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Multimedia in the Pre-Digital Age

Aspen Magazine (1965-1971) and the Digital Magazine Revolution

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ABSTRACT

Met de introductie van Apple's iPad en de groeiende vraag naar eReaders en smartphones opent zich een breed scala aan nieuwe mogelijkheden voor het digitale tijdschrift. Waar in het verleden gedigitaliseerde tijdschriften veelal niet meer omvatten dan scans van het origineel, bieden eReaders, smartphones en Tablet PCs een kans om de lezer van een vernieuwende, interactieve en multimediale ervaring te voorzien. Dat tijdschriften de sprong naar digitale varianten zullen moeten maken om relevant te blijven in een digitaliserende wereld lijkt evident; de vraag rijst echter wel welke invloed het inruilen van de lineaire structuur van het gedrukte werk voor de interactieve hypertextuele structuur van de digitale variant heeft op de tijdschriftveraring.

Dit artikel poogt een kritische blik te werpen op de nieuwe generatie digitale tijdschriften aan de hand van een van haar voorlopers, het multimediamagazine *Aspen*. Dit tijdschrift, dat verscheen tussen 1965 en 1971, wilde radicaal breken met het traditionele, gebonden magazine door terug te keren naar 'the original meaning of that word in the sense of "a storehouse, a cache, a ship laden with stores".' Om dit te bewerkstelligen verscheen *Aspen* niet alleen ongebonden in een doos, maar bevatte ieder nummer naast een verscheidenheid aan papieren materiaal ook een flexidisc met muziek of audiofragmenten. *Aspen* ook het eerste tijdschrift dat bewegend beeld bevatte, in de vorm van een spoel Super 8 film.

Aan de hand van een studie van enkele van de meest innovatieve nummers van *Aspen* wordt in dit artikel gezocht naar historische parallellen met de huidige ontwikkelingen in de wereld van het digitale tijdschrift. *Aspen's* unieke vorm maakte het mogelijk om het lezerspubliek op een vernieuwende manier aan te spreken, maar de idealistische aard van het magazine leidde ook tot problemen. Door middel van een vergelijkende blik maakt dit artikel zichtbaar dat een halve eeuw later veel van de voordelen en nadelen van het ongebonden tijdschrift terugkeren in het digitale magazine.

KEYWORDS

digital magazine, iPad, Aspen magazine, multimedia, sixties, hypertext, design
digitaal tijdschrift, iPad, Aspen magazine, multimedia, jaren zestig, hypertext, design

The past went that-a-way. When faced with a totally new situation, we tend always to attach ourselves to the objects, to the flavor of the most recent past. We look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future.¹

– Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage* (1967)

GOING NONLINEAR: CHALLENGES FOR THE MAGAZINE IN A DIGITAL WORLD

That the traditional, paper-based magazine has arrived at a decisive crossroads is rapidly becoming a cliché. In an increasingly digital world, which favors the interactive over the static, the nonlinear over the linear, the user-centered over the designer-centered, and mixed media over single media, the magazine has little choice but to reinvent itself or perish. The developments listed here, often loosely lumped together under the term Web 2.0, present an urgent call for action for the magazine industry, which increasingly finds itself faced with digital threats similar to those that have been occupying the publishing, newspaper, movie and music industries for the past decade. With the continuing success of Amazon's Kindle and the recent release of Apple's iPad, new media have appeared on the market, posited snugly between the smaller laptops and the Smartphone; portable, yet equipped with large enough screens to provide for a comfortable reading experience, the eReader and tablet computer provide their users with a versatile platform to access information from a wide variety of sources at any given moment. The case of the iPad, with sales exceeding one million within a month of its American release, illustrates that the tablet computer has successfully carved out a niche of its own in the media landscape. In an effort to capitalize on this new market Condé Nast, publisher of twenty-eight magazines, some of them (*Vogue*, *The New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair*, *Wired*, etc.) among the most recognizable of the trade, announced in March of this year that it would release iPad versions of five of its most popular publications by summer 2010. It is hard to overemphasize how much of a 'game-changer,' to use *Wired* magazine's qualification, the iPad really is.² Much more than the digital magazines that have been around for years and that have often amounted to little more than scans of the original publication, the iPad offers a locus for true interactivity, prompting the user into what Roland Barthes termed a writerly, instead of a readerly, experience.³ In fact, it is these interactive, nonlinear aspects of the medium that should be further explored by the designers of digital magazines, if these publications are to offer any true competition in the flood of competing information that media consumers are bombarded with every single day.

One productive theoretical approach to the new generation of digital magazines is hypertext theory, as first developed by Theodore Nelson in the early 1960s. Nelson, then a Master's student at Harvard University, envisioned an information structure which

¹ Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage*. New York: Bantam Books 1967 (74-75).

² The iPad is qualified as such by *Wired*'s Creative Director Scott Dadich in a video preview of the forthcoming iPad version of the magazine. See: www.wired.com. Retrieved on June 2, 2010.

³ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*. Oxford: Blackwell 2002 (4).

would be non-sequential and open-ended, inviting the reader to traverse the text via an anti-hierarchical system of links, a feature he called ‘zippered lists.’ Much like the digital magazine, Nelson’s proto-hypertext required a writerly approach, inviting its users to engage in active exploration of its labyrinthine structure. Barthes’ distinction between readerly and writerly proves apt, then, when distinguishing ‘ordinary’ digital texts from hypertexts. In fact, Barthes’ study *S/Z* (1970), in which he first introduced the terms readerly and writerly, offers a convincing description of what a functional hypertext may look like. As Barthes envisioned it, in an ideal hypertext

the networks are many and interact, without any of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one.⁴

Hypertext scholar George Landow also stresses how the ‘hypertext blurs the boundaries between reader and writer’ and thus necessitates a very active reader, one who is willing to critically navigate his way through a nonlinear information jungle, and a potentially unreliable one to boot.⁵ Whereas in the 1960s Nelson’s hypertext remained to a large extent hypothetical, for the average contemporary Internet user these problems of information overflow and questionable reliability have become a hallmark of the Web experience.

