

# INTRODUCTION

This catalogue is the documentation for an exhibition of assembling magazines that took place at **Subspace**, Iowa City, during September, 1996.<sup>(1)</sup> The call for submissions was circulated among the correspondence art network and the exhibition was comprised of 38 titles from 15 countries, a small number of assembled books, two audio compilations and assorted artists' magazines, books and catalogues. Many contributors submitted statements about their publications and others offered articles and histories on particular aspects of assemblings. Also included in this catalogue are interviews with editors of four of the periodicals in the exhibition. I'd like to thank all the participants who contributed so generously and were instrumental in creating an exhibition that reflects the spirit of collaboration and exchange that is so central to this international networking community.

This publication is dedicated to Guillermo Deisler (1940-95), the Chilean born artist and editor of the exceptional assembling magazine *UNI/vers*(:), (35 issues, 1988-95).

The term 'assembling magazine' embodies an innovative publishing paradigm which first gained widespread attention in the early 1970's through the publication of the American magazine *Assembling* (1970-87). Frustrated at the limited number of distribution outlets for experimental art and literature during this period, the editors of *Assembling* responded with an open submissions policy. Contributors were invited "to submit a thousand 8 1/2 x 11" copies of whatever they wanted to include."<sup>(2)</sup> These works were then assembled into an edition of 1000 copies. The first issue included 42 contributors from ten states and three countries. A year earlier in West Germany, one issue of a similar magazine was published under the title *Omnibus News* (1969). Significantly larger than the first *Assembling*, it included 117 contributors from eight countries and was issued in an edition of 1500. Christian D'Orville, in one of the introductory statements by its three editors, writes about his interest in creating this 'Blättersammlung' (collection of sheets) and the uncensored and chance manner in which this mass of heterogeneous material was brought together.<sup>(3)</sup> In important ways these magazines invert the traditional publishing model: editorial prerogative is abolished, the contributors now become the editors, and the 'editors' assume the role of coordinators. Traditional roles collapsed as both became collaborators in a cumulative process leading to the final publication. More importantly, assembling magazines threw open the doors for anyone to step onto the *omnibus* of experimental publishing.

The seeds of this publishing strategy can be traced back to the early avant-gardes of this century. Within this context assemblings can be seen as encompassing a sphere of activity concerned with extending traditional publishing formats and the development of independently produced artists' periodicals.

Most of the early avant-gardes published periodicals (arguably

a prerequisite in establishing avant-garde credentials), but, despite the sometimes radical texts and the formal experimentation of these publications, the majority of them still subscribed to the traditional roles of the editor and that of the contributors. Although these periodicals are important repositories of avant-garde texts and images as well as vital players in avant-garde strategizing, the structuring and form in which they came into being is always left unchallenged.

There are some exceptions. Hugo Ball, the founder of Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, in an entry in his diary from April 18th, 1916, writes "Tzara concerned about the magazine. My proposal to call it Dada is accepted. We could take it in turns to edit; a common editorial board which would entrust the task of selection and arrangement to one of its members for each issue."<sup>(4)</sup> As it turned out the first issue of *Dada* was published a year later in 1917 with Tristan Tzara firmly entrenched as the editor "simply because no one but Tzara had so much energy, passion and talent for the job."<sup>(5)</sup> To my knowledge it would not be until 60 years later with the establishment of *Commonpress* (1977-1990), that the apotheosis of this cooperative editorial strategy would be fully realized.<sup>(6)</sup>

