

## Swell maps: the pros of limits

Gwynneth Porter questions Natural Selection designer Warren Olds under duress about the Art Forum Berlin session “Publishing Without Limits: New Directions for Art Magazines” he attended in August. It featured panellists Gabriel Kuri – Casper magazine, Mexico; Power Ekroth – SITE magazine, Stockholm; Mircea Cantor – Version artist-run magazine, Bucharest; Massimiliano Gioni – Charley, New York/Milan; and moderator Anton Vidokle – e-flux, New York.

**Gwynneth Porter: I thought “Publications without Limits” sounded interesting as an Arcadian (or, on the other hand, difficulty adverse?) proposition, but I wasn’t sure what it was really supposed to be about. You were there, what was it to address? (I know you are over-worked, but I thought it would be interesting for us to discuss this given that NS4 is being launched at an exhibition about self-organised publications projects<sup>1</sup>...)**

Warren Olds: I can tell you exactly if you like [quotes from the blurb]:

Rattling the chains of art magazine publishing recently has been the advent of a number of new publications whose innovations and experiments are reinventing the idea of the art magazine. Of these new journals, some have been initiated by artists in places with little access to mainstream magazines – Version from Bucharest, e.g. – while others, such as Charley, which digests and processes images, artworks, articles and previously published materials, in order to reshuffle and re-interpret information, change content and format at each and every appearance. Still others, resolved not to concern themselves with alienating readers, provide challenging theoretical content – SITE, from Stockholm, is a good example – or deconstruct the magazine format entirely. What all these new ventures have in common is their desire to bypass the limitations of conventional art publishing – e.g. distribution, circulation, structure, content complexity and nominal intellectual demands made on the readers – by re-envisioning and reinventing the hidebound practices of mainstream art magazines. Our panel takes a close look at these new publications and engages their editors in a critical discussion.

There was a bit on the proceedings where the title was talked about. The Italian guy in New York from Charley said [note with tolerance that I am recollecting this from memory and from a hastily reviewed mp3 file] that many interesting art magazines are born because of limits. The biggest limit actually being money. He talked about this as something that is struggled with by people who set up magazines, but that there is also a compelling freedom in publishers not wanting to invest a cent in someone’s magazine ideas.

Initially Charley was conceived of as less of a book or a publication, but a space, a place in which things could happen. Conceiving of it in this way allowed them to come up with the idea of a magazine where every issue reinvents itself. The basic idea of Charley is that he has no fixed format, no fixed content, except that he has to be art. He has no deadlines. When they want, they do a magazine.

**Masculinising the pronoun is lovely in Europe isn’t it? I wonder how talking like that affects people – thinking of inanimate objects as masculine and feminine. Perhaps they are. She, the table... Does chivalry apply to furniture I wonder.**

I dunno.

He said they set themselves some limits; and that limits have creative potential – when you have a problem, you have to find a solution. The magazine had to be extremely cheap, costing the least possible to be produced. Every issue had to be a do-it-yourself desktop publishing project. The name came about to suggest an ordinary person. He had to be based on recycling. Based entirely on recycling. Everything has already been published elsewhere, used by someone else. Which made sense coming from a place like New York where there is so much art publishing. Charley could be a place where things are digested.

**That’s kind of like Warhol’s idea of left-overs – if you change your desire to match what is available as left-overs, you will always have whatever you want.**

I often forget to make leftovers... But yes – if you set yourself some limits, or rules, you end up having to do it.

I also liked how he said he, Charley, was not supposed to be about them, but about what they do not know. Their role was talked about as gathering material and creating visual tensions. They try not to impose taste. It’s not about who is hot, who you should buy, who you should forget... (Charley 3 was devoted to recycling material from the 80s, focusing on artists hyped at the time but since forgotten – artists who didn’t make the reconstructed version of the 80s that Artforum was undertaking, coincidentally, at the same time.)

**That runs up against the idea the all content must reflect the position of the editors, and material should be edited accordingly, and a homogenised voice established. Seeking out what they do not already know is a much more teachable editorial stance, a sort of radical curiosity...**

Perhaps, their focus is more on the process rather than the product. It’s the opposite of the second habit of highly effective people (to begin with the end in mind).<sup>2</sup>

They also run a gallery that they got for free – they don’t buy sell or deal, just show.

