Avalanche Magazine: In the Words of the Artist
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Avalanche, published in New York City from 1970-1976 by Willoughby Sharp and Liza Béar, is closely associated with post-minimalist, post-studio conceptual artists in the United States. Replete with artist interviews, documentation of performances, and pieces created for the magazine, Avalanche is an important primary source for the study of the conceptual art scene in New York in the early 1970s. The author describes the format and content of Avalanche, offers examples of its research value, and concludes with a brief discussion of expanded access to the contents of Avalanche with the publication of a facsimile edition and the creation of an online index.

Introduction

In 1976, Studio International published “A Survey of Contemporary Art Magazines” in which editors of 125 art magazines throughout the world were asked twelve questions with the intent of providing a general review of art magazines at that time.1 Of the sixty-seven respondents, twenty-two of the respective magazines were published in North America, thirty-seven in Western Europe, four in Eastern Europe, one each in the South Pacific, Southeast Asia, Asia, and the Middle East. On average, the magazines had a staff of ten or fewer employees, 55 percent paid contributors, and print runs averaged seven thousand copies per issue. A majority of magazines strove for international coverage. When asked if their magazines provided art information or art criticism, 55 percent claimed their intention was to provide readers with art information over art criticism; 22 percent saw no difference between the two. The intended audience was knowledgeable about or involved with the art world in some capacity, whether as practitioner, collector, or visitor. According to Ulrich’s Periodicals Directory, twenty-six of these magazines are indexed in periodical indexes such as Art Retrospective and Bibliography of the History of Art.2

Included in the survey is the artist magazine Avalanche, founded in 1968 by Willoughby Sharp and Liza Béar. Avalanche was published in New York City from 1970-1976 and ran for thirteen issues. According to Sharp’s survey answers, Avalanche had a print run between four and five thousand copies per issue and was sold in bookstores, museums, on newsstands, and by subscription (Béar remembers libraries being among the subscribers). Avalanche had a staff of two part-time employees, and contributors were not paid.3 In matters of audience and content, Sharp stated that Avalanche was “[...] an artist’s art magazine” and the “first priority [was] enabling the artist to communicate directly to the Avalanche audience.”4 The content of Avalanche is international in scope with a focus on artists working in New York and California. Conceptual, performance, and video art is documented in the form of gallery announcements, interviews, artworks, and reproductions. The tone of the journal is casual and intimate, with artists sometimes being mentioned by last name only, as though the reader is assumed to be familiar enough with the “scene” to know who is being referenced.

Until recently, researchers’ access to Avalanche has been restricted due to its limited availability in libraries and exclusion from periodical indices.5 This meant that discovery of the content occurred only through word of mouth or scouring of footnotes and bibliographies. While this may not prevent intrepid scholars and graduate students from learning of the journal’s existence and the content within, it does not supplant the role an index can play. Issues of access have been reduced with the combination of the publication of an affordable facsimile edition of Avalanche in May 2010 by the non-profit organization Primary Information and the creation by this author of an online index to the magazine.

Artist Journal

Liza Béar and Willoughby Sharp met in New York City in November 1968 when Béar went to Sharp’s apartment to pick up a friend’s film which had appeared in an exhibition organized by Sharp called “Air Art.”6 At the time, Sharp was an independent curator and writer based in New York City, and Béar was a writer and underground magazine editor living in London. A few months after the meeting, Béar had relocated to New York, and she and Sharp founded Avalanche. The first issue was published in 1970. Sharp and Béar shared editing and publishing duties.7 They replaced content about art—exhibition reviews, scholarly essays, art criticism—found in contemporary art magazines such as Artforum, Studio International, and Art News, with direct communication from the artists through interviews, exhibition announcements, and the art itself. As Béar explains it, “Radical work calls for a radical approach. No intermediaries. Let those who make the work explain what they’re doing and why. We favor investigative dialogue over pronouncements.”8 It is this preference for the voice of the artist over that of the critic that makes Avalanche an artist’s rather than an art magazine. The intention was for the artists featured in Avalanche to speak directly to fellow artists reading the magazine, as well as expose this new art to the collectors and dealers that were required to fund the artists’ livelihood. Sharp had no qualms about the promotional role Avalanche played: “If anything I was
trying to encourage these artists to get in the market, helping them market their work." With the exception of issue one which includes an essay on body art by Willoughby Sharp, there are no articles in *Avalanche.* The main content consists of interviews and dialogues with and between artists, documentation of artworks in varying states of completion, and announcements and descriptions of past and upcoming projects, exhibitions, and performances. Interviews were conducted by Béar and Sharp and edited with the assistance of the interviewee. Sharp met many of these artists while traveling abroad on curatorial trips. Additional contact was made socially as Béar and Sharp traveled in artistic circles. Content also arrived via unsolicited submissions documenting new works and announcing upcoming publications, exhibitions, and performances.

