



Cover of *REALLIFE Magazine*, no. 10, Summer 1983. Cover image by Jessica Diamond, *Helpless* Peabrains. All photos by Lance Wakeling



Spread from no. 10, Summer 1983



REALLIFE MAGAZINE

Looking back at an era-defining publication
by *Susan Morgan*

My particular field is history, but history of a past so recent that it flows into the present," the writer Esther McCoy once explained. "I wrote about the people I knew, contemporaries. . . . And because history has speeded up, they became history soon." On the occasion of an exhibition and a recently published anthology of *REALLIFE Magazine*—the publicly funded art publication that I founded and edited with Thomas Lawson during the 1980s—I've found myself returning to McCoy's clear appraisal of how time passes, perspectives shift, and how the notion of a finite history unsettles us.

New York City was bankrupt and the art world was a smaller place when Tom and I arrived in lower Manhattan "more than a quarter of a century ago" (as historians and publicists like to say). I had moved to New York from Nantucket, Massachusetts; I cooked in restaurants and wrote little stories that were published in the sort of literary magazines that paid you with three copies tied together with a satin ribbon. Tom was a painter from Scotland, working toward his Ph.D. in art history at the CUNY Graduate Center. We came from different places but spoke a common language, one that randomly sparked and circled around such shared interests as Raymond Roussel, Carl Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, saltwater swimming, public libraries, and surrealist magazines.

In 1979, when we decided to start our own magazine, there were so many artists we wanted to read or write about whose work wasn't featured in the pages of the art magazines with robust advertising revenues: artists who were either still unknown or had fallen out of popular favor. I remember an editor at *Art in America* obliquely turning down Tom's proposal to write about Cindy Sherman. "She's someone you know, isn't she?" was the noncommittal form of "no" he received. Michael Hurson, whose work revered image-making when monochrome painting and minimalist sculpture reigned supreme, thanked me rather poignantly for interviewing him. "It was a time when we didn't think anyone wanted to hear from us," he said.

REALLIFE Magazine always had an aleatory quality—each slender, black-and-white issue developed through a combination of intention and happenstance; contributions often came informally from people we encountered in the city or as we traveled. Tom and I worked as unpaid editors; with a designer (most often Janet Waegel), we put the magazine together with a kind of covert-action efficiency, sneaking in after hours to the art departments of major magazines (where Janet worked by day). Laying out the pages, we discovered the sympathetic rhyming and compelling disjunctions that occurred among the images and texts we'd collected. The first issue featured a cover by Sherrie Levine: a silhouette, a woman's profile that had been cut from a magazine photo picturing a model posed as an artist. It spoke to us.

For me, trying to write a history of *REALLIFE Magazine* is absurdly difficult: how do you fit a pattern of meaning on what was simply lived day to day? Kate Fowle, who curated the recent exhibition at Artists Space, has traced out a rather formidable timeline that identifies and highlights the magazine's concerns. "Having the opportunity to read the issues in quick succession, rather than over ten years," Fowle has noted, "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 [it] went on to record the rise of postmodernism and postfeminist 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 Kelley, Group Material, David Hammons, and Critical Art Ensemble before the mainstream press were paying much attention."

Magazines are ephemeral and have the capacity to mirror culture and locate specific moments in time. There are many histories of the 1980s. For us, the chronicle of the '80s that emerges looking back at *REALLIFE Magazine* is one we—and many of the contributing artists—recognize and tentatively embrace as our own.

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