

ARTISTS SPACE



*R E A L L I F E Magazine 1979-1990*

MAIN SPACE 03.29.-05.12.2007

*R E A L L I F E Magazine 1979-1990*



Real life was elsewhere

ARTISTS SPACE **MAIN SPACE** 03.29-05.12.2007

CURATOR KATE FOWLE EDITORS KATE FOWLE, STEFANIA HEIM, JENNIFER MOON



THOMAS LAWSON AND SUSAN MORGAN INTERVIEWED BY KATE FOWLE // LOS ANGELES, DECEMBER 23, 2006

**KATE FOWLE:** Looking over the complete run of REALLIFE Magazine, I was struck by how it maps the 80s in terms of charting the evolving politics, cultural scene, and art practices of the decade. In the way that you describe its beginnings, emerging out of late-night conversations between you both with people such as Sherrie Levine, David Salle, Paul McMahan, Helene Winer, Michael Smith, Barbara Kruger, Robert Longo, Jack Goldstein, Dan Graham, Craig Owens, Richard Prince and Walter Robinson, it seems now that the publication became a forum for a new generation of practitioners. Having the opportunity to read through the issues in quick succession, rather than over ten years, it's possible to see how the magazine shifts quite clearly, in that it started with a focus on appropriation and an interest in TV and film culture, then went on to record the rise of the postmodernism and post-feminist debates before reflecting on issues such as institutional critique, hypertext, AIDS and the revolution in El Salvador, as well as introducing the work of Mike Kelly, Group Material, David Hammons, and Critical Art Ensemble before the mainstream press were paying much attention.

**THOMAS LAWSON:** I think it was one of those periods when artists feel that art has become too rarified and abstract and needs to reconnect to everyday activities, and to real life. But how do you do that, and what is real life? Is it our experience, or is it the stories that are told to us? I think that's what people were trying to work through. In the late seventies and early eighties Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine were taking pictures of everything someone else had already taken pictures of, putting it up on the wall, and saying "look, look, look!"



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Sounds a bit simplistic, but I think it was a pretty exciting moment—artists trying to come up with different ways of thinking about looking. What they wanted to do was reconsider ways of representing what is looked at.

**KF:** I was a teenager in England during the 80s so my perspective on the decade is pretty different, but there are some articles where experiences coincide. One poignant one for me was the piece that Dan Graham wrote on the C30, C60, C90 Go tape that Bow Wow Wow released. While Dan was making connections between the record industry and oil shortages, piracy and consumer culture, I was playing the song until the tape warped.

**TL:** That's funny. Dan was always thinking about how art developed in response to culture. At that time he was working on various texts and a long video tape about rock and roll [Rock My Religion 1982–84] developing a whole theory on the political-religious context of rock 'n' roll, connecting it to the Shakers, the Pentecostals, and a whole strand of American religious enthusiasm. The text that he produced for us about Bow Wow Wow developed from those interests but reflected a shift in his focus. The way Malcolm McLaren used Annabelle and Bow Wow Wow to probe a collective fascination and repulsion with mass marketing, the way a complicit manipulation of desires worked even better than anyone knew, led Dan to an interesting take on the then current debates about appropriation and how art could possibly subvert all that.

**SUSAN MORGAN:** The amazing thing about cassette tape was its potential for reproduction and low cost distribution. It seems quaint now in the era of YouTube but at that time, video and audiotape provided a sense of immediacy. They also diminished some notions about specialization and connoisseurship. Suddenly you could just make a tape, give it to somebody else, and then relationships might spark. In a way, REALLIFE Magazine and the other small art magazines that were around at the time were about that same idea of connection and exchange.

**KF:** It's clear that REALLIFE was invested in addressing what artists were thinking about, including each other's work, movies, new music, and television. In the early issues, there's Barbara Kruger writing on Gentlemen Prefer Blondes and The Price is Right, Dara Birnbaum utilizing the set from the Hollywood Squares to make an intervention into another article, David Robbins contributing notes toward a proposed film, Richard Prince writing about going to the movies alone, and Tom talking about Richard Gere in American Gigolo. It's like the process of people working through their experience of a mediated world.

