“What is 291?”

Iterations of an Avant-Garde and Its Legacies

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Abstract

“What is 291?” The results of this survey, issued in 1914 by the photographer Alfred Stieglitz to artists, writers, and patrons of his gallery, known by its address at 291 Fifth Avenue, were published in his magazine Camera Work (1903–1917). However, just as Stieglitz was issuing the questionnaire, his associates—Marius de Zayas, Paul Haviland, Agnes Ernst Meyer, and Francis Picabia—were already planning a magazine called 291 (1915–1916), thereby transforming the question even as it was being asked. Read as a response to the questionnaire, the publication 291 destabilizes and amplifies the community Stieglitz had established, while visually embedding its history into the pages of the new magazine. Taking 291 as a case study of the avant-garde and its legacies, this essay traces the origins of the magazine from its predecessors—that is, the periodical Camera Work and the gallery 291—to consider “What is 291?” and its afterlife. Emerging from the intersection of a magazine and gallery as a new iteration of print culture, 291 worked to expand the American avant-garde and to reimagine the magazine as a medium.

Keywords


“What is 291?” The results of this survey, issued in 1914 by the photographer Alfred Stieglitz to artists, writers, and patrons of his gallery, known by its address at 291 Fifth Avenue, were published in his magazine Camera Work (1903–1917) (Fig. 1). Questionnaires, which were ubiquitous at the time,

1 Note: This issue was dated July 1914 but was actually published in January 1915. The responses themselves were submitted throughout 1914.
enabled figures like Stieglitz to assert their role in shaping avant-gardes and to ensure their legacies. However, just as Stieglitz was issuing the questionnaire, his associates—Marius de Zayas, Paul Haviland, Agnes Ernst Meyer, and Francis Picabia—were already planning a magazine called 291 (1915–1916), thereby transforming the question even as it was being asked. Read as a response to the questionnaire, the publication 291 destabilizes and amplifies the community Stieglitz had established, while visually embedding its history into the pages of the new magazine. Much like the genre of the questionnaire—and the avant-garde itself—291 self-reflexively embodies its own historical origins while displacing them with a new aesthetic.

Questionnaires often serve as hinges between new movements during times of crisis or transition, drawing attention to shifting notions of the avant-garde and its frequent reinventions, while magazines like Camera Work and 291 function as archives of these communities at such moments. Taking 291 as a case study of the avant-garde and its legacies, this essay traces the origins of the magazine from its predecessors—that is, the periodical Camera Work and the gallery 291—to consider “What is 291?” and its afterlife. Emerging from the intersection of a magazine and gallery as a new iteration of print culture, 291 worked to expand the American avant-garde and to reimagine the magazine as a medium.
1 Introducing 291

291’s indebtedness to Stieglitz, Camera Work, and the gallery 291 is evident in the writers and artists that it features, and of course, in its name. Published from March 1915 to February 1916, comprising nine issues (three of which were double issues), 291 was backed financially by Stieglitz, as well as by Paul Havi-land and Agnes Ernst Meyer. It did not contain any advertisements, but rather offered a year-long subscription for a dollar (each issue was 10 cents), as well as printing what it called a “special edition limited to one hundred autographed copies on special paper” (Japanese vellum) for five dollars. However, it only sold about one hundred copies per issue, and many were given away (291, 1915: 2; Stieglitz, 1922). Some issues unfolded like a large booklet while others expanded to form a poster, at times spanning 20 x 12 inches, defying the typical model for either reading a magazine or displaying art.

Consisting of two to three large sheets that folded to form four to six pages, 291’s orientation and scale varied, creating new and unexpected reading and viewing experiences. For example, the Picasso drawing Oil and Vinegar Castor (1911), included on page five in the first issue, is printed horizontally, despite its vertical orientation. Such a flexible layout suggests that 291 was intended to be handled and manipulated. Indeed, art historian Hannah Wong argues that the layout and design of 291 invites the reader to reorient and interpret the magazine in the act of reading. She analyzes Picabia’s “mechanomorphic portraits” of the key figures in 291—Picabia, De Zayas, Stieglitz, Meyer, and Haviland—in the July–August 1915 issue, which “function as a dynamic and interrelated set” (Wong, 2015: 120) (Fig. 2). The placement of each offers distinct interpretive possibilities about their relationships and aesthetic platforms, allowing the reader to animate the material through their physical encounter with the page. As Wong argues, even “the simple act of moving past the Stieglitz cover to the image of Picabia on the interior is strongly reminiscent of a central theme in de Zayas’s essay”, on Stieglitz and American art, which is the only text included in the magazine (Wong, 2015: 121). She also points to the “conversation” that occurs between Picabia and De Zayas through the physicality of the magazine, as the two portraits face each other when the pages are opened and closed (Wong, 2015: 123). Such imaginative possibilities demonstrate 291’s own self-consciousness about the connections between the magazine’s form, content, and key figures.

2 According to Francis Naumann, 100 people subscribed to the regular edition and eight paid for the deluxe edition. (Naumann, 2011).
291’s first cover communicates a tension between continuity and rupture with its predecessors in its design and content. Dynamic pink and black lines cut diagonally across the cover of 291 from March 1915, visually announcing an avant-garde sensibility (Fig. 3). Nestled among thick black hyphens is the phrase “291 throws back its forelock”, caricaturing Stieglitz, whose face sits atop a large black square representing his camera (and who is, ostensibly, tossing his hair). Produced by De Zayas, the first cover of 291 already suggests an ambivalent relationship with Stieglitz, who founded Camera Work and 291, as well as with the medium of photography, which he championed. In these ways, 291 visually embodies its indebtedness to Stieglitz, his magazine, and gallery, while also making a clear break with its antecedents.
“WHAT IS 291?”

