

# BACK TO (REAL) LIFE

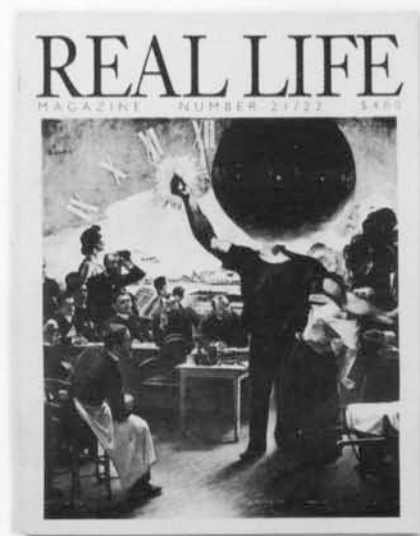
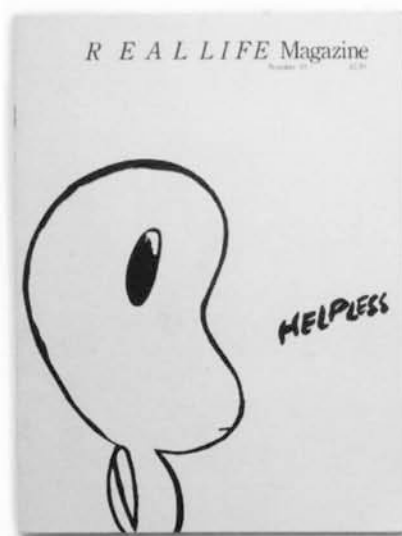
## 15 years of a magazine by artists, for artists

A carefully made-up fashion model posing as a sculptor in her studio, complete with a clay bust of a child, is framed by a feminine silhouette. This image is in fact an early, lesser-known work (*Untitled*, 1978) by Sherrie Levine, that doyenne of '80s appropriation art, which appeared on the cover of the first issue of *REAL LIFE Magazine*, in March 1979. It reappears on the cover of *REAL LIFE Magazine: Selected Writings and Projects 1979-1994*, a recent volume that adds a new dimension to our understanding of the art of the last several decades. Tracking key moments in Levine's development is only one small example of its contributors (two of the earliest appropriated photographs from her groundbreaking "After Walker Evans" series [1980-81] appeared in the magazine in 1980 and are included in the selection of reprints). The book's various interviews, texts, and artists' projects cast new light on the 1980s, a period that has had enormous influence on art being made today. Hence while many of the usual suspects—Levine, Richard Prince, Barbara Kruger, Jeff Wall—appear in the book, it also features a number of lesser-known yet significant figures from the period who are due for reappraisal, like critics Valentin Tatransky and Joe Bishop. History is always messier, and thus more interesting, than our standard narratives would have it, as evidenced by some of the surprising juxtapositions to be found in the book's pages. Who would expect to find Dan Graham's incisive, historically minded reading of Wall's first lightbox photo, *The Destroyed Room*

(1978), cheek by jowl with the article "Trash Drugs and Male Bonding" by a pre-Sonic Youth Kim Gordon, who conjures a scene of Robert Longo and Rhys Chatham jamming on guitars while passing back and forth a bottle of "Locker Room" brand poppers?

Admittedly, most of the articles collected here don't have quite the lurid appeal of that one. But they do have something more important—historical value. The brainchild of artist-critic Thomas Lawson (now dean of the School of Art at CalArts) and writer Susan Morgan, *REAL LIFE* was published intermittently from 1979 to 1994. Although it never had the high profile or achieved the staying power of an academic counterpart like *October* or a broader-circulation magazine like *Artforum*, in its own scrappy way it managed to cobble together a finished product that in retrospect does a good job of tracking the art of those years. As discussed in the introductions written for the new volume by Lawson and Morgan (who edited the book with Miriam Katzef) and by White Columns director and chief curator Matthew Higgs, the magazine was born out of the troubled economic and political conditions of downtown New York life in the late 1970s. It grew along with the burgeoning critical and market acceptance of mass media-oriented art in the early 1980s and began to evince a more overtly political view by the middle and end of that decade, spurred in part by the AIDS crisis and the politics of the Reagan years.

Perhaps the most notable aspect of *REAL LIFE* is signaled in Lawson and Morgan's intro, where the pair explains that they wanted the magazine to be "a place for artists to talk about and with artists, discuss each other's work and



consider the work that had influenced us." This emphasis on artists setting the terms of conversation is evident throughout: the book is filled with artist interviews (such as a seminal 1986 session with David Hammons by Kellie Jones); writings (including important early texts by Prince, one written under the nom de plume "Fulton Ryder," and several pop-culture analyses by Kruger); and projects, such as a 1985 Mark Dion piece on the economics of art restoration. One gets a real sense of artists talking to one another, as evidenced by Graham's aforementioned 1980 essay on Wall (based in part, we learn from a note that appeared in the original, on an exchange of letters between the two), which generated a response several years later in the form of Wall's own dense, two-part reflection on Graham's art, relating it particularly to the historical development of Conceptualism.

