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THE MAGAZINE AS AN ALTERNATIVE SPACE

ART-RITE, 1973–1978

“Things are possible when you’re young,” Walter Robinson mused, thinking back on how he, Edit deAk, and Joshua Cohn—three recent college graduates with no previous publishing experience—founded *Art-Rite* magazine in 1973.¹ Reveling in its own disposability and its homespun, zine-like format, *Art-Rite* forged an iconoclastic, experimental style of criticism, focusing on younger, lesser-known artists in SoHo, whom the editors encouraged to write for the magazine and to use it as a medium. As implied by its title, *Art-Rite* sought to create a kind of criticism that would be, like the bargain products in a dime store, accessible and unpretentious. The magazine had a quaint, artless quality with its half-tabloid newsprint pages, hand-stenciled logo, and do-it-yourself layout. As the editors confided in the eighth issue: “I got the media coming out of my typewriter. It is a very special media, though. It is small and free and designed to look insignificant and void of the sixties ego tripping.”²

Art-Rite’s humble format and unassuming tone and temperament could not have been further from the coated, full-bleed pages and cinematic layout of *Avalanche*. The latter, though initially founded to champion the new alternative artistic practices emerging in the then-uncharted enclave of downtown Manhattan, had come within a few short years to represent its own brand of exclusivity within the up-and-coming SoHo art scene, as the neighborhood morphed from a marginal outpost of the art world into the new hot spot. Indeed, Stephanie Edens, writing in *Art-Rite*, described the groundbreaking cooperative gallery space 112 Greene Street, as “sceney, hard to get into, subsumed by an ingrouped clubiness,” and observed that it “now attracts the kind of rad-chic audience it once repelled.”³ *Art-Rite*’s unostentatious, low-key bearing was more compatible with the egalitarian and inclusive attitude of a new crop of nonprofit, artist-run galleries that would become known as alternative spaces. One example of the new type of alternative space was Artists Space, described by Edens a few issues later as “[rising] above the promotional excitement which sells art in the commercial gallery while it also avoids the cliquishness which leaves us on the outside of some SoHo Cooperative spaces.”⁴

By the time *Art-Rite* began, the salad days of conceptual art had begun to wane. In retrospect, the utopian claims surrounding art of the late 1960s seemed wide-eyed and idealistic—even to those who had initially espoused them. Whereas, in 1968, Lucy Lippard had hailed dematerialization as a strategy through which art might escape the gallery and market, five years later she was considerably more skeptical, writing, in her 1973 book *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*:

Hopes that “conceptual art” would be able to avoid the general commercialization, the destructively “progressive” approach of modernism were for the most part unfounded. It seemed in 1969 ... that no one, not even a public greedy for novelty would actually pay money, or much of it, for a Xerox sheet referring to an event past or never directly perceived, a group of photographs documenting

an ephemeral situation or condition, a project for work never to be completed, words spoken but not recorded; it seemed that these artists would therefore be forcibly freed from the tyranny of a commodity status and market orientation. Three years later, the major conceptualists are selling work for substantial sums here and in Europe; they are represented by (and still more unexpected—showing in) the world's most prestigious galleries. Clearly, whatever minor revolutions in communication have been achieved by the process of dematerializing the object (easily mailed work, catalogues and magazine pieces ...) art and artists in a capitalist society remain luxuries.⁵

And yet, during the 1970s, the hopes of art of the 1960s were not abandoned altogether, so much as they were toned down and tethered to a new set of practical concerns, evident in the numerous alternative spaces and collectives that emerged during this decade.⁶ As Brian O'Doherty, an important theorist and proponent of the alternative space (often credited with coining the term itself), stated, "A lot of the radical energies of the '60s fed into alternative spaces. They were started by people who asked a lot of questions in the '60s and are answering them in the '70s."⁷ The rise of alternative spaces was encouraged by the new availability of public funding, which O'Doherty, as director of the National Endowment for the Arts' visual arts program from 1969 to 1976, was instrumental in allocating.⁸ Relieved of the need to sell art, alternative spaces could afford to be experimental and open-ended in their programming, prioritizing the needs of artists over those of dealers and curators. They not only fostered experimental art, but supported the ideological and practical goals of political activism within the art world and promoted artists' moral and legal rights. As O'Doherty observed: "The artist-generated institution for making or showing work may be the single most important development of the seventies. Significantly, it is a social rather than an esthetic one."⁹

As artist-run cooperative galleries and collectives proliferated throughout North America during this period, artists' magazines complemented and reinforced their aesthetic and ideological goals, providing important discursive spaces within which art and art criticism opposed the values of the mainstream art world and commercial art press. As *Art-Rite's* editors explained, "The editor of an establishment magazine confessed that 'vital aspects of present day art are not included in his pages simply because the commercial interests which persist in dominating the communication outlets, on every level, ensure that much relevant art activity fails to surface.' This indicates the *raison d'être* of the alternative periodicals vis-à-vis the '70s art superstructure."¹⁰ Artists' magazines played a significant—yet often overlooked—role in supporting alternative spaces, by both providing crucial publicity for their cutting-edge exhibitions (which received scant attention in the mainstream art press) and bolstering their institutional objectives by promoting artists' rights. *Art-Rite*, along with countless other alternative artists' periodicals, functioned alongside bricks-and-mortar gallery spaces to challenge the social and economic exclusivity of the mainstream art world and to forge new artistic identities and criteria—a struggle that was especially crucial for artists confronting the racist and sexist institutions of the art world during this period.

In her 1977 article "Alternative Space: Artists' Periodicals," Howardena Pindell claimed that artists' magazine should be considered alternative spaces in their own right. While Pindell's article provided a historical overview and chronology of artists' periodicals since 1900, her use of the term "alternative space" clearly referenced the politicized, countercultural sense of this

concept as it had evolved within the North American alternative space movement of the 1970s. Working as an assistant curator in the Museum of Modern Art library, Pindell was interested in the periodical as an alternative space not only as a scholar but as an artist and activist. A founding member of the AIR Gallery, the first nonprofit space dedicated to women artists, Pindell had witnessed firsthand the potential of alternative spaces to counter the social inequities of the mainstream art world, remembering, “At the time I was fighting against the art world as being both male and white-dominated.”¹¹ Artists’ periodicals, she observed, were crucial to this struggle, providing “a means for the artist to put him- or herself directly into art history without the aid of the critic or dealer or curator as mediator—an alternative space.”¹²