FIGURE 3 Marius de Zayas, “291 throws back its forelock” 291 (New York), no. 1 (March 1915); cover. 40.5 × 28 cm

PHOTO: THE MIRIAM AND IRA D. WALLACH DIVISION OF ART, PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS: PHOTOGRAPHY COLLECTION, THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY. “291,” THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY DIGITAL COLLECTIONS. 1915. HTTP://DIGITALCOLLECTIONS.NYPL.ORG/ITEMS/6b627ff1-9a58-53e2-e040-e00a18065cb0
Magazine as Exhibition Space: *Camera Work* and 291 Fifth Ave

To analyze the magazine *291*, one must return to the origins of the institutions and entanglements to which it alludes, whose histories were articulated in the questionnaire “What is 291?” Both *Camera Work*, founded in 1903, and the gallery 291, opened in 1905, emerged out of Stieglitz’s frustration as a photographer; without institutions in place in the United States to promote photography as a fine art, he started his own, and in advocating for photography, he came to champion all new forms of artmaking and worked to establish a national avant-garde.3

The magazine *Camera Work: A Photographic Quarterly* was roughly 11 ½ x 8 ¼ inches and designed in the art nouveau style by fellow photographer Edward Steichen. It had the heft of a sturdy book, suggesting the importance of its contents, and it reproduced photographs by artists ranging from Clarence White to Paul Strand on high-quality paper.4 *Camera Work* also featured reproductions of artwork by artists such as Picasso, Matisse, John Marin, as well as experimental literature by writers such as Mina Loy and Gertrude Stein, and key translations of texts by Kandinsky, Bergson, and others. In this way, the magazine was a hallmark of the interdisciplinary nature of the avant-garde as texts like Stein’s “portraits” of Picasso and Matisse reimagined the relationship between art and language, and underscored the close relationship between American artists and writers and their European counterparts. Such intermingling of art and literature also laid the groundwork for the American avant-garde Stieglitz worked to promote.

Stieglitz sought an exhibition space to complement his editorial aims, opening the “Little Galleries of the Photo Secession” in November 1905 at 291 Fifth Avenue in New York, which was soon simply called “291”. It displayed photography along with modern painting and sculpture from Europe and America, so that, according to Stieglitz, “photography could be measured in juxtaposition to other means of expression” (Stieglitz, 1922). Throughout its print run, *Camera Work* demonstrated how a magazine and gallery could serve comple-

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3 From its contentious origins in 1839, early photographers had to confront accusations that their work was mechanical, technical, and scientific, rather than artistic. For more on the origins of photography see Batchen, 1997; For a comparison between avant-garde print cultures of the Americas, see Cole, 2013 and Cole, 2018.

4 Jonathan Green calls *Camera Work* a “small encyclopedia of the mechanical printing processes available during the first seventeen years of this century” because “along with straight photogravure there are mezzotint photogravures, duogravures, one-color half-tones, duplex halftones, four-color halftones, and collotypes.” (Green, 1973:10)
mentary aims. *Camera Work* included installation shots of exhibitions at 291, announcements for upcoming shows, and reviews of past shows, thus enabling its audience to experience the gallery in its pages.\(^5\) For instance, the April 1906 issue of *Camera Work* recounts the galleries’ appearance at the time of their opening:

One of the larger rooms is kept in dull olive tones, the burlap wall-covering being a warm olive gray; the woodwork and moldings similar in general color, but considerably darker. The hangings are of an olive-sepia sateen, and the ceiling and canopy are of a very deep creamy gray. The small room is designed especially to show prints on very light mounts or in white frames. The walls of this room are covered with a bleached natural burlap; the woodwork and molding are pure white; the hangings, a dull ecru. The third room is decorated in gray-blue, dull salmon, and olive-gray.\(^6\)

*Camera Work*, 1906: 48

By publishing this detailed description of the gallery in the *Camera Work*, the magazine allowed its readers to feel part of its physical space, supplementing and expanding the gallery community while demonstrating the inextricability of *Camera Work* from 291.

As described in *Camera Work* and seen in installation shots, Stieglitz radically departed from customary display practices at the time (Fig. 4).\(^7\) 291’s pared-down installations defied the academic salon-style hang, and reinforced its function as a neutral, independent exhibition space free of both snobbery and commercialism (Mancini, 2005: 169–170). Moreover, the gallery’s range of media, artists of different ages and nationalities, and combination of both traditional and more provocative work, set up what art historian Sarah Greenough

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5 For example, an installation shot documenting the 1906 Gertrude Käsebier and Clarence H. White exhibition was published in *Camera Work* (New York), no. 14 (April 1906): 46.

6 Steichen helped find a location for 291 and after he moved to Paris he helped identify artists for Stieglitz to exhibit there. The galleries were decorated primarily by Edward and Clara Steichen, inspired by Josef Hoffmann, a founder of the Vienna Secession movement. (Niven, 2004: 206).

7 As the magazine recounts, the galleries consisted of three small rooms with burlap on the lower half of the walls, divided by a slim shelf that hugged the length of the wall. Images were lit from above, while sculptures were placed on central pedestals, which otherwise held plants or flowers. (*Camera Work*, 1906: 48); Stieglitz either hung artwork in an “evenly spaced single row” or he “clustered works in irregular patterns across the walls, grouping them together based on formal qualities.” (Wilson, 2009: 31).
FIGURE 4  *Camera Work* (New York), no. 14 (April 1906): recto images of "Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession," immediately before p. 45

PHOTO: MARQUAND LIBRARY OF ART AND ARCHEOLOGY, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
calls “a dialogue that would enable 291 visitors to see, discuss, and ponder the differences and similarities between artists of all ranks and types” (Greenough, 2000: 31–32). Thus, while 291’s gallery space is recalled as a tiny series of rooms decorated in subdued colors in Camera Work, in some ways the gallery’s simplified décor reinforced its mythic status.8

When Stieglitz founded the magazine and the gallery, there were few institutions to support photography or avant-garde art in America; part of his project was to build institutions to define and sustain this output. While Stieglitz had the company of a few gallerists and collectors, museums that displayed modern art in New York were formed after 291 had closed in 1917.9 Solomon R. Guggenheim began to collect modern art in 1927, the Museum of Modern Art opened in November 1929 and the Whitney Museum in 1931, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art only began collecting photography after Stieglitz donated part of his own collection to the museum.10 Marsden Hartley, one of Stieglitz’s artists, described Société Anonyme (begun in 1920 by Katherine Dreier, Man Ray, and Marcel Duchamp) as an organization that might “continue what was so well begun ... at 291” (Hartley quoted in Gross, 2006: 5).