**I like how it’s just thought of as opening space generally, this project.**

**Did any discussion of limits really get going on the whole?**

Well the guy from Version (from Romania, based in Paris) said that their magazine came from the question why do students not have a space to show? This led to a magazine initially called “no name” magazine.

**That was the name of a cruiser club in Christchurch. There is also that idea that avoiding being named or classified is a way of ducking out of integrating processes...**

Version can be downloaded for free. It was done with their pocket money, he said.

Really, without limits, it was one of those classic kind of debate titles where they try to be controversial. But it's difficult to think about it in the “no limits” sense because you have to have limits. If you don't have limits I'm not sure what you'd end up with – maybe a lifestyle magazine?

Mostly it was a show-and-tell type thing. The way it was sort of formatted... I guess the idea was that each presenter would talk about their magazine, and this would be followed by a broader discussion. But after about two hours of this – well it was actually 1hr 16mins – no-one wants to have much of a discussion. And audiences usually ask weird self-interest questions. Those panel things are always a bit hit and miss. This was a pretty good one though – lots of stuff packed in there, even if it didn't get discussed much.

**What were some things you noticed though?**

Version magazine was set up by a bunch of people who had just graduated and wanted to start a magazine. In many ways I got the sense of a fair bit of self-interest in the process of doing that.

**With Version or all of them?**

All of them really. The people from Casper and from Charley and the Version people are all practising artists. [Site is, their rep said, about art theory and nothing else, and in some ways the most traditional magazine there. Not really an art magazine, but they do think that art is the only meta-structure of reality. Because it has 6-point type no one reads them, she said, so they can put any kind of text in they want. It is financed by collaboration. Quarterly funding is compulsory to get Swedish funding. It can be downloaded but because it is in 6pt you probably won't be able to read it, she said.] That was something I wondered, if, in part, their magazine was a way of disseminating their practice, or promoting it. Traditionally you would say you're not respecting 'the magazine', but really they just support each other.

**I've never been that convinced by the idea of objectivity or critical distance in art writing. I think a lot of artists, too, are attracted to the idea of cutting out the middle-man generally, and establishing more suitable contexts for their work.**

The Charley guy talked about it as setting up their own space, the fact that they didn't have a space to do what they wanted to do. Their practice has limits placed on it that usually wouldn't extend to publishing, but it means they have to look elsewhere, generally.

**An inverse relationship to real estate economics maybe...**

Well, yeah, but there has always been publishing in relation to art. The e-flux guy introduced the panel by talking really interestingly about the history of avant-garde art journals and how they had the most fantastic eccentric forms, from being secret societies, to being projects to create new kinds of human beings. He specifically wanted to undermine the idea that magazines are glossy, web-offset, A4ish sized things...

He also talked about how Fluxus came out of a meeting of Lithuanian immigrants in New York – originally a cultural club was proposed, and then a magazine was mooted which is where the name Fluxus came from. Vidokle thought it was interesting to consider this in light of Fluxus' future activities – multiples, ephemera, publications, almanacs, concerts, performances and happenings... He compared this to how Rosalind Krauss described extended cinema in her Voyage on the North Sea – how the medium's aggregate condition led to a slightly later generation of theorists finding support for the compound idea of the apparatus: the medium or support for film being neither the celluloid strip of the images nor the camera that filmed it; not the projector that brings them to life, nor the beam of light that relays them to the screen, and not the screen itself, but all of this taken together including the audience and its position, caught behind the source of light behind it and the image projected before our eyes...

