

Why Zines Refuse to Die

Samizdat & Xerography

Jason Rodgers

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Why would someone continue to read and publish xeroxed zines two decades into the 21st century? Didn't the technocracy announce that this variety of underground publishing was superseded by the hyper-mediated cybernetic dream web?

Yet people still cut up words and images and glue them on paper. They stand in front of xerox machines to copy them, and then staple the pages together.

Zines are amateur publications created out of passion rather than for money. They can be about your local underground music or international tape trade scene. Or personal zines, focusing on diary/memoir style writing. Misanthropes publish politically incorrect rants. Anti-political anarchists publish fringe polemics. The rough edges of feminism have always played a role. Or, bookish, nerdy obsessions. These magazines are always self published, mostly with copy machines, but all sorts of artisan printing techniques are used.

Zines have their roots in science fiction fanzines of the 1930s. Hugo Gems-back, the founding editor of the first science fiction publication, *Amazing Stories*, was sick of receiving letters to the editor with nit-picky criticism. He began running return addresses with the ones he printed so fans could write each other instead of bothering him. And they did, giving birth to science fiction fanzines. Another major influence was the literary, so-called little magazines. These were more academic in tone, but there were definitely some wild ones in the bunch, such as Diane DiPrima and Amiri Baraka's *Floating Bear* and Fug band member Ed Sanders' *Fuck You: a Journal of the Arts*. In the 1960s, underground newspapers such as the *Fifth Estate*, *East Village Other*, and the *Berkeley Barb*, provided the informational structure for the counterculture revolution.

The most common period associated with zines is the 1980s and '90s. One of the major players then was Mike Gunderloy. In 1982, he began publishing a review zine called *Factsheet 5* with a policy of reviewing everything sent to him, including offensive and controversial titles.

He thought it would be interesting to get people from different subcultures talking, to connect the anarchists to the science fiction people, the avant-garde literary types to the punks. He hoped to create cross pollination, and he did!

Factsheet 5 grew to the point where Gunderloy quit his day job and worked full time reviewing zines. Or, more accurately, 80 hours a week. This is what eventually did him in. He was burnt out.

In 1990, he gave the zine to Henry Luce, who published only one issue, which was universally hated. The ownership then moved onto R. Seth Friedman, who was accused by some of trying to capitalize on the 1990s "zine explosion."

Gunderloy ended up donating all his thousands of zines to the New York State Library in Albany, New York. The collection is right in my neighborhood, so I spent a few years visiting it every Saturday. At the same time, I've been publishing review zines for years.

There has been a resurgence of zines in recent years, with increasing visibility for them in corporate backed craft/ DIY/marketspaces, like Etsy.com, that describes itself as “an e-commerce web-site focused on handmade or vintage items.” This is a recuperation of DIY, contextualizing it as just another gig in precarious capitalism.

In reality though, there hasn't been resurgence, because zines have never gone away. A lot of us have continued making them through the years. Ever so often, a mainstream publication notices the phenomenon and a reporter writes about it as if they've discovered some hidden corner of publishing.

To publish a zine in the 21st century is to make a conscious decision. They are a statement that there is a qualitative difference between print and digital media. It is a revolt against the social media that dominate our society

There are plenty of zinesters who have continued to publish from the 1980s. The Irreverend Suzy Crowbar still publishes the quirky *Popular Reality*. It grew out of a Yippies '80s offshoot, *The Shimo Underground*, characterized by an anarchic attitude, humor, and lots of feuds. These days it has more experimental literature, psychedelic art, and jokes. It was crucial in the development of post-left anarchy, but anarchism (with an ism) was always too ideological for Crowbar. She recently decided to become more mysterious, so you'll have to do some digging to get in contact.

There are a few publications that are networking zines. These focus on zine reviews in order to put zinesters in contact with each other. PJM publishes *Node Pajamo*. I publish one of the other primary review zines: *Asymmetrical Anti-Media*. It reviews zines, music, and mail art, but only includes publications with postal mailing addresses hoping to encourage people to send their zines to each other as trade.

Trade is a crucial aspect of the zine community, which unfortunately seems to be less common now publishers send copies of their zine to other zines that interest them, in hopes of receiving a trade back. I like to imagine that zine trades are a counter-economic activity that helps to bring back gift economy.

There are a number of zine projects that attempt to preserve and revive forgotten and forbidden historical heresies. Until recently, there was *Enemy Combatant*, that published extremist forms of anarchy focusing on egoist material, but also including illegalist, anti-civ, lunatic fringe, queer, and occult material. It forced a historical revision of the anarchist tradition, showing there has always been much more strangeness than would make a lot of anarchists comfortable. Unfortunately, they recently ceased publishing.

There are a number of other zines devoted to unearthing fringe and radical history mOnocle Lash Anti-Press focuses on obscure experimental, avant-garde, post-neo-absurdist, and utopian literature from the 19th century to the present.

No Quarter, published by David Tighe, started out as an exploration of early 20th century illegalist anarchists and pirates. Now, it has moved on to a more general radical history, with special interest in the fringe.

Untorelli Press produces wonderful zines focusing on individualist anarchy (of the insurrectionary and illegalist variety) and queer nihilism.

