

NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND

Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture

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ONE ZINES

But what are they? That's the first question I'm usually asked when I start to talk about zines. My initial, and probably correct, impulse is to hand over a stack of zines and let the person asking the question decide, for this is how they were introduced to me.

Some years back I went on a trip to Boston to visit some old friends playing in a band. There I planned to hang out and work as their "roadie," lugging equipment to gigs, setting it up and taking it down. I had played in a couple of punk rock bands in the early 1980s and I suppose part of me wanted to feel again some of the excitement and energy that comes from being in a band and part of a subcultural scene. Fortunately, my descent into nostalgia was nipped in the bud; when I got there the band had broken up. I had little to do except walk around the city, sneak into Widener Library, and hang around my friends' apartment. Scattered around their apartment, piled precariously on the coffee table, buried under old pizza boxes, forgotten in the cracks of the sofa, were scruffy, homemade little pamphlets. Little publications filled with rantings of high weirdness and exploding with chaotic design. *Zines*. Although I knew about zines from my days spent in the punk scene, I had never really given them much time or thought. Now, with plenty of time, I spent hours going through them.

I was awestruck. Somehow these little smudged pamphlets carried within them the honesty, kindness, anger, the beautiful inarticulate articulateness, the uncompromising *life* that I had discovered (and lost) in music, then

later radical politics, years ago. Against the studied hipness of music and style magazines, the pabulum of mass newsweeklies, and the posturing of academic journals, here was something completely different.

In zines, everyday oddballs were speaking plainly about themselves and our society with an honest sincerity, a revealing intimacy, and a healthy "fuck you" to sanctioned authority – for no money and no recognition, writing for an audience of like-minded misfits. Later I picked up a thick journal crammed with zine reviews called *Factsheet Five*, leafed through their listings, and sent off for hundreds of zines. I discovered tens of thousands more at the zine archive housed in the New York State Library. I even began to publish my own zine and traded mine for others. As I dug through mountains of these piquant publications, a whole world that I had known nothing about opened up to me. It was incredibly varied: zines came in more shapes, styles, subjects, and qualities than one would imagine. But there was something remarkable that bound together this new world I had stumbled upon: a radically democratic and participatory ideal of what culture and society might be... *ought* to be.

In an era marked by the rapid centralization of corporate media, zines are independent and localized, coming out of cities, suburbs and small towns across the US, assembled on kitchen tables. They celebrate the everyperson in a world of celebrity. Losers in a society that rewards the best and the brightest. Rejecting the corporate dream of an atomized population broken down into discrete and instrumental target markets, zine writers form networks and forge communities around diverse identities and interests. Employed within the grim new economy of service, temporary, and "flexible" work, they redefine work, setting out their creative labor done on zines as a protest against the drudgery of working for another's profit.

Defining themselves against a society predicated on consumption, zinesters privilege the ethic of DIY, do-it-yourself: make your own culture and stop consuming that which is made for you. Refusing to believe the pundits and politicians who assure us that the laws of the market are synonymous with the laws of nature, the zine community is busy creating a culture whose value isn't calculated as profit and loss on ruled ledger pages, but is assembled in the margins, using criteria like control, connection, and authenticity.

I came to realize that, considered in their totality, zines weren't the capricious ramblings of isolated cranks (though some certainly were), but the

variegated voices of a subterranean world staking out its identity through the cracks of capitalism and in the shadows of the mass media.

Zines are speaking to and for an underground culture. And while other groups of individuals come together around the shared creation of their own culture, what distinguishes zinesters from garden-variety hobbyists is their political self-consciousness. Many zinesters consider what they do an alternative to and strike against commercial culture and consumer capitalism. They write about this openly in their zines. What was amazing to me, coming from years of sterile academic and political debates on the Left, in which culture was often in the past dismissed as irrelevant to the "real struggle," was that zines seemed to form a true culture of resistance. Their way of seeing and doing was not borrowed from a book, nor was it carefully cross-referenced and cited; rather it was, if you'll forgive the word, organic. It was a vernacular radicalism, an indigenous strain of utopian thought.

I began my study of zines in earnest near the end of the 12-year conservative drive of the Reagan/Bush era. Against this juggernaut, the radical political opposition, in which I was an active participant, acted out a tragedy seemingly unchanged for decades. One variant went as follows: Leaders organize a "mass" demonstration. We march. We chant. Fringe groups hawk their ridiculous papers. Speakers are paraded onto the dais to tell us what we already know. We hope the mainstream media puts us on the news for five seconds. Sometimes they do and sometimes they don't. Nothing seems to change. Certainly there were lively and successful models of demonstration and organization, like those of ACT UP in its heyday or the WTO protest. But these stand out against the relative failure of the rest. The social movements of the decade that spoke the language and captured the imagination of the public were those not of the Left, but of the Right.

In zines I saw the seeds of a different possibility: a novel form of communication and creation that burst with an angry idealism; a medium that spoke for a marginal, yet vibrant culture, that along with others, might invest the tired script of progressive politics with meaning and excitement for a new generation. Perhaps most important, zines were a success story. Throughout the 1980s while the Left was left behind, crumbling and attracting few new converts, zines and underground culture grew by leaps and bounds, resonating deeply with disaffected young people. As a punk rocker, Left politico, and scholar of culture, I was intrigued by their success. Perhaps, I thought to myself, zines were the crack in the seemingly impenetrable wall of the system; a culture spawning the

next wave of meaningful resistance.

And so I decided to make the politics of zines and underground culture the focus of my study. By politics in this case I mean simply what zine writers articulate, either explicitly, or as is often the case implicitly as being the problems of the present cultural, economic, and political system; what they imagine and create as possible solutions to these problems; and what strategies and chances they have for actualizing these ideals on both a small and a large scale.

