

Art monthly 1976- On the gentle art of staying the same while changing utterly

Patricia Bickers

Founded in 1976, *Art monthly* is Britain's oldest contemporary art magazine. It is impossible, and perhaps even unwise, to try to account for the magazine's longevity, but a contributing factor may be the high degree of continuity between the past and present that is reflected in the loyalty of *Art monthly*'s readership and of its writers and regular contributors. This does not mean that the magazine has not changed at all; on the contrary. That *Art monthly* has adapted and responded to shifts in the art world over the years is reflected, for instance, in the large number of student subscribers to the magazine. However, change has been introduced gradually and in a manner in keeping with the founding ethos of the magazine. This is what is meant by 'the gentle art of staying the same while changing utterly' – the subheading for this article, and of the talk on which it is based.

Art monthly was founded, appropriately enough, in the upper room of a pub in London's Museum Street. It was appropriate not only because the pub, the Museum Tavern, became an unofficial *Art monthly* annexe (the original office being conveniently located nearby at No.37) but also because of the determination, stated in the first issue, that a copy of the magazine would cost no more than 'the price of a pint and a packet of fags'.¹ In keeping with this commitment to affordability, *Art monthly* was stapled rather than perfect bound so that it could be rolled up like a newspaper and, like a newspaper, it could be discarded after reading. How times have changed: today a pint and a packet of fags would set you back considerably more than the present cover price of the magazine, while attitudes to smoking have altered drastically since 1976. On the other hand, *Art monthly* is still stapled, affordable and disposable – though in a departure from 1976, it is now printed on biodegradable paper.²

Art monthly was the brainchild of Peter Townsend, legendary editor of *Studio international*. Having been ousted by the new owner, he approached Jack Wendler, an American collector based in London

since 1971, with the suggestion that he become publisher of a new magazine. Two years earlier, in 1974, Wendler had closed his gallery after three years in business. In its brief life the gallery only sold one work (and that to another exhibiting artist), but its influence can hardly be measured. Back in 1968, while still in New York, Wendler had co-published, with Seth Siegel, the celebrated *Xerox book*, which featured many of the artists who later showed at the Wendler Gallery.³ The gallery opened with a show of Lawrence Weiner and ended with Mario Merz. In between the programme covered a range of American and European – including British – artists, among them John Baldessari, Douglas Huebler, Marcel Broodthaers, John Murphy and Daniel Buren. During a recent exhibition at Chelsea Space, held to mark Wendler's return to the US after 38 years as a UK resident,⁴ the press release pointed out, 'The Jack Wendler Gallery brought to London the work of most of the first generation of conceptual artists', adding that such work had previously only been known to audiences in England 'through the pages of *Studio international*' under Townsend's editorship.⁵ The continuity between the Wendler Gallery and

Studio extended to the fact that Siegelau, who was the first to show most of those same artists in New York in the 1960s, later edited a special issue of *Studio*.⁶ To cut a long story short, with Wendler on board as publisher and co-editor⁷ with Townsend, and a grant from the Arts Council of Great Britain, as it then was, the first issue was launched in October 1976.

Fiercely independent, *Art monthly* was – and is – politically of the left, which means a commitment to the public sector and to public service, which is another way of saying that no one associated with the magazine is going to make their fortune. However, the fact that everyone who works on the magazine supports themselves partly through other activities including in my case, teaching,⁸ helps to keep us in touch with issues that matter to our readers. In aesthetic terms this means a commitment to radical art and to an anti- or non-formalist approach: the inaugural issue contained an undertaking 'to provide informed coverage on contemporary art and the issues that surround it', a stance that contrasted sharply with the then dominant Anglo-American formalist view of art, derived largely from Clement Greenberg,⁹ that argued for the aesthetic, political and economic autonomy of art. In pursuance of this alternative, contextual approach to contemporary art, *Art monthly* included, besides the usual news, reviews and interviews, regular coverage and critical analysis of political, educational and economic issues – in

particular the workings of the art market – as they affected the art world. This is as true today as it was then: for instance *Art monthly* recently published a special art education issue inspired by the 40th anniversary of the 1968 student riots in Paris, and there is a regular Salerooms column which today is written by Colin Gleadell.¹⁰ Also included from the outset was a groundbreaking monthly column on legal issues – Artlaw – written by Henry Lydiate, who still writes the column as well as continuing to advise *Art monthly* on all legal matters, of which more later.