One might wonder why people who want to abolish history would want to preserve historical texts. There is a difference between what an anti-civ type dreams of and Winston Smith in 1984 throwing dissenting records into the memory hole. The Internet erases memory, so it is to the advantage of iconoclasts to attempt to preserve underground culture.

In his zine “How Do We Know?” Olchar Lindsann, of mOnode-Lash Anti-Press, writes, “No archivist I know expects digitized media to last more than another generation. This offers radical communities a unique opportunity: when the Internet falls, an event of even greater significance than the destruction of the Library of Alexandria, much of official culture will be wiped out of existence. Henceforth, the histories will be written on the basis of what was preserved in print.”

Another important advantage is that reading from print, as opposed to the screen, allows a much greater retention and ability to process the material being read. In his 2010 book, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, Nicholas Carr provides a compelling argument that the Internet encourages a form of reading that could be characterized as hyper-skimming. It discourages deep reading. This in turn makes it difficult to process the material being read into long term memory, which is necessary to process information.

If we want to communicate with people in meaningful ways it is crucial to use forms that are capable of doing so. This is particularly true if we are interested in engaging people in a manner that encourages them to think about ideas for themselves, rather than parrot ideological slogans.

Radicals often talk about reaching what authoritarian leftists call the masses. What a terrible way to think of communication, turning it into a quantitative measure directed towards who they perceive as a homogeneous blob.

Rather than aim at masses, a better goal is to reach people within a narrow ideological confine. The Internet encourages communication based on filter bubbles, a sort of echo chamber. Zines, on the other hand, have no difficulty connecting with others. It is as simple as leaving a zine somewhere. This can be someplace where our kindred spirits congregate, such as an infoshop or a record store. I have left thousands of zines in random or strategic places over the years.

Zines continue to exist and are even more devoted to creating, with fewer illusions of commercial success. They have the ability to resonate across time, to be important years or even decades from when they were published. I doubt that a tweet shares this power.

Jason Rodgers publishes a multitude of zines and flyers. *Asymmetrical Anti-Media* is a regularly appearing review zine. Other recent communiqués include “Affinity and the Passional Conspiracy” and “Command Lines, Control Lines.” They are available by mail: PO Box 10894, Albany, NY 12201.

Some sample zines among the hundreds

Node Pajamo (PJM, PO Box 2632, Bellingham, WA 98227) is one of the major review zines. PJM manages to be both snarky & good hearted in his reviews.

mOnocle Lash Anti-Press (c/o 01: char E. Lindsann, 2027 Mountain View Terrace SW, Roanoke, VA 24015) is another wonderful project that wants to preserve the strangest of the historical countercultural tradition. They publish zines, flyers, and TLPs (Tacky Little Pamphlets) of bleeding edge experimental poetics and historical pieces about the forgotten history of the avant-garde and counterculture.

Untorelli Press (c/o The Future, PO Box 3133, Bloomington, IN 47402) preserves wondrous anarchist texts. They put out a collection of egoist, illegalist Albert Libertard’s writing, reprinted John Moore’s *Book of Levelling* (ecstatic visionary primitivism) and a number of other zines focused on insurrection and queer nihilism.

Apio Ludd’s **My Own** attacks the shackles of civilization on the basis of egoism, using the weapons of poetics and humor. He does not want his address available on the Internet, so you are going to have to track it down.

Anchorage Anarchy (Bad Press, PO Box 230332, Anchorage, AK 995230332) is a long running individualist anarchist zine. It is market anarchist oriented, but anti-capitalist.

Cheap Toys (Giz c/o CI RA, 50, Rue Consolat 13001, Marseille, France) is a bilingual (French & English) anarcho-punk zine.

Mission Mini-Comix (1930 Mission St. Unit 102, San Francisco, CA 941033482) are the masters of the mini-comix format. Issues vary between political activist, dark surrealism, personal recollections about drug abuse, and queer humor.

Ear of Corn (Food, PO Box 6061, Saginaw, MI 48608) is a music zine that seemingly reviews every obscure metal and noise release put out by a micro-label composed of one weirdo.

Letterfounder (Answer Shirker Press, PO Box 392, Lewiston, ME 04243) Each issue brings together a selection of texts and images drawn from their mail.

Contents include poetry, collage, political polemics, and personal writing.

Paracosm Press (Po Box 3365, Bloomington, IN 474202) puts out a number of interesting zines critiquing how the decline of counterculture experimentation has pushed anarchists to fall back into activism, leftism, and moralism.

Clumsy (Agatha Thrash, PO Box 3426, Bloomington, IN 47402) is a personal oriented zine. The material that makes the biggest impact is her writing about abusive relationships.

Fiddler’s Green (PO Box 10146, Berkeley, CA 94709) subtitled “Art & Magic for Tea Drinking Anarchists, Convivial Conjurors & Closeted Optimists.” Produced by letter press and full of interesting writing on magic, spirituality, and speculative fiction.

The easiest way to order a zine is to wrap a couple of dollars cash in a note stating what you want to order, placing it in an envelope, affixing a stamp, and placing it in a mail box.

fifth Estate

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<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/406-spring-2020/why-zines-refuse-to-die>
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[fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fiftheestate.org)