291’s exhibitions, mirrored in the magazine, positioned European culture as the point of departure for an American avant-garde, and Stieglitz emphasized the national aspect of his project in his rhetoric. For example, in an

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8 A reporter wrote in the New York Sun that the building housing 291 was “undifferentiated from its neighbors” and that the sign for the gallery was “easily overlooked” (“291”, New York Sun, 1915: 5).

9 Other artists, museums, magazines and patrons were also working to ensure the viability of American art, including: Robert Henri, leader of the Ashcan School of realist painters, Arthur Davies, who organized the Armory Show in 1913, and the collectors John Quinn and Walter and Louise Arensberg. Newman Emerson Montross opened his gallery in 1910, Charles Daniel started the Daniel Gallery in 1913, Harriet Bryant opened the Carroll Galleries in 1914, the same year that Stephan Bourgeois began the Bourgeois Gallery and Robert Coady launched the Washington Square Gallery. In 1926 Edith Halpert opened the Downtown Gallery, where she focused on both folk art and modern American artists (and represented the estates of many of Stieglitz’s artists after his death in 1946). From 1924 to 1927 Jane Heap, editor of The Little Review, ran “The Little Review Gallery”, in New York; A.E. Gallatin began his “Gallery of Living Art” in 1927. For more see Platt, 1985; Wilson, 2009.

10 Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney began her art collection in 1908 and started the Whitney Studio in 1914, which became the Whitney Studio Club in 1918, before forming the museum in 1929 and opening it in 1931; Stieglitz began corresponding with the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1922 and donated seventeen of his own photographs and those from his collection in 1928 and 250 in 1933, after which he was named a “Fellow of the Museum in Perpetuity” and spurred the museum to begin to collect and display photography. (Metropolitan Museum of Art: correspondence, Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O’Keeffe Archive).
announcement for the 1908 Matisse show, Stieglitz boasts of introducing the artist “to the American public and to the American art-critics” (Announcements, 291). Picasso’s drawings and watercolors, on view at the gallery from March 28-April 25, 1912, were similarly lauded as “the first opportunity given to the American public to see some of Picasso’s work in this country” (Announcements, 291). In an essay on Picasso in Camera Work, Marius De Zayas declares: “I intend to make these artists known to the American world” (De Zayas, 1911: 66). Picabia, who Stieglitz exhibited at 291 after seeing his work in the Armory Show, demonstrates optimism for American arts by saying in an interview with the New York Times, “France is almost outplayed. It is in America that I believe that the theories of The New Art will hold most tenaciously” (Picabia quoted in New York Times, 1913: 5). By introducing such artists’ work to American audiences, Stieglitz hoped, in turn, to invigorate American art and cultivate a receptive audience for new art of all kinds.

Many of the artists that Stieglitz showed—Picabia, De Zayas, John Marin, and Marsden Hartley—were polled in the 1914 questionnaire. By 1914 the aesthetic and financial future of both Camera Work and 291 were uncertain, due to the vagaries of real estate, the expense of putting out a magazine, and the costs—both practical and personal—related to the impending war. The building housing 291 was slated for demolition in 1915 and was eventually razed in 1919. The questionnaire “What is 291?” was thus a forum in which contributors could bridge the magazine and the gallery, define their relationship to national and international art formations, and determine their shared legacy. However, the questionnaire also marked a turning point for 291, at once historicizing it and pointing to its future, as evidenced by the founding of 291 soon thereafter.

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11 This article was an abridged English translation of a Spanish version De Zayas wrote for his father's magazine, América: revista mensual ilustrada, published in Camera Work to coincide with the Picasso show at 291 in 1911. De Zayas later showed eleven of Picasso's paintings at the Modern Gallery in 1915.

12 Picabia's show was held at 291 from March 17–April 5, 1913.

13 The war affected readership in Europe, inflated the costs of paper, and threatened the magazine's relationship with its German and Austrian printers. It also damaged Stieglitz's relationships with some of his colleagues. Stieglitz, having spent several formative years in Germany, was sympathetic to the Germans, a wildly unpopular position in America and particularly in France, where Steichen was living under threat of German occupation. (Lowe, 1983: 127); (Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O'Keeffe Archive, Series I, Box 46, Folders 1995–1996).

3 A Self-Reflexive Community: Stieglitz Issues a Questionnaire

In the context of the questionnaire, the phrase “291” registers as both a print community and an exhibition space. Promoting the two as a single symbiotic unit with significance to a larger community, Stieglitz naturalizes the origins of the questionnaire and denies his role in framing the responses:

“What is 291?” Do I know? No one thus far had told the world. No one thus far had suggested its real meaning in Camera Work, and so again it flashed upon me to ask myself “What is 291?” I would like to know. How find out? [sic] Why not let the people tell me what it is to them. And in telling me, perhaps they will tell each other. Some say ’tis I. I know it is not I. What is it? And then and there I decided that a Number of Camera Work should be devoted to this question.

Stieglitz, 1914: 3–4

Not only does Stieglitz have “the people tell me what it is to them” but he also has this group of people “tell each other” the meaning of 291, reinforcing the function of the questionnaire, and by extension, the magazine, as a polyvocal and collaborative space for artists and writers. Such self-reflexivity, characteristic of the avant-garde, also comes to define 291, which can be read as a response to the questionnaire.

Like other questionnaires of the era, Stieglitz’s survey is at once constitutive and retroactive. The responses to “What is 291?” recounted the work of the gallery, the magazine, and its contributors; a literary equivalent of an artistic retrospective or group show. Priming the audience to consider the achievements of 291, Stieglitz writes in his preface to the questionnaire:

Another year of experimenting done. Nine years of public experimenting. Experimenting in the little garret—variously termed Photo-Secession, Little Gallery, ‘291’—at 291 Fifth Avenue, New York. Several thousand visitors. Not, by far, as many as in former years. Curiosity seekers have fallen away.

