



**SITED ON PAPER: A DEFINING VIEW OF  
ARTIST'S PUBLICATIONS**

**B E R I N G O L O N U**



The newsstand at Farley's Coffee House,  
San Francisco  
Photo by author

This essay gives an introductory overview of magazines created by artists and investigates their contributions to the landscape of artistic production in an age in which the original art object has been thoroughly usurped by its reproducible copy. It also provides a brief description of one seminal artist's publication—*FILE Magazine*—that I will be examining in greater depth in my finalized thesis. The final thesis will offer expanded views of six such magazines that will further illustrate my definition of artist's publications.

## Sited on Paper: A Defining View of Artist's Publications

Some people collect art; others collect memories. I, on the other hand, collect magazines. On any given day, I can be found flipping through the magazine racks of well-stocked bookstores (Farley's on Potrero Hill is a favorite, as is the rack at Cody's on Telegraph Ave). I'm always looking for serial publications that jar my expectations of what can be delivered in print or exceed my notions of what constitutes a magazine. Lately I've become interested in artist's projects that treat the publication format as a curatorial site, a site in which to feature work specially commissioned for its pages. Rather than serving as a source for second-tier representation, the artist's publication becomes the primary site, a container of artwork that reads as a two-dimensional gallery laid out in print, one that also doubles as a highly seductive art object. In an interview conducted with Amy Newman, the author of *Challenging Art: Artforum, 1962–1974*, artist Mel Bochner tries to define an art project conceived for the magazine. It is "not a reproduction of something," Bochner says, but "the reproduction as the thing itself."<sup>1</sup>

Being mass produced and mass distributed, the works sited in publications have little monetary value, but that's part of their populist appeal—because they're easily affordable and make themselves widely available, they hold the promise of broadening the audience for art, of initiating those who are fluent in pop culture into the world of artistic discourse. When someone stumbles upon these extraordinary magazines at the magazine rack, attracted by their quizzical covers or their odd titles, and starts to flip through their pages, he or she might not necessarily be able to define them as "arts" publications per se, let alone "artist's" publications, but that ambiguity is exactly what draws interest.<sup>2</sup> People are captivated by something when they can't fit it into any preexistent categories, upholding the object at hand as something "new."

My initial motivation for researching artist's publications stemmed from a wish to produce one myself. I wanted to approach the act of editing in a creative manner, like a curator who compiles information (images, text, music, etc.) within the pages of a publication. The shift from editor to curator seemed like a natural transition. After all, the two have much in common. They're both "cultural informants," as curator Lars Bang Larsen has termed it.<sup>3</sup> They stay attuned to current trends, whether the trends can be spotted in artist's studios, on television, the news, the music charts, the film theatres, or in recently published literature, and siphon that which is noteworthy out from the bulk, incorporating it into their output. "Why not take greater liberties with the act of editing and turn it into an art form itself?" I thought. Would it be possible to have the editor as curator, the artist, the writer, and the designer work in collaboration with one another as equal agents in producing a transportable exhibition on paper, one that could also serve as a seductive art object? There seemed to be certain risks involved in doing so. For one, I foresaw the potential for an explosive ego clash between the different parties involved. Furthermore, there might have been a reason why curators chose to be curators and artists, artists. The curator, if he or she was too "interpretive," would risk the danger of choking the artist's work by overexplaining or over-contextualizing it. And the artist, as an organizer or curator, would run the risk of not generating any new content, of playing the role of a deejay in sampling and mixing from other, preexistent works and sources.

The latter phenomenon is a critique inspired by many postmodernist works (especially those dating from the 1980s), but this breakdown in categories between "maker," "organizer," and "commentator" can more precisely be attributed to the practices of the conceptual artists from the 1960s onward.<sup>4</sup> Nowadays, it's common practice for artists (as well as writers, designers, filmmakers, musicians, and other cultural producers) to utilize tactics of appropriation in their work. One extreme is presented in artist Maurizio Cattelan's glossy, full-color magazine *Permanent Food*.<sup>5</sup> Cattelan has defined *Permanent Food* as a "second generation" magazine because it has no original content of its own but is compiled of pages torn out from various other magazines from around the world. As the magazine editor/image curator, Cattelan asks artists and friends whose work he admires to send in pages from magazines they think are eye catching. The only creative say he has in this project is the way he chooses to edit and order the images. As evidenced by *Permanent Food's* contents, Cattelan comes across as having a phenomenally "good eye," having made decisions about the placement of imagery not only on formal criteria (color, line, texture) but also on the shock value of the content, wherein jarring and disturbing associations arise from the juxtaposition of dissimilar imagery. Examples of these unlikely couplings include a jet fighter over the Pentagon situated next to a teenager with braces putting