Another magazine that challenged editorial prerogative in a more direct manner was the New York based magazine *The Blind Man* (1917). Initiated by Marcel Duchamp and co-edited with Henri-Pierre Roché and Beatrice Wood, it was inspired by the preparations for the first jury-free exhibition of the newly formed Society of Independent Artists. Duchamp and Roché "thought a magazine could be published without editorial censorship...with the idea that any article would be accepted with a contribution of four dollars."<sup>(7)</sup> The front cover of the first issue stated that "the second number of *The Blind Man* will appear as soon as YOU have sent sufficient material for it." This issue, which appeared a month later in May, was taken up with the furor surrounding the rejection of Duchamp's 'Fountain' by the Society's supposedly jury-free hanging committee. It is entirely in keeping with Duchamp's penchant for dis-assembling cultural constructs that he was responsible for transferring this jury-free strategy from the realm of the exhibition into the field of publishing.<sup>(8,9,10)</sup>

It's not until the post WWII era that the format of artists' periodicals comes under sustained scrutiny with the development of periodicals as artworks themselves (rather than merely reproducing artist's works). One early example which illustrates this trend is *Folder* (4 issues, 1953-56). Edited by Daisy Aldan and Richard Miller, each issue had "at least one original serigraph plus a serigraph cover, and consists of loose printed sheets of fine laid paper, enclosed in a paper portfolio."<sup>(11)</sup> It's significant that this proto-assembling is composed of single sheets gathered together in a portfolio, for this format continued to be a model for a number of artists' periodicals during the 1950's and more decisively in the 1960's. Not surprisingly this strategy was but one way of resolving

the problem of combining individual artists' pages into a coherent whole.

Another periodical that adopted a similar format was Wallace Berman's *Semina* (9 issues, 1955-64). Hand printed by Berman in runs of 150-300 copies, each issue was a loose collection of printed drawings, collages, photographs, poems and writings by contemporary and historical figures. Apart from the second issue, all of these were presented in a pocket attached to the inside of a folded cover.<sup>(12)</sup> Operating well outside of the mainstream, *Semina* circulated within a small network of friends and presages in its intimacy the place that assemblings would assume within the correspondence art network. Michael McClure in a 1992 interview spoke of *Semina* as;

a form or genre in itself. *Seminas* are a form of love structure that Wallace made, drawing friends together....*Semina* has some aspects of religion, the religion of art and friends. There's an initiation to *Semina*, i.e. if Berman chose you. One is chosen. One cannot purchase or request a *Semina*; it simply comes to you. The magazine is outside the realm of commodity and merchandising and purchase. There's nothing to consume. And so it's a completely different kind of thing, and precious.<sup>(13)</sup>

By the late 1950's and early 1960's an increasing number of artists' periodicals were experimenting with different publishing formats. This publishing activity was in response to a broad array of experimental art and literature that depended for its realization, as printed matter. International in scope, these varied fields of experimentation included: concrete and visual poetry, event texts, conceptual works, scores and compositions, to name but a few. One publication that brought together a wide spectrum of this material was *An Anthology*. Published in 1963, edited by Jackson MacLow and La Monte Young, and designed by Fluxus impresario George Maciunas, its extended title gives a flavor of its varied contents, "AN ANTHOLOGY of chance operations concept art anti-art indeterminacy improvisation meaningless work natural disasters plans of action stories diagrams Music poetry essays dance constructions mathematics compositions..."<sup>(14)</sup> Consisting of a bound volume of individually printed pages, including a number of gatefolds, cut cards, sheets tipped-in envelopes and loose inserts, it represented a compendium of the then current American avant-garde.<sup>(15)</sup>

Maciunas, inspired by his involvement with *An Anthology* and in possession of surplus contributions, was concerned that particular artists had not been included and proposed to La Monte Young that another issue be published. When Young declined, Maciunas decided to issue another publication by himself. The name he proposed for this publication was Fluxus. As a skilled designer, Maciunas had given some thought to the presentation of this publication, initially it was to follow in the pattern established by *An Anthology*, except that "graphically it would have been a little more, uh, less conventional than the first one, which means it

would have had objects and you know, a different packaging. So really then the idea germinated to use the whole book as bound envelopes with objects in the envelopes."<sup>(16)</sup> *Fluxus 1* appeared in 1964 as a bolted collection of manilla envelopes which contained assorted printed material and objects and "packaged in a box made from a wine crate with stamped lettering..."<sup>(17)</sup>

