

Avalanche Magazine's Greatest Hits, Pt. 1

BY ANDREW RUSSETH | AUGUST 07, 2010



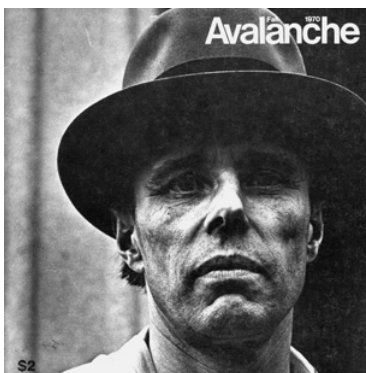
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"Do you want to smoke something?" says **Ed Ruscha** (/artists/edward-ruscha-109). "I'd love to yeah," comes the response. "I'm just going to move this mike around." This exchange, part of a 1973 interview conducted by the late **Willoughby Sharp**, is just one of the period-piece gems recorded by **Avalanche** magazine, an irregularly published, now-legendary art periodical that was created in 1970 by Sharp and Liza Béar (<http://www.artinfo.com/search/results/?query=Liza+B%E9ar>) to rigorously document activity in the art world's burgeoning avant-garde. Running through 1976, it captured the spirit of its milieu: informal and intimate, but at the same time the locus of profound, perhaps unprecedented activity.

For years, copies of *Avalanche* were coveted collector's items, and bringing together all 13 issues was the art-world equivalent of building a complete baseball card set. Sharp and Béar resisted offers to republish the works, and articles were rarely reprinted elsewhere. But now the fledgling New York nonprofit publisher **Primary Information** has printed a complete run of the series. The issues appear almost exactly as they were first designed — the first eight are in a glossy magazine format, with the last five, originally printed as newspapers, bound into a single book. The run is available in trade edition and a signed, numbered limited edition.

The sudden availability of the material, more than 1,000 pages in total, amounts to the discovery of an art-historical treasure chest. Each issue contains voluminous documentation of seminal work by and lengthy interviews with artists like **Joseph Beuys** (<http://www.artinfo.com/artists/profile/5086/joseph-beuys/>), **Robert Smithson** (<http://www.artinfo.com/artists/profile/171548/robert-smithson/>), **Jackie Winsor** (<http://www.artinfo.com/artists/profile/197654/jackie-winsor/>), **Yvonne Rainer** (<http://www.artinfo.com/search/results/?query=Yvonne+Rainer>), and **Bruce Nauman** (<http://www.artinfo.com/artists/profile/20/bruce-nauman/>). In addition, its front-of-the-book sections, "Rumbles" and "Messages," also include fascinating accounts of art events of the time — many of which have appeared only as footnotes in other sources, if they have been documented elsewhere at all.

To mark the publication of *Avalanche*, **ARTINFO** foraged through the magazines to select some of our favorite art-historical tales.

1. The Pleasure and Pain of Being Ed Ruscha (/artists/edward-ruscha-109)

Let's begin back with Ruscha, who, besides being a generous host (and being able to roll an impressive cigarette-like object, which he is shown in one glorious photo doing with a massive pile of what appears to be tobacco), has some good floral advice to offer. "I buy roses a lot," he tells Sharp. "Flowers don't really have to cost that much. In Los Angeles you can buy them on the street for about a fourth of what they cost in the flower shops." However, life is not always so breezy. Ruscha reports that the printer handling his seminal book "Every Building on the Sunset Strip" folded it incorrectly and refused to correct it. "I just broke out in hives," Ruscha says. "I really had spots on my face I was ready to have a heart attack on the spot and I got a lawyer and finally did the job over again."

2. Ads, Part 1: Food

If Liza Béar ever wants to milk the *Avalanche* archives for profit, she could probably make a fortune selling a compendium of the ads that ran in the magazine. **Gordon Matta-Clark** (<http://www.artinfo.com/search/results/?query=Gordon+Matta-Clark>)'s SoHo-based **Food** restaurant placed one particularly great ad in Spring 1972 — about a year after it opened — listing what it calls "fiscal facts" about its operation. The number of free dinners handed out? 3,082. The pounds of duck baked? 1,111. Other vitals statistics: 5,568 loaves of bread baked, 16,000 oranges squeezed, 41,272 customers, 1,083 glasses broken, and 47 dogs asked to leave. Perhaps the most important fact: "84 percent of workers are artists."

3. Chris Burden, Dead

Next to a photo of an obscure lump lying on the side of a road, there is a note explaining that this is documentation of 1972 performance artist **Chris Burden's** "Dead Man" piece, which involved laying "motionless in number one lane of LA's Cienega Boulevard" under a green tarp. Police cars, an ambulance, and a crowd arrived. A police officer lifted the tarp and inquired, "What are you doing?" Burden replied, "I am making a piece of sculpture." He was arrested for issuing a false alarm and put on trial, but got off with a hung jury: nine voting guilty, three voting not-guilty.

