

# Edit deAk (1950– 2017)

Alan Moore



Edit by Patrick Fox

It has taken some days to sink in, but I realize now Edit deAk is gone. She sent me a message only days ago saying she was going to be evicted and could I help her store her stuff. "Sure," I replied, and provided details about my storage space in NYC. (Now I live in Madrid.)

Days later she was dead.

When I met her, I was bright green on the NYC art scene and working for Artforum. I was part of the California

gang, albeit a very junior and not too witting recruit, working for editor John Coplans. John had his own problems, and lasted as long as he could in the super-conflictive hothouse milieu of that magazine in the mid-1970s. I met the Art-Riters — that was Edit and Walter Robinson, then known as "Mike," with his long blond hippie hair — I'm not sure how. It probably was because John assigned me to write about their journal as part of an article on small art magazines. Avalanche actually blew me off, but the Art-Rite people were very nice. (I wrote it and got the "kill fee" for it; oddly, that lost text has been cited and written about since.)

I thought Edit & Mike were the coolest thing going. Playing ping pong with Peter Grass in their enormous Soho loft above Paula Cooper gallery and Artists Space, meeting — or not, only seeing, since the place was huge — other interesting people at the 149 Wooster hangout... all this was intoxicating for me.

When Max Kozloff had enough of my contrarian ways — "Your beat is the underground!" John had told me — and contrived to have me fired, I beat it to Wooster Street to work with Art-Rite. (I still recall the weird contemptuous squint Max, that Marxist porridge disher gave as he looked at me in the office; it was the same look he had 30 years later when he'd abdicated high-power art criticism for photography. Meh.)

Artforum was uptown, on Madison Avenue when I worked for them. In Soho I worked with Edit & Mike. They only very occasionally and carefully exercised their editorial prerogative. Mostly I was writing with them, contributing ideas, turns of phrase, and potato-stamping that great hand-made cover. Such labor for a give-away magazine! But that was the point — it was a gift, and un-theorized.

The power games were out. Friendship was in. We were all in it

together. My relations with other artists became warmer once I was out of the money seat. The artists anxious for glossy mag coverage melted away, and only the ones who were really interesting remained.

On Wooster Street, Edit was queen. It was impossible to predict what she would say or do. Folks at Artforum, on the other hand, were always pretty predictable. They had agendas, cards in their hands to play. Art-Rite didn't. And really, that's how a scene gets made. It's what happens, and we're here to love it and cheer it on.

Through both these connections, I met Europeans. Among them was Joseph Beuys' dealer Rene Block and his assistant Irene Von Zahn. Art-Rite did a cover with Beuys, and Edit and I interviewed him. I thought he was the bee's knees. I still think so — he's my kind of superstar artist. But he wasn't then, at least not in the USA. Some years later, after I'd turned away from art criticism, I was told by a German researcher that I had produced the first non-commercial exhibition of Beuys' work in the USA, working with Rene Block and Ronald Feldman galleries on a show of multiples for my alma mater, the UC in Riverside. This would not have happened without Edit as the hub. Mike and I were both working graphic trades, and he let me set the type for the Beuys catalogue at night at the Jewish Week where he worked.