In the same way that an artist’s book is meant to be appreciated as a designed object in addition to its content, Béar and Sharp were concerned with the format and appearance of *Avalanche* and the readers’ interaction with it. When choosing the format and design of their new magazine, Sharp and Béar looked to Dada and Surrealist publications as well as *Life* Magazine. The first eight issues of *Avalanche* are a 9 3/8” x 9 3/8” square size printed on black and white glossy paper. Due to an increase in the cost of paper, the final five issues are tabloid sized (11 x 17”) printed on a newspaper web offset press on 50 pound uncoated stock. The magazine’s descriptive subtitle changed from *Magazine* to *Newspaper* to reflect the format change. Artists are the complete focus of the journal, a point made as soon as a reader sees the cover, which is typically composed of a close-up photograph of an artist or performer (Figure 1). The covers convey a sense of gravitas with the close-up, unsmiling faces of the artists resembling icons rendered in black-and-white photography. For the first issue, Béar set the type and Sharp designed the layout, designing each artist’s section individually rather than adopting an overall style. Sharp had experience designing publications as he also served as a lecturer and artist (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Cover of *Avalanche* Issue Five (Summer 1972). Yvonne Rainer. Photograph by Gianfranco Gorgoni. Image courtesy of the Ryerson & Burnham Libraries, the Art Institute of Chicago. Photography by Joe Tallarico. Reprinted by permission of Liza Béar.

Figure 2: Spread from *Avalanche* Issue Five (Summer 1972). Willoughby Sharp advertising his availability as a guest lecturer. Photograph by Wayne Cordes. Image courtesy of the Ryerson & Burnham Libraries, the Art Institute of Chicago. Photography by Joe Tallarico. Reprinted by permission of Liza Béar.

Content: Interviews

In 1971 the *Avalanche* headquarters relocated from East 20th Street in Gramercy Park to a loft at 93 Grand Street in SoHo. In effect it was a move from one art scene to another. The Gramercy Park location was just a few blocks from Max’s Kansas City, a restaurant and gathering spot for artists and “personalities,” and SoHo was becoming a nexus for emerging artists and performers. The large, raw spaces were affordable and malleable enough to support and exhibit works not fit for traditional studio or gallery spaces. Artists themselves, Béar and Sharp had a connection to the scene they were covering; in fact the *Avalanche* loft space also served as a performance venue during its renovation. This involvement in the artistic circle philosophically and physically lends a different dynamic to the interviews conducted by Béar and Sharp. Artistic process, intent, and issues of reproduction and documentation are common themes. The published interviews relay information not traditionally included, such as the ordering of drinks, acknowledgement of a visitor, and the “uhhs” and “ums” that make up conversation. Photographs of the artist and the works being discussed accompany each interview (Figure 3). The location and date of the interview are also included and occasionally a brief biography and exhibition history as well. The interviews are probing, and the tone is one of casual seriousness. Sharp and Béar don’t hesitate to ask follow-up questions or challenge the artists’ statements. Not all of the interviews in
Avalanche were with established artists; Vito Acconci, Joseph Beuys, Jan Dibbets, Michael Heizer, Bruce McLean, Klaus Rinke, and William Wegman all appeared in Avalanche before they had a one-man show in an American gallery. Many of the interviews are referred to as conversations, an appropriate distinction as Béar and Sharp were peers of and occasionally friends with the artists they interviewed. There is ease to the conversation that provides the reader with a glimpse of the artist’s personality. In addition, the knowledge base from which Béar and Sharp formulated their questions alleviated potential artificiality in the interview conversation. In her editing process, Béar was conscientious about retaining the cadence and flow of conversation as well as the artist’s intended meaning. She remembers,

In the early interviews the work and concepts were so new that my main editorial focus was on clarity and making sure the artist really meant what had been recorded on tape, without radically altering the structure and flow of the dialogue. I was also fascinated by artists’ turn of phrase and individual idioms in discussing their work, and wanted to preserve that from academic jargon, journalese or more conventional ways of saying things—which usually reflect a mainstream point of view.