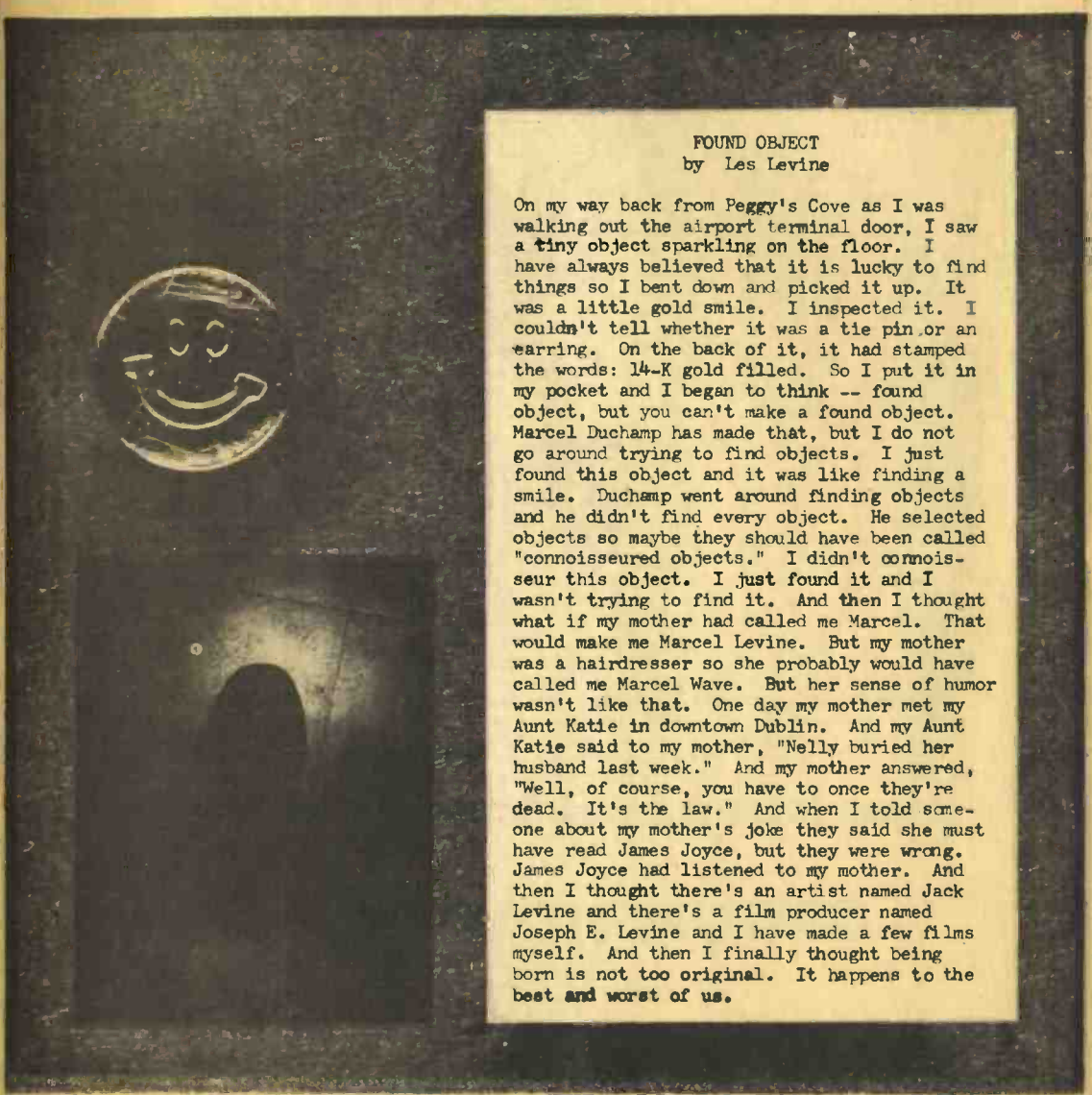
BABY BLOOD

It was in O’Doherty’s seminar on art criticism that deAk, Robinson, and Cohn first met, during the spring of their senior year at Columbia University. O’Doherty was an important mentor for *Art-Rite*, providing advice and various kinds of practical and editorial assistance for the fledgling publication. (His name even appears on the masthead of the first issue, though it is crossed out because he insisted that his young protégés take full credit for the new publication.) O’Doherty’s role in *Art-Rite*’s beginnings is significant, suggesting that the publication inherited and furthered his efforts to create alternative structures within the art world—efforts that in many ways began with *Aspen* 5+6, discussed in chapter 2. O’Doherty had gone on to become editor in chief of *Art in America* in 1970, a post he held until 1974. Seeking to reinvigorate that magazine, he invited Cohn and Robinson to write reviews, prompting deAk to remark, “We realized that criticism must be in horrible shape if they’re so hungry for baby blood, right?”¹³ (The three even considered calling their magazine “Baby Blood.”) One of the original ideas for *Art-Rite* was to produce the magazine as a newsprint insert in *Art in America*—a kind of Trojan horse that would smuggle alternative ideas into the bastions of the mainstream art press. This history testifies to the complicated relationship between mainstream and alternative institutions at this time—one of interdependence and mutual fascination as well as opposition. Ultimately, *Art-Rite*’s editors chose autonomy, recalling, “Of course, when we realized what we were doing, we had no need to be in *Art in America*. ... We wanted our own little rag, no matter how ugly or cheap-o or shitty it was gonna be.”¹⁴

After graduating from college, the three editors enrolled in the Whitney Independent Study Program—an institutional affiliation that they exploited as they laid the foundations for the new magazine, approaching critics, artists, and gallery owners for support and advice, and asking fellow students to contribute articles. The first issue of *Art-Rite* was published in the spring of 1973. A mere eight pages long—so insubstantial as to be practically a flyer—this first issue consisted of one thousand copies printed for \$100 and “distributed haphazardly through the galleries.”¹⁵ For the first cover, the editors tapped Les Levine, whose own magazine, *Culture Hero*, a gossipy, satirical tabloid that covered the downtown art scene, served as an inspiration for *Art-Rite*. Levine provided a droll, stream-of-consciousness text/image piece in which he recounts finding a little gold smile on the floor—a story that captured the whimsical, self-effacing character of the magazine itself.

ART-RITE

FOUND OBJECT by Les Levine



On my way back from Peggy's Cove as I was walking out the airport terminal door, I saw a tiny object sparkling on the floor. I have always believed that it is lucky to find things so I bent down and picked it up. It was a little gold smile. I inspected it. I couldn't tell whether it was a tie pin or an earring. On the back of it, it had stamped the words: 14-K gold filled. So I put it in my pocket and I began to think -- found object, but you can't make a found object. Marcel Duchamp has made that, but I do not go around trying to find objects. I just found this object and it was like finding a smile. Duchamp went around finding objects and he didn't find every object. He selected objects so maybe they should have been called "connoisseured objects." I didn't connoisseur this object. I just found it and I wasn't trying to find it. And then I thought what if my mother had called me Marcel. That would make me Marcel Levine. But my mother was a hairdresser so she probably would have called me Marcel Wave. But her sense of humor wasn't like that. One day my mother met my Aunt Katie in downtown Dublin. And my Aunt Katie said to my mother, "Nelly buried her husband last week." And my mother answered, "Well, of course, you have to once they're dead. It's the law." And when I told someone about my mother's joke they said she must have read James Joyce, but they were wrong. James Joyce had listened to my mother. And then I thought there's an artist named Jack Levine and there's a film producer named Joseph E. Levine and I have made a few films myself. And then I finally thought being born is not too original. It happens to the best and worst of us.



5.1

Les Levine, cover, *Art-Rite*, no. 1, April 1973.
Courtesy of the editors and the artist. Collection
of Steven Leiber, San Francisco.

5.2

Art-Rite corporation's angel hair package.

It has been suggested that the magazine may have taken its title from the Art-Rite corporation, which manufactured Christmas decorations, including an iridescent tinsel-like substance made of spun glass called angel hair that was popular in the 1950s. Another possible allusion is to an important little magazine and press: Anne Waldman and Lewis Marsh's *Angel Hair*.¹⁶ In addition to its homophonic pun, *Art-Rite*'s potential association with the Christmas decoration manufacturer sheds light on the magazine's kitschy, nostalgic quality, and its fanciful, festive attitude. *Art-Rite* signaled a new self-consciousness about the magazine's status as a cheap, accessible medium, simultaneously hyperbolizing and ironizing conceptual art's utopian claims. In particular, the magazine's editors embraced the paradox of its commodified format, emphasizing its status as a mass-produced consumer product (like Warhol's Fab issue of *Aspen*), while simultaneously mobilizing this fact to redouble their efforts to deprivilege and democratize the experience of art.¹⁷

Early issues reveal how green the editors were. Their novice status led to some rather cringe-worthy faux pas. "I've really enjoyed both issues and think they're too cute for words. ... I'd just like to point out that the critic I *think* we both have in mind is Clement Greenberg not this mysterious anonimo Greenburg you keep talking about," Linda Nochlin wrote in a letter to the editor, published in the third issue.¹⁸ While it was true that *Art-Rite*'s editors were literally young and inexperienced, their physical age was less important than the way in which they self-consciously staged these facts to signify their antiestablishment attitude toward the mainstream art world. As they explained, "Power trips were eliminated automatically by the nature of the givens: Our not knowing enough, being ... unreliable, vocational (rather than professional) and having been motivated by belief—which is really quite different from power, mutually exclusive, really."¹⁹ As Lippard vouched for the magazine in a grant application, "all the risks larger institutions don't and can't take, *Art-Rite* can and does."²⁰



5.3

Yuri, cover, *Art-Rite*, no. 4, 1973. Courtesy of the editors. Collection of Steven Leiber, San Francisco.