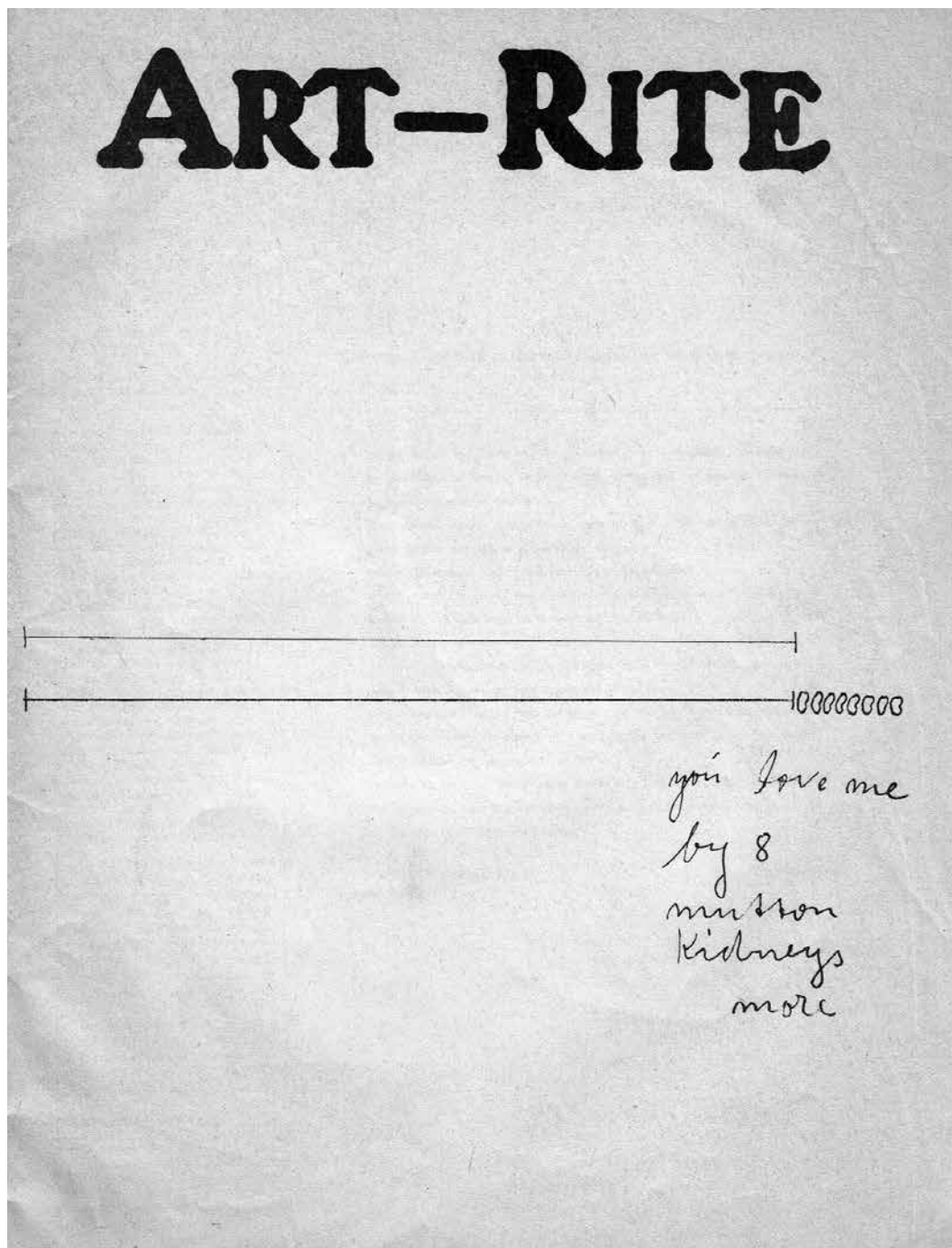
With time, the Art-Rite project ended. Edit began to write for Artforum. Mike was gone, but she continued to favor the collaborative method of composition — "I can't write English," she said. And she hired me. We'd sit there day after day, struggling with her drafts which I banged out on an electric typewriter. I took her at her word, and turned her elliptical phrases and ambiguities into clear plain prose. I've always been a stylist of the straightforward, loving

R.L. Stevenson and Ross Macdonald. Edit would take the texts we wrote together to Artforum, and go through a second round of work with Ingrid Sischy. (A South African like John Coplans, this late great editor also had a whole lot to do with the way art in the '80s went — "our" way.) When the text we'd worked on was finally published, I never recognized any of my work in it. It was entirely different!

I was baffled as to why Edit would want to continue to work with me. But hey, money is money, and the working conditions were great. I met Ramelzee and Jack Smith at her place, both great artists and extremely weird, the way she liked. Along the way she was getting deep into night life and fashion. Seminal downtown DJ and early hip hop enthusiast Johnny Dynell was a constant presence on Wooster Street. Models like Lisa Rosen and the inimitable Terry Toyne. She had a big Jean-Michel drawing on the wall. There was a party for Elvis Costello (he was a wall flower at it). Edit would babysit Francesco Clemente's mynah bird, which would cry out at times during our writing sessions. As we wrestled with her thoughts and phrases, I began to think these caws were meaningful interventions.

As the same time I was working for & with Edit, I was doing ABC No Rio on the Lower East Side. "When worlds collide," indeed. Soho was just too glam for me — in fact, Edit produced an important early hip hop event at the Kitchen called "Dubbed in Glamor." I was more the hard-bitten radical type, and I felt the clash of mores very strongly. Finally, I couldn't do it anymore. (Looking at that poster now, I realize how much it was about female solidarity.)

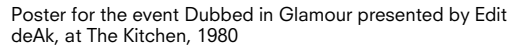
From time to time I would hear word of Edit. She was traveling; she wasn't doing so well. You didn't see her in print anymore. I didn't know any of her real friends. Then the loft from which she'd



Fall 1975 issue of ART-RITE magazine cover by Joseph Beuys

Now of course I regret not seeing her during my occasional brief trips to New York. After decades of disconnection, it just never seemed important. But then one never expects an old friend to drop dead. Other friends who have recently passed were already ill — Willy Lenski, Diane Torr. Glenn O'Brien? Last time I saw him he asked me why I wasn't making him any money (I distributed video). He was a pure New Yorker.

