

Guest Editorial

The Role of Academic Libraries in the Shifting Landscape of Zines

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What is a Zine?

In my workshops, I always start by asking this question. The students are often apprehensive and unsure, worried about saying the wrong thing. Some will say they have no idea; others will tentatively describe a folded pamphlet. In general, they tend to focus more on zines as objects, rather than the culture that surrounds them.

By contrast, when you ask a zinester¹ to describe the medium, they are likely to respond with “it’s whatever you want! As long as you’re making it yourself.” When pressed they might talk about photocopying, saddle-stitched staplers, folded mini-zines, etcetera—but stress that this isn’t what it’s about. It’s about sharing information, self-expression, and building community. Stephen Duncombe writes that when asked for a definition, his “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” (Duncombe, 2008, p. 6). However, as I’ve continued to teach teens and young adults, it has become clear that few people are being exposed to zines through this method.

In a recent workshop when asked “what are zines?” a student answered that they’re “like a real-life version of an Instagram carousel post.” Comments like this are not new. In the article “Zines Are Not Blogs,” zine librarian and researcher Jenna Freedman responds to similar comparisons, expressing some frustration that explaining zines was often met with “You mean like a blog?” (Freedman, 2005). These questions are emblematic of the cultural shift surrounding zines and book arts in general. Digital imitations of printed media have become the point of reference for many people, rather than the original physical inspiration. Beyond conflating digital and physical structures, more recently the curated nature of social media content tends to hide the messy fringes of zine culture. Zines have become less scribbled manifestos and more glossy, professionally printed periodicals, both online and at in-person zine fests (McDermott, 2018). There is nothing inherently wrong with this, reference points and general trends naturally shift because of evolving technologies. However, the modern landscape of zines and resulting perspectives color a patron’s impression of a library zine collection. For some this may be their first opportunity to get their hands on the “scrappy pile of pamphlets” Duncombe describes. How can we make that experience powerful? What collection practices do justice to the rich history of zines, the artists who make them, and the people who read them?

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Zines as a Radical Act: Then and Now

Zines are a medium that grew out of a need to speak and be heard. While the first works to use the name “zine” were science fiction fanzines of the 1930s, the self-publishing revolution was kicked into high gear with the widespread adoption of photocopiers in the 1970s and 80s (Joseph & Sawyer, 2023). With the means of production in the hands of the people, it became possible to not just speak your mind but shout it to whoever would listen. Zines acted as way to share information and perspectives that mainstream culture was either uninterested in or unwilling to acknowledge. For those on the fringes of society, zines were a safe space to be themselves. Zinester, design professor, and activist Tad Hirsch writes: “While zines can be self-important, pretentious, and, well, dull, they can also be thought-provoking, emotionally fulfilling, and response-generating. They can lead to a community of creative, intelligent people in open discussion, without the intervention of commercialism or any real institutionalism” (Duncombe, 2008, p. 206). In the 1970s-90s, zines were radical because of their content: their countercultural ideals, rejection of authority, and often explicit nature. And while this is still true of modern zines, the option to post these same ideas on the internet recontextualizes the choice to print them on paper.

The internet took the spirit of zines, that “anyone with anything to say can say it to anyone in the world” and made it an accessible reality (Bleyer, 2004, p. 55). The same information could be shared in a folded mini-zine or on personal homepage, but the latter can be accessed by anyone regardless of location, on the same machine where you can read international news. In this way, the blank URL bar has proven to be the “great cultural equalizer” (Bleyer, 2004, p. 57). Twenty-one years since these quotes were published, the rise of social media amplified this phenomenon beyond expectation. Quantifiably social media platforms are a more effective means of communication than passing out your stapled booklets—and yet, people still make zines.

