
Gwen Allen, Assistant Professor of Art History at San Francisco State University, has produced a much-needed monograph on magazines by artists, ca. 1960-1980. Until now, examinations into this particular kind of publication mainly have been limited to commentary incidental to broader discussions of art makers and movements. Allen’s book-length treatment, which argues for their importance as an alternative to the mainstream art press and commercial gallery system, and as a radical and self-reflexive space, finally gives artists’ magazines the attention they deserve.

The ephemeral and obscure nature of artists’ magazines makes them a challenging study, and the depth and scope of Allen’s research is commendable. Starting with Art Forum, which was itself founded in reaction to the status quo, she investigates the response by the artistic community to Art Forum’s inevitable monopoly as a taste-maker, asserting its own role in the critical dialogue and campaigning for dematerialization in art practice. This history is traced through a series of case studies: Aspen (1965-1971), 0-9 (1967-1969), Avalanche (1970-1976), Art-Rite (1973-1978), FILE (1972-1989), Real Life (1979-1994), and, in an epilogue on international activity, Interfunktionen (1968-1975). It is an excellent selection of titles that illustrates the diversity of formats in which the magazine manifested, from boxed assemblages to mail art, as well as how overarching political and artistic trends and the interplay between alternative and mainstream affected and were reflected in these serial expressions of text and imagery.

Perhaps the most compelling part of the narrative is the glimpse into the personal relationships that originated, fueled, and fractured these collective endeavors. There is, above all, a great sense of the fun that was had in creating. The noncommercial nature of self-publishing was liberating, in this regard, while simultaneously responsible for the fact that many artists’ magazines were so short-lived. Springing from a refusal to conspire with the marketplace, the irony is that such publications often “failed,” deliberately or otherwise, before becoming the very thing they were reacting against—which, Allen argues, is their strength.

Allen offsets the largely American, largely New York, focus of this monograph by including a 113-page illustrated compendium of artists’ magazines internationally from 1945 to 1989, which is in itself enough to make this title a vital addition to any library with significant holdings on art and artists from this period. Artists’ books collections would also benefit from this title, as so many important artists making books during this period were involved in the publications discussed. The volume itself is sturdy, well-illustrated, and an enjoyable, edifying read.

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