Powerful Peculiarity: Zines as a Tool to Represent Subjectivity in Peripheral Communities

SUNY New Paltz Honors Thesis by Dani Gardner

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The year is 2016 and I'm a sophomore in high school. It's a Friday night in New York City and my friend's punk band, On Pink We Wear Wednesdays, is playing a show at a teen venue called the 7eventytwo, hosted by the Church Street School for Music and Art in Tribeca. I had never been to a teen show before, hardly spent much time in a DIY space, and certainly didn't have much experience going out in the city on a weekend.

As my friends and I navigate the trains downtown and the winding streets of lower Manhattan, I start to get nervous. Anxious thoughts like "what do I do with my hands while the bands play?" "what's my plan if I get sucked into a mosh pit?" and "who will I see there, how should I talk to them?" overcome me.

We arrive. There's a bouncer at the door who tells us that if we want to do anything illegal, to keep it outside. More qualms pulse though me. I pay eight dollars at the door and turn right from the lobby of the teen center into a dark side room. Colorful streaks of light move around the room and random images are projected against the far wall. I see familiar faces and unfamiliar faces and hear the murmurs of small talk as everyone waits in anticipation for the first set to start. In the back there is a table with bowls of candy and bottles of water. Beside the sweets and refreshments are pieces of copy paper, stapled together to look like little books. Within these pieces of paper (likely printed at the school library or the author's parents' office) were teenage confessions, collages, poetry, and artistic expressions. It was this night that I came to find out that these folded and haphazardly bound pages are called zines.

I had never seen anything like a zine before, I knew nothing about it. All that I knew was that these zines were made by high schoolers at the show to give away or sell that night. I left with a few things from my big night out: other people's sweat, temporary hearing loss, a sense of community, and a zine by which to remember and embody it all.

Figure 1. "Valentines Blow Your Minds," a 7eventytwo members-only party held on Feb. 10, 2012, featured four popular bands from the area. Photo courtesy of Ryan Muir.

The show at the 7eventytwo was the first of many experiences in which I have been a part of zine distribution and the community that it forms. That night at the teen center pulled the curtain back and revealed the intimate connection that exists in the moment that a zinester hands their zine to a reader. I think of this intimate moment as the birth site of the rhetorical strength of the content within a zine.

This thesis is an exploration of how the form of zines has evolved over time and served as a medium to make strong rhetorical arguments within subcultural or peripheral communities. I argue that self-publication is the main contributor to the essence, resonance, and aura of a zine. The author has nearly complete agency over what they produce and thus can freely express their ideas. While a zine can be defined in numerous—though not infinite—ways, the most accurate way to describe the form is that it is a self-published tactile material, self-distributed within a subcultural community.

The history of self-publication (the means through which counter-cultural art and texts have come to be) can be traced back to the art books of Russian avant-garde artists of the early 20th century. Like zinesters throughout history, these avant-garde artists did not see their voice represented in mainstream culture, so they published material to do it themselves. The desire to share ideas, ideology, art, etc., that were otherwise underrepresented has been the common motivator for zinesters from the science fiction fanzines of the 1930s to the punk zines at the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century.

Though self-publication is the connective tissue between the work of the Russian avant-garde and the zinesters today, the reasons and means by which zines are produced have changed in large part due to cultural shifts and technological advancements. In this thesis, I explore how zines have changed across time, the development of cultural ideology, and modes of production, how they are different from other forms where there is a sense of self-publication (such as blogs and social media), how they create a space that embodies the author and reader's community, and how they are used in different settings as commodities or included in academic institutions.

This essay is structured as follows: zine classification; my interpretation of zine history; the phenomenon of self-publication and the power that the process of publishing one's own work has in communities and institutions that allow for freedom of speech and expression; what the form of zines can accomplish that other mediums, like blogs, which allow for extents of freedom of expression via self-publication cannot; zines as the physical embodiment of identity, ideas, and individual expression in peripheral communities; the role of zines in academic institutions (libraries, in classrooms, as pedagogical tools); and finally zines as commodities, particularly as they are sold in shops like Black Cat Bulk Goods in New Paltz, New York and Desert Island Comics in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The common denominator throughout the aforementioned

topics is that the form of zines and the culture created through it serve as a tool to represent, engage with, and embody subjectivity and subjective experiences in peripheral or marginalized communities.

What Is a Zine?

The nearly unanimous way to define a zine is something that has been self-published. Outside of this universal distinction, definitions vary immensely. For that reason, perhaps the question is not to ask what a zine is, but what a zine isn't. Zines are limitless in their content and flexible in their form. However, while they are characteristically ambiguously undefined, the possibilities of a zine are not infinite. The strength that a zine has as a rhetorical device stems from the fact that it is a physical object, usually printed on paper (though this varies) by independent authors who self-publish and distribute their work within subcultural communities.

To precisely describe and figure out what qualities give zines life as an essential rhetorical tool within subcultural communities, I have asked two questions: 1) how does it rhetorically develop the message that the author attempts to send? and 2) how is it laid out aesthetically. In other words, how does the medium of a zine affect its message? In her chapter, "Zines then and now: What are they? What do you do with them? How do they work" from the book *From Codex to Hypertext: Reading at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century,* Janice Radway authoritatively asserts in her chapter titled "Zines then and Now: What Are They? What do you do with them? How do they Work?" that "Zines are peculiar" (27). She goes on to clarify that "Defining zines abstractly is difficult, nearly everyone agrees. Better to invoke their materiality, their particularity, and their modes of production, distribution, and circulation" (28). Radway's

argument points to a crucial question: instead of asking what a zine is or is not, the better question is to ask what a zine is doing.

Radway builds on this crucial point as she brings it into the conversation of the academic field of book history. She contends that the identity of a zine "...ought to be reformulated in both a more social and a more performative way. We ought to ask not what a zine is but what zinesters do with them, how, and in what contexts" (29). What we must examine is not the content itself, but the effect of the content on the reader. Zine-making is a process by which the author discovers more about their identity, ideology, or message and how such subjective experiences interact with the peripheral community that they are trying to reach. I agree with Radway that in order to properly understand the rhetorical effects of zines, we must "...ask how the practices of zine-ing reciprocally act upon all those who engage in them" and that "We need to know how zine-ing works and how the forms it generates exert their multiple effects" (29). Perhaps an extension of the fundamental question, "what is a zine," is to ask how a zine produces an emotional response within the creator and the reader.

Radway theorizes that when it comes to analyzing zines as a rhetorical form and examining the forms' cultural value, there is a binary between materiality and sociality on the one hand and opposition to textuality and content on the other hand. Each side of this dichotomy in the rhetorical approach to a zine produces different understandings of exactly what it is. Radway accounts for this as she concludes that those who examine zines "...move on to analyze the politically and ideologically alternative nature of what is contained within them. In doing so, such studies designate zines as booklike texts. What you do with zines, they suggest, is read them" (28). Radway's definition is perhaps the most ambiguous way to classify what a zine is. By stating that zines are meant to be read, and not emphasizing a prescription or analysis for the

form and content of the genre, Radway implies that there is no one right or particular way to produce, conceive of, or read a zine.

Zines are intertextual in the sense that readers and creators conceive of what they are or could be from the zines they have encountered before. They are seldom treated as a product of academia and are usually disregarded in institutional settings. Thus, they are not usually subject to institutional terms or definitions. Thus, the descriptive words that people might give to provide language to the aura of a zine varies from person to person. Gabe Fowler, owner of Desert Island Comics in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, teaches a class at New York University called "Zine Scenes." On the first day of class, before he gave students any information about zines from the context of the course, he had them provide words that they thought described a zine.