As I spent more time with zines and zine writers, immersed in this underground world, I realized there was a minor flaw in my theory/ fantasy of underground culture as vanguard of world revolution. Witnessing this incredible explosion of radical cultural dissent, I couldn't help but notice that as all this radicalism was happening underground. The world above was moving in the opposite direction. The election of a president who "felt our pain" notwithstanding, politics were becoming more conservative and power was becoming more concentrated. More disturbing was that zines and underground culture didn't seem to be any sort of threat to this above-ground world. Quite the opposite: "alternative" culture was being celebrated in the mainstream media and used to create new styles and profits for the commercial culture industry. The history of all rebellious cultural and political movements is the history of the unavoidable contradiction of staking out new ground within and through the landscape of the past. But today this laying of claims may be harder than ever. No longer is there a staid bourgeoisie to confront with avant-garde art or a square America to shock with counter-cultural values; instead there is a sophisticated marketing machine which gobbles up anything novel and recreates it as product for a niche market. When the *New York Times* gushes over zines, when punk



ABSOLUTELY ZIPPO'S SUBURBAN ESCAPE

feminist Riot Grrrls are profiled in *Newsweek*, when "alternative" rock gets its own show on MTV, and when the so-called Generation X becomes an identifiable and lucrative market in the eyes of the editors of *Business Week* and *Advertising Age*, rebelling through culture becomes exceedingly problematic. The underground is discovered and cannibalized almost before it exists. Alternative culture was discovered not just by the entertainment industry but by the academy as well, particularly by radical scholars, much like myself, looking for the latest historical agent to hang their political hopes, or blame their failures, upon. In the academic world, however, there has been a lot of sloppy thinking about the relationship between culture and politics. Critics have invested capitalist ideology with a totalizing power and reach, arguing that all cultural expressions are inevitably expressions of the logic of the status quo. Or more recently, they do the opposite and make the most outrageous liberatory political claims for the most banal of cultural acts. My purpose here is not to extol or dismiss for scholarship or social change gains from neither, but to *understand* the politics of zines and underground culture.



The powers that be do not sustain their legitimacy by convincing people that the current system is The Answer. That fiction would be too difficult to sustain in the face of so much evidence to the contrary. What they must do, and what they have done very effectively, is convince the mass of people that *there is no alternative*. What I want to argue in the following pages is that zines and underground culture offer up an alternative, a way of understanding and acting in the world that operates with different rules and upon different values than those of consumer capitalism. It is an alternative fraught with contradictions and limitations ...but also possibilities. We can learn from both.

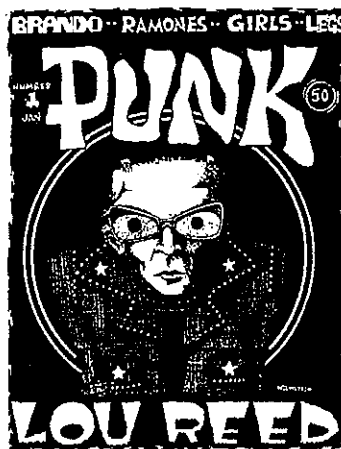
But what are they? Try again: zines are noncommercial, nonprofessional, small-circulation magazines which their creators pro-

duce, publish, and distribute by themselves. While shaped by the long history of alternative presses in the United States, zines as a distinct medium were born in the 1930s. It was then that fans of science fiction, often through the clubs they founded, began producing what they called "fanzines" as a way of sharing science fiction stories and critical commentary, and of communicating with one another. Forty years later, in the mid-1970s, the other defining influence on modern-day zines began as fans of punk rock music, ignored by and critical of the mainstream music press, started printing fanzines about their music and cultural scene. In the early 1980s these two tributaries, joined by smaller streams of publications created by fans of other cultural genres, disgruntled self-publishers, and the remnants of printed political dissent from the sixties and seventies, were brought together and crossfertilized through listings and reviews in network zines like *Factsheet Five*. As the "fan" was by and large dropped off "zine," and their number increased exponentially, a culture of zines developed. By the early 1990s the two editors of the early *Factsheet Five*, deciding upon a title for a commercially published version of their zine, could honestly and accurately refer to *The World of Zines*.¹

When I think of the typical citizen of this world, I see in my mind Christine Boarts, the 35-year-old editor of *Slug & Lettuce*. Dressed in black from head to foot, hair multi-hued dreadlocks, rings lining her ears and nose, tattoos circling her wrist and gracing her shoulder, she still thinks of herself as shy and quiet, the weird girl who sat at the back of the class in high school, in a town where "there was nothing goin' down at all." But, as the Velvet Underground song



GENESIS: SCIENCE FICTION
FANZINES. SNIDE, 1940



THE SECOND WAVE OF PUNK, 1976

goes, "you know, her life was saved by rock & roll."²

It was in the small punk scene in the central Pennsylvania college town where Chris grew up that she found a community (outside her liberal family) where "it was okay that I wasn't like everyone," and it was through her zine that she forged connections to the larger underground scene which gave her the "inspiration and direction" to chart a course for herself outside the mainstream. Surviving on a shoestring, she has just put out her eightieth issue of *S&L*, fitting it in someplace between organizing punk shows, shooting photos of live bands, crisscrossing the country in a van, and developing photos as her primary job. Living on the outskirts of a society that equates success with material acquisition, status, and stability, Chris is poor, marginalized, and perfectly happy.³ Most zinesters are young and the children of professionals, culturally if not financially middle-class. White and raised in a relatively privileged position within the dominant culture, they have since embarked on "careers" of deviance that have moved them to the edges of this society; embracing downwardly mobile career aspirations, unpopular musical and literary tastes, transgressive ideas about sexuality, unorthodox artistic sensibilities, and a politics resolutely outside the status quo (more often to the left, but sometimes to the right). Like Chris, they're simply "not interested" in the "big game" that is the straight world. In short, zine writers and readers, although they'd be horrified to be tagged with such a pat term, are what used to be called bohemians.