How should magazines then employ the potential provided by the reified hypertext and the opportunities offered by Web 2.0? Although the advocates of Web 2.0 have been legion, 2009 and 2010 also saw a steady stream of publications questioning some of its key features, many of them written by prominent members of the Internet community.⁶ There is no need to explore their many objections to current Internet developments too extensively here, but it should suffice to note that many of these objections may also hold for the fledgling digital magazine. Thus, for example, when in his recent study *You Are Not a Gadget* (2010) Jaron Lanier observes that increased online interactivity has transformed the Internet from both an idealistic means of transnational communication and a potential Borgesian information repository into a vast expanse of mediocrity, this may also serve as a caveat for the digital magazines currently under development. Of course interactivity may pave the way to democratization and finally realize the aspiration of many magazines to become a true forum for conflicting opinions; nevertheless it may be good to bear in mind that quantity does not equal quality and that on the Web, perhaps even more than anywhere else, ‘collectives can be just as stupid as any individual – and in important cases, stupider.’⁷

⁴ Barthes 2002 (3).

⁵ George Landow, *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in an Era of Globalization*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 2006 (4).

⁶ For an overview of recent works on many of these issues see: Michiko Kakutani, ‘Texts Without Context.’ *The New York Times*, March 17, 2010.

⁷ Jaron Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf 2010 (56).

Amid these conflicting opinions and, moreover, as the digital magazine is as of yet such a novelty, it proves hard to look into the future and predict in which direction technological, economical, social and cultural developments (not necessarily in that order) will lead the industry; it may, however, prove useful to look into the past for clues. In this article I propose that the loose leaf magazine, as published in numerous incarnations in the twentieth century, provides particularly interesting parallels with its modern day digital equivalent, among which are nonlinearity, interactivity, multimediality and a writerly approach to readers. It should be noted that although loose leaf magazines had been around since the Russian Constructivist experiments of the early twentieth century, their true boom came in the 1960s, a period which constituted a watershed moment in media history, much like our own.⁸ It could thus be valuable to compare these two media crossroads and the types of magazine they produced in order to shed some light on the current situation.

The magazine I propose for comparison here is *Aspen*, the American multimedia magazine in a box published in ten issues by editor Phyllis Johnson between 1965 and 1971. Although *Aspen* was only one of many loose leaf magazine ventures in the 1960s, it is a particularly fruitful choice for comparison, because of its high production values, extensive print runs (between 15,000 and 20,000) and its three-dimensional, multimedia approach to the magazine concept. *Aspen's* inception was also directly influenced by the media theory of the age, most notably by the works of Marshall McLuhan, to which it devoted an entire issue in 1967. Whereas other magazines may have consisted wholly of loose printed matter, *Aspen's* content was more versatile. Not only did issues at times contain flip books, kites, newspapers, posters, foldouts, postcards, and other paper-based materials, nearly each issue of *Aspen* also contained a flexi disc with music or audio fragments. In 1967 *Aspen* also became the first magazine to include film, in the form of a reel of Super 8. Each of *Aspen's* issues was guest edited and many of its editors and designers have by now become hallmarks of 1960s culture. *Aspen's* contributor list also reads like a sample sheet of the 1960s cultural landscape, including John Cage, Timothy Leary, J.G. Ballard, Jack Smith, Ossie Clark, John Lennon, Yoko Ono, Steve Reich, Kate Millet, Susan Sontag, Dennis Oppenheim, and many others.

It should be needless to say that what follows cannot pretend to give a comprehensive overview of *Aspen*, nor can it explore all possible analogies with the digital magazine.⁹ This article should thus be interpreted as a first impulse to further study. In

⁸ Not wholly incidentally the terms multimedia, mixed media and intermedia all stem from the mid-1960s.

⁹ For a full history of *Aspen* please refer to my Master's thesis *Multimedia, Miscellanies and Mini-Museums: Aspen Magazine, 1965-1971* (Radboud University Nijmegen 2009). For this thesis seven of *Aspen's* former guest editors and designers were interviewed and this article draws repeatedly on the insights they were able to provide. I am indebted to the kindness of George Lois, David Dalton, Quentin Fiore and Brian O'Doherty for allowing me to reuse the interview material in this article. It should be noted that *Aspen's* editor, Phyllis Johnson, could not be reached for this study. A full Web version of *Aspen*, designed by Andrew Stafford, is available at www.ubu.com/aspen. This digital version may be seen as a companion piece to this article, as it provides detailed information on *Aspen's* individual issues and their contents that has been omitted here for the sake of brevity.

what follows I have chosen to first give a brief recapitulation of *Aspen*'s inception in 1965, as it sheds some light on editorial intentions with the magazine. This is followed by short discussions of two of the magazine's more innovative issues and concluded by a note on *Aspen*'s eventual demise in 1971 and possible analogies to our own times. Insofar as *Aspen*'s format may have been quixotic, over time it has not only become an art historical curiosity, but in many ways its successes and failures can also prove highly relevant for our own day and age.

RETHINKING THE MAGAZINE CONCEPT: *ASPEN*, THE MAGAZINE IN A BOX

In 1965, when former *Women's Wear Daily* and *Advertising Age* editor Phyllis Johnson visited the fifteenth annual International Design Conference in Aspen (IDCA), Colorado, she went home keen to radically reinvent the magazine concept. The edition of the IDCA Johnson visited was devoted to 'Configurations of the New World' and featured speeches by such luminaries as architect James Rouse, designer George Nelson and Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall. What the 1965 IDCA shared with its previous incarnations was a starry-eyed idealism, an unshakeable conviction that many of the modern world's problems could be repaired through astute design.¹⁰ As the IDCA's promotional materials, reproduced in *Aspen* 1 (1965), stated:

'[h]ardly a day goes by when we are not reminded that 1984 is here [...] it becomes literally correct to describe today's world as *new*.'¹¹ With this new world in mind Johnson set out to design a magazine to match.

The first issue of *Aspen* appeared in December 1965 and came packaged in a glossy black 12" by 10" box, adorned by a single, oversized Bodoni letter A. The issue contained seven sections, five of which were booklets, supplemented by a flexi disc, and a



Fig. 1: Box for *Aspen* 1 (1965), design by George Lois.

