

# ARCHAEOLOGY

## IMPULSE

# It Will Happen

**I went back and I went back trying to write the *Impulse* introduction. An ironic situation: never before in my life was writing difficult: I would tell others how to write, advising them to just let it flow, write: it will happen, try. And here I was unable myself.**

*Eldon Garnet* 1979



Polaroids from the Journals of Eldon Garnet

History? But who remembers in honest detail. What I wanted to provide was not a chronological historical description, but a rough explanation of who it was that produced *Impulse*. However, that direction always led directly back to me: and I didn't know if I was ready yet to write my autobiography, to let you know what actually transpired: all the sordid details. And, although there might be some denial here, I was never an egomaniac. I remember one glossy magazine out of Los Angeles called *EgoZine*, which only published material about the editor. *Impulse* may have been my vision, but it was not about me: I was just the inquisitive conduit through which the material flowed, and the keyword here is *inquisitive*. I wanted to know everything, everywhere. It was culture in the making.

*Impulse* was primarily an artist's magazine. I was an artist and everyone who was integral to the magazine saw themselves as an artist producing a magazine. We had to teach ourselves the skills of editors, designers, publishers: no one was formally taught, no one designed an issue of *Impulse* who wasn't a practising, exhibiting artist. As the executive editor and publisher, I was not part of the established publishing world, but rather an artist who decided to produce a magazine as part of his art practice. It wasn't that difficult a notion in the 1980s: I developed as an artist on Marcel Duchamp's approach and 1960s conceptualism. The '80s were infused with a post-Duchampian conceptualism: from the late 1960s on, Duchamp, the early conceptualists, and Andy Warhol made art the most expansive of territories. So, of course, a magazine was art not in terms of the commercial galleries and museums, but art on the street, in the public, and in the art, architecture, literary, film, critical, theoretical, technological, and scientific worlds: all at once and all together: the world of culture: from the Caves of Lascaux to computer production.

My vision of *Impulse* was as impulsive as the world of the late 1970s, as expansive as the 1980s. We played to create a magazine of the era, in which it was both product and reflection: reflecting the cultural moment, by necessity a part of the cultural moment.

The 'we' of *Impulse* is what kept it alive, active, able to continue its existence: a constant energy supply of individual talents working together. I might

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*Mary Ann Hanet* 1979



*Sylvère Lotringer* 1979

have been the spark, the centre from which an energy flowed, but it was a collective activity.

I inherited *Impulse*, the small literary magazine, in 1974 from Peter Such, who had established it in 1971. *Impulse* at the time may have had no sense of design and style, but it did have one simple principle which I believed in: ‘Please do not send critical articles or reviews.’ Throughout *Impulse’s* history there were no reviews of exhibitions, performances, activities: only primary expression by cultural producers: as close to the voice of the artist as possible.

Peter Such had published my poetry in the first issue of the magazine along with works by such future Canadian literary icons as Margaret Atwood, Al Purdy, Dennis Lee, and Matt Cohen. In my youth, I was a hot young poet. Such had heard about my master’s thesis, a critical anthology of thirteen Canadian poets, each of whom had published at least one book, but most of whom had released many books from small Canadian presses. According to my master’s thesis, these poets were too radical to be published by the Canadian publishing establishment. My critical anthology manuscript was sent out for possible publication and duly rejected by the major Canadian publishers, thereby proving my thesis. Only Peter Such’s *Impulse* and Press Porcépic, recently established by Dave Godfrey, saw the necessity of publishing this anthology, and they did so, first as a double issue of the magazine and later, with a slightly altered cover, as a book, *Where? The Other Canadian Poetry*.

As editor and novice designer of this critical anthology issue, the last poetry issue of *Impulse*, I always felt I had paid my literary dues. After Such gave me the magazine, complete with a rudimentary granting structure and a business manager, I abandoned the magazine’s small-press literary roots and turned it into a visual magazine. My first issue as editor/publisher/designer was a monograph of the photographs of Fletcher Starbuck.