**SM:** For people who grew up in the 50s and 60s, television framed an idea of American life. It was a constant household presence but it was also entirely about artifice. And at times when art isn't addressing narrative, there are always television shows that are occupied with storylines. Game shows presented a very brazen idea about ambition and success, a kind of barebones get-rich-quick scheme.

**KF:** Do you think this interest ties in with the advent of channels such as Manhattan Cable TV, where artists started making programs themselves?

**TL:** I think that the connection between REALLIFE Magazine and the cable shows that it was a period when there was a lot of cultural change happening and there was a lot to think and talk about. Public access TV provided a new medium through which people could communicate. So some people were excited that they could do it, and other people were excited that late at night you could see people that you actually knew talking on TV. I think the magazine played into that same Zeitgeist. Its do-it-yourself look was accessible to the community and was a place that you could share your thoughts.

**KF:** Looking at the adverts, or the use of advertising space in the magazine signals this do-it-yourself attitude on a number of levels, and very much reflects the decade. The adverts chart the start of Metro Pictures, Mary Boone, and later Nature Morte, which I think is one of the most significant and long-lasting developments of the era because artists such as those that circulated around REALLIFE in the early days were also starting to have the opportunity to show work within the commercial system for the first time. But then you have other adverts that record the activities of Artist Space and 112 Greene Street, which later became White Columns, and that reflect artists' independent projects—everything from design agencies to small publishing and record labels—as well as being a space that artists use for artworks.

You can feel an enthusiasm in the first issue of REALLIFE on the first page where it's like, "we want to document and talk about all the things that are happening across New York that nobody's looking at," and it lasts for one issue. You quickly move away from this survey approach, but some of the articles and, as I say the adverts, continue to record events and projects happening at the time.

**TL:** That was a case of practicalities and economies. As we began to think about the magazine we decided it would be great to acknowledge all this temporary work that was going on: performances, short-term installation, all these things that end up being insufficiently documented, broadcast or made available for discussion. But soon we were faced with the logistical nightmare of going out every night to see something...who's got the energy for that?

I had always imagined the magazine in the trajectory of Surrealist journals; that it would be all about the voice from inside. It would be the voice of a new beginning, providing primary information, something that art historians would look at in the future and say, "this is what people were really thinking about," not what someone observing them thinks they might be thinking about.

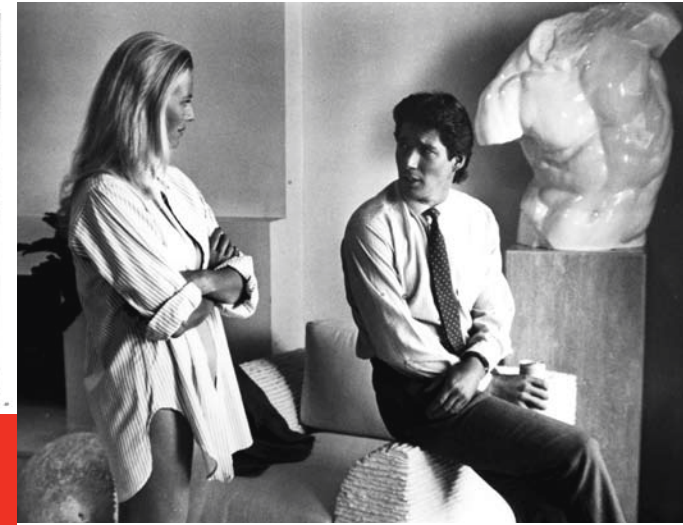
**KF:** There is also something in the idea of a Surrealist legacy in the playfulness and jokes that weave through the run of the magazine—people using pseudonyms, Michael Smith's cartoon adventures, and that BP Gutfreund prank...