4. Ads, Part 2: Minimalism

There is fierce competition for the most minimalistic, stripped-down ad in the magazine's run. **Paul Maenz** (<http://www.artinfo.com/search/results/?query=Paul+Maenz>), a gallerist and curator who worked variously in Brussels, Cologne, and Frankfurt, probably wins that award for purchasing two blank pages, with a tiny note in the lower-right corner explaining that he was responsible for the monochromes. However, the cleverest minimalist ad belongs to Turin dealer **Gian Enzo Sperone** (who later created a partnership with dealers **Angela Westwater** and **Konrad Fischer**). He turns his self-promotion into a love letter, printing in block letters: "Gian Enzo Sperone is in love with **Art & Project**, **Leo Castelli** (<http://www.artinfo.com/search/results/?query=Leo+Castelli>), **Konrad Fischer**, **Heiner Friedrich**, **Yvon Lambert**, **Paul Maenz**, **Franco Toselli** (<http://www.artinfo.com/search/results/?query=Franco+Toselli>), **John Weber** (<http://www.artinfo.com/search/results/?query=John+Weber>)."

5. Make Your Own LeWitt

Using teams of draftsmen expertly trained to execute Sol LeWitt (<http://www.artinfo.com/artists/profile/26/sol-lewitt/>)'s instruction-based drawings are de rigueur today among institutions and collectors. That wasn't the case back in 1972, when LeWitt turned two pages of *Avalanche* into a do-it-yourself art piece for what he termed "Page Drawings." One example, printed in the center of the page, read as follows: "On this page using a pencil or a pen, draw lines from each vowel in this paragraph to each corner of this page." Not a bad surprise to find in a magazine with a \$2 cover price (still a bargain at today's price, adjusted for inflation: \$10). Of course, those that completed the drawing would have had some explaining to do when they went to sell their copy on the competitive *Avalanche* resale market.

6. Ads, Part 3: Willoughby for Rent

"You can get this ham cheap!" the text at the top of one ad reads. And who is this ham, this gigantic bearded man leaping through a muddy pigpen, trying valiantly to avoid the hogs in the ad's photo? And just what is he doing? Why, it's "Willoughby Sharp, Publisher of *Avalanche*," serving as a guest lecturer at the **University of Iowa**, the accompanying text explains. It continues, tantalizingly, that Sharp "is available as guest lecturer on the New Art during this academic year."

7. Gordon Matta-Clark's List of Ingredients

One of the most bizarre, deadpan items in the whole magazine's run appears in the first issue of *Avalanche*, published in fall 1970. It reads in full: "The ingredients of Gordon (<http://www.artinfo.com/artists/profile/40045/gordon-matta-clark/>)Matta (/artists/-matta-203446) Clarks 'Museum' shown at the **Bykert Gallery** in June are: agar, water, dextrose, triptone, glycerol, sperm oil, NaCl, sugar, Pet milk, V-8, cranberry juice, corn oil, yeast, chocolate Yoo-hoo, and chick broth; the hardware, gold leaf local vines, galvanized pans, screw hooks, thumb tacks, and black magic plastic steet [sic]; known strains, Mucors-Racemosus, Rhizopus-Apophysis, Aspergillus Niger, Penicillium Notatum, and Streptomyces Griseur."

8. The Terror of Vito Acconci

Issue number six was devoted almost entirely to documentation of the undefinable and winningly unpleasant performance work of Vito Acconci. (Much of this takes the form of photographs of a naked, hirsute Acconci performing various actions, like running in place, and classics like "Following Piece" and "Seedbed" are also covered.) In addition, there is documentation of more obscure pieces like "Sound Barrier," which was performed in July 1971 in Toronto with his very understanding collaborator, artist Jay Jaroslav (<http://www.artinfo.com/search/results?query=jay+jaroslav>). Acconci writes out his guidelines for the piece: "Camera focus on Jay's mouth: his goal is to keep his mouth open, let out a continuous scream — my goal is to force his mouth shut, muffle the scream." But, he emphasizes, he's doing this for a good cause: "The sound should be a nuisance — the audience shouldn't be able to stand it — my performance is done for their benefit: they're on my side as I try to stop the scream." In the large black-and-white photos, Acconci's hands are aggressively gripping Jaroslav's mouth. There appears to be some biting taking place.

9. Mary Sue Ader on Bas Jan Ader

On July 9, 1975, Dutch artist **Bas Jan Ader** set sail in a small boat from Cape Cod, Massachusetts, for Ireland as part of a work he titled "In Search of the Miraculous." He never arrived and was declared lost at sea. A little less than a year after his departure, Sharp and Béar interviewed his widow, **Mary Sue Ader**, about the voyage. He was an experienced sailor, she explains, and made a trip "in 1962 from Morocco to Los Angeles with another man on a 45-foot sailboat." The length of his boat the time of the disappearance: "12 feet and 6 inches," which would have been the smallest one-man boat to ever cross the Atlantic. "So Bas was looking to break the record?" Sharp asks Ader. "Well, that was kind of a side aspect," she replies. Was it suicide? "No, I'm absolutely convinced that was nowhere in his consciousness. We talked about it, and he assured me repeatedly these were not his intentions."

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