STRIKING THE BALANCE: BOMB MAGAZINE’S NEGOTIATION WITH ARTISTIC INTENTION

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the place and agency of the artist interview in little art magazines produced during the 1970s and 1980s in New York City. In particular, it focuses on BOMB, a magazine established in 1981 by artist Betsy Sussler. Taking into consideration BOMB’s art historical predecessors, I argue that BOMB was a direct response to the conversation initially sparked by Roland Barthes’s seminal work “The Death of the Author,” which challenged the art world to focus on an artist’s work rather than on his personality. Published in 1967, “The Death of the Author” ignited controversy and led many artists and writers to recuperate the artist’s voice in criticism. This can be seen depicted in the publication of Avalanche in the late 1960s, early 1970s. Founded by artists Liza Béar and Willoughby Sharp, it reshaped the artist as genius, suggesting his interpretation was necessary in order to understand his work. Realizing this duality, Sussler fashioned a magazine that merged these two ideas. Through producing BOMB, its editors asserted that the artist’s voice was an important component to understanding his work, but it was not capable of offering the sole definitive interpretation.
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Chapter 1

The Nature of the Project

In 1967, French literary critic Roland Barthes published his seminal work called “The Death of the Author.” Reshaping the course of art criticism, Barthes’s essay altered the contemporary narrative from one focused on artists’ intentions to one about works’ agency. His argument that artistic “genius” and intension were, in many respects, secondary to the formal and structural aspects of the artwork itself would have a profound impact on writers, particularly in New York in the late seventies. As Barthes’s work was translated into English in that period, his ideas began to shape the theoretical emphasis of journals, such as *Artforum* and *October*, through the essays of people like Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson — critics for whom the anti-authoritarian, anti-commercial implications of Barthes’s essay resonated. Indeed, the very title of Krauss’s collection of essays from the late seventies and early eighties entitled *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (a volume in which Barthes is frequently cited) summarizes the tendency of all the book’s essays to trumpet the collapsing notion of artistic agency.¹

There were many, however, for whom this art critical trend of de-emphasizing artistic intention was insidious. In tacit opposition to journals like *October*, some artists and writers decided to recuperate the artist’s voice in criticism. The magazine *Avalanche* offers just one example. Founded by Liza Béar and Willoughby Sharp in the late 1960s, early 1970s, *Avalanche* postulated the artist as genius through its pairing of conventionally-organized interviews with artist headshot covers — and in the process, the magazine mystified artistic intentions. As if

recognizing this emerging duality in art critical discourse, artist Betsy Sussler created her own magazine, *BOMB*, which struck a balance between the two opposing ideas. Established in the spring of 1981, the magazine explored a wide range of art forms through film stills, photographs, short stories, poetry, and — most notably — interviews that would challenge the very format of the interview itself. As explained by Sussler, *BOMB* was founded as a way to record conversations between artists, allowing them “to be the authors of their own tales.” Thus, through producing *BOMB*, its editors asserted that the artist’s voice was an integral part of understanding a work’s meaning; however, it was not to be regarded as providing the exclusive answer. It was one tale among many.

Though much scholarship has been produced on little art magazines of the 1960s and 1970s, *Avalanche* being one of them, less exists on magazines of the 1980s, particularly *BOMB* — which is unfortunate, as *BOMB* was the journal in which some of the most important artists of the postmodern period, such as Sherrie Levine, Sarah Charlesworth and Cindy Sherman, made their most dynamic early appearances. The time period provides a compelling context for the development of an artist magazine, especially considering the state of criticism and the insular art world emerging in lower Manhattan, where *BOMB* was initially created. This thesis tries to find a place for *BOMB* by examining its approach to an “artist-centered” art journalism in an age in which artistic identity was coming under increased scrutiny and critique.

As a student of art history and the editor of a campus newspaper, I am particularly interested in the journalistic side of the art world — particularly criticism and the periodicals that print it. What first drew me to *BOMB*, therefore, was the fact that its editors identified, first and foremost, as artists and adopted the traditional journalistic form of an interview as a centerpiece of each issue. But, rather than using those interviews as source material to then develop the story (as is often the case with journalism articles), *BOMB*’s editors decided to print the interviews in

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2 “BOMBSITE,” last accessed April 6, 2013, bombsite.com/issues/0/articles/2934.
question and answer format. Although this is not a novel approach to story telling, it does allow for a different interpretation, because it ostensibly provides a less-mediated channel to the artist’s voice. This notion in itself, though — the notion of the interview as a somehow unmediated presentation of artistic intent and voice — is problematic, as a great deal of recent scholarship has shown.¹ But, while some journals might have suppressed the artificiality and performative aspects of the interview, BOMB tended to revel in it.

Because BOMB has been nearly absent from scholarship, this paper will at first delineate its history, which I’ve woven together through personal interviews, newspapers articles and connections discovered through secondary sources, as well as materials at the BOMB archive at Columbia University. By excavating the close-knit art world of the 1980s, I was able to locate the connective tissues essential to the formation of BOMB.² Through reviewing this paper, readers may garner an analysis of the narrative BOMB supplied of the 1980s New York arts scene and its direct response to prior periods.

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³ Evidential of this is the fact that Mark Magill said, “My sense is that we felt the center of the art world was downtown and those who were interested would be drawn to [BOMB]. With the exception of Brooklyn in more recent times, the NY art world has barely made it past 24th Street in all these years.”

