

Primary Information Brings Art to the Masses

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The best-named periodical of the 20th century was *Fuck You: A Magazine of the Arts*. It was founded in 1962 by Ed Sanders – poet, activist and member of the rock band The Fugs – and ran for 13 issues until 1965. *Fuck You* came on the heels of *Yeah* (1961–65), another anti-establishment zine, started the previous year by Sanders's fellow Fug, writer Tuli Kupferberg. Sanders's title and subtitle encapsulate a mind-body problem that has often troubled the more recondite corners of small-press publishing culture. On the one side is the *Fuck You* part, as in: you're not cool enough, not smart enough, not sat comfortably enough on the right side of history to get what we're talking about. On the other side is the *Magazine of the Arts* part: a helpful, demure product description, suggesting that the publication offers something for everyone, with the hope that its ideas will be widely disseminated, adopted by the general public, perhaps made into law and, against all the evidence of reality, provide its editors with a healthy living.

In the mid-2000s, if you were interested in reading artist-made publications from the Fugs' beatnik Manhattan – or from the heydays of happenings, fluxus, conceptual art, mail art and other influential postwar movements – you were out of luck. It was easy enough to find an art history book that would tell you about the existence of magazines such as *Art-Rite* (1973–78), *Aspen* (1965–71), *Black Phoenix* (1978–79), *File* (1972–89), *Heresies* (1977–93) and *Newspaper* (1968–71). A museum might put on display a few rare period zines, magazines in boxes, magazines on tape, Gestetnered broadsides, Xeroxed screeds, or whatever subcategory of spit-and-Letraset best described a given title, but all were kept tantalizingly out of reach in a vitrine. Reading the original issues was near impossible. They might as well all have been titled *Fuck You: A Magazine of the Arts*.

Take *Avalanche* (1970–75), for instance. Founded in New York by Liza Béar and Willoughby Sharp, *Avalanche* – which also ran for 13 issues – featured in its pages a who's who of 1970s conceptual art, including Vito Acconci, Hanne Darboven, Sol LeWitt, Gordon Matta-Clark, Yvonne Rainer, Robert Smithson and Lawrence Weiner. Sharp once said that its philosophy was 'to amplify the artist not merely by putting their faces on the cover but to go into some kind of dialogue with them and find out how we could serve them'.¹ The irony was that, in the space of a few years after its closure, *Avalanche* was serving no one. Renewed interest in minimal and conceptual art of the 1960s and '70s grew during the early 2000s, as did mystique around its print ephemera. James Hoff, executive editor and creative director of New York publisher Primary Information, remembers seeing a major feature on *Avalanche* in *Artforum* in 2005. 'It was something you just couldn't get your hands on unless you were around when the magazines were first published and you held on to them, or you had access

to an archive, or had thousands of dollars to buy them from rare books dealers. There were people talking about this stuff, and artists weren't part of the conversation because they didn't have access to the material.'

That same year, Hoff, along with his friend Ryan Haley, had been working on a single-volume compilation of *0 to 9* (1967–69), a zine produced by Acconci and Bernadette Mayer. The project, for Ugly Duckling Presse, demonstrated to Hoff that 'big artists, lesser-known artists, everyone, were interested in the idea of this material being back out in the world. I didn't anticipate anyone agreeing when we asked them if we could reprint their work, but everyone gave us an enthusiastic yes.' At the time, Hoff also worked for New York's Printed Matter, a bookshop and distributor founded in 1976 and devoted to artists' publications. There, he befriended Miriam Katzeff, who was interning at the organization, and the pair became fascinated by the work of the activist Guerrilla Art Action Group. Printed Matter had published a compendium of the group's manifestos and communiqués in the late 1970s. It had fallen out of print, but the archive was shelved above Hoff's and Katzeff's desks. 'We'd go through it, completely enthralled. We felt that, as younger creative people, as artists, we wanted to have access to this material. That feeling was only compounded over the years as more and more secondary-market material came into Printed Matter. Magazines like *Avalanche* and *REALLIFE*, or books by Exact Change and Something Else Press who did facsimile and archival publications.'