In the first edition of *Notes from Underground*, Duncombe offered that the future of the medium could be summarized in “one word: computers.” He predicted that while they wouldn’t become completely obsolete, that “zines on the internet are the likely successor to paper” (1997, p. 197). In the new afterword “Do Zines Still Matter?” included in the second edition, he reconsiders this prediction, arguing that while the choice to print physical zines is in some ways a nostalgic one, that zines have always been about more than their content (2008). The internet has made it easier to access zines, and while digital zine archives can be incredibly valuable², these facsimiles cannot replace the experience of holding a zine in your hand. There is a level of intimacy that cannot be replicated online, an almost mystical sensation of closeness (Piepmeier, 2008; Watson & Bennett, 2021; Kauffman, 2018). A zine reader interviewed by Watson and Bennett addresses this, saying: “I don’t think I’ve ever read a full zine digitally, and I’m not sure that I ever will... I think digital sharing of zines is a really great way to get zines to more people... [but] I don’t feel that zines work in the same way digitally as they do in printed form, but it is something as a reader that I definitely feel quite strongly that I can’t get the same experience from reading a zine on a screen that I can in printed form” (2021, p. 13).

This idea is vital to understanding why, despite everything, people make the conscious choice to put their work on paper. In this age where you can publish whatever you want in an instant for the world to see, the decision to make a physical zine becomes a radical act. It is a call for connection, it satisfies an urge for thoughts to be made tangible. This has never

been more relevant than in the present moment, when users are complaining that Instagram, Facebook, and X (formally Twitter) have devolved into AI, far right political extremism, and horrific news stories. Policies such as allowing artists' work to be scraped to train generative AI, or most recently Meta ending third-party fact checking, has resulted in many artists leaving these platforms. Some have headed to alternative platforms like Bluesky, while others question returning to social media at all (Tenbarga, 2025). It feels like we might be entering a new era, one being defined as we speak. What is clear is that people crave community — something that zines have always excelled at making. In her foundational article "Why Zines Matter: Materiality and the Creation of Embodied Community" Alison Piepmeier writes that "In a world where more and more of us spend all day at our computers, zines reconnect us to our bodies and to other human beings" (2008). Seventeen years later, with computers even more intertwined in daily life, we can consider this sentiment and make the revolutionary choice to consider ourselves.

The Library as a Source of Inspiration: Building Cycles of Creativity

At least 170 zine libraries and collections³ exist across the US, demonstrating growing interest in the medium. The question becomes: when developing or maintaining a zine collection, especially in a larger academic institution, what are the priorities and best practices? And beyond this, how can a zine collection go beyond pamphlets on shelves, and become a tool for motivating students to grow creatively? Academic libraries specifically have the opportunity to create a cycle of creation and inspiration, aided by their standing within existing institutions. A possible path:

1. Academic libraries legitimize zines as a source for research in the eyes of library patrons through the collection's context in a larger institution.
2. The library uses that perception of legitimacy to encourage patrons to create their own zines, either through programming or independently.
3. The library further acknowledges and incentivizes this creation by offering opportunities for student work to be included in the collection.
4. Patrons become contributors, inspire other patrons, and communities continue to grow.

This is just one, simplified version of how this could look. The truth would be messier, like zines themselves. A major consideration here is that making zines out of a perceived legitimacy is counter to their essence. The point being that anyone can make a zine, regardless of status, race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, and education level. The idea of "legitimacy" here is in response to shifting cultures surrounding zines, and the changing impression of what a "typical zine" is.

In recent years, there has been a shift in quality of the archetypal zine, with the line between "zine" and "art book" becoming a bit murky. At fests you'll see fewer perzines⁴ and classic photocopied minizines, and more professionally printed work (McDermott, 2018). This can range from periodicals reminiscent of traditional glossy magazines, to risograph⁵ printed work, to elaborate popup books. Returning to the idea that creating physical media in 2025 is a deliberate choice, it makes sense that artists who make that choice care deeply about the materiality and aesthetic of their work. These works are still zines, and in some cases unique printing techniques and constructions can be a source of inspiration to potential, emerging, or established zinesters. However, the overall trend towards refined and curated work has the

effect of making the medium seem more professional and less attainable. Some zinesters have pushed back against this shift, creating events such as Dear Diary Zine Fest (DDZF). DDZF was founded in 2018 in response to feeling discouraged by the commercial nature of modern zine fests, and craving space specifically for perzines. The inaugural event had exhibitors from all over North America, some travelling internationally or cross-country to attend, indicating that this gap had been felt in the larger zine community (McDermott, 2018).