*Fluxus 1* was certainly not alone in reconceptualizing the format and packaging of a book/periodical, for there had been a number of publications in previous years that had embraced elements of the structuring of *Fluxus 1*. I believe, however, that this publication brought together all these experimental strands into a unique and compelling object, and served not only as the model for the



Omnibus News, #1, 1969

numerous boxed anthologies that Maciunas would go on to publish, but influenced alternative and experimental publishing from this period onwards. The difficulty in defining what exactly *Fluxus 1* was, is reflective of the intermedial works being made by artists in the early 1960's. Originally planned as the first in a series of seven yearbooks (only two were published), it falls uneasily between publishing genres. Lacking periodicity it eludes definition as a periodical, yet fits the etymological definition of a magazine (a storehouse); the inclusion of 3 dimensional objects and loose printed matter in envelopes stretches the definition of a book as a sequence of bound pages of written or printed literary works; a 'yearbook' or 'anthology' is more precise only in the manner in which these terms encompass the variety of material collected together, but falls short of describing its actual physical form. Maciunas in a 1962/63 letter (before *Fluxus 1* was published), envisaged that it "should be more of an encyclopedia than...a review, bulletin or even a periodical."<sup>(18)</sup> To push the etymological metaphor further, it does seem that 'encyclopedia' is a strangely

appropriate term for what, in effect, Maciunas was attempting to do, which was to provide a "general education course" (Med. Lat. root) in the new intermedia arts by way of a publication that in itself, and its contents, was thoroughly intermedial.<sup>(19)</sup>

Within the next few years two American editors would extend the format developed by Maciunas and apply it to the publishing of periodicals. *Aspen* (10 issues, 1965-71) edited by Phyllis Johnson and *S.M.S.* ('Shit Must Stop,' 6 issues, 1968) edited by William Copley, adopted a boxed and portfolio format respectively. Both published two and three dimensional multiples from an array of historic and contemporary avant-garde artists. William Copley, in a pre-publication brochure for *S.M.S.*, exemplifies this new attitude towards magazine format;

Each portfolio will contain personal manifestations by the new as well as the established contemporary artists in all media. The primary concern of the publisher is...to liberate the artists from the restrictions of format...The publisher's complete sympathy with the artist's objective will permit expanded use of new materials in every category (for the composer, choreographer, sculptor, poet, painter, writer, filmmaker, all inventors)<sup>(20)</sup> and fresh application of conventional means.<sup>(20)</sup>

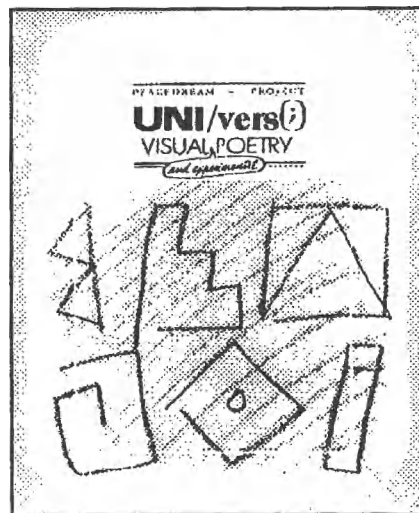
A consistent feature in the works of artists from the late 1950's is their incorporation of different communication systems into their expanded arts activities. The emergence of the postal system as an integral feature in the conceptualization and distribution of their works is noticeable amongst the Nouveaux Realistes in France, the Fluxus community and in particular the extended web of participants in Ray Johnson's New York Correspondance School. By the late 1960's an international community was emerging which used the postal system exclusively as the medium for exchange and collaboration between its decentralized members. Rejecting the exclusiveness and competitiveness of existing art institutions, this community coalesced as a parallel counter-institution. Known variously as correspondence art, mail art, postal art or simply the Eternal Network (Robert Filliou), its participants began organizing shows, publishing periodicals as well as initiating more personal projects and exchanges. The leitmotif of this informal network can be ascertained from the operational guidelines that were established for the increasing number of correspondence art exhibitions being organized during these years. These were: no fees were charged for submission, no jury or selection process, all works to be exhibited, no works returned and documentation to be sent to all participants.<sup>(21,22)</sup>