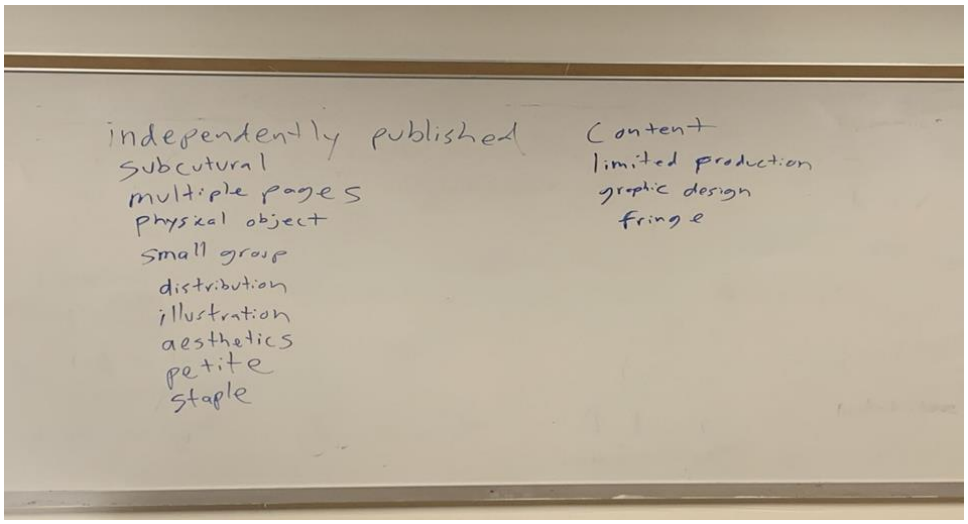


Figure 2. List of words on the white board that students NYU class "Zine Scenes" ascribed to zines. Photo courtesy of Gabe Fowler, 2023.

The phrase "independently published" reigned at the top of the white board of Fowler's classroom. Other words included in this list that stand out to me are *subcultural*, *physical object*,

distribution, aesthetics, limited production, and *fringe*. Zines, in their inherent essence, are self-published artifacts that contain language, images, and symbols an artist wants to string together at a particular moment in time. They are also objects that can be self-defined or defined by a group consensus. Fowler identified his class's list as a "sort of living document" and their "criteria." The lack of form in the categorization of zines creates descriptions of it that are living and flexible. Not only does the zine form allow variety and malleability in its criteria, but the lack of clearly defined parameters also allows for the same malleability in the creation of zines and what can be called a zine, so long as it is self-published.

Zines are born out of a desire to create. More than that, many zines that are made with the intention of spreading accessible information are founded on the premise that the author did not see their identity, beliefs, or passions represented, or represented well, in popular or mainstream culture. Fundamentally, whatever zines are regarded as in their exact definition, they serve as a tool for both their author and the community of readers to represent themselves in a peripheral culture. Fowler summarizes that zines are "self-acknowledgement of underrepresentation," and are born from the realization that the creator is not seeing themselves represented in their community (Fowler). While there are an infinite number of reasons why a zinester might go about creating a zine (and an infinite number of ways in which to do so), the source of inspiration boils down to creating a representation of the self within a community at a particular moment in time.

The definition of a zine that Radway provided is drawn from the Duke University Library's website for the Sarah Dyer Zine collection. This definition explores the rhetorical uses of zines and places emphasis on self-publication. According to the Duke zine collection library, the content found within a zine can include "…a messy hodgepodge of personal thoughts or an

expertly designed political treatise" (Radway 28). The effect of the content occurs through "The unifying thread of their outside-of-the-mainstream existence as independently written, produced, and distributed media," and proves that zinesters and zine readers "…value freedom of expression and freedom from rules above all else" (Radway 28). This definition attests to an imperative truth in the conception of zines: that they are self-published and thus, because of the right to free speech, a space for free expression. A zine is a space unlike most other books or places where one can find text. Zines are a physical manifestation of expression. The ideas that a zinester wishes to represent and bring into existance can appear on 8 ½ x 11 copy paper but it can also be screen printed on canvas, bound with screws instead of staples, fastened with pins, or fabric stitched together.

Zines can be printed on twenty loose leaves contained in an envelope, like "The Magnificent Eros" by Bela Shayevich.

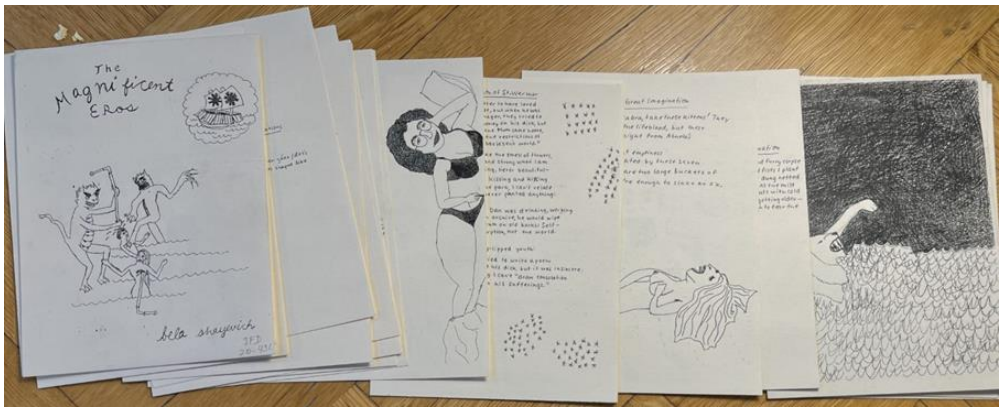


Fig 3. "The Magnificent Eros," an unbound zine printed on 22cm loose leaf pages. The zine as well as the poetry and illustrations within it are by Bela Shayevich. Photo courtesty of author, 2023.

Or they can also be printed on newspaper-sized canvas using a silk screen method, like this facsimile of "NUTS!" by Ben Charles Trogdon:

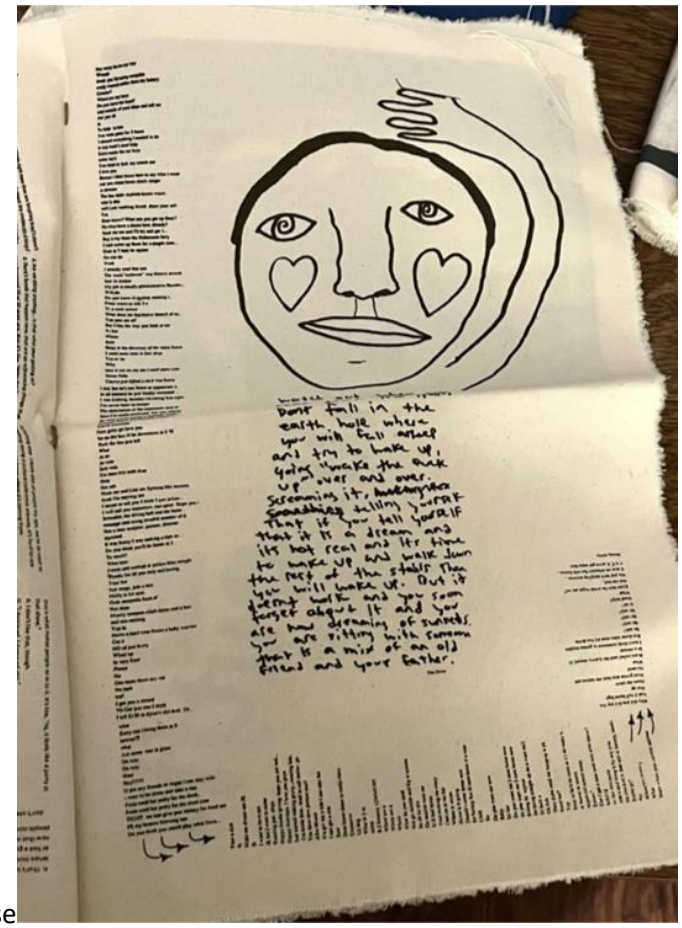
se 

Figure 4. A page "NUTS!" by Ben Charles Trogdon, illustration by Dan Swire. "NUTS!" was originally produced on newsprint and later photocopied and silkscreened onto fabric to create the facsimile of the zine by Jill Pucciarelli, owner of Black Cat Bulk Goods. Photo courtesy of author, 2023.