Mark Magill, e-mail message to artist, March 5, 2013.
Chapter 2

*BOMB & the Colab*

Before discussing how *BOMB* negotiates a balance with artistic identity, it is important to consider the situation and time period in which the magazine was created. According to Betsy Sussler [Figure 1-1], she was initially interested in launching *BOMB* because she had left an earlier magazine, *X Motion Picture*, “unfinished.”⁶ This small film magazine, in Sussler’s words, operated as “an organ to document and to discuss work.”⁷ For the first issue, ten artists decided to write articles and to contribute $20 each so that it could be published. The production of *X Motion Picture* provided Sussler with a network of friends and colleagues and gave her an idea of what it would be like to produce her own publication. For a more specific example of connections formed, consider Sussler’s relationship with artist Duncan Hannah. According to an interview

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with Hannah, he was responsible for the cover illustration for *X Motion Picture*’s first issue.\(^8\) But he later also contributed a number of artworks printed in the first few issues of *BOMB*, and an interview between Simon Lane and him was published in *BOMB*, as well.

Upon the completion of *X Motion Picture*’s first issue, Sussler shared it with a group of artists who had been convening in the lower side of Manhattan, near SoHo.\(^9\) This sparked interest in producing further issues, leading to the unification of the artist group under the name “Colab.” Hannah recollects that the artists of the Colab were particularly interested in the possibilities presented by a magazine “because the art world, and I suppose the literary world, seemed closed off to the youth. We were in our mid-twenties; there was no outlet for us, so we decided to take matters into our own hands.”\(^10\) In addition to publishing *X Motion Picture*, the collaborative functioned as a way to support new artists, to work on collective projects, and to fund galleries and shows. Though power struggles eventually led to *X Motion Picture*’s demise, the Colab was able to endure longer.\(^11\) During the magazine’s final years, however, Sussler was not involved in production, as she was in Australia filming.

But the failure of *X Motion Picture* did not diminish Sussler’s editing ambitions. When she returned to New York City, Sussler still wanted to print conversations between artists. In

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\(^8\) Duncan Hannah, in discussion with artist, February 4, 2013.


\(^10\) Duncan Hannah, in discussion with artist, February 4, 2013.

\(^11\) According to the interview with Sussler published in *Framework*, “This was an artists’ organization started, some thought, as a collective to aid its members in setting up funding for production (film and theatre), and others thought of it as a collaborate organization whose members would create productions together.” This schism resulted in the end of the magazine, but, as stated, the Colab itself was able to work out the turmoil. For, as stated in an essay published by Walter Robinson in 1982 “Collaborative Projects and Rule C (Excepts),” “Colab now has a single rule: Money may not be allotted solely for the benefit of any one individual. This rule, essentially a simple financial regulation, hints at a Colab ‘philosophy’ of group-generated publicly sited art projects, a philosophy that underlies all our successes (from X to the murals), is presumably responsible for our generous funding by the government, and finally serves as the primary criterion for eligibility for Colab funds.” Karyn Kay, “Menage: An Interview with Betsey Sussler,” *Framework* 0, no. 21 (1983): 31.
particular, similar to *X Motion Picture*, she hoped to focus exclusively on artists who explored film and video-based media.\(^{12}\) Thus, *BOMB* was born. According to Mark Magill, one of the inaugural art directors for *BOMB*, “The idea was that those film and video projects had limited opportunities for distribution and screening, so an artist-run magazine could help extend their reach and lifespan.”\(^{13}\) With *BOMB*, Sussler sought greater editorial control than she executed over *X Motion Picture*; however, she could not divorce herself from the collective entirely. During *BOMB*’s early years, Sussler relied on Colab and its members for financial backing and support.

The Center for New Art Activities\(^ {14}\), along with *X Motion Picture*, is credited with publishing the first issue. Also, *BOMB* stated it was partially financed by Artists Space\(^ {15}\) and the Collaborative Projects Inc., a more formal name for the Colab. *BOMB*’s first issue was published at 591 Broadway, New York, which was also conveniently the location where many of the Colab’s shows were held and where many of its members lived. In addition to members of the Colab, Sussler made other beneficial connections with and through other artists. For instance, Sussler was introduced to Magill through his girlfriend, painter Mary Heilmann, when they all attended the same party (a soirée hosted by musician Dickie Landry). It was there that Magill first heard about Sussler’s ambition to launch *BOMB*, and because he had experience with magazine design,

\(^{12}\) Mark Magill, e-mail message to artist, February 8, 2013.
\(^{13}\) Mark Magill, e-mail message to artist, February 8, 2013.
\(^{14}\) According to Collaborative Projects Inc.’s website, “The ground floor and basement loft space at 93 Grand Street was also the HQ for Center for New Art Activities, Inc. (CNAA), the not-for-profit umbrella for *Avalanche* through 1976. CNAA sponsored the first National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grant for the Green Corporation, [the name of the collective] prior to Colab acquiring its own tax-exempt status.”
\(^{15}\) Founded in 1972 by Trudie Grace and Irving Sandler under the New York State Council on the Arts, Artists Space’s purpose was to facilitate emerging artists. Exhibitions were held with artists selecting exhibitors, which is interestingly the same principle *BOMB* adapted (artists interviewing artists). In addition to organizing exhibitions, Artists Space also established programs to help artists, such as the Emergency Materials Fund and the Independent Exhibitions Program. Artists Space is still active today at 38 Greene Street in SoHo, NYC.
he offered his expertise to Sussler.\textsuperscript{16} Thus, with Magill’s help — along with that of Sarah Charlesworth and Michael McClard (the other two founders of the magazine)\textsuperscript{17} — Sussler was able to produce \textit{BOMB}.  

\textsuperscript{16} Mark Magill, e-mail message to artist, February 8, 2013.
\textsuperscript{17} According to Magill, these four were the founders of \textit{BOMB}; however, the first issue also denotes Glenn O’Brien as the Editor at Large, and according to the interview with Sussler published in “Menage,” he, along with Sussler, “talked everyone into the name \textit{BOMB}.” Also listed in \textit{BOMB}’s first issue are Associate Editor Craig Gholson, Consultants Liza Béar, Edo and Jeff Goldberg, and Typesetting Gail Vachon and Virginia Zurinco.
Mark Magill, e-mail message to artist, February 8, 2013.
Chapter 3

A Magazine that would ‘Bomb’

It doesn’t seem Sussler had a great deal of money to produce BOMB’s first edition. But, as Sarah Charlesworth reminds, an excess of capital didn’t seem to be a requirement at the time: “there wasn’t a lot of big money involved… We just sort of said ‘let’s do this.’ It will give people a direct outlet and can be very hands on.”