on blood-red lipstick; a penguin doing a belly flop off an iceberg next to a dangling gold earring shaped like a crucifix; a furry bat hanging in a cave next to a close-up of two immaculate models with clear plastic bags over their heads. Cattelan assembles a provocative object out of the magazine format by "taking," not "making" *Permanent Food's* contents. He thereby addresses the plight of the postmodern artist, as if to suggest that rather than generating new material, artists need to act as editors in picking out and presenting choice selections from the glut of imagery cluttering our consciousness. By usurping the role of the curator, Cattelan the artist thus elevates the act of curating to a more creative endeavor.<sup>6</sup>



*Permanent Food*, issue #9

*Permanent Food* was just one of the highly engaging magazines I came across as I was researching the “perfect” artist’s publication. Other groundbreaking projects such as *Trans*, *Zing*, *Blast*, *Cabinet*, and *Colophon* also grabbed my interest.<sup>7</sup> This is by no means an exhaustive list. There must be hundreds of such magazines in circulation at any given moment around the world, with a new one hitting the racks each month. But I’ve mentioned the six above because they meet a list of criteria that give form to my definition of an artist’s publication. This list of criteria, which I’ve described in the following section, will serve as a general guideline for me in producing my own publication. My research also yielded some historical precedents that treated the magazine format as a curatorial site.<sup>8</sup> *Aspen*, the *SMS* journals, and *FILE* were just some such examples that helped lay a groundwork for the concepts that were further investigated by their contemporary counterparts.

### A Peculiar Species: How to Spot an Artist’s Publication and Where It Lives

First off, artist’s publications need to be published as serials, not one-time occurrences; like a repeated advertisement seen over and over again on TV, or a billboard passed by again and again until its message is entrenched in one’s memory, this continuity helps drive the artists’ agendas home. The more familiar readers become with a publication’s look and feel, the more easily they can decode its messages, and more quickly internalize them. But sometimes the concept of novelty can trump this reliance on familiarity, especially if it’s innovation that readers are in search of. Such was the case with the publication *Aspen*, which yielded ten issues over the course of its run, with a different editor “curating,” each issue.<sup>9</sup> As a result, each single issue differed vastly from the others in format as well as content.<sup>10</sup>

*Aspen* single-handedly broadened the concept of what constitutes a magazine. In a letter that *Aspen*’s publisher Phyllis Johnson wrote in its first issue, she cited the original definition of the word *magazine*: “a storehouse, a cache, a ship laden with stores.” She expressed her motive for undertaking a literal interpretation of this meaning, creating *Aspen* as the first magazine in a box. “Since it comes in a box,” stated Johnson in her letter, “our magazine need not be restricted to a bunch of pages stapled together. . . . we can put in all sorts of objects and things to illustrate our articles.”<sup>11</sup> Its contents revealed specially commissioned and cheaply reproducible objects—pieces of ephemera ranging from records, tapes, posters, postcards, stamps, and paper sculptures for self-assembly—that could be sorted through and taken out by the reader/viewer like the pieces of a puzzle and reassembled at will.<sup>12</sup>

*Aspen* had a handful of predecessors that treated the publication format as an elaborate collection of art objects, the most noteworthy being the limited-edition catalogs produced for two important exhibitions of Surrealist art, one dating from 1959, titled *Boite Alerte*, and the other for the international Surrealist exhibition of 1947.<sup>13</sup> The catalog for *Boite Alerte* had a deluxe edition that came in the form of a cardboard box modeled after a French postbox. The contents of the catalog included *missives lascives*, or “lewd letters,” from each of the show’s participants, a group of artists and poets that included the likes of Andre Breton, Hans Bellmer, Meret Oppenheim, Man Ray, Leonora Carrington, and Octavio Paz. The letters contained poetry, stories, records, and other rather risqué personal objects such as silk stockings stamped with declarations of love. One anonymous envelope labeled, “do not open under any circumstances whatsoever” was empty. The catalog for the international Surrealist exhibition also had a deluxe limited edition with artist’s prints, and featured a cover



**Cabinet magazine, issue #4, Summer 2001**

designed by Marcel Duchamp, with a tactile sponge sculpture of a single female breast. A fetish of the object (not to mention the objectification of the female form) was a common motif for the prurient Surrealists, and Duchamp managed to transform even the commonplace exhibition catalog, a container of mere reproductions and representations of the original artwork, into a highly desirable object of possession.