All the issues produced after this photographic monograph were first and foremost conceptually and visually directed. At the time, ‘Expect the unexpected’ was my anthem. The first releases after the Starbuck photo issue were small glossy journals, probes into visual culture in which artists were invited to create art for publication in a magazine. Such artists’ production

was exemplified by Les Levine and Michael Snow. Snow used ten pages of one issue to publish out-of-focus Polaroid blow-up images of the introductory pages of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Zettel*. Les Levine went even further, creating an entire issue of the magazine as proposals for sculpture, a series of photographs of a small outdoor party: ‘The following photographs are proposals for a series of sculptures with performers yet to be executed.’ The attempt was to take the form of the magazine beyond the expectations of a magazine, to experiment with the form of the magazine as container, to give the reader something unexpected. From 1975 to 1978, *Impulse* was known as a magazine of changing formats. I was obsessively interested in the notion of change and disruption. I was young, working basically alone, with a fuck-you attitude toward audience. Marshall McLuhan at the time, who liked *Impulse* but really did not understand me, described me as a ‘hopeless romantic’ after watching my early video work. In reality, I was a typical diehard avant-gardist, with dadaist tendencies: not an uncommon ailment of energetic artists in their early twenties.

It was the logic of exploring the possibilities of the magazine beyond the prescribed expectation of a magazine that led to the release of *Impulse* as a long-playing record in 1976. Naturally, the expectation would be for an art magazine to produce an experimental sound work, something John Cage-like, or at least an atonal non-musical experience, or perhaps a spoken-word record. So, if that was what everyone expected, I couldn’t do it: I had to push further, and what I edited/produced was an LP of the songs of Joe Hall. In retrospect, I can attribute my attraction to the work of Joe Hall as a throwback to the more poetic *Impulse*: his unique lyrics ranged from the deeply romantic to the absurd and silly: a distinctive poetic essence. Also, there was his outsider position. Few who bought *Impulse* would have heard of Joe Hall. The audience, whoever they were, and I didn’t appear to care, would assuredly be surprised both by the release of the magazine as an LP and the content of the issue.

The last issue of the changing format era of *Impulse* was its release as a microfiche and a ticket to a screening on a specific date in Toronto or San Francisco of a Super-8 film. The issue and the film were titled *Einstein’s Joke*. The microfiche consisted of 108 stills

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from a Super-8 film which was shot, not particularly for projection viewing, but rather to produce a new invention: the film-fiche, a printed 4 x 6 inch plastic film consisting of a grid of 108 frames, 12 rows of 9 columns. The film was shot with the actors speaking a pidgin German and released with English subtitles. All the subtitle frames were included in the film-fiche. They narrated a joke which Einstein is rumoured to have told at many dinner parties, an absurd story that seems humourless and ridiculous except possibly as a moral take on, or an allegory for, the circular absurdity of life. It was an issue of a magazine as object, as concept, as joke on technological progress, on science itself. The screening of the issue as a film was a conceptual indulgence. With little advertising, the screenings of the films were only sparsely attended.

An era of the magazine was conceptually complete. It was time for another change, a new direction, something no one would expect. And it was at this point that I began a collaboration with Mary Ann Hanet, a young and irreverent artist with a healthy disdain for painting and a well-developed Duchampian sense of the ironic. The history of *Impulse* can be traced through the presence of a number of talented and strong women. Mary Ann Hanet was the first. It was obvious to both of us that the most radical move *Impulse* could make at this moment, 1978, was to publish a magazine which didn't change its format. It would be a magazine which looked like a magazine, something which could become recognizable over time as *Impulse*. We chose a format, 11 x 11 inches, square: we chose the grid to be our guiding impulse: we chose to leave the '70s behind and enter the '80s, which were still two years away: we chose the future over the present. So, in the fall of 1978, we released the new *Impulse*. We didn't understand the divides between music, architecture, fine art, photography, food, limbo dancing, and poetry. Our concern was culture, and we were not particular about its form as long as it was primary material, not reviews of other people's art, and was fresh and interesting.

