

# CURBED

When *Nest* Was What's Next Looking back at the fearlessly eccentric magazine that Condé Nast was too afraid to buy.

By Wendy Goodman



Raymond Donahue's bedroom — in the attic of his mother's New Jersey home — was featured in the first issue of *Nest* in 1997. The walls and ceiling were covered in photocopies of actress Farrah Fawcett's magazine covers. Donahue's mother gave him the beanbag chair for Christmas in 1980. Photo: Courtesy The Best of *Nest*, by Todd Oldham; Text by Valerie Steele; Photograph by Jason Schmidt

In the fall of 1997, the arrival of *Nest* dropped a bomb in the middle of the shelter-magazine world. It cost \$7.50, and its cover featured a room plastered floor to ceiling with Farrah Fawcett magazine covers. If you looked very closely, you'd see there was a discreet line running vertically up the left side of the cover that read, "Raymond Donahue's bedroom." Who was that? What was this?

*Nest* was a joyride into the unknown at a time when publishing was big business and publishers played it safe. Condé Nast and Hearst offered up a vision of good taste viewed through a kind of posh Slim Aarons social lens

Wendy Goodman, "When Nest Was What's Next." *Curbed* (October 13, 2020), accessed online.

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few had access to. Those corporations spent lots of money on focus groups to tell editors what cover images would sell, which usually meant something familiar and certainly never too risky, much less perverse. For those of us producing stories, that usually meant a cover photograph of a well-polished wood table piled with tasteful artifacts and features about, by, and for affluent white people.



*The first issue of Nest* (1997). Photo: Courtesy The Best of Nest, by Todd Oldham; Text by Valerie Steele; Photograph by Jason Schmidt

I was very much a part of that world, entering my career in fashion in the mid-'80s and going on to cover design at *House & Garden* (1997 cover price: \$2.95). I had always been attracted to outliers, wanting to tell the stories of people who rattled the cages, forging new paths of beauty laced with strangeness. Mostly, that was frowned upon; my editors wanted nothing too weird, nothing that involved a reconsideration of something old but interesting. That first issue of *Nest* reinforced my inner voices. I had to meet Joseph Holtzman. I wasn't alone: The fashion designer Todd Oldham saw the magazine and immediately figured out how to enter the *Nest* universe. He became a confidant of Holtzman's and a contributing photographer, with stories in almost every one of the 26 issues between 1997 and 2004. Toward the end of that run, Condé Nast succumbed to Holtzman's mad world of high and low, sending out its then-all-powerful taste ambassador James Truman to make a deal to buy *Nest*. But that was before they saw the Spring 2004 issue featured an image of Jesus ("looking like your kindly next-door Aryan," by artist Warner E. Sallmann) with a cover line circling his head like a halo that read, "Decorating for the Christian Home." The issue included the "Ten Commandments of Decorating." All of which made them nervous. Sixteen years later, Holtzman and Oldham are publishing a book, *The Best of Nest*

(Phaidon Press Limited), about the magazine, which today feels both like a time capsule and entirely fresh. It took years for Oldham to persuade Holtzman to do the book. "I was just trying to deliver on *Nest*," Oldham says. "The hardest thing to maintain was the happy whiplash. *Nest* was like, *Whoa! Here's Derry Moore's palace, here's a cardboard box that the Dutch homeless lived in* — that was the part I really wanted to protect. I do describe it as a Fellini film; there might be a ten-foot-tall woman walking in the background who you might never see again. That is kind of *Nest*." I spoke to Holtzman about the book and why he finally gave in to Todd.

### **How did this come about?**

I should just tell you I very much see this as Todd's book. And his take on this. Originally, I wasn't going to be included and then Todd wanted to interview me — it was going to be writers from each issue — and then I panicked. I'm just not good in a Q&A. Todd wanted—instead of having other writers, he wanted my voice. So that's when I said, "Okay, Todd, I'll do this."

### **I love your text.**

Did you read that rambling thing? I think that's important because my idea there is that I tried to answer all the questions that might be in an interview so I wouldn't have to do an interview — but I'm happy to talk to you, hon. Still, you see, it's Todd's book. Todd is really my hero. And I met Todd after the first issue; he called me up.