¹⁰ This conviction would last until the late 1960s, when it became increasingly untenable in a politically radicalized America. The IDCA's idealism would clash violently with America and Europe's counterculture in 1970 when the conference was disrupted by French and American protesters. See: Alice Twemlow, 'I Can't Talk to You if You Say That: An Ideological Collision at the International Design Conference at Aspen, 1970.' *Design & Culture* 1, 2009, 23-49.

¹¹ George Nelson (ed.), 'Configurations of the New World.' *Aspen Magazine* 1, 1965. Italics in the original. Note that material in *Aspen* is almost never paginated; the individual sections do, however, allow for relatively easy tracing of quotes.

folder of loose advertising sheets. The booklets, devoted to the IDCA, skiing and local wildlife, mostly extolled the virtues of Aspen, ‘one of the few places in America where you can lead a well-rounded, eclectic life of visual, physical and mental splendor;’¹² the flexi disc provided jazz music to match. The issue also included a letter to the reader by hand of Phyllis Johnson, in which she explained how the magazine intended to return to ‘the original meaning of that word in the sense of “a storehouse, a cache, a ship laden with stores”.’¹³ Thus, each of *Aspen*’s boxes was intended to reward the inquisitive reader, and, as Emily King has noted, did so by communicating intelligence, instead of opulence.¹⁴ In addition – and contrary to traditional magazine design logic – *Aspen* toyed with the concept of the gift box, garnering attention by veiling instead of revealing its contents. Accordingly, hardly any of the boxes and folders *Aspen* produced throughout the years yield much of a clue as to their contents. These practices led to an innovative magazine experience, in which *Aspen*’s guest editors gradually received more and more freedom to fill the boxes with intricate labyrinthine information structures.

For *Aspen*’s first two issues, however, Johnson retained an iron grip on the magazine’s content, maintaining Aspenite idealism as its centerpiece. For the design she drew upon her acquaintances in the advertising world, in particular those associated with what would later be called the advertising creative revolution of the mid-1960s. Thus, via a mutual friend, Johnson approached *Esquire* cover designer George Lois to work on the first issue, who agreed to do the job pro bono. Although Lois had been in advertising since the late 1950s, by the time *Aspen* 1 was published he had evolved from ‘one of the street fighters of the creative revolution’ to a byword for provocative, groundbreaking design.¹⁵ Lois’ covers for *Esquire* were, in the words of Steven Heller, ‘acerbic critiques of contemporary society, politics and manners that subverted the conventions of mainstream magazines.’¹⁶ It is, then, all the more conspicuous that *Aspen* 1 betrays little of Lois’ design qualities. In fact, Johnson and Lois’ ideas of what would constitute a three-dimensional magazine had soon proved incompatible. Realizing that *Aspen*’s flat box still adhered mostly to two dimensions, Lois proposed to add a third dimension in the form of a pop-up version of the Herbert Bayer tent which had been inaugurated as the IDCA’s new accommodation that year. But, despite her innovative intentions, Johnson’s concept for *Aspen* was still firmly rooted in the traditional magazine concept, causing her to flatly reject Lois’ pop-up. As Lois remembers, Johnson’s unwillingness to fully exploit the possibilities of the magazine’s format made him feel constricted:

¹² Phyllis Johnson, ‘A Letter from Phyllis Johnson.’ *Aspen Magazine* 1, 1965.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Emily King, ‘Thinking Inside the Box: *Aspen* Revisited.’ In Michael Beirut, William Drenttel and Steven Heller (eds.), *Looking Closer Five: Critical Writings on Graphic Design*. New York: Allworth Press 2006, 62-68 (62).

¹⁵ Mark Tungate, *Adland: A Global History of Advertising*. London and Philadelphia: Kogan Page 2007 (56).

¹⁶ Steven Heller, ‘Indubitable Achievements.’ *The New York Times*, November 24, 1996. Several of Lois’ *Esquire* covers can be seen on his website www.georgelois.com; seventy of them have also been collected in George Lois, *Covering the ‘60s: George Lois, The Esquire Era*. New York: Monacelli 1996.

I did this sensational pop-up and she said: ‘Well, I don’t know, I’m not so sure that’s so interesting.’ And I said: ‘What?!’ [...] ‘What are you talking about? We all go crazy about it.’ I did the tent and it was designed by Herbert Bayer and in a sense it had become for anybody who goes to Aspen, the symbol of Aspen. I was totally blown away and she rejected it and we just finished the job and I said goodbye to her. It was a pain in the ass job to do. [...] I’m working with [*Esquire*’s] Harold Hayes, I’m changing the world with magazine covers and he’s not just leaving me alone, he’s telling me go, go, go and I walk into this woman and I’m doing it pro bono, free, and she’s tying my hands, she’s handcuffing me.¹⁷



Fig. 2: Selected loose leaf advertising in *Aspen 1*. Shown is advertising for the Seven Arts Book Club, Adele Simpson designer clothing, Grant’s whiskey, IBM and Fabergé.

Harold Hayes once remarked that Lois’ talent was so significant because it was ‘impossible to control or regulate, and [...] that if anyone or anything ever succeeded completely in doing so, it would simply disappear.’¹⁸ If Johnson’s obduracy did not stifle Lois’ talent fully, it for certain severely curtailed it; the design of *Aspen 1* is adequate, but decidedly far from as visionary as Lois’ work for *Esquire*, or for that matter as *Aspen*’s later issues.

Lois and Johnson’s divergent views are exemplary of the highly idealistic, and impractical side to *Aspen*’s format, which negated part of its commercial viability. The magazine’s approach to advertising provides a clear illustration here. Much like anything in the box, ads in *Aspen* were loose leaf, collected in a folder labeled the ‘Ad Gallery’ and placed at the bottom of the box. Although the loose leaf approach allowed for a versatile

¹⁷ Interview with George Lois, October 9, 2008.