In addition to the interviews with Sharp and Béar, Avalanche contains conversations between artists and “Dialogues,” a more collaborative and improvisational type of interview that Béar treated like documentary soundtracks, indicating in the published transcript where she made cuts or changed tapes.

An interview with an artist does not necessarily answer all questions presented by the work, and it in no way frees the viewer from his or her own role in interpreting the piece. What it does do that a critical study or review cannot is intimate what the artist thinks and feels is important, all the while presenting a glimpse of the artist’s personality. The interview is a discussion of process and product through the lens of the artist, providing scholars with precious insight into the artist’s working method, interests, and intent. This is of particular importance when studying conceptual art which, by its very name, alludes to the importance of the ideas surrounding the works. Below are two excerpts from Willoughby Sharp’s interview with Lawrence Weiner in issue four (Spring 1972). They are discussing Weiner’s stated conditions under which a work can exist: “The artist may construct the piece. The piece may be fabricated. The piece need not be built.”

[WS] Before we go on to the other two conditions of existence, perhaps we can go back a little way in your own thinking and discuss how you developed these three conditions of existence for a work.

[LW] This is a subject that’s been clouded over by quite a few mistakes by contemporary art historians. But in my own eyes, it originally stems from 1960, when, confronted by the problem of painting not meaning much to me any more, and confronted by an entire situation in New York, I went to California. And was attempting to build sculptures by blowing holes in the ground in Mill Valley. My only difficulty there was that I was still thinking in terms of each crater being unique. After a while I began to lose interest in the craters, and then upon returning to New York, I tried to convey this loss of interest in the unique object and just deal with the idea of painting as such, which was a complete disaster. So I went through three or four years of doing paintings that I was purporting were not unique objects, they were just a visualization of what a painting should be.

A few pages later they are still exploring this topic:

[LW] In Number One the artist is constructing a piece.


[LW] That means I.

[WS] But why do you deny yourself? Why don’t you say something more personal.

[LW] Perhaps I’m setting up universal conditions for the way art could exist. When something is fabricated ... When someone is confronted with the work, having accepted the responsibility for it, and says, “Well, I want to build it,” if I were there to say “No, the way you build it would be different from the way I build it, mine would be better,” that would be improper. What I’m doing is setting up a situation where any way that the piece is built is alright. To understand the implications of the work is to realize that if you were to purchase it, all you would be doing would be to accept responsibility for my product. Which is a moral commitment rather than a narrow aesthetic commitment. It’s the taking the so-called commerce part of the art out of the aesthetic and putting it into just a normal, moral, you-work-and-get-paid-for-it situation. People who find the art exciting or interesting or within their own concepts useful will support the continuing existence of my investigations.

[WS] As is happening in this situation because we’re already going on the tacit agreement that this interview will be used in an art context. Public information about what’s happening in contemporary art.

[LW] Not in, but within. Because saying “in” would imply that what I am making is the only kind of viable art, which would be an asinine statement. There are people making viable art which is contradictory to my concept of viable art.
Content: Rumbles

In addition to the artist interviews and writings, each issue of *Avalanche* includes a section called “Rumbles.” “Rumbles” covers the international conceptual, post-minimal art scene in its many iterations. The tone is that of a busy insider and presents what was causing a rumble in the art community—a description of a performance piece, update on a tour, announcement of an impending publication, exhibition, or television show. “Rumbles” entertains as it informs and presents a privileged view of the contemporary art scene unfolding in the alternative venues in the United States and abroad. This section was authored by Sharp and Béar and includes information and announcements received directly from artists and gallerists. Frequently the artists and activities mentioned in the two to twelve pages of “Rumbles” are also featured in the interviews and art spreads that comprise the major content of the journal. Entries vary in length from sentence-long to column-long announcements. Below are entries from issue three (Fall 1971):

