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Zine

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Let us start with a succinct definition of *zine* from Janice Radway, echoed across the academic literature: "Until zines emerged as digital forms, they were generally defined as handmade, noncommercial, irregularly issued, small-run, paper publications circulated by individuals participating in alternative, special-interest communities" (2011, 140). From here, the familiar story of the zine unfolds: the term *zine* is a recent derivation of *fanzine*, itself coined in the 1930s to refer to self-published magazines of science fiction, punks in the 1970s adopted the form to create an alternative infrastructure for a global phenomenon, and (some) girls and young women in the 1990s used zines to build a revolution of some kind—what kind exactly remains up for debate—upon a foundation of emotional intimacy and immediacy. Indeed, in academic studies and adjacent histories, the zine is most often heralded as a material form for the marginalized, as a medium of self-expression (without editors, advertisers, or censors) made through accessible means (using low-cost technologies of reproduction) in search of community (rather than audience) and infused with the tempo of immediacy, even urgency. These qualities of self-expression and community building are common themes for zine study, as found in Stephen Duncombe's *Notes from Underground* (1997), the first academic monograph about zines and "alternative culture": "The tension in the punk scene between the individual and the community, between freedom and rules, is a microcosm of the tension that exists within all the networked communities of the zine scene. Zines are profoundly personal expressions, yet as a medium of participatory communication they depend upon and help create community" (65).

Zines are also often narrated either as continuation, extending or building upon preexisting print formats from earlier periods, or as eruption, expressively bursting forth with oppositional energies. In the former, zines are given a genealogy through continuity of form. From the pamphlet wars of seventeenth-century England between the Diggers and Levelers, both political movements committed to popular sovereignty; to the French Revolution and the wide circulation of anonymous or multiple-authored tracts arguing against the "unnatural" tyranny of the aristocracy; to the 1930s and the self-publication of science fiction fanzines in an era of censorship in the name of "decency"; to the early twentieth-century avant-garde movements of futurists, Dadaists, surrealists, and Situationists and their competing, clashing manifestoes; and to the late 1960s, when mimeographed feminist manifestos decried the gender politics of revolutionary discourses that privileged a "generic" masculine revolutionary. Across these varied historical and aesthetic movements, the zine is often described as a living artifact that continues to articulate the distinction between a radical egalitarianism and "the establishment." In nearly all these movements, small-scale self-publication challenged the supposed universalism of democratic cultural formations through this alternative form of public address. Thus it is at the same time that the zine is described through eruption—not in its form but by virtue of its content. Through the pamphlet, the broadside, the tract, the fanzine, the manifesto, anarchists, revolutionaries, "losers" (Duncombe 1997), or marginalized subcultures (nerds, punks, or teenage girls) express at times oppositional

opinions, arguments, and feelings (none of these being distinct bodies) that have no forum in "dominant" cultures or mainstream publications. It is as such, as Radway observes so well, that zines are described as "political because it challenges established hierarchies of forms and voices, the selection of those who are attended to as legitimate, authorized denizens of the major institutions that comprise contemporary knowledge production" (2011, 145). This form is often narrated then as facilitating a nonalienated relation to labor (thus it is a do-it-yourself endeavor) that often spills into or implies otherwise a nonalienated, or at least *less* alienated, relation to self and to others (Gunderloy 1990; Duncombe 1997). For instance, Mary Celeste Kearney and Elke Zobl connect the girl zine to life writing, whether through words or comics, as at least semi-autobiographical work (Kearney 2006; Schilt 2003; Zobl 2004). Because of this sensibility of nonalienation (real or imagined or somewhere in between), zines are often assigned a temporality of immediacy; these missives capture a moment in time and are an aid for communion with others, as soon as possible. *Revolution, Girl-Style Now*, as it were (Piepmeier 2009).

