

Picture Press

Marcelo Gabriel Yáñez and Philip Aarons in conversation with Randy Kennedy :

Primary Information's facsimile edition of *Newspaper*, compiling all fourteen issues of the publication for the first time, was published in March. Contributors to *Newspaper*, which was issued irregularly from 1968 to 1971, included Peter Hujar, Paul Thek, Diane Arbus, Andy Warhol, Richard Avedon, Ray Johnson, Yayoi Kusama, Billy Name, Mel Ramos and Brigid Berlin.

Marcelo Gabriel Yáñez and Philip Aarons on the republication of *Newspaper*, the cult East Village image-only magazine founded in 1968

Randy Kennedy: Thanks to you both for taking the time to talk about *Newspaper*, which I think one can safely say is among the most fabled artist publications to come out of downtown New York in the 1960s and 1970s—fabled in part because original copies in even passable condition are practically impossible to find now, and because much of the publication's history seems to have been lost to history, through the devastation of AIDS and other causes. I feel like I'm somebody who's pretty obsessive in mining the history of publications like this, but I had no idea about *Newspaper*. Especially considering that Peter Hujar was an editor, along with his partner Steve Lawrence, and that the list of contributors is stunning. Marcelo, I know you came to know about it when you were working as an archivist for Danny Fields, the music manager and writer. Phil, when did it first come on your radar?

Philip Aarons: I don't think I can give you an exact date. I'm a voracious collector of materials that deal with things in New York, California and elsewhere, material from avant-garde circles, and I have a particular focus on things that are likely to have been overlooked. Anytime I see something that I haven't heard being flogged endlessly by the people who deal in rare books and ephemera, I'm even more excited to find out about it. And there was very little that was findable about *Newspaper*. It was a periodical without three things that otherwise pushed similar publications to the forefront of people's interest. First, it had no text, which is remarkable. It was available for free, right, Marcelo?

Marcelo Gabriel Yáñez: Sort of. They did run subscriptions, but how many people actually subscribed? We don't know. They never really kept their promises in terms of the timeline they set out in the subscription information.

Aarons: Right. And then maybe the most important thing in this regard is that it didn't have a name attached to it that was significant within the art world at that time. The publisher, Steve Lawrence, was not a household name outside of his own household, and Peter Hujar was known only within certain circles. I think that led to an even more marginalized existence than many other avant-garde periodicals of the time. Later, it just dropped out of the world. I found some copies. I loved looking at them. I knew that they were

amazingly fragile and that anytime I looked through the newsprint of one I had decreased its life span by a not-insignificant amount, as Marcelo can testify when we flipped through them to see which issues I had that were complete. I don't want to take any particular credit for doing anything here other than liking the issues of *Newspaper* and thinking they were worth preserving.

Kennedy: Marcelo, how did Danny Fields come to have a closet full of issues?

Yáñez: Danny knew Steve Lawrence and was involved somewhat with the publication. Volume three, number one, which is the last issue we reproduce in this book, was done for the Cockettes' performances in New York. Danny was the publicist for those infamous performances, and he had a heavy hand in commissioning that issue from Steve and Peter. Danny managed the Stooges and there are Stooges ads in some issues, with images taken by Hujar, which Danny organized. He was essentially part of the network of the publication.

Kennedy: Hujar is so well known now, but Steve Lawrence, for all the work he did, remains a very obscure figure in that East Village scene. Can you talk about what you've found out about him and how he and Hujar came to make the magazine?

Yáñez: We have no documents at all as to what was going on behind the scenes of the publication, but we know Lawrence was born in Texas, outside of Dallas, grew up in the Dallas area and decided to head east, moving to New York when he was nineteen. He became friends with a lot of people who were going to Parsons, and one night cruising on Christopher Street he met Peter. They entered into an open relationship and eventually moved in together at 188 Second Avenue, which is across the street from the movie theater that Peter lived in later, a place where Jackie Curtis had once lived and which David Wojnarowicz took over after Peter's death. What Steve did in order to make ends meet when he moved to New York is a matter of speculation. I've heard people say that he was dealing drugs, selling to people at Max's Kansas City and the Factory. But he also did set design for Richard Avedon a couple of times, building sets for commercial shoots, as well as for Sheyla Baykal's Palm Casino Review. He also became very close to Paul Thek and they spent summers together on Fire Island. Eventually, Steve became part of Thek's artist co-op, constructing installations, and he also worked in advertising in various venues. In Patricia Bosworth's biography of Diane Arbus, there's a mention of Steve Lawrence, but his name is misspelled, which is also very common throughout his whole story. Sometimes, he's misidentified in books simply as "Richard." Avedon and Marvin Israel introduced Lawrence to Arbus, and they developed a brief friendship while he was doing *Newspaper*.

