Thematic Investigation

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Publishing Art: Alternative Distribution in Print

The essays, artists' projects, and interview that follow explore the use of the printed page as a site of alternative distribution for art. In the expanded field of the 1960s and 1970s, printed matter, in the form of criticism, interviews, photographic reproductions, documentation, and advertisements, became a new kind of medium—one that challenged formalist models of medium-specificity and prompted new kinds of self-reflexivity about institutions and audiences both inside and outside the so-called art world. Given the current interest in alternative distribution on the part of artists, art historians, and editors—exemplified by the artists' projects recently published in these pages—the time seems ripe to revisit its history in the conceptually oriented practices of the 1960s and 1970s, and to consider how it has evolved since.[1]

The term "alternative distribution" connotes an ideological opposition to the dominant structures and hierarchies of the art world (or in independent film and record labels, the culture industry) and has historically been coupled with a desire to produce and exhibit art outside the mandates of profit and to reach a wider audience. And yet, as we pressure this blanket category with the complexity of specific examples—from tactical interventions into editorial and advertising space to editor-initiated invitations to publish—questions are begged: Which structures and hierarchies? What audiences? To what are practices of alternative distribution an alternative?

To publish, from the Latin *publicare*, literally means "to make public," and the cheap, accessible form of magazines both embodied the radical politics of the 1960s and resonated with new poststructuralist models of semantic freedom. In an era in which protesters took to the streets and Roland Barthes advocated "the birth of the reader," artists used print media to democratize the experience of art and empower the viewer. Independent and artist-run publications, including *Aspen*, *0–9*, *Avalanche*, *Interfunktionen*, *FILE*, and *Art-Rite*, became vital sites of alternative distribution through which artists shed the restrictions of the white cube. Also significant were tactical interventions in mainstream publications, such as Dan Graham's advertisements and articles, including "Homes for America," published in *Arts Magazine* (December 1966–January 1967). This article about suburban tract housing slyly reveals the important role of publicity in the 1960s art world, illustrating Graham's observation that "if a work of art wasn't written about and reproduced in a magazine it would have difficulty attainting the status of 'art.'"[2] Other magazine works, such as Robert Smithson's "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan," published in *Artforum* (September 1969), emphasize the institutional contingencies of media information that underlie the supplementary logic of the artist's sculptural investigations.

These works opposed the market in part through their unpretentious and innocuous disposability, the way they seemed almost to invite the possibility of being overlooked. And yet the egalitarian and antimarket rhetoric that attended alternative distribution was often contradicted by its limitations in practice. For

1. In 2005 *Art Journal* published special stand-alone projects by four artists: William Pope.L (Spring 2005), Clifton Meador (Summer 2005), Barbara Bloom (Fall 2005), and Mary Lum (Winter 2005). The projects were funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

2. Dan Graham, "My Works for Magazine Pages: 'A History of Conceptual Art,'" in *Two-Way Mirror Power: Selected Writings by Dan Graham on His Art*, ed. Alexander Alberro (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 12.

Lynda Benglis, *Artforum* advertisement, 1974, published in *Artforum*, November 1974, 10¼ x 20½ in. (26 x 52 cm) (artwork © Lynda Benglis; provided by Cheim & Read, New York)

example, art magazines presumed specialized audiences, reproduced the divisions of class, gender, and race that operated in the rest of the world, and fueled the commercial art market. Indeed, as Alexander Alberro has written in his book on the alternative distribution practices developed by artists in collaboration with the dealer Seth Siegelaub, "The egalitarian pursuit of publicness and the emancipation from traditional forms of artistic value were as definitive as the fusion of the artwork with advertising and display."[3] While such contradictions qualify the more utopian claims made in the service of alternative distribution, they do not necessarily mark these practices as failures, but highlight the need to be specific and nuanced in the approach to magazine works; they invite us to pay attention to the economic and formal factors that structure the politics of printed matter, from layout and advertising to publication schedules and circulation.

Several pieces from the 1960s and 1970s offer models for such a site-specific analysis of the art magazine, emphasizing the material, institutional, and discursive contexts of publications. Against received notions of Conceptual art as cerebral and dematerialized, Graham's 1966 *Schema* insists on the objecthood of the magazine, or "the physicality of print," as the artist put it.[4] This algorithmic template, consisting of a list of variables about the layout, paper stock, and typeface to be filled in by the editor, changes depending on where it is published. *Schema* disrupts our automatic reading habits, reminding us that reading is not only a conceptual activity, but deeply visual and tactile. Another work, Lynda Benglis's scandalous 1974 *Artforum* ad, used advertising space in order to implicate the magazine in the systems of publicity and marketing.[5] A send-up of a pornographic centerfold, featuring a nude photograph of the artist sporting a dildo positioned as an oversized, plastic phallus, Benglis's ad shrewdly allegorizes the exploitation of the intellectual labor of artists and critics. Both of these examples

3. Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 5.
4. Dan Graham, "Interview with Dan Graham by Mike Metz," *Bomb*, Winter 1994, 24.
5. See Richard Meyer, "Bone of Contention," *Artforum*, November 2004, 73–74.