Together, in a small Toronto office at King and John Streets, we reinvented the magazine: a square just slightly smaller than the size of an LP dust jacket; glossy paper; an experiment 'with the standard format ... touch the square ... the grid is intended to bring the

lines to tension to create what will transform the past into the present into the future ... the package which may absorb and transmit ... it is not a vacuum which asks to be filled but a structure, a grid ready for the images of the construction.'

It was this mandate which carried *Impulse* through the next three issues. These issues had covers consisting of only the reproduction of a blue-line printer's grid, a large helvetica *Impulse*, and a coloured banner listing the issues' contributors. The concern was culture: poetry brushed up against an article on teleculture, and semiological philosophy met robotics. Together Mary Ann Hanet and I designed *Impulse*: both artists self-taught in design. We were amazed that we would receive compliments on our fresh approach to Swiss design. We were naïve enough to have to research Swiss design to discover what were our supposed influences. *Impulse* in its new incarnation began to accumulate fans. Warhol just loved *Impulse*: 'Whatever made you get this shape? It's a beautiful shape, god it really is. Oh it's really terrific. You have such nice paper.'

By the time 1980 arrived, *Impulse* had already published four issues in what we considered the 1980s. The format was established, a design sensibility was developing, Mary Ann Hanet had moved on, and Shelagh Alexander was the newest associate editor: the hippies were gone, and the punks were alive. Swiss design and modernism were replaced by the postmodern: the grid was still present, but it was quickly fading, the image coming to the forefront, the photograph filling the grid. I shaved my beard and moved on from existentialism and structuralism to cultural semiology.

Shelagh was an early punk, when punk arguably still had elegance as an ingredient of its style. She had acquired her punk in England at the time of the Sex Pistols before they were corrupted by America. We lived and worked together on Richmond Street, editing and publishing the magazine out of an illegal artist's loft. It was the beginning of the Queen Street West art scene, Toronto's equivalent to the East Village scene at the time. For Toronto, it was an art scene driven, not by new commercial galleries, but by the Canadian engine of communications, in this case art magazines, which included *Impressions*, later to become *C, Centerfold*, later to become *Fuse*, and, of



1979 *Judith Doyle*



1980 *Shelagh Alexander*

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*Kenny Baird* 1980



*Adair Brouwer* 1982

course, *File*, General Idea's self-promotional vehicle. It was a scene motivated, not by mercantile concerns, but rather a sense of cultural collaboration.

The *Impulse* offices were a hundred metres down an alley from the Cameron House, Toronto's newest artists' bar and hotel. The loft was the perfect party space: open: there was a darkroom and a private, always closed, bedroom door. It was also a photo studio, where I shot my own work and many of the magazine's images. International artists visiting Toronto often dropped by the studio for drinks and the latest issue of the magazine. *Impulse* launches were always accompanied by a large party in the studio attended by hundreds, body-to-body mingling.

It was in this era that Kenny Baird became the designer of the magazine. At first, he worked as a design assistant under Shelagh Alexander but quickly became her co-designer. With her departure from the magazine, by the summer of 1982, he was the magazine's prime designer. Shelagh, who was always prone to melodrama, left me and the magazine in cliché style, by going out to purchase a package of cigarettes and literally never returning. Her final contribution was as the model for the cover of the Summer 1982 issue, a photograph of a blindfolded woman pulling back on an empty bow, aiming upward into an empty sky.

The Richmond Street years reflect *Impulse's* expansion internationally in both editorial content and readership. It was not uncommon to find the work of the French thinkers such as Jean Baudrillard writing about 'Nuclear Implosion' or Paul Virilio on 'Speed Space,' or an interview between *Impulse's* New York contributing editor Sylvère Lotringer and Félix Guattari. It was also a period of social concern: *Impulse* running an interview/dialogue between pro-abortionist Dr Henry Morgentaler and anti-abortionist Dr Bernard Nathanson; an article on 'Psychiatry as Social Control'; or an artist's work by Hans Haacke on Alcan's pro-apartheid policy in South Africa. *Impulse* exhibited a continuous desire to reflect change: social, political, economic, artistic, cultural. It was concerned as much about the status of women as pop love songs; with neo-conservatives as the 'Suicidal State'; and possibly did not really see the cultural difference between 'Transborder Data Flow' and 'Art/Furniture.' *Impulse* didn't see itself standing outside of culture looking in, but rather was itself part of the

newest, the most lively, a creative participatory producer. We were a mirror in which we too were being reflected. It was a time before cultural studies had been institutionalized. Warhol liked *Impulse* because he saw himself reflected: an active purveyor of pop culture.

