

ART PAPERS

032c
A Prior
Adult Magazine
African Arts
Afterall
Afterimage
American Art
American Art Journal
American Art Review
American Artist
American Ceramics
American Fine Art Magazine
American Indian Art Magazine
Antike Kunst
Antike Welt
Aperture
Apollo
Appearances
Archigram
Archives of American Art Journal
Archivo Español de Arte
Arkitip
Ars
Ars Orientalis
Art & Antiques
Art & Artists
Art & Australia
Art & Design
Art & Seoul
Art & Text
Art & the Public Sphere
Art + Auction
Art-Language
Art-Rite
Art Agenda
Art AsiaPacific
Art Book
Art Bulletin
Art Business News
Art Criticism
Art in America
Art Issues
Art Journal
Art Licks
Art Lies
Art Monthly
Art Newspaper
Art Nexus
Art on Paper
Art Papers
Art Review
Art South Africa
Art Tomorrow
Art World
Art/Text

Art-E
Art.es
Artfancy
Art Revista
Arte Veneta
Arte y Parte
Artes de Mexico
Artext
Artforum International
Artist
Artnet
ARTnews
Artonview
Art-Press
Arts & Activities
Arts & the Islamic World
Arts Asiatiques
Arts d'Afrique Noire
Arts Journal
Arts Magazine
Arts Review
ArtUS
Artweek
Aspen
Avalanche
Bad Day
Bidoun
Blind Spot
Bomb
Brooklyn Rail
Bulletins of the Serving Library
Burlington Magazine
C: Magazine
CAA Reviews
Cabinet
Camera Austria International
Camera Obscura
Camerawork
Canadian Art
Canvas
Capricious
Casco Issues
Ceramic Review
Ceramica
Ceramics Monthly
Cine Qua Non
Circa: Art Magazine
Contemporanea
Corduroy
Corridor 8
Craft Arts International
Creative Quarterly
Cura Magazine
Curator
Curious
Das Kunstwerk
Das Muenster
Depart
der:die:das
Die Bohm
Die Kunst
Documents

Dog Food
Dot Dot Dot
Draft
E-flux Journal
E Il Topo
Ein Magazin über Orte
Elephant
Errata#
Esopus
Etc. Montréal
Everything
File Magazine
Fillip
Flash Art International
Framework
Frau Boehm
Frieze
Frieze d/e
Fukt Magazine
Gagarin
Garageland
Girls Like Us
Grapheion
Hali
Harbour
Headmaster
Heresies
Hesperia
Hunter and Cook
Hyperallergic
Imbroglia
Inuit Art Quarterly
Interview
Issues
Jamini
Jewish Art
Juxtapoz
K48
Kaleidoscope
Karen
Kayısı Kent A4
Kilimanjaro
Kingbrown
Kunstforum International
Krytyka Polityczna
Latin American Art
LEAP
Little Big Man
Lovely Daze
LTTR
Matte Magazine
May
M/E/A/N/I/N/G
Modern Matter
Modern Painters
Monaco Magazine
Mono.Kultur
Mousse Magazine
Myth of Europa
Naked Punch
Nero Magazine
Neural
n.paradoxa
New Art Examiner
New Ceramics
Nka
Objects
October

ART MAGAZINE
NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2013 US \$7 CAN \$9 UK £6

Octopus
On Paper
Oriental Art
Osmos
Outpost Journal
P: Art & Culture
PAJ
Paper Monument
Parachute
Paragone
Parkett
Partisan Review
Performance Research
Permanent Food
Perspecta
Picture Magazine
Pop-Up Magazine
Possibilities
Printed Project
Printmaking Today
Product
Provence
Public Art Review
Raw Vision
Rhizome
Rooms
Sculpture
Sculpture Journal
Sculpture Review
Shifter
Shopping Hour
Smug Magazine
South Magazine
Spike Art Quarterly
Storia dell'Arte
Structurist
Sup
Tate Etc.
Texte zur Kunst
The Artist
The Blackmail
The Journal
The Thing
Third Text
Tiger's Eye
Toilet Paper Magazine
Tribal Art
Triple Canopy
Umbrella Online
Unpublished Magazine
V&A Magazine
Vague Paper
Varoom
Veneer
Very Nearly Almost
Vie des Arts
Visible Language
Visual Arts Research
Visual Culture & Gender
Volume
Whitewall Magazine
Whole Earth Catalog
Woman's Art Journal
X Magazine
X-tra
Zing Magazine



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THE GOLDEN AGE

TEXT / BEN DAVIS

When the cognoscenti get together and talk about contemporary art magazines, often a deep sense of decline attaches to the conversation. Part of this stems from the generally waning status of dead-tree periodicals in our Internet age, and the sense of professional crisis faced by all professional writers contending with this new reality. Part of this malaise comes from general nostalgia, an older generation's attachment to the moment that formed its tastes and sensibilities. But in the case of art magazines, there's something more at stake. For there was a moment, now passed, when the institution of the art magazine played a specific role in the discourse about art, one that made such magazines seem particularly important. Maybe being able to think about this moment in historical terms can help shake the present free of some of its neuroses.