The endless variety in the physical appearance of zines is where contention over definitions is found. How can something be defined so matter of factly if it can appear in a multiplicity of ways? The abundance of ways to describe a zine is a part of the beauty of the medium and a major part of why zines should only be defined as self-published. If there were definite parameters on what a zine must be, then I believe there would be fewer zines, which is

antithetical to their very essence. They should not only be accessible at the point of their acquisition, but they should also be accessible in their creation and formation.

A zine is the intersection of the creator and their community; it is the community looking at itself and it is a space to demonstrate or counteract the ideologies that shape it. Zines are the embodiment of the crossroads between a zinester and their respective subcultural communities, which one might conceptualize as a performance, the interaction of which occurs on a theatrical stage. Radway explores the theatre of zines and further theorizes that "as performances, zines are transformative, productive, and socially generative, which is to say, they propagate new ways of inhabiting the world" (35). More than any concise, formulaic, or visual definition, a zine is a space in which an author generates subjective ideas about themselves and their community and presents them on a public stage (within the pages of a piece of paper).

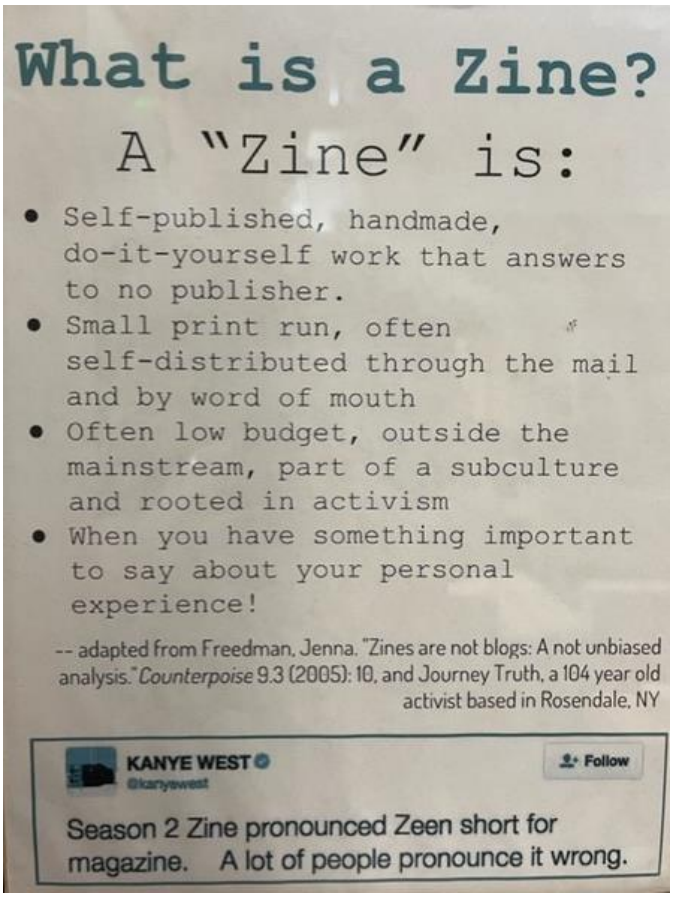


Figure 5. "What is a Zine?" On display in the SUNY New Paltz zine library. Photo courtesy of author, 2023.

Jenna Freedman expounds upon abstract conceptions of what the form of zines can accomplish for the individual and their subcultural community in her article "Zines are not Blogs: A Not Unbiased Analysis." Freedman also provides a concise list of uncontestable definitions of zines:

1. Self-published and the publisher doesn't answer to anyone
2. Small, self-distributed print run
3. Motivated by desire to express oneself rather than to make money
4. Outside the mainstream

5. Low budget

One can write an entire book to attempt to describe the essence of a zine, what it accomplishes in form and content, and its use as a tool in subcultural communities. Freedman's list of zine characteristics helps me to not write that book and reminds us that, in sum, a zine is self-published, self-distributed, anti-capitalist, and serves to engage with subcultural communities that are outside of the mainstream.

History of Zines

When authors and zine theorists examine the historical context of zines, they typically trace the evolution of the form to science fiction fanzines of the early twentieth century. This narrative is then traced through counter-cultural movements of the mid-twentieth century, to punk and Riot Grrrl zines of the 90s and 2000s. There is validity in this timeline, as it contextualizes the many settings a zine has been used for in recent history, and how those settings have manipulated the medium of the zine to suit their message. To provide a historical analysis of zines, some make the argument that the early pamphlets of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* fit the description of a zine. While Paine's pamphlet was indeed revolutionary in its expression of radical ideas, its primary similarity with the nature of zines is its distribution methods. *Common Sense* was printed like any other pamphlet, and not at all concerned with aesthetics. I am not convinced that Paine's pamphlet has a direct correlation to the form of zines aside from the facts of self-publication and self-distribution of radical thought.

Fowler theorizes that a closer, more accurate, origin of zine making and the self-publishing of art and ideology are the art books of the Russian avant-garde era at the turn of the

twentieth century. I concur with Fowler in the belief that the self-published work of Russian artists during this time period suggests the first major contributions to the evolution of zines. Indeed, the self-published work of Paine challenged to institutional ideologies, but the content produced by the likes of Russian artists like Mikhail Karasik created an aesthetic portrayal of a subjective experience that subjectively retells history.

Not many sources confirm or argue for a direct connection between the work of the Russian avant-garde and the form of zines. However, the two genres share many crucial facets that come to define them in aesthetics and initiative. For example, Karasik is one of many Russian avant-garde artists whose work exhibits many similar aesthetic and technical choices to zine construction. The similarity in artistic approach is explored in Melanie E. Emerson's article, "Conversations with the Avant-Garde: The Books of Mikhail Karasik," wherein she crucially states that "the Russian historical avant-garde used inexpensive materials and often quickly produced publications that were ephemeral in nature" (24). Karasik's use of collage and lithography as well as his choice to overlap colors, images and text create a profound rhetorical impact on the piece's narrative (Emerson 24). Such artistic choices reinforce the "intertwining nature of personal and narrative and collective memory" and allow Karasik to use "his unique voice to force a retelling of histories that are at once personal and familiar" (Emerson 24). The very same aesthetic choices are commonly found in zines and produce similarly strong rhetorical narratives. Aesthetic qualities are one way that the work of the Russian avant-garde bears a strong resemblance to zines, and thus proves that the work of Karasik and other artists of his time could have contributed to the form of zines as they exist today.

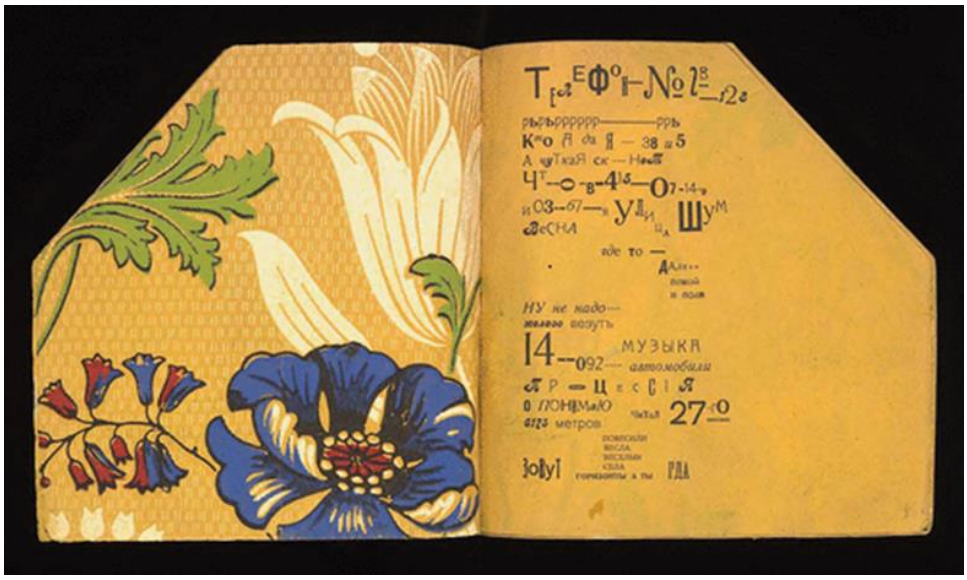


Figure 6. Two pages from *Tango s Korovami: Zhelezobetonneyt Poemy* (*Tango with Cows*) by Vasily Kamensky, 1914, printed on wallpaper. Image courtesy of Getty Research Institute (Emerson 29).