There is one important distinction separating *Aspen* and the Surrealist catalogs. Whereas the Surrealist catalogs were to be sold as semi-precious objects through a gallery, publications such as *Aspen* allied themselves more closely with popular culture magazines, sold for low sums to people who might not have considered themselves art collectors.<sup>14</sup> The difference between an “artist’s book” and an “artist’s publication” can be explained in similar terms. Whereas the artist’s book (or *livre d’artiste*) is rare, produced in a limited edition and often handmade by the artist or his or her collaborators (whether handprinted, hand letter-pressed or handbound), the artist’s publication employs commercial printing processes that enable lower production values and higher print runs.<sup>15</sup> In both its sale value and its distribution, an “artist’s publication” vies more closely with the “arts publication” than with an “artist’s book,” but differs from the former through its need to exist as an art object in and of itself.

The issue of cost brings up the question of access, which is another defining point of an artist’s

publication. Producing something cheaply as simply a “cultural by-product” (in the genre of posters, postcards, or album covers) downplays its “value” and makes it more widely available.<sup>16</sup> But distribution and availability also play a significant role in enabling access. The magazines acquire an audience depending on where they are sold—the kinds of bookstores, record stores, or magazine stands that they can be found in. Obviously, a magazine available at Barnes and Noble is going to reach a broader public than one that can only be found in a museum bookstore. But the magazine has the benefit of potentially occupying both spaces. Those that are even more obscure are only available for sale directly through the publisher, on its Website or through the mail. Obviously, these types of magazines are more likely to appeal to a few insiders “in the know.” But maybe that rarity, that difficulty of access, is in turn what defines these publications as art objects, differentiating them from something you can buy at the checkout stand at Safeway. It’s a catch 22—no matter how affordable and accessible a publication strives to be, limited distribution through independent channels curtails its audience, thus branding its experience as being “rare,” which in turn ascribes a higher value to the magazine, thereby turning it into a commodifiable art object.

Producing their own publications enables artists and curators to sidestep exposure in more established media outlets and venues, thereby circumventing the gallery circuit. Since most arts magazines rely on advertising dollars to stay in print, those advertisers are going to have a say over the editorial content. Low production costs eliminate the need to rely on heavy advertising dollars or generous financial backers, which in turn equals greater financial freedom and more creative liberty. The producers of artist’s publications are thus able create their own contexts for their work, without having to filter their messages through an editor or having a random format imposed upon them by a graphic designer. They control every step of the process, from the conception phase of their ideas, to generating the artwork or the text, to having a say in how everything is presented on a page and in what order. Therefore, the magazine format can often function as a marketing tool for the artist or writer’s work, one that is defined solely by the creator of the work, in the manner he or she sees fit.

I should mention that not all of the publications I’ve chosen to highlight use their pages to promote careers. Some promote specific political ideologies instead, undertaking a critical examination of themselves as media vehicles. Marshall McLuhan’s essay “The Medium is the Message” outlines how different forms of media can act as tools of social conditioning. “Subliminal and docile acceptance of media impact has made them prisons without walls for their human users,” states McLuhan.<sup>17</sup> His argument is grounded in the belief that media seduction has pervaded our notion of community, to the extent that it functions as a primary social bond. Through their impact, various forms of media can disseminate shared social values, which are directly linked to our economy of consumption. Magazines are essentially elaborate conveyors of advertisements; their main role is to be tastemakers and agents of commodification. They inform the public about what’s worth experiencing, which products encapsulate these experiences, and how to most efficiently obtain such products. Their implicit messages read as such: “If you buy the cultural products and partake in the cultural activities presented within our pages, then you too can belong to the communities that have adhered this value system to these items.” This is the community building that McLuhan speaks of, as well as a specific type of social conditioning that, through repeated delivery, inscribes audiences with a set series of desired responses to certain forms of stimuli.

McLuhan’s essay downplays the significance of content in media, stating: “‘content’ analysis provides no clues to the magic of media or their significant change.”<sup>18</sup> But it should be noted that con-

tent can hold sway if it takes a critical investigation of the medium; in other words, if it uses the content to make a pointed commentary about the medium’s function, revealing its artifice, and thus shattering its seductive hold over our consciousness. “The serious artist is the only person able to encounter technology with impunity,” states McLuhan, “because he is an expert aware of the changes in sense perception.”<sup>19</sup> Artists can break the spell of any given media by subverting every convention and cliché of its formats—in the case of the magazine format, this can range from the masthead to the editorial statement to the advertisements. By merging the context, the vehicle, and the actual medium of the magazine, artists can create a parody of the original to problematize its function.