Before leaping ahead to examine this problem, it's worth noting that the fate of art magazines is different—though connected—to another present-day concern: the state of art criticism. The two phenomena interact and interpenetrate in all kinds of ways (where, after all, do people get paid to write art criticism?), but I'd like to start with acknowledging their difference.

Diderot's pioneering early criticism was done for *Correspondance littéraire*, a publication with a small international audience of just a few dozen.¹ The avant-garde, as its very name indicates, got out in front and addressed itself to a relatively small audience. And the various alternative artist-run magazines of the 1960s and 70s such as *Art-Rite* and *Avalanche* were tiny indeed, and not set up as lasting businesses of any kind, even if now we remember them as some of the most vital venues for art writing of their era.

Clearly, the conditions for producing art writing that is relevant have only a little bit to do with the conditions for establishing a gigantic, thriving publishing enterprise. Thank god.

Nevertheless, without understanding the conjunction between a certain moment in magazines and a certain moment in art criticism, it's hard to understand the particular agita that

greeted the topic of the art magazine today. In particular *Artforum's* perceived stagnation is something that serious commentators harp on again and again as a sign of criticism's overall degradation. Way back in 1993, Yve-Alain Bois was already recalling the period when *Artforum* "was still something to be read and not yet a glossy printout in the hands of dealers,"² while Barbara Rose, writing just last year on the decline of criticism, lamented that *Artforum* had become "a repugnant object."³

Artforum has never had the widest circulation among art magazines (that honor goes to the venerable *ARTnews*), which makes it all the more striking that its golden moment throws off such an intense, almost blinding light. In its day, it did indeed have an overpowering importance: in 1972, *Newsweek* singled out *Artforum* in an article on "the growing, seminal importance of the art magazine," declaring grandly, "No longer the passive judge and recorder of art, it [the magazine] is now a part of the action."⁴ Today, at a moment that some people call "post-critical," the lament is that what is written about art has little bearing on what does and doesn't succeed.⁵

What, then, made for the unusual alignment of pragmatic dominance and particularly intense sense of purpose in the late-60s-early-70s "Moment of *Artforum*"?

In my book *9.5 Theses on Art and Class* and elsewhere, I've argued that the transition to the footnoted, theory-driven mode of criticism that is *Artforum's* signal contribution to the arena of popular art writing should be understood in conjunction with a very specific material transformation in society: the dramatic explosion of university education taking place across the developed world in the 60s and 70s. In this period the phenomenon of mass education seemed new and exciting; the existence of a magazine that framed art in terms of ideas instead of feelings (as did its antagonist, *ARTnews*, known for employing "poet-critics") very much captured that moment.⁶

Yet this explosion of university education was not without its own tensions. Most notably, the campuses became the key site of struggle during

the 60s, as students massively rebelled against the corporate model of university education, against the war in Vietnam, for civil rights, and against a materialistic culture in general. Founded in San Francisco in 1962, *Artforum* moved to New York City in 1967, by which time all this political energy was rattling its way upward into the art world. Artists like the conceptualists and the minimalists found themselves rebelling against the more inflexible forms of formalism, seeing this rebellion as a quasi-political rejection of the establishment. Heady writings by the figures involved in this shift, including Donald Judd and Robert Smithson, famously found an outlet in *Artforum*, providing a particular sense of lively engagement.

More decisively still, the explosion of feminist, gay rights, and post-colonial struggles of the 60s and 70s created the basis for a transformation in art-historical sensibilities in general toward what would later be called the New Art History.⁷ Between 1970 and 1980, a dramatic shift in terms of reference in the academic language of art began to take place. In his introduction to *The State of Art Criticism*, James Elkins actually graphs how it is at this moment that such terms as "semiotics," "psychoanalysis," "the gaze," and (most dramatically) "feminism" explode into use in art-historical bibliographies, while at the same moment, references to old-guard heroes such as Erwin Panofsky and E.H. Gombrich level off and then crater.⁸

In short, during the period, a large-circulation art magazine could seem particularly relevant because there were particularly relevant debates taking place, not just among small groups of artists, but across the dramatically expanded field of art writing, and across the country.

