of all this were it still in existence. It would, I suspect, have been torn between interrogating the yBa phenomenon and scorning it; between building up the possibilities of lottery funds for practitioners whilst simultaneously decrying the narrowness of its cultural parameters.

The death of Steve Rogers in 1988, only eleven issues after he took over the editorial reins from founder and long term mentor Rob la Frenais, sent the magazine into a tailspin. His death was sudden and unexpected, highlighted by the fact that he was simultaneously credited as Editor of Issues 56/7 whilst on the facing page one could read his obituary. A sweet and gifted man, Steve would doubtless have appreciated the irony.

New editor Gray Watson’s editorship began with an overhaul in design, format and content: with regard to the latter the focus shifted to a seemingly more academic stance. A recent examination of these later issues reveals that the content was not as academic as might have appeared at the time – maybe just hobbled by a more orthodox design – but a perception that the “feel” was altogether different remains. By the time the magazine was winding down the scattergun review pages had been replaced with a more orderly section, which curiously began with the coda that events would be “reviewed geographically, starting with London, followed by the other regions.” The party, for me at least, was over.

Do we need a Performance magazine in the late nineties? There is ample evidence that performance art as it was known is going through a low point in terms of activity and support. The desire for partially-controlled authenticity – of staring back at a bloodied maniac on a winter’s night as the breath steams from both your mouths – has abated over the last ten years as younger practitioners encode seductive replays on digital tape and pixel dots – virtual reality headsets run confrontations again and again between the viewer and electronic leviathans. Do either audiences or artists want or need to be active in the peculiar way that performance art encompassed?

The only surety is that, as the guerrilla mechanics pronounce the virility of, say, the web, another group will decry its sterility. Form and content will remain central to any and all humanistic – if elitist and clinically insane – art practice. The job of prediction and disruption will still need to be done. In this respect issue 12 of Performance magazine, in July 1981, retains a cogent message for all art soothsayers Jung and Old. Lynne McRitchie, analysing the “state performance” of the Royal Family, wrote that —

“ Prince Charles and Lady Diana will have every opportunity to be happy – security, money, homes, time, space and endless love, given by subjects who need to believe in what the royal couple represent. For the rest of us such security is surely impossible. The daily grind wears us out and makes us tired. We are not nineteen and don’t wear diamonds.”

Look upon my works all ye mighty, and despair.

peter Suchin:

Aspects of Art Criticism



From February 1996 to the end of June 1997 I held the post of "Critic in Residence" in the visual arts department at the University of Northumbria, a temporary appointment related to the "1996 Year of the Visual Arts". The brief for the job, insofar as there was one, was to publish articles and reviews in relation to the Year: this much was clear. What wasn't in evidence, however, was any form of discussion within the department of what exactly it was that the role of a critic based in an art school might be.



Such an absence of discussion did not mean that no-one had any thoughts on the matter. On the contrary, presumptions as to what the critic should do or be were legion. Such commonsensical expectations were revealed in the manner in which artists, tutors and students (both within and outside the university) would casually but confidently ask if I would review their work or write a catalogue essay for them. There appeared to be two main ideas about the critic that were held by artists.

The first of these was that it was the critic's job to promote the artist, the former being considered as in some way subservient to the latter, existing only to support and validate their work. What never came up, unless I raised it myself, was that I might not share the artist's view that writing about their work should be one of my priorities. Nor did the realisation that if I did express an interest in writing something then the artist would have to accept that they had no control over what was actually written. To insist on being reviewed involved them taking of a risk, since I might, in writing, disagree with their account of what it was they felt they were doing or making. Furthermore, if I was critical of an artist's practice this might imply not that I didn't understand the work but that there were problems within the practice, as opposed to with my reading of it.

As for the matter of getting a review into print, artists frequently don't realise that it is magazine editors, and not critics, who decide what gets published.