Robert Smithson, "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan," 1969, article published in *Artforum*, November 1969, 10¼ x 20½ in. (26 x 52 cm) (artwork © Estate of Robert Smithson/licensed by VAGA, New York, NY)

complicate the notion of publications as direct channels to the public and underscore the highly mediated nature of encountering art in magazines.

If Benglis's advertisement caused an uproar, prompting an angry letter (and subsequent resignation) from several *Artforum* editors, and if Graham's interventions encouraged readers to reflect critically on the function of the art magazine, it is increasingly difficult to imagine an artist provoking this kind of a response today in art magazines, which regularly commission artists' projects. Indeed, the NEA-funded artists' projects recently published in *Art Journal* pose similar questions to those raised by institutional critique, which has been accepted and canonized—institutionalized—by those very fixtures it once sought to challenge.[6] And yet, as with institutional critique, a careful look at the history of alternative distribution reveals that it was never as aloof from the conventions and commercialism of the art world as has sometimes been supposed. Many of Smithson's and Graham's magazine pieces were supported by forward-thinking and intellectually generous editors, notably Philip Leider at *Artforum*. And in 1970 *Studio International* devoted an entire issue to an exhibition of artists' projects entitled "July/August 1970," suggesting that even at this early moment, alternative distribution was sanctioned by the mainstream art press.

These qualifications suggest that the point of alternative distribution may never have been to escape the art world, but to acknowledge its permeation by the communication structures of the real world and to reveal the space of media as shot through with power and politics, and issues of race, class, and gender. As Graham wrote: "Magazines determine a place or are a frame of reference both outside and inside."[7] This idea of a magazine as something that demarcates or frames communication seems especially relevant today, when the contingencies of communication are increasingly invisible and murky in the global informational

6. See Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum*, September 2005, 278–83; and Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).
7. Graham, "My Works for Magazine Pages," 13.

SCHEMA

(number of) adjectives
(number of) adverbs
(percentage of) area not occupied by type
(percentage of) area occupied by type
(number of) columns
(number of) conjunctions
(number of) depression of type into surface of page
(number of) gerunds
(number of) infinitives
(number of) letters of alphabet
(number of) lines
(number of) mathematical symbols
(number of) nouns
(number of) numbers
(number of) participles
(perimeter of) page
(weight of) paper sheet
(type) paper stock
(thinness of) paper stock
(number of) prepositions
(number of) pronouns
(number of point) size type
(name of) typeface
(number of) words
(number of) words capitialized
(number of) words italicized
(number of) words not capitalized
(number of) words not italicized

Dan Graham, *Schema* (March *1966*), *1966* (variant 1967), published in *Aspen* 5/6, Fall 1967, 8 x 8 in. (20.3 x 20.3 cm) (artwork © Dan Graham; photograph provided by Marian Goodman, New York)

flow. Against the idea of unfettered accessibility that guides many claims about new media's potential, the essays and artists' projects that follow explore the ways in which forms of distribution, whether old or new media, mediate between art and its public, yielding both the possibility for communication and its limiting condition.

Cherise Smith examines Adrian Piper's *Mythic Being* advertisement works, which appeared in *The Village Voice* in the early 1970s, illuminating the crucial role of audience in Piper's practice. Smith argues that the artist's magazine interventions, understood alongside her performance and correspondence art from the same period, reveal the complex ways in which Piper understood and addressed her audience, both inside and outside the art world. Arnold Kemp uses the pages of the *Art Journal* as an alternative delivery system for one of his recent large-scale ink drawings on canvas. These works, which problematize the idea of blackness as designating a pigment, a color, the race of people, and experience in the world, are here inflected by the materiality of print: the black-and-white surface of the magazine page. David Little considers the alternative media practices forged by Colab in the late 1970s, as it sought to distribute collaborative art outside the venues of the already established alternative-space movement. Discussing Colab's magazine *X Motion Picture Magazine* as well as the organization's work in video and cable television, Little offers a precise account of how this work challenged mainstream media, directing the aesthetic and theoretical expertise of artists to activist ends. Adriane Herman and Brian Reeves, a.k.a. Slop Art, humorously and incisively explore how issues of commerce, class, and taste intersect in the marketing of art and artists. Combining a satirical critique of the elitist presumptions of the professional art world with a sincere desire to expand the audience of art, Herman and Reeves question dominant definitions of aesthetic value and the institutions that uphold them. Gwen Allen and Seth Price discuss Price's *TitleVariable* (2001–), a project the examines the way that digital technologies have affected music production and distribution.