It is white, middle-class culture, and its discontents, that informs zines and underground culture. But since one of the attributes of zines is their diversity and unpredictability, the portrait of a young, white, formerly middle-class bohemian looks less and less representative the further one delves into the world of zines. Not all zinesters are young: much older writers like Los Angeles Science Fiction (SF) fan Don Fitch, who describes his age as "76 going on 17," put out zines like *From Sunday to Saturday*. Some zinesters, like Freedom, a Staten Island high-schooler who publishes *Orangutan Balls*, are working-class. And Franetta McMillian, an African-American woman from Delaware, publishes *Sweet Jesus*, while two Los Angeles Chicanos, Lalo Lopez and Estaban Zú, put out *Pocho "Kickin' Butt for La Raza" Magazine*.⁴

Zine publishers are identified less by who they are, then, and more by what they believe; the best description of one I've come across is actually a composite portrait written in 1946 of a similar genus: the "little magazine" editor or writer of the early twentieth century:

Such a man is stimulated by some form of discontent whether with the constraints of his world or the negligence of publishers, at any rate something he considers unjust, boring, or ridiculous. He views the world of publishers and popularizers with disdain, sometimes with despair... [and] he generally insists that publication should not depend upon the whimsy of conventional tastes and choices.⁵

"The whimsy of conventional tastes and choices" certainly plays little part in the subjects picked by these writers, whose zines span almost every field, from the sublime to the ridiculous, making a detour through the unfathomable. But one thing gives coherence to this eclecticism: zinesters' fascination with the margins. These may be the margins of literature or music, explored through a science fiction fanzine like *STET* or the punk rock *Philly Zine*. Or perhaps the perimeter of politics surveyed through the anarchist essays of *instead of A magazine*, the conservative libertarian rants of *Inverted-A HORN*, or *Finster's* feminist-infused stories, opinions, and photo-collages.

In the gay safe-sex *Diseased Pariah News* the borders of "acceptable" sexuality are scouted, as they are in the soft-core poetry and pornography of *Ash* and the harder-core *Black Leather Times*. Numerous zines obsessively catalog the ephemera of the past: *Show-Me Blowout* unearths long-dead Missouri garage bands from the fifties and sixties; *8-Track Mind* is devoted to eight-track tape trivia; *Bad Seed* researches JD, juvenile delinquency, pulp novels and lurid teen exploitation films; and *Past Deadline* reprints nineteenth century newspaper articles. Other writers, turning their attention to the ephemera of the present, celebrate the edges of modern consumer culture through satirical reviews of banal products in zines such as *Meanwhile* and *Beer Frame*. The unaffected drawings, poems, and ideas of a young woman in the *Watley-Browne Review*, and the mental meanderings of the residents of an old age home recorded in *Duplex Planet*, chart the boundaries of artistic expression. And even the margins of sense itself are stretched: by an entire zine of pictures of bowling pins in different settings in *Eleventh Pin*; by the nonsensical photo/text collages of *balcony of ignorance*; or by *Your Name Here*, a zine soliciting a new creator, name, and content for each issue. This hyperspecialization of zines – science fiction, punk rock, eight-track tapes, defunct Missouri garage bands – is a bit misleading, for unlike mainstream "niche market" periodicals, zines don't follow well-laid plans for market penetration or move purposefully in a defined direction courting profitable demographics. The majority of zines are specialized, but only to the point that they communicate the range, however wide or narrow, that makes up the

personal interests of the publisher. Zines meander and change direction, switching back, then back again, flowing wherever the publisher's interest takes them. The result is less a defined set of discrete topics covered and more an amalgam of the diverse interests of those doing the writing. In fact when Mike Gunderloy, the founding editor of *Factsheet Five*, attempted to make his zine easier to read by ordering zine reviews by category, he says he was flooded by letters in protest.⁶ "Yikes! *Factsheet Five* arranged in headings/categories? Urgh!!! When zinedom becomes reduced to 'definitions' it loses its soul," one such letter howls.⁷

A typical zine (although "typical" is a problematic term in this context) might start with a highly personalized editorial, then move into a couple of opinionated essays or rants criticizing, describing, or extolling something or other, and then conclude with reviews of other zines, bands, books, and so forth. Spread throughout this would be poems, a story, reprints from the mass press (some for informational value, others as ironic commentary), and a few hand-drawn illustrations or comix. The editor would produce the content him or herself, solicit it from personal friends or zine acquaintances, or, less commonly, gather it through an open call for submissions.⁸ Material is also "borrowed": pirated from other zines and the mainstream press, sometimes without credit, often without permission.

The form of the zine lies somewhere between a personal letter and a magazine. Printed on a standard copy machine, folded widthwise to form a folio and stapled in the crease, zines typically run from ten to forty pages. They can, however, run over one hundred pages as *Maximumrocknroll* does, and range from color reproductions and card stock covers, like those of *Fish Taco*, to what was once sent to me by the editor of *Frederick's Lament*: a seemingly random jumble of smudged copies, mass cultural flotsam and jetsam, and written personal statements stuffed into an envelope.