¹⁸ Harold Hayes, ‘Harold Hayes on George Lois and Those *Esquire* Covers.’ *Adweek*, October 5, 1981.

reading experience, it also meant that each of the sections of the box would have to fight for the reader's attention, and the advertising most of all. Here an interesting parallel appears with the digital magazine: once unbound, the reader is no longer forced to at least flip past the advertising and advertising agencies will thus have to restyle and reintegrate their ads into the magazine context to entice readers in innovative ways. In the case of *Aspen* Lois remembers discussing this with Johnson:

You could easily lose [the advertisements], or throw them away. [...] I thought it was silly. The only thing that could have been interesting [would have been] if advertising agencies thought of ways to put something in there that maybe popped up, that you would take out and maybe would hang or pop up or use as a gimmick. I said [to Phyllis Johnson]: 'Why don't I just make a pamphlet out of the advertising?' But she said: 'No, no, no, it's very exciting when you open it up and you take the ads out,' and I said: 'You take it out and you throw it away.'¹⁹

Of course advertising designers in a digital environment have infinitely more tools at their disposal to capture the reader's attention than those confined to paper, but the fact remains that the freedom to read in a hypertextual fashion entails the freedom to disregard ads. As such, traditional magazines, in which any blend of ads and other content is often still anathema, will have to revise their views on integrated ads, if advertisers are to remain interested in buying space within their digital pages. If the *Aspen* case may serve as an illustration, here Johnson's idealistic view of advertising clearly failed to bloom. Although Johnson's letter in *Aspen* 1 had hinted at possible future inclusion of 'a ski lipstick, a tiny salt spoon, a new perfume,' none of these ventures ever materialized.²⁰ In fact, after its sixth issue, *Aspen* would silently discontinue its advertising altogether.

'ALL MEDIA WORK US OVER COMPLETELY': *ASPEN* AND MARSHALL MCLUHAN

Aspen's first two issues had presented its readership with an innovative reconceptualization of the traditional magazine, but had, in turn, exploited the new format but sparingly. While the loose content encouraged non-sequential reading and both issues had included flexi discs with music, so far the shape of the paper-based material had been guided by the form of the box and most of the contents had, in fact, been variants on ordinary stapled booklets. All this changed, however, with the publication of *Aspen's* third effort, Andy Warhol's Fab issue (1966), designed by music journalist David Dalton. This issue was succeeded in early 1967 by a box fully devoted to the media theories of Marshall McLuhan, soon to make his entrance as the high guru of multimedia, intermedia and the like with the publication of *The Medium is the Massage* (1967). Whereas the magazine's earlier issues had steered clear of 'ordinary life,' offering the alternative of an isolated Rocky Mountains spa, *Aspen* would, in fact, from now on devote each subsequent issue to a different countercultural or artistic movement. In this

¹⁹ Interview with George Lois, October 9, 2008. Time seems to have proven Lois right here; many of the *Aspen* copies offered for sale today feature advertising sections which are incomplete or missing altogether.

²⁰ Phyllis Johnson, 'A Letter from Phyllis Johnson.' *Aspen Magazine* 1, 1965.

process *Aspen's* third and fourth issues play a transitional role. They are artifacts of the cultural apogee of pre-1968 America, still unspoiled by My Lai, the Weathermen and Kent State. Both issues also show a magazine in limbo, on the one hand struggling to match an innovative format with equally innovative content, on the other hand unwilling to break fully with its rustic roots.

Even though there is too little space at this point to fully discuss *Aspen's* Fab issue, David Dalton's idiosyncratic reinterpretation of the magazine's format remains clearly visible in future issues, and thus begs a moment's notice. Dalton met Andy Warhol at a 1961 Christmas party, and for a short time he and his sister Sarah had been the artist's first assistants. By 1966, however, his relationship to Warhol had become more impersonal, as the latter moved into his studio The Factory, surrounded himself with self-appointed stars, and became the center of a media frenzy. Nevertheless, when approached by Phyllis Johnson to work on an *Aspen*, Warhol quickly hired Dalton to design an issue devoted to Pop Art. Dalton's box represents *Aspen's* first attempt to let the form of each individual item be decided by its contents, a practice he playfully combined with Pop Art's customary reappropriation of everyday objects as art. Thus when deciding on the design of the box, Dalton remembers simply making a trip to the supermarket:

[D]efinitely the most graphic, eye-popping things in the supermarket were the laundry detergents. All of that stuff [was] a swirling vortex, it was just amazing. So, Fab, anyway was really appropriate, because it was around the time of The Beatles, obviously, and so that expression 'fab' was still in use. We got permission from, whoever that is, Procter & Gamble [...] to use it. They didn't have a clue, they didn't really understand what we were doing.²¹

Dalton's design for the box is ingenious in at least two ways: the detergent theme cleverly combined Warhol's penchant for brand names with the cult of newness so commonplace in the fast-paced world of consumer products to stress the new direction the magazine was taking. On the inside the contents also reinvented everyday items to suit Pop Art's agenda of transmuting the ordinary into art; thus, for example, the Ten Trip Ticket Book reinterpreted this everyday object for the drug-infused 1960s, printing excerpts from papers presented at the 1966 Berkeley LSD Conference on each stub, and the reversible Underground Movie Flip Book provided *Aspen's* first interactive feature.

At first glance the choice to devote the third issue of *Aspen* to Warhol seems out of key, all the more since the artist's violent anti-art attitude contradicted the high

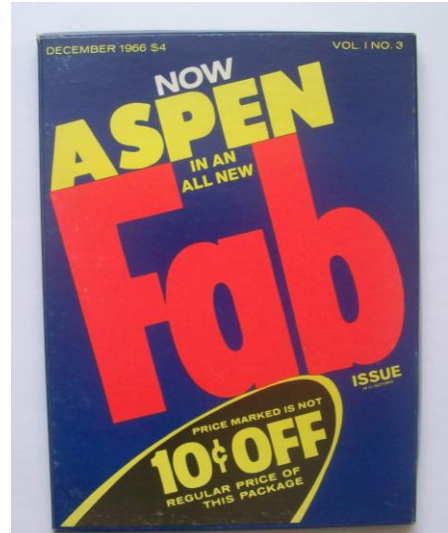


Fig. 3: Cover art for *Aspen* 3 (1966). Design by David Dalton.