BOMB’s very publication format seemed to register the conflict between ambition and budget. Measuring about one-and-a-half times the size of a regular magazine, BOMB’s first issue was a formidable thing composed of a glossy cover, but filled with 50 pages of cheap newsprint. Large in scale but inexpensive in material, the size and substance of the newsprint at once claimed more real estate on the newsstand, even as its low cost paper beckoned associations with the lowest cost publications (newspapers) available periodically. This thriftiness was, in part, a symptom of the age: members of the BOMB crew remember this period as a relatively dry one in terms of external funding. Due to funding cuts made by the Reagan administration and wealthy people’s expenditures on high art, money was rarely funneled into emerging artistic projects. The lack of printed color and delicate nature of the BOMB’s cover reinforces the notion that it was created on a budget. Moreover, for the first issue, contributors were instrumental in publishing the magazine. As Magill further explained,

Literally, I designed and laid out the magazine. I spaced the type in the manuscripts and took the copy to Gail Vashon [sic], who set the type. The magazine was laid out in my loft [in] Tribeca or Joseph Kosuth’s loft on Broadway. I took the layouts to the printer along with Betsy [Sussler] and Liza [Béar], who negotiated the price with the printer. Then Michael McClard and I would drive around in my old, left-hand drive Scout and try to get newsstands and magazine shops to accept issues on consignment.

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18 Sarah Charlesworth, e-mail message to artist, March 3, 2013.
20 Mark Magill, e-mail message to artist, February 8, 2013.
Sussler’s thrift, however, was probably not the result of a desire to save for future issues, as she did not expect the magazine to survive. Because she thought the magazine would “bomb” after a few issues, she figured the word would be an appropriate name for the publication.21

Other editorial decisions further suggest that Sussler did not anticipate BOMB would sustain years of publication. For a more explicit example, consider the title of the issue’s first article, “Great Expectations” by Kathy Acker. Although these words could imply that Sussler held ‘great expectations’ for the magazine, they could also be read ironically, especially in reference to the undeniable literary allusion of Charles Dickens’s Great Expectations. Often acknowledged as one of Dickens’s best works, Great Expectations is a coming-of-age story about a boy named Pip. Acker appropriates word for word the same introduction Dickens’s invented — “My father’s name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip...”22 — to relay the childhood of a young girl, hopelessly enchanted yet mistreated by her mother. Her mother also eventually commits suicide, leaving Acker’s Pip orphaned, just like Dickens’s character. Also, another parallel can be drawn between the mother and Dickens’s Estella, whom Pip reveres for her beauty and continually vies for her attention and affection. Similarly, Acker’s protagonist, often entrenched in daydreams,23 desires to be accepted by her mother, “the most beautiful woman in the world.”24 Despite their tumultuous childhoods, colored

21 “BOMBSITE,” last accessed April 6, 2013, bombsite.com/issues/0/articles/2934.
23 “The day after my mother committed suicide I started to experience a frame. Within this frame time was totally circular because I was being returned to my childhood traumas totally terrifying because now these traumas are totally real: there is no buffer of memory.” Kathy Acker, “Great Expectations,” BOMB Magazine 1, no. 1 (spring 1981): 5.
by figures who take advantage of them, both Pips leave “the first segment” of their lives with “great expectations.”

Acker’s use of the word “segment” probably references the magazine context in which her story emerged and its relationship to the origins of the Dickens story. Dickens originally released *Great Expectations* in a serial form in the magazine *All the Year Round*. Because of its popularity, people would purchase the magazine and look forward to reading the excerpt each week. Though Acker denoted the same serial format considering it specifies the story as “the first chapter,” the series mysteriously disappeared after the first issue, thereby showing that Acker did not plan for future editions. Even more significantly, Dickens’s *Great Expectations* does not conclude altogether happily for Pip (he winds up destitute); Acker’s story (and Sussler’s editorial decision to include it) therefore suggested that expectations for *BOMB* were similarly pessimistic and offered a self-deprecating edge to the first issue.

Yet, predicting that the magazine would be short lived does not necessarily signify that Sussler figured *BOMB* would be unsuccessful. In fact, evidence — at its most obvious, the inclusion of a form to subscribe to *BOMB*, with a price tag of $10 for three issues — suggests quite the contrary. Additionally, the title of the magazine also implies that Sussler suspected *BOMB* had the potential to be influential. The word, ‘bomb,’ is inherently paradoxical. Though it can indicate a failure (as Sussler postulated about *BOMB*), it can also represent “a success (esp. in entertainment).” Interestingly, Charlesworth said the reason the name was chosen was “because it sounded very Pop, just kind of lively. It didn’t really mean anything.” And yet, Pop art had become incredibly influential: first, among artists like Acker who were keen on exploiting techniques of appropriation that Pop initially developed, and second among the general public,

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26 Interestingly, a few years later after the “Great Expectations” was published in *BOMB*, Acker released a full-fledged novel called *Great Expectations*, which was eventually met with acclaim.
28 Sarah Charlesworth, e-mail message to artist, March 3, 2013.
who often absorbed Pop’s familiar iconography with or without awareness of its critical edge. Therefore, the magazine’s title could have served as a way to grab the public’s attention when they passed by stands that had agreed to hold issues provided by Magill and McClard. Most important, considering Sussler devoted her time and resources to this project, it is difficult to imagine that she suspected the magazine would implode.

Figure 2-1. BOMB’s Cover, Vol. 1, Issue 1, Spring 1981.29

In another vein, the word ‘bomb’ is also a mechanism of decisive destruction, exuding explosive force onto others. Because BOMB offered something which traditional criticism did not, the artist’s voice, it is probable that Sussler was cognizant of the latter definition of “bomb.”

