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Do Magazines Furnish a Room?

Some Remarks about Art Magazines, Their Form and Lifespan

Roland Früh

It feels as if there are more and more magazines about art, culture, lifestyle and the like, more and more titles, both local and international, both good and undistinguished. But what to do with them? Read and throw them away? Or stack and keep them after all? This text wonders about the (quality of the) quantity of art magazines and about what exactly defines those that survive even frequent changes of residence.





Sorting out the recently acquired Stieghorst Collection at the Sitterwerk in St.Gallen, January 2015. Photo: Roland Früh.

How much is too much?

In the fall of last year, a private collection of roughly 12’000 books and various magazines passed into the possession of the art library at the Sitterwerk in St. Gallen, thereby expanding its holdings overnight by about 40 percent. As the person in charge of the art library, this suddenly confronts you with a logistical problem and, ultimately, with a moral issue as well. How to transport all that to St.Gallen and how much are you allowed to weed out? In the case of books, the latter must be decided piece by piece, individually, as it were. Things are different with magazines: you either take ‹all or nothing› — you keep the collected issues or dispose of them. Few would think of cherry-picking individual issues. And so we stand and ask ourselves what to do with the almost complete collections of Du and Art, what to do with Parkett, Kunstforum, Kunst-Bulletin, Hochparterre? Is this art criticism or can it be thrown out? And perhaps also: does it look good or can it be thrown out? After all, collected magazines are admittedly presentable. Shelves or coffee tables with magazines are fashionable these days in private spaces. Yet decorating private rooms with magazines is a relatively new thing: when comparing photographs from architectural magazines of the past eighty years or so, it becomes clear that around 1935 people still liked to present empty, tidy spaces and shelves, while in the 1950s some printed material started to find its way into the images and today, in magazines such as Apartamento or Wallpaper,the personality, indeed the zeitgeist of the spaces is dramatically staged with the magazines that are lying around. In fact, it is just the same at the library. Magazines are a matter of good taste and lend the space a certain credibility and currentness — even if it is the very magazines that keep throwing themselves out of vogue.

And so the relevant question is, in my case out of an actual task, but really also in general: what distinguishes magazines? Why do we reserve space for them, keep them? What is it that ultimately counts: their content, their form or their representative function? This sounds somewhat superficial, I admit, but we shall see where it will take us…



VEMBER, 1935 21

Photographs by Fred R. Dapprich

A house for a professor and his wife should be a simple problem, even if he is on the faculty of the California Institute of Technology. But read this schedule of requirements. Living room must accommodate seminars of 25 to 30 students and provide 150 feet of book shelves. Kitchen must provide for large informal buffet suppers. Garage must have space for woodworking shop. Living room and bedroom must have north view and all rooms southern exposure. How perfectly the conditions were satisfied is shown in these views. The dining terrace will some day become a dining room. The gardens planted with native shrubs will leave the professor more time for his books and seminars.

HERE ANY PROFESSOR MIGHT FORGET HIS HAT

Article about the Graham Laing Residence of Harwell Hamilton Harris from *California Arts & Architecture*, November, 1935, 21.



Spread from *Apartamento* no. 5, accessed June 21, 2016, http://www.omarsosa.net/2010/apartamento-magazine-issue-5/.

In or out?

The surprising acquisition of the new collection had a «learning-on-the-job» effect, because the host of Du's, Kunst-Bulletin's, Frieze's, Kunstforum's and individual Tate etc.'s as well as Cologne-specific items were to be sorted out and assessed in terms of value and whether they are worth preserving. We came upon a complete collection of Parkett and of the German magazine Art — and while the latter was discarded without much ado, Parkett was neatly taken to the side, tenderly dusted by hand and happily placed on the new shelves in chronological order. But why is that Parkett is given more affection than Art. What does Parkett have that Art doesn't have?

