

The Box as Meeting Place

Artistic Encounters in *Aspen Magazine* (1965-1971)

Aspen was a multimedia magazine, each issue presented as a box full of surprises by artists, writers, thinkers, and unknowns. What kept contributors as diverse as John Lennon, Yoko Ono, J.G. Ballard, and David Hockney together?

In 1965 New York magazine editor Phyllis Johnson travelled to Aspen, Colorado, to partake in the International Design Conference Aspen (IDCA) and returned home asking herself how the traditional magazine could be adapted for the modern age. Later that year she launched her answer: *Aspen Magazine*, the multimedia magazine in a box. Between 1965 and 1971 ten issues of *Aspen* appeared, each put together by a different guest editor and devoted to a different theme, ranging from Pop Art and Minimalism to psychedelic art and Asian culture. Opening one of *Aspen's* boxes now is like unearthing a time capsule and its contributor list reads like a sample sheet of the 1960s, including work by William Burroughs, John Cage, Timothy Leary, John Lennon, Nam June Paik, Robert Rauschenberg, Jack Smith, and Andy Warhol, among many others. As Johnson stressed in a letter to *Aspen's* readers included in the first issue, the magazine was intended as a multime-

dia revolution. *Aspen* would return the function of the magazine to 'the original meaning of the word, as "a storehouse, a cache, a ship laden with stores"', and in doing so it would liberate it from its linearity and two-dimensionality, as well as from the dominance of printed matter.¹ Accordingly, throughout the years *Aspen's* slim boxes and folders contained posters, flip books, newspapers, stamps, a kite, a miniature sculpture, flexi discs with music and audio recordings, and in 1967 even a reel of Super 8 film – a first for any magazine. To its subscribers the contents of each issue came as a surprise and connecting the various items demanded a non-trivial amount of activity on the account of the 'reader'. To borrow a term from Roland Barthes (whose famous essay 'Death of the Author' was first published in English in *Aspen's* no. 5-6), *Aspen* subscribers needed to have a writerly, not a readerly, frame of mind.²

1 P. Johnson, 'A Letter From Phyllis Johnson', *Aspen Magazine* (1965) 1, s.p.

2 R. Barthes, *S/Z*, Oxford 2002, p. 4. Originally published in Paris 1973.

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Peanuts Hucko	Susan Sontag
Mayles Brothers	Samuel Beckett
Jean Renoir	William Burroughs
Dr. Karl Menninger	Moholy-Nagy
Andy Warhol	Marcel Duchamp
Willem de Kooning	Confucius, Guatama Buddha,
Timothy Leary	and numerous Zen priests
Marshall McLuhan	(names on request)
John Cage	Buckminster Fuller
Cockroach	and many more

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Contributors

- John Lennon
- Yoko Ono
- Mario Amaya
- John Kosh
- Richard Smith
- Eduardo Paolozzi
- Michael Instone
- David Robinson
- J. H. Ballard
- John Tavener
- Christopher Logue
- Ian Hamilton Finley
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2. Selected contents from *Aspen 7*. Design by John Kosh.

Since the assemblage of each *Aspen* issue depended largely on the individual cultural networks of its guest editor, the magazine's boxes became preeminent places where texts – in the broadest sense of the word – by artists, authors, critics and others met. It should come as no small surprise that one of *Aspen's* key inspirations was the Canadian media guru Marshall McLuhan, to whom Johnson devoted an entire issue in 1967. In his groundbreaking book *The Medium is the Massage*, McLuhan observed that when different forms of information touched, unexpected results might occur, and *Aspen* wholeheartedly embraced this mantra.³ For sure, much more than within the rigidly linear pages of regular magazines, within *Aspen's* boxes its contents literally touched. As much as it was a magazine, *Aspen* was also intended to be an experience that addressed all the senses simultaneously, blurring the boundaries between texts, images and audio. While neither term was

in common usage in 1965, *Aspen* fits within a growing multimedia or intermedia approach to art in the second half of the decade, which did away with the rigid categories that separated the various art forms. But *Aspen* also intended to create active and engaged readers. While the loose-leaf format first of all made the inclusion of both sound and moving images possible, it also stimulated interaction with the reader. It was the reader who needed to assemble Tony Smith's miniature sculpture included in nos. 5-6 (1967), who needed to perform the Philip Glass score '1 + 1 for One Player and Amplified Table-Top' in no. 8 (1970), and who needed to fold and fly the kite designed by Nori Sinoto included in the last issue (1971). But the best example of the magazine's experiential approach came in late 1968 when *Aspen* produced its own edition of the Judson Church publication *Manipulations*, a collection of fourteen Fluxus and performance art pieces staged at Judson Church by

Jon Hendricks the year before. Appropriately, the issue came free of charge.