Art monthly was modelled on left-leaning publications the *New statesman* in the UK and *The Nation* in the US, reflecting the fact that the new magazine was an Anglo-American venture as well as signalling that it would be an unashamedly text-based publication. Black and white, but for the red logo, and densely packed with information, absolutely no space was wasted: there was no cover as such, or rather the first page *was* the cover, while the free gallery listings were printed on the back page/cover. There were no ads on the front page (or indeed in the first feature pages), so that without even opening it, the reader was able to start reading the magazine straightaway, perhaps while strap-hanging on the tube home from work [see fig.1]. However, the appearance of textual density was offset by a commitment to flexibility, accessibility and above all readability – aims that continue to inform the design,

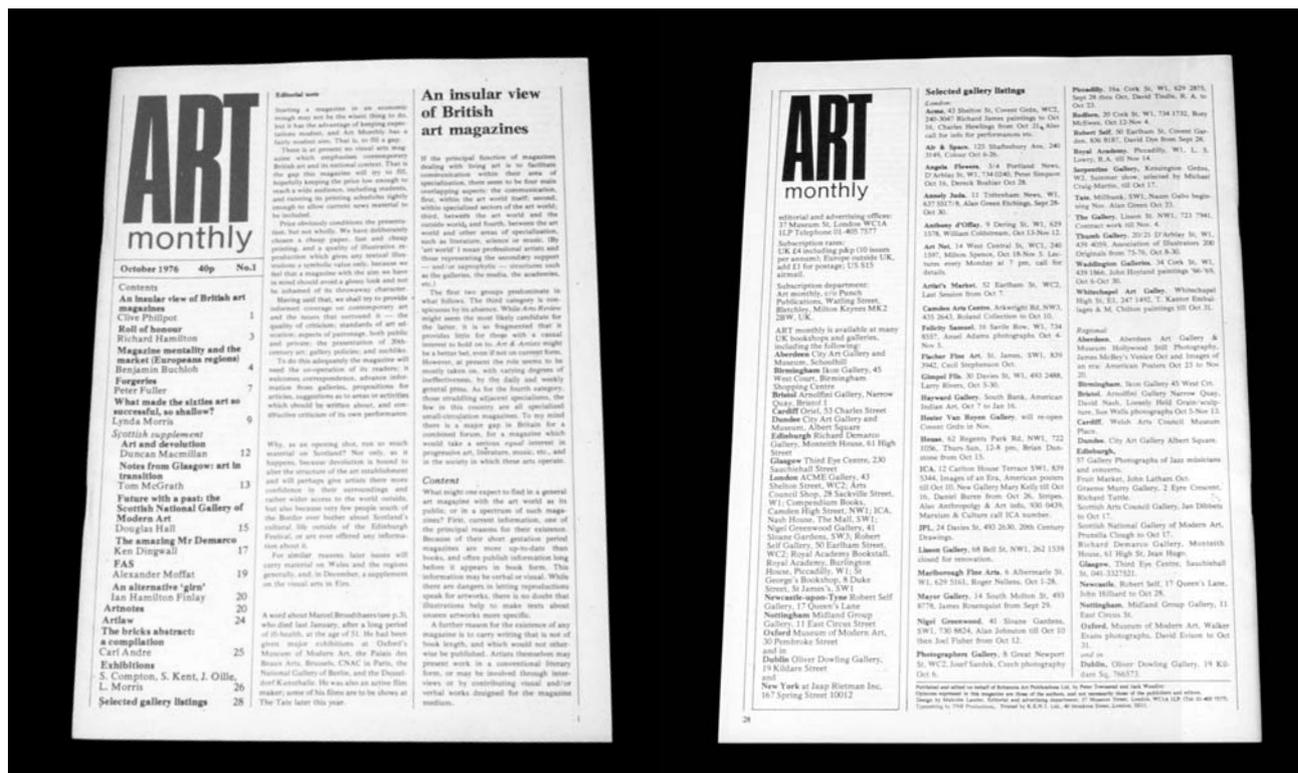


Fig.1 Front and back of issue no.1, October 1976.

