

ART-RITE

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I have often wondered: how is it that so many of the post-conceptual, post-minimalist, performance, and video artists that have made up New York's vibrant downtown arts scene over the last three decades all seem so familiar to each other? Is it a coincidence that so

many disparate artists share a bafflingly flexible position, encompassing both underground and overground priorities, insider and outsider viewpoints? How is it they are at once critical, humorous, and deeply knowledgeable, while seemingly free of the formal tone and self-seriousness that mars so many vanguard art projects and publications? Was there some shared point of reference informing this commonality or a local equivalent to the alternative publishing vibe that permeated the small press and international mail art network?

On a rainy December evening, a book signing and panel discussion about the 1970s alternative publication *Art-Rite* answered my questions, and celebrated the launch of a valuable artifact: a 678 page paperback tome published in an edition of 2000 by Primary Information and Printed Matter, Inc., which contains a full facsimile reprint of the landmark periodical's run, handsomely repackaged for 2019 bookshelves. The standing-room-only panel, moderated by downtown fringe aficionado Carlo McCormick, featured raconteur, post-Pop painter, and *Art-Rite* editor Walter Robinson, as well as venerable artists Pat Steir and Robin Winters, both *Art-Rite* contributors. The event took place in the achromatic Wooster Street space near Grand that bears the name of legendary dealer Jeffrey Deitch, who provided a reverent, charming introduction for the who's who of familiar faces in the audience, calling the large turnout "a retort" to the idea that art in New York is over. "We're very much still here," he concluded.

Deitch introduced the speakers by stating that "the downtown community in the mid-1970s without *Art-Rite* would have been completely different... a giant gap. This was the center of the discourse. It was a remarkable contribution." Later in the evening the always deadpan Robinson sarcastically added, "Nothing would have happened if hadn't been for us." *Art-Rite* launched a major creative wave in the 1970s scene, often the first place one would read about many artists whose works now adorn museums worldwide. Over its five year run, between 1973 and 1978, the publication, despite its DIY feel, curated hundreds of interviews, statements, and exhibition and performance reviews, as well as projects "by, with, and about" a clan of artists who found a platform in *Art-Rite's* pages.

Pat Steir, now an internationally shown and collected painter, recalled feeling alienated from the larger art world in those days, and called *Art-Rite* "an outsider's forum" that provided a space of creative freedom. Not on the staff of the publication, she lovingly dropped names and told various amusing stories. One of these involved creating a cover that was potato-stamped by hand in three colors; another centered on how she became a founder of *Printed Matter* bookstore. She was also a board member of *Semiotext(e)* and founder of the landmark feminist journal, *Heresies*, initiated in 1977 as *Art-Rite* was winding down. Robin Winters paid homage to Steir's dedication to painting at a time when the practice was not in vogue, and to Deitch for both being an intrepid art appreciator and contributing his presence to Winters' obscure early projects. Robinson, in turn, praised Winters's chops, originality, and hard work. Earlier in the evening, Winters read aloud his

first contribution to *Art Rite*, a letter to Nelson Rockefeller—described as “an art supporter and murderer”—that invited the politician to act out his “world power domination ideas” as performance.

As moderator, McCormick navigated the evening with open-ended questions that cautioned against nostalgia while steering conversation towards the nature of art world discourse in *Art-Rite*'s era, when the voices of artists were stronger and more prominent than the voices of collectors. McCormick credited community members around *Art-Rite* who achieved degrees of notoriety and credibility in the '80s with bringing attention to what was visually compelling—a quality intentionally lacking in the Conceptual and Minimalist art world of the '70s. However, the stars of the evening were the founders and editors of *Art-Rite*: Joshua Cohn and Edit DeAk, both in absentia, and Robinson. This trio was enrolled in the Whitney Independent Study Program together, as was Winters, who twice referred to the community around *Art-Rite* as “tribal.” Robinson recalled his co-founders fondly, describing Cohn as a best friend who left after the seventh issue, and Edit DeAk, who died in 2017, as “the one who did inspired things.” Robinson called her the “reigning inspiration and much of the force behind the magazine,” and wistfully led the crowd to a collective sigh by personally wishing she were here now. Her loss seemed palpable in the room: DeAk's “long red hair and amber eyes,” were evoked during the question and answer period, while Robinson remembered the Hungarian immigrant as “sexy, with an accent like Zsa Zsa Gabor, but serious, not goofy.”

The evening served as a clear demonstration of *Art-Rite*'s unique importance in connecting the Fluxus-influenced Soho loft era to the go-go 1980s. This unpretentious and funky magazine moved breezily through the small but expanding community it earnestly mapped, pushing out cutting, humorous, streetwise stories and critiques to the very audience they covered: a hungry, emergent generation of artists, who would soon become the defining voices of their era—if they weren't famous already.