**SM:** I think we've always had a sense of irreverence and fun: it's good for emphasis, contrast, and simply lightening the mix. I also think there was an essential difference between us and the glossier, more mainstream, magazines that have an established format where every review starts, "This 33-year-old

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*offshore structures for biomass and thermal gradient*  
*energy*  
*BOB ZIMMERMAN, Artist-Civil Engineer—offshore*  
*cities*  
*FOUNDATION FOR ART RESOURCES—relation of*  
*art support systems to collaborative ventures*  
*I. C. CHUANG, Civil Engineer—space-frame*  
*structures*  
*VIC HENDERSON, RANDY DAVIS, DAVID*  
*AMICO, Artists—layout of downtown LA*  
*CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF THE ARTS—panel*  
*discussions: responsibility of artists for material*  
*conditions*  
*GLENN SMALL, Architect—how recent art gives*  
*definition to his work*  
*DON PICCARD, Balloonist—suspended canopies*  
*UC-IRVINE—film showing better use of Irvine terrain*  
*KPFK—public radio call-in show: specific problems,*  
*specific responses (air pollution, public-access TV,*  
*implications of media choice)*

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artist born in Steubenville, Ohio is showing a new series of ...” We were interested in the connecting points and disjunctures that occurred between artists. We wanted to get away from the way that everything had to sound resolved in regular art magazines. The people who contributed to REALLIFE were in transition. It was a place that encouraged questioning.

**TL:** There was a philosophical difference in that mainstream art journals strive for a level of neutrality, a reporting of the facts so that an interested reader anywhere can feel comfortable that this is good information on what was happening in New York or other places. I remember feeling very proud that our magazine had so many very distinct voices in it without a heavy editorial overtone.

**KF:** And throughout the run of the magazine distinct shifts occur in the types of article and subject matter. One of the earliest is in issue 6 where you print the transcript of the ‘Post-Modernism’ conference at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in 1981. To me this is one of the earliest recordings of artists, and surprising artists—David Salle, Julian Schnabel, Sherrie Levine—talking about these ideas, as opposed to theorists and architects.

**TL:** That felt, for me, very much like a continuation of an ongoing conversation because it was organized by Craig Owens who had been a classmate of mine, and one of the first people I met when I arrived in New York in 1975. He was deeply skeptical of the commercialization and marketing of these new ideas and saw a huge split in integrity between artists like Sherrie or Richard, who were not marketable at that time, and Julian and David, who were.

**KF:** In reading the article I was made aware that the whole concept was being worked out. The language and ideas are very different to the way that Post-modernism is discussed now.

**TL:** No one was really sure about it and people were staking different claims to it. David Salle had a lot of interesting things to say at that time on those issues. I think, at least for me, the underlying point is the disquiet around the place of the market in relation to the development of ideas.

**KF:** Do you think this sentiment is amplified because you and others involved in REALLIFE were also entering the market for the first time?

**TL:** Absolutely. And we were learning about it very quickly. I’ve always had a slightly idealized version of how things work—you know, that art is about prioritizing the life of the mind, the studio, artists talking amongst themselves and so on, and so I thought once you’re part of a gallery it meant you could get broader dissemination of your ideas. But what I saw was this fairly small group of people—collectors and those who guided them—who came in on a regular basis and who were not so interested in all these ideas. Obviously they were somewhat interested, but there was also all this attention to rankings, who had waiting lists, whose prices were rising fastest. That was really disheartening. The writing I did at Artforum at the time was infected with some of this disenchantment.

**SM:** There’s also something else that is interesting about understanding the

period. Theoretical texts that are taken for granted now just weren't in wide circulation. It takes time for things to filter down and become part of the general conversation, especially if the work needs to be translated. I mean at that time even the influence of someone like Walter Benjamin was only just surfacing.

**TL:** I think he was first published in English in the late 60s. In terms of the percolation of ideas the "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" essay was tremendously influential in the 70s. Baudrillard was the theorist of the 80s. I can remember having a conversation with Judith Barry around the time she did something for us and she was talking about this writer that I hadn't at that moment heard about, and all the ideas that she was ascribing to him seemed to be the ideas we'd been trying to hash out. I think that we were collectively thinking through a version of Baudrillardism without Baudrillard.

**SM:** Reading does create non-corporeal intellectual communities. When you are having discussions around ideas and then you read something written by someone who is considering nearly the same thing—in another place, from a different angle.

**TL:** I think the material that we published into the mid-80s provides evidence of a number of people coming at these issues and using as tools the intellectual work of a previous generation who were trying to get somewhere else. For example, one of the ideas that we had when we started the magazine was to find older artists to talk to who had been out of step with the 70s in some way, artists like Bob Moskowitz and Michael Hurson who were very active but on the periphery of events because they weren't post-minimalists. They were invested in the image and in representation, so they were inspirational to us. But they weren't actually thinking about the same stuff, their concerns,



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as artists, were purely within the realm of art, while we were interested in the intersection of art and mass media. Of course it is never so simple; Michael was one of the most acute observers of mass media and its effect on our lives. I still remember him impishly telling me that he'd thrown out all his clothes and replaced them with an Armani suit after reading my American Gigolo piece.