The publisher and editors of Parkett once provided a few clues in an interview with Mirjam Varadinis in their anniversary publication. Thus Dieter von Graffenried said: «Being in Zürich also means being in Switzerland. And a Swiss publication is something very special. Had we been a French, German, or American journal, I don't think it would have been as easy to foster this crossing of boundaries, this openness, and we would certainly have been perceived differently.».[1] (A self-assessment and an assessment of Zürich that Gilbert & George would probably take issue with, since they judged Zürich differently: «[London] is the best place to see the world from. Whatever happens in London is the same as the world is. Whereas whatever happens in Zürich is just to do with Zürich.»)[2] Yet the self-description of the editorial team of Parkett demonstrates what Parkett most certainly has always had: self-confidence and an attitude — the confidence of developing something out of the locality of the Zürich network that is of international significance and pursuing it with consistency and the necessary dose of seriousness. For instance, the format has barely been changed since the

first issue in 1984. From the outset, Parkett was a text-heavy, intellectual, recondite publication, more book than magazine. After 1995, the publication took on additional weight with its switch to sewn binding and to three issues a year (from four) — which shows how essential form is. The design was never at any time compulsively contemporary. Trix Wetter designed Parkett from the outset as a classical — neoclassical, really — publication and Jacqueline Burckhardt said: «I remember that we were often criticized because the magazine was too beautiful.»[3] Today, Hanna Williamson-Koller is responsible for Parkett's design which, though slightly adapted, is still somehow neoclassical, timeless, «dressed down». What Parkett also has is a vision and a perfected network. From the outset, the magazine was created together with the artists, rather than just about them. That is a defining characteristic.

Perhaps what Parkett has is an aura? Assembled on the book rack, it exudes a certain heft and integrity — even though it is unlikely that its articles are read more often than those in Art and even though Parkett, too, ends up being outdated with each new issue, every four months, becoming documentation and art history.



Karl Lagerfeld's private library in the May 2002 issue of the French version of the magazine *Architectural Digest*, May 2002, accessed June 22, 2016, http://anysomeno.com/?p=7983.



An issue of *Parkett* in an Interio catalogue (fall/winter 2004/2005), in Mirjam Varadinis (ed.), *Parkett, 20 Years of Artists' Collaborations.* Zürich: Kunsthaus Zürich, Parkett Editions, 2004, 94.

What's new?

The aura of Parkett is somehow astounding; after all, the magazine was never particularly ‹contemporary› in its design. Rather, its editors drew already for its very first issue on examples such as Minotaure and Interfunktionen — ‹historical› publications really.[4] Other well-respected magazines such as October, Ambit and Texte zur Kunst also celebrate astonishingly classical formats. Even Artforum, which would indeed be described as fashionable, follows an extremely constant, experiment-averse strategy. More contemporary alternatives such as Kaleidoscope, Frieze, Elephant etc. never attain the same auratic level, as they appear fashionable, ephemeral and disposal-friendly. Is this, perhaps, why in art criticism in general the old is the ‹new new›?

«Good ideas often make you ask yourself why you didn't come up with them earlier»[5], Peter Liechti states in his notes, thereby basically describing the exact approach of Parkett and other classical publications: old ideas rethought. And so one could ask what the new ideas for printed art criticism would be? What would the criteria be, if one would like to describe a novel editorial concept?

In search of criteria the following may provide a more precise description: a few years ago there was a legal dispute to the west of Switzerland about the redesign of a magazine devoted to art criticism — and cases brought before a court have the advantage that they deal in verifiable criteria and avoid ambiguities… This is how it, in fact, was in this case, since it was apparently possible for abstract terms such as ‹innovative design› or ‹novel editorial concept› to be defined and categorized. The dispute was, simply put, about copyright and about the

question whether or not a redesign was sufficiently different from the original design and concept. The analyses put forward by the opposing parties described the layouts and visual concepts in detail: the editorial decisions on the form and length of texts, the use of pictures, the ads, down to purely formal criteria such as the cover design, choice of typeface, type area or placement of titles and footnotes. However, the ‹objective criteria› fell short of expectations in the description of the formal details. Of course, certain elements had been changed in the redesign, but others had been left the same, making it extremely difficult to conclusively resolve the matter. But what was neglected in the seemingly quantifiable analysis was the more important fact that the editorial team had from the very beginning explicitly drawn on the aforementioned timeless magazines such as Texte zur Kunst, October and Parkett. And so as not to undermine this editorial concept, certain design parameters could under no circumstances be changed. If one doesn’t want to drift off into a completely different category, classical typography, a type area and format similar to in a regular book as well as the reduction of trendy elements are simply part of it. And also part of this formula is that texts do not just fill the available columns, but are allowed to have the length they need.