Zines are thus invoked as minor objects taken to diagnose certain normative conditions, whether the technologies and conditions for publicity, the material or felt experience of outsiderness, the failures of politics as usual, the exigencies of girlhood, whatever (Nguyen 2012). But what else can be said about zines, either besides or apart from the usual story? How and why do concepts of self-expression and community so often appear as transparent social goods through this particular medium? How do we think about the temporality of zines decades later? Consider the aesthetics of intimacy and its forms, bringing together the histories of expressive interiority with the particularity of the zine as a rhetorical and aesthetic medium for publicity. The form itself, often photocopied or printed half-sized sheets of paper or smaller, creates that sense of intimacy through scale and material. Whether comic or manifesto (as examples of what might be found inside), genre conventions and boundaries might be stretched or discarded, and at the same time, an aesthetic of authenticity or accessibility might cohere yet another structure of affective expectation. As one zine writer, for instance, related to Alison Piepmeier in her study of girl zines, "I really hated when people would be like, 'Oh, it's all just girls in their bedrooms, sprawled out writing in their diaries, and then they'll send them to each other.' I'm like, that's an aesthetic choice. You're still constructing something when it looks like a diary entry. I wasn't photocopying my diary, or if I was, it was for a specific reason." At the same time, she asserted, "I'm creating this kind of media that's literally from my most sacred place to somebody else's most sacred place" (2009, 90). In such a fantasy of unmediated intimacy—with oneself, with others—we might observe after Lauren Berlant the "unfinished business" of sentimentality, the premise of "a world of strangers who would be emotionally literate in each other's experience of power, intimacy, desire, and discontent, with all that entails" (2008, 5). Zines, as Duncombe argues, personalize politics—what this means, however, is not guaranteed (1997, 28).

Thus we would do well to also reconsider what Miranda Joseph calls *the romance of community*. What does it mean, exactly, to build community? Just as intimacy (with its associations to *real* experience) is often counterposed to theory, community (as *real* communion) is often counterposed to capital (Joseph 2002). The concept of community building often narrates the exclusion of populations from public and political cultures, especially when and where an idea of the universal emerges; at the same time, as Janet Lyon argues in her study of the manifesto, the form

might also reproduce a dichotomy, claiming a "we" as an often-undifferentiated population (Duncombe's "freaks, geeks, nerds and losers," for instance, or "girl culture") even as the idea of a coherent "we" is being contested (1999). Thus is community central to the rhetorical forms—academic and otherwise—that invoke the zine as a foundation or a network, but this seeming self-evidence bears further critique (Nguyen 2012). It would be useful, for instance, to pay attention to how communities and publics are "overdetermined and also organized differently" through their forms of address (Berlant 2008, 8). Lauren Berlant's work on intimate publics and the fantasies of collectivity that adhere to them through sentimental modes, for instance, might be brought to bear upon claims of emotional accessibility and communion. How might we otherwise perceive the temporality of the zine, the relation between an aesthetics of intimacy and an aesthetics of urgency? What is the push of the "here" and the "now" that generates the address?

It is also important to consider that we do much more with zines than make them or read them. They are material objects too, and not only do we make them, but we scan them, sell them, distribute them, collect them, donate them, categorize them, make examples of them, copy them (in multiple senses of the word), teach them, lose them (to others who never return them), and destroy them. How else, then, might we consider the zine and its aesthetic of immediacy and those practices that extend their lives into the present or future?

In the years since its most proliferate era—after personal computers but before digital media—the zine as a material object has had its conditions of possibility changed dramatically. In the 1990s, the largest distributor of zines was Tower Records, mainstreaming the zine form for a moment, and during that time, some zines reached print runs in the thousands; in 2006, Tower Records declared bankruptcy and closed all its retail locations throughout the United States. Since the 1990s, other independent distributors—of records and comics as well as zines—have closed or struggled. Yet despite the passing of the copy machine into relative obscurity (including the closure of hundreds of independent copy stores, the transformation of thousands of twenty-four-hour Kinko's into daytime FedEx Offices, and increased security to remaining photocopiers, rendering commercial copy scams nearly impossible) or because of it (thus enhancing their auratic qualities), zines became a much-heralded medium for self-expression or communication—an analog form in a digital age. Its reputation for authenticity, even ground-up democracy, has been seized upon by "cutting-edge" brands (selling everything from clothes or a lifestyle concept to trend forecasting or vague promises of "innovation"), which publish glossy publications miming the aesthetic of self-expression and community for guerilla or viral (or otherwise buzzwordy) marketing. Zines are taught in workshops and classrooms as a craft activity or creative assignment—a substitute for the research paper, for instance. Since the 1990s, zine fests have been organized in Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York City, as well as in smaller locales throughout the country. Such fests reflect changes in independent publishing, including the financial nonviability of print; for instance, *Maximumrocknroll*—the longest regularly published punk print magazine since 1984—ended its run in 2019. In this era, writers and artists printing small runs for zine fests or limited distribution is more feasible than submission to alternative press or underground magazines that no longer exist or to digital platforms that do not offer compensation.