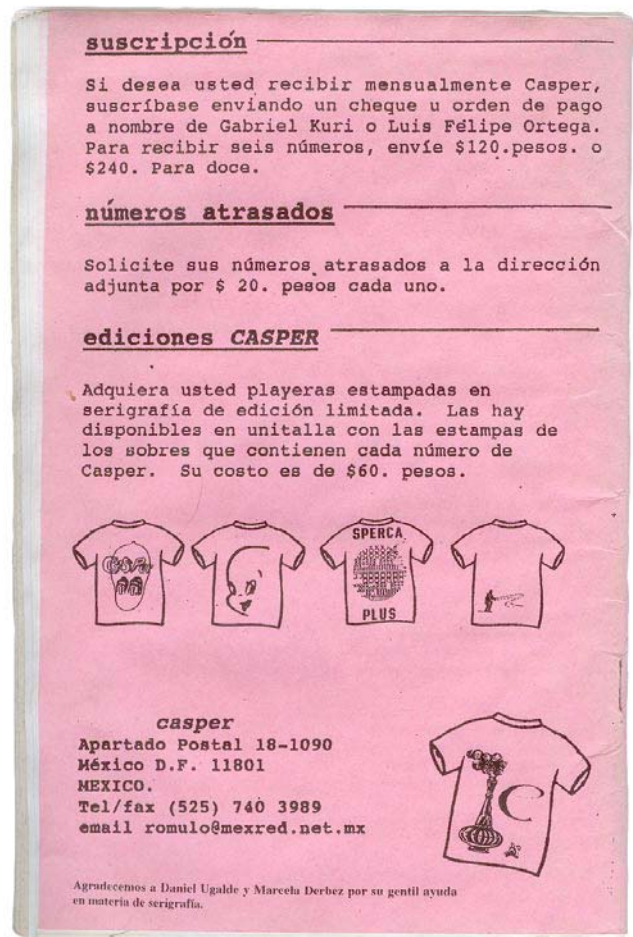
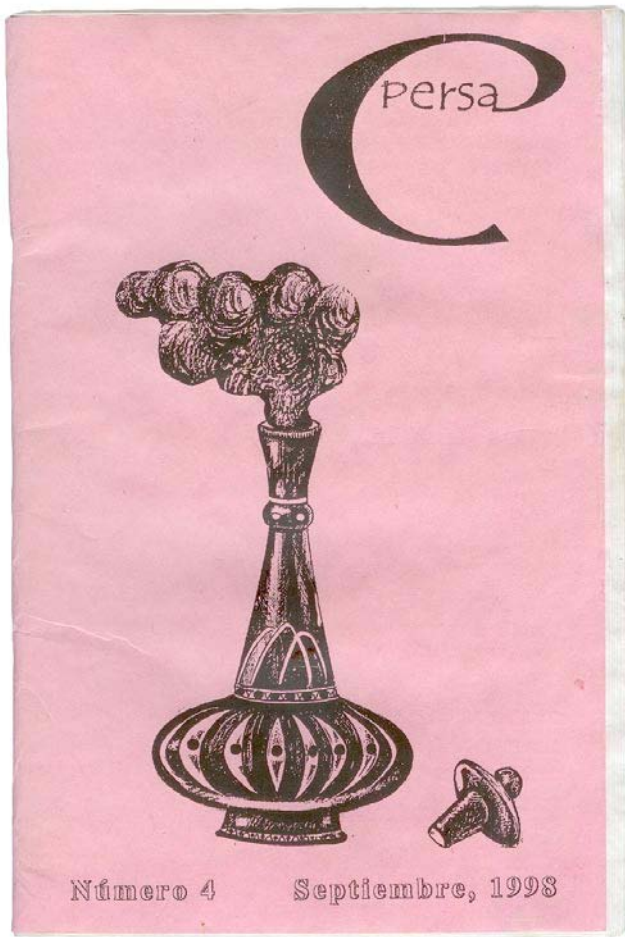
He talked about e-flux as being, similarly, a kind of expanded publication, to (quoting Molly Nesbit) fulfill a desire that art takes on the characteristics of all forms of social life.

He said when people ask him what e-flux is, he always gets thrown off by the question – it isn't a website, although they do have one. It isn't an advertising agency but they do publicise projects. It isn't a mailing list, although they do have a very large one. It isn't an NGO, although they sponsor more things than they probably should, he says. It is not a publisher, although they publish books. It is not a gallery but they have just opened a space that will house for a period their Video Rental project.

**I like that refusal to identify itself at the same time as operating very widely and particularly. I like the chimeric potential of web projects – conveniently invisible and uncontrollable entities/communities...**

Someone did say that by calling yourself a magazine are you placing a limit on yourself, and one of the panelists said, “but we wanted to make a magazine”.

