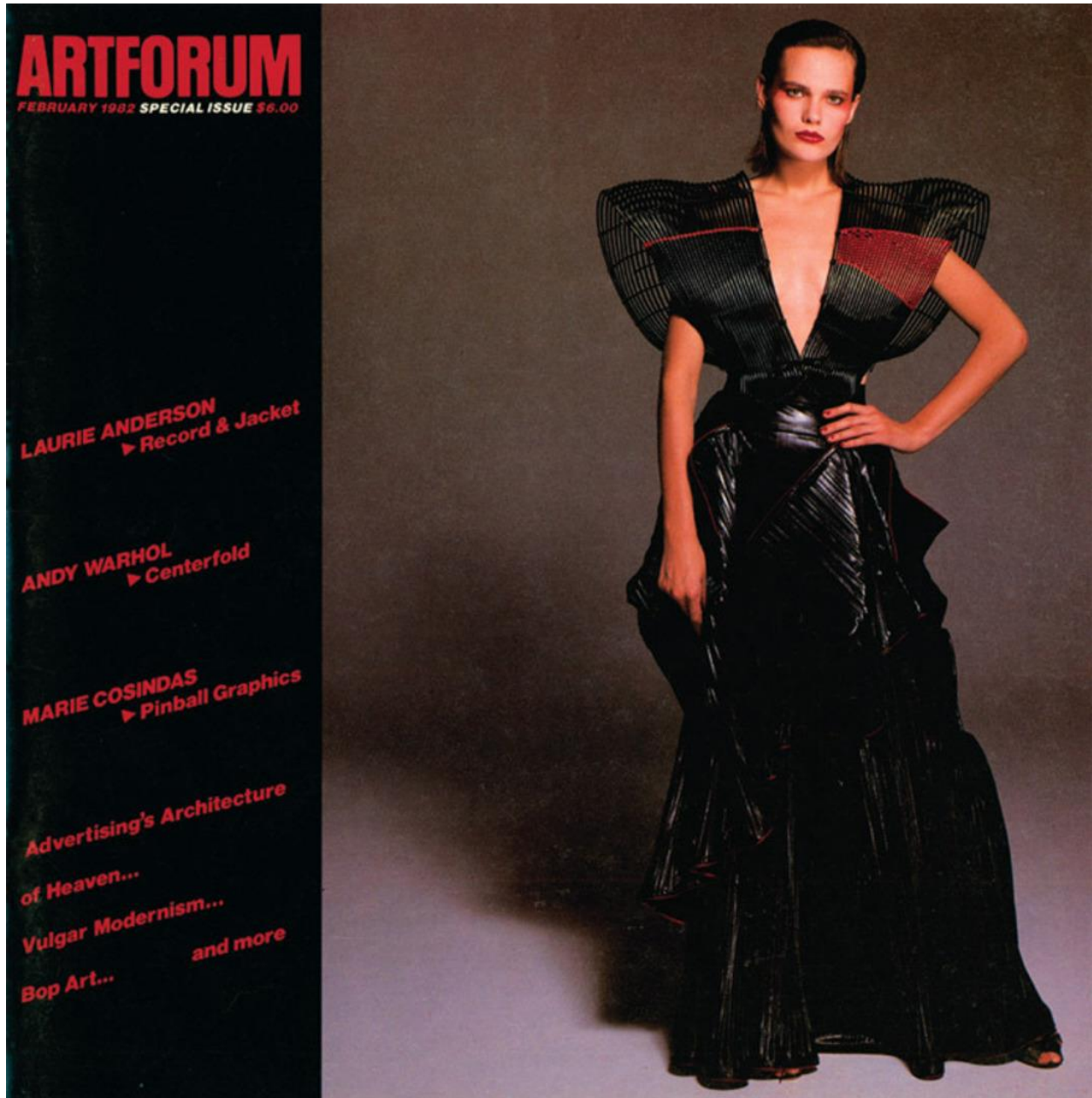


## Ingrid Sischy talks with Michelle Kuo



Cover of *Artforum* 20, no. 6 (February 1982).

**MICHELLE KUO:** Under your tenure [1980–88], *Artforum* distinctly moved beyond the visual arts, to culture more broadly—not only to different media but to mass media.