Generally speaking, artists appear to consider critics as servants or attendants, an attitude alluded to in the title of Stuart Morgan's anthology 'What the Butler Saw'. Oscar Wilde's remark about the vanity of artists who "seem to imagine that the primary function of the critic is to chatter about their second-rate work" is also apposite.¹

The second stereotypical projection made by artists with respect to critics was exemplified for me when an artist involved in a group exhibition for which I had contributed a catalogue essay, uttered, upon being introduced to me, words to the effect of "oh, it's the enemy". Her remark was, I believe, intended as a joke. Nonetheless, this 'joke', uncluttered as it was by the kind of complexity I wish it had actually contained, indicated a certain way of thinking about critics, as people who are parasitic upon artists, and totally dependent upon them and (since critics supposedly know nothing about what they are writing or talking about), as generators of jargon or nonsense. A third implication of the "critic is the enemy" attitude is that visual artworks don't require any kind of textual appendage, because art is itself a "visual language". The artist is thereby someone who "speaks" through his or her visual work.

The cliché that language (in the conventional sense of that term) pollutes the allegedly rarefied air in which the fine artist dwells is a complicated, and I think insidious fantasy held by many producers and consumers of art. A number of things are usually implied when the expression "visual language" is used, including that art is a universally-legible means of communicating emotions, themselves supposedly readable across all cultural and social boundaries. Coupled to this is the belief that to think critically about works of art destroys their "magic". "Feeling", in such superficial conceptualisations, is thought to hold much more democratic franchise than "theory", as though intellectual activity was not an as explicitly human attribute as the experiencing of emotional states. The opening words of Terry Atkinson's "Phantoms of the Studio" are to the point with respect to this somewhat entrenched belief —

"No matter how much theory is disguised or repressed, there is no practice without theory. The theory that practice has nothing to do with theory is a theory, a disingenuous and naive one, but none the less a theory".²

For my own part, the position I begin from is that there is no such thing as an art practice which doesn't in some way or other involve language, in the ordinary sense of that term. Language is present at every level of the work's making and reception,

whether that of personal taste (“I really like that painting”), of the assigning of titles and other “supplementary” linguistic features, or of the acts of description and analysis carried out in magazines, catalogues, newspapers, television and radio programmes, as well as within scholarly journals and books. When artists talk with a dealer about the percentage of the sale price they think they should receive they use words, whether or not the artwork “speaks”, in their view, “for itself”.

There is always language somewhere in, around, or close to the visual work. One might even propose that it is a function of all “interesting” work that it generates language, such documentation and exchange becoming in effect part of the work’s meaning, “mentality” and field of influence. If a piece of work is sufficiently cohesive it will be able to survive any amount of criticism, remaining at the centre of even contradictory readings of its modus operandi. If the work is shallow and insubstantial it will easily be pulled to pieces by critique.

I have considered the attitudes frequently held by artists towards critics. I want now to present some examples of critical positions taken by those who write about artists and their work. There are four kinds of criticism to which I will give my attention here. The first of these might be described as prescriptive or dogmatic criticism. Two examples of well-known critics who might be placed within this category are Clement Greenberg and Peter Fuller.

Greenberg’s approach involved the promotion of specific values at the expense of other concerns, something which is of course inevitable but which was, in this critic’s case, rather extreme. Emphasising “truth to the medium” as a prime requisite for artistic practice, painters were encouraged to make work in which the flatness of the canvas or other support was made clearly apparent, any illusion or representation of three-dimensionality being strictly not the order of the day. A further form of evaluation in Greenberg’s critical project involved the question of “quality”, an attribute the supposed workings of which owed much to the aesthetic theories of the philosopher Immanuel Kant. In Greenberg’s transcription of Kant the existential, retinal-related experience of the sensuous surface of painting took precedence over the cognitive to an astonishingly severe degree.³

In the case of Peter Fuller, the focus fell upon a peculiarly reductive notion of “British” art, and upon practices said to embody universally legitimate subject matter. Fuller promoted “the haptic” and the expressive, calling up birth, death, pain, anxiety and love as the only proper referential content of art. His compressed “Marxist” cravings left no room for alternative accounts of practice or of the social function of art. Anything not complying with his paradigm was ignored or forced, by deliberate distortion, to fit this too-restrictive frame (the sensuous but simultaneously “cool” surfaces of Jasper Johns’ paintings, for example).