**KF:** Can you talk about the "political issue" of REALLIFE that came out in 1983? It's interesting for a number of reasons, but primarily because it introduces a new roster of contributors and perspectives, and it is the first to overtly address the politics of the time.

**TL:** That issue had to do with growing opposition to the Reagan administration and the US interventions in Central America. Reagan had already been in power for several years at that point, but to begin with people were in shock, or a state of denial, and it wasn't clear that he would last. By the "political issue" we were facing the certainty of a second term.

One of the ironies is that this thicker, double issue was possible because the Reagan administration had mounted the beginnings of its attack on the National Endowment for the Arts. It took the best part of a decade to succeed in gutting the NEA, but that was the beginning of it. At the time of this first attack a lot of organizations decided not to apply because they felt they would never be funded in light of the new restrictions. We did though, and we made out like bandits, relatively speaking. That year we got the biggest grant we ever received, which meant we were able to have a slightly larger issue and some color.

**SM:** It was one color: a splash of red on the inside cover.

**KF:** How did a younger generation of artists and writers, such as Group Material, Gregg Bordowitz, and Mark Dion get more involved in the magazine?

**TL:** Around this time the publication had become, relatively speaking, established. We had a subscriber base, a distribution system and we had pen pals. Grants from the NEA and NYSCA were reliable and at a decent level. We were able to increase the print run up to something like 1500 ... it was working. At that point we had to make a decision about either really becoming magazine publishers, and clearing the necessary space in our lives to dedicate to producing four issues a year, buckling down and selling ads and having an office, or keeping it as this happily amateurish opportunity to publish whenever we felt like it. We decided that we didn't want to become magazine publishers. It was an important moment for us, realizing that we could do it but that we didn't want to.

**SM:** And realizing what we didn't want freed us up. We didn't feel we needed to address the missing elements of other art magazines.

**TL:** And we didn't want to continue covering the same artists just because they were the ones who we had the connections to. It could have become this sort of self-perpetuating machine where we would start to say the same thing over and over again. Repeatedly looking at the "next" series of paintings by David Salle, or reporting on Sherrie Levine's 'next' move. That could be one approach but was not what we wanted to do. We were more interested in find-

## Michael Hurson

an interview by Susan Morgan

If you're looking bad, people don't say anything. If you're looking great, they say, "You're looking great." You don't have to say a word, they're happy. You just say thank you. The visual part presents itself. You don't have to explain. That's the way it is with painting, but paintings that don't work seem to stimulate a lot of conversation.

A lot of your work seems to show a dialogue and an indication of time, your drawing. Ghost story, for example. Ghost story is two ghosts talking, one scaring the hell out of the other one. It's an isolated work, but it represents a lot of my interests. My work from the very beginning has shown the passage of time, short passages of time, two people meeting, talking, shaking hands. There's a painting I did in 1967 of a man watching television, just sitting in front of a television. It's about five inches high but about seven feet long. Just a man sitting in a chair looking at television. I always thought the painting was fifteen minutes long. At one point I wanted to call it Fifteen Minutes, but it's called Grey Picture.

The eyeglass paintings are very definitely about passages of time. They are really very much akin to animated cartoons. Jennifer (Bartlett) calls it a two-step picture. That was her phrase. I don't know what to call it. I thought the shape of the canvas was a good way of presenting a passage of time. I felt that what it is, is a passage of time, but a jump out in a film, a cut from one scene to the next. It's the shape of the painting, but it's not a shaped canvas. You're seeing as your eyes move about, as you might see a film. You look at one figure you can't really concentrate on the figure below, your eye moves up and down and you experience a sense of flow, a sense of movement. The fact that it's eyeglasses, with legs moving, it stimulates that experience.

In his article about you in Artforum, Robert Floucau-Wittman mentions that you used to work for Burr Tillstrom.

