

Various histories of REALLIFE Magazine

Thomas Lawson and Susan Morgan

A:

Trying to write a history of your life is absurdly difficult: how do you fit a pattern of meaning on what was simply lived day to day? Sometime in 1978, two years after we met, we began to talk about publishing a magazine: the idea presented itself as a way to document the particular interests and passions that fueled the decision-making of the people we identified with, the artists we knew. We had arrived in lower Manhattan when the city was still variously regarded as dangerous, glamorous, and bankrupt. In the autumn of 1975 (not long after the failed assassination efforts of Manson girl Squeaky Fromme), President Gerald Ford had famously rebuffed beleaguered New York: “Ford to City: Drop Dead,” the front page of the Daily News shouted.

We had moved to the city to find the life we had always imagined, a life of art and freedom, of late nights and fervent argument and productivity. We came to New York to understand modern art and the ambitions and stamina required to make it. We came to New York to test ourselves, invent our lives, and to make art like no one had ever seen.

To many of us, New York was a glittering promise, the destination we had long determined to reach. It was as if we had internalized Patti Smith’s mantra from *Piss Factory*:

“And I got nothin' to hide here save desire
And I'm gonna go, I'm gonna get out of here
I'm gonna get out of here, I'm gonna get on that train,
I'm gonna go on that train and go to New York City
I'm gonna be somebody, I'm gonna get on that train, go to New York City,
I'm gonna be so bad I'm gonna be a big star and I will never return,
Never return, no, never return, to burn out in this piss factory

And I will travel light.”

The city we found in the 1970s was literally falling apart: great swathes of working class housing had been burned and abandoned and streets were in dangerous disrepair; along the Hudson River, the derelict piers stood like contemporary ruins, a neglected and renegade urban architecture; and a portion of the elevated Westside highway had collapsed into an unsalvageable heap. Landfill, compressed garbage and tons of sand, had been deposited along the water’s edge to mimic a beach and hint at an expansive future. As the finishing touches were being put on the World Trade Center plaza, slabs of luminous white travertine lay stacked on empty sidewalks. Phalanxes of brown Norwegian rats ran through the quiet streets at night; the city’s cycle of demolition and new construction had upset and diverted the vermins’ traditional routes.

We lived in East Village tenements or in old manufacturing spaces and worn-out offices in Lower Manhattan. The lodestars of this downtown world, the social spaces that defined it, were a handful of now long-closed bars and ad hoc exhibition and performance spaces that sprang up in lofts and then disappeared, as well as Artists Space in the Fine Arts Building, the Anthology Film Archives, the Collective for the Living Cinema, St. Mark's in the Bowlerie, Franklin Furnace, the Clocktower, the Performing Garage, CBGBs ...

Real Life Magazine was generated out of numerous late-night discussions circling around our questions, attitudes, and desires. At that time the support offered to younger artists, by commercial galleries and established art publications, felt sparse; and the shadow cast by post-minimalist strategies felt strong. The alternative galleries – such as Artists Space, 3 Mercer Street, and Franklin Furnace -- allowed new work to be shown and the discussion about art to broaden. But conversation is inherently ephemeral and even gallery exhibitions are fleeting: somehow it seemed that all of our talk was directing us toward the printed page.

Our idea was to provide a forum for our generation to speculate on the general culture, a place for artists to talk about and with artists, discuss each other's work and consider the work that had influenced us. We knew that we wanted to address both content and context.

Apart from just the two of us, the people involved in various ways in the discussions that lead to our decision to start Real Life Magazine included: Sherrie Levine, Bill Edmundson, David Salle, Paul McMahan, Helene Winer, Steve Fraccaro, Mike Smith, Barbara Kruger, Robert Longo, Jack Goldstein, Douglas Crimp, Craig Owens, Richard Prince, Walter Robinson. As the circle widened and criss-crossed relationships, we exchanged ideas and sought advice from Dan Graham, Roselee Goldberg, Robert Pincus-Witten, and Rosalind Krauss. We were heartened to find immediate precursors in such magazines as *Avalanche*, *The Fox*, and especially *Art-Rite*. We recognized these publications as models and were encouraged by the possibilities they revealed.

B

We began talking about publishing a magazine sometime in 1978, and started putting together a first issue in the latter part of the year. Raising funds was difficult – neither of us felt comfortable asking people for money, although we did write to some well-known artists looking for help. None gave us any. But Robert Longo, who had arrived in the city from Buffalo, had the generous wherewithal to bring together a Buffalo-based designer, typographer and a printer who would do the necessary work out of shared interest and for mercifully little money. The first issue came out in March 1979. Later that year we wrote our first grant proposal, to the New York State Council on the Arts. Here is what we said.