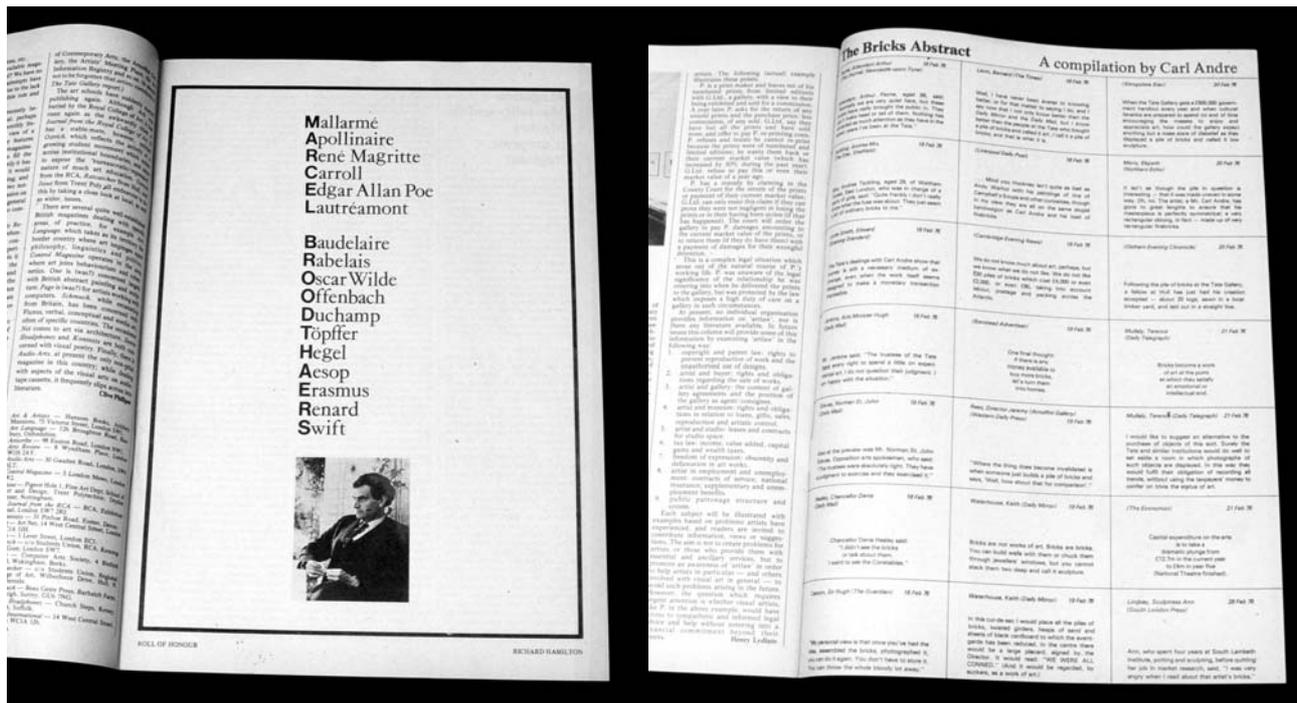


Fig.2 Left: *Roll of Honour*, Acrostic by Richard Hamilton commemorating Marcel Broodthaers who died the year in January 1975. Right: *The Bricks Abstract*, Carl Andre, from issue no.1, October 1976, pp. 2 and 25. Carl Andre contributed this work to the special 30th anniversary edition of prints presented as a gift to *Art monthly*'s contributors in 2006. The other artists who generously contributed to the set were John Baldessari, Fiona Banner, Angela Bulloch, Michael Craig-Martin, Liam Gillick, Hans Haacke, Isaac Julien, Michael Landy, John Murphy, Simon Patterson and Lawrence Weiner.

