

in Czechoslovakia), he has maintained a left-wing stance. Sayle's satire of Egbert and Bill's diffident pretensions has a more pronounced class angle. This is not wholly a consequence of his political views but was also shaped by his experiences as an art student in London during the 1970s. Scruton, for his part, rehearsed a familiar conservative argument that the pair's aesthetic and moral "emptiness" was a product of the moral turpitude of the sixties. A more interesting aspect to his essay is the claim that their demotic appeal veiled a new contemporary patronage that sustained them.⁴⁰

Despite this shared antagonism to Gilbert & George, it is not my claim that they evince a horseshoe theory of politics, where left and right are equally misguided; but there is a curious dovetailing nonetheless, which speaks to the place of contemporary art in the public imagination. The two critiques are marked by fascination (if I may be so bold as to argue for a TV comedy sketch as critique). It is as if, for *Modern Painters* especially, the journal needed to define itself agonistically. What it was *for*, however, appears to be less clear-cut. Gilbert & George may have signified the "enemy", but the polyvocality of the letters pages attests to the status of modern painting remaining contested.

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Peter Fuller: In Search of the Mainstream

In his editorial to the first issue of *Modern Painters*, Peter Fuller, the magazine's founding editor, referred to a group of institutions, organisations, and people that *Modern Painters* was resolutely against (see figs. 2a and 2b). Alongside the Arts Council, patrons of the "New Art", and the Turner Prize, the magazine *Artscribe International* was picked out as a specific object worthy of Fuller's ire. Accused of "promoting a tacky preference for the novel and fashionable" instead of a "revival of British higher landscape painting", *Artscribe International* was, according to Fuller, a prime contributor to a disregard by the arts sector of a "common national culture" and a lack of both care and acknowledgement of either tradition or the spirit of discovery.⁴¹ This wasn't the

first time Fuller had targeted magazines in his art criticism. In 1976, when the Victoria and Albert Museum staged the exhibition *The Art Press: Two Centuries of Art Magazines* and *Studio International* produced an accompanying special issue on art magazines, he had contributed a review in *New Society* and a longer article in *Studio International* that offered both his viewpoint on the history and current state of affairs in art publishing and an elaboration of his vision for the role of magazines and the status of British art.⁴²

To an extent, Fuller's opinions on these projects reappear in 1988, but perhaps his earlier criticism has less to do with the chauvinistic aims associated with *Modern Painters*, being instead desirous more of a space free from "cynical commercial motives".⁴³ In the 1970s, he was motivated by a Marxist politics that sought to democratise the production and reception of art by moving them away from the malign influence of the monied class; endorsing the then arts minister Hugh Jenkins's argument that "art should be entirely freed from the market so that historically significant works would become available to all".⁴⁴ Fuller's views on the role of the magazine in the 1970s appear to be nothing less than radical. Yet, as he moved through this decade into the 1980s, his position on what art was constrained his ability to open out the "space for criticism" that he felt was absent from the cultural mainstream in this period. Fuller's writing as a critic lived in magazines, but his commitment to accommodate only positions and practices that reflected his own interests resulted in a marginalisation rather than a mainstreaming of such ideas. Mirroring the trajectory of debate around the economics and status of art in the general population, Fuller's eventual contribution to creating the space he felt to be necessary was *Modern Painters*.

The two articles by Fuller from 1976 argue that the effects of commercialisation on the art world and art publishing damaged the mainstream understanding of British art history (fig. 6). Positioning criticism as an active arbiter between artworks and the public, he argued that the key questions on the relationship between "men, nature, masterpieces, and the tradition" were unresolved because of the failures of art criticism and the magazines that commissioned it.⁴⁵ These points, highlighted in the first article and further developed in the latter, were understood to be exacerbated by the pluralism of the art world, which had been corrupted and contaminated by its attachment to market forces. The ensuing

“crisis in art”, positioned by Fuller alongside John Tagg and Richard Cork, in part as a response to these and other issues, produced an intensive period of art criticism. In building his case for a “rigorous critical” magazine in response, Fuller expanded the range of magazines he wrote for, capitalising on a rapidly developing context that he himself was involved in manufacturing. While this opportunity offered him the chance to shape and affect the discourse, his criticism often lacked accuracy or indeed adequate research into the subject at hand.⁴⁶



Figure 6
Cover of “Art Magazines”, special issue of *Studio International: Journal of Modern Art* 192, no. 983 (September–October 1976). Digital image courtesy of Studio International.