²¹ Interview with David Dalton, January 16, 2009. The Fab laundry detergent was produced by Colgate-Palmolive at the time.

humanism expounded by both the IDCA and the magazine's earlier issues. Closer examination, however, shows that the choice for two subsequent issues devoted to Warhol and McLuhan may have been a deliberate attempt to position the magazine within the contemporary critical and artistic discourse on America's changing mediascape. In this respect *Aspen's* McLuhan issue (1967) plays a pivotal role. Released shortly before the publication of *The Medium is the Massage*, *Aspen's* fourth issue shared its groundbreaking design with McLuhan's book. *The Medium is the Massage*, designed by Quentin Fiore and produced by Jerome Agel, was arguably the first book for the television generation: profusely illustrated, it presented McLuhan's theory in bite size chunks of text by way of what Agel called 'a Cubist production.'²² *Aspen* 4, also designed by Quentin Fiore, shared this agenda to '[call] into question the uniformity and continuity of the space of the book.'²³ For McLuhan the collage was the ideal vehicle for his message as it steered away from traditional reading's monomania – one word at a time – instead opting for a mosaic form. McLuhan argued that the collage was, in fact, present in many different media at the time and had become the ideal way to address what he termed the experiential 'allatocness' of modern life. As such, in his 1964 study *Understanding Media*, he observed that the newspaper

from its beginnings, has tended, not to the book form, but to the mosaic or participational form. With the speed-up of printing and news-gathering, this mosaic form has become a dominant aspect of human association; for the mosaic form means not a detached 'point of view,' but participation in the process.²⁴

McLuhan realized that many modern media had become totally immersive and participatory, literally becoming extensions of our human faculties and influencing everyday life in myriad ways, many of them unperceived by the average American.

Since *Aspen's* format was also aimed at a multisensory, immersive experience, the choice to wed it to McLuhan's writings was a logical one, a fact advertising for *Aspen* emphatically stressed at the time by forthrightly stating that '*Aspen Magazine* is a McLuhanism.'²⁵ The contents of the McLuhan box represented various approaches to the new media trends McLuhan observed in society. Thus John Cage contributed his rambling, chance-derived *Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse)*, a text he himself described as 'a mosaic of ideas, statements, words, and stories;' a mock printing proof of several pages from *The Medium is the Massage* formed a literal mosaic; and a blurry multi-exposure picture of light-drenched hippies at the San

²² Agel is cited in Philip Marchand, *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger*. Cambridge: MIT Press 1998 (203).

²³ Richard Cavell, *McLuhan in Space: A Cultural Geography*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2003 (126).

²⁴ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York and London: Routledge 2007 (228).

²⁵ 'Marshall McLuhan Was Here. He Left a Message for You' [advertisement]. *Evergreen Review* 48, August 1967.

All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The message. Any understanding of social and

aspen 4

Marshall McLuhan
Quentin Fiore

Nothing else NEWSLETTER

Marshall McLuhan was here. He left a message for you.

The message is *Aspen*.
Aspen Magazine is a McLuhanism. Being three-dimensional, and therefore not limited to the printed word, it stimulates touch and hearing as well as sight like no two-dimensional magazine has ever done before.
 Until now, every magazine was a bunch of pages stapled together. It arrived in your mailbox folded, mutilated and spindled—usually with more ads than editorial. But why? asked our editors.
 Why couldn't a magazine come in a box? Why couldn't each article be a separate booklet, in the shape, color and paper most appropriate to the subject? Why shouldn't an article exploring jazz be accompanied by an LP record illustrating in sound our words in print?
Aspen Magazine is the answer. Our editors, no longer limited by the restrictions of a bound magazine, have let their imaginations soar. They are thinking in three dimensions. And there is no end to the exciting ideas.
 Take our current McLuhan issue,

designed by Quentin Fiore, co-author with McLuhan of the new best-selling paperback, "The Medium is the Message." Our medium will massage you with McLuhan messages about the tribal man (a psychedelic poster of "The Tribal Stomp" at the Avalon Ballroom, San Francisco); the multi-sensuous man ("The Braille Trail," a self-guiding nature trail for the blind, both seeing and non-seeing); the electronic man ("The Electronics of Music" with a record of electronic music); the information man (excerpts from a diary of John Cage); the anti-environment man ("Pcycles," the hippy and outlaw motorcyclists); plus a press proof of 32 pages from the new McLuhan-Fiore book. Our advertisers are rising to the challenge, too, with special booklets and newsletters—"Real News is Bad News. Advertising Is All Good News."
 Each issue of *Aspen* is the work of different top designers; each issue is a complete surprise. You never know what will pop out. Andy Warhol and David Dalton put our last issue in a Fab box. Our fifth issue, devoted to

Far Eastern Thought, will be designed in authentic Oriental manner, complete with scrolls and poem card decks, and maybe even edible rice paper. It will be the issue you hang all over the house.
 But *Aspen* is not only a delight to the eye, it's a feast for the intellect, with content as unexpected and rewarding as the format. *Aspen's* ambition is to cover everything that enhances life and anything that can be described as a civilized pleasure of modern living—art, architecture, music (always with a record), dance, gourmet dining, nature and conservation, concrete poetry, underground movies, avant-garde theater, iconoclastic people.
 Why do we call it *Aspen*? Because we're using the cultural spa of the Rockies as a point of view, a state of mind, a symbol of the free-wheeling life (much as *The New Yorker* uses New York).
Aspen is published quarterly. A single copy is \$4, but a subscription brings you six issues for \$16. That's \$8 below the single-copy price of \$24.

It's not cheap, but then, it's not cheap to produce. And look what you get. At the least, a conversation piece. At the most, a phenomenal collector's item that will bring you an abundance of pleasure and edification.

ER 7/7

Aspen Magazine
 P.O. Box 205
 Village Station
 New York, N. Y. 10014

I get the message. Please accept my subscription to *Aspen Magazine*, the first unbound magazine in a box. I understand that I can cancel at any time and pay only for the issues mailed.