Yeah, yeah. That and a fin'll get you coffee. But really, Edit deAk's New York artworld was a familial zone. Competitive, sure. Not unaware of the stakes of money and career. But a community fabric was being knit with every show and every text.



That was the point of Art-Rite. And that was the point of the art work Edit did. And that's why there will always be room in my storage space for her stuff until she needs it again.

The text above is tight; the product of the shock of her death. I'd thought to revise it, but can't, can only add. Of Edit there is so much more to say, to know; so much mystery to unravel. For one, why'd she stay in New York? How her life could have been different if she had returned to Europe instead of remaining forgotten amongst her *haute bohème* friends in the rapidly Babbitizing city of Trump? In the European context, she was already an important critic of what Achille Bonito Oliva called *transavanguardia*. But that would have been playing the game, and I don't think she wanted to. Not that one, anyhow.

The Times obituary has her always one step ahead, in search of the new — a fashion scout. More, now I think she was a then-hidden link to an Eastern European style of avant-gardeism that grows under the stones — a way of making art under repression that we now need to know more about. The post-1989 years have seen a rash of new scholarship on art in the Red East. A text on Hungarian art action in the '70s, from whence Edit & Peter fled: "[I]magine an open air stage in a small town not too far from Budapest, where some young men appear and start reading all sorts of nonsensical texts. The performance is stopped in some minutes later when the police arrive and arrest the youngsters. No, it was not part of the happening, it was real police action. It was always difficult for the authorities to identify, classify or even name the ideologies behind tolerated art (including, of course, avant-garde). Often they were called mystical; or existentialist (independent of the meaning of the term, it was just a swear-word); or just simply bourgeois."<sup>1</sup>

When I knew her, Edit was attuned as only an East European could be to what in New York was coming into spectacular flower under conditions of systemic repression. She called herself a "HungaRican." (Another East-West European, Stefan Eins, also took this leap, starting Fashion Moda in the South Bronx; when he got his first state grant, he took me and Edit to the Russian Tea Room.)

As well as a champion hobnobber, a pal of the late Rene Ricard (called an Olympian acid tongue in a Luc Sante obit), putting in an immaculately-clad appearance at Glenn O'Brien's funeral, Edit was a key figure in a moment of international Euro-American Cold War art, in a way that very much remains to be sorted out. She was also an artist — like Jonas Mekas, a diaristic filmmaker and

photographer. Patrick Fox was working with her on that when she died.

Klara Palotai, of the expatriate Hungarian Squat Theatre group posted a chunk of Edit's text which bottles her belletrist critical style:

So it's champagne and cuchifritos, barred from heaven, no fault of our own. We have codified this urban limbo. We are in the urban synch but we are not down the drain. We are mavericks poised between our world and your world. We are prospectors of slum vintage. Who renamed the city after our own names. This is our turf. We operate a hardcore cradle of maverick kink. This is the jive of the personal. Poker-faced. We are flim-flam. Poised, raunchy and sensual our coded touch depleted of imagery, we have put this city into a garbage bag and emptied it in your lovely home. Don't bug us. We are not you. You have become us. We have taken your garbage all our lives and are selling it back at an inconceivable markup. We have died a copy death. We are stultified in the urban stink. Art Spectacle. We were driving in a cab with the window down and a diamond ring flew in our eye. We are the artists of the berzerker lumpen. Not for mature audiences. Our channel has been preempted by impossible messages we do not understand. Cultural intrigue. We are putting the jive of the personal idiosync back to the mass produced. Cheap appeal. This is the visual scuzz- urban lyric of image pirates. We have bought from the world- wide street and its dimestores, ladies and gentlemen, high art. This is the great white hope of neo slum turfs. You are receiving an unlisted signal. Our excitement whips coded images into subjective events. Prime Time/ Dime Time.<sup>2</sup>

Wrote Fritz Demmer, aka Demi: "Dear Edit, what a precious character to have to be without."

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Gyorgy C. Kalman,  
"Continuation, resemblance  
or structural similarity?  
„Dada" in the 70's in  
Hungary," draft posted to  
academia.edu.

<sup>2</sup> Edit Deak, from her  
"Urban Kisses/Slum  
Hisses," abridged from  
an exhibition handout  
at a group show at  
Brooke Alexander gallery,  
September, 1981.

f: for Edit