As zines are put together by hand using common materials and technology (do-it-yourself is the prime directive of the zine world) they consequently look the part, with unruly cut-and-paste layout, barely legible type, and uneven reproduction. There are, however, zines with large circulations, like Chris's *Slug & Lettuce*, that are printed professionally on newsprint (at over 1,000 copies this becomes vastly cheaper). The decline in the cost of personal computers and the spread of desktop publishing capability to the smallest of offices (where zinester

employees can "liberate" computer time) have given more and more people access to equipment to put out professional-looking publications.

Zines cost anywhere from nothing to the price of postage to about five dollars, but swapping zines through a barter system is common and part of the ethic of participation among equals. Distribution is primarily person-to-person via the mail, though zines are also sold in some book and music stores and traded, sold, or given away at punk rock gigs, conventions, activist conferences, and the like. They are advertised via word of mouth, through other zines' review sections, and through zines like *Zine World* and *Broken Pencil*.

The lifespan of a zine ranges from single-issue "one-shots" to volumes spanning years, with their circulation running from eight copies to *Cometbus'* twelve thousand. But I would estimate two hundred and fifty as the average circulation, as publishers strive for a scale that allows them to have complete control over production and distribution, while maintaining personal contact with their readers.⁹ In line with this ideal of publishing intimacy, zines are almost always one-person operations. A minority are run by small collectives, and a majority accept input from others, but zines for the most part are the expression and the product of an individual. Enough exceptions exist, however, to break this rule. *Maximumrocknroll*, the long-running punk zine, lists about ninety individuals who helped put out a given issue. True, more than

ZINE TAXONOMY

The breadth of zines is vast and any effort to classify and codify them immediately reveals shortcomings. But by looking over the reviews in a number of old issues of *Factsheet Five*, I've come up with the following broad categorizations:

- Fanzines. These are no doubt the largest and oldest category of zines; one might well argue that all zines are fanzines. Simply, fanzines are publications devoted to discussing the intricacies and nuances of a cultural genre. Within fanzines there are distinct subcategories:
 - Science fiction: Beginning in the 1930s, publications by and for SF fans were the first zines. Now a minority numerically, SF fanzines still make up a solid segment of the zine world.
 - Music zines: focused on either a particular band or performer or, more commonly, a specific genre, most often punk or "alternative" rock. This category once made up the largest genre of zines in the United States in the mid 1990s.
 - Sports: These are not that big in the United States, but very popular in the UK where football (soccer) zines are an integral part of sporting life. Still, in the USA, fans of baseball, wrestling, skateboarding, roller derby, and women's sports all create zines.
 - Television and film zines: focused on entertainment both popular and patently unpopular; horror and kitsch drama are particularly well represented.
 - Etc: fans of household items, mass transit systems, board games, and what-have-you all put out zines, some done seriously, some as satire.

- Political zines: These may be broken down into two subgenres:
- Politics with a big *P*. These may be subdivided again according to more or less traditional categories such as: Anarchist, Socialist, Libertarian, Fascist, and "identity" categories such as Feminist and Queer.
- politics with a small *p*. These do not identify explicitly with traditional categories, but with political/cultural critique as a major focus of the zine.
- Personal zines, or perzines: personal diaries open to the public; shared notes on the day-to-day life, thoughts and experiences of the writer.
- Scene zines: These contain news and views on the local music and underground cultural "scene" in the writer's area.
- Network zines: like *Zine World* and *Broken Pencil*, concentrate on reviewing and publicizing other zines, music, art, computer and other underground culture. They serve as nodal points for the bohemian diaspora.
- Fringe culture zines: cover assassination theories and "proof" of secret nefarious undertakings, UFOs, and serial killers. They deal with the standard fare of supermarket tabloids, but explored in much more depth and with far more intelligence and sometimes humor.
- Religious zines: Witches, paganists, and born-again Christians, as well as "joke" religions like the Church of the SubGenius and Moorish Science, all put out zines for the faithful and wayward.
- Vocational zines: tell the stories of life on the job, whether that job be washing dishes, doing temp work, writing for a newspaper, substitute

half these people are listed as "shitworkers," a category of contributors you normally do not see credited on the mastheads of established magazines, but nevertheless, *Maximum-rocknroll* is known for its large, complex, and reasonably efficient production organization. Unlike almost any commercial publication, however, large or small, *MRR* is decidedly non-profit.

To say that zines are not-for-profit is an understatement. Most *lose* money. It's not that they aim to be in the red; most try to break even, and if money is made, that's fine, it is more money to spend putting out the next issue. And, again, there are exceptions. Mike Gunderloy, former editor of *Factsheet Five*, managed to survive by publishing his zine, albeit with eighty-hour work weeks and mercenary forays into computer consulting. R. Seth Friedman, the following editor, was doing the same. But as a rule, and with the exception of free zines and records sent in for reviews, zines are not expected to bring material reward. In fact the very idea of profiting from a zine is anathema to the underground, bringing with it charges of "selling out."¹⁰

What zines are expected to provide is an outlet for unfettered expression and a connection to a larger underground world of publishers doing the same. But since virtually no zine writers send their zines to the Library of Congress to be catalogued, get an ISSN, or list themselves in the *Small Press Review* or *The International Directory of Little Magazines and Small Presses*, it is difficult to determine

exactly how large this world is. Such informed sources as Mike Gunderloy estimate that there are currently at least 10,000–20,000 different zine titles circulating, while others such as Seth Friedman have stretched this number up to 50,000 during zines' peak in 1997.¹¹ I lean toward the more conservative estimate, but even with 10,000 titles, using the standard magazine readership estimate of three readers per magazine and 250 copies per zine as a safe mean, the estimate of a possible total zine readership, and thus primary contact with some facet of the zine world, is as high as 7,500,000.