Name _____
 Address _____
 City _____
 State _____ Zip _____

\$16 enclosed for 6 issues
 (Foreign subscribers prepay \$18 in U.S. funds)
 Bill me for \$16
 (Overseas destinations payable in advance)

Fig. 4: Advertising for *Aspen 4*, in *Evergreen Review* 48, August 1967.

Francisco Avalon Ballroom visualized McLuhan's concept of 'allatonceness.'²⁶ Although the items in the box hardly formed a unity, designer Fiore found this to be an advantage, since the patchwork-like quality of the contents allowed for an exploration of McLuhan's theories from several angles. Additionally, *Aspen's* mosaic distribution of information would, so Fiore hoped, occasion some unexpected interactions between the various materials, a fact the box underlined by repeating McLuhan's maxim 'When information is brushed against information...' at various locations in the issue.²⁷ Much like *The Medium is the Massage*, Fiore intended *Aspen 4* to be an experiential statement of concern, or, in his own words, an attempt 'to convey, in a simple and attractive way, the effects of the then 'new informational technologies' on real life.'²⁸

What is then the relevance of *Aspen's* McLuhan issue for our discussion of the digital magazine? As *Aspen* emphasized, the boxed magazine was in many ways a first attempt at a paper-based incarnation of McLuhan's theories. It further expanded the experiment attempted in *The Medium is the Massage* by adding sound in the form of a flexi disc and by moving beyond the limits of the bound book. Much like the digital magazine *Aspen 4* showed that the box could function as a small information universe of its own, in which its 'readers' would be invited to freely roam in search of possible connections between the disparate materials, only loosely guided by the editor's hand. *Aspen's* McLuhan issue shows the potential of magazines to communicate a coherent message, without restricting themselves to a static layout; its writerly readers were incited to find their own way among McLuhan's meandering theories and within the freeform locus of the box. The digital magazine should be able to further expand this dynamic approach, resulting in a many-leveled information network; in fact, *Aspen's* next publication, the double Minimalism issue, would not only become the magazine's most ambitious venture yet, but also became its closest approximation to a proto-hypertext.

ENTER/EXIT ANYWHERE: BRIAN O'DOHERTY'S *ASPEN* 5-6

When approached in 1966 to design an issue of *Aspen*, Irish-American artist Brian O'Doherty decided to turn his box into a mailable mini-museum. Inspired by Stéphane Mallarmé, to whom the box is dedicated, O'Doherty envisioned a self-contained universe, a multi-tiered labyrinth characterized by numerous interconnected contributions and centered around the three themes of time, silence and language. Included in the box are thirteen printed materials, five flexi discs, a miniature sculpture by Tony Smith in eight parts, an 8mm film reel and a folder of advertisements. O'Doherty's introductory booklet divides the material into the three abovementioned themes, but also identifies six movements: Constructivism, Structuralism,

²⁶ John Cage, *A Year from Monday: New Lectures and Writings*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press 1969 (3).

²⁷ The McLuhan quote is from p. 76 of *The Medium is the Massage*, where it is concluded two pages onwards with 'the results are startling and effective.' In *Aspen 4* it returns on a mock printing-proof for *The Medium is the Massage*, as well as on the front of the John Cage fold-out.

²⁸ Email to the author, January 20, 2009.

Conceptualism, the ‘tradition of paradoxical thinking’ (i.e. presumably Dada), objects, and ‘between categories.’²⁹ For O’Doherty these movements were ‘to trap the contents of the box in different configurations,’ inciting readers to see the various possible connections between the issue’s different sections.³⁰

O’Doherty was the first *Aspen* editor to be given utter freedom during the design process, freedom he used to create what is – at least, art-historically speaking – *Aspen*’s prime legacy. His objectives, in any case were clear: his issue was to be a monument to what he identified as a ‘crucial moment in the 1960s,’ that is, the transition from Minimal Art to Conceptualism:

I was laser-focused. I knew exactly what the issue should be: a summary of my[self] and some of my colleagues and [...] Modernism’s ancestors as a platform on which I perched my colleagues and myself. [...] I was aware, perhaps before the others, that we were inserting a hinge into history on which it would turn.³¹

Propelled along by a young artist’s energy O’Doherty’s ‘hinge’ would result in ‘an intricate network of correspondences woven by the box’s players [which] spread its web across time and space, creating a dense circuit of interrelated information.’³² Acutely aware of his unique position in cultural time and space – that of an ‘urbane polymath working in the eye of the storm’ – he set out to commission work by colleagues, ancestors and fellow-travelers.³³ The original plan soon outgrew its skin, resulting in the magazine’s only double issue. The yearlong design process also clearly stretched *Aspen*’s budget, resulting in several unpaid contributors, including Roland Barthes and translator Michael Benedikt.

Aspen 5-6’s intricate contents and wide scope – it contains work by more than twenty-five artists spanning the first six decades of the twentieth century – precludes a thorough analysis here, an analysis which at any rate would require a comprehensive art historical contextualization. Nevertheless, O’Doherty’s boxed maze represents *Aspen*’s most successful attempt to approach the hypertext and it is this structure which begs



Fig. 5: Box and selected contents from *Aspen* 5-6 (1967). Design by Brian O’Doherty.

²⁹ Brian O’Doherty, ‘Contents.’ *Aspen* 5-6, 1967.

³⁰ Brian O’Doherty to Jan van der Marck, November, 1992. In Elvehjem Museum of Art, *Patrick Ireland: Labyrinths, Language, Pyramids and Related Acts*. Madison: Elvehjem Museum of Art 1993 (39).

³¹ Email to the author, June 26, 2009.

³² Alexander Alberro, ‘Inside the White Box: Brian O’Doherty’s *Aspen* 5+6.’ *Art Forum*, September 2001.

³³ Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, ‘Brian O’Doherty / Patrick Ireland.’ *Frieze Magazine* 101, September 2006.

further attention here.