Furthermore, zines are now amassing in library collections and institutional archives, academic studies

and popular press anthologies republish images and passages alongside close readings and remembrances, and papers are scanned, compressed, reformatted, re-edited, uploaded, remixed, downloaded, and shared on public digital platforms—the conditions for encountering zines, then, are radically changed (Freeman 2010; Eichhorn 2010; Kumbier 2014). As zines are increasingly subject to archival and other forms of preservation, J. B. Brager and Jami Sailor in *Archiving the Underground* issue a useful caution. First published in 2011, *Archiving the Underground*, a zine exploring the tensions that accompany "the academic project of archiving and 'academicizing' the subcultural practices in which we [zinesters] participate," included interviews with several scholars and archivists (some based in universities and some not) such as Lisa Darms, archivist from the Fales Library at New York University; Adela Licona, author of *Zines in Third Space: Radical Cooperation and Borderlands Rhetoric*; Alison Piepmeier, author of *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism*; and Milo Miller from the nonaffiliated Queer Zine Archive Project. Brager and Sailor put to them questions about the codification of a canon, concerns about the misrepresentation and appropriation of zines and other underground cultures, and the relationship between academics, archivists, and artists and cultural producers. Together, Brager and Sailor write, "Like a whispered secret, the truths that zines contain may be ephemeral. They shift and change and from issue to issue, like the identities, situations and addresses of their creators. The danger in archiving individual issues in zines is that it cements a particular whisper. And the danger of publishing a book about zines is that you are projecting that whisper, far beyond its original and perhaps intended audience" (2011).

Zine study is often narrowly located in the moment of publication, stretched out through an insistently presentist premise decades later. Thus some zine makers are inscribing "DO NOT ARCHIVE" in their zines to combat both the institutionalization of their output as well as its temporal seizure. Such concerns also inform their digitization; Peipmeier, in her study of "girl zines," cites a former zinester who observes of her own efforts to take old zines offline: "Zines are tangible, are material. The writing is contained in an object that physically ages. Ink fades. Paper yellows. Holding a zine from even just ten years ago feels like holding a historical document. It's easier to place it, the writing inside, and the person who wrote it, in a particular moment in time, to contextualize it. Words appearing on a computer screen, even if they are date-stamped, seem the opposite: decontextualized, ahistorical, atemporal" (2009, 16). Also of concern is how zine collections are amassed (through donation or solicitation), how permissions—if any—are sought from the original creators, and how collections then come to institutionalize partial histories or then aim to identify and "correct" archival absences. As someone who is herself "collected" and who has an ambivalent-to-hostile relationship to being so, I have asked elsewhere, To what ends is the minor object—like the zine—recruited beyond what documentation, preservation, and circulation claim to do, especially as an object identified as the "correction" or resolution to a crisis of knowledge production (Nguyen 2015)? Janice Radway proposes that zines cannot be read only through their immediate moment and their "short-term futures," as if possessed of "half-lives"; instead, she pursues a longitudinal study of zines and their *afterlives*. Toward this end, she argues, "It will be critical to understand how zines functioned over time as aesthetic, rhetorical, and social technologies for making a range of things happen" (2011, 148).

There is still much to consider with regard to zine aesthetics (which vary widely, after all), their irregular serial and temporal rhythms (months, even years might

go by between issues), and institutional or informal collection and classification apart from or alongside other print media—zines, newsletters, flyers, and so on—as "disposable" forms. Their study might also inform genealogies of the aesthetic and ideological properties of authenticity, improvisation, spontaneity, and community (such as the fest or the network; Relyea 2013). Finally, these creative works might be hailed as a revolt against former modes of capitalist production (rationalization, standardization, systematization, and bureaucracy) while eliding or accepting as a matter of course the dangers implicit or impending in reorganizing or regularizing modes of short-term, more varied, and autonomous labor, even the labor of love.