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**INGRID SISCHY:** Much of that impetus came from what artists themselves were looking at, talking about, and creating. If you look at our very first issue [February 1980], we handed the editorial pages over to artists and alternative art magazines. We didn't ask them what they were going to do before they sent in their projects.

And that was no accident. The philosophy behind it derived, in large part, from the world of artists' printed matter and of artists' books, where the relation between the artist and the audience is very immediate. Those were my roots. It is also important to remember the context. This was toward the end of a golden era of all kinds of alternative spaces for art—including Earth art, video art, performance art—which had arisen because artists and critics had been increasingly critical and suspicious of institutional power structures, be they galleries, museums, governments, academies . . . The aim was to go around institutions and create contexts for direct contact between the artist and the audience that wasn't mediated by museums, galleries, academia, any of that.

When I began my position as editor, it felt as if *Artforum* had become very narrow. Many artists, young and old, women and men, straight and gay, white and not, had been left out of the dialogue because they didn't fit the reigning definition of what was deemed appropriately avant-garde or appropriately modern. Europe was barely covered. Forget the East, Africa, etc.

We wanted to open things up on all fronts. It was also a critical moment in terms of photography, because this was before it had been really commodified by the art world. So in these back issues you will find a lot of attention given to photography: the history of photography, photojournalism, as well as specially commissioned photographs. We were looking at what we called photographer's photography—by which we meant not art-world photography, but photography that had a very different goal in terms of communication, a very different economic structure, and a very different history. And of course we were also focusing on photography's new intrinsic, critical role in art. Obviously, Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, Sarah Charlesworth . . . Tom Lawson's writing on the Pictures generation was a touchstone here.

**MK:** And there was an effort not only to explore photography but to experiment with other formats within the magazine.

**IS:** Yes. The point was to use the page as a primary ground for art. As a nonproscenium stage, even. Take, for example, the February 1982 special issue, when we put Issey Miyake's bamboo cowboy dress on the cover. Laurie Anderson created a special flexi disc of *let X = X*, which became her famous record *Superman*. We gave her the pages around the record insert, too, so she could also create the cover and the liner notes for readers to assemble. Jim Hoberman wrote his seminal piece "Vulgar Modernism," on the relationship between abstraction and comics; Andy Warhol did a big centerfold pullout of dollar-sign paintings; and Christopher Makos was commissioned for a very prescient drag photograph of Andy. We centered this issue on a topic that many artists seemed to be thinking about at the time: the increasingly invisible boundary between high art and low art.

Looking back, I think we had an intuitive sense that the end of print was on the horizon, with the coming of computers, new technology, etc. With Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in

the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” as a kind of intellectual centerpiece, we often put a spotlight on typography sizes and fonts. In our issue on “The Future” [May 1983], each article had a different typeface. There are articles on twentieth-century science fiction, on the history of automatons, on the history of photomechanical processes. To make the issue of perspective visceral, we designed the science-fiction piece as if you were reading it in outer space, with no center of gravity—so, page by page, you turned the magazine 360 degrees in order to read it.

In that issue, there is also a piece called “Train as Book,” where Edit deAk wrote about the work of Rammellzee, the brilliant philosopher of graffiti, who talked about “arming the letter.” Now when you look at that piece, at the idea of writing in the dark, and you think about what has occurred with technology and the changed means of communication that we have now, the article is interesting in a wholly different way.

**MK:** But you also see, during this entire period, the efflorescence of the ideological critique of media—Barbara Kruger debunking television, Carol Squiers reading the news image, or Benjamin H. D. Buchloh taking on appropriation and montage. There is a palpable urgency to these texts.

**IS:** Yes. And I think that’s why we had such a commitment to the work of philosophers such as Baudrillard, Lyotard, and Deleuze, who all wrote for us. But none of it was programmatic. It wasn’t as simple as saying that we needed a pluralism of voices as contributors. It was this drive to unmask, to deconstruct assumptions and dogmas that put up walls in terms of ideas about visual thinking. The reason we put Miyake’s fashion image on that cover was not at all because we thought fashion equaled art, but because fashion had its own important visual language, which was of great interest to artists. We wanted to include the dynamic and vital world of ideas that are around art.