Both Fuller’s articles and *Studio International*’s issue on art magazines raise valuable questions in regard to how critics and magazine editors saw their own influence and importance in representing and shaping artistic practice and discourse. *Studio International* had dominated the sector under Peter Townsend’s editorship by showcasing American and European conceptualism in the 1960s. By the mid-seventies it saw reason to address its position in defence of what were, in the new editor Richard Cork’s statement in the September–October 1976 edition, “absurdly institutional expectations” whereby the magazine was assumed to fulfil a role as an “official national channel”.⁴⁷ Given

that it had a large institutional subscriber base and had recently been acquired by the millionaire architect Michael Spens, who in 1975 had fired Townsend and hired Cork, this defence was pertinent to the trajectory of the magazine under Cork. As the decade progressed, his steer is now seen to have contributed to the conditions for the establishment of both *Art Monthly* and *Artscribe*, the first aimed at promoting “British Art in its national context” and the latter a result of Cork’s lack of interest in painting and sculpture.⁴⁸ Regardless of the realities of such influence, at the time of the magazine’s special issue, Cork and Fuller were united in their concern around commercial influence on either art or art criticism, but pursuing separate agendas, with Fuller focusing more on the use of government funding for Tate as a “middle-class obsessional game” of an acquisitions policy to which he was violently opposed.⁴⁹ Their established positions—one a commissioning editor, the other a writer for hire—along with their privilege of both gender and ethnicity, meant that, for Fuller, specific art forms, interest areas, and groups of people could be dismissed or ignored in his writing, despite the proliferation and platforming of feminist, Black, and Asian art in institutions during this period.⁵⁰

In a display of apparent editorial transparency, the *Studio International* “Art Magazines” issue attempted to survey and highlight questions about the industry, such as how art magazines were funded, who owned them, what audiences they were aimed at, and whether they prioritised criticism or information. The sixty-eight responses received were published without differentiating between commercial titles and artist produced periodicals.⁵¹ *Artforum*, for example, declared an operating budget of \$45,000 with an issue run of 20,000, while *Artscribe* noted that, with a print run of 2,000 and a budget of £200 per issue, its editor’s work was unpaid and it had no employees. Others, such as *Artifact*, a new UK imprint, had no working budget and a first issue run of 5,000. It is also worth noting that there were only nine (eight, not counting *Studio International* itself) UK-based titles, of which five had produced only a single issue at that point (*Artifact*, *Extremes*, *One*) or were artist-edited (*One*, *Audio-Arts*, *Control Magazine*). What emerges from the broader survey, however, is a frequently stated editorial indifference to both the art market and advertisers, and a conflicting sense of how much magazines could influence the scenes they responded to.⁵² Instead of exposing undue external influence over

editorial freedoms from owners, the survey described a wide range of shoestring operations that frequently depended on unpaid writing submissions and reader subscriptions.

Several questions in the survey went unacknowledged and seemingly unnoticed by Cork and Fuller: the economic barriers placed on potential contributors by the lack of payment for their contributions; the role of experimental writing within artistic practice that shaped several of the publications within the *Studio International* survey; the expanding field of artists' publications as distinctive and separate from commercial publications; and the contribution of female practices within art and publishing both broadly and specifically. These omissions indicate how Fuller's and Cork's ideas deviated from the Marxist materialist lens that had previously focused their ideas: neither fair pay nor equality ever entered the debate from their perspectives on art criticism. For Cork, critical discourse continued to be abstracted as "social purpose" as art rather than as having the potential to create fairer conditions, while Fuller retreated further from the left towards what has been described as "rescuing an emancipatory view of the aesthetic" rather than shifting the burdens of capitalism.⁵³