Additionally, the editorial decision of using Charlesworth’s image [Figure 2-1] of lightning hitting the Empire State Building further connotes this latter definition. The king of American Pop, Andy Warhol, had even created an earlier 1964 film, entitled *Empire*, that solely stars the iconic Empire State Building, visually depicted in a similar commanding fashion as Charlesworth’s work. Charlesworth explained that the photograph was chosen in part because the Empire State Building “grounds [the magazine] in NY… [and because] it was just meant to be striking.”30 And striking it is: juxtaposed against a nebulous black background, the stark-white tower emanates off the page. Its brightness carves out the vague shape of the building’s front, while also producing a hazy glow that consumes a third of the page. This absorbing light radiates in triangular form from the tower’s peak, amassing space and directing the audience’s gaze upwards to the singular distinct, crisp and clear, electric element on the page: BOMB.

Even more noteworthy in supporting the latter definition is Sussler’s interview with Karyn Kay, in which Sussler revealed that BOMB’s name was derived from Wynham Lewis’s *Blast*.31 Created in London in the early 1900s, *Blast* was a fleeting magazine that explored avant-garde art. With the help of Ezra Pound and Edward Wadsworth, Lewis published the magazine to ‘blast’ certain people and commend others.32 In order to establish continuity between the art world and a specific publication, *Blast*’s editors developed a new movement, Vorticism.33 Based upon the symbol of the Vortex (or a whirlpool), its imagery is “a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing,” as expounded by Pound.34 Similarly, by implementing the interview form in *BOMB*, Sussler also hoped to establish a

30 Sarah Charlesworth, e-mail message to artist, March 3, 2013.
medium through which ideas could continually evolve — a notion that will be further investigated later in the paper. The final parallel that can be construed between *Blast* and *BOMB* is their respective life spans. Although *BOMB* is still active today, Sussler never envisioned such an outcome. Rather, she thought its publication was going to represent a “wonderful, ephemeral moment where we caught a certain time and a certain place, [and] recorded these conversations.”35 The interview, then, was not to be a monument but an event — even a disruptive and energetic one.

35 “BOMBSITE,” last accessed April 6, 2013, bombsite.com/issues/0/articles/2934.
Chapter 4

The State of Art Criticism

Because Sussler probably did not foresee BOMB as an enduring product, it was imperative that the first issue convey what she wished: a conversation about meaning between two artists. This aspiration is a direct result of the art critical discourse of the time, which she felt misrepresented the artists, for it either negated the artist’s voice or focused solely on it. Even contemporary critics began to vocalize their doubts on the worth of their field, for they felt criticism tended to usurp the artist’s expression. To understand why Sussler wanted to bring the artist’s voice into contemporary discussions about art, it is necessary to reference the conversations of the time. In 1967, French literary critic Roland Barthes published a radical essay entitled “The Death of the Author.” This text called for an eradication of authorial intent from critical and historical discourse. He problematized the idea that in order to comprehend the work, one must understand its author. Barthes faulted prior scholarship and culture with creating this issue. He maintained that both had centered on the identity and psychology of an individual, neglecting the actual work’s agency. More explicitly, Barthes used Van Gogh’s supposed madness and Tchaikovsky’s perceived vice as examples of how the public had cemented these characteristics as explanations for the respective authors’ work. Barthes argued that not only are these characterizations unnecessary, but they are also insidious. They direct attention away from the actual work, which is, in itself, performative. He carried this idea further by asserting “writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all

identity is lost.” It is through this loss of identity that the writing itself advances to the forefront and is then capable of being interpreted by the reader. By divorcing the work’s relation to the author, one is able to garner how it operates in itself and in society. According to Barthes, this knowledge (as opposed to being aware of an individual’s goal) is more legitimate for realizing a work’s function and purpose. Also, Barthes questioned the idea of authorship because perceived authors had taken ideas from prior works, making their work (in Barthes’s opinion) unoriginal.

Because the scholastic norm was to concentrate on the artist, Barthes’s argument proved polarizing to some. Additionally, the concept of centering on the artist was heightened in the period that preceded “The Death of the Author,” Modernism, because it frequently eschewed the influence of social and historical circumstance in art. Nonetheless, many historians and critics, such as Michel Foucault, did adopt Barthes’s view. Foucault’s 1969 “What Is an Author?” espoused that culture had not only centered on the author, but it had also idealized him: “We are used to thinking that the author is so different from all other men, and so transcendent with regard to all languages, that, as soon as he speaks, meaning begins to proliferate.” This notion can be traced back to ancient writers who praised and named specific Greco-Roman artists for their artistic ability. Furthermore, as opposed to exploring their entire oeuvre, they called attention to select works considered supreme. Because later historians followed this paradigm, scholarship was long limited to work viewed as representative of the figure of the author. Thus, many pieces have been eliminated or at least marginalized by historical discourse. For Foucault, this disregard was alarming because it further eclipsed history’s complete narrative.

By the mid-1970s, concepts proposed by Barthes and Foucault, namely defetishizing authorial intent in interpretation, were prevalent in many critical publications in the United

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States. As a result, writing on art became highly theoretical. Regardless of whether artwork necessitated this approach to writing, it is indisputable that criticism began to consider the work more than its author. Much of this writing appeared in one particular journal, *Artforum*, founded in the early 1960s in San Francisco by John Irwin, John Coplans and Philip Leider. As explained by scholar Cynthia Gadsden in her dissertation “*Artforum, Basquiat, and the 1980s*,” the journal’s publication house soon moved to New York, and by the 1970s, its “innovative style of writing about art established a new standard for art and cultural criticism.” Heralded by critics like Rosalind Krauss (who was largely responsible for introducing Barthes’s French text to American scholarship) and Annette Michelson, *Artforum* trafficked in discourse that was “heavily invested in formalist readings of art and art practice” as opposed to being rooted in the “visual invention” created by the artist.