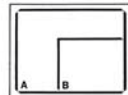
During the time I was doing the eyeglass paintings, from 1969 to 1971, I worked for the puppeteer, Burr Tillstrom, Kukla, Fran and Ollie. I had known him for years before that. I met him in 1960 at Otiswe, (Barnes School of Painting, Stage-Luck Morgan). I didn't know his work. I didn't know Kukla and Ollie. I found out years later that I watched Carmen Vito at the same time. I don't have the finest memories at the time. Then one night at Otiswe Burr did a private performance and I was just astounded.

In 1969 I really needed work and he suggested that I be his assistant. It was a wonderful job. He worked on shows like Hollywood Palace and The Tonight Show, when it was still in New York. It was the most exciting thing in the world to come to New York and work on the Johnny Carson show. The energy surrounding that show was so exciting, everybody was up and for a performer to be on the Carson show, that's an honor. It was just one day, television is very clear, straight right to the point.

Burr always works improvisationally, there's never any script, just a line of indication. "Well, we might sing this song, or we might talk about this." I've seen Burr and Fran go into a show driving in the car, talking about everything under the sun except what we're going to do. I was the assistant, so I did

have to worry about certain props, and I did have to turn the pages of the music. The puppeteer has two hands but they represent an entire cast of characters. As Burr works alone the appearance of a third character means one puppet must leave the stage. Kukla's up and Ollie leaves. My job was to get Ollie off and Fletcher Rabbit on. All the while, to the right of me, was a monitor showing what you would be seeing in your home. It's this flow of comedy and it's effortless, but on the other side of the screen is me, trying to get Ollie off and helping Burr to get the fingers into the palm of Fletcher. Then Fletcher comes up and there's this fraction of a second where you don't know where you stand, meaning me, how I operate, because the belief in Fletcher is so great, he is so real as an image, that all of Fletcher that you don't see, below the stage, doesn't exist. I don't remember that. I don't see that, I don't know about that. I'm transfixed. I'm looking at the monitor, it's so odd. At times the problem was that I so enjoyed the show that Burr would have to kick me to get my attention.

I watched Burr and Fran go to shows with no conversation about what they would do except right before the show. Burr would go over and speak to Fran and they would laugh and say a few things and it would seem to be that they finally came up with something. A minute before that, Fran would be meticulously chain-smoking and working a crossword puzzle. There's a lot of chain-smoking in television. The show begins, Johnny comes out or whatever, and it's all so funny and lighthearted and simple. I'm always astounded at how good Johnny Carson is.



Michael Hurson. Study for Sam Peckinpah, 1971. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery.

REALLIFE 17





ing other artists who were working out their opening ideas, figuring out the territory they would explore.

**KF:** It's unusual that in its ten-year run the magazine involves three generations of artists' voices, each with different imperatives overlapping in the same scene.

**SM:** Yes, but they are kind of micro generations: there's only about five years between each.

**TL:** Our decision not to move more into the mainstream also allowed us to explore a range of possibilities. We could expand the number of voices and let it go where it would, not just with younger artists but with older ones, too. I mean, David Hammons was someone who, in 1985/86, hadn't had a lot of attention in New York. Kellie Jones's interview was terrific—it was really the first time anyone had sat down with him to get his story out. And then to get Adrian Piper to contribute her excellent pithy letter to Donald Kuspit, and having Jeff Wall write the lengthy "Kammerspiel" on Dan Graham. None of these pieces were typical magazine content at the time.

**KF:** And there's also that interview with Critical Art Ensemble, who were pretty much unknown, which introduces their whole idea of "hypertext."

**SM:** When we wrote the introduction to the REALLIFE Magazine anthology, I said that the way that each issue developed editorially occurred somewhere between intention and happenstance. I remember that in 1981 I used to walk up West Broadway from Chambers Street to Spring on my way to work. For a while,

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there was a Richard Serra sculpture on the little triangle at Franklin Street.

**TL:** It was very vertical, three tall panels of Corten steel. It was said to be a temporary installation, and it was controversial. It was seen as a clear sign of the coming gentrification; suddenly art was in our neighborhood in this public way. Richard was local, he lived down the street, but there were a lot of artists living in the neighborhood, busy working in their studios making art. So there was a generally cantankerous reaction: why does Serra get to do this?