**MK:** If you felt the slow death throes of print, in a way, how did you register the advent of other communications media?

**IS:** Well, it was the ’80s, so we were in the middle of the rise of personal computing and new technological objects. It was as if the art could sense that something new was happening, as if it intuitively focused on what was changing. For instance: the near-obsessive examination on the part of artists, critics, writers, and art historians of the whole idea of the original.

**MK:** This goes back to the impending photographic domination of communication.

**IS:** And very much to the ascent of performance, too. We tried to represent those developments in an immediate way. Like when we asked Brian Eno to compose music for the magazine. Or when we photographed break dancing step by step.

**MK:** If you were venturing into media or topics that were not safely within the realm of the visual arts, you also waded into the fierce debates over cultural studies and the famous modernism and primitivism exchange.

**IS:** That was a logical extension. For example, René Ricard’s groundbreaking piece on Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, “The Radiant Child” [December 1981], belonged in the same field of ideas as the pieces we published when the “Primitivism” show opened at the Museum of Modern Art. We went to the opening and had an almost physical reaction to what was on the walls—this blatant expression of the hegemony of modernism, and the parochial limitations of our worldviews in terms of relating to the cultural other—which led to Thomas McEvelley’s piece [November 1984] and the famous exchange of letters between William Rubin, Kirk Varnedoe, and McEvelley that followed.

And there were other issues that had been kept out of the pearly gates, to which we felt it was critically important to devote space and attention. There was an issue on “The Figure” in the early ’80s [November 1980]. At that point, figuration had acquired a bad name, identified with retrograde painting. But to us, this new notion of the figure represented much more. It represented an extension of feminist thought, as well as the very important issues of homoeroticism and homosexual representation, something that had never been put out front, on the page, on the table, in open discussion.

We had Robert Mapplethorpe take a series of photographs of Lisa Lyon, a performance artist who was building and sculpting her body. So this wasn’t simply “a return to the figure,” but a real search for who this new figure was and what these issues of contemporary identity meant. And, of course, one cannot underestimate how critical, literally, the onset of AIDS was to this entire period. What we lost when we lost all those lives has yet to be reckoned with. We were conscious every day that we were not making a magazine for art in a bubble.

**MK:** And this kind of bodily difference—and the reshaping of the body—became such a constitutive part of how we look at figures and their representation today.

**IS:** Exactly. I think there is a Baudrillard piece in one of those issues about the obscenity of retouching.

**MK:** And then there is the market: the elephant in the room in any conversation about the situation of media at that time.

**IS:** It very much was the elephant in the room, always. If one looks at a piece like Buchloh’s “Parody and Appropriation in Francis Picabia, Pop, and Sigmar Polke,” one sees how critically important it was to address the subject. Since modernism, it has to be. But it wasn’t stampeding the ideas—the way the market does today, I’m afraid. These ideas concerning the body, the word, the image, were much more powerful than the marketplace back then. We weren’t consumed by thinking about commodification; we were committed to keeping it in sight, though.

Take Lucas Samaras’s project *The Marketplace* [Summer 1985]: eight pages of abstracted portraits that pinpoint the market in a handful of archetypes—“The Art Dealers,” “The Art Critics,” “The Collectors”—whereas now that world is so thoroughly sweeping you could never do that. Now the crisis has to be how criticism, art magazines, any of it, can have any impact on the forces that are at play, since everything is so immediately commodified. And those forces were not at play quite in the same way or at the same scale.

**MK:** There is clearly a shift surrounding our consumption of the “new,” in the very temporality of reading and looking and listening.

**IS:** One hundred percent. And the idea that an art magazine could be an object that could do something nothing else could do: That was what drove us. Somewhere in there, I think, was an intuitive understanding of what, eventually, would become the role of the Internet. But by making a magazine into a kind of object that gave you primary art, that gave you sound—well, I’m nervous to say it because I don’t want it to sound sentimental, but it was a real love letter to what an art magazine is.

*[Ingrid Sischy](#) is a contributing editor to Vanity Fair US, international editor to Vanity Fair Italy and Vanity Fair Spain, and was previously the editor of Interview and the editor of Artforum.*

— [Ingrid Sischy](#), [Michelle Kuo](#)