The word “prescriptive” is appropriate because these two critics “lay down the law” for future practice, as though to say art is “this” and “this”, and cannot be anything else. Not content with describing work already in existence, a stipulation of aesthetic propriety was made, cancelling diversity and “deviation” in advance of its possible appearance.

The writers associated with the American critical theory journal *October* – Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster and Rosalind Krauss, amongst others – represent a more overtly theorised form of critical practice than either Greenberg or Fuller. Their writings utilise a combination of Marxist, psychoanalytical and Post-Structuralist theories to assemble a kind of criticism which reflects, as part of its project, on its own nature as criticism, as well as working to debunk or rewrite mainstream art historical accounts.⁴

In his 1963 essay “What is Criticism?”, Roland Barthes noted that it was the job of criticism to not only examine a given aesthetic object but, simultaneously, to consider its own ideological position and limitations. This is the approach of the writers associated with *October*. Foster, has suggested that theory should be considered as a toolbox of possible methods of analysis, with individual “tools” being tested against the object under examination. Any pretence at objectivity is thus abandoned, the methodology deployed being openly presented.⁵

A third model of critical practice involves the critic taking a work of art as a point of departure for a virtually autonomous act of writing. Oscar Wilde proposed this position in “The Critic as Artist”, and a contemporary example of this manner of writing can be found, according to Thomas McEvelley, in the work of Stuart Morgan.⁶ Morgan does though keep in mind the artists he’s writing in relation to, not simply abandoning his initial “trigger” point, even if he manages to gather together a wide number of tangential threads.

Writing in 1980 in her obituary of Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag describes how Barthes had appeared to be able to take anything, object, book or image, and make of it an intelligently sensuous text —

“One felt that he could generate ideas about anything. Put him in front of a cigar box and he would have one, two, many ideas — a little essay. It was not a question of knowledge (he couldn’t have known much about some of the subjects he wrote about) but of alertness, a fastidious transcription of what could be thought about something, once it swam into the stream of attention.”⁷

Although normally described as a critic or commentator, Barthes, and others like him, shift the practice of the critic into another domain. As McEvelley suggests —

“Art criticism is really its own genre of literature, not exactly following the rules of any other. By its privileged position in between art, philosophy, philology, poetry, essay-writing, society, and other things, criticism is a specially versatile area in which an individual writer can mark out his or her turf in any number of ways.”⁸



The final kind of criticism I will refer to here is the case of artists as critics. Art practice is itself, it might be argued, a form of criticism, since each practice, each work could be said to carry within itself an implicit critique of previous works of art.⁹ Then there are those artists who have explicitly worked as critics — Laurie Anderson, Patrick Heron, Donald Judd and Adrian Searle are just a few examples.¹⁰

It is of course also the case that many artists, whilst not claiming to be “critics” as such, have produced substantial bodies of written work. Some well-known twentieth century examples are Duchamp, Malevich, Mondrian, Schwitters, Smithson and Stella, but there are many others.

If one considers the conceptual practices of the 1960s and 1970s, one sees yet again another variation on this theme, with groups of artists issuing their own small-scale (but often highly influential) publications. The Art & Language group published the first issue of *Art-Language* in 1969. There had been [many] precedents earlier in the century (e.g. *De Stijl*, *Dada*, and the *Surrealists*). Today, two of the best known artist-initiated publications are probably *Everything* magazine, based in London, and *Variant*, formed in Glasgow in the 1980s and still published there today.¹¹

I will close with a few brief remarks about the function — or functions — of the art critic. An important aspect of the critic’s job is explicatory (whether or not the audience is a lay or specialist one). It is also incumbent upon the critic to offer an analysis, or at least an informed discussion, of the work under consideration. Finding a means of doing these things may well necessitate the invention or adaptation of a vocabulary that is suited to the task at hand.