**SM:** Meanwhile, when I walked by in the mornings, there would be dozens of pairs of sneakers, each pair tied together by its shoestrings, tossed over the top of the sculpture. They'd be taken down and then, in the night, more shoes would appear. It was so smart and subversive, the best critique imaginable, and word was it was David Hammons doing this. One night some years later we were at a party and a guest arrived with a catalogue that she'd just done about the painter, Norman Lewis. And I said, "Oh, my boyfriend wrote a catalogue for the last show that Norman Lewis did just before he died." And she said, "Tom Lawson?" So, that's how we met Kellie Jones and asked her if she would be interested in doing something with David Hammons.

**KF:** One of the great aspects of the magazine is to see how artists influence and participate across generations. I'm thinking of Allan McCollum, who first appears in the magazine with his writing on Matt Mullican, then his Surrogate paintings are written about by Paul McMahon in 1983, and a few years later he is one of the artists Gregg Bordowitz and Andrea Fraser become particularly interested in. Similarly, with Wall's Kammerspiel piece, I like the fact that five years earlier you have Graham writing about Wall's The Destroyed Room in the magazine. There's a real sense of mutual respect and interest in each other's work that evolves.

**SM:** My feeling about art and publications is that they can represent their time. When you talk about the changes that you see in the magazine, it sounds rather grand, as if we had an overall plan; when, in fact it was only about us being attentive to what we were hearing and seeing. You know it's funny because the magazine had this ambition to document ideas, experiences and events because they were so ephemeral, but the magazine itself was ephemeral. On the other hand when you actually look at the run now it accrues substance and it actually does hook into very specific things about the 80s.

**KF:** The 'no bull' issue you edited, where you invited everyone who had ever contributed to submit something new "to celebrate our survival," is one that gives an overview of the ideas and debates that accumulate through the run. I love the newspaper clipping of the cloned bulls that you contribute Tom, because it was so symbolic of my overall reading of the magazine. That issue also brings things back to the beginning via Louise Lawler, whose piece 'Board of Directors' is on the last page, and she's also one of the first artists mentioned in the opening article in the first issue, which was on the exhibition Janelle Reiring curated at Artists Space.

**SM:** That issue was in 1990 and we were really at the height of the AIDS crisis. Survival was a real question, in one form or another. There was a sense

that our landscape had changed and so many people who were contemporaries were gone, leaving conversations unfinished. There was this plunging sense of thinking, "I'm in my 30s not my 80s, I'm not supposed to be looking at old party pictures, and realizing people are missing." There was an atmosphere of melancholia in the city; we were beginning to realize the extent of a huge cultural loss.

**TL:** People missing and conversations not completed ... you know like Craig [Owens]. Craig was a really important presence for a lot of us in the later 70s and early 80s. And there was still a lot to be said and argued with, but it was just cut off. And this happened over and over. I think it's hard to re-imagine the damage done.

**SM:** It's hard to imagine now what the dynamic was. It wasn't just the losses from people dying, there were others who really just completely withdrew, who could no longer bear knowing what was really happening.

**TL:** Anyway, that was our twentieth issue. It was the end of the decade and something of a summation. I always think of it as the light bulb issue because we had a photo of one of these great, larger-than-life store signs in Los Angeles on the cover. I'd been spending time as a visitor at CalArts. New York was weighing on us. We hadn't yet decided to give it up but we were, I guess, unconsciously not sure if we would continue so I went into that issue a little down, wondering if we'd somehow missed the point of the decade. And then it was great. I think everybody who could, sent us something. It was very affirmative. The responses we got were proof that, at least for some, art was actually about ideas and metaphors and emotions. It's a very moving issue, no bull at all.

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PUBLISHED ON THE OCCASION OF THE EXHIBITION

REAL LIFE *Magazine*  
1979-1990

MARCH 29 – MAY 12, 2007

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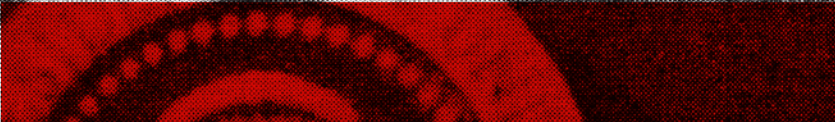
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DESIGN PAMELA OLECKI

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