Continuing his series of themed issues, Cork commissioned a special issue of *Studio International* on women's art in 1977, a belated gesture that *Art & Artists* had already made with its issue on women's art in 1973.⁵⁴ In his editorial note he bemoaned the lack of a British magazine "wholly devoted to women's art, feminist or otherwise", seemingly unaware of the many feminist and lesbian networks (such as the Women's Free Arts Alliance), newsletters, single and special issue artist publications, and perhaps more significantly *Spare Rib*, which included writing specifically on women's art.⁵⁵ While his editorial struggled with the age-old male art dialectic, the issue itself revealed autonomous scenes of artists, curators, and writers fully engaged with instigating and reproducing inclusive spaces and publications to house their work. A glance across the contributors to the 1973 and 1977 issues confirms the presence of Lucy R. Lippard, Yve Lomax, Carla Liss, Susan Hiller, Lynne Tillman, Rosetta Brooks, Sarah Kent, Mary Kelly, who were either involved with, or would in the early 1980s join, publications such as *BLOCK*, *Wallpaper*, *Unmuzzled Ox*, *Heresies*, *Profile*, *Top Stories*, *ZG*, *REALife*, and *Wedge*.⁵⁶ These

titles, which provided alternative spaces for experimental and critical writing, were joined by *Chrysalis* in the United States and *Feminist Art News (FAN)* and *MAKE* magazine in the United Kingdom, which focused exclusively on female and feminist practices.

Indeed, the context specificity of the special issue, aimed at being a locus for criticism, became a catalyst for stratification as the 1980s began. Instead, and perhaps as Fuller had predicted in his many critiques of postmodernism, arts publications were more than ever commissioned and read by those involved in their production. As diversified communities who were not represented by such titles grew and were activated to self-publish, the perceived traditional mainstream audience for magazines such as *Studio International* decreased.⁵⁷ In the context of art publishing, diversity was disproportionately understood by critics as a symptom of the commercial imperative of the market, alongside the ongoing cultural devolution encouraged by the policies of the Arts Council of Great Britain. For writers such as Fuller, diversification signalled a retreat from art capable of social transformation towards art that only mimicked a once radical position. Previously united with Cork in their viewpoints on this subject, Tagg and Fuller parted ways with him in a backstabbing article published in *Art Monthly*.⁵⁸ Before long, the duo also split as Fuller shifted his writing further towards a conservatism that framed the aforementioned “traditional” mainstream as one united by a collective understanding of art’s transcendent capabilities within a biological interpretation of figuration, to describe what he saw as “enduring representations” in art, through images relating to birth, reproduction, love, and death. He extended this view into a dismissal of feminism, declaring that there was no “such a thing”: “The feminist art movement is nonsense, complete nonsense, from start to finish”.⁵⁹ Figuration for him was constructed around his ideas of the feminine rather than the feminist, and therefore a connection to a certain “essentialist biocriticism” can be understood as entirely aesthetic, but this collision provided a window onto a broader set of critical implications facing the reception of feminist practices at the time, when it was reframed in institutional exhibitions such as the *Hayward Annual '78* (1978), *Women’s Images of Men*, *About Time* (both 1980), and *Issue* (1981).⁶⁰ The space afforded to female practices by institutions sat in opposition to Fuller’s formulation of what constituted art, but when he was questioned by

readers in response to his provocative claims and held to account about the dominance of men as subjects and as contributors to the first issue of *Modern Painters*, he provided no editorial response.⁶¹

At the end of the 1970s, converging on several overlapping and interwoven discourses focused on critical postmodernism and Marxism, social practice, and criticism itself, Fuller's writing proceeded to reject previous allies and to further contract the critical space in which he had positioned himself. He described Terry Eagleton, Griselda Pollock, and Victor Burgin as "decadent stylists", and "social functionalism" (through his extended quarrel with Cork) as "infecting the fringes of art institutions". His own interventions into psychoanalysis led him to voice again a "growing dissatisfaction with the aridity of much of the current left debate about the visual arts".⁶²