This style of criticism, of course, did not prevent artists from continuing to create work. In fact, many — such as those of the Pictures Generation — directly commented upon this

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40 As stated by Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Roland Barthes’ 1968 essay ‘The Death of the Author’ remains the ar-text to delineate the implications of the shift away from the author as both source and locus of meaning, asserting instead that meaning is never invented, much less locked in…” And further, Hal Foster argued, “Similarly, the postmodernist work is seen less as a ‘book’ sealed by original author and final meaning than as a ‘text’ read as a polysemous tissue of codes. So, as Barthes writes of ‘the death of the author,’ postmodernists infer ‘the death of the artist,’ at least as originator of unique meaning.” Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Photography After Art Photography,” in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984): 81. Hal Foster, “Re: Post,” in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985): 194.


notion. As Douglas Eklund in his catalogue *The Pictures Generation* noted, though postmodern artists reintroduced the image into art in the wake of the iconophobia of Conceptualism, they subverted “cherished notions of authorship, originality, and the continued viability of traditional media such as painting.” Through appropriating and altering famous works of art, they explicitly questioned what it means to be an author and to deem a work one’s own. For example, Sherrie Levine’s contribution to the eighth issue of *BOMB* [Figure 3-1] thoroughly diffused the originality embedded in artistic gesture. Entitled *After Willem de Kooning*, Levine effectively plagiarizes de Kooning’s gestural style of brushstroke. The work is made even more interesting

45 Douglas Eklund, *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009): 22-118; Also, on p. 17, Eklund explained, “Barthes extended this concept to question the very possibility of originality and authenticity in his 1967 manifesto ‘The Death of the Author,’ in which he stated that any text (or image), rather than emitting a fixed meaning expressed by a single voice, was but a tissue of quotations that were themselves references to yet other texts. The famous last line of Barthes’ essay — ‘The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author’ — was a call to arms for the artists of the Pictures Generation.”

by the fact that Levine was not the first to replicate de Kooning’s work. During the 1950s, recognizing the market for de Kooning-esque paintings, a number of artists began to reproduce his style of heavy brushstrokes. In fact, his followers were even characterized as having the “Tenth Street Touch,” in reference to de Kooning’s studio on Tenth Street. This “plagiarism” became Levine’s signature gesture: to remove the signature from the artist’s gesture, which can be further seen in her famous Untitled (After Edward Weston) series [Figure 4-1]. For this series,

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48 Professor Sarah K. Rich, Art History 326: Art Since 1940, class notes.
she reproduced copies of Edward Weston’s work, whose originals had been canonized in art history.

Figure 4-1. *Untitled (After Edward Weston)* series, Sherrie Levine, (photograph), 1979.49

There were, not surprisingly, artists and magazines that would shrink from such challenges to artistic agency. Developed in the late 1960s by Willoughby Sharp and Liza Béar, *Avalanche* operated as a direct response to the type of criticism, such as the concept of the “death of the author,” printed in *Artforum*. As explained by Béar in an interview with Mary Ann Miller, “[Avalanche] was devoted to avant-garde art, from the perspective of the artist. Most art magazines at the time, actually all commercial art magazines at the time, gave the critic precedence.”50 Therefore, according to Béar, the goal of *Avalanche* was to create a high-quality

magazine capable of challenging the theoretical turn that art and artists had taken in “the going orthodoxy of the time, Artforum.”

\footnote{New York Foundation for the Arts, “An Interview with Liza Béar: by Mary Ann Miller,” last accessed April 6, 2013, \url{http://www.nyfa.org/nyfa_current_detail.asp?id=17&fId=1&curId=856}.}
Chapter 5

_Avalanche, BOMB & the Interview_

In order to separate themselves from the editors of _Artforum_ and other art magazines, Willoughby Sharp and Liza Béar refrained from publishing criticism or reviews in _Avalanche_. As explained by Béar during a 2010 interview held in honor of _Avalanche_’s reprinting, “because the art was so fresh and new and radical, we thought we should have artists explain it for themselves.”\(^5^2\) Thus, instead of printing essays and articles, they employed artists’ interviews as their method of editorial content. Béar further asserted that this editorial form was “radical” at the time. Yet, as other scholars, such as Julia Gelshorn, have pointed out, interviews appeared in many magazines. In Gelshorn’s article “Two are Better than One: Notes on the Interview and Techniques of Multiplication,” she delineated the interview’s strong lineage. She explained that the interview emerged in multiple mediums and acted an extension of the artist statement. Moreover, it was a product of a general trend to critique contemporary art criticism.\(^5^3\) Nonetheless, Gelshorn did assert that the interview had the same effects in the public art sphere that Sharp and Béar purported. She contended that the interview operated as a way to shed light on the art, and more important, on the artist himself. Through establishing a dialogue with artists, the interview enabled a conversation about meaning from the point of view of the artist. In her article, however, Gelshorn does bring to light the inherent problems of the artist interview. Most poignantly, it enacts a fiction on multiple levels that many accept as authentic. As Gelshorn explained, “…even when we know that the pretentions of the interview to intimacy and spontaneity are often feigned or constructed in the editing process, and even when we know about artists’ and interviewers’ self-fashioning and role-playing, the hope for uncovering hidden truths

\(^{52}\) _Liza Béar on Avalanche at Artists Space_, 2010, Specific Object production, Béar speaking with Christophe Cherix (2010, New York), Web, Vimeo.

beneath the surface persists.” And, in an interview, Béar admitted that interviews published in *Avalanche* were “strongly edited,” yet regardless, she believed they provided a mechanism through which facts could be presented and an artist understood.