Russian avant-garde art books, like many zines, are meant to disrupt culture. The Russian avant-garde artist created a piece of work because their ideology or subjective experience was not being represented in the mainstream culture. Zines are also created to disrupt or redefine culture and embody an author's subjective experience that inspired them to do so. Karasik's work did not predate zines because his art books were published well into the new millennium. However, his work was informed by and bears resemblance to the work of the Russian avant-garde and thus has relevancy in the comparison between the Russian avant-garde artists and zinesters. Realizing what Karasik took from these artists who informed his work is essential to what he tried to convey artistically, culturally, and rhetorically. A predominant feature in both Karasik's work and the work of the early Russian artists is "the physical act of pasting together images that do not necessarily fit together" which "reflects the disruptive nature of his storytelling–another tactic shared with the historical avant-garde" (Emerson 38-39). Emerson records that the artistic approach of pasting images together provides a "...multilayered

narrative" which "appears old and new all at once" and "creates an uneasy sense of time and history and begs the reader/viewer to find a way through" (Emerson 38-39). Zinesters employ similar aesthetic choices (specifically the way that the Russian artists pasted images together) that the Russian avant-garde made to create a narrative in zines that disrupts culture and upends the traditional facets of storytelling. One can apply the analysis of predominant aesthetic and cultural aspects of Russian avant-garde art books to the analysis of the form and content of zines in order to do a closer reading of their ephemerality, essence, aura, and rhetorical strength.

Whether or not Russian avant-garde artists directly contributed to and should be included in the historical narrative of zines, both forms use the same predominant aesthetic choices which came to define them. Much of what is theorized about the historical avant-garde is entirely applicable to the conceptualization of zines, particularly in the author's need to share a subjective experience that they feel is otherwise overlooked in mainstream culture.

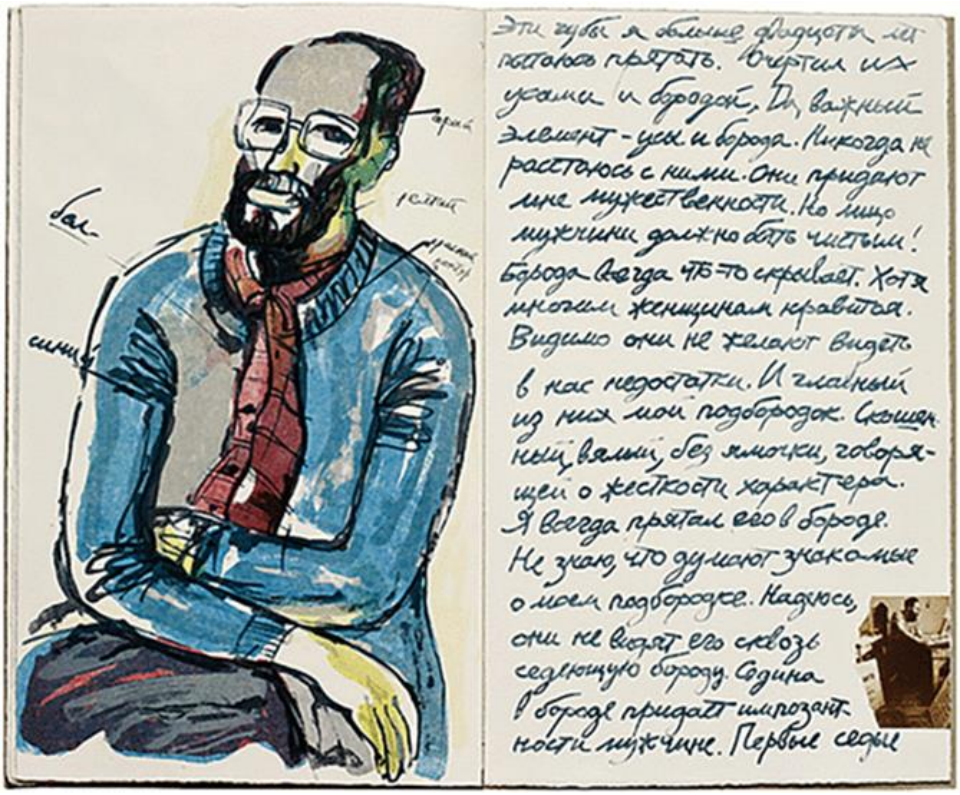


Figure 7. Two-page spread from Mikhail Karasik, *Avtoportret (Self-Portrait)*, M.K. Publishers, 1997. Image courtesy of Mikhail Karasik; reproduced with permission from the artist (Emerson).

Like Russian avant-garde artists, authors of early 20th century fanzines felt that their opinions of popular culture were not visible. Thus, they felt the need to bring fanzines, the source commonly chosen as the genesis of zine history, into existence. According to Fowler, the word *zine* is short for *fanzine*, which itself is short for fan magazine (1:20). Fowler goes further in tracing the etymology of *fanzine* to *fan*, which is short for *fanatic* (1:20), and concisely asserts that "a zine is a magazine made by a fanatic" (1:20). Fanzines were created as reactions to pulp magazines and science fiction stories, which were widely produced as mass-market books to be sold at locations such as local drugstores, train stations, and newspaper stands (Fowler 1:45). Fowler illustrates how fanzines came to be through readers' responses to these pulp science fiction stories, written by the likes of Ray Bradbury, for example (1:45):

> ...People would write letters to these pulps. They would say, 'gee, I really liked that Ray Bradbury story, but the end was so unbelievable. If I had written this story, it would have ended like this (…),' sort of complaining or creatively expounding...some of those magazines would print the person's letters...then you'd have another reader writing a letter writer: 'hey, I saw your letter. Your ending was better than that guy's ending. You should really be writing science fiction stories.' A little network started happening very naturally because of that. These people were a source of irritation to the editors of these pulp magazines, who called them fanatics. (Fowler 1:45)

Fanzines were born out of a desire to communicate with others within a subculture. Science fiction fanatics, or fanzine writers, did not see their ideas, even about pulp fiction narratives, represented, and they decided to create something to bring what they thought should be written

to life. Fowler attests to the letter writers' desire to contribute to or create change in their subculture. He explains that fanfiction is "...born from disappointment with the primary culture," and that fanfiction authors believe "the primary culture is not serving my interests for X,Y, and Z reason," and he concludes that "obsessing over that thought makes you a fanatic" (Fowler 4:05). The feeling of disappointment within a member of a subcultural community runs so deep that they have the strong desire to create something to counteract it: the zine.