Rosetta Brooks, who was involved with the scene around St. Martin's School of Art that included artists such as John Stezaker, an artist frequently dismissed in articles by Fuller, asserted in her editorial to the first issue of *ZG* in 1980 that the lack of an artistic mainstream had created "false barriers between different worlds of cultural experience and a return to the safety of traditional ideas".⁶³ The diminution of the mainstream was, in her view, tethered to the loss of more avant-garde practices, and her response to this was *ZG*, a magazine that attempted to explore a cultural mainstream without disciplinary boundaries, connecting to many artists, writers, critics, and musicians who were all immersed in technological landscapes that overlapped and mutated ideas and affect. Brooks's project, and those of the artists she worked with—Yve Lomax, Cindy Sherman, and Sherrie Levine—were a very specific enquiry into the effects of media, consumerism, and reproduction on the female body (fig. 7). Similarly, artists affiliated to the British magazine *BLOCK* (fig. 8), produced in the Art History Department of Middlesex Polytechnic, and the US-based *Wedge* (fig. 9) harnessed the special issue format by collaborating on an edition that extended the exhibition *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality* (1984–85) into print circulation. Focused on the proposition of sexuality as socially reproductive, the exhibition's "thesis", as described by the curator Kate Linker, was located in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory.⁶⁴ These magazines were attempting, like *ZG*, to offer "a wedge of critical discourse to open a wider and more challenging debate", as described by *Wedge*'s co-editor Brian Wallis.⁶⁵

John Bird, one of the editors of *BLOCK*, later recalled: “The models we looked to were the underground press, *Red Letters*, *Wedge* and *Artery* ... but *BLOCK* was the first properly institutionally-based journal that was combining that look with rethinking notions of traditional discipline ... exploring interdisciplinarity in the field of culture”.⁶⁶



Figure 7

Cover of ZG 7 (1983), featuring *Desire* by Cindy Sherman. Digital image courtesy of ZG Magazine / © Cindy Sherman.

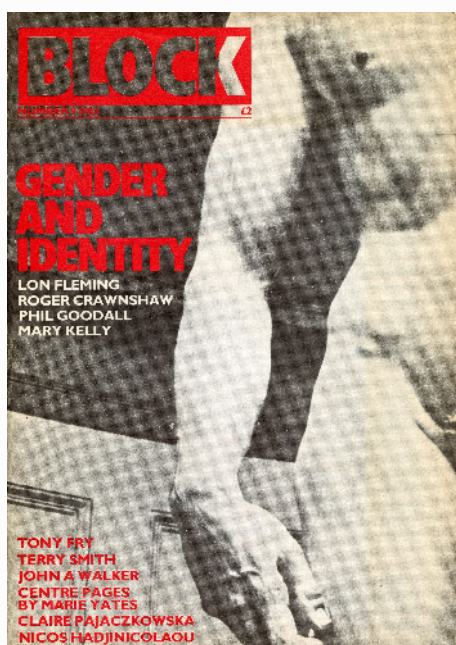


Figure 8

Cover of "Gender and Identity", special issue of *BLOCK* 9 (1983). Digital image courtesy of Middlesex Polytechnic.

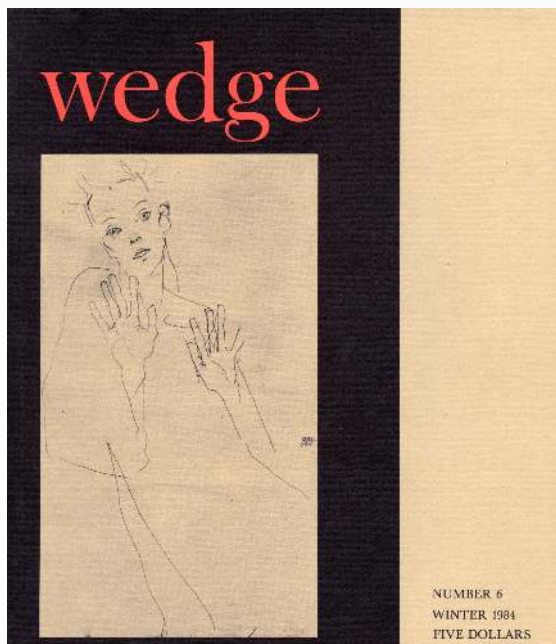


Figure 9

Cover of “Sexuality: Re/positions”, special issue of *Wedge* 6 (Winter 1984), featuring *Self-Portrait after Egon Schiele* by Sherrie Levine. Digital image courtesy of Brian Wallis and Phil Martini / © Sherrie Levine.