Stieglitz, 1914: 3

Experimentation is a common refrain for Stieglitz, and resurfaces in language he later uses to describe 291. Stieglitz’s enumeration of the gallery’s various identities also forms a kind of institutional history, cementing his legacy and conditioning readers for the heterogeneous responses that follow. Moreover, the specified quantity of visitors situates the survey’s participants as proxies.
for gallery-goers, while citing the tapering number of patrons underscores the gallery’s need for assistance. Despite looking back, the questionnaire also works to solidify the 291 community, and, in this case, to ensure its future by celebrating its past.

Ever attuned to his legacy, by issuing a questionnaire, Stieglitz was signaling his participation in the international avant-garde, while transposing its forms to America. The genre was popularized in late nineteenth-century French print culture and soon adopted by publications internationally. It was so common in early twentieth-century print culture that one French writer referred to “enquêteomanie” or “questionnaire-mania” (Picard, 1927: 61). Around the world, magazine editors posed open-ended questions to select recipients, such as “What is the avant-garde?” “Is Impressionism finished?” and “Where is painting going?” (Pérez Ferrero, 1930: 1; Morice, 1905: 34–49; “¿Adónde va la pintura?”, 1945). Responses were then compiled and published in subsequent issues of the magazine, yielding a history of art and literature as told by its protagonists. In turn, readers could imagine their own responses and feel connected to questions that formed the basis of a movement or magazine’s mission, or for Stieglitz’s purposes, the 291 community.

The genre of the questionnaire also underscores the role of the periodical in facilitating the circulation of art and ideas, as the geographic range of contributors mirrored the network that magazines helped to create.15 In this case, Stieglitz describes the sixty-eight respondents as being from “different walks of life, and from different parts of this country, and some in Europe” (Stieglitz, 1914, 4). However, it was precisely because of such geographic dispersion that editors anxiously sought to define their aesthetic missions through questionnaires, much as Stieglitz hoped that the questionnaire would elicit financial, aesthetic, and moral support to sustain the gallery and the magazine (Stieglitz to Hartley, Letter, October 20, 1913, Voorhies, 2002: 116). Stieglitz aimed to show how 291 embodied a new artistic community; yet “What is 291?” also illustrates the tenuousness of this collective identity.

Although Stieglitz claims “291 is not I”, many centralize Stieglitz in their responses to the questionnaire, and he becomes the figure to reckon with in the magazine 291 as well. In the responses, “291” becomes a shifting signifier, defined as a physical space, a “spirit”, and Stieglitz himself. For example, the journalist Hutchins Hapgood announces that he goes to 291 “to see Alfred Stieglitz, to live for an hour in his spirit” (Hapgood, 1914: 11). The critic

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15 I analyze the genre of the questionnaire in depth in Cole, 2018.
Charles Caffin similarly exclaims, “In the final analysis, ‘291’ is an expression of the soul of Alfred Stieglitz”, whereas Belle Greene, J.P. Morgan’s librarian, simply declares, “‘291’ is Stieglitz” (Caffin, 1914: 62; Greene, 1914: 64). Stieglitz, 291, and the questionnaire were also subject to criticism. The most damaging reply came from Steichen, who writes: “I resent this inquiry ... as being impertinent, egoistic and previous ... it makes the process resemble an obituary or an inquest” (Steichen, 1914: 65). The questionnaire does historicize 291, even if it does so in an attempt to ensure its future relevance. Although Steichen explains his reluctance to participate in the questionnaire, through his response, ironically, he complies and defines 291. Steichen is given a platform for his position, however negative it may be; yet Stieglitz also co-opts the dissenting response by including it in an issue that is primarily laudatory of 291. Frustrations such as those voiced by Steichen and others may have sparked the transformation of “291” into the magazine 291 and a new exhibition space, the Modern Gallery.

Those who went on to launch 291 also contributed to the questionnaire, in some ways suggesting which attributes they hoped to retain— or distance themselves from—in their new venture. In her response, Meyer writes “A Toast” to “our beloved 291” (Meyer, 1914: 58). Written in a flourishing, calligraphic hand, Picabia’s original contribution was a stylized letter, a poetic text syncopated with lively pen strokes. Translated, typed, and reprinted in Camera Work, Picabia’s pen marks became broad black hyphens.  

The thick black lines that structure Picabia’s answer later appear on the covers of the magazine 291, suggesting a link between the aesthetics of the questionnaire and the reinvention of “291” (Fig. 3).  

In his reply De Zayas uses 291 as a refrain and visual marker that opens every paragraph, writing: “291 Expression of the Present brought out by one man” (likely signaling that it should be expanded beyond Stieglitz) and calls “291 Magnificent school for Autobiography and——–Caricature” (De Zayas, 1914: 73). Such hyphenation extends Picabia’s gesture, which carries into 291. In his response Haviland asserts, ‘‘291’ ... makes no propaganda. It teaches nothing, for the professional attitude is contrary to its spirit. It is made up of heteroge-
neous elements” (Haviland, 1914: 31). This non-didactic, aesthetically omnivorous stance comes to characterize 291. These tributes hint at the ways in which Meyer, Picabia, De Zayas, and Haviland hoped to reinvent 291. They worked together to start a new magazine devoted to visual poetry, satire, and avant-garde writing and art, and a new gallery, the Modern Gallery, which would be more commercial than 291. Yet these new enterprises continued to be intertwined with their predecessors.

4 Magazine as Artistic Experiment: The Transformation of 291

The magazine 291 was not the direct result of the questionnaire, but rather emerged from the process of questioning the aesthetic and practical future of Camera Work and the gallery 291. Camera Work was suspended during the magazine’s 1915–1916 print run of twelve issues, positioning 291 as Camera Work’s spiritual heir (Camera Work then printed two additional issues, one in 1916 and the last in 1917). The editors explicitly connected the two ventures—that is, Stieglitz’s 291 and the new magazine—through the use of the name and by establishing a narrative of continuity in the publication, even as they reinvented “291”.