It was deAk, who had emigrated from Hungary when she was a teenager, crossing the border in the trunk of a car, who supplied much of the oomph for the new magazine. “She had all the ideas. She had all the drive,” Robinson recalled of deAk, who would make phone calls to artists and critics, refusing to be intimidated by their stature relative to hers, and boldly walk into galleries to sell ads.²¹ “It was about inventing possibilities for herself, I think,” he reckoned.²² The *Art-Rite* editors set up their headquarters in deAk’s downtown loft at 149 Wooster Street, just down the block from Artists Space, and in the heart of SoHo’s burgeoning new alternative gallery scene. A huge space with a darkroom in the back, the loft was the site of all-night writing sessions, wild dinner parties, and a rotating troupe of out-of-town guests. Because they could not afford to pay contributors very much, the editors tried to compensate with hospitality, offering to put them up, feed them dinner, and introduce them to other writers and artists. “A lot of our writers are first time writers who are trying to open doors for themselves. We do make sure that if we can do something for them we do,” deAk explained.²³

Discussing the collaborative nature of the publication, deAk observed, “We work closely together, put our minds all in one pot and stir it until it gets done.”²⁴ Accordingly, many articles were unsigned or bylined “A-R.” Robinson, who had a day job working at *Jewish Week*, an independent community newspaper, covertly used the facilities to do the layout and typesetting for *Art-Rite* (until he was fired for doing so). DeAk’s husband at the time, the artist Peter Grass, did photography for the magazine, along with her cousin Yuri. As deAk observed of the magazine’s do-it-yourself spirit, “You can dream for a while and write, and be psychologists for a while and edit other people’s work ... then you get down to manual labor. Then you become delivery boys and mailmen.”²⁵ Producing the magazine became enmeshed also in the emotional complications of life and relationships; at various points both Cohn and Robinson were romantically involved with deAK, culminating in a fistfight between the two men that precipitated Cohn’s departure from the publication in 1975.²⁶

While *Art-Rite* underscored the magazine’s commodified, mechanically reproduced status as an egalitarian form of distribution, it paradoxically affirmed the experience of the handcrafted. For example, issue 6 featured a hand-folded cover designed by Dorothea Rockburne; and issue 8, designed by Pat Steir, was decorated with potato-prints of cheerful flowers in primary colors, which the editors painstakingly hand-stamped on all six thousand copies. These vivid unexpected glimpses of the handmade gave the magazine an intimate quality that was in contrast to the standardized impersonal character of mainstream media. The editors cultivated a friendly, familiar tone, addressing their readers with affectionate salutations and expressions such as “you’re the greatest”²⁷—an attitude that also defined the circulation and distribution of the magazine, which was “given away in recognition of the community that nurtures it.”²⁸ The fourth issue was even billed as a Christmas card—a “free gift” Season’s Greetings issue (a possible allusion to the *Art-Rite* holiday decoration company) consisting entirely of pictures, with contributions by artists including Christo, Holt, and Matta-Clark.

Following the chaotic rhythms and distractions of its editors’ hectic lives, *Art-Rite* was published irregularly, between four and nine issues per year, according to one subscription flyer. Some issues were published out of sequence, or not at all. The following apology was sent out with issue 17: “We know we are behind schedule—because of production snafus, money problems

and other things. ... If you have not received issue #16, our issue on art in Europe, it's because we haven't published it yet. It's taking longer than we planned to sink our claws into the entire continent!"²⁹ (The issue was never published.) *Art-Rite's* idiosyncrasies distinguished it from the polished professionalism of trade journals, which, as deAk wrote, "come out on schedule with their well-directed art and their packaged glamour. They are rarely hot, rarely cold. They usually have no particular beauty other than the accepted norm; they rarely have charm, they rarely make mistakes."³⁰

THE AESTHETICS AND POLITICS OF NEWSPRINT

When they got the first issue of *Art-Rite* back from the printer, the editors celebrated by lighting a cigar and gleefully tearing a copy in half—a sacrament to the magazine's disposability. "We wanted people to throw it away," deAk recalled. "We didn't want to contribute to raising the value of art. It wasn't made for collectors and galleries."³¹ Unlike higher-quality papers, which are chemically processed to remove the lignon, a chemical compound naturally occurring in wood, newsprint still contains this organic substance, which causes the paper to deteriorate quickly when exposed to air and light, becoming discolored and brittle. Its high absorbency also means that reproductions are much coarser and cruder than those on coated papers. Speaking of the choice to print *Art-Rite* on newsprint, deAk stated, "For me it had a tremendously important aesthetic quality. I loved newsprint, I loved the look of it, the feel of it."³²

Indeed, while *Art-Rite's* half-tabloid format was certainly determined in part by economic necessity, the paper's impoverished appearance also carried important ideological connotations, signaling its affinity with the countercultural ethos of underground newspapers and flaunting its contrast with the spectacular visuality of the mainstream art press. The editors declared, "It is printed on newsprint in the belief that the low cost process will help deinstitutionalize and demystify the esoterica it contains"; they added that "coated stock is ecologically unsound for the mind as well as the earth."³³ As its name implies, newsprint has traditionally been used for only the most temporary of publications, such as newspapers, meant to last for a single day. This literal ephemerality dramatizes *Art-Rite's* contingent nature as a document that sought to participate profoundly in the moment it recorded, by focusing on emerging art and artists. As the editors explained, "Where the commercial structure attempts to consolidate and codify, the alternatives try to accommodate; they deal with the live nerve endings of turmoil—with what is on the verge of formulation."³⁴

Art-Rite characterized its editorial policy as "coverage of the uncovered"—a mandate it fulfilled with its "loft reviews," which promised to report on art before it had even left the studio.³⁵ Lippard compared the magazine to "off-off Broadway," observing that it "nurtures, encourages, and provokes the newest art and the youngest artists."³⁶ It revealed a predilection for eclectic, off-beat topics such as fashion, punk music, and knickknacks, and supported unknown and outsider artists, including the punk musician and artist Alan Suicide (a.k.a. Alan Vega), whose colorful kitschy arrangements of light bulbs at the gallery OK Harris were reviewed in the first issue, and Steve Hermes, an eccentric autodidactic mailroom employee of Columbia University, who was proclaimed in issue 2 to be "an itinerant undeclared artist" who "lives his life to a personalized, original scheme which matches up integrally with conceptual art requirements."³⁷ Meanwhile,

the magazine was not afraid to knock more established artists. A review in the first issue, entitled “Big Boys Downtown” (a pointedly gendered characterization that was not incidental), slammed new work by LeWitt, Bochner, and Judd, dubbing the artists “old masters of New Trends” and accusing them of pandering to the market by repeating the same “boring, frustrating, and useless” formulas that had gained them recognition the previous decade.³⁸ They reserved such venom for artists who had already achieved success: “because they were safe we couldn’t hurt them and since we spent the rest of our life defending babies we had to attack someplace,” deAk maintained, insisting, “the artists chosen for pole-axing ... can’t be hurt by it.”³⁹

Art-Rite promoted conceptual, antimarket artistic practices, hailing Douglas Huebler’s tabloid-style book *Duration Piece #8* as “undoubtedly one of the masterpieces of the season, and not only because it costs \$2.00.”⁴⁰ Other artists who contributed to the magazine or were prominently featured in it were Yvonne Rainer, Gordon Matta-Clark, Vito Acconci, William Wegman, Alan Sondheim, Robert Morris, Chris Burden, Carl Andre, Adrian Piper, Philip Glass, Robin Winters, Richard Foreman, Laurie Anderson, Trisha Brown, Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke, Lucinda Childs, Michelle Stuart, Charles Simmonds, Jack Smith, Joan Jonas, Nancy Holt, Eleanor Antin, and Rebecca Horn—a list that reveals, among other things, the prominence of women artists in *Art-Rite*’s pages, which is in striking contrast to their marginalization within the mainstream art world at the time. The magazine candidly drew attention to feminist art with a poll titled “Unskirting the Issue” (issue 5, Spring 1974), consisting of responses by several women artists to the question: “Do you think there is a shared female artistic sensibility in the work of female artists?” *Art-Rite* was also supportive of new media, publishing special issues on video (issue 7, guest-edited by Anna Canepa) and performance art (issue 10), and it registered the growing politicization of the art world with articles on artists’ rights.