The critic may be either supportive of, or, literally, critical of a particular piece or body of work, but hopefully his or her comments will be in some way helpful to the artist. Roberta Smith, *The New York Times*’ senior visual arts critic proposes that the critic’s function might be viewed from another angle — “If you’re going to be a critic”, she says, “it’s very important to have that sense that you’re writing for viewers. You’re on the front line of the viewing audience. You’re a professional; your main job is to record your reactions as honestly as possible, not to be an advocate for artists.”¹² Such a stance is far removed from that of the artist who only looks to critics for that he or she might gain from their unswerving, blindly sympathetic attention.

notes

- 1 Stuart Morgan “What the Butler Saw”, Durian Publications, undated, but published in 1996. Oscar Wilde, “The Critic as Artist” (1890), included in *The Works of Oscar Wilde*, G. F. Maine (Ed.), Collins, 194, p. 967
- 2 Terry Atkinson “Phantoms of the Studio”, *The Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 1990, p. 49. The notion of visual language is also discussed in: Peter Suchin, “Visual Literacy: Notes on a Quaint Cliche”, *Muses*, Winter 1996 — 1997, and in Peter Suchin, “Literacy, criticism and fine art”, “Round Midnight 2” (supplement distributed with *Artists Newsletter*, December 1996)
- 3 I am aware that Greenberg’s work has been the subject of a radical reassessment in recent years. See Thierry de Duve, *Clement Greenberg Between the Lines*, *Dis Voir*, 1996
- 4 For an example of a work by Buchloh which offers an unconventional reading of the ideology of expression, see his “Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression”, *October*, N. 16, Spring 1981.
- 5 Roland Barthes “What is Criticism?”, in Barthes, *Critical Essays*, Northwestern University Press, 1972. Barthes also writes perspicaciously about criticism in his “Blind and Dumb Criticism”, included in Barthes, *Mythologies*, Paladin, 1979, and in many other places throughout his voluminous writings. For Foster’s toolbox analogy see the opening pages of his *Recordings*, Bay Press, 1985, and also Billy Clark/Leigh French/Peter Suchin/Hall Foster, “Hall Foster Interview”, *Variant*, Vol. 2, No. 3, Summer 1997
- 6 Thomas McEvelley “Stuart Morgan: Earnest Wit”, in Morgan, *What the Butler Saw*
- 7 Susan Sontag “Remembering Barthes”, in Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn*, *Writers and Readers*, 1983, p. 169
- 8 Thomas McEvelley op. cit., p. 14. For further observations on art criticism by this writer see Jay Murphy/Thomas McEvelley, “Interview with Thomas McEvelley”, *ArtPapers*, Vol. 20, No. 5, September/October 1996
- 9 T S Eliot has discussed this form of implicit criticism in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, included in Eliot, *Selected Prose*, Penguin, 1965
- 10 The present writer is both a critic and a painter
- 11 The catalogue for the exhibition *Life/Live*, *Musee d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris*, 1996 (2 vols) contains a section documenting current British art journals, a number of which are edited and produced by artists
- 12 Roberta Smith in Anne Barclay/Roberta Smith, “Interview with Roberta Smith”, *Art Papers*, Vol. 20, No. 4, July/August 1996, p. 18

above
EVERYTHING magazine

TOWER OF BABBLE
installation closeup

opposite
RED CRAYOLA WITH ART + LANGUAGE
for an assessment of this Ip,
see everything magazine 2:1

TOWER OF BABBLE
installation view

The Big Art Issue

1971-1997

“ why are there no great women art(ists)/historians/critics/pornographers/activists/journals?”

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