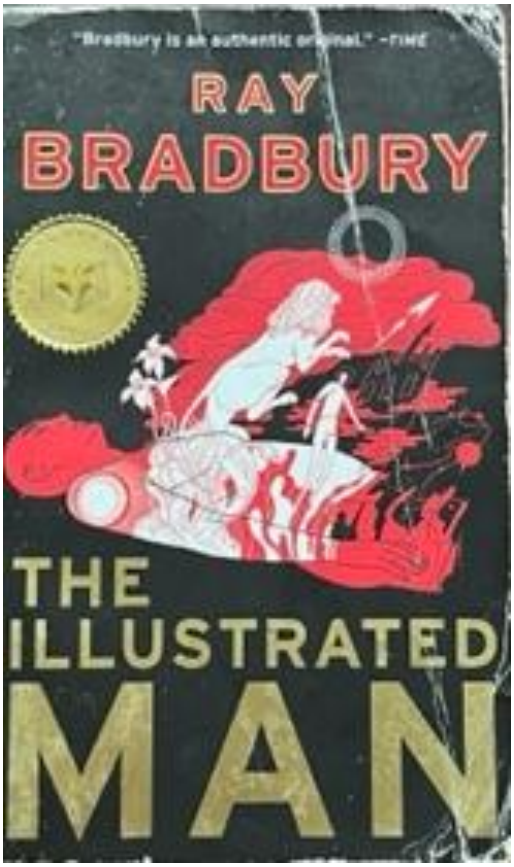


Figure 8. *The Illustrated Man* by Ray Bradbury. Science fiction short stories that inspired fanzines. Photo courtesy of author, 2023.

Some subcultural fanfiction communities are so prolific that there are books like *Boldly Writing: A Trekker Fan and Zine History, 1967-1987* by Joan Marie Verba, which document two decades of *Star Trek* fanfiction—a mere snapshot of the breadth of fan content created about the

TV series. Verba describes fanzines as having "...no title page, no table of contents, no address to send inquiries to, and no author's name on the first story" (27). The amateur qualities like, for example, a lack of authorial information (as Verba indicated), come to define the genre and form of fanzines. Fanzines were not meant to be commodified, published widely, or even well regarded; instead, they were made to interact with a community of passionate people, who, in this case, might care very deeply about *Star Trek.*

However exciting it may be for people in science fiction subcultures like those that Verba refers to as 'Trekkers,' their fanzines are often redundant and overly specified. Perhaps that is what gives the genre its charm amongst those who read and contribute to it. The book by Mark Todd and Ester Pearl Watson entitled *Whatcha Mean, What's a Zine? The Art of Making Zines and Mini Comics* includes a section called "A Personal History of Zines" by Raina Lee. In this section, Lee asserts what she believes a zine to be, provides a historical narrative of the form, and comments on the rhetorical potential of it. Lee also writes that fanzines are a genre which focuses on "a very specific matter almost to the point of exhaustion," which is perhaps why there is a seemingly infinite number of fanzines on *Star Trek*. While fanzines are considered by many to be the start of zine history, they are also the first of numerous genres within zine culture.

Eventually, zines blossomed as a form that many used as a piece of resistant media. What started as forums to express bookish interests became the paper embodiment of counter-cultural revolutions. In one of the most widely cited books on zine theorizing, *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism*, Alison Piepmeier expertly encapsulates the evolution of zine history:

> Most studies of zines identify them as a resistant media originating in male-dominated spaces. They are positioned as descendants of the pamphlets of the American Revolution and Dadaist and Smaizdat publishing, emerging from the fanzines of the 1930s and the

> punk community of the 1970s. According to this narrative, zine proliferation was triggered by the convergence of punk culture and technology. Punk culture provided the 'zine' terminology, along with a non-elitist, do-it-yourself (DIY) structures and aesthetic, and these ideologies were channeled into the production of zines because of technological innovations such as desktop publishing and inexpensive, widely available photocopying." (25)

Many subcultures amalgamated by using a do-it-yourself (DIY) structure to produce what was inevitably called zines in order to represent themselves and their ideologies. Representations in this manner can be traced throughout history from pamphlets of the American Revolution, to Russian avant-garde art books at the turn of the 20th century, to fanzines of the 1930s, to punk and counter cultural communities in the 1970s and beyond. What classifies these eras of zine history are imperatively and predominantly aspects of self-publication.

Self-Publication

Self-publication is the means by which a zine comes into existence. Whether a zine is made for just the author, one other person to read, or to share with a community of people, it has been self-made and self-published. The beauty of self-publication is that there are no editors change the author's work, no institution mandates what should or shouldn't be in it, only the author decides for themselves what to create. There are no consequences in self-publication. Once a zine has been made, it has been published. There are no repercussions to producing a zine in so far as no one is going to deny a zine author the right to self-publish their work.

The phenomenon that a person or community can produce a zine without anyone's permission but their own makes it a radical tool for engaging with identity, ideology, and institutional oppression. This principle of self-publication is exemplified in *Clarion*, a zine produced by incarcerated women. In her article, "'Literary Vandals': American Women's Prison Zines as Collective Autobiography," Olivia Wright analyzes how *Clarion* "manages to expand the spatial dynamics of prison" (117) and creates an embodiment of the how the contributors to the zine navigate space, time, and the feelings that come out of their experience under conditions of confinement. *Clarion,* and the community that was formed because of it, is only possible because of initiatives to self-publish zines. And yet, in order for this level of self-publication to be attainable, there must be a liberal democracy and a lacks of state of police intervention on freedoms of speech and expression.

Self-publication, when total freedom of speech is possible to exercise, creates the possibility for people who feel underrepresented in their communities to address their identities within a marginal community. Zines are important tools for peripheral communities because of their accessible nature, apparent in *Clarion*, wherein "Anyone was invited to contribute to the zine that provided a platform 'where women and children in prison can communicate with each other and people on the outside" and which provided a space for those who are "locked up" to "feel free to use [the zine] to express your thoughts and feelings about your life ('Who we Are' 1)" (Wright 112). Self-publication results in not only expression but also reflection: incarcerated women created a space to realize how they feel at a particular place and time in their life. Wright asserts that *Clarion* and other zines produced by incarcerated people carve out "a space for marginalized incarcerated women to communicate with relative freedom and articulate their own experiences and opinions, without prejudice or discrimination, knowing that there is a responsive

audience of similarly minded people" (116). Self-publication evades censorship by its very nature. Thus, there is a greater chance for an author to authentically represent themselves. This authenticity is found within zines like *Clarion* and is the basis for which communities are formed. The power of self-publication is that it is by no means required to adhere to the norms of a professionally published text. In fact, the nature of self-publication and DIY culture is resistent to the norms of doing anything in a professional way.

Zines vs Other Mediums

Figure 9. Photo of *David* by Michelangelo. Courtesy of Mollie Zoldan, 2022.

Imagine yourself in Florence, Italy, beneath Michelangelo's *David.* Above you is the nearly 17-foot tall naked, biblical hero, standing in contrapposto. You are awestruck by subtle details like the veins in his hands and slingshot over his shoulder. These details are canonical, revolutionary, and astonishing, and can be felt in their most impressive essence by admiring one of history's most important masterpieces in person. Such artistic specificities would undoubtedly go unnoticed in a photograph of *David.* Fowler argues that the loss of nuanced details is the difference between a physical zine and an online zine: "it's like looking at a statue in person and looking at it online; one is a zine, and one is an archive of a zine" (Fowler) . I concur. The subtle details that are exhibited in *David,* for instance, are lost on a viewer who is browsing an image of the statue, and not examining it in person, walking around its circumference, and experiencing it in its full aura. The same loss occurs when one is looking at what Fowler asserts is an archive of a zine—not a zine itself.