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Adam daytime and nighttime rooms, Issue 1 (1997). Photo: Courtesy The Best of Nest, by Todd Oldham; Photograph by Doug Brown

I was not involved in popular culture much. I didn't even know who Todd was, but my assistant came in [and said], "Todd Oldham is on the phone," so we met, and after that, Todd was in essence my singular reader. I always had an extra first hand-bound copy made, one to show to the advertisers and one to send to Todd.

**You were living in Baltimore in the years before *Nest*??**

I'd sort of made a tomb for myself in this very grand old Waspy apartment. I was a neighbor of Mr. T. Rowe Price. I was kind of floundering in Baltimore. Basically, I spent the aids years just taking care of people. I didn't have to work; I volunteered. I was in the New York scene, and my boyfriend became sick in Baltimore, and that's when I moved back. My father bought me this apartment, and I spent years here sort of honing my craft.

**And you got to the idea of making a magazine after working on a book project?**

I started doing a book with Derry Moore [Henry Dermot Ponsonby Moore, 12th earl of Drogheda, a British photographer], and this is really what happened: I had his whole archive available, and we were putting together a really beautiful book, and Carl [Skoggard, Holtzman's husband and *Nest* collaborator] was writing it, and then I said, "Derry, we've got to shoot something modern," and I found a friend of mine — his name is Aiden Shaw; you might know the name from *Sex and the City*, but he's an iconic gay porn star artist — and I shot his council flat. Afterward, he said, "You know, it sounds like you don't do anything; you just talk." And then he said, "You know, you should start your own magazine." So he was listed on the masthead as the "KIC-IN-THE-ASS." Basically, I always have to prove myself to somebody or something, you know?

**How did you find stories?**

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I was working in this AIDS organization, and I met this person who was in that organization, and he told me about Raymond. He was very annoyed that I would dare to want to put his weirdo friend in the magazine, but it just piqued my interest, and everyone didn't think it was good, and Jason [Schmidt] shot that, but I knew I wanted that to be on the cover, and I made him go back. I wanted the camera to be set this way and that way. And he went back, but that was the beginning of a really good relationship with Jason. I got all my contacts through my hairdresser, Jason Croy, you know. That's how I got my first group together.



Joseph Holtzman's apartment, Issue 2 (Fall 1998). Photo: Courtesy The Best of Nest, by Todd Oldham; Text by Arlene Swatch; Photograph by Evelyn Hofer

PLAINT CARL SKOGGARD  
PHOTOGRAPHS EVELYN HOFER  
CAPTIONS ARLENE SWATCH

Yes,  
I too  
married a decorator...

Even after that *House & Garden* piece? you ask. How much more warning would anyone require? Four smiling women told all about being hostages to the irrepensible male passion for tufts and ruffles. About their spouses' intense concern with which pantyhose they (the wives) would wear. Smiles notwithstanding, one knew that the brief taper of these wives' decorator-instinct had gone out—or been snuffed out.

This warning came, alas, too late for me. My life was already in the sights of my special decorator. Even then I was living through interesting times, as the waxy Chinese saying has it. Oh, truly, it is unwise for man or woman to contend with a decorator-sponse for artistic rights to some hypothetical "personal space"! Let us take hair, for instance. Why would you unleash a turf war on your personal scalp? I no longer take much interest in consultations going on just above my head between my decorator and the cutter. A blessing if they agree. I like to think.

Being married to a decorator means living with a volcano right there in your sanctum. There are always rumbles and every so often a true eruption, with more or

THIS SET WAS SHOT THREE-Piece with (above left) and THE A CHAIRWELL CONVERSATION PIECE. In the Pi (right), bold, big-top stripes in turquoise lacoon animate lively paintings (left to right) by Kandinsky, DeStijl, and Picasso. A George II walnut games table adds sturdy heft to this thoroughly modern set.

Photo: Courtesy The Best of Nest, by Todd Oldham; Text by Arlene Swatch; Photograph by Evelyn Hofer

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## But you'd moved to New York when it started.

I rented an apartment down the hall [from my place]. I went to Ikea and got tables that I am still using in my studio and then that was just it. I'd been working on the book with a graphic designer, a talented man in Baltimore named Alex Castro, and he had done some really high-end art books. He liked working with me, so we did the first magazine together. It was going to be pretty clean and white, and then *Wallpaper* came around, and I had to switch the aesthetic really quickly, and then I kind of took it the other way.

