

REAL LIFE MAGAZINE: SELECTED WRITINGS AND PROJECTS 1979–1994

Edited by Miriam Katzeff, Thomas Lawson & Susan Morgan
Introductions by Thomas Lawson, Susan Morgan & Matthew Higgs
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In the early 1980s, a high level of activity in New York went unexamined (at first) by the big art magazines and commercial galleries, a perceived gap from which *REAL LIFE* magazine emerged. Founded in 1979 by artist Thomas Lawson and writer Susan Morgan, *REAL LIFE* started as a public forum for under-regarded or unregarded artists and writers, so that they would develop in an atmosphere of serious criticism. It just so turns out that many of these artists emerged as either some of the most significant of their generation or as necessary reassessments from the previous one: Dan Graham, Jeff Wall, Barbara Kruger, James Welling, Richard Prince and Kim Gordon, along with Lawson and Morgan, to name just a few.

One of the problems that can arise from collecting the back issues of an old magazine into a book is that everything that felt fresh and vital at the time may feel, upon updated examination, dustily, painfully and irredeemably dated today. But looking through *REAL LIFE Magazine: Selected Writings and Projects 1979–1994*, I'm astonished by the freshness of the writing. *REAL LIFE* documents the early evidence of the vibrant art scene developing in the early 1980s, capturing the shifting away from post-minimalist puritanism into the decadence of expressive painting, narrative and pop culture reappropriation. But the magazine transcends being a simple document of the time, and the writing, such as Jeff Wall's long essay on Dan Graham, fascinates for its depth and clarity rather than the who or when of it.

As the scene changed shape, so did the magazine, moving away from its original core to find new artists and new conversations to

engage in, including Mike Kelley, Chris Burden, Dave Muller and Critical Art Ensemble. Much of *REAL LIFE*'s print run coincided with the rise and collapse of the last big art boom, and the magazine so accurately captures the again-familiar talk of the ever-impending bust. And the editors' move from New York to Los Angeles mirrored the shift away from the East Coast art capital towards its self-appointed successor.

Though emerging organically out of a particular milieu (the broken-down ruins of New York in the late 1970s, late-night conversations in East Village tenements), the critical acuity of the essays contained within are incredible, both in their depth and authority. So many of the fanzines and magazines to come out of this era were amateurish, market driven or simply stodgy; *REAL LIFE* manages, like much of the art concerned in the magazine – as Lawson is quoted as saying in Matthew Higgs's introduction – to embody a 'familiarity towards popular culture. A mixture of love and contempt for the ever present images of capitalist consumerism.' As editors, Lawson and Morgan seem to understand the seductive quality of pop culture, mixing this awareness with an acute critical awareness. Critical without falling into the jargon of academia, hip without being hipster, dealing directly with culture in a manner both incisive and informed, *REAL LIFE Magazine* renews our sense of the vitality of a particular time, and underscores its relevance for ours.

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