It is worth noting the influence of the Internet here, an arena that has, by and large, collapsed the differences between the context and the content of an artwork.<sup>20</sup> Many Net-based artworks comment upon the Internet while utilizing its content as their building blocks. The Web thus becomes the site in which the works are situated, the vehicle through which they are distributed, as well the material from which they are made. This offers fertile ground for effective spoofing tactics. For example, Net artists and “hactivists” can create Websites that parody corporate homepages, with exaggerated commentary exposing the exploitation hidden behind these companies’ corporate veneer. These parody sites often have domain names that are deceptively similar to the original, so that any random Web surfer looking for the original site may stumble upon the fake site by mistake, without even being aware of the fact that they are in the wrong place.<sup>21</sup>

It’s a scenario parallel to some of the artist’s publications I have chosen to highlight here. The magazine is the context in which the works are situated, but in turn, being context specific, the works literally become the magazine, unable to exist outside of it without losing their form or meaning. The medium can’t be separated from





**A rehearsal for the Miss General Idea Pageant, documented in the Summer 1978 issue of *FILE Magazine***

## HOT PROPERTY

(excerpt from script)

### Scene 1

Video camera picks up The Spirit of Miss General Idea 1984 — played by Anna Depuis, Miss Montreal 1975 — as she enters the ramp framed by the follow spot. She is attired in mondo bondage gear, cat mask, black bathing suit, boots. . . the works. Her entrance cues the voice-over narrative as Anna acts out a dominant daydream with lots of posing and gesturing.

pieces from artists considered to be big players in the art world, a close association that could, in turn, be viewed as an indication of this collective's own rising fame. A 1987 issue of *FILE* featured a cover of van Gogh's sunflowers and the exorbitant price tag the painting fetched at auction. Its editorial statement read:

the artists in this issue use the language and the subject of commodification as the canvas upon which they layer their artworks. As McLuhan once said, the medium is the message—and integral to that medium is the use of commercial and industrial processes, advertising lingo and the visual language of consumer commodities. . . . In this issue we construct a portfolio of artworks recycling consumer culture.<sup>27</sup>

Andy Warhol's dollar bills graced the inside front and back covers; Barbara Kruger created a mock fashion spread with images appropriated from popular fashion magazines that exploited ethnic stereotypes; and Richard Prince's photographs of images from porn magazines were inserted as a type of Marlboro ad, posed with hunky men epitomizing masculinity. But as much as these art projects tried to spoof and critique the art market's impulse to commodify the artists' political agendas, and the arts publication's role of promoting such commodities, one wonders if *FILE* might have eventually fallen prey to actually promoting these commodities, using the status commanded by the careers of these well-known artists to in turn raise the publication's profile.

As a comparison, take the tongue-in-cheek tone of *FILE*'s earlier years, as in a 1972 issue dedicated to "practicing non-artists."<sup>28</sup> These practicing non-artists were the bag ladies and street characters living on the streets of Toronto, not

to mention General Idea's landlady. The street people were "performance artists," and the landlady's collection of potted plants earned her the title of "installation artist." This change in *FILE*'s focus from bag ladies to art stars is somewhat telling. It's not altogether unlikely that *FILE* served as a marketing vehicle to promote General Idea's career. Not to say that there's anything wrong with that, but as General Idea gained more exposure within the art world, their publication appears to have become increasingly entrenched within the very same establishment that it critiqued. This is further evidenced in the increasing number of advertisements appearing on the pages of *FILE*'s later issues, ads for galleries, art fairs, and other, more mainstream arts publications. The artists seemed to be aware of the fact that a publication could not engage in a critique of the establishment if it ran the risk of representing the establishment itself. Their editorial statement for the last issue reads:

In this era of corporate culture, the culture is corporate: *FILE* cannot continue without becoming enmeshed in the deadlines, managing editors, international correspondents, advertising representatives and other signifiers of the mundane world. Invisibility, then, is impossible in this decade of celebration of visibility. If the message is the medium, as McLuhan contended, then that message is marketing.<sup>29</sup>

It's a given that those publications which effectively turn the media vehicle against themselves abolish themselves in the process. It's an internal sabotage of sorts. Perhaps that's why many such publications (with the notable exception of *FILE*) are so short-lived. As soon as they achieve their task, they either render themselves moot or become coopted by the mainstream. Thus unfolds the never-ending cycle of appropriation, subversion, and eventual cooption that feeds the media machine.