But because most zine makers are also zine readers, as part of a whole subculture, and tend to read numerous zines, the real number is certainly lower, most likely in the 500,000–750,000 range.

When one thinks of underground culture, one's mind naturally turns to big cities, the traditional loci of bohemia, and certainly writers living in Portland, San Francisco, and New York City produce more zines than any other single locale. But it is more out-of-the-way places like Harvest, Alabama; Freehold, New Jersey; Morganville, Kansas; and Monrovia, California, that, taken together, outstrip the major metropolises as the germination points of zines.¹² Examining the zines reviewed in an issue of *Zine Guide* or *Factsheet Five* – which held the most complete listing of zines available – I found an almost two-to-one ratio in favor of small-city/suburban/rural origin over large urban

teaching, working as a librarian, or practicing fractal geometry.

- Health zines: these contain recipes for healthy food, information about diseases and medicine, experiences of living/coping with mental health issues, advice on coping with AIDS and dealing with death, and other health-related issues.
- Sex zines: deal with straight, queer, bondage, black leather stories, pictures – a zine for probably every sexual proclivity.
- Travel zines: Very often in the form of “road trip” diaries, these zines are travelogues of bumming around on the cheap.
- Comix: these are underground comic books on themes humorous, serious, and nonsensical.
- Literary zines: showcase original short fiction and poetry.
- Art zines: contain print media collages, photographs, drawings, and mail art which create a network of artists and a floating virtual gallery.
- The Rest: a large unsortable category.

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FROM ACNE-RELATED SUICIDE TO
JULIA CHILD IN COMETBUS

areas. Out of 1,142 zines listed from the USA, 749 originated from outside the major cities in each state.¹³ Though surprising, this disparity makes sense: Gentrification and the allure of the bohemian life for non-bohemians have sent rents and services in urban areas out of reach for many people, particularly those who eschew stable careers and ideals of material success. Most people who publish are young and often still live in the suburbs with their parents. As traditional garrets give way to gentrified lofts and smoky cafés are superseded by the Starbucks coffee chain, creative misfits scattered across the country use the culture of zines to share, define and hold together a "culture" of discontent: a virtual bohemia.

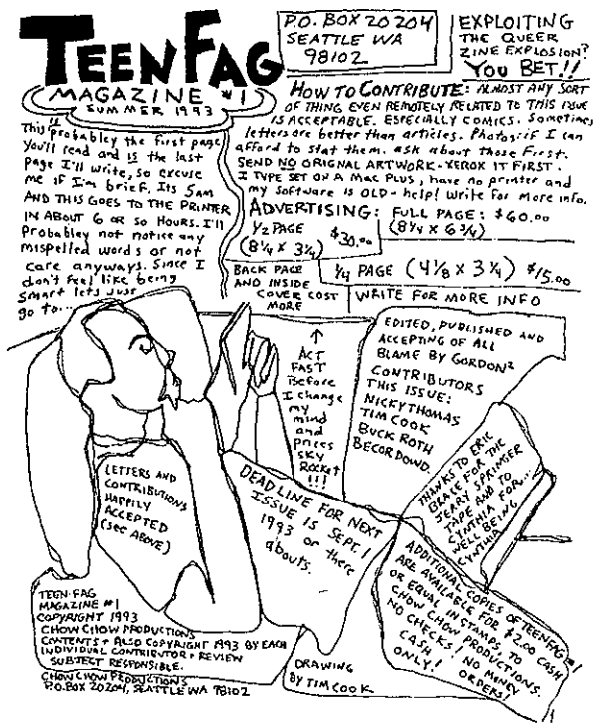
But what are they? If pushed to come up with a single defining attribute I would have to say this: zines are decidedly *amateur*. While this term has taken on a pejorative cast in a society that honors professionalism and the value of the dollar, the roots of amateurism are far more noble: *amator*, Latin for *lover*. While other media are produced for money or prestige or public approval, zines are done – as *Factsheet Five's* founding editor Mike Gunderloy is fond of pointing out – for *love*: love of expression, love of sharing, love of communication. And in protest against a culture and society that offers little reward for such acts of love, zines are also created out of *rage*.

Zines are not the only cultural expression of love and rage lurking underground today. Though drawing from a different population – primarily urban, primarily black – and forged out

ture of this book unorthodox and perhaps unsettling. I struggled mightily with how to organize this seemingly disorganized subject matter, how to discipline undisciplined subjects.¹⁴ In the end I decided to structure the book around major themes in the zine world, with these broken up by subthematic "vignettes." I think it works in balancing out the unfolding and chaotic dynamism of the contemporary zine world with the structure necessary to make sense of it. I also think it accurately describes what binds the world of zines together: ideals, actions, and reactions. Finally, it mirrors the structure of zines themselves: at first glance a bit fragmentary, but coming together inevitably to reveal a world, provide an analysis, and make a point.

Still others will be disappointed that I've written a book on zines at all. Isn't this just another exploitation of zines, "selling out" the underground to the above-ground world? Perhaps. But alternative culture has already been discovered - the more important

question is who will represent it and how. The ways in which I explore and explain the world of zines certainly bear the mark of my theoretical interests and political concerns, but I'm of the world I write and my concern for the underground runs deeper than its status as this (or last) season's cultural exotica. More important, I'm a conscientious observer and a careful listener. And I believe that what zinesters have to say and what zines represent are too important to stay sequestered within the walls of a subcultural ghetto.