Intimacy is lost when zines become archives and they lose the rhetorical effects of their physical form. The distinct sense of intimacy between a zine author and reader is essential to the specific messages that the zine form can convey. The physical zine serves as an embodiment of the intimate connection, which is crucial to what distinguishes a zine from blogs and other online self-published formats. A blog, an internet archive of a zine, or another place on the internet where an author engages with a community through semi-uncensored discourse, has a distinct loss of aura as compared to a physical zine. Walter Benjamin theorized this loss of aura in his frequently cited essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" in which he assertively reiterates that "what withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art" is its "aura" (1054). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'aura' as "A supposed subtle emanation from and enveloping living persons and things, viewed by mystics as

consisting of the essence of the individual, serving as the medium for the operation of mesmeric and similar influences" and "a distinctive impression of character or aspect" ("aura," n., 2b and 2c). Benjamin argues that technological reproduction strips traces of the essence of the individual who created a piece of art; it takes away from its aura. Therefore, the distinction between physical zines and e-zines or other online self-publishing formats is one of humanistic essence. It becomes difficult to find or maintain a connection between a zine creator and reader when the zine or the self-published content akin to it is reproduced into an online format. The reader can no longer feel the subtle, aesthetic and tactile details of the technologically reproduced zine because they cannot hold it in their hands. They cannot flip from one page to the next; they cannot commune with the object in a way that maintains its original aura. And thus, the online source that they have scrolled through becomes forgettable.

In his article, "Why the Brain Prefers Paper," Ferris Jabr provides insight as to how content is interpreted differently in reading something online versus on paper. He makes the argument that interpretations and comprehension of a text read on paper or online are varied because of the psychological and biological functions of our brain. Jabr points to a few areas of research that help to explain how online reading inhibits comprehension. At the very basis of his argument, he makes it clear that "...e-readers fail to re -create certain tactile experiences of reading on paper, the absence of which some find unsettling" (50). These tactile experiences, like flipping pages in a book, serve to create a map of the text in the reader's brain. Thus, "...most digital devices interfere with intuitive navigation of a text and inhibit people from mapping the journey in their mind" and comprehension is impaired because screens "distort people's sense of place in a text" (Jabr 51). Thus, not only is the aura of a zine lessened by digitization, the

reader's comprehension and retention of the zine's content is disrupted because of the reproduction.

It should be clear that I believe an e-zine is an inappropriate substitute for a zine. However, it is a substitute nonetheless, with information that might be extremely useful to certain readers. But it is important to ask the question that Jabr poses: how does the technological reproduction of a zine change the way we read it (50)? One person can read a physical copy of a zine, and another can read the same zine as an online PDF. These two readers can have vastly different interpretations of the content because they read it in two different formats. Benjamin would ascribe the source of different understandings of the same texts to a loss of aura in the PDF of a zine: "Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at close range in an image, or better, in a facsimile, a reproduction. And the reproduction as offered by illustrated magazines and news-reels, differs unmistakably from the image" (1055). Not only does Benjamin argue that interpretations are skewed due to technological reproduction, but he also asserts that the original work and its reproduction are entirely different pieces of media. A different form, such as an internet archive of zines like the Queer Zine Archive Project, changes the interpretation of the content.

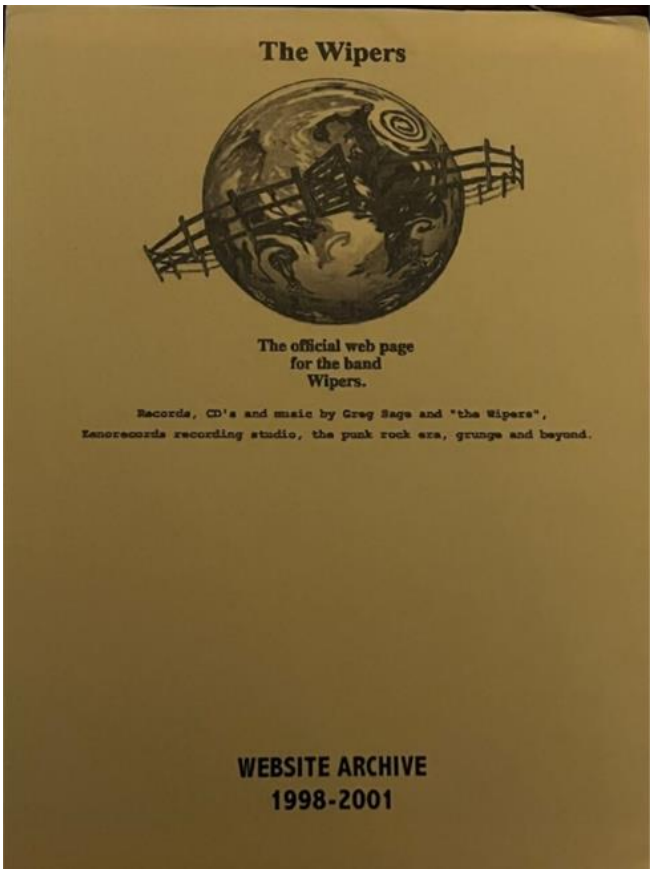


Figure 10. "Website Archive." A zine of the official web page for the band Wipers; an intersection between physical zines and web pages. Photo courtesy of author, 2023.

It is important to realize that in order to make a physical zine, one only needs a pen and paper. Blogs on the other hand require a website and thus access to internet, a computer, and, as Freedman points out, an internet service provider: "While blogs can be a very empowering medium, there aren't many people out there capable of fully hosting their own blogs. Therefore, there is usually an internet service provider that has the power to pull the plug on something it deems offensive, be it because of politics, sex, religion, copyright, or anything else" (1-2). A blogger cannot operate in total independence, but a zinester can. To publish on the internet means to face censorship, rules or structures that a website or publication source necessitates. Thus, a blogger or producer of electronic media is reliant on a source that controls their content.

On the other hand, a zinester, as Freedman put it in her list of zine characteristics, "doesn't answer to anyone" (1). While the production of a zine might require the use of a copy-machine, which could disrupt the margins, color, layout, or other various aesthetic qualities of the zine, the machine does not censor the zinester. Moreover, a zinester can make executive decisions when it comes to how to layout their content: "A zinester can be far more creative with layout, design, and materials than a blogger can" (Freedman 3). Ultimately, a zinester has a sense of independence and autonomy over their work (aside from the distortions that result from copy-machines) than a producer of electronic media. The form of zines allows for more flexibility in what an author can produce, and how they choose to do so. The rhetorical strength of a zine very much stems from the fact that an author has total liberty in how they want to layout their information, illustrations, and thoughts. This liberty is what makes creating a zine accessible, and thus a generative form for sharing information within subcultural communities.

The word *zine* typically signifies a small book of only a few pages, usually made out of one cut up and folded sheet of copy paper. There exist only a few parameters in form, and even less in content when it comes to constructing a zine. Because there are hardly any formal prescriptions for authoring a zine, a reader never knows what they will encounter when they flip open an object that takes this form. There is no blurb to tell them about the contents of the zine, there are no endorsements from well-regarded zinesters printed on the cover, or any information that tells a reader much of anything in regard to what the zine is about. Even zine titles can be ambiguous or misleading. Take, for instance, the zine "Happiness This Way." by Tania Velm.

Figure 11. Front cover of "Happiness This Way." by Tania Velm. Photo courtesy of author, 2023.

Though not explicitly stated, after flipping through Velm's zine, a reader can easily gather that it is an art zine. Throughout, Velm collaged images of animals, people, food, a wine bottle, lipstick, jewelry, and more. Along with the assortment of images, Velm includes short motivational statements such as "no more! sad days or sad songs," "do something you would absolutely love," and "go forth with you" (Velm). Velm also includes some color coordination on each page (one page has mostly blue images, another red, etc.). A zine titled "Happiness This Way" can be about anything related to happiness. Velm's zine exhibits that this specific medium can be a place to reflect on a feeling (like happiness), a random assortment of images, and

contain a meaningful message (to work towards happiness). “Happiness This Way.” is fun to look at, is cute, and totally arbitrary.