A newly dominant academy discovering a sense of purpose, however, was only half of the puzzle. Such critical developments coincided with a particular moment in the art economy as well, one in which it was consolidating into an industry on a different scale. In particular, what artists and outsiders alike commented on in the 70s—sometimes with resentment—was the king-making

INSIDE FRONT COVER + OPPOSITE: Conrad Bakker, *Untitled Project: SUBSCRIPTION* [*Artforum International* September 1969–June 1970], 2009–2010, oil on carved wood (courtesy of the artist). A carved and painted subscription of one year of vintage *Artforum International* magazines based on specific back issues dated from September 1969 through June 1970. These magazine/sculptures were mailed to ten individual subscribers between September 2009 and June 2010.

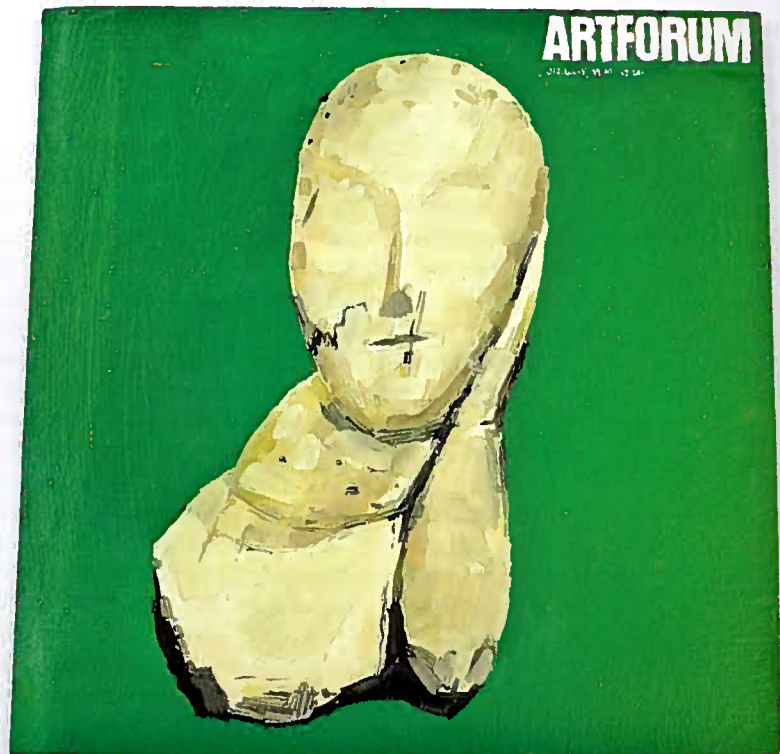
commercial *authority* that a periodical like *Artforum* could wield in its day.

From pop art on, the market for work by living artists in the United States—as well as the number of galleries involved in the business—grew dramatically. In the 1960s and 1970s, a theory-driven criticism could play a specific commercial role: it was *Artforum's* editorial innovation to focus specifically on new art, which, with relatively little historical justification, needed a legitimating code. Theory could provide that better than personal anecdote, and a periodical magazine, by definition driven to highlight new things each month, was a perfect site for this conjunction. At the start, the theory in question was a hopped-up version of Clement Greenberg proffered by Michael Fried, but soon it was replaced by various more or less strident reactions to it.⁹

One can see, however, how this particular role for highly serious and specialized art magazines would be a transitional one; it functions best where contemporary art's value is still unsteady. In the 1950s through to the 1970s, the idea that art was a career still seemed somewhat outlandish: "In those years, there was no history of anybody making a living at art," George Segal recalled (exaggerating the case a little).¹⁰ By the 1980s, the yuppie art boom changed the dynamics, creating in the process a growing audience for art writing outside the specialty publications: "The swelling market ... occasioned relatively broad public interest in art, and that interest was largely met by critics writing in major newspapers and mass-market weeklies."¹¹ An overnight popular sensation like Jean-Michel Basquiat could be eaten alive by the tabloid media in the early 80s within the course of a few short years.

And so, already by this period, you have the intimation of a situation where money and celebrity become major drivers of market value, and a specialized kind of writing about art no longer has the unique role of motivating interest. As Benjamin Buchloh memorably put it, "You don't need criticism for an investment structure, you need experts."¹²

Not everyone is nostalgic for *Artforum*, or thinks that its influence was completely salutary. It helped create the popular image of art writing as somewhat emotionally stilted. What I do think is interesting—and weird, and noteworthy—is the fact that for a time the most influential of glossy art magazines was also steeped in a language that was so self-consciously mandarin. But this role was determined by a very peculiar set of forces in temporary alignment: a surging—but not yet totally self-secure—art market, an ascendant culture of academic discourse, and the reality that the institution of the glossy specialty magazine could serve as the mediator. This conjunction of factors is over.