That same year, Hoff and Katzeff decided to set up their own small press. They wanted to create a dialogue between their contemporaries and the artists found in these older publications. 'I felt like our like-minds were mostly in Europe,' recalls Katzeff. 'I would often learn about interesting European artists that way and follow their publishers. At the time in New York, there were a lot of younger artists who had newly opened galleries, but there didn't seem to be many US-based publishers who wanted to give younger artists the opportunities to publish.' Taking the name Primary Information from art dealer and curator Seth Siegelaub – it was Siegelaub's argument that conceptual art books weren't secondary information but, rather, the primary artwork – Hoff and Katzeff's first title came out in 2007. *REALLIFE Magazine: Selected Writings and Projects 1979–1994* was edited by Katzeff with *REALLIFE* founders Thomas Lawson and Susan Morgan. The magazine had emerged in 1979, at the tail-end of America's first wave of conceptual art, when new debates around postmodernism were heating up. It provided a space for artists to explore questions of representation and the media. At first, it featured names now associated with the pictures generation – including Jack Goldstein, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince – later focusing on younger artists, such as Jennifer Bolande, Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Group Material. Primary Information's *REALLIFE* anthology resonated with younger artists, critics and curators who found themselves in a rapidly changing media landscape. And since *REALLIFE* was, in many ways, a magazine about the nature of images – who owns them, how they circulate – it was an apposite choice for Hoff and Katzeff's debut title.

Their book was an anthology rather than a complete re-run of the original. They republished its pages without fetishizing it as an historical object; without, as Andrew Blackley observed in his 2008 review of the book for *Art in Print*, ‘reproducing stains, tears or wrinkles’. (The press currently works with designer Rick Myers, who is punctilious and committed to giving the reader a flavour of the size and texture of the source material.) *REALLIFE* was followed soon after by other archival titles, including a full run of the 1960s Great Bear pamphlets (2007), Allan Kaprow’s *How to Make a Happening* (2008) and a 2009 compilation LP of music by the no wave group Disband (featuring Martha Wilson, Barbara Ess, Daile Kaplan and Barbara Kruger). These gave readers a sense of the originals without pretending to be them. ‘Part of our mission,’ says Hoff, ‘is to make sure people understand that the publications are facsimiles. If we define artists’ books as works of art, then we have to produce them as though we’re restoring them in a way.’

At the core of the Primary Information philosophy is access. ‘Based in New York,’ says Katzeff, ‘the organization benefits from being able to visit special archives and collections to access out-of-print publications, so part of our goal was to make those works available through wide distribution.’ Price is crucial. They sell everything at cost, and subscriptions, which leapt in number during the pandemic, make the books even more affordable, much to the annoyance of distributors who get cut out of the producer-to-consumer chain. ‘The idea of accessibility moves beyond just the intellectual history, or the sort of material we’re putting out into the world.’ Hoff explains. ‘We’re supporting artists on the one side and, on the other, supporting the audience who wants to read the books by making them as cheap as possible.’

These principles extend to the way Primary Information is staffed. It runs from a small, plain office on a nondescript block in Brooklyn, New York. Katzeff left to pursue other projects in 2019, and there are currently four employees: Hoff, Matthew Walker (executive director), Sam Korman (managing editor) and Nathan Harrington (operations). ‘I believe part of running a non-profit,’ says Hoff, ‘is trying to explore new models for how organizations or companies can function in society. We decided that everyone’s labour should be valued equally, so we all get the same hourly rate and health care cover.’ Walker adds, ‘What we do couldn’t happen if we weren’t a non-profit. At best, we’re breaking even on the production costs, so the challenge is how to sustain our operations outside of sales, even though sales themselves are important. We’re perpetually navigating changing funding landscapes, not to mention other external challenges. For example, the supply-chain issues that occurred in the wake of the pandemic presented a huge hurdle for us.’