Early issues of *Aspen* came in 'a rather dignified format', as Johnson put it, with the shape of the booklets dictated by the dimensions of the box.⁴ From the start, though, each issue included a flexi disc, adding sound to an inherently silent medium. But in 1966, *Aspen* radically changed course. That year Johnson approached Andy Warhol to assemble the third issue, whose 'Fab' box imitated a laundry detergent box of the age, a cultural re-appropriation that ingeniously wed Warhol's obsession with consumer products to *Aspen's* three-dimensional format. In the period 1966-1969 *Aspen* further explored this newfound interactivity, culminating in the often discussed double issue on minimalism designed by Brian O'Doherty (nos. 5-6, 1967) and the 'Art-Information' folder, edited by Dan Graham (no. 8, 1970), both of which pushed the limits of the format.

While *Aspen's* boxes were long neglected by scholars, recent years have seen several studies of the magazine.⁵ Most of these have been from an art historical perspective and focus almost exclusively on the above-mentioned issues edited by O'Doherty and Graham. As such, they to an extent misrepresent *Aspen* as a scholarly American art magazine, neglecting its interest in popular culture. As a counterweight, this article limits the discussion to two of the later issues that represent *Aspen's* wildest experiments with the multimedia formula, namely the 'British' box edited by Mario Amaya, and designed by John Kosh (no. 7, 1969), and the 'psychedelic' or 'Dreamweapon' issue edited by Angus and Hetty MacLise (no. 9, 1971).⁶ In doing so I in-

tend to stress *Aspen's* diversity, but both issues also provide key examples of how the boxed approach facilitated interaction across the borders of the various media.

Britain in a box: artistic interaction in *Aspen* no. 7

Not burdened by the need to make overtly artistic statements, *Aspen* no. 7 intended to be a light-hearted 'Pandora's box of British wit & whimsy, fun & games', as advertising for it stressed at the time.⁷ It should be read in the context of what is often inimically dubbed the British Invasion of popular culture, which washed over the United States in the wake of the appearance of The Beatles on the Ed Sullivan Show on February 9, 1964. The invasion was not just a musical one, though. The period also showed a growing influence of British fashion designers in the United States, with Mary Quant's mini skirt as its prime exponent, as well as the belated re-evaluation of British pop art as equivalent to its more famous American counterpart. Of course, *Aspen's* box came too late to truly contribute to the movement, and it was, in fact, mostly intended as a commemoration of the closing decade. Its designer John Kosh recalled: 'It was sort of a celebration. [...] Harold Wilson, the prime-minister, was about [to leave office]. We'd all had a wonderful time and I think it was mainly retro, a sort of retrospective of the stuff.'⁸ Kosh had been brought in by guest editor Mario Amaya, a friend of Warhol's and the editor of *Art and Artists*, a London magazine which, much like *Aspen*, aimed 'to fill the gap between life and art', if in a more conservative format.⁹

3 M. McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage*, Corte Madera 2001, pp. 76-77. Originally published as *The Medium is the Massage. An Inventory of Effects*, New York 1967.

4 Johnson, op. cit. (note 1), s.p.

5 See for example: E. King, 'Thinking Inside the Box: *Aspen* Revisited', in: M. Beirut, W. Drenttel and S. Heller (eds.), *Looking Closer Five: Critical Writings on Graphic Design*, New York 2006, pp. 62-69; B. Moore-McCann, *Brian O'Doherty / Patrick Ireland: Between Categories*, Surrey 2009, pp. 72-77; G. Allen, *Artists' Magazines: An Alternative Space for Art*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 43-67. A full digital version of *Aspen* is available online at: <http://www.ubu.com/aspenn>.

6 The issue is often referred to as the psychedelic *Aspen*. When interviewed Hetty MacLise seemed rather amused by the name, judging it to be a misnomer. Her own description of the issue was 'colourful'.

7 'Advertisement for *Aspen* no. 7', in: *Evergreen Review* (1970) 76.

8 Interview with John Kosh, May 19 2009. The interviews cited in this article were originally conducted by the author for a 2010 Master's thesis on *Aspen* for the Radboud University Nijmegen.

9 'A New Art Magazine' [advertisement], in: *Art International* 10 (1966) 3, p. 18.



