Evidence of the Hand in *Art/Life* in Light of the Livre D’Artiste

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**ABSTRACT**

This essay dwells upon the human hand, on its evidence in pages of *Art/Life*. Evidence of the Hand is a motif in publisher Joe Cardella’s personal artwork, both on and off *Art/Life* pages. Examining a few key dimensions of this motif, we first discuss the hand’s appearance in all of Volume 1 (1981), as well as in selected instances throughout later issues. Second, we linger on *Art/Life*’s earliest collages as art’s high-brow ‘aura’ took a hit with printing technology’s first democratic offering to artists. Following a natural progression, we then turn our attention to *Art/Life* as democratic medium, focusing on an international mail art project. This essay then closes this treatment with a zoom-in on first and last anniversary issues. The only issue ever boxed, the November/December issue of Volume One allowed for an explosion of artistic and material possibilities, leading to the transformation of *Art/Life* from two-dimensional Xerox-based zine to multimedia artist-book collected and archived by the world’s leading academic and art institutions. This development culminated in *Art/Life*’s 25th Anniversary Issue.

**KEYWORDS**

*Art/Life* Limited Edition Monthly; Joe Cardella; livre d’artiste; artist book; Fluxus

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we find when we turn the page? As we peruse a colored piece of acetate, or fragment of aluminum, when we find dried berries, jingling bells or burlap, or even a bit of yellow cloth from a Christo umbrella, we are initiated into a given material culture, with unique social and historical dimension. The artist’s material existence turns between our fingers. We imagine ways in which artists wrestle with material properties, or luck out, discovering something new about printed cellophane or dirt from the New York boroughs. As a contributor to Art/Life prepared each month’s submission of artwork, he or she made 200 “original permutations” of the same piece, adhering to 8 1/2” × 11” format, sending them to Cardella before the 15th of each month. “No one could be late,” Cardella says, “only early for the next issue” (Cardella “Art/Life Interview-Part 2”).

Today we are all “readers” of Art/Life, those of us with opportunity to visit an archiving institution, or have copies of our own. We hold the limited monthly in our hands, turn its pages, inspect its three dimensions, and observe layers of collaged semiotic display, words on text, and text on word. What we forget is the fourth dimension of Art/Life – time. Art/Life circulated among collaborating artists for 25 years. Each artist would respond in real time to their own and others’ lives. From month to month, year to year, artists checked in. Some, for example, Michael Row, John Piper, Rudolph, Henning Mittendorf, and other All-Stars were in most issues, while other “one shot wonders” disappeared as shooting stars into the maelstrom of an ongoing publication. Artists documented births, marriages, deaths, and heartbreak, hailing from all climes. Art/Life’s post-office box was an unending store of surprises, stuffed with 25 years of mail art. From January 1981 to January 2006, the publisher individually handled multiple times two and half million pages. Each month, between 30 and 40 artists’ pages were collated and Vello bound into an original artist book by the Art/Life assembly crew at headquarters in first Santa Barbara (1981–1984) and then Ventura, CA (1985–2006). Lastly, issues were then sent to contributors, subscribers (such as Yale University Library), and archiving institutions (such as Harvard University Library) in over a dozen countries.

This essay dwells upon the human hand, on its evidence in pages of Art/Life. “Evidence of the Hand” is a motif in publisher Joe Cardella’s personal artwork, both on and off Art/Life pages. We turn now to a few key dimensions of this motif. First, this essay discusses the hand’s appearance in all of Volume 1 (1981), as well as in selected instances throughout later issues. Second, we linger on Art/Life’s earliest collages as art’s high-brow “aura” took a hit with printing technology’s first democratic offering to artists. Following a natural progression, we then turn our attention to Art/Life as democratic medium, focusing on an international mail art project. We then close this treatment with a zoom-in on first and last anniversary issues. The only issue ever boxed, the November/December issue of Volume 1, allowed for an explosion of artistic and material possibilities, leading the transformation of Art/Life from two-dimensional Xerox-based zine to multimedia artist book collected and archived by the world’s leading academic and art institutions. This development culminated in Art/Life’s 25th Anniversary Issue.

1. Evidence of the hand in Volume 1 (1981) and later issues

1.1. The drawing/drawn hand

The reader sees a reproduction of the original cover of Volume 1, Issue 1, published in 1981 or the first issue’s cover made by Joe Cardella with a roll of nickels and a Xerox
machine at the Santa Barbara Public Library. As the artist is right-handed, he had to use his left hand to produce an image of the artist’s right-hand drawing. This reference to self-reflexivity in art evokes a Chinese Chan or Japanese Zen esthetic, fusing subject and object in a relationship of identity. Art/Life’s formula of identity between art and life is “Art is to Life as Life is to Art. Each is the other and both are one and the same.” This formula (\(A:L::L:A, A = L, L = A\)) is drawn as type font, visual formula, or semiotic component consistent through Art/Life’s 25-year run, from first to last issues.