The magazine served as a rotating exhibition space for a series of artist-designed covers: clever, understated works for the page, many of which emphasized and exploited the publication’s distinct, lightweight materiality. William Wegman’s spare, simple line drawing for issue 2 created a visual rhyme out of V-shaped marks that signified seagulls and waves in a schematic seascape. Christo “wrapped” issue 5 with a trompe-l’œil paper bag—an image that referenced the artist’s monumental architectural and landscape wrappings, but also alluded wryly to the practice of concealing porn magazines in brown paper wrappers.⁴¹ In 1976, *Art-Rite* inaugurated its Dollar Art Series, in which entire issues of the magazine were given over to an artist or artists—including Alan Suicide (issue 13), Rosemary Mayer (issue 15), Kim MacConnel (issue 17), Image Bank (issue 18), Demi (issue 20), and Judy Rifka (issue 21)—to create a mass-produced work of art available for less than a gallon of milk.

Among the most inspired of *Art-Rite*’s covers was Dorothea Rockburne’s design for issue 6. Instead of printing something on the surface of the page, the artist explored its three-dimensional materiality, folding back the cover to diagonally bisect it into two triangles, limned by the slightest shadow. The editors diligently executed Rockburne’s idea according to her instructions, creasing thousands of covers themselves, and readily donated two extra pages of precious editorial space to accommodate the design, which required that the first and second pages of the magazine be left blank. Deeply site-specific, Rockburne’s cover emphasized the interactive, tactile dimension of the “handmade newspaper,” as she called *Art-Rite*, as well as its quotidian,

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throwaway character.⁴² Heightening this effect, the exposed surface of the newsprint has yellowed over time, much like a photogram—a happy accident, according to the artist, but one that poignantly expresses the paper’s fugitive quality.

Rockburne’s cover cleverly referenced her *Drawing Which Makes Itself* series, begun in 1972, with which she reconceptualized the act of drawing as a fundamentally process-driven activity—less a means to render a preconceived object than a trace of the interaction between artist and materials. As Rosalind Krauss noted of these reductive, postminimalist works in which abstract marks were produced by creases and shadows on paper or carbon paper, they insist on the externality or “publicness” of meaning.⁴³ Rather than using paper as a surface on which to project her individual, a priori thoughts and feelings—a conduit for the private self—Rockburne allows that surface itself to generate meaning, locating artistic process in the external world as something equally available to all. If the democratization of aesthetic experience implied by Rockburne’s drawings remained largely symbolic within the context of the gallery space, her *Art-Rite* cover demonstrates how this idea of publicness might gain significance within the medium—and media space—of the magazine itself, as a model of communication in which the meanings of art and art criticism were not dictated from above but accessible, nonhierarchical, and collaborative.

“A FLOATING ARTIST SPACE”

In its support of experimental, unsaleable art and unestablished artists, *Art-Rite* clearly paralleled the goals of alternative artist-run gallery spaces such as Artists Space, where deAk worked part time as assistant director from 1974 to 1975. As Irving Sandler recalled of Artists Space, one of the earliest and most influential publicly funded alternative spaces, which he and Trudy Grace founded in 1972, “The idea was that artists, who often felt victimized by juries, now would become the jury of the whole. They would choose.”⁴⁴ Though there was no formal affiliation between the two, *Art-Rite* and Artists Space were deeply aligned ideologically. *Art-Rite* extensively covered exhibitions and performances at Artists Space, and the latter, in turn, frequently advertised in the magazine. Through deAk’s position, *Art-Rite* even occasionally participated in Artists Space’s programming. For example, in 1974 the magazine presented an evening performance series there called *PersonA*, a kind of after-hours guerrilla performance event with participants including Jennifer Bartlett, Eleanor Antin, Peter Hutchinson, Alan Sondheim, Kathy Acker, Laurie Anderson, Adrian Piper, Dennis Oppenheim, and Jack Smith.⁴⁵ Moreover, the magazine was distributed at Artists Space and other alternative venues, suggesting that its circulation coincided with the foot traffic in the alternative galleries.

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Dorothea Rockburne, cover, *Art-Rite*, no. 6, Summer 1974. © 2010 Dorothea Rockburne / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Collection of Steven Leiber, San Francisco.

However, while artists' magazines facilitated the institutional objectives of alternative spaces in the 1970s, and even constituted alternative spaces in their own right, they also differed from bricks-and-mortar institutions, opposing the monumentality that characterizes even the most rustic of architectural structures. Indeed, deAk insisted that, despite their many parallels, "Artists Space was not like *Art-Rite* ... which came from the people, establishing our voice, our own style and category. Artists Space was something grown-ups and institutions like NYSCA dreamed up."⁴⁶ By contrast, with its relatively low overhead and quick turnaround, the magazine could afford to be more daring and spontaneous in its editorial decisions, featuring artists who were too unknown to make it into even the alternative spaces. DeAk was especially sympathetic to the plight of the countless artists who came in the door of Artists Space looking in vain for exhibition opportunities (as she later recalled of her position there, "I did everything from being the cleaning lady to making it possible for artists to breath the air there because they had so many rules and regulations").⁴⁷ She would sometimes invite such artists to publish in the magazine, explaining later: "Maybe nothing could happen for that artist at Artists Space, but we could do something in *Art-Rite* for them."⁴⁸

The relationship between *Art-Rite* and Artists Space attests to the complex reciprocity between the two-dimensional, representational surface of the page and actual, three-dimensional alternative spaces and institutions in the 1970s. On the one hand, magazines functioned as a corollary or supplement to the physical gallery space. *Art-Rite's* insistently do-it-yourself format and newsprint pages even suggested an analog to the raw, unfinished architectural interiors of so many alternative gallery spaces. Several alternative galleries published their own journals, and others used the printed page as a substitute exhibition space. For example, the Institute for Art and Urban Resources purchased seven pages of advertising space in the December 1976 issue of *Artforum* in which it presented "The Magazine Show"—the work of six artists (Richard Nonas, Alan Saret, Robert Ryman, Patrick Ireland, Susan Rothenberg, and Richard Tuttle) who created pieces that fit the format of the magazine page.

At the same time, however, magazines provide a model of space that is not limited to geometric or architectural definitions, but is rooted in their conditions of circulation and distribution, insisting on space as a temporal field of possibility—something that is itself contingent and mutable. Such a model informed the ideological goals of alternative spaces themselves, which not merely provided a physical place or architectural container for works of art but, as Martin Beck has argued, reconceptualized space as a means of social production.⁴⁹ As one critic pointed out at the time, "The 'alternative' these establishments provide is to be found in the word 'space'—a neutral, nonjudgmental, nonauthenticating, openly experimental and sympathetic place to house new ideas, a place unconcerned with traditional amenities like engraved invitations and plaques on the walls, or trustees with connections to IBM and XEROX."⁵⁰ In some ways, it might be argued, magazines did not merely serve an ancillary role to alternative gallery spaces, but were an original prototype for such spaces. (Brian O'Doherty's own exploration of *Aspen* magazine as an experimental, artist-driven exhibition space in the late 1960s suggests the primacy of the magazine in his own understanding of the alternative space.)

