

A Magazine Reader and the rise of the Unglossies

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A Magazine Reader O3 workshop. Work in progress by Isabelle Mauduit and Ellen Pearson.

Context

Niche fashion publications of the past were often a showcase serving as a vehicle for careerist self-promotion. As ‘insider’ publications, they may have rejected some stylistic codes of mainstream fashion media, yet ultimately sought to impress ‘the industry’ and positioned their content as directional, as avant-garde.¹ While such titles continue to exist, a new type of niche fashion publication has arrived on the magazine shelves. Less concerned with impressing or pleasing, new arrivals investigate, critique and experiment with the fashion construct, imagining alternatives.



A Magazine Reader 03. Contribution by Marco Dalle Fratte.

Arising from a general dissatisfaction with the state of fashion media – rigid structures and aesthetics, lack of space for critical reflection, excessive promotional content – ‘Unglossies’ maintain an optimistic outlook nonetheless and focus on experimental approaches while producing complex content. Among such Unglossies appearing in niche magazine stores are *ZARA (Ocean No Nothing)* by Ming Lin & Elaine W. Ho, who also produced the critical and participatory mail-order fashion catalogue *iwishicoulddescribe-ittoyoubetter*, *F de C’s Reader* series or the revised *SHOW NOTES* by Dal Chodha. An alternative to corporate-owned mass media, their makers are converted fashion practitioners, academics, students and recent graduates. They seek to bridge theory and practice and contribute to an emerging public discourse. Reflecting their common objective, they avoid stereotypical roles that separate designer from producer, consumer from critic, inside and outside perspectives. Instead, they highlight the interdependence of all contributors in shaping fashion as a whole. Their approach rejects claims of social authority, preferring to address readers as valued co-creators of fashion’s social sculpture.

Unglossies can be read as a documentation of the contributors’ dynamic interaction with each other that draws readers directly into processes of reflection and discussion. Often adopting aesthetics that underline these processes behind the content, their distinct appearance sets them apart as critical fashion publications. In contrast to glossies as trivial distraction covering up

unpleasant realities, they reveal deeper implications of the fashion system and shape new ways of navigating its complexities. While articulating a direct critique of existing publications, to which some have partially reacted by adopting a more inclusive editorial line, Unglossies also seek to re-imagine structures of production and distribution, beyond the content. With self-publishing and project spaces becoming more accessible, with multiplication of distributors for niche publications and long-time professionals leaving mainstream titles to launch on their own, fashion practitioners are increasingly seeking to collaborate with peers instead of working under established brands. Radically open and unbound by traditional hierarchies, Unglossies represent a new-found freedom of interaction in fashion's co-production.



A Magazine Reader O1 and A Magazine Reader O3 workshop.

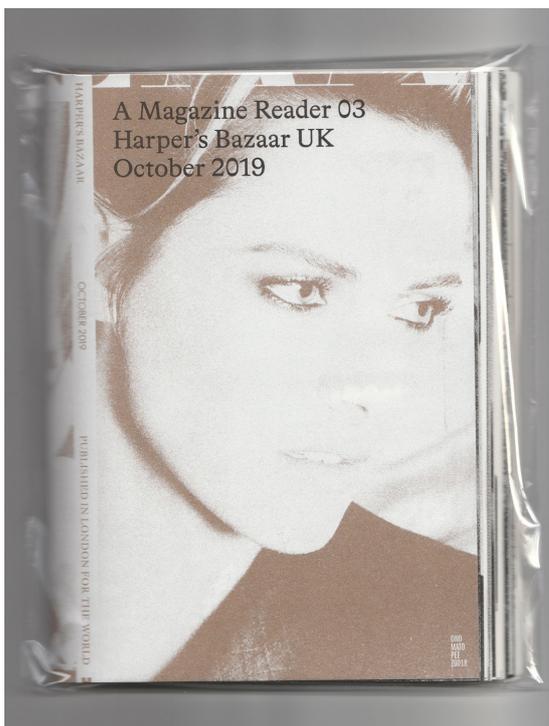
Process

A Magazine Reader workshops and zines, initiated in 2018 by *Warehouse* co-founders Femke de Vries and Hanka van der Voet, experiment with new forms of fashion reception, discussion and production. The idea for the format was derived from their individual research into fashion magazines and has evolved into a distinct collaborative practice. Engaged in an ongoing exchange and collaboration with other expanded fashion practices² such as *D&K* (Ricarda Bigolin) and *Mode and Mode* (Laura Gardner), the project's initiators are contributing to the fashion-critical axis that is forming between Melbourne and Amsterdam, experimenting with performative and participatory processes. Ultimately seeking to cooperate with different spaces and institutions as well as widening the scope of contributors³, *A Magazine Reader* is opening up fashion for discussion.