1.2. **Reach for the Sky**

*Reach for the Stars* (1981) is Cardella’s first use of the whole hand as principle subject in an artwork. In it we see the inked print of right-hand palm and finger pads. Rubber-stamped rocket ships take off into the stars, as five other hands vary in darkness/lightness and upward/downward orientation. The full-hand motif appears much more bluntly in *Reach for the Sky* (plastic glove stuffed with glitter and sparkles mounted on white Xerox stock paper) within the first anniversary issue of Art/Life. As mentioned above, Volume 1, Issue 11, was bound loose-leaf within a 3/4” tall white box. This allowed artworks to be folded and placed loosely between two other pages.

1.3. **Art/Life’s earliest collages – Xerox manifestations**

After that hand-drawing-hand first cover was made with a roll of nickels on a Xerox machine at the Santa Barbara public library, rapid developments of color Xeroxing proved form-shattering, changing the art praxis of Art/Life by the publication’s second year. Above we see a black and white Xerox by John McCuish revealing jagged edges of hand-torn pages from a chess manual. This fragmented chess thematic features semi-prominently at the start of Art/Life, one of many woven skeins of varying duration throughout a 25-year development. What’s interesting here is this reproduction of an original, consisting in fragments of reproduction, a chess game between truth and ourselves. We trace substance in the artist’s message.

We see levels of representation in texture. A photocopy of what looks like crinkled aluminum provides a two-dimensional fractal textured surface, over which is placed a small square of the original layer, upon which the artist collages a television set picturing a high-contrast landscape during either sunrise or sunset. These choices we make as “reader” of this page challenge us, play with our mind. We are merely dealt the artist’s hand. This piece of Xerox art asks us to discern how shadows work. What material serves as backdrop? Of what are these severed hands made? With the artist book, we set to understanding its physical parameters first, before interpreting “content.”

1.4. **Mail art campaign – Art/Life as democratic medium**

In as early as Volume 2 (1982), Art/Life launched a mail art campaign aimed at raising awareness of this extremely tactile and effective mode of communication. It takes a human hand to send a letter. Each piece of mail changes hands many times en route to us, taking longer than email or phone. The international mail art movement is a democratic artistic movement based on sending artwork through postal services. Its
development is inextricably tied to Ray Johnson’s New York School of Correspondence and the Fluxus movement in the 1950s and 1960s.

Cardella’s move in the 1970s from New York brought a Fluxus-informed art practice to Santa Barbara, CA. After being forced to move his studio more than once, he began culling art production, making it more mobile. He no longer wanted to occupy so much physical space with his work, finding mail art to be the best way forward. This praxis of producing a monthly artist book/journal via mail pivoted Cardella into the position of not only curator but also publisher of artworks.

The only parameters Art/Life artists heeded were its size requirement and submission deadline. The size requirement posed an initial problem for European artists, as their A4 paper sized slightly narrower and taller. For works that were expensive or time consuming, Cardella recommended artists go through a proof process with him, to avoid having all 200 works returned at the artist’s expense. The proof process was both disciplined and liberal.

1.5. First year anniversary issue – objects!

Art/Life anniversary issues can to a certain extent exemplify a given year’s volume. Cardella chose to box an issue for the first and last time. Volume 1 Issue 1’s four pages had been stapled at the upper left-hand corner. Much of its first three years were bound by left margin plastic slip cover. From Volume 4 onwards, Art/Life was Vello bound along its left margin.

Volume 1 Issue 11’s box is white, with Art/Life cover printed in red. This ensemble is wound round with red cross ribbon, a golden orb attached just right off-center, a crossing point of vertical and horizontal horizons. Up until this boxed issue, pages were mostly two-dimensional. After this issue, objects were mostly embedded within pages, or chanced falling out. This issue’s binding provided outer encasements beyond all margins, allowing four artists to place unattached objects freely between pages. A reader takes these objects into one’s own hands, turns them over, and pries at them.