Oversimplified as it is here, the example is, of course, taken out of context, but it does illustrate how important the editorial focus on a particular format is and how limited possibilities within those formats can be. It also allows us to understand the conviction of the editorial staff which sticks to the ‹classical› format with the firm awareness of belonging to a category that will be appreciated in the long run and wants to offer a counter-argument to the ephemerality of fashionable magazines.



The Sitterwerk art library during installation, 2004. Photo: Katalin Déer.

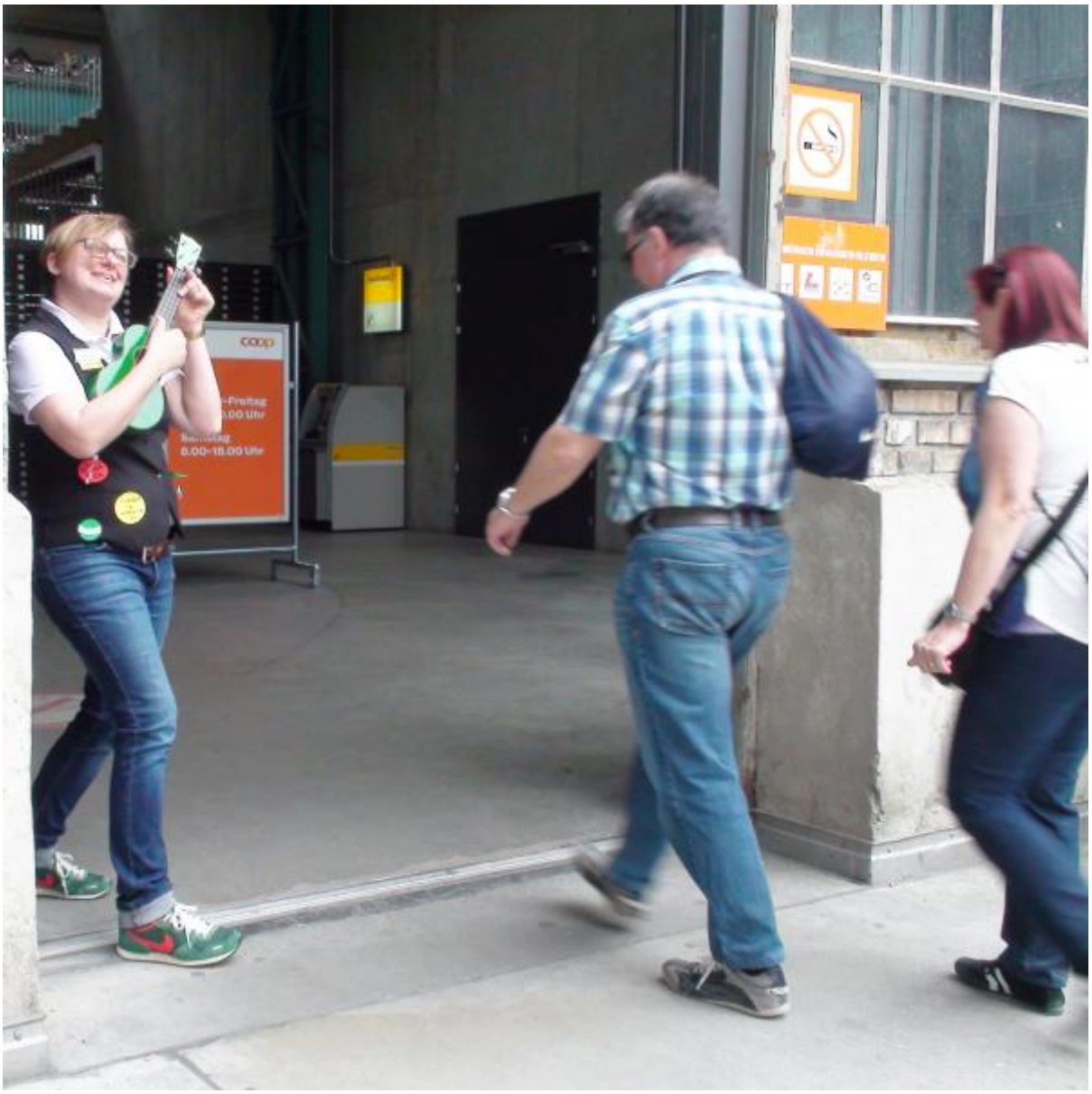
In Conclusion

Again, which are ultimately the magazines for which we should reserve space on the shelves? And what distinguishes them? Pointing merely to consistency and classical models would not suffice. It is about more, of course — and dismissing the contemporary or the fashionable would be absolutely wrong. Even the quite fashionable magazine Artforum can survive for many years, perhaps precisely because it is almost entirely made up of ads and thus also tells us something about the economic history of art. What I would like is if the description of Jean-Philippe Toussaint were used. Toussaint writes that he always strives for ambivalence — two simultaneous poles — in his texts: «Two seemingly irreconcilable notions have always been at play in writing, I think: urgency and patience.»[6] Toussaint wants on the one hand that the impulse be palpable in his texts; texts should be urgent and never incidental. And, on the other, that texts not be hastily written, but with the necessary patience that lends them their credibility. Perhaps this applies to art magazines as well? Either way, I like the notion that it is not the contemporariness of fashion or the frequently rehashed formula of the ‹serious‹ magazine that interests us in the long run, but rather a certain radicalism and a need for action — both in content and in form, that is. Really just the way Norman Potter put it as early as the 1960s: «Why are these worth reading? … Because there was spirit and necessity behind them – a quality of concern, reflecting a group effort, shared values, direction: a coherent standpoint. In a word – something to say, and the need of that form to say it.»[7]