With such dramatic changes in the UK art publishing landscape taking place in a period when much broadsheet space dedicated to the arts was taken up by writers espousing views not dissimilar to his own, Fuller’s own break with “Althusserian Marxism”, as he described it, was a final response to the collapse of disciplinary boundaries within contemporary arts practice. Abandoning his previously held leftist political position, he wholeheartedly took up an intentionally parochial, anti-international perspective.⁶⁷ Positioning artists such as Graham Sutherland, Jacob Epstein, and Henry Moore as modernist inheritors of Ruskin’s and Morris’s British radicality, his turn to tradition assumed the form of a “critical stance towards the mass media as a substitute for aesthetic affirmation”.⁶⁸ What was less apparent was who the audience for such views was. Writing in almost every issue of *Art Monthly* for several years since its founding in 1976, and indeed maintaining a life through his writing, Fuller frequently drew on the democratic strengths of the medium to heckle a readership, often repeating his opinions, describing them and himself as persecuted and subsequently rejected by a dominant Left that was losing ground to an increasingly conservative landscape. His idea for a mainstream space for

culture became one that could support only art subjected to a “universal common-sense understanding” by the public at large. As suggested by Andrew Brighton, by abandoning the art world for the establishment, Fuller became more successful in his criticism but his arguments “got no more sophisticated”.⁶⁹

Fuller’s combative approach to criticism consistently exposed the contradictions of his ideas. Writing for *Artscribe* in the early days, and sharing with the editor James Faure Walker a scepticism for photoconceptualists such as Burgin, Stephen Willats, and Stezaker, Fuller’s response to *Artscribe*’s “Painting Now” issue placed him at odds with Faure Walker. Fuller’s critique of the formalism of painters such as John Hoyland and Bernard Cohen, put forward by the magazine, exposed an overly simplistic understanding of an external public as “simply *one* public with *one* unanimous voice”, as commented by Faure Walker.⁷⁰ This exchange would conflict with Fuller’s later assessment of painting “now”, as *Modern Painters* aligned itself further with Kitaj, Hoyland, and others represented in the Royal Academy’s *New Spirit in Painting* exhibition in 1981.⁷¹ By describing Fuller’s supposed “disgust at things bourgeois”, Walker touched on one of the central failings of Fuller’s magazine writing across these two decades, which was also reflected in the mainstream press: his attitude that “the public audience” should either share his opinions or be led towards them. Instead Fuller’s radical vision for magazines and art criticism became one that was unified by and subject to his opinions, rather than a critical space that welcomed debate from an informed and engaged audience. When he was challenged, the resulting exchange, more often than not, was enough to make one wonder who could possibly agree with either respondent, as demonstrated by the exchange in the letters page of *Art Monthly* when Toni del Renzio took issue with Fuller’s antagonistic review of the *Hayward Annual* in 1986 (fig. 10).⁷²

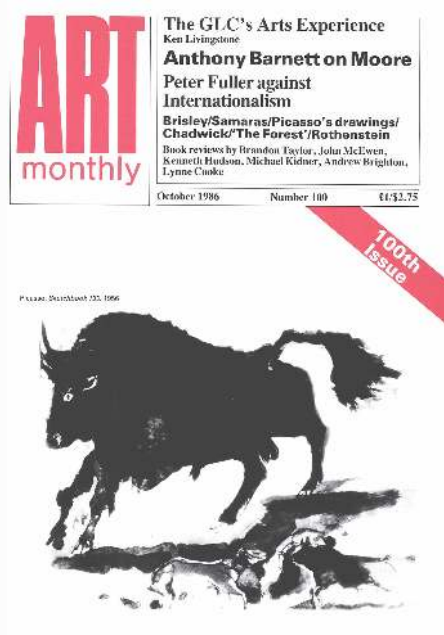


Figure 10

Cover of *Art Monthly* 100 (October 1986). Digital image courtesy of Art Monthly Foundation.