HAND-DRAWN, LOW-TECH TEEN FAG

In dealing with such an idiosyncratic subject matter as zines, there exists a distinct temptation just to hand over a stack of them and let readers decide for themselves what they are. But that's impossible here and, in light of the purpose of this book, not even desirable. In recent years, I've poured over thousands upon thousands of zines and interviewed scores of zine writers and readers. I've published zines myself and been part of the underground cultural scene. I've read what there is to read and kept a watchful eye on the times in which we live. In the pages that follow, I'll apply this experience to act as a guide, mapping out the philosophical and political contours, the twists and turns, the love and rage, that make up this strange subterranean world.

of Mac graphics with a positive message, and into serious articles on how to get a better life. (S-24t/MG)

THE POTASSIUM REVIEW #4 (Free from Mark S. Ivanhoe, 6923 South Dr., Richmond, VA 23225-1303): This is Mark's personalzine, tracking his budding career as a writer but also striking off into fields of its own. This issue has the results of his "Inquiry into the Occult", starting with having his mind blown by the **ILLUMINATUS!** trilogy and going on through skepticism and counter-skepticism. (S-12/MG)

OPRACTICAL ANARCHY #1 (\$1 (?) from Chuck O, 622 N. Henry St., Madison, WI 53703): A new publication designed to recommend steps towards anarchy that can be taken in the here and now. It leads off with the idea of recommending anarchist books to your public library. Community-supported agriculture and recommended reading are also part of the package. (S-4t/MG)

THE PRAGMATIST Vol. 8 #6 (\$10/yr from PO Box 392, Forest Grove, PA 18922): These people take a utilitarian approach towards promoting Libertarian ideals, showing how our society would be better off as a whole with less government. The War of Drugs is the cover story in this issue, including a fine essay by Richard Riley Conarroe recounting his experience in getting off several juries. (S-16t/MG)

THE PRAIRIE RAMBLER #166-167 (\$1.23 from Jerry B., PO Box 505, Claremont, CA 91711-0505): A collection of quotes and reading from all over the place—Red Skelton as likely to appear as Chinese proverbs. Makes for excellent reading when you have limited time, with Jerry's own commentary providing spice. (S-8/MG)

THE PRINTER'S DEVIL #11 (\$2.10 from Joe Singer, PO Box 66, Harrison, ID 83833): A zine for those interested in the production end of producing a fanzine or other short-run printing project. Typefaces, design, press repair, sources for supplies, layout and all sorts of news are here. They also print letters from a bunch of readers with knowledge to share. (S-20t/MG)

PRINTER'S INK Vol[print]. 7 #1 (On request from Thomson-Shore, PO Box 305, Dexter, MI 48130-0305): A newsletter for customers of Thomson-Shore, a fairly large short-run book printer. There's always something of interest here, with this issue talking about the impact of desktop publishing on the trade and revealing more good news about soy-based inks. (S-4t/MG)

PRISONERS' LEGAL NEWS Vol. 2 #6-7 (Donation from PO Box 1684, Lake Worth, FL 33460): A collection of news stories from behind the prison

DO ZINES STILL MATTER?

SOME THOUGHTS ON SELF-PUBLISHING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

When I wrote *Notes from Underground* in the mid-1990s I defined zines as "the variegated voices of a subterranean world." More than a decade later, zines are still being published and my definition, I think, still holds: zines are the creative outpourings of an underground world that passes below the radar of most people.

What's surprising is how little has changed in the zine scene. Moe is still publishing her *Xtra Tuf* and still making it "free to commercial fishing women." *Cometbus* hit issue #50 and Aaron continues to tell stories about his life on the fringe, even if it's now the fringes of New York City rather than the Bay Area. Politically, zines remain on the margins of mainstream politics, staking out their position through exhortation (*Am I Mad...Or Has The Whole World Gone Crazy?????*) or expose (*The CIA Makes Science Fiction Unexciting*). And zines still revel in the absurd ephemera of our culture, be it the biographies of long forgotten, and by conventional standards quite wacky, scientists in D.B. Pedlar's *Rogue Reader*, or Chris Pernula's lovingly hand-drawn portraits of champion bowlers in *Bowling Stars of 1989* (Serious? Ironic? Does it matter?)

As evidenced by J.L. Heckman's *Work Stories*, zines still chronicle and condemn the soul-sucking labor that most of us do for money, while at the same time zines bare witness to the possibilities of a different sort of labor; work which is done, in the words of the pioneering zine scene organizer Mike Gunderloy, for "love, not money." Zines continue to champion the life of "losers" like "Bubby" in Chris Johnston's comix zine, *My Friend Bubby*. And, perhaps most important of all, zines still record and relate the everyday thoughts of maybe not so everyday people trying to make sense of their place in a world in which they often feel they don't quite fit.

Even the aesthetics of zines have not changed all that much over the past dozen or so years. Text is still cut out and pasted over images, introductions are still hand lettered, amateur pictures and comix are still scattered across pages, and the odd snippet from the mass press is still reproduced for comic or dramatic effect. From the outside many zines look the same too: photocopied and fashioned from standard size paper, folded in half and stapled at the spine.

The world of zines has remained remarkably steady. Meanwhile the world of self-publishing has changed radically.

In the coda to the first edition of this book I wrote: "What is the future of zines? One word: computers." I was hardly going out on a limb with this prediction. Even back then, when the Internet had just recently broken out of its geek ghetto and the graphic interface of the Web was just beginning to take off, the transformative importance of computers to all forms of communication was obvious. Today, in the overdeveloped world at least, computers permeate nearly all aspects of our life. The price of technology has dropped, public access to the Internet has improved, and new software makes it ever easier to make and share your own media creations. We live in a digital age.