Despite being somewhat self-contradictory, the interview advocated for a return of the author — an argument heightened in *Avalanche* through further editorial decisions executed by Sharp and Béar. Especially in the beginning, *Avalanche* stressed the importance of the artist, as can be seen by the exclusion of author bylines and in the naming of the magazine. As Béar explained, “We wanted [the name] to be earth related because of the first issue to be around earth art… we tried to respect the individual sensibility of each artist.” This focus on the artist is additionally illustrated in an issue published solely on one artist, Vito Acconci — a format intended to be replicated in later editions, but due to funding issues, was never realized. Even when the issues featured multiple artists, however, the covers [Figure 5-1 & Figure 5-2] still suggested the vitality of the genius author concept. As Douglas Eklund contended in *The Pictures Generation*:

> …even though those early conceptualists had in theory conducted a systematic evisceration of all authority and erased their own heroic status as ‘authors’ their grizzled, bleary-eyed visages on the cover of *Avalanche* magazine revealed them to be something like rock stars in the small, insular world of no more than ten New York galleries and another ten in Europe that featured their brand of advanced art.

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Figure 5-1. *Avalanche’s* Cover, No. 6, Fall 1972 (Vito Acconci Issue).  

Figure 5-2. *Avalanche’s* Cover, No. 4, Spring 1972 (Artist Lawrence Weiner pictured).

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Clearly, Sharp and Béar, along with other artists of the time, still wanted to position themselves in society as people whose opinions mattered and whose status was mythic. Béar even admitted that the covers were created explicitly as a way “to highlight the fact that the focus was on the artist.” And artists were more than happy to oblige to being the center of attention. By engaging in these interviews with *Avalanche*, artists visibly asserted how they believed their opinions were necessary in order for people to comprehend their works. Moreover, through participating in these conversations, artists were given the opportunity to speak directly to the public, which traditional criticism was unable to provide.

*BOMB* was indisputably influenced by *Avalanche*, considering Béar served as a consultant for multiple issues. According to Mark Magill, Béar lived with Michael McClard, during the early stages of *BOMB*’s creation and often attended many of their meetings. Additionally, she was invaluable in negotiating cheap printing prices, Magill said. Most importantly, however, *BOMB* adopted a similar editorial format as *Avalanche*, for it, too, utilized the artist interview. Like *Avalanche, BOMB* was also a direct response to *Artforum*. However, through attending to artists who placed strain on the questions of authorship and artistic agency, *BOMB*’s editors clearly were also aware of the emerging duality exhibited in criticism sparked by Barthes’s “The Death of the Author.” Though Sarah Charlesworth was unsure how much influence *Avalanche* exerted over *BOMB*, she said *BOMB* was “very much about not being like *Artforum. Artforum* was the ‘official voice’ of art. We were more like a street magazine, artists and writers for themselves.” This sentiment was shared by Magill, who explained that, “As with

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63 Sarah Charlesworth, e-mail message to artist, March 3, 2013.
Avalanche, we also felt that who better to identify up and coming artists than other artists.”

Though BOMB initially intended to focus on film and video art forms, Magill said BOMB quickly broadened its scope because its founders, who selected interviewees, were also involved in other media.

Although BOMB was clearly influenced by Avalanche and Béar’s involvement, Betsy Sussler’s magazine diverged from the argument set forth by Avalanche. Interviews printed in Avalanche tended to emphasize the artist’s personality and life as the essential mode to elucidate a work’s meaning. For a more overt example, consider the following exchange between Béar and Vito Acconci:

LB: Can we try to get at your obsession with movement?
VA: One that this interest in movement can be traced back to…
LB: It’s not an interest, interest is too cold and academic.
VA: Okay, obsession.
LB: It’s hard for you to say that, isn’t it?
VA: Very hard.
LB: You come on so much as an obsessed kind of person, and yet you always talk about “my interests” in very neutral terms.

Here, Béar focused more on Acconci’s traits than on his work, as she discussed the intricacies of his character. In BOMB, however, interviews centered on artists’ processes, methods and motives. As Charlesworth illuminated, “…[In BOMB] we were exploring each other’s work instead of writing definitive analysis and positioning ourselves as actors and interpreters of action.” This idea follows consistently with Sussler’s advertisement that BOMB afforded artists the opportunity

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64 Mark Magill, e-mail message to artist, February 8, 2013.
66 Sarah Charlesworth, e-mail message to artist, March 3, 2013.
“to be the authors of their own tales.” Intrinsic in both quotes is the concept that *BOMB* is incapable of offering the absolute truth, as truth is a fabrication created by multiple constituents. Moreover, Sussler’s quote illuminates that *BOMB*’s editors clearly recognized artists should be a part of contemporary conversations, though they cannot be removed from their roles as producers. Thus, through its interviews, *BOMB* manipulated the author-artist function, and instead of asserting their being as genius, it focused attention on their works. For instance, in “Menage” where Craig Gholson interviews Betsy Sussler for the publication’s first issue, Gholson directs the conversation to consider Sussler’s subject, research and creative process for her film *Menage*:

CG: How did you direct the acting?

BS: Well, I would choose two or three gestures and one attitude for each character knowing that when the script was actually acted out these attitudes would come into conflict with each other and have to change.

CG: So do you think the actor has to know the motivation?

BS: No, I hate that. And it wasn’t that sort of script. Well, that’s not entirely accurate. There was a subtext in some instances, but we never dwelled upon it.

Similarly, Sarah Charlesworth’s interview with Amos Poe on his film *Subway Riders* quickly centers on the challenges Poe endured and the changes made during the film’s production:

SC: Of all your films, SUBWAY RIDERS seems to have gone through the most transformations in its production period. How has it changed since you first conceived it?

AP: Yeah, I don’t know… the more it’s changed the more it’s stayed the same. It’s different from my script but still recognizable. It’s taken more time so the bottom line is that it has to pay off.