In the first issue of 291, Haviland extends the questionnaire exercise by offering his own definitions for “291” through an imagined dialogue between a “professor” (Haviland) and “291” (Stieglitz):

Professor. What I wonder at, is why you did not tell the world what 291 is. 291 I wanted the other people to tell me.
Prof. Have they done so?
291 Each one of the sixty odd contributors has said what 291 was to him; the sum total of what it is to each individual makes up the spirit of 291.

HAVILAND, 1915: 4

What constitutes 291—and whether it refers to the magazine or the gallery—remains indeterminate. The two characters adopt the tone Stieglitz took in his preface to the questionnaire, creating the sense that Stieglitz is interviewing

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18 Satire had long been an essential mode to De Zayas, who held an exhibition titled “Up and Down Fifth Avenue: A Social Satire (An Exhibition of Caricatures Mounted and Staged by Marius de Zayas)” at 291 from April to December 1910.
himself (and indeed, he is the figure deemed “291”).\(^{19}\) However, in the dialogue the professor (Haviland) persists in asking what the implications of the questionnaire are for the future of “291”. He has the Stieglitz figure refer to 291 as “nothing but a laboratory, only a place for experiments”, using the terms that Stieglitz invoked in the questionnaire (Stieglitz would also later characterize 291 as an experiment). “You are waiting for the what next?”, Haviland writes, and concludes that the publication 291 is this next step: “If 291 sees clearly the path which is traced for it, great things might be expected from it” (Haviland, March 1915: 4). In this way, Haviland positions the new publication as the logical result of Stieglitz’s institutions, one that emerged from his own process of questioning.

Despite its clear relationship with Stieglitz, 291 aesthetically diverged from Camera Work. Whereas Camera Work resembled a large book with ample display space and lush reproductions, 291 was more of a broadsheet than a book and its component parts were angular, including bold fonts that transformed enigmatic quips and calligraphic poetry into design elements. De Zayas first envisioned such a format for a publication on his 1914 trip to Paris, where he met Guillaume Apollinaire and exchanged copies of Camera Work for Apollinaire’s Les Soirées de Paris, which he described to Stieglitz as “a center very much in the spirit of ‘291’”.\(^{20}\) Like Soirées, 291 is large-format and animates the relationship between text and image, reflecting De Zayas’ interest in the “psychotype”, wherein typographical elements merge with graphic ones to create new interpretive possibilities (Naumann, 1996: xiii).\(^{21}\) In the May 1915 issue, for instance, a thick liquid blackness interrupts and structures the text and images in the magazine’s two interior pages. These playful choices reinforce the self-conscious materiality of the magazine and further distinguish it from its predecessor.

291 saw itself as a successor to Stieglitz and also as a harbinger of a reinvigorated American avant-garde. De Zayas solidified this stance—at once an

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19 The interview is a genre closely related to the questionnaire and one of its primary precursors. For early examples of this transition see: Huret, 1891; Huret, 1892.

20 It is notable that in this context what De Zayas identifies as “the spirit of ‘291’” is actually a departure from Stieglitz’s aesthetic, and comes to form the basis of the magazine 291, to which Apollinaire contributed a signature “idéogramme” originally published in Les Soirées. De Zayas to Stieglitz, 1914, in Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O’Keeffe Archive. For more see: Bohn, 1976.

21 As Steven Heller explains, “Instead of being concrete signifiers, random letters embodied covert ideas and were manifested as symbols on an expressive canvas. Each psychotype was designed specifically for printing.” (Heller, 2003: 58). See also: Cohen, 1979: 460.
homage to Stieglitz and a break with him—in a manifesto-like essay on the relationship between modern art and America, printed in the fifth issue of the magazine:

The real American life is still unexpressed. America remains to be discovered. Stieglitz wanted to work this miracle. He wanted to discover America. Also, he wanted the Americans to discover themselves. But in pursuing his object, he employed the shield of psychology and metaphysics. He has failed. In order to attain living results, in order to create life—no shields!.

De Zayas, July–Aug. 1915: 3

The essay situates Stieglitz’s achievements (and failures) as a starting point for transforming America. It at once contends with the past—here figured as Stieglitz—and insists that 291 is a new object, wholly of its time, that will reinvent America. As such, much like Haviland does, De Zayas positions the magazine as a response to the crisis articulated by “What is 291?”

Although 291 sought to surpass Stieglitz, it also showcased his work. The September–October 1915 issue was focused on Stieglitz’s 1907 photograph The Steerage (Fig. 5), which had originally been published in a 1911 issue of Camera Work, highlighting the intertextuality of the two periodicals. In 291 The Steerage was printed as a large-scale photogravure on both vellum and Japanese paper. In this now-iconic print, a drawbridge cuts diagonally across the frame, creating a dynamic, angular composition and underscoring the divide between the upper and lower decks, and thus, social classes. Reflecting on this image in the magazine, De Zayas announces: “Stieglitz comprises the history of photography in the United States. ‘Camera Work’ bears witness to this” (De Zayas, Sept–Oct 1915: 1). Through this homage, 291 celebrates Stieglitz and Camera Work as it historicizes him them both. Despite featuring this image, 291 primarily included Picabia’s playful “object portraits” and De Zayas’ caricatures, indicating a shift toward a more provocative, proto-Dadaist aesthetic rather than promoting photography, which had been a priority of Camera Work.