This raises some obvious questions: In this digital age, when anyone with a computer can publish whatever they want to an anonymous audience of millions, are analog zines obsolete? Are personal websites, blogs and social networking sites playing the role that zines once did? Are zines today the self-publishing equivalent of that embarrassing older guy in the non-ironic 80s-era band t-shirt who lurks at the back of rock shows? (mea culpa) To sum it up: Are print and paper zines merely an exercise in nostalgia?

In part, the answer is an uncomfortable: yes. Zine producers have historically embraced new technology. They quickly adopted small hand presses in the 1930s, mimeograph machines in the 1950s, photocopy machines in the 1980s, and desktop publishing in the 1990s – why stop now and fetishize the materiality of paper? One could plausibly argue that blogs are just ephemeral per-zines, and fan sites on the web are nothing other than digitally displayed fanzines. Perhaps the only thing that separates a zine from all these new forms of computer-mediated communication is the medium.

Zines have always been more than just words or images on paper: they are the embodiment of an ethic of creativity that argues that anyone can be a creator. Professional newspapers, slick magazines, and academic journals, art galleries and television shows, regardless of their content, have a uniform message to the reader or viewer: you can't do this, you are not skilled enough, you don't have the resources, so just sit back, appreciate and consume the culture that professionals have made for you. A zine, with all its amateur, low-rent, scruffy seams showing, says something else to the reader: this is easy, you could probably create something just as good, now go out and Do-It-Yourself. In this way zines are profoundly democratic. However, if the ideal of DIY constitutes the *raison d'être* of zine production, then the Internet serves that purpose far better

than the photocopy machine. At its peak zine publishing involved maybe tens of thousands of people; self-publishing on the Internet touches millions. From this perspective one might argue that while zines made the promise of democratizing the media, the internet has actually delivered it.

But there's something missing from the blogs, the fan sites and the social networking pages – and I think this something has everything to do with democratization. I recall an incident, discussed in a different context later in this book that happened in the zine scene in the early 1990s. It was in the wake of the discovery of the Seattle underground and “alternative music,” and zines were getting a bit of mainstream attention. My friend Pete, who published the brilliant zine *Dishwasher*, was invited to appear on *Late Night with David Letterman* to talk about zines and his quest to wash dishes in all fifty states. Pete agreed, but then sent a friend to pretend to be him on the show. As Letterman interviewed the fake Pete, all of us in the zine scene watched and had a good laugh. If the mainstream world thought they could appropriate our culture then we'd feed them a bogus world to appropriate. Then I came across a posting on an early computer bulletin board devoted to fanzines. A young man had seen the bogus Pete on Letterman, heard about the gag, and felt betrayed; he wanted to see his hero, the real Pete. At that moment I realized something: that the world of zines wasn't just about self-publishing and individual expression, it was a culture; a culture with its own set of norms and values, expectations and restrictions, insiders and outsiders. This kid, who had found zines via the wide-open anonymity of the Internet, was still outside. He just didn't “get it.”

One zine writer I interviewed for this book likened her discovery of the zine scene to falling down Alice's rabbit hole and emerging into a completely different world. In this new world scraps of paper found on the ground constitute creative content and a job at Kinko's is a coveted position; a Laundromat can become a covert setting for a poetry reading and being called a freak, loser, or anarchist is a compliment, not an insult. It was a subterranean counter-world to the straight world above. The rules of this world were continually debated: Was it okay to charge money for a zine or must it only be traded for another? Is newsprint legitimate, or does hiring someone to print for you constitute a betrayal of the DIY ethic? Was it selling out to write a book about zines? But the fact that these issues were continually contested cemented the community together. We were, in essence, defining and redefining, an alternative culture.

The world of self-publishing on the Internet is not an alternative culture. There is no cultural price of admission into the digital realm, there are no arcane

rituals to master or rules to follow (or even debate). The result is a multiplicity of voices and values. There is nothing wrong with this; indeed there is a lot that is good. But this diversity does not constitute a community, and as such, there are no coherent community values. This doesn't mean that there aren't any values expressed, but it does mean that in the absence of a set of counter-norms, the values articulated or manifested on the web can often conform to those of the dominant arbiters of cultural value: the marketplace and the cultural establishment. As such, blogs become calling cards for aspiring mainstream writers, Facebook and Myspace pages become advertisements for one's own celebrity, and so on.

When the values we've so dearly cultivated venture out into the wider world they become transformed. Take our sacred DIY ethic for example. In the zine scene Do-It-Yourself means a rejection of consumerism: we don't want to consume a culture that others have produced for us so instead we'll make our culture ourselves. But DIY culture has now become a big consumer business: "scrapbooking" is a 2.5 billion dollar enterprise and Build-A-Bear "workshops" populate malls across the country. On the Web, Internet powerhouse Google now owns the user-generated YouTube, while sites like Etsy.com create a platform for people who do-it-themselves to sell their creations to others, who don't. I'm not necessarily condemning these things. Etsy.com was built by ex-students of mine and I appreciate how it helps independent crafters make a living. Scrapbooking gives creative pleasure to millions of people. And, much to my horror, my son truly loves the bear he "built." I'm only pointing out that as an ethic spreads – as it is democratized – it mutates and no longer retains the original meanings it once had. In the zine scene we preach the ethics of DIY and democratic creation but the experience of self-publishing on the Internet demonstrates that when everyone begins to express themselves then there isn't the scale or coherence that encourages the formation of an alternative world-view.

The zine world, like all bohemia, is a ghetto. This sounds negative, but I don't mean it this way. For in this ghetto, we get to set the standards of what constitutes valid expression and creativity, instead of having these definitions determined by the academy, art world or the commercial marketplace of culture. We create an alternative culture. Self-publishing may have been democratized with the rise of the Internet, but within the zine scene Do-It-Yourself is more than just a publishing practice, it is an entire way of thinking, being and creating; a shared ideal of what culture, community, and creativity could be. It is this subterranean vision that needs to be nurtured ... and shared. Zines do this, and that's why they matter. They are, still, notes from underground.