Greeter in Action - Silvia Popp

Bildbeschrieb: Der Greeter trägt während den enthusiastischen Begrüssungen eine Weste mit informativ-illustrativen Badges. Vorteilhafterweise spielt sie auch noch ein Instrument. Greeter in Action / Silvia Popp, 2016


EINGANG


coop


SILVIA
GREETER
#1
JA
THANKS
for
stopping
by!


SILVIA
GREETER
Montag-Freitag
7.00-20.00 Uhr
Samstag
8.00-18.00 Uhr
YES
JA
THANKS
for
stopping
by!



Silvia Popp, geboren 1977, lebt in Zürich. Tätig als freischaffende Künstlerin (Boutique Pamela, Insel Institut) und im Team (Studio Action mit Anja Moers). Abgeschlossene Ausbildungen als Kauffrau, Künstlerin und Ausbildnerin. Seit 2011 als Dozentin für Netzkultur an der F+F Schule für Kunst und Design und seit 2005 im Opernhaus Zürich in der Personalabteilung als Berufsbildungsverantwort-liche für Kaufleute tätig.

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Die Künstlerin Silvia Popp arbeitet an einem weitverzweigten Werk, das sie teils alleine, teils im Duo Studio Action zusammen mit Anja Moers entwickelt. Dazu gehören die im Insel-Institut gebündelten Forschungsarbeiten, Arbeiten im Umgang mit öffentlichen Räumen und Landschaften sowie Projekte, die Tools, Arbeit, Arbeitsbedingungen, zahlreiche Wertfragen im Kontext von Arbeit, Menschen und Transformation von Welt thematisieren. Zentral sind immer die Menschen selber, die – obschon selten im Bild enthalten – meist sehr direkt adressiert werden. Exemplarisch ist die noch im Entstehen begriffene Arbeit Greeter in Action. Von Walmart-Greeters und vergleichbaren Figuren

inspiriert agiert Silvia Popp als Performerin im Selbst/Auftrag irgendwo in Nähe eines Eingangs zu einem Einkaufszentrum, einer Bushaltestelle oder einem Eishockeystadion oder im Foyer des Kunsthaus Zürich, um herzlich, gewinnend, ja vereinnahmend bis verschwörerisch die ankommenden Leute zu empfangen und nach einem gemeinsam gegangenen Weg wieder zu verabschieden. Die Direktheit ihres Vorgehens ist dermassen überraschend und entwaffnend, dass sie in jenem Sekunden-Zeitraum, in welchem sie einen Kontrollverlust bewirkt, bei den Adressierten einiges auslöst.