The impact of this shift also effects people less familiar with zine culture. When I speak to students about making their own zines, they seem intimidated. They say: "I'm not an artist, I wouldn't know what to do." Alternatively, they come up with a grand plan for what is effectively a 60+ page book. Both responses come from perceiving zines as this huge thing that requires a massive investment of time, and while that can be true, it doesn't have to be. Collecting policies that include scrappier, unassuming zines show students that you don't need to be a great artist to make a zine. In this case, to "legitimize" these works is to show that anyone can make something worthy of consideration.

It is also important to consider zine authors' wishes when developing these collection policies. In an anonymous survey⁶ conducted from December 2015 through August 2016, zinesters rated their level of comfort with their work being included in different types of libraries. Notably participants responded more negatively to being included in libraries "closed to a specific academic community" (9.3% extremely non preferable, 23.3% non preferable, 49.3% neutral, 9.3% preferable, 8.6% extremely preferable) versus public libraries (0.6% extremely non preferable, 0% non preferable, 16% neutral, 22% preferable, 61.3% extremely preferable) (Hays, 2018, p. 67). This feeling does not apply to otherwise using zines in academic settings. Attitudes about being included in a lesson plan for a professor's class (70.5% extremely preferable or preferable, 27.2% neutral) or their zine being used as a part of academic research (66.2% extremely preferable or preferable, 33% neutral) were generally positive (p. 68).

These findings indicate that access is very important to zinesters, which makes sense as it is a medium founded on democratization of information. Zines have a history of being anti-establishment, it is natural for there to be some tension between their authors and academic institutions. Given this context, asking zinesters for permission before acquiring their materials is paramount for academic librarians. Zines are personal, they're raw, they're unfiltered, that is what makes them powerful. But it also makes the author vulnerable if their words are removed from their anticipated context (Hays, 2018). In 2015 the Zine Librarian Interest Group published "Zine Librarians Code of Ethics," a guide to navigating these aspects of collection development, access, and use. By showing the community respect and grace, academic libraries can demonstrate their commitment to zine culture, and in turn inspire their users. Duncombe writes, "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" (2008, p. 210). There is a magic to holding a zine in your hands, only to be suddenly struck with inspiration to create. Zine libraries have the opportunity to bring this experience to all who visit, and therein lies their power.

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Notes

1. Term for a person who makes zines.

2. For example, Queer Zine Archive Project (established in 2003) has a significant portion of their collection available for free online. This includes many historically significant zines by LGBTQ+ creators, creating a valuable resource for research and education, especially for those who would otherwise not have access to work of this nature.

3. Counted from the list of zine libraries collected by Barnard College (<https://zines.barnard.edu/zine-libraries>).

4. Portmanteau of “personal zine,” a zine written about personal experience, opinions, and emotions.

5. Risograph (or riso) is a brand of digital duplicators manufactured in Japan. They print at high speeds in vivid colors by pushing ink through a stencil wrapped around a color drum. The process is often described as a “cross between photocopying and screen printing.” Riso has grown in popularity significantly over the past ten years, with over 300 print shops in the US and 900 internationally according to the “Atlas of Modern Risography” (<https://www.stencil.wiki/atlas>).

6. Participants had to be older than 18 and had to self-identify as zine writers. Survey was promoted through online zine communities and in person zine fests. Number of responders per question ranges from 110-150 (Hays, 2018).