As illustrated in the above quotations, *BOMB*’s style was more about enabling conversation specifically about an artist’s work rather than about centering on the artist himself. This idea is

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further exhibited in the artists whom *BOMB*’s editors selected to interview. Especially in its inaugural years, *BOMB* features interviews about film — a medium that inherently challenges the idea of there being one central artist figure, considering it requires the involvement of many. Thus, *BOMB*’s interviews explored the product and process, rather than the individual. The same cannot be said about *Avalanche*, for as shown in the quoted example above, Béar colors Acconci as an “obsessed kind of person,” thereby offering a definitive answer on his personality.

Moreover, *BOMB*’s interviews also differ in the language they employ. Unlike in *Avalanche*, *BOMB*’s interviews appear more refined and less colloquial. This aspect can be partially attributed to *BOMB*’s intense editing process. Not only do the editors edit the text, but, in some cases, the interviewer and the interviewee also have the opportunity to make corrections. In *BOMB Speak Art!* (a book of interviews compiled from multiple editions of *BOMB*), Sussler explained the reason for editing was so that “both participants get to say what they want, exactly the way they want, without misinterpretation.”

An interview with Magill further revealed the interview process *BOMB* enacted:

> The interviews were generally conducted at the artist’s studio using a cassette tape recorder and then transcribed and edited. The interviews were edited for coherence and sometimes shared with the interviewee but that wasn’t general rule. The feeling was much more of artist to artist, rather than journalist to subject.

This aversion of the journalist-and-subject mode was also referenced by Sarah Charlesworth in an interview, for she said “…the magazine was just an extension of real involvement in each other’s work. Nobody was privileged as ‘the artist’ and someone else ‘the journalist’… The point is that we were interested in each other’s work, and the interview was one of the many ways we explored the work.”

Although it is apparent that both Béar and Sharp were also interested in using the interview as a method to discover artists and their works, there was an obvious divide

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71 Mark Magill, e-mail message to artist, February 8, 2013.
72 Sarah Charlesworth, e-mail message to artist, March 3, 2013.
not executed in *BOMB*. Unlike in *BOMB* where various artists would interview others, Sharp and Béar were exclusively in charge of conducting the interviews — except in the case of one interview. Therefore, in a way, there was a sense of hierarchy, even if enacted unconsciously, that was exhibited in *Avalanche*.

Furthermore, as alluded to previously, *BOMB*’s interviews appear more controlled and pre-meditated than those published in *Avalanche*. Although *BOMB*’s interviews still seem somewhat spontaneous due to their tangential questions and breadth, they nonetheless denote a scripted nature. This factor is most likely a result of contentions editors held with artists’ interviews published before *BOMB*. As Saul Ostrow, an art editor for *BOMB*, asserted, the magazine’s style of interviewing was a “consequence of the tendency of artists of the fifties and sixties to use interviews and statements to either mystify the effects of the efforts or to overdetermine their meaning.”

Because of this, *BOMB*’s editors endeavored to print interviews that were more lucid and representative of artists’ processes and intentions. Though Mark Magill said he does not “think *BOMB* attempted to pilot conversations intentionally,” he did assert that, “our day-to-day conversations with each other performed that function. A lot of the intent, identity and agency was part of the air we breathed, being at what we felt was the pioneering edge of what was being created by ourselves and by the other artists we knew.” Additionally, the first interview published in *BOMB* exemplifies how *BOMB* took a directed approach to interviewing. In this interview, the very first question interviewer Kathy Acker asked filmmaker Michael McClard is “Ahh, Michael, what was your motive in making *MOTIVE*?” Even when McClard ventured to refrain from answering the question, Acker redirected the interview so that he eventually revealed his intentions. Whereas, in *Avalanche*, interviews would at times end without ever reaching a

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74 Mark Magill, e-mail message to artist, February 8, 2013.
conclusion, as was the case in Willoughby Sharp’s interview with Lawrence Weiner:

WS: What does the photographic image of the work [A Square Removal from a Rug in Use] mean to you?

LW: Nothing, absolutely nothing.  

In short, this comparison of the differing interview styles in *Avalanche* and *BOMB* epitomizes the diverging goals of each magazine. Instead of glamorizing the romantic notion of the author, *BOMB* wanted to engage in conversations about content with artists, thereby adding a component of scholarship to existing literature. It is important to note an exception found in *BOMB*. While the interview with Duncan Hannah does focus on his work as opposed to his personality, it does not appear to be as directed as most. Instead of employing *BOMB*’s typical question and answer format, Hannah’s interview by Simon Lane alternates voices through the variance in textural depiction. Additionally, the questions do not read as pointed about artist process and method and are rather more interpretive — yet they still adhere to a discussion of Hannah’s works. These divergences can be explained by how Hannah was interviewed. According to Hannah, Lane didn’t appear to have any questions prepared; rather, the interview “was very haphazard, sort of disorganized, but fun.” Interestingly, and most likely not coincidentally, the interview was not denoted as an interview (unlike the others published in the same issue, No. 4) and instead was titled “Simon Lane Meets Duncan Hannah.”

But, for the traditional *BOMB* interviews (which appeared to be more pre-mediated than those of *Avalanche*, as previously stated), Betsy Sussler contended that the magazine employed “carefully developed dialogue.” In a discussion with college student journalists at the Spring National Media Convention in 2011, Sussler shared how she instructed interviewers to equate

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77 Duncan Hannah, in discussion with artist, February 4, 2013.
78 “BOMBSITE,” last accessed April 6, 2013, bombsite.com/issues/0/articles/2934.
themselves to directors producing a film or theatre production. She explained that “as an interviewer, you are directing, you are pushing — in the questions that you ask, you are sending someone towards one idea or another.” It was thus the responsibility of the interviewer to develop a conversation that would engage BOMB’s readers. This idea again illustrates how BOMB’s interviewing method was distinctly different than that utilized by Avalanche. Instead of equating the interviewer to a director, Béar believed he or she was akin to a documentary producer. As opposed to “pushing in the questions that you ask,” as Sussler instructed interviewers to do, Béar said she and Sharp “would start with a lead question, have a menu at the back of the mind… but then the main thing is to listen and to see where the conversation is going; what the person wants to talk about.” This further illuminates why BOMB’s interviews appear more scripted than those of Avalanche. Ultimately, Sussler believed that, like in a theatrical show, it was the responsibility of the interviewer (or director) to bring to the forefront a work’s meaning, which can only be derived through its author, its content and its audience.

