

Courting Failure



Bernard Aubertin, page in *Revue Integration*, No. 4, 1965, on the cover of Gwen Allen's *Artists' Magazines*.

The expectation of failure is connected with the very name of a Magazine. — NOAH WEBSTER

Indeed, Mark Robinson in the editorial of *CIRCA* published in March 1990, celebrated the 50th issue with these opening words:

“This is our fiftieth issue. Perhaps only those who have themselves attempted the task of maintaining the production of a magazine – through panic, crises, debt and disaster – will know what that means.”

Gwen Allen used the above Noah Webster quote as a leader to the introduction of her study of artists' magazines – a real treasure trove of art magazines' lore – and proceeded with the following paragraph:

“In 1788 the American publisher and dictionary writer Noah Webster, founder of several short-lived periodicals, lamented the precarious enterprise of publishing a magazine. The average life span of a magazine in the United States between 1741 and 1850 was only eighteen months, and it was not until well into the nineteenth century that the advertising industry made magazine publishing a reliably profitable business. Yet the ephemerality that defined the magazine at the dawn of its invention has remained fundamental to the social possibilities inherent in this particular form of printed matter. *To publish a magazine is to enter into a heightened relationship with the present moment.* Unlike books, which are intended to last for future generations, magazines are decidedly impermanent. Their transience is embodied by their unprecious formats, flimsy covers, and inexpensive paper stock, and it is suggested by their seriality, which presumes that each issue will soon be rendered obsolete by the next.”

The focus of Allen's book, however, is on artists' magazines and more specifically those produced in the 1960s and 1970s. Further commenting on “the utopian hopes artists and critics pinned to the magazine during this time” she adds:

“Like the relationships and communities they embody, artists' magazines are volatile and mutable. They seek out the leading and precarious edges; they live at the margins rather than in the stable and

established center. They thrive on change and impermanence, favor process over product, and risk being thrown away. They court failure.”

Yet such failure, she argues “should be understood not as an indication of defeat, but as an expression of the vanguard nature of these publications and their refusal of commercial interests.”

Robinson acknowledges that CIRCA “may now be the longest continuously running art journal in these islands (with the exception of Artscribe)” which brings on its own difficulties as he points out:

“I have heard it said that CIRCA has become ‘part of the establishment’ [...] I believe we have a certain authority, but it is one that has been gained by sticking with writers who have had something to say, and by simply keeping standing whilst everyone else falls over.”

It is debatable whether CIRCA was an artists’ magazine as understood by Allen (more on this in a future blog), but it certainly had its fair share of the precariousness of publishing a magazine.

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References:

Mark Robinson, editorial (unsigned) to CIRCA # 50 March / April 1990 pp. 19-20

<http://circaartmagazine.website/issues/?issue=50> (click ‘Show scans of pages’ towards top of the page for scans of Issue 50)

Gwen Allen Artists’ Magazines, An Alternative Space for Art, MIT Press, 2011 pp 1-2. (Emphasis added). An excerpt from the introduction is available here:

http://www.artpractical.com/feature/introduction_from_artists_magazines/