In “Clearing a Space for Criticism”, Fuller argued that an editorial commitment to exposing the transitory and transactional relationship between the market and history on the perception of art would strengthen critical discourse.⁷³ Such processes of demystification could only be performed by a critic prepared to “search for the contradictions in his own perception”. The contradiction of *Modern Painters* was its marginalisation from the contemporary art world, of which Fuller had previously been a part. Launched during a wider economic recession, many of the aforementioned smaller magazines had ceased publishing and editorships had changed. Faure Walker had left *Artscribe*, before it added *International* to its title; Brian Sewell had replaced Richard Cork as art critic on *The Evening Standard*; and there was a return to painting in the neo-romantic style, as seen in the galleries of both the Royal Academy and Bernard Jacobson, who backed the magazine financially. Having left behind the politics that had motivated his original critical reflection, Fuller’s first editorial, titled “A Renaissance in Art?”, noted through an indiscriminate citation of statistics a wide “public indifference” to the art and culture he considered a “sham”, and levelled similarly arbitrary criticisms at *Artscribe International*, citing subscription and circulation numbers without context. Using the first issue to settle some scores by inviting Matthew Collings, until recently editor of

Artscribe International, to engage in a “self-interview” by responding to prompts from the magazine, the article instead revealed a continuing ambivalence to Fuller’s ideas of a British “traditional sensibility”. By declaring that any art-viewing audience would be able to consider these ideas for themselves, Collings echoed the same sentiments voiced by Faure Walker a decade earlier. Fuller’s turn to tradition in *Modern Painters* foreclosed the critical space his earlier writing had attempted to clear. Sir Roy Shaw’s article, “Art for Whom?”, reiterated the tensions related to the exhibition of the same name at the Serpentine in 1978, and created a jarring sense of disconnection from the proposed “public” audience and the readership being served by such retrospection from the establishment by inviting the former secretary general to reflect on the current state of the Arts Council. As Fuller’s vision of a radical tradition celebrated in the present failed to find purchase beyond the pages of the magazine, the possibility of a British art renaissance, couched as a question in the title of his editorial, remained unaddressed.



Figure 11

Cover of *Synthesis: A New Magazine of the Arts* 1, no. 1 (June 1969). Digital image courtesy of Peter Fuller / Roy Fuller.

Fuller’s editorship of *Modern Painters* was short, and the launch of *Frieze* magazine in 1991, along with the YBA movement almost subsumed any other articulations of this period. The deregulated and devolved artistic mainstream of

the 1990s navigated a route that in its disavowal of Marxist institutional critique for entrepreneurship, mined the commercial “free” market for potential. In 2006, after a period of investment by the state in the “culture industry”, *Frieze* revisited the questions originally posed by *Studio International* in 1976 to see what had changed. Finding again a publishing environment that had critically failed to address the economic conditions of those involved as contributors, Richard Cork, invited to comment on the results, said: “As a critic myself, I ended up wondering how anyone without a salary or a trust fund can possibly afford to write for art magazines at all”.⁷⁴ *Modern Painters* wasn’t Fuller’s first magazine. In 1969 he had launched *Synthesis: A New Magazine of the Arts*, with the accompanying editorial note: “We want to break down the tyranny of the closed, critical circles and the facetious escapism of the underground press, which in their different ways, are at present preventing the objective observer from seeing what is happening in the arts” (fig. 11).⁷⁵ Combining poetry and fiction writing alongside features on David Hockney and on the film-makers Lindsay Anderson and Jean-Luc Godard, the magazine, in its attempt to explore underground scenes along with those involved in more commercial ventures, sounds not dissimilar to the publication space Fuller himself wrote about in 1976. *Synthesis*, as described by J. J. Charlesworth, was a magazine “where the counterculture and the mainstream coincided”. Just as Cork failed to recognise his own agency in relation to an art world in crisis, perhaps Fuller, having disavowed his radical past, refused to understand that he had already produced the critical space he so desired.

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A Ruskin Effect?

Art historians may at times feel discomfort, even disaffection, with the ideologies underpinning the foundation of their discipline. Yet rarely does this discomfort amount to a bodily shudder. Such is the visceral reaction brought on by the first few pages of the inaugural issue of *Modern Painters*, at least for those scholars (myself included) invested in the study of modernism and its