In the same issue that included The Steerage, Haviland addresses the aesthetic divide between Stieglitz and Picabia, connecting the two through a discussion of the “machine.” He writes, “We are living in the age of the machine” (Haviland, Sept–Oct 1915: 1), alluding at once to the camera as a machine, and

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22 For analyses of the photograph see Perloff, 2005: 201; Sekula, 1984; Francisco and McCauley, 2012.
23 For more see Bohn, 1980.

indirectly, to Picabia’s “machine art.” In this vein, Picabia produced a portrait of Stieglitz as a camera for 291 with the caption “Ici, c’est ici Stieglitz / foi et amor” (Here, this is Stieglitz here / faith and love) for the cover of the July–August 1915 issue (Fig. 2). The top of the picture plate says “Ideal” printed in formal Germanic type, leaving it ambiguous as to whether or not Stieglitz is still striving toward or has failed to reach his ideal. Through such inclusions, 291 brought together Stieglitz’s visionary photographic eye and Picabia’s machine aesthetic while exposing a tension between the two.24

As for Stieglitz, he repeatedly refers to 291 as “an experiment”, as in a letter to Hartley:

I am sending you #2 of ‘291.’ ... The whole thing is nothing more than an experiment, and a means to give De Zayas, Mrs. Meyer, Katherine Rhoades and some of the others a chance to experiment. It may develop into something bigger. It all depends upon the talent attracted. But as it is, it has already given us some fun and has attracted some attention.


Stieglitz indicates his support for the project, but does not treat 291 like a lasting object the way he did Camera Work (rather, “it has ... given us some fun”). Yet reflecting on 291 in 1922, Stieglitz retroactively credits himself for desiring and then supporting such a publication: “I had been waiting for some years for a thing like this to happen. I had always wished that there would be some magazine somewhere in this country devoted to satire” (Stieglitz, 1922). Stieglitz plays the role of benefactor and nurturer of his disciples’ talent, explaining: “What was wanted from me was my sanction to use the name ‘291’ as the name of the magazine and to have me be one of the three guarantors assuming responsibility for payment of bills” (Ibid). However, he concludes this text by once again eluding responsibility, much as he did in the questionnaire, announcing, “I was more or less an onlooker, a conscious one, wishing to see what they would do as far as policy was concerned if left to themselves, how they represented the spirit of 291” (Ibid).25 Ever protective of the “spirit of 291”, Stieglitz praises 291’s successes, but does not fully embrace it as part of his legacy.

Stieglitz formally appraised 291 after it had completed its print run. In October 1916 a newly reissued Camera Work printed the text “‘291’—A New Pub-

24 For more see: Rozaitis, 1994; Bohn, 2002.
lication”, at once celebrating and historicizing it, much as 291 had done to Stieglitz. The text refers to the magazine as a set of experiments, particularly with type-setting and printing, that helped advance the American avant-garde:

“291” is always experimenting. During 1915–1916, amongst other experiments, was a series with type-setting and printing. The experiments were based upon work which had been done with type and printers’ ink, and paper, by Apollinaire in Paris, and by the Futurists in Italy. No work in this spirit had as yet been attempted in America. The outcome of those American experiments has been a portfolio consisting of twelve numbers of a publication called “291”.

“‘291’—A New Publication”, 1916: 62

Note that the meaning of “291” shifts throughout the text, indicating Stieglitz’s gallery in the first word of the paragraph, but then identifying the magazine 291 in the final word of the paragraph. In this way, Camera Work further destabilizes any answer to the question “What is 291?”

The confusion between 29i and 291 was further complicated by the establishment of the Modern Gallery, which De Zayas and the other editors opened soon after launching the magazine. On October 7, 1915 an announcement for the Modern Gallery was printed as an insert in 29i. The text read:

“291” announces the opening of the Modern Gallery ... for the sale of paintings of the most advanced character of the Modern Art Movement, Negro Sculpture, pre-conquest Mexican Art, Photography ... The work of “291” will be continued at “291” Fifth Avenue in the same spirit and manner as heretofore. The Modern Gallery is but an additional expression of “291”.

“‘291’”, 29i, 1915

As evidenced by the repetition of the name “291”, the Modern Gallery wanted to expand the work of Stieglitz’s gallery without encroaching on the “spirit” of 291. As if to underscore the fluid meaning of “291”, below the announcement was subscription information for the magazine 29i, whose address was still listed as 29i Fifth Ave. (The Modern Gallery was located at 500 Fifth Avenue, only twelve blocks north of the gallery 29i). As indicated in its announcement, the Modern Gallery hoped to fulfill the legacy of 29i while making work available that was previously difficult for collectors to obtain, due to Stieglitz’s notorious lack of interest in commercial sales (Watson, 1992: 178).
Stieglitz’s ambivalence toward the Modern Gallery was evident in a framing text he wrote for *Camera Work* wherein he repeats the term “experimenting”. It concludes with the irrevocable break between the Modern and 291:

> Mr. De Zayas, after experimenting for three months on the lines contemplated, found that practical business in New York and “291” were incompatible. In consequence he suggested that “291” and the Modern Gallery be separated. The suggestion automatically constituted a separation.

> “291’ and the Modern Gallery”, 1916: 64

The Modern Gallery and 291 officially separated after three months, but the former stayed open until June 1918, a little more than two years after the magazine 291 had folded (it became the De Zayas Gallery from 1919–1921, after which it closed and De Zayas moved to Europe). Stieglitz positioned both 291 and the Modern Gallery as ephemeral experiments of the past, working both to claim them and to distance himself from them, as a way to centralize his place in the legacy of 291.

5 Periodical Networks: 291 and Dada Magazines

291’s “experiments with type-setting and printing”, as Stieglitz described in *Camera Work*, also spurred new possibilities for art periodicals, thereby further reinventing 291 and its legacy. “No work in this spirit had as of yet been attempted in America”, the text had declared (“‘291’—A New Publication”, 1916: 62). Subsequent innovations point to the larger periodical network that 291 helped to catalyze, as other magazines also reimagined their format, scale, and design. 291 preceded the opening of Cabaret Voltaire in February 1916, considered the birth of Dada, and many of 291’s successors, in turn, were influenced by Dadaist aesthetics as well as by 291. This proliferation of magazines included: 391, *The Blind Man*, *Broom*, *Rongwrong*, *TNT*, *New York Dada*, *The...*

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26 Stieglitz writes that 291 ended because “Haviland had gone to Europe, De Zayas had split from 291, Agnes Meyer become a Freer-ite with Chinese art aspirations more aglow than ever, I was left with the ‘poor’ 291.” Stieglitz, 1922.