layout and editorial policy of *Art monthly*. The contents list, which immediately proclaimed the magazine's conceptual bias, was also printed on the first page.¹¹ And what a list it is! On page 3 Richard Hamilton compiled *Roll of Honour*, a tribute in the form of an acrostic to Marcel Broodthaers, who had died in January 1975; on page 25 Carl Andre contributed *The Bricks Abstract*, in which he collated, in grid form, texts from press cuttings covering the Tate Gallery's decision to display *Equivalent VIII*, which it had purchased in 1972 [fig.2]. The tone of outrage might seem incredible at this distance of time but 17 years later, in 1993, when the Tate again put them on display as part of its re-hang, the press response was depressingly similar. In order to point out how little things had changed since 1976 we re-published, with Andre's permission, his original page alongside a sampling of the current press cuttings, headed 'A Pile of...'.¹² Doyen of artists' books, Clive Phillpot, compiled a survey of British art magazines, including mainstream, specialist and student magazines, analysing the four main types of publication, an analysis which still holds good today.¹³ Benjamin Buchloh followed, with a piece analysing European magazines and their relationship to the art market. Other contributors included Peter Fuller and Lynda Morris, and there were reviews by Susan Compton and Sarah Kent and, in a special section on

Scotland, a contribution from the redoubtable Ian Hamilton Finlay. Over the next ten years and more the magazine followed the course set down in this first issue, with some additions including a regular artists' book column. When I started writing for it in 1985, *Art monthly* had moved to a tiny office at 36 Great Russell St – still within spitting distance of the Museum Tavern. The magazine had also been slightly redesigned with the introduction of a white, coated paper cover, the red logo in the top left-hand corner as before and alongside it the list of features, but now with a black and white image included. The contents were still listed on the back cover along with late listings and late news items. The inside front cover, page 2, carried comment sometimes written in-house, but mostly by outside contributors ranging from Max Hastings to Joan Bakewell. The main change for *Art monthly*, as for other magazines, was the advent of computers and desktop publishing. When I joined the magazine as associate editor in November 1989, Liam Gillick (introduced to the editors by Michael Craig-Martin, he had joined the magazine immediately on leaving Goldsmiths in 1987) was in charge of editorial and subscriptions, as well as being an occasional contributor.¹⁴ However, as he was also the only one who understood the software, it seemed logical for him to redesign the magazine.¹⁵

Looking back, it is extraordinary what Gillick – who accordingly became production designer – was able to achieve on *Art monthly*'s tiny, solitary Apple Mac SE computer. The new design was launched in the December/January, 1989/90 double issue. The chief change was to the logo, which was updated using a different, 'fatter' font, while the features were listed along the bottom of the front cover. On the back cover, the masthead and the contents were laid out more clearly. In terms of internal layout, features were now laid out in two, rather than three columns, for greater readability and, at the foot of each page – now printed on acid-free paper – the magazine logo was printed, reversed-out.¹⁶ Otherwise, much was as it had always been. The obvious advantage of desk-top publishing was that it saved considerably on production costs, but it also meant that it was possible to work right up to the last minute – before sending the layout pages to the printers. Many were the times that we worked side-by-side late into the night, drinking bad coffee, cutting and pasting while Gillick wrestled with the mysteries of leading and kerning.

Things were a little easier when we moved to larger offices at 26 Charing Cross Road, but not much. That first year – in fact the first two years – represented a steep learning curve for me. I had literally stumbled across contemporary art in the 1970s while on a slender scholarship to Italy as an undergraduate studying art history. Arriving in Venice, I saw banners advertising the Biennale and, my curiosity aroused, I visited it on the first Sunday after the opening, when admission was free. I was hooked instantly, though it was not till several years later that I began to write about contemporary art. One of the reasons that Townsend invited me to join the editorial team at *Art monthly* was because he was then dividing his time between Australia and the UK, a punishing schedule for a man half his age. At the time I was engaged in research into early 14th-century documents in the Archivio di Stato in Florence that would occupy me over the Summer, so my start was delayed until the Autumn. I mention this as an indication of how inexperienced and unprepared I was for what was to come. Expecting to be guided by experienced editorial staff like Michael Archer and Margaret Garlake, who was assistant editor, I found on my return that in the interim Archer had left to become editor of *Artscribe*, and Garlake was leaving to concentrate on her PhD.¹⁷ Hoping to learn from the great man himself, I learned instead that Townsend was about to leave for his next three-month stint in Australia.¹⁸