Chapter 6

Igniting Conversations

This concept exhibited in BOMB’s mode of interviewing is also present in its choice of printed artworks and short stories. For a more specific example, consider the cover of the magazine’s third issue published in the spring of 1982 [Figure 6-1].

Figure 6-1. BOMB’s Cover, No. 3, Spring 1982.\(^{81}\)

Designed by Mark Magill with the help of Mary Heilmann, it explores a similar appropriation formula utilized by Pictures Generation artists. With its explicit reference to Philip Guston, the cover features a figure dressed in a checkerboard cape, whose head is covered by a paper bag.

\(^{81}\) “BOMBSITE,” last accessed April 6, 2013, bombsite.com/issues.
with two eyehole slits that look remarkably similar to Guston’s hooded figures appearing in works such as *The Studio* [Figure 6-2] and *The Room* [Figure 6-3].

Figure 6-2. *The Studio*, Philip Guston, 1969, (oil on canvas).

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82 According to Christopher Brookeman of Grove Art Online, as quoted from MoMA’s website, “[Guston’s] most radical shift came in the late 1960s with works such as *Evidence* (1970; San Francisco, CA, MOMA), when he confounded the art world with a new figurative style in which blunt cartoon shapes are used to create a personal iconography. Certain images recur in these paintings, such as the soles of shoes (as in *Back View*, 1977; San Francisco, CA, MOMA) and people’s heads (e.g. *Painter in Bed*, 1973; London, Saatchi Col.), inhabiting a sort of spare parts world in which the disembodied, separate items have a unique and surrealistic life of their own.” “Philip Guston,” last accessed April 6, 2013, http://www.moma.org/collection/artist.php?artist_id=2419.

As explained by Magill, the cover was also self-referential in nature because Heilmann was creating checkerboard paintings at the time. The work also includes a “false perspective checkerboard floor” — which alludes to Holbein — while the masked figure holds a

[Figure 6-3. The Room, Philip Guston, 1970, (oil on linen).]

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85 Also noteworthy is that the cover was not the only self-referential work created by Magill, which was also later utilized in BOMB’s publication. A number of images with varying subject matters, each titled Polaroid, appear throughout the first few issues. As explained by Magill, “Polaroid Corporation has a large-scale 24”x24” instant camera in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Mary Heilmann and I would share studio time at Polaroid Corp with our friend William Wegman. One of the main reasons Mary and I used the instant aspect of the camera was that we could create immediately self-referential images (photos of photos of photos) all in one session. Self-referential nature of BOMB, with artists identifying and interview[ing] other artists shared that spirit. Art from art, so to speak. And the immediate nature of producing the magazine itself was another aspect we favored. In other words, no editorial board or publishers to answer to. So immediate and self-referential were two qualities in common with the making [of] the Polariods and making the magazine.”
Mark Magill, e-mail message to artist, February 8, 2013.
checkerboard stick. A similar appropriation technique is set forth in Kathy Acker’s “Great Expectations” (discussed previously as being the first story in BOMB’s first issue), where Acker initially copies Charles Dickens’s novel of the same name, thereby questioning artistic authenticity. Acker is, in essence, plagiarizing Dickens, adopting word for word his opening sentences, thus turning the great expectation of a new beginning into the regurgitation of a familiar past. This idea of challenging the validity of authorship is also relayed in Magill’s cover. Probably most evidential about the piece is the character of a masked man, which implies the argument set forth by BOMB that though the artist’s voice is important, the narrative should not focus solely on the personality of the artist, for he is incapable of providing the exclusive answer. Rather meaning can be found in the conversations that happen between a work’s viewers, critics and producers — and BOMB hoped to provide a channel through which to ignite those dialogues.

Yet, BOMB’s notion that a work’s implication necessitates the involvement of many was not a novel one, for, as stated previously, BOMB was unequivocally the result of its cultural environment. During the 1960s and 1970s, a strong tradition of artists’ books (executed in manifold forms, such as comic books, magazines, graphic works, and illustrated books) developed. Essentially, as scholar Clive Phillpot explained, “Artists’ books are distinguished by the fact that they sit provocatively at the juncture where art, documentation, and literature all come together.” Seamlessly combining these three elements, BOMB could be regarded as a postmodern artists’ book. Interestingly, BOMB even takes the format of a book in that its back cover refers explicitly to the front, as it is an inverse of Sarah Charlesworth’s photo. When describing her cover in an interview, Charlesworth even said the back’s design worked purposefully as a “‘bookending’ [for] the magazine as a whole.”

86 Mark Magill, e-mail message to artist, February 8, 2013.
88 Sarah Charlesworth, e-mail message to artist, March 3, 2013.
in book design, *BOMB* was produced in multiple copies, brought art out of museums and galleries, and was made for a diverse audience — all goals that artists’ books specifically strived to accomplish. Additionally, when *BOMB* was first published, these artists’ books had evolved to expound on their specific time period. As scholar Brian Wallis argued,

> Many authors of postmodern artists’ books use conventional forms (such as interviews, monologues, jokes, dream narratives, and parables) critically, as new ways to oppose the imposed narrative structures, the unquestioned hierarchy of characters, and the easy closure of much conventional literature… in place of the omnipotent author, they acknowledge a collectivity of voices and active participation of the reader.\(^8^9\)

Similarly, *BOMB* was a direct response to an art world that either heroized its makers (the artists) or its interpreters (the critics), who supplied the definitive meaning of the works. Through offering interviews that centered on artistic processes and on intent but did not cement a conclusive idea, *BOMB* left meaning to be interpreted from a multitude of factors: the work’s content, the author, and the audience.

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