“REALLIFE Magazine was first developed by Thomas Lawson while working as a NEA funded critic in residence at Artists Space. During these development stages it became clear that enthusiasm for the idea of this kind of magazine was such that it would be possible to publish only a small selection of material contributed or promised. It also became obvious that although budget considerations limited the first issue to activity in New York City, the response to selective canvassing state and nation-wide indicates that, given the opportunity, the magazine could expand its coverage relatively easily.

In an effort to ensure that the magazine would indeed develop statewide coverage, contact was made with Hallwalls in Buffalo to discuss the possibilities for producing the magazine at low cost while providing support for local artists. As a result of their cooperation several artist-run businesses in the Buffalo area agreed to collaborate. Deb DeStaffan worked on design and layout, Trade Type did the typesetting and October Graphics the printing and binding. The first issue has twelve pages with seven black and white reproductions. The design is such that each article takes up the space of one or, at most, two pages, with one full-page illustration. This format can easily be expanded should more money become available. The projected circulation at the beginning is 1,000.”

A year later, writing to the National Endowment for the Arts, we had become clearer and more declarative, even a little combative: “The purpose of REALIFE Magazine is to provide a forum for the critical discussion of new work by a new generation of artists, along with information about certain older artists whose work seems increasingly important despite the relatively low profile presented by their careers. Few of the artists discussed work with established commercial galleries, showing their work independently or in any of the so-called Alternate Spaces. Anyone familiar with the current scene knows that there is a tremendous amount of activity at present, but that little of it gets exposure, much less documented or discussed critically. However, if artists are to develop they must work in an atmosphere of serious criticism. It is the purpose of REALLIFE Magazine to provide this.

REALLIFE Magazine publishes material by and about artists who have yet to earn the recognition of major magazines. But unlike most other small publications that deal with lesser known artists, it attempts to place the work within a critical discourse, and is not content simply to print a random selection of photographs and drawings. In addition to critical articles the magazine contains interviews and writings by artists (working notes, statements, reviews of other artists and discussions of aspects of cultural life in general).”

C

The magazine always had an aleatory quality – contributions came from people we encountered in the city or and as we traveled. Susan interviewed Michael Hurson, Robert Moskowitz, Steve Gianakos, and William Wegman. Tom interviewed Stefan Eins and Joe Lewis from Fashion Moda in the Bronx, Komar and Melamid from Moscow. We

published writing by Barbara Kruger, Richard Prince, Judith Barry, Allan McCollum, and Dan Graham. We published visual work by Jim Welling, Mike Smith, Sherrie Levine. We published pieces about David Salle, Cindy Sherman, Jack Goldstein, Matt Mullican, and Jeff Wall. The balance was vibrant, continuously tilting, and mercurial.

By 1981, both our outlook and the New York neighborhoods we knew were reconfiguring. We looked elsewhere: there were essays from Los Angeles about Mike Kelley and Chris Burden; a feature on young artists, associated with Tanja Grunert, in Stuttgart; and the debut of David Robbins, a young artist/writer from Milwaukee by way of Providence, as a regular contributor. In the micro-evolutionary stages of the art world, within five years, a new generation of artists appeared in our pages – Mark Dion, Group Material, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Jennifer Bolande, Richard Hawkins and Tony Greene.

When we started, print was still controlled by the typesetter, and we worked with a number of eccentric and demanding characters over the years. At some point we began to use a Kaypro ‘portable’ computer for editorial work, replacing a beautiful old IBM Selectric typewriter. In 1984, Deb DeStaffan decided she had had enough of our late-night sessions, and passed the design role on to a friend, Janet Waegel. Janet was fearlessly obsessed with a new technological tool, the Mac, and insisted we get with it. We bought a MacPlus and discovered the joys of sending edited text by modem. While Janet worked at Esquire, Rolling Stone and US, their art departments served as our covert design offices over the next six years. During that time, we published a number of genuinely important texts: Jeff Wall’s magnum opus on Dan Graham, Kellie Jones’s interview with David Hammons, Adrian Piper’s “Open Letter to Donald Kuspit,” a first interview with the then-Florida-based Critical Art Ensemble.

In 1990 we published #20, and invited everybody who had contributed or been associated to send in something. The responses we received were amazing and moving; over ten years and twenty issues, there was an unanticipated pattern of meaning.

The following year we moved to Los Angeles, and although we tried to continue, using CalArts as a support mechanism, the impetus for REALLIFE Magazine was gone. This was a project that was generated out of a specific place and time. Two more issues were produced, one with a guest editor, Lane Relyea, looking at other networks, from zines to the fledgling internet. And then we laid the magazine to rest.