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Building a One-Man Magazine, One Impossible Feat at a Time

By DAVID CARR

Esopus magazine is a thing of lavish, eccentric beauty, less flipped through than stared at, forcing readers to reconcile their expectations of what a magazine is with the strange artifact in their laps.

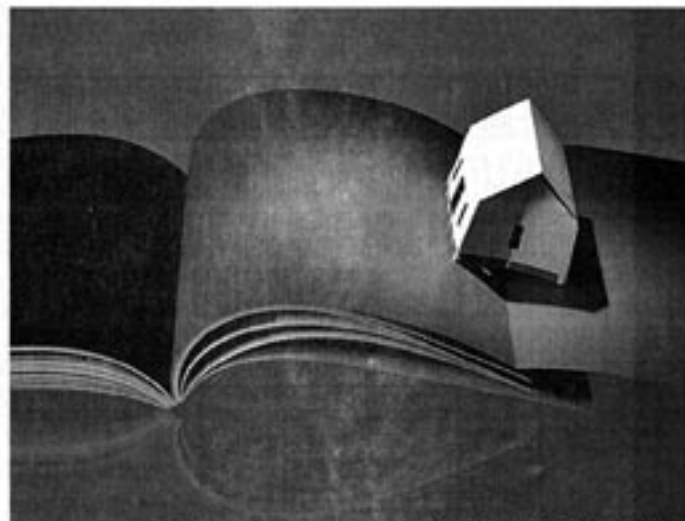
With its hand-built feel and soaring visual narrative, it is clearly the work of a heaving team of first-rate designers, thinkers and editors working with unthinkable budgets, even though, more curiously, it has no advertisements.

But pull back the cover of Esopus and you will find only Tod Lippy, designer, editor, conjurer. Just Tod Lippy, with his one d and his conceit that he can make the magazine he wants and that people will give him \$10 for each one and that then he can make another one. With a circulation of 5,000 and a twice-a-year schedule — it came out of nowhere in 2003 — it is not so much a magazine as a cult that meets semiannually.

No. 3, the fall 2004 issue, was recently published, and it's tough to know where to begin reading. "Mamushka," an illustrated fairy tale by Andrea Dezso, full of childlike wonders and dark, thoroughly modern portent, is followed by a journal and photo act from Marvin Lazarus, a suburban in-house lawyer at a water company who spent his lunch hours during the 1950's photographing Modern art royalty: Isamu Noguchi, Man Ray, Franz Kline. The issue also includes an interview with the New Jersey proto-rockers the Wrens, pictures of Rudy Vallee's annotated joke book, the third in a series of "Object Lessons" by the artist Alex Shear, a set of current federal documents about treatment of prisoners that has been ghosted to unreadability, a poem, a CD and four separate proposals from people pitching their plans to get Esopus (ee-SO-pus) some publicity.

It is hard to say what it is but safe to say there is nothing else like it — except the first two issues of the magazine. At a time when coming up with another version of a shopping magazine — Hey, let's do guy shopping this time! — passes for innovation, Esopus reminds that magazines are limited only by the people who put them out, who in turn blame the thickheaded sensibilities of their readers for their own lack of imagination. The apparently relentless need to promote the products sold by advertisers probably does not help much, either.

Meetings at magazines are often



Right, Fred E. Conrad/The New York Times

The fall issue, left, of Esopus, the brainchild of Tod Lippy. Right, a pop-up feature from the last issue.

full of suggestions to think outside the box, which is where Mr. Lippy likes to live. He is off the grid of publicists, advertisers and scenesters. His magazine reflects no fealty. Esopus No. 2 includes something called "Ghost Form" by William Christenberry, a pop-out magazine version of the hand game involving a church and a steeple that open to reveal the people. It is gorgeous and looks ungodly expensive.

Sitting in the Howard Johnson's in Times Square, Mr. Lippy said that after receiving estimates that would have made the feature unthinkable, he asked advice from his Canadian printer, who suggested that a group of Hutterites, a religious sect similar to the Amish, might be willing to do the handwork necessary at an affordable rate. So he found the church that made the steeple that he could put in the magazine to sell to the people. At Esopus, there is no rich uncle, no corporate backer, just Mr. Lippy's craftiness and a plan to put together a nonprofit organization to back the magazine.

Mr. Lippy, 41, is single-minded about the need for a general-interest magazine that is not dumb.

"I'm really frustrated with the level of mediation that seems to shroud all artistic activity," he said, dipping a French fry into some mayo. "Popular music now ends up contextualized by car and sneaker commercials. The mixing and melding of advertising in magazines is pretty disturbing as well. I wanted to create some unfiltered space."

The current issue, by way of commentary, carries a CD titled "Prod-

uct Displacement," with advertising slogans embedded in the lyrics, a bit of whimsy brought forth by bands like the Baptist Generals and the New Black. If it all sounds very twee and very downtown, that is not really the case. Mr. Lippy's dad was and is a farmer in Maryland, and Esopus has subscribers in 40 states — and 10 countries. (Its Web site, www.esopusmag.com, gives a list of stores where it is sold, Barnes & Noble outlets among them.)

Mr. Lippy's interests are far-ranging partly because he spent a lot of time working on them in school. He graduated from Texas Christian University, received a master's in art history from Williams College and then a master's in cinema studies from New York University. He ended up at Print, a magazine for graphic designers that has done plenty of its own stretching of traditional magazine memes.

"Anybody who has worked with Tod will say that he is an innately gifted editor," said Martin Fox, an

A special-effect feature was assembled by hand.

editor at large at Print and its editor for 40 years. "He has an interesting take on almost everything and a sense of pacing that makes his magazine work like no other. And because he is such a nice guy, people

want to do things for him. Everybody is giving him work for what is essentially an honorarium."

Mr. Lippy eventually left publishing with the idea of getting into films and made a short called "Cookies" that did well at some festivals, but he missed the immediacy of making something, specifically a magazine, that would pop into people's lives.

Even though he yearns for an administrative assistant, he says there is strategic and artistic value in making a magazine as a party of one.

"I am the only person that contributors deal with, and I think they end up thinking that they end up with something that genuinely reflects their work," Mr. Lippy said. It helps that the rights to any bit of work revert to the person who made it.

Even if there were more readers and more help, Esopus would never become a monthly or even a quarterly.

"Three times a year is about the most I could do," he said. "It is a pace that produces something that is between a book and a magazine. We are hoping to do events, but I don't see the frequency ever increasing that much."

There is, of course, the matter of the name, which is not exactly user friendly. As Mr. Lippy tells it, there is a creek of that name that runs clear and clean in upstate New York until it enters a reservoir and comes out the other side, muddied and compromised. In the course of the magazine's short life, Mr. Lippy feels that that reservoir has yet to come into view.

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