There was discussion of establishment art magazines and the limits they place upon themselves – is there a limit between the editorial limits and economic limits, and how these have become conflated – those “not economically viable” reasons for making decisions. Does the magazine then end up being a big monster that rolls along not being that useful to anyone. I dunno. Usually in a magazine you have a redesign every now and again. Often this comes with an editorial revisal. I mean Artforum went through that in the early 90s where they became more of a style mag, with film and music, thinking that this was a way of broadening their market. But it sort of dilutes it as well. It ignores that fact that people might read more than one magazine.



There was also a small amount of discussion about distribution...

#### For print mags?

Yeah, distribution being a problem, about it costing money. And a question about whether this resulted in a closed audience. Distribution was also talked of as being a kind of promotion in itself, and costing money accordingly.

The Charley guy talked about their use of existing magazine distribution channels. Somebody takes care of this. They didn't see the need to reinvent the way magazines are distributed.

**Did they talk about the internet much? I mean three of the four magazines at the forum make great use of it...**

They talked about the immediacy of print. But it was discussed in terms of the digital adding something to the possibilities of print rather than replacing something...

#### Do online magazines suck?

I like the idea that when something is printed out, it can be read in more than one chair.

**Or, for laptop people, that reading can happen away from electrical devices and their hum. Or in bed without deleting the libido. I mean laptops are worse than TVs in the bedroom. I mean it has to stop somewhere. Also, I think there is a certain**

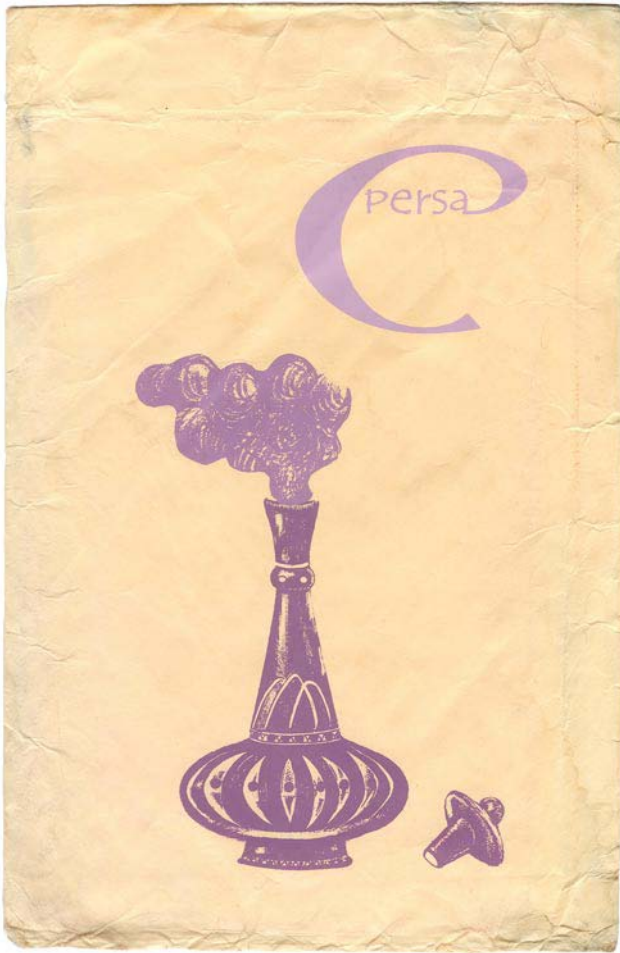
Left & Right: Front and back covers from issue #4 of Casper.

#### ocular nausea associated with screens...

**As far as limits go, they tilted at talking about relationships with money, and homogenisation. Did they talk about criticality in relation to art magazines?**

**I'm attracted to an idea of post-criticality I read into an Interactivist Info Exchange posting (Tiqqun, "How To?"). It said "Critique has become vain because it amounts to an absence. (...) It reproduces absence. It speaks to us from where we are not. It propels us elsewhere. It consumes us. It is craven. (...) Rather than new critiques, it is new cartographies we need. Not cartographies of Empire, but of the lines of flight out of it. How to? We need maps. Not maps of what is off the map. But navigating maps. Maritime maps. Orientation tools. That do not try to explain or represent what lies inside of the different archipelagos of desertion, but indicate how to join them..."**

**I read this as suggesting that movement forward might not come out off doing negative inventories on things one hates, as this just mires one in that that is being critiqued. Better to excitedly and energetically explore that which seems to represent some sort of solution; something that is of value, or that might show the way - criticism as "swell maps" of the what's-good-now? I don't think this necessarily has anything to do with the old adage "if you have nothing good to say, don't**



The envelope from issue #4 of Casper.

