

ARTS ONLINE; 3-Dimensional Magazine Lives Again in 2 Dimensions

By MATTHEW MIRAPPAUL
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Published 10 times between 1965 and 1971, Aspen billed itself as the first three-dimensional magazine. Most issues arrived in a notebook-size box stuffed with articles that had been printed individually rather than stapled together. But it was the nature of its contents that made Aspen magazine stand out like a ski lift in a cornfield. Each issue was as likely to hold postcards, posters and phonograph records as essays. And among the magazine's 235 contributors were many prominent figures on the 60's cultural landscape, including Roland Barthes, John Lennon, Marshall McLuhan, Lou Reed and Andy Warhol.

Thirty years after Aspen ceased publication, copies of the actual magazines are rarely found outside museum libraries and dusty flea-market bins. Now, though, Aspen can be viewed on the Internet, where the three-dimensional magazine has been digitally reproduced for the two-dimensional computer screen with remarkable verve. The material was put online last month at Ubu.com/aspen.

Aspen provided a vivid snapshot of its era. The Pop Art issue came in a Warhol-designed soapbox. Another issue described works by denizens of the Judson Memorial Church gallery, a mecca of early performance art in New York. The Fluxus issue had conceptual scores by Philip Glass and Steve Reich and a LaMonte Young recording. Deborah Wye, chief curator of prints and illustrated books at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, said, "The accuracy of the moment is something that hits you between the eyes when you open one of the boxes."

Given Aspen's historical importance, one might assume that a digital re-creation of the magazine would become the work of a museum. Instead, the online version is a labor of love by Andrew Stafford, 48, a San Francisco bookseller who gradually amassed a set of the magazines during the 1990's. He wanted to share his collection.

"As an example of creative publishing, Aspen is just stunning," he said.

Mr. Stafford's project provides a primer in the pleasures and pitfalls of putting real-world materials on the Internet. But there is no denying that Aspen is an ideal candidate for online presentation. At a time when magazines are routinely accompanied by compact disks with music or computer software, it is easy to overlook how progressive Aspen was in packing its issues with the thin plastic records called flexidiscs and, in one instance, a reel of 8-millimeter film: a truly multimedia magazine.

Adapting the magazine for the Web's multimedia capabilities became irresistible to Mr. Stafford. In 1999 he started digitizing some of the magazine's printed pages. He converted the flexidisc recordings into sound files that could be played on a computer and also asked a friend with a movie projector to transfer a reel of short abstract films by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Robert Rauschenberg and two other artists into video files.

Happily, Mr. Stafford did not stop there. He learned Web-animation techniques so that he could create interactive versions of some exhibits. For instance online visitors can flip through the digitized pages of Lennon's 1969 diary, playfully created in 1968 (sample entry: "got up. went to work. came home. watched telly"), or rotate the lines and dots on a page of John Cage's score for "Fontana Mix."

Mr. Stafford completed his digitizing effort in 2000, just as lawsuits over copyright violations involving online song files were reaching the courts. He said, "I became totally intimidated by the prospect of breaking about 150 copyrights." Deterred by the amount of work that would be needed to acquire permission to republish all the Aspen materials online, he put the project in a drawer. Instead he created a free tutorial about Marcel Duchamp, which he put online last August at UnderstandingDuchamp.com.

He was soon contacted by the artist's vigilant and unhappy rights administrators. So far, he said, he is dodging their demand for several thousand dollars. While researching the problem, he approached Kenneth Goldsmith, a New York poet who has operated UbuWeb, an Internet-based archive of experimental poetry and avant-garde works, since 1996. The site is at Ubu.com.

Mr. Goldsmith volunteered to put the Aspen project on his site, which he did last month.

Despite Mr. Stafford's experience with the Duchamp tutorial, Mr. Goldsmith said: "Over the years I've found that people only come after you for rights when you're making money. Since UbuWeb is completely free, nobody has ever really bothered us about rights." He said he removes entries when living artists complain, but that rarely happens.

"Most artists who find their stuff on UbuWeb are thrilled," he said. Avant-garde artists rarely expect royalties. "They want an audience."

He may be right. The editors of several Aspen issues said they were pleased that the material was available again. Jon Hendricks, who edited the performance-art issue, said, "The idea was to get the information out rather than to think of it as property." Nor did Jeffrey H. James, executive director of the Cunningham Dance Foundation, object to audio recordings of the choreographer Merce Cunningham on the Aspen site. Mr. James said, "The educational value of having Merce's thoughts out there on the Web outweighs our motives of ownership."

Still, Mr. Stafford worried that individual contributors would force him to remove select entries. He said, "Losing just 10 percent of the contributors would reduce its usefulness by at least half, so I'm hoping all will cooperate."

The ultimate arbiter would probably be Phyllis Johnson, a former intimate-apparel editor of Women's Wear Daily who created Aspen. But her contributors have lost touch with her, and she could not be reached for comment.

Ms. Wye of the Museum of Modern Art was enthusiastic about Mr. Stafford's Web site, saying that it achieved the same goal as the original magazine: making art available to a larger public. (The magazine's circulation was 15,000 to 20,000.) She also appreciated having the audio and video entries online, noting that even an institution like the Modern does not always have turntables and movie projectors around.

On the other hand, the Web site does not convey the tactile qualities of the real magazines. "You can't imagine how beautiful these flexidiscs are in person," Mr. Goldsmith said. "An audio file is no substitute for the sensuality of vinyl." And Mr. Stafford's straightforward site design encourages online visitors to go through each issue in a linear fashion, losing the treasure-chest element.

There is one gap in Mr. Stafford's collection, the last of Aspen's 10 issues. Recently a book dealer with a complete set (asking price: \$10,000) offered to mail him color copies of its pages. Mr. Stafford said the issue should be online by Christmas.

Mr. Stafford said he understood that he would never recover a dime from his preservation project. Aspen magazine "was a folly," he said, "as is my Web site, I guess."

He continued: "Aspen the magazine never made a penny, I'm sure. So Phyllis Johnson and I share that across all these years."

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