It is within the correspondence art community that the pivotal conjunction of themes that I have outlined coalesced to create the necessary matrix for the establishment of assembling magazines. The pre-requisites for these magazines were: i) the development of innovative periodical formats necessitated by the works coming out of these expanded arts activities; ii) the application of correspondence art's jury-free submissions policy to that of

publishing; and iii), the presence of a decentralized network of artists for which assemblings acted as pivotal sites in the collective transaction of community. *Omnibus News* and *Assembling* represent the beginnings of this new publishing paradigm and assemblings continue to this day to be an enduring feature in the topology of the correspondence art landscape, as well as locations through which community is accessed and replenished.

This catalogue is just the beginning in an effort to document this important alternative publishing activity and to bring to light, the nearly three decades-long history of assembling magazines.<sup>(23)</sup>

Stephen Perkins



UNI/vers(2), #29, 1993

## References

1. A small selection of submissions were exhibited at the Iowa City public library during March 1996.
2. Richard Kostelanetz in: *Assembling Assembling*, New York: Assembling Press, p. 14.
3. The other two editors were: Thomas Niggel & Heimrad Prem.
4. Hans Richter. *Dada Art And Anti-Art*, New York: Thames and Hudson, p. 31.
5. Richter, *Ibid*, p. 33.
6. It could be argued that Ken Friedman's *New York Correspondence School Weekly Breeder* (1971-1974) with its three different editors would also meet these requirements. I would argue that the implementation of rotating editors came *after* the establishment of the magazine and that it was not initiated with this particular strategy in mind.
7. Beatrice Wood, "I Shock Myself: Excerpts from the Autobiography of Beatrice Wood," *Arts Magazine*, May 1977, p. 136.
8. The eventual fate of *The Blind Man* was decided upon "in a