3. Selected contents from *Aspen* 9. Design by Angus & Hetty MacLise.

Amaya intended the British Box to illustrate the diversity of contemporary English culture, but he also felt that the disjointed contents of the box needed to speak for themselves. It was not up to the editor to connect the dots; instead, an explorative, writerly reader might discover unexpected links, points of overlap and tension. As Michael Instone observed in one of the essays included in the issue: '[O]ne mark of a nascently critical and essentially new view of the world is a restlessly eclectic and explorative borrowing of bits and pieces from other cultural areas where they just happen to fit.'¹⁰ As such, many of the works in the box undercut the distinction between high and low culture, turning the everyday into art. Amaya's *Aspen* issue contained work by a number of young English pop

artists and many of them also deliberately sought out these borders between the various media. Eduardo Paolozzi's *Gay Atomic Colouring Book* combined images from popular culture and abstract art in a piece that was both a unique work of art and a children's divertissement. Similarly, David Hockney and Peter Blake's contributions borrowed materials from popular culture – a fairytale, a postcard, a clipping from a 1930s magazine – and reconfigured them as art.

In line with Instone's essay, Amaya clearly intended there to be a dialogue between the works included in the box. In one example, J. G. Ballard contributed the short story *Crash!*, which freely combined narrative prose with seemingly non-fictional accounts of scientific experiments.¹¹ As such, the story

transmuted the everyday into art, mixing literature with objective research results. The effect on the reader closely resembled the effect of the pop art works in the box: both *Crash!* and the works by Blake, Hockney and Paolozzi called into question what constituted art, but also deliberately mixed the artistic with the pedestrian. In the same vein, the audio recordings by John Lennon and Yoko Ono extended pop art's rejection of high culture, and its tendency towards fractionation into youth culture. Together Lennon and Ono recorded an untitled radio play, which in its disjointedness resembles John Cage's work at the time: beeps from a radio gradually form words, only to dissolve again into noise while Lennon and Ono talk in the background. The play is significant for several reasons. For one, it purports to give an inside view into a private life; it presents Lennon and Ono as regular people, concerned with everyday things, but then turns this into art. But it also breaks up communication, celebrating the disconnection and decontextualisation of culture, much as the pop art contributions did.

The British Box was intended as a multimedia adventure: within the cardboard confines of the box the reader was intended to discover the breadth of contemporary British culture, stretching from Peter Blake's kitsch elevated to art, to concrete poetry by Ian Hamilton Finlay and a sewing pattern by Ossie Clark. Divided as these artists seemed to be at a first glance by their diverging disciplines and materials, Amaya's box brought them into dialogue and pressed the reader to find a form of unity in their shared irreverent approach to art.

A Closely Knit Network: *Aspen* no. 9

In early 1971, *Aspen's* penultimate publication arrived in the form of a colourful folder

labelled 'Dreamweapon', edited by the artist couple Angus and Hetty MacLise. Angus MacLise is now mostly remembered as the first drummer for the Velvet Underground, while Hetty MacLise had previously been responsible for the 'souped-up, kaleidoscopic color' of the *San Francisco Oracle* (1966-1968), the unofficial chronicle of the Haight-Ashbury scene.¹² A recent study of his work called Angus MacLise 'a human link-document', in the sense that he united artists of all stripes and colours, 'acting as a catalyst, and as an imp'.¹³ This label could easily be applied to Hetty as well. Accordingly, even more than previous issues, *Aspen* no. 9 depended on a localized network of writers, poets, filmmakers, musicians, experimentalists and others. As Hetty MacLise recalled: 'All the people who contributed were actual friends, who Angus could reach comparatively easy. Meaning they all lived nearby, in the Lower East Side.'¹⁴ While some of the artists included have reached popular recognition (Terry Riley, La Monte Young, Marian Zazeela), others remain relatively obscure (Lionel Ziprin, Benno Friedman, Don Snyder, Vali Myers), or wholly unknown (Dale Wilbourn, Aymon de Sales, Nikki Grand). 'Dreamweapon' presented a motley of work, including drawings, poems, speculative texts, musical scores, calligraphy, experimental photography and, of course, sound recordings. The folder was designed in spray paint by Hetty MacLise; on the inside, the various foldouts, posters and booklets show a strong similarity to other work that Angus MacLise produced at the time, work which has only recently drawn renewed attention.¹⁵

For Angus MacLise the *Aspen* issue was part of a larger project under the title *Dreamweapon*, 'an artistic enterprise involving theatre, music, dance and multimedia as well as

10 M. Instone, 'London Subcultures', in: *Aspen* 7 (1969), s.p.

11 It should be noted that while the story shares its title with Ballard's 1973 novel of the same name it is not, as is often inferred, an early excerpt from the book. It is, in fact, a separate short story, which, despite being described as an excerpt in *Aspen*, later appeared verbatim in Ballard's 1970 short fiction collection *The Atrocity Exhibition*.

12 S. Heller, *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant-Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century*, New York 2003, p. 188.

