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Part of the panel Unexpected Legacy Collections: progressive collection policies and practices for zines, minicomics, and alternative presses.

Note: Due to technical limitations of PDF format and to original time constraints, this paper and the accompanying slideshow have been modified from the original presentation.

My talk centers on zines but also on artists’ publishing in general. I also like the phrase “stackable ephemera,” which I heard yesterday from Darin Murphy, Librarian at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. I’m not a stickler for definitions, which are nearly impossible to come by anyway. To simplify communication, I’ll use “zine” to refer to many inexpensive, self-published or small press materials.

Zines have been institutionalized in higher education, yet they remain elusive. Still, there is evidence that zines are being made and studied. Faculty are creating new knowledge in various disciplines (see my Zine Studies Fanzine). There are historical zine collections, typically those being studied, often formed by large gifts. Such collections are unique and valuable, but we need contemporary zine collections, too. Waiting for gift donations means denying students and scholars access to contemporary publications and, to some extent, relying on others to shape our library collections.

Because funds are typically limited in academic libraries, collaborative collection development is smart. Long Island University’s Artists’ Book collection, for example, was developed with a policy that included collaboration among LIU Brooklyn, Pratt Institute, and Brooklyn Museum, according to Constance Woo, former Dean at Long Island University Brooklyn library. Similar arrangements can be made for developing zine collections. The Artists’ Book collection at LIU Brooklyn could be expanded to include zines, and the collection could focus on health in general, as well as athletics and Brooklyn, reflecting student interest and programs of study. Brooklyn
College has a new zine collection, so LIU Brooklyn could coordinate collection development with Alycia Sellie, the zine librarian there.

Based on anecdotal conversation and email exchanges, I’ve found that zines are firmly placed in higher education curricula. Zines are being taught to classes—by both librarians and faculty. Most instruction seems to be in social science, library science, and art, architecture, and design. Art department zine activity is of special interest to us librarians. Art zines, which often incorporate writing and research, provide a good opportunity to embed art and design across disciplines. Furthermore, the fine line between “zine” and “art zine” encourages interdisciplinary study.

Zines in the curricula provide opportunities and alternatives: we can collaborate outside the library and enrich our own work experiences when we provide instruction that is not centered on finding a peer-reviewed article in Proquest Databases. Wherever zines live in academic libraries, they market and even mark the library as a place to visit—and scholarship and exhibitions that are produced from zine and other special collections create measurable value for the library and institution. Educators and librarians are always talking about “student-centered” libraries, and acquiring unique materials like artists’ zines is one way we can appeal—not to mention teach and encourage learning. The format of indie publications excites students and the possibility of exchange or self-distribution interests them. Reflecting current trends in higher education, DIY and small press provide opportunities to cross disciplines, invigorate a subject, and startle students into attention. Zines provide both a low tech (print form) and high tech experimental learning environment. (Zine makers often do research on the Internet and use desktop publishing to some extent in the creative process, and some zines are made available as PDF files on the free Internet.)

I want to emphasize, though, that I am not necessarily advocating for a discrete artists’ zine collection. Zines could be part of an artists’ book collection—as a genre—or part of a zine or alternative press special collection—or even part of a magazine collection. Zines could be introduced to classroom discussions about technology (as someone reminded me yesterday, print is a technology), libraries and archives, popular and alternative culture, history, communication, music, and more. For most cultural creatives and many college students in general, any instruction with alternative materials is interesting if not compelling. Beyond instructional

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purposes—in which a teacher introduces zine specimens to students on the spot and perhaps interprets them—zine collections should be cataloged in libraries for the same reason we catalog books: to enable patrons to connect themselves with the material.

Just last week I met with a colleague at LIU Brooklyn who is frustrated with undergraduates being required to read and cite peer-reviewed journal articles in research papers. She expressed interest in having students work with the zine form in their research process. The professor told her students to feel free to handwrite on their research paper, insert drawings or poems, and paste in photos or sections from a magazine article. Zine formats enable students to hack or expand the research paper format. Of course students have to produce formal research papers at some point, but first and second year courses in particular are solid candidates for experimentation. Instead of having students research historical New York Times articles, why not have them read and look at contemporary, alternative primary sources?