- typical Dada gesture, Henri-Pierre Roché & Picabia [editor of 391] played a game of chess with an absurd twist. The winner was to have permission to continue publishing his own magazine. Roché lost the game, and consequently *The Blind Man* ceased publication after two issues." In: Stephen C. Foster, *DadaArtifacts* (exhibition catalogue), University of Iowa Museum of Art, Iowa City, 1978.
9. As John Held recounts in his article titled "Assembling Magazines" on page 18 of this catalogue, there was another magazine titled *Spawn* which in its editorial for their March 1917 issue (one month before the first issue of *The Blind Man*), lays out a similar open editorial policy for this "cooperative periodical managed by contributors." My lack of information about this magazine precludes me from commenting further, however, it would seem to be based on a very similar jury/editor-free strategy as that of the first exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists and *The Blind Man*. Held's quote from the *Spawn* editorial comes from its original listing in Howardena Pindell's excellent chronology of artists' periodicals, titled "Alternative Space: Artists' Periodicals," *The Print Collectors Newsletter*, Sept/Oct, 1977, p. 96-121.
  10. Although my emphasis in this text concentrates on magazines coming out of the 20th century international avant-gardes, I suspect that there is a parallel, and largely undocumented, tradition of cooperatively edited magazines arising out of networks of people unconnected to this international coterie. An interesting article detailing one magazine that sits squarely within this tradition appeared in the *International Herald Tribune*, June 1-2, 1996, p. 6. Written by Roderick Conway Morris and titled "A Homemade Arts Magazine," it details the rediscovery of the Italian magazine *Lucciola* (Firefly) which was published from 1908-1926. Edited by Lina Caico and produced monthly by a group of Italian women, *Lucciola* was "entirely handwritten and illustrated with drawings, paintings and photographs, and existed as a single copy that was posted from subscriber to subscriber..." One of the conditions of becoming a subscriber was that they should also be contributors, thus one could call *Lucciola* a one-issue assembling. Morris, having surveyed the subscriber list at the back of each volume, concludes that the women contributed to similar periodicals in Germany (*Parva Favilla*) and another in France (*Mouche Volante*).
  11. Barbara Moore and John Hendricks, "The Page as Alternative Space 1950 to 1969," in Joan Lyons (ed), *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Source Book*, New York: Visual Studies Workshop, 1985, p. 88.
  12. This description from: Richard Cándida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, p. 232.
  13. Michael McClure, "On Semina," in *Wallace Berman: Support the Revolution* (exhibition catalogue), Institute of Contemporary Art, Amsterdam, 1992, p. 60.
  14. Jackson MacLow, "How Maciunas Met the New York Avant Garde," in *Art & Design*, #28, 1993, p. 38.
  15. A consistent feature in the publishing process of many experimental publications that are made up of individually printed sheets, in particular assemblings, is the collective and social nature of the publication process. At each point in this process, from the soliciting of works from individual artists and the shaping of a collective presence in the publication, to the final party in which the publication is hand collated, there is a process of 'gathering' (literally and metaphorically). From this perspective Jackson MacLow, offers an insight into why some of the copies of *An Anthology* had collating mistakes. "When all the pages had been finally printed, I organised collating parties, where many poets, composers, musicians and other artists and hangers-on gave their labour to get the pages together. (Because of the abundance of soft drugs supplied by some of the participants, we ended up with a number of miscolated copies)." In: Jackson MacLow, "How Maciunas Met the New York Avant Garde," in *Art & Design*, #28, 1993, p. 45.
  16. Larry Miller, "Transcript of the videotaped interview with George Maciunas by Larry Miller, March 24, 1978," in *Fluxus etc.*, *Addenda 1*, (exhibition catalogue), New York: Ink, 1983, p. 15.
  17. Barbara Moore, "Seminal Artists' Books and Periodicals," Backworks, Sales List: L106, nd., unpaginated.
  18. George Maciunas, "1962/63 Letter to Tomas Schmidt," in *Fluxus etc./Addendum II*, (exhibition catalogue), Gilbert Silverman, 1983, p. 157. [My attention to this statement was drawn by Clive Phillpott's article, "Fluxus: Magazines, Manifestoes, *Multum in Parvo*," in: *Fluxus*, (exhibition catalogue), Museum of Modern Art, 1988, p. 10.]
  19. Definition from: *The American Heritage Dictionary*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1985.
  20. Barbara Moore, "Seminal Artists' Books and Periodicals," Backworks, Sales List: L106, nd., unpaginated.
  21. Clearly, the egalitarian ethos embodied in these conditions was formulated in direct opposition to the norms that prevailed when artists sought entry into the established art world.
  22. In 1970 there were 2 correspondence art shows, in 1975 there were 22 and by 1980 this figure had expanded to 126. Source: John Held, Jr., *International Artist Cooperation: Mail Art Shows, 1970-1985*, Dallas: Dallas Public Library, 1986.
  23. The following references are for the few publications that focus on assembling magazines beyond the cursory level: Richard Kostelanetz (ed), *Assembling Assembling*, New York: Assembling Press, 1978. *International Artists-Magazines* (exhibition catalogue), Art Nürnberg 6—Art Fair International '91, editor Jurgen Olbrich Nürnberg, 1991. Géza Perneckzy, *The Magazine Network*, Köln: Soft Geometry, 1993. *Networking Artists & Poets: Assemblings from the Ruth & Marvin Sackner Archive of Concrete & Visual Poetry* (exhibition catalogue), editor Craig Saper, University of Pennsylvania Library, 1997.