One of the final events before the closing of 112 Greene Street [an alternative exhibition space in SoHo] was [Jackie] Winsor’s *Up and/or Down Rope Piece*, performed the evening of June 29. The 20-minute activity involved three participants: a 1/4 ton of 4” hemp rope with tensile strength of 1/4 million lbs., and male and female performers of contrasting builds, one long and lean, the other soft and rounded, with respective pulling strengths of 150 and 100 lbs each. It could be viewed from either the street floor or the basement; actions on one floor were implied by those on the other. [...] Throughout the performance (Jackie Winsor’s first), the differing musculature of the human performers was juxtaposed against the gradual alterations in the rope. The idea for the piece originated some months ago in the process of conveying the rope from the road to the third floor of her Canal Street studio.

At 11 am on Sunday August 22, Robert Grosvenor launched his *Kinetic Ocean Piece*, a 30-foot long equilateral triangle constructed from 4” diameter aluminum tubing, which extended 6’ above the surface of the Pacific Ocean about 200’ away from the sponsoring institution, the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art. A mention in “Rumbles” may be the only printed documentation of an event, adding to its historic importance and relevance for researchers of art from this time.

The “Publications” section within “Rumbles” lists periodicals, books by artists, books about artists, and catalogs. Béar and Sharp received publications by mail and listed the titles of their favorites. Some of the donated publications were set outside the office for passersby to pick up.

Content: Documentation

The editors wanted the artists to talk about their work and working methods, but they also felt it was important to include photographs documenting the creation, installation, and performance of art, music, and dance pieces. Reading *Avalanche* is akin to touring a studio, visiting a gallery, and going to a performance, all in a single issue. The documentary photographs in *Avalanche* can be as useful to the researcher as the interviews. Issue one contains a photo essay of Joseph Beuys installing his piece in the important 1969 conceptual art exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bern, *Live in Your Head: When Attitude Becomes Form*, photographed and designed by Shunk-Kender (Harry Shunk and Janos Kender) (Figure 4). Issue two (Winter 1971) contains an interview with Bruce Nauman, interspersed with photographs by Gianfranco Gorgoni, of Nauman building and installing a corridor piece at San Jose State College. Issue ten (December 1974) documents Gordon Matta-Clark’s *Splitting (The Humphrey Street Building)*, and an interview with Joel Shapiro in issue eleven (Summer 1975) includes photographs from the foundry where his iron sculptures were cast. Some of this content was solicited by Sharp and Béar, but not all of it. Word spread around the downtown artistic community that a new art magazine was being published. This sparked interest and unsolicited submissions by artists such as Vito Acconci and William Wegman.

Conceptual art redefined how art was made, exhibited, and received. Among the innovations in the late 1960s was the expansion of the exhibition space to include books and magazines. *Avalanche* issue two was one venue for Bruce McLean’s *King for a Day* which was also exhibited at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1970 and at the Tate Gallery in 1972. A work such as *Fear Ritual of Shark Museum* by Jack Smith in issue ten was clearly created for the magazine (this piece is copyrighted by both Smith and *Avalanche*), but much more common are...
works that are an amalgam of documentation of a piece and the
piece itself repurposed and restructured into a magazine work.
Issue two contains spreads by William Wegman (Mrs. Burke, I
Thought You Were Dead) and Vito Acconci (Drifts and Conversions)
that were either created for the magazine or are a selection
of film and performance works repurposed for the printed page.28
(Figure 5). No context is provided; the works are simply
presented. These artworks are interesting to view and study on
their own, but they also contribute to the larger discussion of the
exhibition and dissemination of artworks during the 1960s and
1970s.

Performances are also described and documented. In issue
five (Summer 1972) Keith Sonnier, Tina Girouard, Suzanne
Harris, Richard Landry, and Kurt Munkacsi discuss the perfor-
mance Illustrated Time-Proscenium II which took place at the
Stadt Theatre in Kassel, Germany, in 1972 (Figure 6). The top
two-thirds of the page contains photographs of the performance,
while the lower third contains a dialogic description of each act
by the performers.29 The art of Vito Acconci comprises all of issue
six (Fall 1972) and contains photographic stills from videos and
performances, excerpts from his poetry and his commentary,
and explanation of his oeuvre. Issue nine (May/June 1974) is
devoted entirely to the exhibition Video Performance that took
place at 112 Greene Street from January 13-21, 1974. It contains

interviews with the participating artists about their pieces,
photographs documenting the performances, and stills from the
videos shown. Content such as this is extremely important for
researchers as it uncovers an artist's working method in addition
to documenting the completed piece.