Zahlreiche Angesprochene gehen ebenso herzlich auf die Begrüssung ein, bis sie die kleine Verschiebung feststellen (oder auch nicht), die zwischen persönlich und persönlich liegen kann. Sowohl jene, die sich persönlich reingelegt fühlen wie auch jene, die der Situation von Beginn weg nicht trauen, mögen bei soviel Greeter-Herzlichkeit und ihrem eigenen spontanen Zuspruch oder aber ihrer reflexartigen Abwehr von einem Gefühl der plötzlichen Peinlichkeit gepackt werden.

Interessant an der Vorgehensweise von Silvia Popp ist, dass sie mit glaubhafter Ernsthaftigkeit für das Gegenüber anwesend ist und dieses erst dann wieder gehen lässt, wenn es sich sagen kann: hey, es war sicher kurz peinlich, aber dies hat mich eintauchen lassen in einen Raum der Nähe, wo persönliches Empfinden und eine Art Bewusstsein für die Begegnung in der Öffentlichkeit auf erfrischende Art aufeinandergeprallt sind. Und das ist mir meine Peinlichkeit wert!

Wiewohl die Greeter-Weste gespickt ist mit Badges und Buttons, die Aufschriften wie Yes, Oui, Ja! oder #1 oder zuletzt auch BAM! enthalten, so bleibt trotzdem unklar, wofür der Greeter stehen soll.

Ganz im Gegensatz zu jenen unterbezahlten Schausteller/innen, die im kommerziellen oder werbetechnischen Auftrag unterwegs sind. Dies mag irritieren. Doch Silvia Popp legt hier gerade jenen Zwischenraum frei, der zunächst peinlich berührt und dann sogleich entspannt, da klar wird, dass der Greeter auch bestimmt nichts Böses im Schilde führt. Vielleicht.

PS and unrelated:

Gilbert & George made yet another comment about Zürich: «We always say that if a spaceship landed and people got out and said we've got five minutes to film planet Earth and want something typical, we'd say, go to Aldgate. You wouldn't tell them to go to Zürich….» [8]

[1] Mirjam Varadinis (ed.), *Parkett, 20 Years of Artists' Collaborations.* Zürich: Kunsthaus Zürich, Parkett Editions, 2004, 167.

[2] Robert Violette and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (eds.), *The Words of Gilbert & George,* London: Violette Editions, 1997, 130.

[3] Varadinis 2004, 136.

[4] Ibid., 55.

[5] Peter Liechti, *Klartext, Fragen an meine Eltern.* St.Gallen: Vexer Verlag, 2013, 184.

[6] Jean-Philippe Toussaint, L*'urgence et la patience.* Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 2012, 26.

[7] Norman Potter, English cabinet maker, designer and author, on the subject of design magazines in an unpublished letter from 1967.

[8] Violette and Obrist 1997, 218.

ROLAND FRÜH

After completing his art history studies in Zürich in 2007, Roland Früh first worked at Hyphen Press in London, then at Werkplaats Typografie in Arnhem and at the same time contributed to publications and exhibitions as art and design historian. Since 2009 he has been a lecturer in art and design theory at ECAL, Lausanne, and at the Zürich University of the Arts. Since September 2014 he has been in charge of the art library of the Sitterwerk Foundation in St. Gallen.

Nach dem Abschluss des Kunstgeschichtestudiums 2007 in Zürich arbeitete Roland Früh erst in London beim Verlag Hyphen Press, dann am Werkplaats Typografie in Arnheim sowie als Kunst- und Designhistoriker an Publikationen und Ausstellungen. Seit 2009 ist er Dozent für Kunst- und Designtheorie an der ECAL, Lausanne, und an der ZHDK, Zürich. Seit September 2014 ist er für die Kunstbibliothek der Stiftung Sitterwerk, St.Gallen, zuständig.