Student-made zines could become part of a permanent, special collection in a library. Alycia Sellie is doing this at Brooklyn College. In 2011, I was part of an NEH grant-writing team at the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) in New York City—working on a new 2-year college humanities grant. I influenced the Associate Dean of Academic Affairs, who became enthusiastic about having students make zines in different humanities courses and also about archiving them in print or digital formats. (Some of this might have been due to his own nostalgia over zines.) What really won him over, though, was putting zines in his hands during meetings as well as presenting him with scholarly articles about them. We ran out of time to submit the grant, but I learned about how receptive higher education administrators might be to zines.

I worked with the book artist Esther Smith at BMCC for the last few years teaching historical and contemporary zine culture, focusing on New York City, to her art and design students, who tended to be commuters, New Yorkers, & international students. Most were not pursuing art as a major (but were fulfilling a general education requirement), but the sessions might have influenced them to consider studying visual art, design, or literature; in any case they learned something new about art, youth culture, alternative politics, and communication.
Many librarians are familiar with the look and feel of zines in general, and also realize that zines as we know them grew out of the fanzine subcultures, particularly science fiction fandom of the 1930’s. There is a famous page from the 1970’s punk zine *Sideburns*, illustrating the 3 guitar chords necessary to “go start a band.” A punk zine manifesto could have been, “Here are the 3 things you need: pen, paper, and photocopier. Now go make a zine.” The 21st Century artist’s version of zine making is more complicated and might be represented by something like, “Here is a computer, here is a sketchbook, and here is the Cloud,” figure it out.

My slideshow provides detailed information about the distinctions among zines, art zines, art magazines, and artists’ books (as does my *Art Documentation* article about art zines). Raymond Pettibon, who started his career illustrating album covers and flyers for hardcore bands, is a major artist who continues to create affordable art, in the spirit of the democratic multiple. His *The Major Arteries* zine costs only $10, but because it is by Pettibon, the store it was made for, Ooga Booga, limits purchase to one per person. It’s worth noting, too, that many zines are made by designers, especially graphic designers, and their work is often overlooked in zine discussions and collections. What about artist’s books? An inexpensive book made by Rita Ackermann or Chris Johanson might be acquired for an artists’ book collection, but an equally excellent inexpensive book made by a little known artist may be ignored because it doesn’t cost enough to seem important.

I’m particularly interested in independent art magazines, which often resemble art zines. Many contemporary independent magazines display the same noncommercial spirit that informs contemporary art zine-making practice: a sense of experimentation and freedom; the result of research; facilitation and performance; purposeful obscurity; resistance to categorization; and nods to art history. For examples, despite heavy advertising (favorable for many students, in fact), *Pop* magazine’s fall 2010 issue is rich with unique content, including a section art directed by Takashi Murakami, including Cindy Sherman’s *Bookzine*, a zine inserted in the magazine. The photo zine includes photographs of Sherman wearing Chanel couture, spanning several decades. It is only available as a *Pop* magazine insert. This magazine art project was expanded into a large piece, which is included in Sherman’s 2012 MoMA retrospective. Further blurring the line between magazine and zine, many zines are periodicals. *KnitKnit*, an artist’s zine...
produced by Sabrina Gschwandtner, explored the intersection of traditional craft and contemporary art.

Art magazines often get the short shrift in academic libraries, especially now that zines are trending in higher education. Mostly absent from academic libraries and minimally represented in others, such magazines may be unavailable for future study by students and scholars. (Right now, the MoMA is exhibiting “Millennium Magazines,” and the MoMA website includes rich information about scores of outstanding visual arts magazines and zines.) Exceptional magazines, like zines, should be collected for study despite the fact that many are difficult to acquire and lack indexing. Browsing—and anticipated future study—could be reason enough to collect. Students can even be involved in the magazine selection process. Involving students in such a way is practicing student-centered librarianship. At Pratt Institute Library in Brooklyn, we purchased or acquired sample copies of numerous periodicals and displayed them together. We taped comment cards in the back and asked students to provide detailed feedback. After a few months, we read the comments and considered them in our periodicals selection process.