**say anything at all". That has had way too much mileage here.**

Well, I didn't get the sense that those on the panel had been forced into making their magazine or that they felt answerable to anybody. Overall their content and editorial decisions seemed more push than pull – not much bad energy at all really... Although one coked-up-seeming Berlin dealer took issue with the moderator's lengthy introduction, ironically asking him to speed up the reading of it. After agreeing to slow it down, he took up reading again at the same pace.

**Did they speculate much about the future of art mags? I ask this because I was wondering a little while ago about something Alan Kaprow said about how the future of art (in a discussion with Robert Smithson in the late 60s called "What is a Museum?") that seemed to me to have interesting implications, or, rather, bode well for spirited art magazines:**

**My opinion has been, lately, that there are only two outs: one implying a maximum of inertia, which I call 'idea' art, art which is usually only discussed now and then and never executed; and the other existing in a maximum of continuous activity, activity which is of uncertain aesthetic value and locates itself apart from cultural institutions. The minute we operate in between these extremes we get hung up (in a museum).**

**The magazine existing in the realm of the hypothetical, or something, where discourse and uncertainty are valued...**

As far as the future goes, Casper is re-appearing as an insert in a mainstream newspaper. The Site magazine lady talked about how they are publishing "lost" writings...

**What was the highlight?**

The Casper guy's manifesto... I think we could just insert it here because they plagiarise so gleefully themselves.

**Sure. Tessa gave me a couple of copies of Casper back in 1999 that she brought back to New Zealand, but she had them in her backpack at the gathering the year it rained a lot and by the time they got to me they were very wavy. But the aesthetic was excellent (they seem to suit being bashed) and I immediately loved the "I dream of Jeannie" cover and the Louise XVI chair fake tattoo giveaway. A lot of it I couldn't understand because it was in Spanish, but the content I could was very exciting and a real mash-up of enthusiasms and teathy commentary. I especially loved the friendly ghost title – it gave the whole thing an imaginary or supernatural status; even undead. The way they kept changing the title by mixing up the letters of Casper was ace too. It seemed to run quickly ahead and defy the way things can become fashionable and unfashionable by being identifiable and easily available. But most of all I liked its flagrancy and liberty; how Casper as a name suggests things that cannot be killed and (i.e. we can't be killed either because we don't need anyone else's cash).**

Here goes:

Casper begins not; it only restarts. This magazine supplement has lived, half-died and has reborn more than once. Casper, Sperca, Pescar, Persac, Pacers, Scrape has as many lives as it has combinations of its constituent letters and takes that shape dictated by necessity, and necessities of light doses of Caprice. This initiative of four artists – Daniel Guzmán, Gabriel Kuri, Damián Ortega and Luis Felipe Ortega – has not been miraculous, nor heroic. We did not invent boiling water, nor do we split the water in two but we do what it takes for it to be channelled into the pipeline. We do not want others to channel it for us. We do not believe in the possibility of occupying other running publication spaces. We do not believe in the conviviality of visual arts with almost anything. We do not believe that what concerns us as artists is being discussed seriously enough, nor humorously enough. We do not believe in many things but we do believe in re-incarnation. This is why we choose an organism that, starting with its name, is capable of re-invention. Casper is again a monthly project that will live for one year. We hereby announce its pending death so that it will not be interpreted as premature but more importantly so that whoever wants to get involved understands the gift of its scheduled life as one that should be lived with urgency and plenitude before convention catches up with it. The spirit of Casper, or Casper as a spirit, feeds off collaboration. We would like to channel the energies and efforts of our colleagues. We would like to disseminate information, and consume it. We would like to do this all seriously. We want to do it and why not have fun as well? We demand control over the voice but also over the tone of it, and we know that in order to do so we must open some doors, close others and allow others to be opened only by secret code. The first step to democratise the flux of information, and particularly the one that concerns and interests us, is assuming that democracy is not possible. We do not want to create consensus. We only hope to be responsible in our

nepotism. We do not want to professionalise our task but we do want to play rather seriously.

– Tentative manifesto of August 17th 2004, to appear on the front page of re-launch of Casper as a supplement insert in a major circulation Mexican newspaper.