In a 1976 issue of *Art-Rite*, the critic Lucy R. Lippard observed that what was written in feminist artists’ books often didn’t match the accessibility of the form. ‘The next step,’ she ventured, ‘is to get the books out into the supermarkets, where they’ll be browsed by women who wouldn’t darken the door of Printed Matter or read *Heresies*, and usually have to depend on Hallmark for their gifts.’ Primary Information’s books haven’t yet made it onto the supermarket shelves, but social media and the popularity of artist book fairs have helped vastly extend the reach of their publications. In 2008, they issued downloadable PDFs of

documents relating to the activities of the Art Workers' Coalition in 1969. Given out for free at the time, coalition ephemera could fetch more than US\$1,000 apiece by the 2000s. Primary Information made them free again, and the popularity of the downloads helped them persuade Siegelraub to give permission to reissue, also as free PDFs, his conceptual art catalogues from 1968 to 1971. 'The 1968 Xerox book, which is the most famous, was downloaded more than 60,000 times in a single week,' Hoff tells me.

Some of the first non-archival publications by Primary Information came out in 2012, with titles by Lutz Bacher and Sarah Crowner. Books by Lucas Blalock, DeForrest Brown Jr. and Tiffany Sia, among many others, have followed. It's arguable that a throughline connects these publications to the historical artists who originally inspired Hoff and Katzeff. Bacher, who passed away in 2019, carried the torch for 1970s conceptualism. In Blalock's photography or in Sia's films, you might find traces of *REALLIFE* and a shared interest in the nature of images and power. Brown Jr.'s scholarly and impassioned book on techno history, *Assembling a Black Counter Culture* (2022), might resonate with both the 1971 *Black Art Notes* collection (republished by Primary Information in 2021) and Dan Graham's writings on pop music.

It's easy to see patterns that may only exist in the loosest form. The Primary Information list has largely evolved intuitively, sometimes out of chance conversations, often simply according to the tastes of its directors. When the press started, Hoff and Katzeff compiled a list of 100 books, both old and new, that they wanted to see. Of these, Hoff estimates they've produced about 20. 'While we may have started by publishing early fluxus or conceptual-art projects, the idea is to work against those expectations and release new things, to be in archives that are still unknown, to work on stuff that needs to be back out in the world,' he says. Last year's compilation of Peter Hugar and Steven Lawrence's *Newspaper* feels like it will be a hardy perennial: interest in the history of downtown New York never seems to wane. Constance DeJong's genre-bending novel *Modern Love*, from 1977, is now in its sixth printing and has gained a cult following beyond the art world. The new edition of Pippa Garner's satirical *Better Living Catalog*, originally published in 1982, is on its third printing within the space of a year – indicative, perhaps, of an increasing awareness of trans artist histories. Recent publications devoted to Jimmy DeSana, David Wojnarowicz and Martin Wong reflect a younger generation's interest in the era of the AIDS crisis.

When Primary Information released their boxed facsimile of Kupferberg's *Yeah* in 2017, it felt like a quaint snapshot of beatnik mischief, a relic of boomer protest drifting through the steroidal conflicts of Donald Trump's presidency. Suddenly, in 2024, *Yeah* seems weightier. In the first couple of issues, poems and cartoons ran alongside pithy editorial grenades lobbed by Kupferberg: 'Speaking to the leaders of nations,' he wrote in the second instalment, 'I said: Have you no other things to do than to plot our deaths? Why dont [sic] you try to get laid again?' Kupferberg collaged newspaper clippings, stories that showed America for the absurd place it can be. With each new issue, the clippings and advertising detritus gradually replaced the poems and drawings. Kupferberg's anger at the cruelty and violence

of the US, its racism, its warmongering, became increasingly palpable, feverish even. The cover of issue ten simply reads, in big block letters: 'KILL FOR PEACE'. It features more than 100 pages of clippings about the military, advertisements for guns, uniforms and brothels, spreadsheets of biological weapons, letters informing parents that their sons have been killed in combat.

Multiple wars rage. At the time of writing, student encampments and occupations are appearing around the US, protesting the Israel-Gaza war. Once more, 'KILL FOR PEACE' is every politician's excuse for cowardice and violence. *Yeah* almost vibrates on my bookshelves. It bears out Siegelau's idea about primary information: that an artist's book can be the work itself, not a document of something else, not a container for another object, either old or new – simply current.

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DAN FOX

Dan Fox is a writer, filmmaker and musician. He is the author of *Pretentiousness: Why It Matters* (2016) and *Limbo* (2018), both published by Fitzcarraldo Editions, and co-director of *Other, Like Me: The Oral History of COUM Transmissions and Throbbing Gristle* (2020).