

Review

Gwen Allen, *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011. 368 pp. ISBN: 978-0-262 01519-6, €30,99.

The 1960s in America witnessed a gradual dematerialization of the art object: Pop Art made art reproducible, Minimalism disassociated it from artistry, Process Art and Conceptualism rendered the artwork itself a mere byproduct of the artist's ideas. To an extent this dematerialization was a continuation of prior anti-art movements, in particular Dada, but in the New York art world it also explicitly rallied against the gallery system. Throughout this period artists sought out alternative spaces in an attempt to bypass established institutions like the Museum of Modern Art and the larger galleries. But, as Gwen Allen argues in her study *Artists' Books: An Alternative Space for Art*, they also increasingly turned to magazines as locations to directly publish their works. Artists like Dan Graham, Sol LeWitt, Robert Rauschenberg and Stephen Kaltenbach used magazines as alternative exhibition spaces, democratizing the distribution of art. In 1969, Kaltenbach bought advertising space in *Artforum* to publish ironic admonitions like 'Perpetuate a Hoax' and 'Become a Legend'. In 1966, Graham pu-

blished 'Figurative' in the advertising section of *Harper's Bazaar*. Basically a copy of a grocery receipt, the location of this artwork, between ads for Tampax and Warner's Comfort Curve bras, made it a striking comment on advertising's commercialism.

But, as Gwen Allen's study shows, in the late sixties and early seventies artists more and more came to present their work through artists' magazines, many of which were part of an intricate network of artist collectives, alternative spaces and smaller presses. Allen's book is an attempt to understand the mechanics of these magazines and does so through a set of chronologically organized case studies. Five of the magazines discussed were produced in New York: *Aspen* (1965-1971), *0 to 9* (1967-1969), *Avalanche* (1970-1976), *Art-Rite* (1973-1978) and *Real Life* (1979-1994). Two additional case studies underscore the international dimension to artists' magazines, the Canadian mail art magazine *FILE* (1972-1989) and Cologne-based *Interfunktionen* (1968-1975). Allen opens her study with a chapter on a more traditional art magazine, *Artforum* (1962-now), which many in the 1960s art scene came to see as a behemoth of conservative art criticism, despite its founders' initial idealism. Her study of *Artforum's*

gradual move from the margins of the critical spectrum to the very center illustrates the dangers of commercialization and commodification avant-garde magazines are susceptible to. It also shows what some of the editors of the other magazines discussed rallied against. As one of the editors of *Real Life* observes, at some point the choice is between abandoning amateurism and becoming a real magazine, that is, 'buckling down and selling ads and having an office'. (198)

Artforum is effective as a counterpoint, but there is still great diversity among the other magazines discussed. Some were part of the mimeograph revolution, such as Vito Acconci and Bernadette Mayer's *O to 9*, whereas a loose leaf magazine like Phyllis Johnson's *Aspen* was a professional production from the start. *O to 9* was produced in editions of 250 to 300 copies and for the most part distributed freely among friends and colleagues, *Aspen* cost \$4 and claimed circulation figures between 15,000 and 20,000 copies per issue, although in all likelihood these were gross exaggerations. The magazines also vary greatly in appearance: *Aspen*'s issues arrived in a flat box or folder, *Avalanche* was professionally printed on glossy paper, while *FILE*'s haphazard design echoed its origins in the Toronto mail art scene.

While Allen at times refers to the concept of the public sphere, as defined by Jürgen Habermas, and uses Arjun Appadurai's notion of the social life of commodities, *Artists' Magazines* is far from a theoretical study. Allen's analyses of the individual magazines are lucid and insightful, drawing upon access to complete runs of these often ephemeral publications as well as interviews with for-

mer editors. In particular, her attention to the practicalities of publishing a small magazine – Where to print it? Where to find the money for the next issue? Will people continue to read us? – adds value to this book, as this type of history is too often mired by anecdotal or even hagiographic accounts. Still, as the book lacks a general conclusion of sorts, the case studies at times refuse to connect, yielding it a slightly fractured feel.

Nonetheless, the inclusion of five New York-based magazines allows Allen to point out interconnections between these publications, as well as contrasts and points of overlap. The international dimension to this study is somewhat limited, though. As Allen stresses, American and Canadian artists' magazines were only a fraction of what was published, a fact that is further attested by the eighty page compendium of artists' magazines at the back of the book. As faster communication and cheaper air travel became ubiquitous in the 1960s, movements like Conceptualism went global, and so did the artists' magazines connected to them. The chapter on *Interfunktionen* hints at some of the transatlantic dynamics at play, but also feels like an open invitation to devote another book to a number of artists' magazines across the world.

For Allen one of the legacies of these magazines is their ability to record the activities of artists and collectives that functioned outside of the mainstream and were, as such, ignored by the established outlets for art criticism. But by providing a look behind the scenes, Allen also shows art that is still in flux, before history transfixes it as part of a movement, as a cog in a larger whole:

'[Artists' magazines] emphasize the role of the accidental, the happenstance, the unintended in what often gets passed down as inevitable.' In this light, Allen's analysis of *0 to 9* is, for example, also an analysis of editor Vito Acconci's own development from poet to performance artist, or from the page to the street.

As mentioned before, *Artists' Magazines* comes with a compendium of artists' magazines published between 1945 and 1989, which is an extremely worthwhile addition. Although Allen is clearly aware of the limits to such a compendium – many artists' magazines were ephemeral to the point of complete obscurity – the versatility of the format, as well as its dissemination across the

world becomes impressive just by leafing through this appendix.

All things considered, *Artists' Magazines* is a wonderfully written and beautifully designed study of a subject which deserves much more scholarly attention. Next to making one want to start one's own artist magazine, despite being forewarned of the hardships endemic to the endeavor, this is a book which deserves to be read by all those who take the postwar avant-garde seriously.

•> MAARTEN VAN GAGELDONK is preparing a dissertation on the American publisher Grove Press and its literary magazine *Evergreen Review* at the Radboud University Nijmegen.