The workshops create collaborative environments where contemporary fashion magazines are examined, dissected and reconfigured, one issue at a time. Via critical engagement with the magazine as an object, with its structure and its contents, relationships between brands, media and the public can be re-imagined. Slow and active reading instead of recreational browsing

reveals underlying mechanisms of seduction and repetition, subtleties in tone and language as well as gaps between intended and actual audience. Taking on a different angle for each issue, at times more visual, at others with more extensive written reflections, the workshops dissect various elements that contribute to fashion as an idea, a system and language. After a first day of intense discussions, a common impulse across past workshops was to provide a mapping of different types of content within the magazine, visualising the extent of brand partnerships and strategic product placements. According to two former participants of workshops taking place within ArtEZ' MA Fashion Strategy course, Chinouk Filique de Miranda and Denise Bernts⁴, *A Magazine Reader* represented a starting point for personally durable research interests. Many participants decided to expand on their investigations later on, for their graduation projects and beyond. A collaborative setting and intuitive process, yet within some formal and thematic constraints, helped define individual positions as divergent methodologies were discussed within a common context. From sober analyses to satirical expressions, experimentation with fashion language, visual explorations and investigative strategies, contributions propose a variety of alternative approaches for fashion content with a deeper meaning.

Each workshop involves the active support of a graphic designer⁵ who provides general and individual advice in order to produce a cohesive publication. Making use of independent risograph workshops, they explain the printing process and involve participants in a hands-on way in the physical production process of the zine. Immediacy of outcome and low-threshold access dissolve barriers between content (dream) producers and manufacturing of the product, while encouraging cross-disciplinary collaboration among independent practitioners. During the workshop, informal groups were formed for different aspects of the zines' production, according to participants' strengths and interests, while budget and production decisions were taken collectively. This grassroots democratic approach, strikingly different to fashion's usual decision-making hierarchies, translated into collectively negotiating space for individual contributions, an active back-and-forth towards developing a common visual identity and intensified discussions.



A Magazine Reader 03 and A Magazine Reader 02 workshop.

Product

The resulting product consists of a riso printed stack of A4 sheets, combining black ink and one accent colour. Each zine is bound together by a rubber band, hand-numbered and offered in a clear plastic wrapping. The zine's impermanent binding is suggestive of a work in progress, which could be further extended or rearranged. Its appearance was collectively decided on in the first workshop and later issues decided to adopt it, creating a recognisable series. Communicating a DIY artistic nature and small edition, it opposes the high-volume glossy magazines it dissects. While glossiness acts as a veneer that contributes to fashion's myth creation, a sealed surface with nothing to add, the uncoated riso print texture appears to strip away the myth. Drawing readers behind the scenes, covers of Issue 01 and 02 depict the process with annotated and re-worked scans of analysed magazines.



A Magazine Reader 03. Contribution by Rebecca Nevins and Hanka van der Voet. Image: Anouk Beckers.

Immediately challenging readers to a more active interaction, the luxury-themed inaugural issue (*V*GUE, British Vogue February 2018*) is wrapped by a custom receipt, obstructing access to the zine. Setting the tone for what lies ahead, this contribution by Ieva Uskurataite informs the reader of the total number of fashion items appearing in the original magazine with their combined cost. The list is followed by a commentary about intangible values and short-term satisfaction as well as a hidden message for an especially attentive reader. An editor's letter captures the voice of established mainstream magazines, mixing hyperbolic and patronising language with informative content. Its author, Chet Bugter, appears as 'contributing editor' in an appropriation of the original *Vogue* masthead, with names of original staff blanked out, while all other zine contributors were added under 'fashion critic'. The number of fashion critics in *V*GUE* constitutes a statement in itself, pointing towards an ongoing conversation about the function of criticism in fashion.⁶ Chinouk Filique de Miranda proposes a criticism that intervenes in existing content. Her contribution reveals multiple storylines within fashion articles and proposes guides for individual modes of reading that separate informational content from subliminal advertising and expose hidden agendas. Issue 02 (*British Vogue November 2018*) dives deeper into the role of language in fashion's commodification. Excessive catchphrases, emotive headlines and

evocative descriptions lose their meaning when taken at face value, finally allowing an unfiltered reception of visual content. Meanwhile captions hidden in the crease of the magazine are receiving special attention in Denise Bernts' contribution, while their vagueness is translated to visuals that are folded away. Meta-commentaries by contributors at the back of the zine open up yet another dimension, reminding readers of the product as process.