27 After 291 folded, in 1916, De Zayas began correspondence with the Dadaist poet Tristan Tzara, and the following year exchanged 291 for Tzara's publication *Dada* (1917–1921), for which many 291 contributors also wrote.
Ridgefield Gazook, and Others.28 Such periodicals position the magazine as a site of freeform experimentation and as an extension of a collaborative artistic practice.

It is telling that many of these magazines were founded largely by and for artists, who in their role as editors, were able to control the distribution and display of their artwork. In 1917, when Marcel Duchamp’s Fountain was rejected by the Society of Independent Artists, it was instead featured in a photograph taken by Stieglitz in the Blind Man, a magazine that Duchamp edited along with Henri-Pierre Roché and Beatrice Wood. Duchamp also worked on Rong-wrong (1917) and New York Dada (1921), the latter with Man Ray. New York Dada explores what art historian Emily Hage calls the “magazine as interactive medium” and indicates Duchamp and Man Ray’s commitment to “reinventing what an artists’ magazine might be” (Hage, 2012: 176–178). Man Ray also launched TNT (1919) and The Ridgefield Gazook (1915), the latter of which art historian Dawn Ades calls a “light-hearted parody of 291 in the spirit of a high-class college rag magazine” (Ades, 1978: 39). Such print experiments, like 291, embraced the malleability of the magazine as a site of artistic creation.

291’s clearest successor was Picabia’s magazine 391. Between January 1917 and October 1924 Picabia edited its nineteen issues itinerantly in Barcelona, New York, Zurich, and Paris. He explicitly aimed to translate 291 abroad, reinforcing and extending the community’s transatlantic connections. As Picabia wrote to Stieglitz from Barcelona: “You will receive a magazine ‘391’ which is a duplicate of your magazine ‘291.’ ... it is not as well done but it is better than nothing, for truly here there is nothing, nothing, nothing” (Picabia to Stieglitz, January 22, 1916, Letter, Camfield, 1979: 93). Much like 291, 391 employed a wide variety of typefaces to upend a linear reading experience. Picabia “had become fanatical about expressive typography”, design historian Steven Heller notes, “using illegible typefaces as well as fashionable advertising fonts” (Heller, 2003: 57). He favored type that was “mutable and expressive”, interspersing traditional and more eclectic choices (Heller, 2003: 60). These typographical elements, along with the magazine’s inclusion of 291 contributors—Apollinaire, Ribemont-Dessaignes, and of course Picabia himself—as well as its mix of poetry, mechanical drawings, and essays, all emphasize the magazine’s indebtedness to 291 as telegraphed by its name.

Picabia makes his loyalties explicit on the cover of 391’s eighth issue, published in Zurich in 1919, through a drawn grid titled Construction moléculaire (Molecular Construction). In it he plots the relationship between the maga-

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zines and figures with whom he aligns. 391 is in the center of the grid, not far from Stieglitz and De Zayas. Also featured are Duchamp, Apollinaire, Tzara, Picabia himself and his wife, the critic Gabrielle Buffet, as well as publications such as *Dada, Camera Work, The Blind Man, Les Soirées de Paris*, and of course, *291*. Further connecting these figures is a mechanical drawing atop the grid comprised of a set of lines and open circles that imply movement. In *Construction moléculaire*, Picabia diagrams these figures' and publications' interconnections, allowing him to create a genealogy for 391, which sits at the center of this constellation of relationships.

Years after 391 had ended, in 1937, Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia published an article which began “People ask: Why 391? What is 391?” (Buffet-Picabia (1937) in Motherwell, 1981: 261). She answers the questions as follows:

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29 For more see: Joselit, 2005.
Before 391 there was 291 ... Stieglitz published a truly sumptuous magazine named *Camera Work*, containing his own photographic work and that of his disciples ... 291 Fifth Avenue became perhaps even more famous as a laboratory of ideas than of photography. So much so that soon the number 291 came to symbolize an avant-garde movement ... The name of the magazine *Camera Work* was changed to 291. Such is the genesis, such the mystery—now unveiled—of this number which has intrigued so many readers.

Buffet-Picabia defines 291 as the arrival of an avant-garde in New York and then positions 291 as the legacy of *Camera Work*. Although she gets the name change wrong—*Camera Work* and 291 were different publications—she reinforces the narrative of continuity between them, which culminates in her husband’s periodical 391 and the question “What is 391?” Much like 291 before it, 391 materially embedded a network of relationships into the publication itself.

### 6 The Legacies of 291

An analysis of 291 points to the expansiveness of the magazine as a medium: as a set of innovative and interactive design elements, a visualized network of relationships and collaborations, a compendium of artistic concerns, a site for literary experimentation, and a community formation. Because of its exuberant design, 291 freed its contributors—and its readers—from the traditional experience of producing or consuming a magazine. As scholar Jay Bochner writes about 291, “the pages move from being transparent, sequential text to a place where things are happening” (Bochner, 1996: 216). As such, 291’s formal experimentation anticipated contemporary interpretations of the magazine as an art object and site for display. For instance, in the 1960s and 1970s, as art historian Gwen Allen outlines, artists saw the magazine as an artistic medium and an “alternative exhibition space” (Allen, 2011: 1). “Utopian hopes of artists ... depended on the very fleeting and precarious nature of the magazine itself”, Allen writes (Allen, 2011: 2). Much like those involved with 291, subsequent artists continued to explore and exploit the material and affective qualities of magazines, as collaborative, interactive, and performative spaces.

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30 See also: Naumann, 2011.
31 For reflections on digital iterations of such magazines see Seita, 2019.
Although it was designed for reader interaction, in 1915 291 was little read. When the gallery 291 closed in 1917, Stieglitz describes selling 8,000 remaining copies of 291—a collectible object printed on the highest quality paper now exhibited as artwork—to a rag picker for $5.80 (Stieglitz, 1942: 215). However, he continued to ask and answer the question “What is 291?” long after physical copies of either Camera Work or 291 were widely available. The act of defining “291” through Camera Work’s questionnaire introduced a self-reflexivity legible in 291 itself. 291 was a gallery, a community, a magazine, and an aesthetic sensibility, and its meaning and legacy continued to be the focus of intense debate.