And yet, if the magazine functioned as a substitute for an exhibition space, offering a place that could transcend the architectural and institutional constraints of the gallery—a "floating

artist space” as O’Doherty called one artists’ publication⁵¹—its discursive space also remained deeply embedded in specific architectural and geographical places. As *Art-Rite*’s editors asserted, “Our activities extend way off the pages of the magazine.”⁵² The magazine’s local vantage point in SoHo was stressed in its editorial and advertising space, both of which were dominated by downtown alternative venues. Issue 11/12 featured, in lieu of traditional advertisements, fourteen pages of photographs of New York art spaces, taken from the street view—a kind of extended photo essay which provided a valuable visual record of the neighborhood during this period, while reinforcing *Art-Rite*’s own placement within this urban setting. The editors insisted: “Our communication is not long distance, we are in close proximity to the art.”⁵³

ART WRITING: *ART-RITE*’S CRITICISM

Art-Rite’s editors were not nearly as guileless and unsophisticated as they sometimes liked to pretend. Having been steeped in critical theory and institutional critique in the Whitney Independent Study Program, they published a manifesto-like editorial statement entitled “Reorganizations” in the third issue, revealing an approach to art and art criticism that was broadly informed by systems theory and structuralism. “Art is a sign, a medium of communication. As such it is a node within the communicational matrix which includes primarily the viewer, the artist, the context, a history of art and art criticism, plus any other aspect of human experience either the artist or the viewer puts into the circuits,” they wrote, offering the following set of propositions:

Good art is proportional to the circuits it creates.
 Criticism tends to emphasize circuits art stands for (art–art history, art–its history, art–thought).
 Good criticism identifies the circuits art actually creates.
 Art–artness circuits alone are of a very low order.
 Art–self circuits are of a high order.
 Art–viewer–other people circuits are of a high order.
 High order art is hard for artists to make.⁵⁴

“Reorganizations” attempted to account for the complex social world within which art and its interpretation takes place. In opposition to formalist criticism, *Art-Rite*’s editors insisted that art should not be judged in terms of some objective measure of aesthetic quality but according to its capacity to engender communication and connections between people—a capacity their magazine sought to enhance by making art and art criticism more accessible.

Denouncing the “tired, chewed up, self-referential intellectualism” they perceived in the mainstream press, and especially in the formalist criticism that had dominated *Artforum* during the late 1960s, *Art-Rite*’s editors fostered an unorthodox, decidedly unstuffy form of writing that eschewed the expert judgment of the critic in favor of the *sensus communis*.⁵⁵ As deAk explained, “It’s cross-checking the art, taking it from the point of view of a layman walking into the gallery and not knowing any of the bullshit. What would he or she see?”⁵⁶ Drawing on market research techniques, they regularly used the poll as a format, locating the evaluation of art in the pooled, collective knowledge of the many rather than imposing the judgment of a single critic. They developed a style of criticism that was folksy, colloquial, and resolutely subjective, insisting, “We need not remain detached and analytical while looking at art.”⁵⁷

In its deliberate embrace of the amateur over the professional critic, *Art-Rite* harked back to the ethical function of art criticism as it had emerged in the eighteenth-century public sphere. As Jürgen Habermas has pointed out, the first art critics, who assumed the title of *Kunstrichter* (art judge), saw themselves as nonspecialists: “The *Kunstrichter* retained something of the amateur; his expertise only held good until countermanded; lay judgment was organized within it without becoming, by way of specialization, anything else than the judgment of one private person among all others who ultimately were not to be obligated by any judgment except their own. This is precisely where the art critic differed from the judge.”⁵⁸ However, while the supposedly universal bourgeois public sphere of the eighteenth century that Habermas describes was largely limited to white middle-class men, *Art-Rite* appealed to the emancipatory claims of criticism in order to facilitate the advent of new counterpublics within the art world of the 1970s.

Art-Rite’s experimental approach to criticism (combined with the editors’ actual inexperience) inevitably resulted in some fairly jejune prose, especially early on. As an example, the following sentence about Alan Suicide’s show appeared in the first issue: “This indecently capturing fancy paraphernalia becomes disenfranchised symbols, toys for a ritual of access.”⁵⁹ Also somewhat sophomoric was a “fictional review” in issue 2, entitled “the Case of the Paint-Cast Shadows,” about a woman who experiences flashbacks of an erotic rendezvous while visiting the loft space of a painter named Hilty. Over time, however, the editors developed a quirky and quite lyrical style, rooted in careful observation and vernacular language. For example, about Matta-Clark’s *Splitting* they wrote: “It was very odd at Gordon Matta’s house, a house as material, in the weeds and sunshine in a suburban slum, condemned, small cracked rooms, spacious yard, hair cream still in the bathroom, very concrete, very unreal.”⁶⁰

Against the animosity and suspicion that had so frequently characterized the relationship between artists and critics in the late 1960s, exemplified by the heated debates in *Artforum* or by *Avalanche*’s outright rejection of criticism, *Art-Rite* ushered in a new camaraderie between artists and critics. Its masthead did not segregate editorial staff, artists, and writers according to role or title, but listed them together under the cooperative, nonhierarchical heading “by, for, about, and thanks to.”⁶¹ Many of the articles the editors wrote were unsigned. Others were bylined “Edward Pursor,” a pen name they sometimes used to represent the “rickety old critic” who was their alter ego.⁶² As they explained, “There’s no way, really, to sign those articles. ... An idea would come and one person would write it. But it might not be that person’s idea and the writing would go through changes. ... Someone might bring in a finished article and say ‘what do you think of it?’ Or else someone would say, let’s sit down at the typewriter and do an article, and then we’d all pump ideas out.”⁶³ The practice of publishing articles anonymously, deAk noted, also prevented readers from elevating any one critic’s opinion to an authoritative status: “We decided not to sign our articles so that people would not construct that kind of an image for us, or any kind of image for us, of who we were.”⁶⁴ She added, “I really don’t think that a critic is important,” and vowed “to destroy the criticism of critics, so that people will learn to put things together for themselves. I want to take away criticism’s importance and focus it back to the artwork.”⁶⁵

As part of their effort to demystify and deprive the practice of art criticism, *Art-Rite* published a column entitled “The Critics” that offered readers an up-close-and-personal glimpse of several of the period’s best-known critics. As deAk described the column, “The idea was to

break the power. It was just to bring down the image of the critic as a person with proficiencies and with limitations like every person has. We wanted to show to the artists that if somebody writes a negative review about them, it's all right.”⁶⁶ Accompanied by candid snapshots of each critic, the column discussed their critical approaches while revealing snippets about their personal history, art collections, and even sartorial preferences. They disclosed, for example, that Lawrence Alloway was the son of a London bookseller, was bedridden with tuberculosis at the age of eleven, and lived in two floors of a brownstone on West Twentieth Street, as well as the fact that Robert Pincus-Witten was “quite a snappy dresser.”⁶⁷

Among the critics *Art-Rite* profiled was Lucy Lippard, whose reputation as an “antiacademic rebel” was clearly a model for the publication’s own renegade brand of criticism.⁶⁸ The profile recounted Lippard’s beginnings as a page and research assistant at the Museum of Modern Art, where she spent her days carrying heavy piles of periodicals to curators and met Dan Flavin, Robert Ryman, and Sol LeWitt, who also worked there as museum guards; her political awakening on a trip to Argentina in 1968; her boycott of *Artforum* (“in protest against *Artforum*’s Greenbergian line and the fact that they didn’t want articles on many artists who interested her, though some of these would soon become *Artforum*’s own cover boys”);⁶⁹ her important work as an activist with political artists’ organizations, such as the Art Workers’ Coalition, which she helped to found in 1969; and her doubts about being part of the art world at all (“I can never figure out if I should keep on plugging for the work and the values I care about and provide at least a whisper of dissent from the artworld mainstream, or quit entirely in protest”).⁷⁰ While Lippard was frank about her disillusionment with conceptual art, acknowledging that “conceptual art got co-opted too and I certainly don’t blame any of the artists because artists should be able to make a living off what they do like everybody else,” she also reaffirmed her ongoing commitment to the unrealized egalitarian promise of art in the late 1960s, insisting, “it is crucial that art acquire a broader audience or it will stifle in its own narrow confines.”⁷¹

ISSUE 14: ARTISTS’ BOOKS

Issue 14 (Winter 1976–1977) of *Art-Rite* was a special issue devoted to artists’ books. Though the use of the book as an artistic medium was not entirely new, with historical precedents such as illuminated manuscripts and *livres d’artistes*, the artist’s book was redefined in the 1960s and 1970s as an explicitly democratic medium. Lippard, who was an important advocate of artists’ books, described the term “artists’ book” as implying “mass produced, relatively cheap, accessible to a broad public. ... Handmade, one-of-a-kind books were something else—often very beautiful, but the kind of ‘precious objects’ I hoped we’d escape.”⁷² In particular, Lippard was optimistic about the potential of artists’ books to fulfill the unrealized goals of art of the late 1960s, observing, “One of the basic mistakes made by early proponents of Conceptual art’s ‘democratic’ stance (myself included) was a confusion of the characteristics of the medium (cheap, portable, accessible) with those of the actual contents (all too often wildly self-indulgent or so highly specialized that they appeal only to an elite audience).”⁷³ By contrast, she argued, “the most important aspect of artists’ books is their adaptability as instruments for extension to a far broader public than that currently enjoyed by contemporary art.”⁷⁴

too pointed. They carried more and less meaning than I wanted. They were always too personal. They were nobody's business but mine. So I stopped. And I made sculpture.