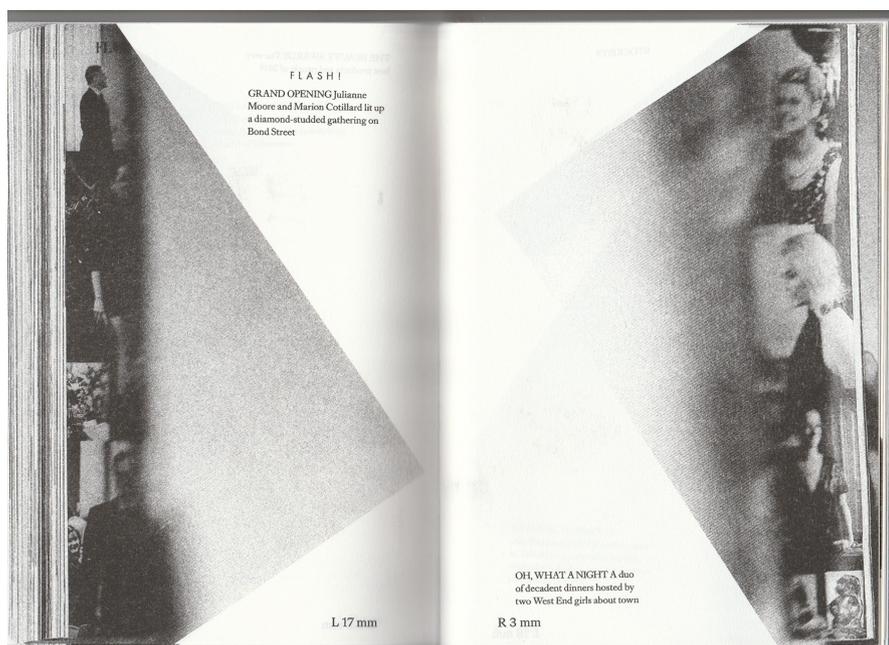
A Magazine Reader 03 workshop. Work in progress by Seok Park.

In contrast to the first two issues, Issue 03 (*Harper's Bazaar UK October 2019*) translates an interrupted reading experience of mainstream magazines by including glossy ad inserts at a 90 degree angle. This intervention plays with the internalised logic of many readers where the number of luxury ads, rather than its contents, translates into the value of a magazine. Issue 03 attracted mostly graphic designers who acted as 'contributing editors' rather than 'fashion critics', creating a highly visual zine. Making use of blurred scans, collage and white space to draw attention to overlooked details in the layout, model poses and backgrounds, the wide range of visual props in fashion magazines take on a strange quality in isolation. Enlarged, they served as a backdrop for a launch and exhibition at publisher Onomatopée's project space in Eindhoven during Dutch Design Week. *A Magazine Reader's* participation reflected an increased interest in and expanded platform for fashion-related contributions. At the time of writing, Issue 04 is underway and the format is set to enter new territories.

Outlook

Discussions during and outcomes from the workshops evolve as *A Magazine Reader* cooperates with participants from various creative practices and theoretical backgrounds. Venturing beyond academia as the sole space where fashion criticism is taking place, the format provides a hybrid platform between research and public, forming a constantly evolving critical practice. At once a learning process for each contributor and a communal research process, the format operates at an intersection where individual and collective

practices can be re-negotiated. As participants make recurring observations, they gradually contribute to a more defined critique. Rather than representing a one-off protest on the magazine shelves, *A Magazine Reader* acts as a returning counter-voice and critical opposition to the media status quo. Remaining involved in fashion while exposing processes it disagrees with, it proposes a discursive form of fashion practice, remaining experimental and open to further collaboration⁷.



A Magazine Reader 03. Contribution by Seok Park.

1

Lynge-Jorlén, A. (2017). *Niche Fashion Magazines – Changing the Shape of Fashion*, London/New York: I.B. Tauris, p. 42.

2

As discussed extensively in: Hoette, R. & Stevenson, C. (eds.). (2018). *MODUS - a platform for expanded fashion practice*, Eindhoven: Onomatopée.

3

In conversation with project initiator Femke de Vries in April 2020.

4

In conversation with participants, during two individual Skype sessions in April 2020.

5

Corine van der Wal for Issues 01 and 02, Zuzana Kostelanská for Issue 03.

6

See also: Granata, F. (ed.). (2013). *Fashion Projects – On Fashion Criticism*, Issue 4, New York: Fashion Projects.

7

Expressed through its additional format *A Magazine Reader Invites*, which shares re-readings of fashion magazines by an artist/thinker/designer, accompanied by a conversation about their approach.

With its ongoing presence, it contributes to a development of critical fashion publications gradually claiming space and an increasing audience. As content is valued over brand names and independent magazine stores are expanding their niche fashion publications offer, established titles are increasingly surrounded by a greater variety of voices. *A Magazine Reader* zines are meta-publications, addressing their audience as active cultural critics rather than passive consumers. Placed alongside their glossy objects of investigation, the zines act as a provocation, reminding readers of their agency, their role in shaping the narrative.

As new fashion enthusiasts discover Unglossies alongside or even before mainstream magazines, this development transforms the nature of the fashion dream, impacting its hierarchies and the function of fashion education. Already, students are actively seeking out courses and formats that explore other ways of 'making' fashion, with niche practitioners paving the way. Rather than finding their way into fashion via glossy ads, runway photos and celebrities, this entryway via independent contributions marks a more egalitarian mode of relating between fashion producers and consumers. Instead of gatekeeping, these propositions act as gate-breakers, positioning readers as co-authors and calling them to action.



Warehouse FOCUS provides in-depth reflection on Warehouse projects through the lense of guest authors.