## Did you ask anybody for advice on making a magazine?

I did go to these men and ask them. I had a dummy magazine, and they told me everything I was doing was wrong; first of all, nobody wanted me to put the Farrah Fawcett thing on the cover. Then the magazine people told me that because it had other magazines (in the photograph), I would be sued ... "You can't do it! [You are] promoting other magazines!" I said, "Fuck 'em." These men wanted \$30,000 to redo my magazine, and they had ties that you wouldn't believe. Do you know what I mean? Terrible taste. So I took the same \$30,000; I went to Italy and I printed it. And it sold out.

## And we all loved it.

And then you know at the other end of this thing, Condé Nast was interested in buying me. Did you know this? James Truman negotiated for months. I liked James — he was interesting, you know? This was a smart guy, and he was interesting. He took me to this cafeteria in the Condé Nast Building, and they were all there, and I was thinking to myself, 'cause I thought magazines were coming to an end, that they are eating dinosaur salad or something. And it was kind of a done deal, and I remember going into the park and crying; one of my previous issues had said kill CONDÉ NAST in code. But then when I put Jesus on the cover, and, ah, they said, "Never mind."



Issue 13 (Summer 2001) featured André Leon Talley, then Vogue's editor-at-large, in his room in Lenox Hill Hospital, which had been transformed by the decorator Mica Ertegun. That's Fran Lebowitz outside the window, smoking. On the right is that issue's letter from the editor, Joseph Holtzman. Photo: Courtesy The Best of Nest, by Todd Oldham; Text by Joseph Holtzman; Photograph by Jason Schmidt

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### **So, wait, that was that?**

They said Mr. Newhouse said, “This is not a decorating magazine.” And that was the end of the deal. I do wonder if I didn’t kind of do that to kind of knock me out of the box for Condé Nast? ’Cause I was soooo unsure; I’d still be working for them: a bitch with a limousine? Can you imagine? It’s really not who I am, know what I mean? But I always loved magazines, and it was a fantasy of mine to be an editor of a magazine. Most people told me I couldn’t do it. Well, for the first time in my life — well, I was on Prozac, hon, and that’s what changed me. That’s when I got out of bed for the first time. I was 39 years old. I was probably a pretty good designer and doing really interesting work; I did a Broadway play that was never produced, sets for ... but nothing ever happened for me; I couldn’t promote myself. I thought any ambition was bad, whatever it was ... I couldn’t do it. And Prozac did it. I’m 39 turning 40, I went to Comme des Garçons, got a wardrobe, and became an editor.

### **Just like that?**

I don’t really know if that’s true [*laughing*], but it’s the way I’m thinking about it now. I was always shopping there anyway. She [Rei Kawakubo, designer for Comme des Garçons] was a hero of mine too, but no one can cut like Todd! That is a whole other story we have to get to. I was blown away when I saw his retrospective.

### **And after the Condé deal fell apart ...**

I guess I was relieved.

### **You shut it down soon thereafter. Was that in part a financial decision?**

Everyone thinks that’s why I did it. but I really did it because I felt I was going to get repetitive. I wanted to leave when it was good, and I even see my stories, I try to push my graphics all the time, and I think I was, and basically the stories were good, but I worried they were repeating the same genre, and I had to go past the limited palette.

### **So you knew the next issue was going to be your last?**

It was already in process. It was a Tuesday ’cause I was seeing my psychiatrist and I announced it then. It was from that day on, and just like I didn’t tell people when I started the magazine, I didn’t tell people when I was stopping it. And I didn’t want to hurt the people I was working with. I had conversations with each of them, but I knew I had to do it. And I didn’t know where I was going to go to next, but I had to do it, you know?

### **And then you became a painter.**

Well, that is when I started again. I was painting when I was 20 and kind of a nutcase, and I have some really good paintings from that period, but then I just didn’t think I was good enough. I switched over to decorative arts and became obsessed with English furniture, and I really thought I didn’t understand painting and became interested in frames ... and then, so, it was kind of a scary leap for me to start over again after the magazine. And it was hard; it’s been hard.

### **Okay, so Todd is the one we have to thank for this book.**

It’s not my book. I’m not promoting the book. I am not that interested in publicity and that sort of thing, but when Todd wanted to do this book, I’d never say no to Todd. I said, “Yes, yes, if you want to.” I didn’t really think that there was going to be, that it would happen, you know?