And that was better; more general, more diffuse, more ambiguous—but also more immediate. People could trip over them.

Yet something was lost. Something important to me: a narrative quality that moves and excites me. Something I can't get and don't want in my sculpture. It's a temporal quality; specific memories used as building blocks in sculpture that snakes through time.

So I make books too. But differently than I did before. My books are like sculpture now; built for the same reasons and in the same way. They aim at the same ambiguous feelings, work with the same not quite regular forms and the same preshaped materials—they are objects; objects to deal with. But, they do what my sculpture can't: they jump, they move, they snake with the richness of real incident—they are the space between the sculptures.

Adrian Piper

Cheap Art Utopia

Suppose art was as accessible to everyone as comic books? as cheap and as available? What social and economic conditions would this state of things presuppose?

(1) It would presuppose a conception of art that didn't equate spatiotemporal uniqueness with aesthetic quality. People would have to be able to discriminate quality in art without the trappings of preciousness, e.g. the gilt frame, the six-figure price tag, the plexiglass case, the roped-off area around the work, etc.

(2) It would presuppose a different economic status for artists. Since art would be cheap and accessible, artists could no longer support themselves by receiving high prices for their work. Their situation would be comparable to that of writers, for whom first editions, original manuscripts and the like play virtually no economic role during their own lifetime.

(3) Therefore art dealers would bear much the same sort of economic relationship to artists that agents bear to writers: perhaps just as symbiotic (we should no longer fool ourselves into thinking of the relationship as parasitic), but not nearly as lucrative an enterprise as art dealing is now. Economically, artists' and art dealers' profits would diminish proportionally.

(4) Since artists' revenue would depend more on volume of sales than on making a killing on the yearly masterpiece, artists would gradually feel increasingly disposed to make their work palatable or relevant to a larger segment of society than that which now constitutes the art world. Some would equate this increased popularity (literally) with a decline in aesthetic quality; these individuals would become bitter, dogmatically elitist, and comfort themselves with the thought that their work represented the last bastion of aesthetic integrity. Others would find that this state of things no longer fueled their images of themselves as rare and special persons, and so would



From top to bottom: Catalogue by Gilbert & George; Notes on Water by Joseph Kosuth; Sonoma Cows by Richard Nonas; White Paper by Gordon Matta-Clark

In addition to serving as a crucial—if somewhat idiosyncratic—resource on artists' books, with an extensive catalog, statements by fifty artists and critics, and numerous articles and reviews, issue 14 of *Art-Rite* considered its own participation in the aesthetic and political possibilities it surveyed, offering a novel set of methodologies for representing and evaluating this important new medium. As deAk later recalled, "we were basically formulating how to write about a new medium that had not been dealt with before."⁷⁵ Instead of presenting a monolithic overview of the topic, they published a series of unedited artists' statements, ranging in length and tone from manifesto-like lists to more academic accounts, to informal, stream-of-consciousness responses, producing a heterogeneous, multivocal discourse that mirrored the collaborative, egalitarian ethos of artists' books themselves. As the editors noted in the issue: "The collective quality of these statements functions as the most basic and genuine definition of artists' books."⁷⁶ The editors also experimented with new ways of photographing books to convey their interactive, tactile dimension. Rather than splayed flat and cropped from their surroundings, books are shown being flipped through, going in and out of focus as their pages are turned.

Besides considering the aesthetic and formal properties of artists' books, issue 14 also emphasized the political potential of this accessible, low-cost medium. This was underscored by the poem by Carl Andre that appeared on the cover. Centered on the page, the poem consisted of a square grid of handwritten, capitalized block letters, quoting a passage from Karl Marx's *Capital*: "The life process of society which is based on the process of material production does not strip off its mystical veil until it is treated as production by freely associated men and women and is consciously regulated by them in accordance with a settled plan." The form of Andre's poem echoes its content, enacting the idea that the work of art might "strip off its mystical veil" and be freed from its status as commodity, emancipating artistic production and reception from their alienated condition within the capitalist system. Like the modular metal slabs of the artist's minimalist sculpture, the poem insists on the concrete facticity of its material—here, language, itself—detached from its capacity to express ideas and illusions. Devoid of punctuation and spacing, the poem encourages readers to connect its letters randomly, discovering new words hidden within it. As Liz Kotz has argued, Andre's poetry attempts to liberate language from the tyranny of authorial intention in order to bring about a radical democratization of meaning—an interpretation reinforced by the artist's own account: "The poetry I am trying to write is poetry which eliminates the poet. ... What I want to illuminate in my poetry are not those things which only I can see, but those things which any man can see."⁷⁷

Though language might be considered the medium of Andre's poem, its meaning cannot be separated from its form of distribution—in this case, a free, self-published artists' magazine. By appearing on the newsprint cover of *Art-Rite*, the poem foregrounds the magazine's role in actually achieving the social transformation to which it refers, by giving artists more control over the production and distribution of their work and allowing them to reach different audiences. However, while artists embraced the printed page as an inherently accessible and public medium—a concept with roots in the Enlightenment model of the public sphere—they also began to question the universal character of this normative ideal, which masked its historical reality. (Andre's description above with its reference to "any man" reveals the gendered assumptions that underwrote his own concept of the public space of the printed page.) Other artists began to think instead

#14

ART-RITE

artists' books

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about how printed matter might register not the mythical universal character of some abstract ideal of the public, but the actual subjectivities of artists and their viewers. Lippard, for example, was interested in the role artists' publications might play in the feminist art movement, observing:

[Artists' books] open up a way for women artists to get their work out without depending on the undependable museum and gallery system (still especially undependable for women). They also serve as an inexpensive vehicle for feminist ideas. ... The next step is to get the books out into 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. I have this visual of feminist artists' books in school libraries (or being passed around under the desks), in hairdressers, in gynecologists' waiting rooms, in Girl Scout Cookies.⁷⁸

Lippard's irreverent description captures how artists' publications, with their egalitarian, unpretentious formats, might oppose the patriarchal category of greatness and challenge the hierarchies of gender and class within the art world.⁷⁹ The model of the public sphere that she evokes is clearly not a universal Habermasian one, equally accessible to all, but a distinctly gendered realm which at times overlaps a more general public space (school libraries) and at other times asserts its separateness (gynecologists' offices). Indeed, as Peter Uwe Hohendahl has argued, for social groups that have been historically excluded from the official institutions of the public sphere, "a unified public sphere to which everybody has equal access is probably less a democratic achievement than a sign of repression, since the formal equality guaranteed by the Constitution had not prevented social and sometimes even legal discrimination."⁸⁰ Instead, Lippard suggests that artists' publications might produce a counterpublic sphere—an alternative space in which artistic communities, especially those marginalized by mainstream art institutions, might develop their own artistic criteria and forms of expression.

5.6

Carl Andre, *THELIFEPROCESSO*, 1976, cover,
Art-Rite, no. 14, Winter 1976–1977. Courtesy of
the editors. Art © Carl Andre/Licensed by VAGA,
New York, NY. Collection of Steven Leiber,
San Francisco.

PRINTED MATTER AND COUNTERPUBLICS IN THE 1970S ART WORLD

Though artists' publications did not show up in the grocery store checkout line as Lippard had hoped, they did offer a crucial platform for women artists to publicize their work, define the politics of feminist art practice, and create a sense of solidarity and community. Lippard herself was a founding member of the Heresies collective which published *Heresies* magazine—one of several magazines founded to support feminist art practices during the 1970s.⁸¹ The editorial statement in the first issue of *Heresies* asserted, "As a step toward the demystification of art, we reject the standard relationship of criticism to art within the present system, which has often become the relationship of advertiser to product. We will not advertise a new set of genius-products just because they are made by women."⁸² As this statement demonstrates, artists' magazines sought not only to change the content of mainstream media, but to transform its socioeconomic relations of production. By insisting that the politics of art and art criticism were inseparable from their form of distribution, *Art-Rite* provided an influential model for such alternatives. (When several former *Artforum* editors founded *October* in 1976, even they paid close attention to the form of the magazine as well as its content, vowing to be visually austere and free of advertisements.)



