

## 'AVALANCHE 1970-1976'

Curated by Lisa Le Feuvre

Chelsea Space, London

11 June to 23 July 2005

Reviewed by Andrew Hunt

In its day *Avalanche* provided a new approach to publishing, and aimed to foreground ideas and artists' projects. Apart from a news section and a listing of artists' publications, it only published interviews conducted by its two main protagonists Liza Bear and Willoughby Sharp along with texts by its chosen artists together with documents of their work. The magazine's critical engagement with a community in the US and Europe led to the production of thirteen issues, which were printed sharply in black and white, reflecting its status as a direct document rather than 'an interpretive publication on art and artists.' Because of this, walking into Chelsea space proved a real eye opener for anyone with a bent for printed matter. Pages had been lovingly copied and pasted to the wall, covering virtually every spare inch of the gallery from floor to ceiling. Each of the covers – the first issues contain a square Bauhaus objectness – were presented in frames, and vitrines were packed with source material, along with copies of *Studio International*, *Art-Rite* and *Interfunktionen* from the same period. Apart from this, the exhibition comprised detailed lists, a number of essays, a conference, and a small publication, whose objective was to reevaluate the short-lived New York based journal.

Lawrence Weiner has recently described *Avalanche* as 'the magazine that gives a sense of that moment *now*,' and in this sense, the exhibition self-consciously became a new document of an existing one, reflecting the intention of curator Lisa Le Feuvre – who is conscious of being born within the same period in the early 70s – to acknowledge her historical and generational distance from the magazine. To quote Le Feuvre, 'this was a time when interdisciplinary abounded, and where the boundaries of the relationships between artwork, audience, and context were being challenged and renegotiated. In 2005 these tendencies have returned, making *Avalanche* essential to reconsider today.' Although the exhibition represented a joy at an excess of information, of archiving, and of time spent with Chelsea College library's collection, this re-evaluation brings up other questions. One concern is that, if taken at face value, it could lead to simple imitations of a radical genre by new publishers, where a model of conceptual art might become emptied of its original transgressive potential, or rendered congenial to new managers of this 'interdisciplinary.'

Despite this danger, if we were invited to think of how we could extend and contribute to thinking of *Avalanche* as both an historical document of ideas, and a precedent for contemporary practices, perhaps the best thing is to look at how it acted as a site for art in its own right. The important point is that it was artists who were presenting what they were doing, instead of critics, in a professional and precise way, and production values were high, giving the first issues an extremely identifiable look and weight. It also provided an awareness that carries through to the present day in terms of reputations; as a surrogate artwork or site for art, it was portable, and there was the possibility of being able to carry the work to Europe, at a time when Carl Andre's work hadn't been substantially seen here in the flesh. 'Rumbles', the news



Early copies of *Avalanche*.

section of the magazine, contained gossip that appears very unguarded and personal by today's standards, and notable projects include those by Bas Jan Ader, Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren, and an entire hundred page issue devoted to Vito Acconci. In another issue from 1973 Gilbert & George and Ed Ruscha share a double page, which perhaps indicates contemporary serendipity through their respective showings in national pavilions in this year's Venice Biennale.

If there was a downside it's how the majority of the female artists were relegated to small mentions in the magazine. Yvonne Rainer is the only woman in the first eight issues to be given a cover, although an interview with Jackie Winsor, and features on Alice Aycock and Hanne Darboven were contained in the Lawrence Weiner issue. It's also strange to see Willoughby Sharp's performative self-mythologising, for example in the Robert Smithson issue, we are presented with an advert for 'Willoughby Sharp, media mogul of the art world.'

Despite this humorously entrepreneurial marketing strategy, it's uncanny that the end came with the thirteenth issue. The magazine's cover – by then printed in a larger format on thin paper – shows a balance sheet that doesn't add up, a signal that that the enterprise had become unworkable. If the exhibition proposed 'a way of thinking around *Avalanche* with the critical distance of the intervening years,' it comes at a time when the role of criticism and art publishing are being urgently re-considered. Although the gravity and weight that is sometimes given to conceptualism can be misleading, what we need are publications like this, which provide a creative model that give contemporary practices time to live and breath, and where artists are able to complete their work through criticism for themselves.