“Happiness This Way.” exemplifies the principle that the lack of parameters required to create a zine creates a multiplicity of possibilities in content. In *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism*, Alison Piepmeier provides insight into the cornucopia of content within zines: “The community of zines doesn’t demand homogeneity or perceived sameness; instead, zine communities are more like what philosopher Iris Marion Youn describes as ‘the ideal of city life,’ characterized by variety, social differentiation without exclusion, and a heterogeneous public” (58). The many different identities, perspectives, and artistic representations that create the content within zines is the grand allure of its form. Zines are like the free verse poetry of self-published forms: they follow the natural feelings and ideas of their author and, because there aren’t many restrictions in creating within the form, the author is freely and easily able to embark on telling any kind of story and expressing it in a variety of ways.

Freedom in design is foundational to a unique experience for a zine reader. The aesthetic characteristics of the form provide intimacy between the author and reader who meet at the crossroads of the zine. This intimacy does not exist in the same way within electronic media. In fact, the close connection between reader and author is held within the paper of the zine itself. Piepmeier contends that “... “...paper is better suited for facilitating human connection than electronic media” and illustrates further that “A piece of paper bears the marks of the body that created it as well as carrying other sensory information (‘the smell of your house on the paper itself’) to the reader. The paper, then, is a nexus, a technology that mediates the connections not just of ‘people’ but of bodies” (63). In addition to what Jabr theorized as far as how comprehension of a text is lessened by digitization, Piepmeier adds that the human connection

presented in a physical zine is what makes it such a powerful rhetorical device. Vulnerability, advocacy, personal opinions, rants, and narratives become more rhetorically potent because of the intimate relationship that can be captured in its most precise essence through the body of a physical zine.

The tactical signatures of a zine's creator bring the sense of human connection to life. When holding a zine, a reader can see the hand-cut, individually stapled pages. A reader doesn't simply read the information within a zine, but they also confront the particularities that make it unique and reveal the author's presence. Piepmeier elaborates about the unique physicalities of zines as opposed to other electronic media: "Zines...are simpler technology, and because no template exists, each element requires choice and each zine is different. The look of zines, then, is individualized and significant...This personal, physical involvement means not only intentionality but also care" (66). The aura of a zine is conjured in the particular decisions that a zinester makes as they birth a one-of-a kind text, work, or object into existence. Contrarily, blogs appear the same to every reader, thus taking away from a source of wonder and intimacy between an author and reader. Piepmeier asserts that the intimate details that can only be found in zines, like messy handwriting, are "...integral to [reader's] enjoyment of it" (69) and ultimately that "imperfections and evidence of the creator's involvement invite readers into the zine community" (70). The imperfections of a zine are its essence, its human markings.

While the aura of a zine is conveyed in its most authentic form through physical interaction, it is also important that zines are catalogued online. Zines are mediums through which radical information is shared, and it is imperative that readers who might benefit from its content have access to it. Though reading an archive of a zine via a website sacrifices the intimacy and embodiment of a printed, tangible zine, accessibility to subcultural discourse

contained within zines is a cornerstone of DIY culture. Daniel C. Brouwer and Adela C. Licona articulate that print zines and digital zines are different forms with different rhetorical effects. Brouwer and Licona introduce the concept of trans(affective) mediation to understand the different rhetorical elements in the printed and digital forms. The authors describe this concept as "...an intervention that treats print zines and digital zines as distinct and distinctly affective domains, with distinct possibilities and constraints, coherences and incoherences, and intensities" (Brouwer and Licona abstract). While the main elements of zines and their contents are still available in digitized formats, to think about them in the same way would be to gloss over how imperative embodiment is to the medium. What is crucial, and maintained by digitized zines, is content. Brouwer and Licona contend that "Digitization may, indeed, provide opportunities not only for broader access but also for distinct sensory experiences and possibilities" (72) and that "...digitization of print zines is an urgent, radical, and also always potentially transformational political act" (71) While the aspects of intimacy provided through embodiment in physical zines are crucial to the rhetorical effect of the medium, the digitization of zines is, as they state, transformational in the sense that the information is accessible to a wider audience.

The Queer Zine Archive Project (QZAP) is an example of how the digitization of zines creates a space to share radical information. This website has an impressive number of scanned zines in their collection that cover territory of many aspects of queer identity. The website is not challenging to navigate, and the digitized zines are easy to turn into PDFs. The goal of the QZAP, first launched in 2003, is to "...preserve queer zines and make them available to other queers, researchers, historians, punks, and anyone else who has an interest in DIY publishing and underground queer communities" (Queer Zine Archive Project 2014). One zine that exemplifies the QZAP initiative is "A Trans Questionnaire" created in 2011 by a zinester who uses the name

Monet. This archive of Monet's zine has varying marginal sizes that are a result of both artistic choice and inconsistent scanning. The content explores stigmatizing situations and questions that trans people might encounter. Monet's zine might be a helpful resource to trans people who might feel alone in the face of questions about their identity. "A Trans Questionnaire" is a resource that might help those people navigate such questions or realize that there exists a community of people who are encountering similar social pressures.

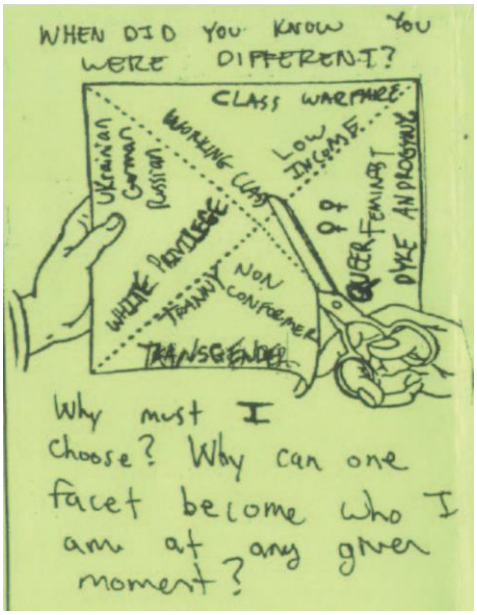


Figure 12. "A Trans Questionnaire" by Monet, p 3. Downloaded from the Queer Zine Archive Project.

Figure 13. First page of the Queer Zine Archive Project zine archive page.

The QZAP is thus an invaluable resource with a vast catalogue of information about queer identity. The mission of the QZAP is to "establish a 'living history' archive of past and present queer zines" to curate a "collectivist approach that respects the diversity of experiences that fall under the heading 'queer'" (Queer Zine Archive Project 2014). This collection might help readers and zinesters navigate experiencing and writing about their queer identity. Brouwer and Licona assert that the goals of such archival projects "are not only appealing but seem also necessary" (77).

In 2023, people in queer communities face a government that wants to take their rights away. Bans on drag and gender-affirming care for minors in Tennessee and Florida's 'Don't Say Gay' bill, signed into law by Governor Ron Desantis are just two of examples of threats to queer communities. Free, ad-less websites like the QZAP, which aims to "provide access to the historical canon of queer zines" in order to "make them more accessible to diverse communities and reach wider audiences (Queer Zine Archive Project 2014) aren't just helpful, they are a

necessary resource to maintain strength in queer communities and help people who might live in Florida or Tennessee, for instance, that are struggling with their identities.

Zines in Academia

Zines are an excellent tool for self-expression. But should they be used as class assignments? If so, how should they be graded? To what extent are they a good pedogeological tool? If a zine's purpose is to fight against institutional oppression, how can they accomplish that if it is written for an institution? How does the authority of the instructor change the final product of a student's zine? Ultimately, can zines find their way authentically into academia?

These are the questions that I walked away with after attending the workshop titled "Harnessing the Power of Zines: Using Zines as a Tool to Examine Race, Class, and Gender," presented by Madeline Veitch, Adrienne Lee Atterberry, and Adolfo Bejar Lara and sponsored by the school of Liberal Arts and Sciences at SUNY New Paltz. This workshop was oriented towards engaging professors with the idea of using zines in their classes as a pedagogical tool. The argument that the presenters made is that zine creation can be a useful assignment in a course curriculum.

