

Open Source

LIZ KOTZ ON PRIMARY INFORMATION

THE 1960S SAW an explosion of artists' books and magazines, to say nothing of artist-produced and countercultural records, manifestos, and ephemera of all types—items that were handed out at demonstrations or exhibitions or bought cheaply through the mail. But today, all too often, viewing conditions hopelessly fetishize and “museumize” such projects: Art that was once as accessible as a stack of pamphlets now sits awkwardly behind glass in a vitrine or is consulted in hushed rooms by researchers wearing white gloves. As I stand in galleries trying to read such documents, I often wonder why somebody doesn't just put all this stuff on the Web. Most institutions and archives, for various reasons—copyright law, conservation concerns, and simply their own curious protocols—seem to be tremendously technology-averse.

Over the past three years, however, some of these publications have emerged from their archival tombs: In bookstores, on the subway, or on a friend's bookshelf, you might have caught a glimpse of, say, Aram Saroyan's 1967 book of Minimalist poems *Coffee Coffee* or one of the staple-bound “Great Bear” pamphlets distributed by Something Else Press between 1965 and '67 and featuring short texts by an idiosyncratic cross section of the decade's avant-garde (George Brecht, John Cage, Alison Knowles, Dieter Roth). These projects—as well as recordings of sound art, and influential periodicals and texts, nearly as cheap as they were decades ago—are being resuscitated by Primary Information, a tiny New York nonprofit. Though probably best described as a small press (albeit one that publishes PDFs and CDs as well as printed material), Primary Information is itself more like an art project than a typical publishing concern.

The initiative began as a collaboration between two friends, artist and poet James Hoff (who lectures and performs his sound compositions under the name Airport War) and curator Miriam Katzeff (the director of New York's Team Gallery), who met in 2001 while working at Printed Matter, New York's celebrated art bookstore. A couple of years later, Hoff coedited the facsimile edition of Vito Acconci and Bernadette Mayer's legendary mimeographed magazine *0 to 9* for Brooklyn-based Ugly Duckling Presse. In its six issues,

which came out between 1967 and '69, the magazine brought together works by contributors ranging from second-generation New York School poets such as Ted Berrigan, Clark Coolidge, and Hannah Weiner to an emerging generation of post-Minimal and Conceptual artists such as Robert Barry, Dan Graham, Adrian Piper, and Robert Smithson. In retrospect, it's clear that *0 to 9* was one of the sites where what we think of as the '60s happened—where different art forms and language-based works bumped up against one another and became something new. Yet for all the magazine's energy and influence, *0 to 9*'s original print run was very small, and by the '90s, unless you happened to stumble on a friend's copy or a bootleg Xerox, you could only find *0 to 9* in a handful of libraries or on the esoteric and increasingly expensive '60s-ephemera market. Until the 2006 reissue, it was something you heard about but that not that many people, especially younger ones, had actually read.

Inspired by the success of the *0 to 9* reprint and by the simple idea that “you could just approach people and get permission,” Hoff and Katzeff started what

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became Primary Information, trawling libraries and bookstores as well as artists' private archives to generate their wish list. All of their projects are published with permission, using digital technologies such as scanning to produce reasonably inexpensive but well-made, attractive but not precious editions. Katzeff describes the goal as publishing “examples of things



Members of Disband, New York, 1979. From left: Ingrid Sischy, Donna Henes, Ilona Granet, Diane Torr, and Martha Wilson. Photo: Delle Kaplan.

we found inspiring that younger artists might take as models.” So far, in addition to Saroyan's poems and the “Great Bear” pamphlets, these exemplars have ranged from Allan Kaprow's lecture *How to Make a Happening* (originally released on vinyl by the experimental label Mass Art in 1966) to a bound selection from Tom Lawson and Susan Morgan's '80s magazine *Real Life*, one of the key documents of the “Pictures” generation. While Primary Information's projects so far have for the most part been from the '60s, the publisher has no chronological parameters, and *Real Life* isn't the founders' only foray into the '80s; they are also planning to put out a CD by Disband, the storied New York feminist punk band whose illustrious lineup included Ilona Granet, Donna Henes, Barbara Kruger, Ingrid Sischy, Diane Torr, and Martha Wilson, among others. Also currently in the works, and eagerly awaited, is a complete reissue of Liza Béar and Willoughby Sharp's magazine *Avalanche* (1970–76).