## Notes

- 1 Amy Newman, "Interview with Mel Bochner," in *Challenging Art: Artforum, 1962–1974* (New York: Soho Press, 2000), pp. 205–206.
- 2 The difference between arts publications and artist's publications will be discussed in greater depth later in this essay.
- 3 Lars Bang Larsen proposed this view of curatorial practice at a lecture he gave at the California College of Arts and Crafts in November 2002.
- 4 Some of the appropriation tactics of the postmodern artists will be discussed later on in this essay in reference to *FILE Magazine*. Some of the conceptual projects of the 1960s are discussed in a different portion of this thesis in the context of *Aspen* magazine.
- 5 *Permanent Food* is published twice a year, and is currently at issue #9.
- 6 However, Cattelan's appropriation tactics probably shouldn't be upheld as the model of ethical curatorial practice, since I don't believe he obtains permission from the originators of *Permanent Food's* content in his creative re-presentation.
- 7 For the very reason that I am also investigating their written content, I had to limit my study of magazines to English language publications, (although this doesn't necessarily mean that they are solely based in the United States or the United Kingdom) because I happen to be most familiar with the English language. This parameter did not apply to the magazine *Permanent Food*, which contains little editorial text and consists of a vocabulary of visual imagery, and is therefore legible to an audience well versed in pop culture.
- 8 Many of these discoveries were made while looking through the archives of Steven J. Leiber, who graciously made his extensive collection of artist's ephemera available to me for my research.
- 9 *Aspen* was in publication from 1965 to 1971. Its guest editors included Andy Warhol, Marshall McLuhan, and Brian O'Doherty.
- 10 Although in one case issues were not different from one another, because O'Doherty edited a combined issue, *Aspen 5+6*, in 1967.
- 11 Phyllis Johnson, from a letter to the readers of *Aspen*, issue #1, 1965.
- 12 This ability to reorganize *Aspen's* contents encouraged a more interactive mode of "reading" a magazine or "viewing" an exhibition.
- 13 The Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme was held at the Galerie Maeght in Paris, and Boite Alerte was held at the Galerie Daniel Cordier in Paris.
- 14 I say semiprecious rather than precious because they didn't command as high a value as the "original" works of art hanging inside the gallery, but because they were produced as limited, "deluxe" editions with rare reproductions, they were worth more than the inexpensively produced, high-run edition of the regular-print catalog.
- 15 This distinction has become a bit more blurred recently with the advent of digital printing, as this commercial process is now also being used for fine art printing. But what still separates artist's books from artist's publications is their editions, with the artist's book having very rare, limited run, and the artist's publication being reproduced in mass quantities.
- 16 I borrow this term "cultural by-product" from critic Michael Bracewell's review of collector Steven J. Leiber's exhibition, *Extra Art: A Survey of Artists' Ephemera*, appearing in *Frieze*, Issue #72, January/February 2003.
- 17 Marshall McLuhan, "The Medium is the Message," in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1964), p. 20.
- 18 Marshall McLuhan, p. 20.
- 19 Marshall McLuhan, p. 18.
- 20 Actually, this was also a trait that could be attributed to the Earthworks of the 1960s, but these pieces, of course, were very tied to a specific place, and even a specific point of time, whereas the publications are wholly mobile art objects, and surfing the Internet is an activity that can be experienced from different parts of the world.
- 21 Noteworthy examples of such parody sites can be found on @Tmark's homepage at <http://rtmark.com/>.
- 22 In line with their ongoing efforts to blur and blend the concepts of "truth" and "artifice," the members of General Idea appropriated these pen names to be used within the pages of *FILE*, as well as within the professional context of the art world.
- 23 Script from General Idea's *Test Tube*, videotape produced by De Appel, Amsterdam, 1979.
- 24 *FILE*, Summer 1978, p. 14.
- 25 *FILE*, December 1972, p.5.
- 26 Dietrich Diederksen, "Glad Rag," *Artforum* v. 40, #8 (April 2002): pp. 104–108.
- 27 *FILE*, Issue #28, 1987, p. 8.
- 28 *FILE*, December 1972.
- 29 *FILE*, Issue #29, June 1989, p. 4.