Conceptualizing how to organize information in the form of zines is useful in so far as it makes students think about course content visually and tangibly. After attending the presentation hosted by Veitch, Atterberry and Bejar Lara, it became clear that zines can be a useful medium for further exploration with course content. The slide titled "Zines? For What?" explores why zines are a good tool to use in the classroom as they can "foster the act of sharing ideas through writing and artwork," act as an open space "for self-expression and representation,"

"democratize knowledge production and create spaces of critical reflection," and "challenge social forces that sanction whose voices matter" (Veitch et al.). By assigning zines, students can creatively work together or independently to interact with course material on a deeper level. They are also able to synthesize potentially dense information from the course and organize it into a zine, making it a democratic multiple (a source of imperative information that is accessible and made widely available to communities).

Figure 13. Image of the SUNY New Paltz Zine Library. Photo courtesy of author, 2023.

Including zines in a library collection or creating a zine library is becoming increasingly popular in academic institutions. However, because zines are often created for limited circulation within insular communities, putting a name, page numbers, or even a date on a zine are often a zinester's last thought. Suggestions for navigating the challenge of putting work that is ephemeral in nature and inherently oppositional to institutions into academic libraries are put forth in the zine, "Zine Librarians Code of Ethics Zine," produced by the Zine Librarians Interest

Group in October of 2015. This code of ethics acknowledges the nature of the zine form and content and lays out appropriate approaches for how to best curate a zine collection that includes the diversity that comes to define zine communities and authors. In the section on access, Barton et al. make it clear that "Zine librarians/archivists' overarching goal is to facilitate the recognition of zines as legitimate cultural artifacts documenting 20th and 21st century lives. To that end, we should do our best to preserve them and make them accessible to future readers and researchers, via physical access and description" (4). The reason to include a zine collection within a library is to maintain representations of culture and individual perceptions throughout history. A zine library in an academic institution is radical in nature became most texts in such libraries have been thoroughly peer reviewed and held at the highest scholarly standards. The inclusion of zines in the same library thus elevates their importance in the sphere of academic institutions. While the elevation of zines allows for more scholarly analysis of them, this is not the point of their existence. The creation and maintenance of zine libraries is important in the preservation of zines, in financially supporting zine authors through acquisitions, and in creating a wider audience for the zine itself.

Commodification of Zines

There are many places where zines can be acquired: music and art shows, zine fairs and clubs, and at shops like Black Cat Bulk Goods and Desert Island. Like zine libraries, the places that one can find zines provide a level of accessibility to their acquisition and allow for zinesters to profit from their work. However, what happens to the nature of the zine form when it becomes a commodity? How accessible is the sometimes-radical information in a zine if it costs money?

My qualms over the pricing of zines began when I went to a Valentine's Day zine fair hosted by the 8 Ball Community at the Sixth Street Community Center in Manhattan on February 11, 2023. At the 8 Ball zine fair zinesters of all kinds from all over the city shared tables to sell their zines and art books. Most of the zines that I saw were being sold for ten dollars. I had a moral dilemma: on the one hand, I wanted to support the work of artists by purchasing their zine for the price that they thought to be appropriate; on the other hand, I think that charging ten dollars for a zine is the antithesis of the nature of the form. Zines are supposed to be accessible; they are supposed to be the medium for which the community engages with itself. The commodification of zines makes them less accessible and hinders people from gathering information that they might benefit from. I only saw one table where the zine artist priced their zines on a sliding scale of one to seven dollars or offered to trade zines.

Figure 14. Image of 8 Ball Community Valentine's Day zine fair. Image courtesy of @8ballcommunity Instagram, 2023.

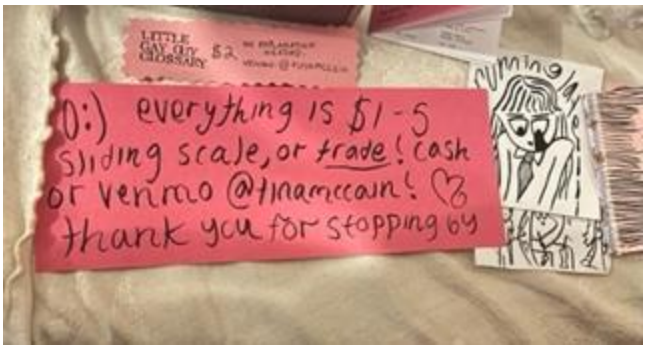


Figure 15. Image of sliding scale or trad sign at the 8 Ball Community Valintine's Day zine fair. Photo courtesy of author, 2023.

In his book, *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture,* Stephen Duncombe believes that the role of zines is to "...form networks and forge communities around diverse identities and interests" (5). By their very nature, not only do zines contribute to and/or reflect on culture, but they are also a medium for creating and embodying it. The objective of creating a zine, besides exercising creative muscles, is for an author to easily, quickly and accessibly interface with their community. The objective is not to profit from creating a zine and zinesters often lose money in the process of publishing and distributing their work. Zines are the physical manifestation of the primary pillar of DIY (Do-It-Yourself) ethics wherein, as Duncomb elucidates, the basic principle is to "...make your own culture and stop consuming that which is made for you" (5). Zines are an embodied space that resists capitalism and provides authors and communities to define their identity and ideology themselves. When they cost more than something like three to five dollars, the accessibility of culture is hindered due to financial barricades.

Black Cat Bulk Goods in New Paltz, New York keeps zines in the shop not only in the hopes to create a community around sharing DIY information, but also treats zines as an object to highlight the store's message. Thus, in treating zines as an affordable commodity (contrary to

how zines are priced at zine fairs), a sub-cultural community of people who are interested in zero-waste (what the store is oriented around) is formed. When I asked Jill Pucciarelli, the owner of the shop, why she sells zines and how they relate to the mission of a bulk goods store, she said that "the zines and the books were the first thing she bought and thought they would fill in the blanks of the message of the store" and added that "you can say so much more with a collection of books that all have different kinds of DIY messages than you could if I tried to explain the store" (3:22). The message that Pucciarelli wants to send through selling zines in her shop is one that adheres to the ethos of subcultural self-publication: "just do it yourself outside of other systems and do it as small as possible...don't do things the way they're presented to you, because the way they're presented is usually terrible" (4:28).

Figure 16. Zine baskets at Black Cat Bulk Goods in New Paltz, New York. Photo courtesy of author, 2023.

To do things yourself outside of other systems is to do them outside of academic, capitalist, patriarchal, and consumerists institutions that try to control culture and cultural production. Zines are the embodiment of resistance to mainstream culture and to institutional domination and oppression. The crucial flexibility in content allows for endless creation in the form of zines. Through self-publication and self-distribution, zines have the power to spread valuable and perspective-changing information to people in subcultural or peripherial communities. And, at the same time, zines can be a funny story or cute note that you give to a friend.

Yet, the production of zines relies on the freedom of speech. Even in the United States, where democratic institutions exist and the right to free speech is supposed to be upheld and protected, institutions have an ideological agenda that interferes with freedoms of expression. Thus, individuals might face immense consequences if they produce counter-cultural self-published material like zines. Take Florida, for instance, where the 'Don't Say Gay' bill is in the public eye: someone who writes a zine about queerness might experience ramifications from academic, capitalist, or governmental institutions because of the content of their material. But those ramifications most likely won't stop zinesters from doing their thing. Zines were born out of a desire for the individual to represent themselves in a community where they don't feel represented. At their root, zines are incredibly powerful in places where freedoms of speech are limited and rights over individual expression are being taken away. Subcultural communities will endure, and, as the history of self-publication has proven, zines will continue to serve as the embodiment of them and become symbols of individuals who have created a space to document, explore, and share their subjective experiences.

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