This was a less than ideal beginning but more importantly, it was a somewhat unsatisfactory

arrangement for the magazine. Sales had been falling, and overall there was a sense of drift (it was symptomatic, perhaps, that *Art monthly* had failed to review the seminal Freeze shows in 1988). In 1987 Townsend had founded *Art monthly Australia*, a magazine based on the same format as *Art monthly*, but which was – and is – an independent publication. He was now editor of two magazines at opposite ends of the world – surely a unique arrangement. But it couldn't continue.¹⁹ Other factors contributed to make this a difficult period in which to take over as editor: cuts to public spending under Thatcher, competition from other – mostly full-colour – magazines which took advantage of the desk-top and later digital revolution, and the rise and rise of figurative painting. With so much competition on the news-stands, it was decided in 1993 that *Art monthly* needed a professional redesign. Deputy editor, Mark Thomson, steered us through the process and the result was a sensitive hybrid of old and new, especially evident in the logo.²⁰ The main change was the adoption of a colour tint on the front cover – a tint rather than full colour so as to signal that the magazine was still black and white inside – and coated paper, the latter to improve the quality of the images [fig.3]. The chief change to the content was the addition of a formal Editorial intended as a reminder, especially for new readers, of where *Art monthly* stands, politically and aesthetically, on key

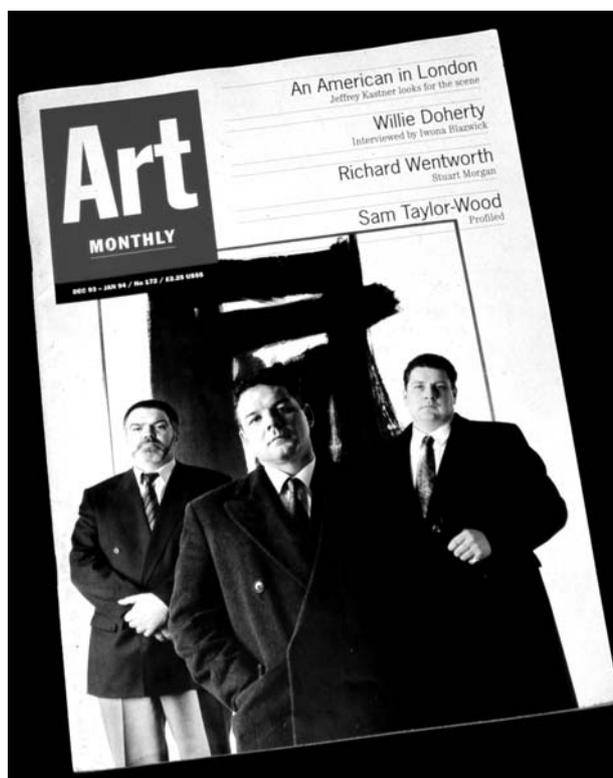


Fig.3 The first professional redesign of the magazine, with Sam Taylor Wood's *Bouncers* on the cover, December/January 1994.

issues in the arts. Since then, the design has been slightly tweaked, the main change being the introduction of *Art monthly's* very own font. *Art monthly* is still stubbornly black and white and it is still primarily about writing and ideas, and debate and analysis, because the best art writing is not a substitute for looking at art, but a stimulant to the reader; it should make them want to look more closely at art for themselves.

Despite the increased competition, not to mention two recessions, *Art monthly* not only survived, it actually thrived.²¹ In fact, in recent years we have actually included more text, commissioning longer feature articles at a time when they are getting shorter and shorter in other magazines, a move almost as perverse in the late '00s as launching a magazine devoted to Conceptual Art was in the '70s. Focusing on bringing on new, and often young, writers – many of them artists themselves – we caught up with developments in contemporary art as they unfolded. It was in the pages of *Art monthly* that the term 'yBa' first appeared in print, in an article by Simon Ford published in March 1996 entitled 'Myth making', a highly influential article that was subsequently reprinted elsewhere several times.²² Ford was critical of the jingoism of the yBa phenomenon, and of its inherent ideological conservatism, a view that accorded with the editorial view of the magazine both then and now.