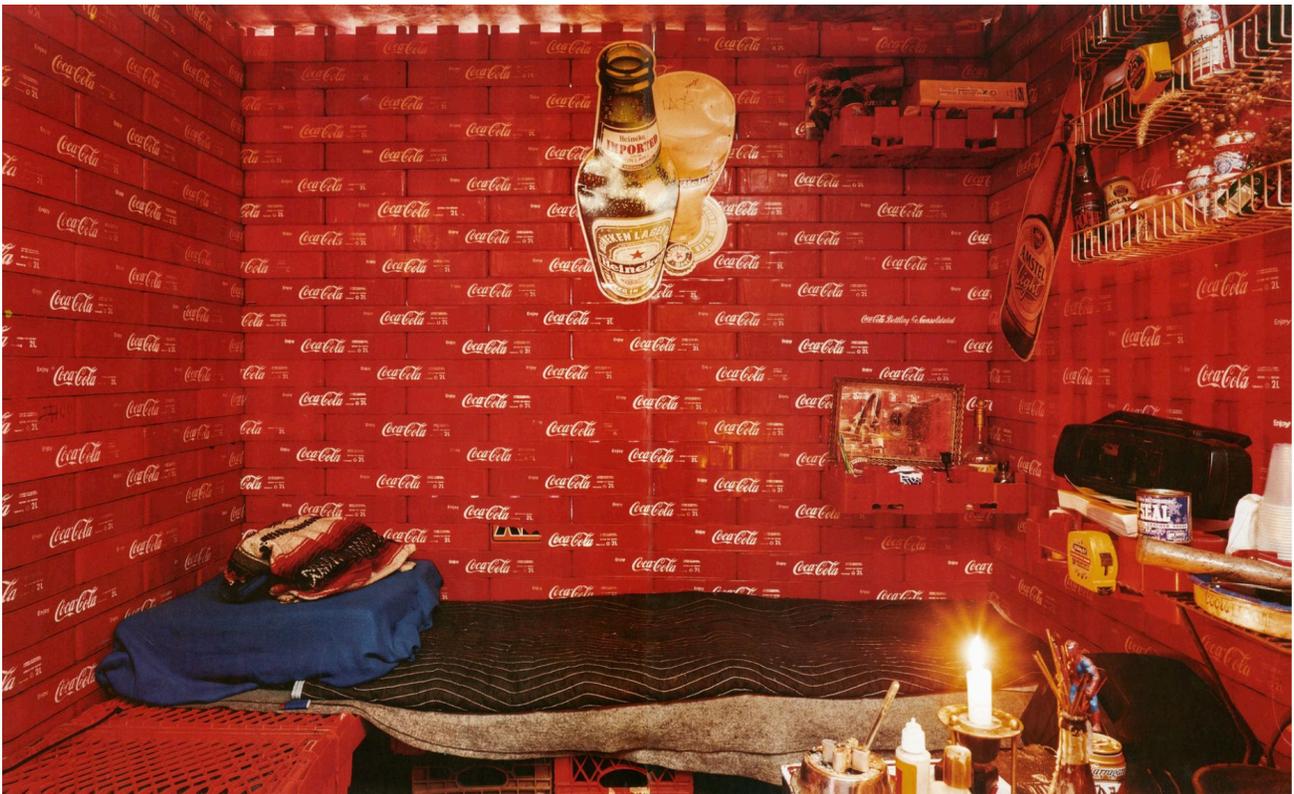
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### What do you think of it?

It's cinematic. I called it a flip-book because Todd is very cinematic. So what interested me seeing what Todd put together was, as a graphic designer, that's what Todd was, a hero for me. And he told me, too, exactly when I hit my stride — and all of a sudden, looking at his book, I became proud of myself as a graphic designer — but I didn't hit it until, you know, midway through. I read Todd's very sweet introduction; he mentions that it seemed to be a magazine put together by someone who has never seen a magazine before. I rather liked that.

### What is next for *Nest*?

My fantasy is I want to put *Nest* online for free, and this was kind of the deal I made with Todd. In my letter to my readers at the end, I said I promise I want this to be fully online and catalogued for free. That is what I feel good about.



Issue 19 (Winter 2002/2003). Photo: Courtesy The Best of Nest, by Todd Oldham; Text by Oliver Ray; Photograph by Jason Ejlal Feuer

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