The Richmond Street years of *Impulse* were radically changed with the introduction of Carolyn White. If Shelagh Alexander had represented the energy of punk, Carolyn White could be described as bringing sophistication to the look of the magazine. An artist who in her youth had produced the most difficult sculptural installations, she had a polite easy manner about her. In the winter of 1982, she joined the magazine as an associate editor.

At *Impulse* the editorial and design processes overlapped and were seamlessly integrated. It was expected that the designer read and commented on editorial material. The visual representation of the material was an integrated part of the editorial process. It was a given that only by knowing the material at a fundamental level would a designer be able to express visually what contributors were presenting in their written or visual contributions. So it was only natural that after a very short 'training' period, Carolyn White, under the tutelage of Kenny Baird and German Vogue, soon became the magazine's co-designer. At *Impulse* one generation freely apprenticed the next until the student could replace the instructor.

If one traces Carolyn White's design history in the magazine – and she was the longest running designer for *Impulse* – it is clear she inherited a visual history from the three other designers. If Alexander's design can be characterized as rough, purposely jagged, then Baird's design smoothed Alexander's edges and applied layers. Baird liked to apply layer on layer of grey and spot colour onto and around the text, the page becoming a complex montage of shapes where the text sometimes showed through. White developed and contributed her own sensibility, maintaining the qualities of her predecessors while incorporating refinement, elegance, and a concern for the primary expressiveness of permitting the text and the image to integrate and complement each other. *Impulse* from 1983 until its demise in 1990 clearly reflects the Carolyn White sense of style and design, a product of the well-dressed, polished, but edgy period of the mid to late

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'80s. Our concern with cultural analysis was expansive; we knew the world was international and demanded sophistication both intellectually and in the shoes one wore. At *Impulse* there was no cultural great divide between the furniture designer and the Jenny Holzer aphorism. The culture of Nicaragua was as interesting and as important as heavy metal music.

*Impulse* integrated cultural content in its pages as much as those working on the magazine integrated functions: the editors switching freely to designers; the business manager expressing editorial ideas emptied of all the mercantile concern that should have gone with the job. Everyone was there, not to improve their corporate abilities, their monetary position, but for the art, their participation in a cultural activity, as one of the cultural workers producing a magazine. But in this creative environment, where everyone was allowed a voice, where the office was occupied by strong-willed individuals, harmony could easily dissolve into destructive disagreement: though this seldom occurred. I knew from the beginning that the running of a magazine demanded a strong central individual. Although I gave almost free reign for other individuals to create in and express themselves through the magazine, it was understood that in disputes, the final decision was mine. I would critique all designs on an ongoing basis; editorial disagreements were either resolved through consensus, compliance, or resignation.

*Impulse* may have been my magazine, but it was generously endowed throughout its history with important, influential, and powerful editors. The most difficult and long-lasting was Judith Doyle, an intelligent, talkative, politically aware woman, who was also prone to debates. In many ways, she was my political foil. The 1980s were a time of political correctness: the feminists were powerful and active; the gay community was beautifully dressed and partying with AIDS at its back; race, class, and gender were everywhere in the art world. But *Impulse* always had the instinct to play against the new restrictions of political correctness: *Impulse* wanted more to be wrong than right. Judith Doyle would often frown on our impish antics. She was faithful to many causes, and *Impulse* gladly became the outlet for her writing. Her political interjections in the magazine were numerous as were her own lyrical, fictive writings. Typical and

topical were her articles on 'Animal Rights' and her 'Chronology of Censorship in Canada.' Judith had just returned from shooting a documentary film about a travelling Nicaraguan theatre troop, so that she was aware of and in touch with many of the current Nicaraguan writers. She was the editor for the Nicaraguan issue released at the height of the American attempt to control the popular Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua.