It is in this opening of a window on a series of important critical exchanges that the *REAL LIFE* book demonstrates its usefulness above and beyond a mere

act of historical recovery. We live in a moment not only when the values of the market predominate (a condition so frequently noted that it seems banal to say so at this point) but also when the vocabulary and language used for talking about art often gravitate to the extremes of either abstruse, theoretically inflected jargon or the froth of gossip column and blog. Reading these selections from *REAL LIFE* conjures a moment, not too historically distant, when things were different: when the market, while certainly acknowledged, didn't function as the insistent, corrosive presence it does today, and when artists seem to have been more fully invested—personally, polemically—in shaping public dialogue on art. For example, take the transcribed conversation (a must-read in my opinion) between David Salle, Julian Schnabel, Levine, Christian Hubert, and Craig Owens from a 1981 symposium on postmodernism. For those of us whose views of the 1980s have been informed by Owens's trenchant analyses of postmodernism, it's refreshing to

LEFT  
REAL LIFE MAGAZINE NO. 10  
(SUMMER 1983)  
COVER ART BY JESSICA DIAMOND  
PHOTO: ELLEN PAGE WILSON  
ALL MAGAZINE IMAGES COURTESY REAL LIFE  
MAGAZINE

RIGHT  
REAL LIFE MAGAZINE NOS. 21/22  
(1991)  
COVER ART BY DONNA KOSSY  
PHOTO: ELLEN PAGE WILSON

FACING PAGE  
ADRIAN PIPER  
FROM "AN OPEN LETTER TO  
DONALD KUSPIT," REAL LIFE  
MAGAZINE NOS. 17/18, 1987-88

the more aggressive Piper  
comes, the more she tightens  
the noose of anxious ambiguity  
around her psychic neck. Her  
naked feelings about



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read Salle's testy yet incisive retort to the former's theoretical posturings. And for an unforgettable smackdown of a critic, one need look no further than Adrian Piper's 1987 "An Open Letter to Donald Kuspit," a point-by-point rebuttal of his claims about her work. Piper's text is accompanied by a drawing of Kuspit as a cockroach—a portrait of a critic that would no doubt hold appeal for many artists.

Given that the *REAL LIFE* book is intended, at least in part, to contribute to the historical record, its editors could have done more to ensure its contents were adequately documented. For one, we aren't provided with sufficient bibliographic information: pieces are identified only by the year in which they were published, not by issue, and thus we have no idea which articles appeared together. Considering that the original run of *REAL LIFE* is not widely available, a circumstance that the publication of this

collection is no doubt intended to redress, such an editorial lapse is glaring, especially when it could have been corrected so easily. There are also some rather egregious slips, like the failure to identify Dara Birnbaum's *Inserted Realities* project from the March 1980 issue, which appears in fragmentary form sharing a page with a Michael Hurson interview. (This omission unfortunately underscores a broader neglect of Birnbaum's work.) Although I realize that the current economics of art publishing restricts the scope of projects like this one, I found myself wishing that more could have been included—and that, optimally, the complete run of the magazine could have been reprinted. Such has been the case with other, similar magazine-reprint collections like that of Vito Acconci and Bernadette Mayer's late-'60s poetry journal *0 to 9* and of *Andy Warhol's Interview* (and, unlike the latter, a complete reprint of



*REAL LIFE* wouldn't need to be packaged in a Karl Lagerfeld-designed crate with wheels and a retractable handle). Seeing *REAL LIFE* in its complete form would have given us not only a better sense of each issue as a discrete entity but also access to other elements of the magazine, like capsule exhibition reviews and even advertisements. That way readers wouldn't have missed, as they do now, the first issue's short review of an important 1978 group show at Artists Space, for which Cindy Sherman appeared in the gallery every day dressed in '50s garb, or the full-page ad appearing in the March 1980 issue under letterhead from the Offices of Fend, Fitzgibbon, Holzer, Nadin, Prince & Winters—a self-declared consulting firm of artists who "collaborate to effect workable improvements." (Improvements in what, exactly, we're left to wonder.)

If, in its potential to broaden our understanding of the work of a key appropriationist, the Levine cover image embodies the collection's potential for reconsidering '80s art, then that image's bookend, the book's last text, underscores how invaluable historical aware-

ness is for thinking about art in the present. In a 1994 essay, Spencer Finch describes contemporary art in New York as gripped by desperation and malaise, his perspective shaped by the experience of the '80s art boom and the market's subsequent collapse. (Might Finch's account prod us to consider whether our own booming market may be due for a correction?) Fittingly, Finch describes that malaise as characterized in part by a sense of amnesia: "Art that was made in the 1970s and 1980s . . . is being remade and reexhibited by a new generation as if it had never before existed." One way to combat this type of amnesia—an affliction not limited to any single moment—is by doing the work of history in a conscientious and compelling way; that is, telling stories about the past that may provide insight into the present. The *REAL LIFE* collection starts us, if partially and haphazardly, along that path.

*REAL LIFE Magazine: Selected Writings and Projects 1979–1994 is published by Primary Information (New York, 2007).*

TOP  
SPREAD FROM *REAL LIFE*  
MAGAZINE NO. 10 (1983)  
PHOTO: ELLEN PAGE WILSON

LEFT  
DARA BIRNBAUM  
STILL FROM *KISS THE GIRLS: MAKE THEM CRY*, 1979  
VIDEO WITH COLOR AND SOUND,  
5 MIN 50 SEC  
COURTESY THE ARTIST