Both Hoff and Katzeff are interested in writing as a practice, in archival and publication structures, and in projects that bridge different social and aesthetic scenes. During a period when the New York art world was growing stunningly commercial, and art stunningly expensive, Primary Information operated according to the thrifty principles of recirculation and reuse and quietly worked against the historical amnesia that tends to characterize boom times. However attracted they are by the aesthetics of the '60s counterculture,



REAL LIFE Magazine



SELECTED WRITINGS AND PROJECTS 1979-1994

From top: Launch of Allan Kaprow's *How to Make a Happening* CD (Primary Information, 2008), Macarone, New York, October 11, 2008. Cover of *Real Life Magazine: Selected Writings and Projects 1979-1994* (Primary Information, 2007).

few artists today have been ready to question the rules of the art world or to challenge galleries or museums over the dissemination of their work. In this context, the Art Workers Coalition's *Open Hearing* and *Documents 1* volumes (dossiers of statements, press reports, and letters relating to the 1969 protests against New York's Museum of Modern Art and related political activities) and Seth Siegelau's 1971 "Artist's Reserved Rights Transfer and Sale Agreement" (a sample contract between seller and buyer that would allow artists to retain considerable rights, including a percentage of resale)—all available as downloads from

Primary Information's website—offer pretty potent counter-models. The very name Primary Information riffs on Siegelau's celebrated claim that publicity, documentation, and distribution are now the "primary information" of art, not just an afterthought, and his legendary late-'60s curatorial/publication

projects are clearly key inspirations for Hoff and Katzeff.

One could situate Primary Information within a broader trend. The past decade or so has seen any number of efforts to retrieve this art-world past, from the New York-based artists' group Parasite's 1998 remounting of Mel Bochner's 1966 *Working Drawings* to the New York collective Continuous Project's 2003 distribution of photocopies of *Avalanche* to the recent institutional restagings of Kaprow's *Happenings* (not to mention the readers on Conceptual, Minimal, and performance art, etc., that have appeared en masse from Phaidon and various university presses). What distinguishes Primary Information is the dedicated, focused nature of its publication project, as well as its open, iconoclastic aesthetic, which has taken shape around personal interests and affinities rather than any set program or label, just as the great artists' presses of the '60s did. Its projects do not form a canon, but rather resuscitate diverse moments of artistic experimentation. And while its re-editions—objects from the '60s remade with the materials and techniques of the present—can produce a curious temporal ambivalence, they are presented straight, without the overt historical distancing and defamiliarization that characterize, for example, a Sharon Hayes performance of a '70s protest or speech. While I am a historian of this kind of stuff, I find myself curiously happy that the reissues are free of the apparatus that accompanies scholarly editions of republished works—the footnotes and the contextualizing essays, the sense of specialization and historicization, and the other interventions by critics, who, in marking their turf, tie things down a little too neatly. It's good to see these materials available to take home, read, even mark up. And though I would love to see more critical work on Knowles, I'm also sure the scores and droll propositions in her "Great Bear" pamphlet ("Make a salad," "Make something in the street and give it away") can go forth into the world without scholarly escort.

When discussing future projects, both Katzeff and Hoff get a bit wild-eyed. There is talk of a ten-plus-hour survey of Acconci's sound works, some of which have never been heard publicly, as well as a collection of his text scores. A partial anthology of the late-'80s German magazine *Eau de Cologne* is planned for next year. And there have been conversations with several contemporary artists, as well as negotiations over some exciting historical materials, though Hoff and Katzeff can't announce these just yet. They are seeking grants and have kept their overhead very low, so that ongoing sales largely support their operation; they tend to sell not only in art venues such as Printed Matter but also in places like LA's independent book/zine store Ooga Booga that bridge the art-music-comics milieus.

In its low-key way, Primary Information is helping to democratize and disseminate an important legacy: AWC's *Documents 1*, for instance, was selling for around eight hundred dollars a copy not too long ago, but in less than a year, nearly five thousand people have downloaded it for free. And while its program may suggest a certain yearning for a lost time, there is nothing nostalgic about Primary Information when it comes to the operations of reproduction, distribution, and publicity. Like UbuWeb, with its ever-growing archive of avant-garde materials, and Dexter Sinister, with its paperless and print-on-demand strategies, Hoff and Katzeff are formulating a savvy approach to cultural dissemination that is geared to its use in the present. They also note their desire to focus more on projects with contemporary artists and writers. This is particularly welcome, since, with a handful of exceptions, the present-day artist's book has become cautious and calcified and, with its endless four-color illustrations, just too expensive to allow for much experimentation. Lately, though, the tide may be turning, as a number of artists and writers seek ways to intervene in the art system via publishing projects. Independent initiatives, like the newly formed Leopard Press and Todd Amicon and Josh Smith's 38th Street Publishers, are helping open a space for new discursive possibilities. By recirculating an idiosyncratic selection of searching, innovative works, Primary Information might spur yet more artists to again think seriously about mass reproduction, collecting, and the archive as vital artistic media. □

LIZ KOTZ TEACHES MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART HISTORY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, RIVERSIDE, AND IS THE AUTHOR OF *WORDS TO BE LOOKED AT: LANGUAGE IN 1960S ART* (MIT PRESS, 2007).