During the late '70s and throughout the '80s there were many who were involved editorially for one or two issues and some who persisted for years. Along with those already mentioned, there were Brian Boigon, Susan Speigel, Andy Payne, Gerald Owen, Alberto Manguel, Donna Lypchuk, Sylvère Lotringer, Lisa Baumgardner, Anne Milne, Willoughby Sharp, James Gronau, James Dunn, Joan Brouwer, Vincent Tangredi, Gary Michael Dault, Marc Glassman, and Andrew James Paterson, all of whom participated editorially. Some made major contributions, such as Susan Speigel, editing a double 'Theoretical Architecture' issue, or Sylvère Lotringer, who co-edited a special 'Death' issue, or Donna Lypchuk, who edited the 'New City of Fiction' issue, while others only participated for one issue as a contributing editor.

It was an *Impulse* principle that the editors were not paid, the basic tone being set by the fact that as executive editor and publisher, I wasn't paid. There was no budget for editors. Most often the only person paid was the business manager. Sometimes the designer received a fee. Writers were sometimes paid from Ontario Arts Council granting programs. Many writers and artists generously donated their contributions.

*Impulse* was sold internationally. We had distributors and art bookstore outlets in Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. It took time and effort to establish this extensive distribution network, quite unusual for a magazine whose print run at its maximum was only six thousand copies. The capitalist equation of more sales equals more income did not apply to *Impulse*, as it still doesn't for much of the art world. The more we distributed the magazine, the more it cost us. Imagine the difficulty of collecting money from the two art bookstores in Cologne which would sell ten



1982 *Carolyn White*



1985 *Brian Boigon*

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*Eldon Garnet* 1990

copies of *Impulse* on a consignment, return basis. If you wanted to manage payment and returns, someone would have to go directly to the bookstore or distributor and personally settle the account with the release of each new issue.

The more successful *Impulse* became, the more readers we acquired throughout the world, the more copies we printed and distributed, the more money we spent, and the less, if anything at all, was available to pay the editors and the contributors. When Susan Speigel edited a double issue of the magazine on ‘Theoretical Architecture’ in 1986, she didn’t do it for an editorial fee, but because she saw the need for the idea of theoretical architecture to be given expression. Like all the editors, her desire was to communicate and disseminate information. When Mary Ann Hanet worked on the early *Impulse*, her only thought was to be involved. When Sylvère Lotringer, Lisa Baumgardner, and Willoughby Sharp acted as New York editors, they did so to help produce a new, active cultural voice. *Impulse* really was a not-for-profit artists’ magazine in the best non-capitalist sense: we looked expensive and rich, but it was all showmanship, the packaging of radical, new ideas in a well-designed container. *Impulse* received a design award from the Canadian Society of Graphic Designers for its ‘Culture of Nicaragua’ issue. We played off the codes of the capitalist mass market, turning them to our non-mercantile cultural ends; always doing what we weren’t supposed to do, looking good, but not in Hugo Boss, in suits of our own design. *Impulse* refused to just be normal, possessing to the end an innate Duchampian sense of old-school avant-gardism.

When I was finally supersaturated with the stress and work which were part of the constant production of a magazine, each issue draining a little more of the life from my body, I gave *Impulse* away. Since I had been given the magazine, I thought it would be immoral to sell it. With a well-endowed granting structure from both the provincial and federal governments, with a business manager, with editors, and with distribution, I gave the magazine to Peter Day, an activist and advocate for contemporary art. Carolyn White and I escaped to Europe to celebrate our freedom, leaving no forwarding number, no possibility to contact us with any magazine questions. A month later, I phoned

Toronto from Milan to learn that two weeks before, Peter Day had committed suicide. I returned to Toronto to a magazine in collapse. It was at this point that I decided that *Impulse* was over. Peter Day had been working on the ‘One Word’ issue of *Impulse*, for which each contributor was asked to submit one word as their one-page contribution. As a final gesture, as an act of respect to Day and the magazine, we completed Day’s ‘One Word’ issue.

In 1990, after nineteen years, fifteen of which I had been editor/publisher, *Impulse* was over.

*History?*