In order to fathom O'Doherty's intricately meandering network of cross-cultural links it is necessary to first examine the packaging it arrived in. As is the case with other *Aspen* issues, the box enclosing the various contributions to *Aspen* 5-6 is part of an overall design plan, but O'Doherty explored its possibilities much more profoundly than previous editors had done. Breaking with the customary flat box, O'Doherty designed a two-part white monolith, constituting a Minimalist sculpture in its own right. As the two box halves allowed for several arrangements this also added a level of interactivity to the packaging heretofore unexplored in *Aspen*.

Once inside the box, the reader is first presented with a contents sheet, which includes an index and sets forth the abovementioned movements and themes. It also contains a long quote from the work *Placement as Language*, supposedly written by a Sigmund Bode in 1928. When tracing the quote, however, one soon notes that not only does the cited work not exist, moreover, Bode is one of O'Doherty's many aliases, this one dating back to his days in Ireland.³⁴ As O'Doherty explained later, the choice for a fictitious source arose from the fact that no real text existed which covered the complex 'festschrift of authors commissioned and commandeered (with a young man's cheek and confidence) to dance to [his] music.'³⁵ The text itself distinctly refers back to Mallarmé, as O'Doherty has Bode ponder how objects 'may perhaps be conjugated in such a way that their positions imply 'verbs' in the spaces (silence) between them.'³⁶ If the Bode text functions as a legitimization of O'Doherty's use of categorization within the issue, it also shows his awareness of the severe writerly demands the issue would make of its readers when he has Bode write that to decipher the box's intrinsic grammar should '[constitute] a test for the reader.'³⁷

One key to understanding O'Doherty's intentions with his *Aspen* issue can be found in the small booklet of essays included in the box, which contains work by Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag and George Kubler. The booklet functions as a theoretical groundwork and, as such, serves to prepare the reader for O'Doherty's multi-interpretable approach to art history; it also contains the issue's main claim to fame, the first publication of Roland Barthes' seminal essay 'The Death of the Author,' which was commissioned specifically for this *Aspen* box. When placed within the overall structure, each of the essays is connected to one of the box's three themes: thus Barthes' text explores the language of fictional works; Sontag's 'The Aesthetics of Silence' investigates various manifestations of silence in the arts; and Kubler's essay contends that the concept of style is irreconcilable with that of historical duration.

³⁴ The name Sigmund Bode is a contraction derived from Sigmund Freud and Wilhelm Bode. The latter was an influential German museum director and artist, particularly well known as the Director General of all Prussian museums between 1906 and 1920.

³⁵ Brian O'Doherty to Jan van der Marck, November 1992. In Elvehjem Museum of Art, *Patrick Ireland: Labyrinths, Language, Pyramids and Related Acts*. Madison: Elvehjem Museum of Art 1993 (39). Italics removed.

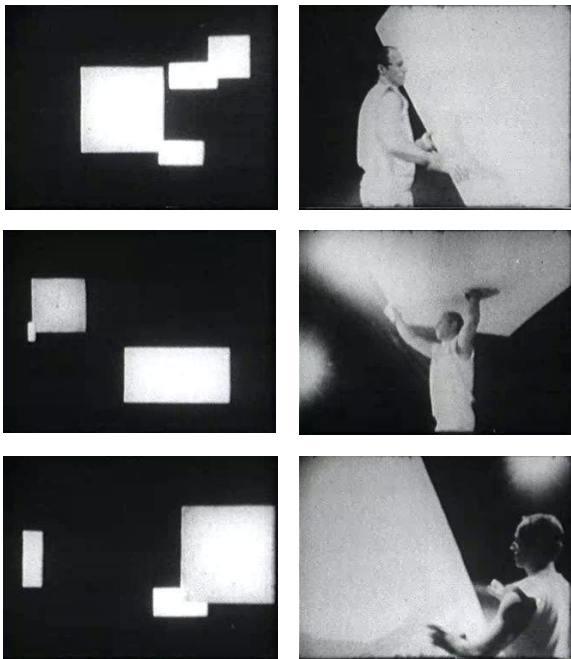
³⁶ Brian O'Doherty, 'Contents.' *Aspen* 5-6, 1967. Italics in the original.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

Barthes' essay with its claim that it is the reader who constructs a textual experience and not a tyrannical author-figure, since each text is 'only a tissue of signs, a lost, infinitely remote imitation,' justifies O'Doherty's hypertextual approach, which also incites readers to make their own particular connections.³⁸ As O'Doherty recalls, Barthes' Post-Structuralist approach to the reading experience, also faithfully reflected his own aesthetic credo at the time:

I should say that for me new pastures had opened when I realized that art need not, was not, about myself. The idea of finding yourself and making art from that fiction was not something I wanted to pursue. It reeked of romantic agony, and was not for me. All of us at the time were very much against emotional excess. Barthes responded very well to the ideas I put forth, said 'I may have something for you' or some such phrase. In time, '[The] Death of the Author' arrived. I saw it as high[ly] explosive. [I] was thrilled to get what I knew was game-changing and historic.³⁹

Barthes' abandonment of the author-centered universe resounds throughout the issue, inviting readers to find their own possible parallels among the both temporally and spatially disparate parts. That the box succeeds in doing this on several levels at the same time is a point that cannot be illustrated here without getting too far off the subject, but perhaps a few illustrations will suffice. By including, for example, an extract from Alain Robbe-Grillet's Nouveau Roman *La Jalousie* (1957), O'Doherty implied that Robbe-Grillet's reduction of the novel to an exercise in mathematics connected the author's



Figs. 6-11: Stills from Hans Richter, *Rhythm 21* (1921) and from Robert Morris and Stan VanderBeek, *Site* (1964).

endeavors to those of the Minimal Artists with their love for grids and permutations. Similarly, O'Doherty coerced former Russian Constructivist Naum Gabo to read an English translation of 'The Realistic Manifesto,' written jointly with Anton Pevsner in 1920 and one of the key texts of Constructivism. Once more, Gabo and Pevsner's plea for a functional art devoid of all forms of embellishment may imply it to be a historical predecessor to Minimal Art, a link certainly not ubiquitous in the United States at the time. Both links, however, are never made explicit. They are there for the reader to find, providing that he or she possesses enough cultural capital to make the connection.