Aarons: When I first got to know *Newspaper*, I was more focused on the breadth of the imagery than I was on the prestige of the artists who made them—Arbus or Avedon or Hujar. To me, it seemed amazingly broad, non-focused stylistically and geographically. I thought a lot about how phenomenal whoever putting it together was. What the fuck was this and how did this interest in images grow so adventurous? I was amazed at the freedom—I guess that would be the right word. And how they pulled it all together.

Kennedy: This is a question for you both. What were the precedents for *Newspaper* or influences on it from those years? Ray Johnson's *Paper Snake*, from 1965, comes to mind because it was so unorthodox and

visually wild, but of course it has text and a thematic throughline, as a collection of correspondence.

Yáñez: There's definitely the influence of surrealism, I think, particularly Bataille's *Documents* magazine from the 1930s. But I also think about Stephen Shore's show called "All the Meat You Can Eat," which employed similarly explosive groupings of appropriated popular images and art images. But that was after *Newspaper* was already underway.

Aarons: It's hard to say. In my collecting, I start basically with Wallace Berman and *Semina*, issues of which Berman began hand-making in 1955 and which may have had some influence. But *Newspaper* looked like nothing else that I can think of. To me, the distinguishing visual and organizational and probably theoretical aspect about it is the use of the grid. I think it was the very first time that someone said, "Well, these things may be a photograph of someone on a horse or in the desert or whatever, but at the end of the day, they're boxes in a gridded format that are arranged that way—whereas collage is, in many senses, the opposite. It's the interposition of images out of a frame into a frame." There's something fundamentally minimalist about a magazine that has no text, that has only images in a gridded format without any real identification of either subject or author. To me, that was the wow of it. It was radical. Nothing is totally new, but to me it was a real break. I think one of the things that needs to be constantly mentioned is that Kynaston McShine—to my mind, one of the great curators of the time—saw *Newspaper* for what it was and ripped it apart and put it on the wall in his own grid in one of the most important conceptual shows in history, "Information," in 1970 at the Museum of Modern Art. Kynaston absolutely got what *Newspaper* was doing.

Kennedy: It would be so interesting to see a subscribers' list, if one still existed. I bet it would be quite a snapshot of overlapping circles within the art world in those years. Even with all the factors both of you have mentioned contributing to *Newspaper*'s obscurity now, it's still kind of stunning how far it's fallen from the historical register.

Yáñez: Part of it can be explained through the chaotic, unstable living situations of so many artists in those days. I'm writing a dissertation chapter about Paul Thek now, and when he got evicted from apartments, all of his stuff was just thrown out. Steve Lawrence got evicted a couple of times and much of his stuff also ended up in the dump. Then he ended up in rehab and moved back to Texas and died at thirty-eight, in 1983, either from cirrhosis or complications from AIDS. Hjar died from AIDS four years later, in 1987. Their lives were so short.

Kennedy: And so was the nature of the medium they printed on. It was almost as if it was meant to disappear.

Aarons: I think that's an important point. I have long had conflicting views as to whether certain materials should be reprinted, as you might imagine. Because nothing is ever the same as the original. Maybe if something is really worth seeing, you should have to go to the New York Public Library, ask for it, go look at it, all of which you can do. But to me, this book was necessary because the materials really would have completely disappeared, eventually. You can't treat *Newspaper* the same way you can treat a rare book or a journal or even mimeograph.

Yáñez: Right. This is a publication you just aren't able to request at the public library. They don't have it, but it's also a huge conservation issue to request an item like this. The Metropolitan Museum of Art does have original copies because someone at the Costume Institute, I've noticed, has been buying up and saving Steve Lawrence publications, including the last thing he did in New York, *Fire Island News* magazine, published one season on Fire Island. Copies of that are incredibly scarce, far more scarce even than copies of *Newspaper*. So it's great that the Met is actively collecting these. The George Eastman Museum in Rochester, New York, also has great holdings of *Newspaper*.

Aarons: I think it's wonderful that this will be back in circulation. It would have been a tragedy for it to have been lost. And it seems like everyone I show it to wants to sit down and go through the whole thing, every issue.

Yáñez: I showed the book to someone who didn't know what it was, and I told them about it, and after looking for a while they were like, "Wow. I love it. But I still don't understand what it is." Which is such a great response. That's so hard to achieve anymore.

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Philip Aarons is a real estate developer, and together with his wife, Shelley Fox Aarons, he is a longtime supporter of the arts and an ardent contemporary art and artist-book collector.