Opposition to the juggernaut of Thatcherism and its creed of market forces became a defining policy for the magazine in the '90s. In art terms this also involved critiquing the workings of the art market, whose values seemed to be driving all aesthetic discourse before it. This inevitably led *Art monthly* on to a collision course with Charles Saatchi, culminating in an article published just before the exhibition, 'Sensation: young British artists from the Saatchi Collection', opened at the Royal Academy in November 1997. It is often forgotten that Saatchi was then still seen primarily as a collector rather than as a dealer and it is in no small measure due to Gleadell, who persistently tracked his market dealings in his regular Salerooms column, that this myth was exposed. The article, titled 'Sense & sensation', which I wrote with advice and help from Gleadell, looked beyond the hype, exposing the ways in which Saatchi manipulated the market, promoting artists in his so-called collection while conversely damaging the market for others by dumping their work or withholding it from exhibition.²³ This was dangerous territory for a small magazine to enter but we turned, as ever, to Henry Lydiat, submitting the text to him

for his expert advice. At his instigation, we also submitted it to Stephens innocent, as the firm was then known, which also offered its services free. It was midnight on the final deadline before the text was passed as legally 'safe'.



Fig.4 'Black and White and Red All Over', the 30th Anniversary cover, no.300, October 2006.

This, finally, perhaps demonstrates why *Art monthly* has survived so far, celebrating 30 years of continuous publication with a big party at the Hayward Gallery in October 2006 [fig.4].²⁴ Ultimately the magazine is shaped not only by the editorial team past and present, including former deputy editors Jeff Kastner, Andrew Wilson and Ian Hunt, but by the writers and readers, the artists who contributed to the special 30th anniversary print edition distributed as a gift to our writers, and the designers and printers who go that extra mile. There is a collective sense of ownership of the project that is *Art monthly* that is also quickly adopted by new readers, which is what the gentle art of staying the same while changing utterly is all about.²⁵ [Fig.5]

Notes

1. The 'Editorial Note' was written by Peter Townsend, but this was not repeated in future issues and there was no editorial as such. Townsend contributed some endnotes as well as writing for the news section, 'Artnotes', but otherwise wrote very little having, regrettably, more or less given up writing for publication, despite all the best efforts of his colleagues, myself included, to persuade him to do so.
2. An exception was the special 200th edition in October 1996; in order to include newly commissioned contributions from as many of the



Fig.5 Sometimes the cover can serve as a message to our readers!

Left: Michael Landy, *Our reputation is your guarantee*, artist's cover for *Art monthly* no.157, 1992; Landy contributed a red on black version of this image for the special 30th anniversary edition of prints. Right: Crash! *I like you*, no.233, February 1997.

original contributors as possible, the number of pages exceeded the limit possible for the magazine to be stapled.

3. Seth Siegelaub has been twice interviewed in *Art monthly*, see *Art monthly*, no.122 (1988-89) republished in *Talking art: interviews with artists since 1976* (London: Art monthly and Ridinghouse, 2006), 290-300 and more recently, in *Art monthly*, no. 327 (June 2009): 1-5 and *Art monthly*, no. 328 (July/August 2009): 11-13.
4. Happily Wendler will continue to be publisher of *Art monthly*.
5. Dematerialised: Jack Wendler Gallery 1971 to 1974, curator, Teresa Gleadowe, Chelsea Space, May 13 to June 13, 2009. It is fitting that the show was curated by Teresa Gleadowe because, as well as writing regularly for *Art monthly*, she was present at that crucial meeting in the Museum Tavern. Also present was Charles Harrison, the art historian, *Art & language* collaborator and sometime contributor to *Art monthly* (who was also assistant editor of *Studio international* from 1966 to 1971 and a contributing editor from 1972 to 1975), who sadly died in August this year. An obituary is included in the September 2009 issue of the magazine.
6. The crucial role played by Barbara Reise, an

American art historian who moved to England in 1966, and who was a contributing editor of *Studio*, has not received the attention it deserves.

Unfortunately, a project initiated by Jack Wendler and Liam Gillick, back in c.1992, that would have redressed this came to nothing. Reise took her own life in 1978.