13 J. Kugelberg, W. Cameron, *Dreamweapon: The Art and Life of Angus MacLise*, (exhibition catalogue), New York 2011.

14 Interview with Hetty MacLise, May 22, 2009.

15 For examples see Kugelberg and Cameron, op. cit. (note 13).

16 A. MacLise, 'Career', (typescript, circa 1974), reproduced in: Kugelberg and Cameron, op. cit. (note 13), p. 9.

publishing'.¹⁶ In any case, many of the contributors to the Dreamweapon *Aspen* produced art that straddled two or more distinct disciplines and aimed for a multisensory effect, an approach that tied in with the many happenings, performances and expanded cinema experiments of the age. To MacLise it was essential that the various components overlapped and freely mixed within the folder, creating a salmagundi that addressed readers as a whole. Of course, this multisensory approach was easily wedded to *Aspen's* multimedia aspirations.

Despite the great variety of contents, the work of twenty different artists, several themes return in *Aspen* no. 9, themes that establish a dialogue between their works. Perhaps the most obvious shared theme is that of improvisation. Despite its careful design, 'Dreamweapon' espoused a feeling of flux, a sense that the artists involved had directly transposed their shared artistic qualities into this issue of *Aspen*, without undue preparation or deliberation. Examples of this improvisational spirit came in various forms. Included were six postcards with stills and a flexi disc of music from Ira Cohen's *The Invasion of the Thunderbolt Pagoda* (1968). The short film, shot in Cohen's trademark oleaginous Technicolor blur, undercut traditional plot-driven cinema in several ways. Most obviously, it was more of a happening than a film, but Cohen's mylar photography even subverted the stability and predictability of the image itself, distorting the real in a capricious way. More improvisation came from Christopher Tree, whose 'Spontaneous Sound', played on 150 different instruments, was included on the flexi disc. Improvisation also came on paper, for example in Gerard Malanga's contribution, an unnamed poem, handwritten across a large sheet of photographs. Malanga's various corrections – parts were crossed out, one stanza was written down, then crossed out and moved – stressed its extemporary aspects, something that also returned in the three sheets with letters from the Australian artist Vali Myers. Other objects in the folder at first sight contradict this spontaneity, such as the delicate calligraphy of Marian Zazeela. But

on closer inspection Zazeela's work attests to a similar attitude: in an accompanying prose poem she accords a level of unintentionality to her art, noting how on their own '[t]he letters grow larger, extend curled tentacles out toward each other, begin rubbing and burying their shoots in each other'.¹⁷

Several other themes also return that connect the various artists, most of them to an extent unsurprising given the time and place the issue was produced in. As such, there is an emphasis on drug use, which returns in Aymon de Sales's poetry and Dale Willbourn's speed-infused triptych of paintings. Another Sixties hallmark, an interest in South American and Far Eastern culture returns in, for instance, De Sales' drawings and Don Snyder's 'Goeralegan', which derives its imagery from India. Once again, though, like in the British *Aspen*, the reader was expected to correlate the items. The folder stimulated readers to freely rummage through it, to listen to the music while immersing themselves in the art, with no prior pattern in place to govern them. Left to their own devices, they could make their own connections and, as such, *Aspen* no. 9 stressed the immersive and multimedia approach many of its contributors espoused.

The Box as a Meeting Place

In 1971, *Aspen* managed to produce one last issue before it folded, a victim to financial woes and a prolonged conflict with the United States Postal Service. In the six years it was published, *Aspen's* boxes and folders constituted microcosms of their own. In a sense, the box functioned as a mini gallery space, its works selected by the guest editor, the curator, who also established a theme between them and created a potential narrative. It should come as no surprise that artists like Andy Warhol, Brian O'Doherty and Dan Graham saw *Aspen* as a vehicle to circumvent the gallery system. Yet, the box transcended the white cube, as its break with the linearity of the bound magazine made it more versatile than the traditional gallery, where each visitor is still to an extent guided by the spatial arrangement of the works. *Aspen* offered its

17 M. Zazeela, 'The Soul of the Word', in: *Aspen* (1971) 9, s.p.

subscribers a freeform exercise, asking them to create their own narrative from the materials offered. That this exercise often reached across disciplinary and medial borders made it all the more interesting. Within the logical confines of the box, artworks could form dialectical networks of any shape, supplementing, contradicting or even negating each other. As such, in a symbolic sense the magazine formed an artistic meeting place, but one which explicitly included the reader. It was his or her cultural capital that connected the various disjointed dots in a particular shape, thus bridging gaps between artists, disciplines and media, but most of all, between the artist and the reader. ●

Personalia

Maarten van Gageldonk wrote a Master's thesis on *Aspen Magazine* for the Radboud University Nijmegen in 2010, which won the Theodore Roosevelt American History Award. He is currently preparing a PhD thesis on the American publisher Grove Press and its literary magazine *Evergreen Review*.