While Stieglitz and many of his colleagues participated in 291, or its allied periodicals, some of Camera Work questionnaire’s respondents felt betrayed by the new magazine. The critic Charles Caffin, for instance, wrote to Stieglitz:

I used the word “disillusionment” solely in reference to the changes that seems to me to have come over the spirit of “291.” The old spirit was mutual helpfulness. But during the past winter I have felt, rightly or wrongy, that a new spirit, one of bitterness, was creeping in. Now comes the magazine, which has taken the old name, but seems to be projected as an organ of antagonism. The impression it produces, confirms the fear that “What does 291 mean?” might prove to be an obituary notice.

Caffin, 1915

Caffin argues that 291, with its bold confrontational style, at once flaunts and disregards the 291 community solidified by the questionnaire. Caffin, and the many others invested in the meaning of 291, fought to define it, lay claim to it, and to preserve its legacy. 291’s shift away from the book-like, elegant Camera Work to a sleeker, more radical publication was controversial, even if it influenced the development of subsequent periodicals in New York and abroad.

As evidenced by Caffin’s letter, the question “What is 291?” continued to be contested after the questionnaire had been printed, and even after the institutions themselves had folded. In 1918 a colleague wrote to Stieglitz “I miss ‘291’,—and still I am more conscious of it than ever.—I feel it is there,—somewhere—and that is all I desire.—The spirit is alive and whether the place will actually be opened or not, has no influence over its existence” (Dewald, 1918). Stieglitz

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291 has since been digitized by the International Dada Archive at the University of Iowa Libraries, the Bibliothèque Kandinsky at the Centre Pompidou, and the Blue Mountain Project at the Princeton University Library; hard copies of the magazine are accessible in libraries’ special collections and museum collections.
himself restlessly returned to the question “What is 291?” and interrogated its meaning and lasting impact, even as he founded subsequent galleries. After the building housing 291 was razed, he went on to form the Anderson Galleries (1921–1925), the Intimate Gallery (1925–1929), and An American Place (1929–1946). Stieglitz organized an exhibition as late as 1937 at an American Place called “Beginnings and Landmarks: ‘291.’” The catalogue calls the show “a demonstration of potentials rather than of final accomplishment” and it served as a way to continue to ask “What is 291?” (“Beginnings and Landmarks”, 1937).

Stieglitz also perpetuated “What is 291?” by circulating the original questionnaire. In 1924 Stieglitz nostalgically reflected on 291’s accomplishments, sending a curator at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston a copy of the questionnaire and remarking:

‘291’ was a laboratory for men. There for 14 years I ‘examined’ the world of ‘art’ as well as the world itself ... ‘291’ was a Cultural Centre—In 14 years about 100,000 people came there. Its doors were never locked ... I am sending you a copy of What is 291? (I think you may have one). It may help you a little.

STIEGLITZ, 1924

Stieglitz enumerates his own time logged at 291 as well as the visitors he amassed, reiterates his commitment to accessibility and experimentation, and positions the questionnaire as a means of accessing that lost era. The art critic Edward Alden Jewel recalls how in 1930 Stieglitz claimed that “What is 291?” remained unanswered (Jewel, 1944).

Stieglitz’s colleagues returned to the question in the collectively-authored book America and Alfred Stieglitz: A Collective Portrait, published in 1934 in honor of Stieglitz’s 70th birthday. In a review, Frederick Julius Ringel compares the two print projects: “Exactly twenty years ago one of the issues of Camera Work carried a streamer with the pertinent question: What is ‘291’? ... America and Alfred Stieglitz ... must be considered the 1935 version of the same query” (Ringel, 1935). However, this time, instead of Stieglitz prompting a composite portrait of 291 through its supporters, his community explicitly created a collective portrait of him. As such exercises demonstrate, the persistence of the question helped preserve and reaffirm the community and its shared purpose, but it also centralized its author, Stieglitz.33

33 In 1937 another reviewer writes, “What is 291? continues to be answered in one way or another by this painter or that by some worker in the allied arts”, suggesting the Stieglitz’s project indeed continued. (Flint, 1937: 5).
In its myriad forms, 291 continued to circulate—in galleries, magazines, in New York, and abroad—accruing in meaning, even as its participants moved on to other projects and questions. For instance, Stieglitz was an advisor to the magazine *Manuscripts* (1922–1923), edited by Paul Rosenfeld and Herbert Seligmann, which in December 1922 asked, “Can a photograph have the significance of art?” Such a question continues Stieglitz’s aesthetic mission and commitment to photography—as well as the genre of the questionnaire—in a new publication. It is precisely the open-ended nature of these enterprises, and questionnaires themselves, that kept such conversations going. In her assessment of Stieglitz, art historian Sarah Greenough credits him with creating a space for debate “to foster a situation in which experimentation, change and even radical actions were possible”, a crucial blueprint for every subsequent avant-garde (Greenough, 2000: 24). It was the openness of his inquiries, what she calls more “idea or an attitude than a codified entity”, that enabled his impact, and I would argue what also allowed his successors at 291 to perpetuate his line of questioning (Greenough, 2000: 26).

Much like other questionnaires, “What is 291?” generated a collective through the act of asking. It served as an opportunity to reflect on—and actively shape—an aesthetic project, and mirrored the network created by the magazine itself. Questionnaires have persisted into the present, as they allow artists and writers to position themselves in an avant-garde lineage while superseding those who came before them. So too did 291 displace its predecessors and pose a bold new kind of magazine. 291 signaled a creative shift, changing and broadening the implication of what “291” could mean, and by extension, what a magazine could be. Much like the questionnaire, 291 reveals the magazine to be an object that records and questions its own history. As a response to “What is 291?”, the periodical 291 draws attention to the elastic boundaries of the medium, positioning it as a capacious category that can withstand formal reinvention, here visually encoded in the publication itself. Emerging out of its community’s self-reflection, 291 points to its materiality as both a magazine and art object, while interrogating its past and reimagining the future. In so doing, it remains a model for artistic innovation—and self-questioning—today.

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