7. Wendler stepped down as editor in 1991.
8. I was kindly invited to be the ARLIS AGM guest lecturer, 2009, by my colleague at the University of Westminster, Sally Bannard.
9. Clement Greenberg was later interviewed at length for the magazine by Charles Harrison and Trish Evans in *Art monthly*, nos.73, 74 and 75 (February, March, April 1984), reprinted in *Talking art*, 185-214.
10. Margaret Garlake wrote regularly on the salerooms, though not in the first issue.
11. While this might be expected, given the editors' own background, it was also intended as a counterpoint to *Artscribe* magazine, which had been launched the year before. Now sadly defunct, the magazine was very much biased towards painting, being largely written by painters for painters as well as being, at least in the beginning, edited by painters.
12. *Art monthly*, no.164 (March 1993): 16-17.

13. Re-reading Clive Phillpot's article is a sobering experience: not only were there so few magazines but of the main magazines listed, *Studio international* and *Artscribe* are no more. *Audio arts* has recently wound up its operation while *Arts review* has been reconfigured as *Art review*. The situation is much healthier today, reflecting the much higher profile contemporary art now enjoys, as well as the different art constituencies that coexist.
14. Liam Gillick reviewed Michael Craig-Martin's retrospective at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in the double issue, *Art monthly*, no.132 (December 1989/January 1990): 20-23.
15. Geoff Jenkins had previously been responsible for the layout.
16. Later the issue number was added, a detail that those who, like me, like to photocopy or download articles for research purposes, will appreciate.
17. Archer's tenure at *Artscribe* was all too brief: the magazine had been bought out by a company called Hali Publications, whose editorial priorities were very different from those of the founding editors. It was Archer's decision to leave. Fortunately, Garlake and Archer continued to write for the magazine.
18. Jack and Nell Wendler, meanwhile, who divided their time between the US and the UK, were due to return to the US for the Christmas period, as was their wont. Fortunately, there was some continuity since Letty Mooring (who has recently stepped down as managing editor but who is still, thankfully, in charge of production) had returned to work on the magazine a couple of months earlier after a brief sojourn in Arizona.
19. In April 1992 Townsend was offered the post of editor-in-chief of *Art monthly* which he refused; he continued to edit *Art monthly Australia* until 1997 when he returned to live permanently in the UK. At my suggestion the post of editor was offered to Stuart Morgan, but he demanded drastic changes and a salary that *Art monthly* simply couldn't afford. We remained on good terms, however, and he continued to write for the magazine until his untimely death on August 28, 2002.
20. Cara Gallardo Weil of Area still supervises the design of the magazine including all leaflets, cards and posters; layout is by Beverley Jackson. Mark Thomson later designed the *Art monthly* interview book, *Talking art* referred to above, bringing his intimate knowledge of the magazine to bear on a design that is totally in keeping with the clean and clear *Art monthly* aesthetic.
21. From an all-time low of 800 sales in 1989-90, *Art monthly* now sells up to 5500 copies, though the full effects of the present recession have yet to be seen. In line with its remit to engage directly with its readers, *Art monthly* has extended and diversified its activities through its website (<http://www.artmonthly.co.uk>), the *Art monthly* Roadshow programme of talks and panel discussions, and the ongoing series of live interviews, 'Talking art' in collaboration with Tate Modern. There is also a regular *Art monthly* radio programme in the first week of every month in collaboration with Resonance FM in which writers discuss issues raised by their features in the current issue.
22. The term yBa derived from the series of Young British Artists shows held at the Saatchi Gallery, beginning in March 1992; it is seldom noted that in fact, very few of the artists who later became associated with the term were actually included in the shows.
23. 'Sense & sensation,' *Art monthly*, no.211 (November 1997): 1-6.
24. By a sad coincidence, Nell Wendler had died in October, 2003. Sadly, too, Peter Townsend died in July 2006, three months before the 300th issue was published. His colourful life and brilliant career as an editor was deservedly remembered and celebrated in the September issue of *Art monthly*, no.299 (September 2006): 14-16. This was also the occasion for *Art monthly* to say a fond farewell to Andrew Wilson who, after nine years as deputy editor, left to become curator of modern and contemporary British art at Tate.
25. It is impossible to mention everyone who has helped to keep the *Art monthly* flag flying, but I would like to mention everyone not already mentioned who is on the present team, all of whom contribute so much more than their official designations suggest: associate editor, David Barrett; editorial assistant, Chris McCormack; advertising manager, Matt Hale; subscriptions and distribution, Brendan Fan; listings, Chris Rawcliffe; proof-reader Penny Williams and indexer, Penny Butler.

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