Today, the market for contemporary art is definitely mature: by 2007, contemporary had even become the biggest category at the auctions, buoyed by lots of New Gilded Age money.¹³ Visual art still needs some kind of discourse to justify its large prices, but that need will never be quite the same, and consequently the taste-making role of theory cannot loom quite so large. Ever since big corporations discovered, via Takashi Murakami's brightly colored monograms for Louis Vuitton, that a connection to fine art could juice sales, simple pop-culture hype has provided an alternative pole of legitimation at ever-escalating levels. One result is that the aesthetic problems that obsess the writers steeped in theory are out of phase with the practices that are setting the pace in the glitzier chain galleries and the blockbuster-driven museums, so that criticism seems less to be shaping the industry than fretting about it impotently from a distance.

On a more subterranean level, if early art theory represented the self-confidence of a new cadre of academic art critics at their place in society, the basis of that self-confidence is definitely on the wane: as lecturer Claire Goldstene notes, "In the 1970s, adjuncts comprised 20 percent of college faculty nationally, a percentage that has now climbed to well over fifty."¹⁴ With the surging power of new tycoons on one side and the eroding institutional base for academic prestige on the other, inequality is pulling apart any basis for the illusion of an equitable conversation between the art buyers and the commentators. Future platforms for serious critical thought will probably look more like *Art-Rite* than *Artforum*—scrappy, guerilla publications on the edges of the business.

Yet I might, today, look for something redemptive in all the angst about the state of the mainstream art magazine. When I personally started writing about art, back in the mid-2000s, I thought it was good sport to mock the marble-mouthed generalities of theory-crit. I remember picking up *November*, a photocopied parody of *October* magazine (the famous theory journal spawned in an editorial split from *Artforum*), which contained wacky essays in the style of Rosalind Krauss, Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster—probably written by some disgruntled graduate students—and enthusiastically writing an item about it for the art news column at the website I worked for.

But in the shadow of the ever-more-pronounced brain-dead character of contemporary art industry, nostalgia for the "good old *Artforum*" might be turned in a positive direction—or at least given a positive spin. The very odd historical place of this magazine means that its ghost bears with it the promise that ideas matter for art—not just at the margin or for specialists, but at the center. By all means, let's challenge how specific theories and ideas have become little more than press-release boilerplate, or need to be renewed by a vital relation to the present. But the general heritage—the idea that visual art deserves a language distinct from any other form of luxury good or high-end entertainment, that it's something that should interest people interested in ideas—is one that is worth holding onto.

NOTES

1. Kerr Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism: Histories, Strategies, Voices*, (New York: Pearson, 2012), 30.
2. Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), xvii.
3. Barbara Rose, "Thanks for the Memory," *The Brooklyn Rail*, December 10, 2012, www.brooklynrail.org/2012/12/artseen/thanks-for-the-memory
4. Quoted in Gwen Allen, *Artists' Magazines* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 13.
5. "Nowadays too many see criticism mainly as PR and reviews as sales tools. This allows the market rather than artists to set the discourse." Jerry Saltz, "Writing Wrongs," *frieze*, October 2005, www.frieze.com/issue/article/writing_wrongs
6. See Ben Davis, "Crisis and Criticism," in *9.5 Theses on Art and Class* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2013).
7. See Jonathan Harris, *The New Art History: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).
8. James Elkins, series preface, *The State of Art Criticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), viii–xi.
9. "Skimming through the pages of *Artforum* ... we discovered at the same time that the vast corpus of American criticism of the late '60s and early '70s, so superior to the French, was largely dominated by a reaction to Greenberg. But the terms of this reaction were still entirely ruled by the tenor of his theory." Bois, *Painting as Model*, xvii.
10. George Segal, quoted in Michael Brenson, *Visionaries and Outcasts: The NEA, Congress, and the Place of the Visual Artist in America* (New York: The New Press, 2001), 27.
11. Houston, *A History of Art Criticism*, 74.
12. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "The Present Conditions of Art Criticism," *October* 100 (Spring 2002), 202.
13. Jennifer Fishbein, "Contemporary Art Tops the Auction Charts," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, April 8, 2008, www.businessweek.com/stories/2008-04-08/contemporary-art-tops-the-auction-charts-businessweek-business-news-stock-market-and-financial-advice
14. Claire Goldstene, "The Politics of Contingent Academic Labor," National Education Association, www.nea.org/home/53403.htm

Ben Davis is an art critic based in New York. His writings have appeared in *Adbusters*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Slate*, *The Village Voice*, and many other publications. He was associate editor at Artnet.com 2004–2010, and is currently senior writer at artinfo.com. A book of his essays on art, the economy, and activism, *9.5 Theses on Art and Class*, was published in July by Haymarket.

ABOVE: Conrad Bakker, *Untitled Project: SUBSCRIPTION [Artforum International September 1969–June 1970], 2009–2010*, oil on carved wood [courtesy of the artist].