**I like how they don't have a website. Professionalism is indeed a scourge. (It is said that the history of professionalism dates back to Machiavelli.) I also love the conflation of high seriousness and high humour.**

He gave some history... Casper was a monthly magazine that was produced in Mexico City between 1998-89. Produced manually and available by mail-order. Distributed to a handful of international outlets further afield. Original and plagiarised material was gathered together, neatly photocopied and sold for 30 pesos. It was deemed important that it was not given away for free so some sort of contract was sealed between producer and consumer. A magazine made by artists about art, and other topics – literature, politics, the pathetic state of Mexican comedy on TV... It came out of discussions between the people making it. Each item was printed as though it was being thrown into a conversation, somewhat like speaking out in print.

It was announced at the outset that there would be only 13 numbers, and then mutate into another form, as yet unknown. The letters were shifted in each title so it became a graphic and phonetic deception in 13 parts. Their credo (if there ever was one, he said) was having non-discriminatory attitude towards the source. They treated with equality original material and plagiarised material. Casper remains an exercise in distributing printed words as well as images, posters, stickers and other trinkets. They made a decision to not compromise the length of features, because to some extent the limits of magazines often dictate content in ways that is not very good.

It was set up initially as a response to a lack of printed critique. The same lack exists, of critical thought, so they thought a magazine produced and consumed by the art community doesn't seem to be a challenge any longer. This is why they decided to shift their energies to producing a supplement for a Mexican newspaper. They have a distaste for how art gets mentioned in one or two pages in style magazines sandwiched between an ad and a bar review. It is important, in their minds, to resist this kind of commodification; the all-engulfing element of style – the way pop culture assimilates art. It's important that art does not resist in the same terms. Art must arrange its forms constantly, reassess their own forms rather than adapt to existing circulation systems. The political efficacy of magazines depends on time but not novelty even though this might sound like a contradiction.

He ended up by saying that they are stripping the word to its phonetic constituents, and the image to its photocopy and newspaper-friendly inkblots...

**Tricks have become necessary in order to gain ground, mercurially...**

**In the interests of getting behind what you like in the way of publications, what were highlights of your time in Holland/Belgium/Germany?**

Well, we ended up discovering some wonderful people who run the Hotel Maria Kapel in the sleepy port town of Hoorn. A hotel/residency for artists with a medieval chapel as an exhibition space. When we stayed, there was an exhibition by a Glaswegian collective called Something Haptic. Their work was a life-size section of a ferris wheel, and I discovered they also operate a not-for-profit publishing house called Trajectory. Its focus is on artists' books of any form. They also do this thing called Number where they take 600-800 word submissions and publish them as complimentary or contrasting pairs. We are hoping to promote the free dissemination of opinion, and as such the project receives no funding, and neither pays nor charges fees of any kind, they say. I also came across another small art publishing house based in Amsterdam (ROMA Publications). I found the existence of these initiatives encouraging.

**It would be great to see more of that happening here. It doesn't need to break the bank, does it?**

Not necessarily.

What did I miss while I was away?

**Well now that you live over the road from us, you know the park down the road? Well, in January, I was over there walking up that kind of abandoned bit where the steps go up to Hopetoun St. I was looking at the ground and trying to ignore this horrible smell, kind of poo, kind of rotting animal, but not convincingly either. I saw some red and pink and white spotted orchid-like flowers scattered on the ground under these big trees and I thought to myself that I had never seen flowers like them before and wondered what on earth trees they fell from. Some sub-tropical plant my temperate mind imagined. Upon close inspection I realised that they grew straight out of the ground. I mean sweet-smelling naked ladies grow out of the ground on stems with no leaves, but there weren't even any stems. And it was the flowers that were emitting the awful smell – there were even dabs of greeny-black sticky stuff on them that said smearable shit to me. I could see that one of them was coming out of a testicular pouch that was visible in the decomposing leaf matter they were growing out of. I told Tessa about it and she found out that they are fungus whose Latin name translates to 'Disgusting Red'. Next year I'll let you know when they are up again.**

Cracker.

#### Notes

1. *Sharp Shooting: self-published journals, zines, posters and ephemera by artists and designers*, St Paul St gallery, Auckland University of Technology, 13 April – 14 May, 2005.
2. Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989.