That this form of proto-hypertextual experiment may also result in unexpected connections can, as a final example, be

³⁸ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author.' *Aspen* 5-6, 1967.

³⁹ Email to the author, June 28, 2009. Quotation marks supplied.

illustrated by briefly discussing two short films included on the 8mm film reel. The first film is German filmmaker Hans Richter's *Rhythmus 21* (1921), which was long hailed as the first abstract film ever created.⁴⁰ The second short film, *Site*, was produced by Minimalist artist Robert Morris together with filmmaker Stan VanDerBeek in 1964. Even a superficial viewing of the two films exposes their clear similarities: although one film is abstract and the other is not, the use of geometric shapes and in particular the way the white rectangles at times occlude the camera seems to imply that Morris' 1964 film has at least some debt to Richter's 1921 film. Brian O'Doherty recollects that at the time he also saw clear parallels, but also that Morris, when confronted with the similarities, claimed never to even have seen Richter's film, let alone be influenced by it.⁴¹ Here the link, as in much of O'Doherty's sinuous creation, truly only exists in the eye of the beholder.

THE WAY *ASPEN* WENT: SOME CAVEATS

Even though *Aspen* did not end with issue 5-6, but its later publications, devoted to cultural phenomena ranging from Performance Art to the burgeoning psychedelic movement of the late Sixties, never again achieved the structural complexity of the Minimalism issue. Lack of funds also rapidly began to erode both *Aspen's* publishing schedule and its three-dimensional aspirations, with the box often being replaced by a variant on a portfolio or folder. In ever more radical post-1968 America, *Aspen's* format also swiftly began to lose its relevance. Whereas in 1965 the opulent boxes could still profess a belief in adroit design as a way to ameliorate the world, the magazine's once progressive nonpolitical humanism rapidly turned into an anachronism in a period in which the Vietnam War revealed itself to be the true 'engine of the sixties.'⁴² Combined with a prolonged struggle with the United States Postal Service over mailing rights, financial malaise eventually led to the magazine's demise with issue ten in 1971. Prone to decay and the loss of individual items, *Aspen's* boxes soon became curiosities and disappeared into library and personal collections, only to regain attention when adapted for the Internet in 2002, a technological development the magazine in many ways adumbrated.

Despite the obvious dissimilarities between digital and loose leaf magazines, the preceding illustrates that they, nevertheless, share several key qualities in design, approach to readership, use of advertising, etc. This may be illustrated by briefly glancing at some of the initial reactions to the first new generation digital magazine available, *Wired* magazine's iPad application, which was released on May 25, 2010.⁴³ The

⁴⁰ Both films can be seen on Ubuweb as part of the online version of *Aspen*. See: www.ubu.com/aspen

⁴¹ Mary Ruth Walsh, 'A Labyrinth in a Box: Aspen 5+6.' Dublin: The National College of Art and Design 2001. See: www.ncad.ie. Retrieved on May 27, 2010.

⁴² Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties*. New York: Oxford University Press 1995 (135).

⁴³ As things go with an article of this nature, when I began writing the *Wired* iPad application was still unreleased. At the time the only footage available was *Wired's* own demonstration video, arguably not the most impartial of sources. The application was released in the week this article was finished and, as such, all reactions to it cited above are from the first week.

application, which sold 24,000 copies within twenty-four hours after its release, ranking number one in the paid downloads for the device, met with mixed reviews. The positive reviewers lauded its rich media, which included a clip from Pixar's new *Toy Story* movie and a virtual tour of the Pixar studios. The magazine was also lauded for overcoming some of the interface issues designers for the iPad are routinely faced with. Thus *PC World*'s Harry McCracken noted that *Wired*'s digital version does a 'remarkably good job of reformatting pages to look good in either portrait or landscape mode – an origami-like challenge that makes my head hurt just thinking about it.'⁴⁴ *The San Francisco Chronicle* noted how the iPad's use of advertising is both enticing and ineffective, as the interactive format lures readers towards the ads, but the application's interface at the same time allows readers to skip advertising relatively easily.⁴⁵ Here, for one, the parallels with *Aspen* seem quite clear, as the boxed magazine faced much the same predicament. "Much of the criticism aimed at the digital version of *Wired* pertained to the magazine's static adherence to a linear format more or less adopted from its paper-based ancestor. Thus, in an astute but damningly negative review, the blog InterfaceLab suggested the application to be a return to the 1990s world of the interactive CD-ROM, or 'a glorified slide show.'⁴⁶ As the InterfaceLab review shows, in this regard *Aspen* was clearly ahead of its time and the modern day digital magazine may in fact benefit from closely studying *Aspen*'s anatomy. Retaining a rigid, linear structure results in digital magazines that are still little more than the electronic equivalent of bound pages, even if niftily navigated with one's fingers. If the digital magazine is to break with its paper ancestor, if, in fact, it is to avoid McLuhan's prediction that when it comes to new media we tend to 'look at the present through a rear-view mirror,' *Aspen*'s proto-hypertextual approach could, despite its evident drawbacks, serve as a fine historical example.⁴⁷ If the digital magazine is to truly evolve away from, and not imitate, the traditional magazine that has served us so well in the past centuries, it will have to, as one of the above reviewers noted, 'go outside the box.'⁴⁸ There is little doubt that Phyllis Johnson would have agreed heartily.

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⁴⁴ Harry McCracken, 'Wired's iPad App: Finally Here, Still a Work in Progress.' From: www.pcworld.com. Retrieved on May 31, 2010.

⁴⁵ Jay Yarow, 'Wired's iPad App Is Pretty Slick, But Way Too Expensive.' From: www.sfgate.com. Retrieved on May 31, 2010.

⁴⁶ InterfaceLab, 'Is This Really The Future of Magazines or Why Didn't They Just Use HTML 5?' From: www.interfacelab.com. Retrieved on May 31, 2010.

⁴⁷ McLuhan 1967 (74-75).

⁴⁸ InterfaceLab, *Ibid*.