5.7

Printed Matter at 7 Lispenard Street. Photograph by Sarah Longacre, c. 1980. Courtesy of Printed Matter, Inc., and Sarah Longacre.

In 1976, deAk, Robinson, Lippard, and a few others founded Printed Matter, an alternative space devoted to publishing, promoting, and distributing artists' publications.⁸³ Like Martha Wilson's Franklin Furnace, which slightly preceded it, as well as like-minded institutions in other cities including Art Metropole in Toronto, Bookspace in Chicago, and Other Books & So in Amsterdam, Printed Matter was a hybrid space, combining the normally mutually exclusive categories of store and nonprofit and merging many different kinds of activities and functions, serving as a bookstore, a gallery for artists' books, a publisher, and an information center for self-publishing artists. These spaces provided important new models of publishing, distributing, and marketing artists' publications that allowed artists to maintain more control over these processes.⁸⁴ In addition, these spaces functioned as archives and distribution centers, organized exhibitions and events, and hosted performances, readings, and screenings—making it clear that the aesthetic potential of printed matter was deeply linked with other new time-based and ephemeral media such as performance, video, and film.

Institutions such as Printed Matter point to another way that the two-dimensional space of the page might intersect with and traverse real, three-dimensional space. By allowing artists and their readers to participate in a larger collective identity, Printed Matter contributed to the social function of artists' publications. According to Lippard, "Printed Matter was originally a community of radical/avant-garde/experimental (not always the same thing) artists. ... Printed Matter was an incredible support system for artists."⁸⁵ Among the space's many other uses, the group Political Art Documentation and Distribution, discussed further in chapter 7, used Printed Matter as the site of its initial meetings. Printed Matter also sought to make artists' publications available to a wider audience outside the art world by giving them a more salient public presence within the urban community. It was with this in mind that the space, which was located during the late 1970s in Tribeca near a large Post Office facility, began to install a series of curated window exhibitions facing out onto the street, with the hope that intrigued passersby would be tempted to step inside.

Even though *Art-Rite* and other artists' publications clearly strove to reach a broader public outside of the art world, their true legacy is most evident within it. As editor Harley Lond wrote in the first issue of the L.A. artists' magazine *Intermedia*, "the vacuum in which artists have struggled for years is now being filled by a host of political and economic organizations striving to create a stronger representation and voice for artists everywhere. There is almost a grassroots movement among artists to take control over their destinies."⁸⁶ Much like the underground press of the period, artists' magazines helped to kindle new social formations in the art world in very practical ways, by circulating resource lists, publicizing political activities, and disseminating information about safety and hazardous materials, housing, and health insurance for artists. As Lippard observed, "Artists' publications were and still are important not only for their content and educational information but also for the networking they generate. At a time when little politics appeared in art magazines (and if it did, it was treated as a separate category) these portable objects could be mailed around the country, sparking actions in other contexts."⁸⁷ Both the collective nature of the periodical and its seriality made it an especially effective vehicle for the formation of artistic communities, since it could spread ideas through space and sustain dialog over time. As the artist-run magazine *The Fox* claimed of itself, it was "less a publication, a reified

object, than the byproduct of a community of people. That is, there is some attempt to use it as an instrument of praxis, both as a cause and effect of self-determination.”⁸⁸

Throughout the 1970s, numerous alternative artists’ magazines were founded, prompted by the same motives that propelled the founding of alternative spaces—to support the ideological and practical goals of political activism within the art world, and to foster new artistic communities and counterpublics. In addition to those already mentioned, magazines such as *Tracks*, *Art Workers News*, *Women Artists Newsletter*, *Appearances*, *Chrysalis*, *Black Art*, *New Observations*, *Big Deal*, and *Red-Herring* sprang up alongside the new alternative gallery spaces. Magazines outside of New York—including *Vision* and *La Mamelie* in San Francisco; *New Art Examiner* and *The Original Art Report* in Chicago; *Straight Turkey*, *The Dumb Ox*, *Intermedia*, *LAICA Journal*, *Performance Art Journal*, and *Choke* in Los Angeles; *Sunday Clothes* in South Dakota; *Criss Cross Communications* in Boulder; and *Art Papers* in Atlanta—were crucial for the development of local and regional art scenes. As Alan Moore noted in 1974, “art world centrism is undeniably breaking down ... art periodicals in outlying communities have become increasingly conscious of their own potential to contribute to the enrichment of contemporary art.”⁸⁹ As with alternative galleries, the increased number of independently published artists’ magazines in North America was precipitated in part by the new availability of public funding during this time.⁹⁰ *Art-Rite*, for example, was funded by both the NEA and the New York State Council on the Arts. Unlike commercial publications, which competed for readers and advertisers, artists’ magazines in the 1970s were guided by a cooperative spirit. They supported one another, publishing advertisements for one another and cultivating common editorial goals. They even occasionally collaborated, as *Art-Rite* and *LAICA Journal* did in 1978, taking advantage of their nearly identical formats to create a joint issue, distributed on both coasts.

In their 1978 article “Alternative Periodicals,” deAk and Robinson sampled the profusion of new artists’ magazines, offering a loose taxonomy with the following categories: Picture Magazines (“consist of artworks, usually graphics or photographs done in the magazine space”); Parochials and House Organs (“fledgling critical magazines and papers, often with strong artist participation, that fashion the scene in communities outside of mainstream centers”); the Voice of the New (“rebellious, enfranchising new art and artists that the commercial periodicals with their interests invested elsewhere, have resisted”); the Scholarly Ones (“misfortune: they continue to mystify analytical writing”); the Lobbyists (“periodical agent for the disenfranchised” which “conceive of their audience as a social unit, and one that needs protection”); and Newsletters (“alternative point: low overhead”).⁹¹ As this overview demonstrates, within the 1970s art world artists’ magazines did not function as a single, unified public sphere, but as multiple, sometimes competing sites of counterpublicity. As deAk and Robinson themselves observed, “The time of a single forum for avant-garde art has ended.”⁹²