Art, architecture, and design students in particular, should know about zine practices. Zines can be works of art, materials in art, or part of an artist’s practice. Nick Relph produced American Photography #1 (subsequent numbers have not yet appeared), a zine sold in conjunction with the group exhibition “The Page,” which included work by the artist. Each page in the zine is a flawed Google Book scan. The Holster art collective participated at the NYC Zine Fest in 2009 and made zines on demand. To paraphrase the Holster: the [on demand] exhibit includes the mechanics of production, emphasizing the zine’s simplicity while showcasing its production as a performative act. This is a quote: “The zine one receives at the end is an object imbued with care and love, something not typically found in other staple bound collections of paper.” This on-demand publishing would be great in the classroom or library and could be interdisciplinary.

Zines are increasingly subjects of or parts of exhibitions. They appear as catalogs or takeaways, too. Curated by Elias Redstone, the “Archizines” exhibition, a showcase of new architecture fanzines, journals and magazines from around the world, originated at the Architectural Association School of Architecture (2011) in London and is currently on view at the Storefront for Art and Architecture in New York City. The National Art Library at the Victoria & Albert

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Museum has acquired the complete Archizines collection. Emily Larned curated “Wanna Trade? (partial) snapshot of a 90’s zine network,” a small, historical zine exhibition at Asheville Bookworks last year. The zines in the show were all traded with the curator’s zines as well as with at least two other zines included in the exhibit. The emphasis was on a particular zine community and its gift economy. The renowned artist Amy Sillman continues to produce zines for her exhibitions. Her exhibit at Sikkema Jenkins Gallery in 2010, “Transformer—or how many lightbulbs does it take to change a painting?” included the zine, The O-G, vol. 3.

There are numerous online resources for purchasing art, architecture, & design zines and other inexpensive artists’ publications, which often sell out quickly. Even if libraries are not collecting, people are. These online sellers, which are listed in my slideshow, are often the only sources of authoritative bibliographic information about zines and other artists’ publications.

In his 1991 short comic “Art School Confidential” Daniel Clowes reveals that at least one Pratt Institute faculty member criticized him for wanting to draw comics in art school. It seems that zines, along with comics and graphic novels, have come a long way in the last 20 years. I won’t argue that a random zine by a recent art-school graduate is a better teaching tool than Alison Bechdel’s superlative Fun Home, but I would argue that zines as a collection, especially, can and increasingly do provide unique opportunities for instruction in a variety of disciplines and professions. What seems of interest to students is the zine author’s status (student, nonprofessional), the format (print, designed), and the subject(s) (any person’s life, science, politics, fandom, hobbies, anything). At the very least, students respond positively to the idea of their own work being of interest to others (besides their professors, who grade it) and being collected by their library. My Clowes Pratt example points to conservatism by faculty and educators in the past. We have an additional problem now, and I’m paraphrasing Marshall Weber, of various government and corporate interests working to influence, regulate, and proscribe the curricula in educational institutions. One way we can resist is by acquiring and

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preserving local materials, alternative media, small press, and self-published zines and magazines.

Librarians can use academic literature to demonstrate the value of independent collections for students and faculty. College is about self-actualization and growth as well as programs of education. Attrition rates in the United States are high, and administrators may consider any proposals or initiatives—like establishing zine collections or enriching artists’ book collections—that might help students persist. If the proposal is affordable, even better. Zine collections introduce students to print and visual culture and create opportunities for engagement, creativity, thinking, and making; and zine study recognizes the value of networks, subcultures, and fandom. Zine study also validates life stories and, importantly, the life stories of the young individual: teenagers, college students, and emerging artists and designers.

Books, Magazines, and Articles from Zine Studies Fanzine, distributed at session on March 31, 2012


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Trethewey, Laura. "Zine vs. art: as artist books morph into art zines, our hero the zine gets a new aesthetic and higher sticker price to match. Is there room in the zine world for both the low-price, cut-and-paste zine and these glossy new commodities?" *Broken Pencil* Jan. 2012: 13-16.


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