1.6. 25th year anniversary issue – uroborotic culmination, coming full circle

If Art/Life anniversary issues can to a certain extent exemplify a given year’s volume, then Art/Life’s final 25th Anniversary Issue serves as an over-arching micro-narrative of its 25-year run. As Cardella puts it, referring to cover artwork “Original Formula” of this issue, “This is the Alpha and Omega, a lid on the whole time capsule, with everything else underneath it” (Cardella “Evidence of the Hand”). Indeed, a lid is made from heavy ceramic tile, set into stained plywood frame, and mounted on hardboard cover. The publisher wanted to reproduce the cover of Volume 1 Issue 1 wherein he had used his left hand to sketch his right-hand writing. His aim this time was to do something no one could replicate. This All-Star issue produces not only a unique facsimile of Volume 1 Issue 1’s cover image “Evidence of the Hand” but also photocopies that entire Issue 1, including it at the front of Volume 25, Issue 11. As the uroboros eats its tail, Issue 275 uses Issue 1’s cover and swallows this whole issue’s textual body into itself.
This final issue of Art/Life rings true to its meta-creator by bringing his projects “Evidence of the Hand” and “Reach for the Stars” to final fruition, ending at the beginning. There are works by long time contributors such as Michael Row, Ann Harithas, and Steve Knauff, each pulling all the stops for this final Art/Life artwork, to honor a quarter-century. So in addition to its uroboros character, Art/Life’s 25-year development reveals a fugue-like progression, spiraling to higher registers as All-Stars mastered the 8 1/2” × 11” format, and delivering deft parting shots.

2. Problems for the artist book — challenges for archiving institutions

2.1. Archiving institutions scramble for methodology

Original published art is a challenge to archiving institutions curating the artist book. It’s precisely this oxymoron (original – published) which precipitates a failure of some archival institutions to effectively manage and present artist-book collections. Intra-textual and genre-bending traditions of the livre d’artiste demand new integrated categories. Unmodified strains of culture, media, style, and thought render Art/Life difficult to grasp. Periodicals are rarely artist books; artist-made periodicals rarely run long. Museums and libraries remain unsure how to present or talk about the artist book.

With a recent bump in hand-art popularity; letterpress, zines, and independent printing resources thrive. In “From Mail Art 101 to History of the Book,” in her essay The Artist’s Book Challenges Academic Convention, Lynne S. Vieth discusses how some archiving institutions rise to the challenge of curating their artist book collections. They do so by working interdepartmentally in collaboration with other experts in various fields. She discusses how stewarding institutions are meeting with one another, of arts writers working with librarians to draw accurate conclusions based upon research (Vieth 14–19).

Vieth opens her article talking about a 2005 Artists’ Book Conference in Los Angeles, organized by the Southern California Chapter of the Art Libraries Society of North America, where critical discourses were developed and methodologies debated and lectured on;

From hands-on preservation workshops to more esoteric discussions about reading and cataloguing artists’ books, the democratic appeal at the heart of this most inclusive and multifaceted of art forms was on display. (Vieth 14)

If that was over a decade ago, we have to wonder why artworks of Art/Life All-Stars Steve Knauff, M.B. Hanrahan, Joe Cardella, Frank Gillette, Dennis Oppenheim, Michael Row, and others sit so silently in the pages of Art-Life. We also have to wonder why some museums who own complete sets of the limited monthly have yet to unbox them. Fortunately there are others, such as the Los Angeles County Museum library, who have the entire set permanently showcased for public access on request.

Those institutions which do invest in the dissemination of Art/Life, in development of discourse about this early form of social media, will find that collaboration between disciplines such as art, philosophy, textual production, library science, material science, and social science will yield the most organic data concerning early Fluxus, New York, and Southern California avant-garde art. This early analog experiment in social media has yet to reach the zenith of its powers.
Notes

1. “Communication for the Creative Mind” was the banner slogan on Art/Life Limited Editions’ transparent plastic cover for the duration of the publication’s run.

2. These objects are indexed in “An Index of Objects Used by Artists on the Pages of the First 164 Issues of Art/Life,” compiled by Art/Life All-Star Michael Row with the assistance of Joe Cardella and Perry Row. Completed and published for the first time over a decade earlier, this index is published in its entirety in Art/Life’s 25th Anniversary Issue.

3. For an astute attempt at new categories in cataloging the livre d’artiste, see Drucker (3–16).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Since obtaining her PhD from Sichuan University in Classical Chinese Literature, Dr Sophia Kidd has been visiting scholar at Ruhr University Bochum and University of Göttingen where she lectured on Chinese contemporary art and politics as well as the role of cultural production in the building of China’s One Belt One Road strategy. Her PhD research focused on spatial production and literary geography in Eastern Jin Guo Pu’s literature, in particularly his “River Fu.” Sophia Kidd works as an arts professional, scholar, and writer in both Southwest USA and Southwest China, integrating an approach that utilizes regional esthetics and cultural studies to gain both synchronic and diachronic insight into the greater milieu of China’s role in global governance.

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