ALTERNATIVE AND MAINSTREAM

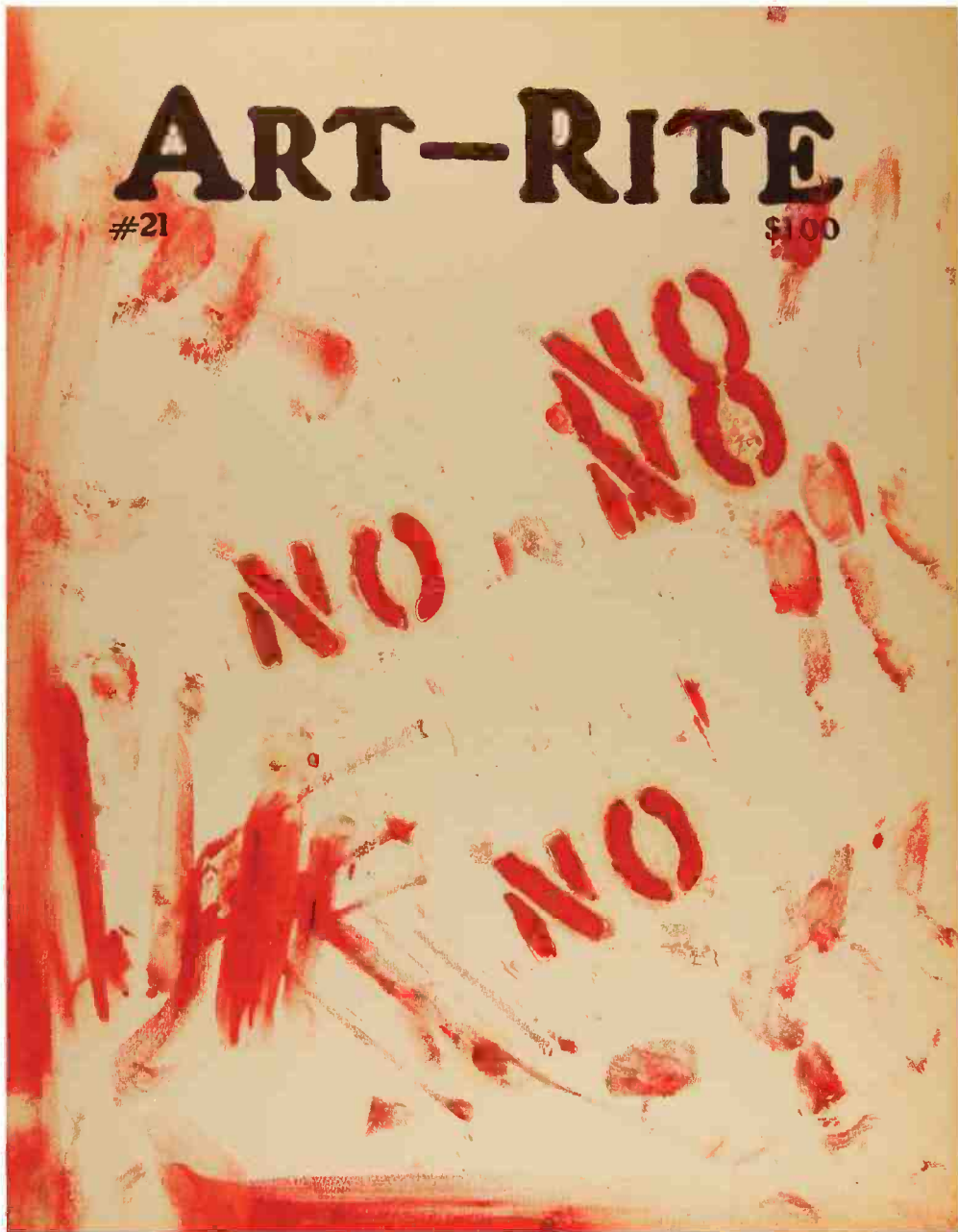
If *Art-Rite* helped to define the artists’ magazine as an alternative space, it also suggested how publications wrestle with the same processes of institutionalization that other kinds of alternative spaces experience. Thus, in issue 8 (Winter 1975), an editorial statement recounted how the magazine had been founded to serve young and unknown artists, and then reflected:

And now I really don't know: who is a young artist? There is a huge bunch of them but their names are always around, they certainly seem to not need this media, or certainly, I feel guilty giving them much publicity since they are so busy promoting themselves, and are doing so well at it that is disgusting. ... Honestly what can a magazine do in such a screwed up situation? Nothing of course. Except one thing. Not give a damn about dedication to young or old or artists and their career being helped potentially by the magazine, but concentrate on the magazine itself and make it good. ... A good magazine. O.K.⁹³

Indeed, though the term “alternative” connotes an opposition to what is mainstream, in practice this opposition often proves highly unstable. As deAk recalled of the origins of the publication, “We came in without a big bang. We just put our magazine around. People up to date thought we had money. We were riding on the absurdity of the situation—that we were three nobodies, had no money, had no fame, and didn’t know anybody in the art world. But it was perfect—we were totally free.”⁹⁴ As Cohn and Robinson then observed, “It’s easy to start a magazine. It becomes harder and harder to stay free once you become known.”⁹⁵ These comments point to the precariousness of alternative enterprises more generally—the fact that, in the process of publicizing and supporting what is marginal, they often transform the margins into the center. If they are successful, they render themselves obsolete. In its support of “young, unknown artists,” *Art-Rite* inadvertently participated in the marketing of these very qualities, feeding the art market’s appetite for novelty.

This dilemma was highlighted during a conference on alternative publishing that took place on February 20, 1977, at San Francisco’s alternative space, 80 Langton Street. Here a group of magazine publishers from California and New York gathered to exchange information about their involvement in the activity of alternative art publishing. *Art-Rite*’s editors were invited, as were the publishers of *Vision*, *La Mamelle*, *Choke*, *The Dumb Ox*, *Intermedia*, and *Assembling*. Tables were set up with current and back issues of each periodical, and at four o’clock that afternoon a panel discussion took place. An audience member asked: “Is there any unifying notion of an alternative magazine in these publications?”⁹⁶ This seemingly innocent question prompted a rather exasperated retort from Tom Mandel, the publisher of *Arts Biweekly*: “What does the word ‘alternative’ mean? It don’t mean shit.”⁹⁷ Another audience member cynically chimed in: “It’s hype for grant applications.” DeAk offered the following observation: “If you unify alternatives you get a mainstream and that’s not what we’re about. ... Our position is somewhat ambiguous. We are not people with a very specific jargon. We don’t make easy issues. We are navigating and trying to float and be open. That is our position.”⁹⁸

The next year, in 1978, *Art-Rite* would float right out of existence, with as little fanfare as it had begun five years before. According to Robinson, the magazine “petered out. We kind of ran out of energy. It’s just one of those things. We never really made any money out of it, it ran its course.”⁹⁹ Likewise, when asked why the magazine ended, deAk explained, “We were getting older. We had to work all the time. ... The magazine wouldn’t pay anything for us. I just got tired.”¹⁰⁰ While these remarks attest to the burnout that is endemic to alternative enterprises more generally, they also suggest how impermanence might actually safeguard such enterprises, in essence preempting the processes of acculturation that would inevitably overtake them. The final issue of *Art-Rite*, designed by Judy Rifka, consisted of two thousand original mixed-media drawings, collages, and stencils, each on a single sheet of paper folded in half, sent out like a handmade card.¹⁰¹



5.8

Judy Rifka, *Art-Rite*, no. 21, 1978, cover. Courtesy of the artist and the editors. Collection of Steven Leiber, San Francisco.

Meanwhile, the notion of the magazine as an alternative space was becoming an increasingly mainstream idea. A little over a year after *Art-Rite* ceased publication in late 1978, *Artforum*'s February 1980 issue, under the direction of its brand-new editor, Ingrid Sischy, was nearly entirely given over to artists' projects—a feature that would become a mainstay in *Artforum* throughout the 1980s. Several of the works originally created for *Art-Rite*'s Dollar Art Series, including Rifka's drawings, were reproduced as artists' projects for the issue, alongside artists' projects by Dan Graham, Art & Language, Ed Ruscha, Laurie Anderson, Jenny Holzer, Peter Nadin, and others. As Sischy, who had been the director of Printed Matter, wrote in her editorial statement, "Apart from the reviews, none of the pages in this issue is a reproduction of a work of art, all are primary art intended for this and only this format."¹⁰² DeAk herself contributed an article in which she reflected back on her experience publishing *Art-Rite* in the 1970s, describing it as "a reaction against what I saw as the monolithic art infrastructure and about my means to circumvent it."¹⁰³ But she pointed out that "now we are in an opposite situation. The power of art's statements and contributions to culture has to be sent beyond the art world's boundaries," and went on to express her optimism about the art magazine as a medium, explaining, "The presence of art directly in a magazine could be like a bass drum, a thumping existence that could lock the whole enterprise into a meaningful track."¹⁰⁴

On the one hand, the February 1980 issue of *Artforum* suggests the assimilation of alternative practices by mainstream institutions, and the art market's black-hole-like capacity to turn even the most valueless object into a cipher for monetary worth (an irony that is only amplified today by the fact that *Art-Rite* and other artists' magazines and ephemera from the 1960s and 1970s have become collectors' items, appraised at thousands of dollars).¹⁰⁵ And yet it also hints at a shift in the relationship between the nonprofit and commercial sectors that would define a new generation of alternative practices in the late 1970s and early 1980s, such as Colab (of which Robinson was a member). Among other things, these new practices would demonstrate not only that mainstream institutions co-opt alternative ones, but that alternatives also borrow from and exploit commercial spaces. Maybe in this sense the February 1980 issue of *Artforum* can be read not solely as the cooptation of *Art-Rite* but also as its final issue—an ending that was also the beginning of a new chapter in the history of the magazine as an alternative space.