NOTES

1. ZINES

1. Mike Gunderloy and Cari Goldberg Janice, *The World of Zines* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992).
2. Velvet Underground, "Rock & Roll," *Loaded*, Atlantic Records, 1970.
3. Christine Boarts, personal interview, May 29, 1996, New York City.
4. Don Fitch, personal correspondence, April 22, 1994.
5. Frederick J. Hoffman, Charles Allen, and Carolyn F. Ulrich, *The Little Magazine in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), pp. 3-4.
6. Mike Gunderloy's response, "Letters," *Factsheet Five*, 22, 1987, Rensselaer, NY, p. 66.
7. Bob McGlynn, in "Letters," *Factsheet Five*, 31, 1989, Rensselaer, NY, p. 113.
8. The criteria for the zine editor's selection of material from others are not too different from what operates in many journals or magazines: nepotism. Editors ask friends or zine acquaintances whom they like and trust to submit material to their zine. The difference between the zine "old boy network" and that of the mainstream publishing industry is that zine networks are made up of people who are kept - or have opted - out of the halls of cultural power.
9. This small circulation is one of the things

that distinguishes zines from other periodicals; as a rule zines have small runs, of under 1,000, while magazines have runs of over 10,000. But this isn't always the case.

A zine like the *I Hate Brenda Newsletter*, devoted to slagging the actress who plays Brenda in the TV series *Beverly Hills 90210* and put out by the editors of *Ben Is Dead*, has a circulation of over 25,000; on the other hand, many academic or literary journals are lucky to break 1,000.

10. Most magazines try to deliver a profit, even though some, including substantial ones such as the *New Yorker*, operate at a loss. It is not the actual profit that is the issue, but the intent of the producer that differentiates zines from magazines. I'll stay with the example of the *New Yorker*. It was never published to make money in a purely mercenary sense; it was and is a prestige publication. However, when its losses became too great for the parent company to bear, a new editor was brought in to change its content and layout to make it more popular and profitable. This sort of change would be heresy to most zine writers, who would rather burn at the stake than alter their publication to please anybody but themselves.

11. Gunderloy and Goldberg Janice, *The World of Zines*; Seth Friedman cited in J. Peder Zane, "Now the Magazines of 'Me'," *New York Times*, May 14, 1995, p. E4.

12. These are the birthplaces of *Frederick's Lament*, *The Holy Experiment*, 10, *The Kansas Intelligencer*, vol. 5, no. 5, and *Moonshines*, vol. 1, nos. 1-2.

13. A breakdown of the geographical origin of zines listed in the Spring 1991 issue of *Factsheet Five* (no. 44) turned up the following results. Out of 1,301 zines listed and reviewed, forty-nine states were represented, with South Dakota being the lone exclusion. Of the 1,142 US zines listed, California produced the most with 226, New York the second with 135, while Ohio, Texas, and Washington state churned out 47, 46, and 42 respectively. None of these figures are that astonishing when one takes into account the population of these states. In the 1990 census California was ranked first, New York second, Texas third and Ohio seventh. Washington, a state with a relatively small population, makes up for this deficiency with the importance of Seattle and Olympia as cultural centers for music and young people throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s. Of the twenty-four foreign countries represented, the major English-speaking nations led the pack, ordered by geographical distance from the USA. Canada was first with 58 zines, followed by the UK with 37 and Australia with 13. Following these, in order, were France, Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, Japan, New Zealand, Sweden, Belgium, Greece, Italy, Spain, Singapore, Poland, Hungary, South Africa, Portugal, Lithuania, Argentina, Brazil, Iceland, and

what was then Yugoslavia. Again, none of this is too surprising: big states, and countries which have large English-speaking and/or well-educated populations, are well represented. The one eye-opener came when I broke down the states according to the categories "major urban" and "suburban/rural." Here, contrary to expectations about the urbanity of underground cultures, I found that the majority of zines did not originate from large metropolitan areas. Only 393 of the zines from the United States originated from the major cities in each state, whereas the remainder - 749 - did not. It should be noted that doing this sort of sampling from *Factsheet Five* has its strengths and its weaknesses. The main strength is that, up until very recent times, the producers of *Factsheet Five* reviewed every zine that was sent to them. Thus the population was self-selected and not edited. The weaknesses stem from the same source: those individuals who produce publications who don't feel the need to be reviewed by *FS5*, or are ignorant of its existence, are not included in my sample. However, my study is of the *culture* of zines, and *FS5* was and may still be the locus of that culture. In addition, those who submit to *FS5* are aware of this culture and have chosen to participate in it. Thus, while this sample may not be representative of all zines in the world, it is representative of a self-conscious world of zines. It also happens to be the only such large-scale listing of a zine universe available.

14. "Disciplining undisciplined subjects" is how friend and anthropologist Ara Wilson once described my project.



Illustration by Matt Mimiaga/Steve Lambert

In addition to *Notes from Underground*, **Stephen Duncombe** is the author of *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in the Age of Fantasy*, co-author of *The Bobbed Haired Bandit: A True Story of Crime and Celebrity in 1920s New York*, and editor of the *Cultural Resistance Reader*. He is an Associate Professor at the Gallatin School of New York University, where he teaches the history and politics of media and culture, and a life-long political activist, co-founding the *Lower East Side Collective* and helping organize the New York City chapter of the international direct action group, *Reclaim the Streets*.