**Artist Journal Index**

While online and print indexes cover hundreds of art jour-
nals, important artist journals remain unindexed and therefore
unknown to many students and other researchers. These journals
are largely ignored in the study of modern art movements and
remain on the sidelines of scholarship. The **Artist Journal Index**
(http://www.artistjournals.wordpress.com) was created by the
author using WordPress software with the goal of expanding
knowledge of the content of artist journals such as *Avalanche*
that are left out of traditional indexes. The Index lists the artists,
curators, writers, galleries, museums, and exhibitions mentioned
in an interview, advertisement, or announcement. The goal is to
have all thirteen issues of *Avalanche* fully indexed by spring 2011.
The author plans to include the German journal *Decollage* in the
Index as well. *Decollage* was published in Cologne from 1962-1969
by the artist Wolf Vostell, and it includes artworks by Vostell and
other Fluxus artists, interviews, and artists' writings.

The *Artist Journal Index* does not include full text of the
journals' content but instead plays the role of map and guide
to the information contained within the journal. In addition to
locating the extensive artist interviews, researchers are able to
track where artists were exhibiting together and with whom,
discover how alternative art spaces advertised, and find exam-
pies of magazine-based artworks. The Index does not make up
for *Avalanche*'s exclusion from standard print and electronic peri-
odical indexes, but it does provide an additional access point to
the information within.

Artist journals, when studied as primary documents, offer a
window into the art movements they cover and from which they
arise. Reading a critical or scholarly interpretation of a perfor-
mance or artwork in a journal is essential, but artist journals
such as *Avalanche* further illuminate artistic goals and intentions
through the inclusion of the primary documents relating to the
artworks, context surrounding the creation and exhibition of the
works, and, most importantly, the artist's voice. To paraphrase
Willoughby Sharp, Who better to explain this work than the
artists who made it?

**Notes**

International* 192 (September 1976): 145-86. There were twelve
questions: 1. Who owns you, and to what extent are the owner's
artistic/financial/political interests reflected in your magazine?
2. What are your sources of income, and do they give you
a profit or a loss? 3. How many members of staff do you
employ? 4. How many copies of each issue do you print, what
is the cover price, and what is the average budget per issue?
5. What is your scale of payment for writers? 6. How important
is the physical "look" of your magazine—quality of paper,
number of colour illustrations, high standard of design, etc.? 7.
What audience do you aim at, and would you be content to
communicate only with a specialised "art" audience? 8. Which
is your first priority—art criticism or art information? 9. Are
you international or national in your scope, and why? 10. Do you support a partisan area of art activity, or remain open to every new development? 11. Are you happy about the influence that art magazines exert on the development of contemporary art? 12. To what extent do you consider your magazine is shaped by (a) your regular advertisers, and (b) the power of the market?


8. Ibid., 14. Sharp was listed as publisher on the masthead for the first eight issues, artist-in-residence for the last seven.
12. Liza Béar, e-mail message to author, November 28, 2010.
13. Béar and Haacke, “Artist in Residence,” 57; Liza Béar, e-mail message to author, November 28, 2010. This stock is different from printing on newsprint. The quality of paper is better, hence these issues are in good shape to this day.
17. Ibid., 6.
19. Ibid.


Avalanche Chronology

Avalanche 1, Fall 1970
Avalanche 2, Winter 1971
Avalanche 3, Fall 1971
Avalanche 4, Spring 1972
Avalanche 5, Summer 1972
Avalanche 6, Fall 1972
Avalanche 7, Winter/Spring 1973
Avalanche 8, Summer/Fall 1973
Avalanche 9, May/June 1974
Avalanche 10, December 1974
Avalanche 11, Summer 1975
Avalanche 12, Winter 1975
Avalanche 13, Summer 1976

Additional Sources Consulted

Burton, Johanna, and Lisa Pasquariello. “‘Ask Somebody Else Something Else’: Analyzing the Artist Interview.” Art Journal 64, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 46-49.

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