

Imperfect Bound

Zines, Materiality, and the Question of Preserving Ephemera

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Introduction: What (or Where) Are Zines?

It seems unlikely that creators of early zines – the disenchanting punks, freaks, and outspoken critics of the 1980's – could have imagined that their cheap and dirty style, born largely out of frustration with mainstream taste-culture, would one day be the hallmark of “DIY Chic” – viewed not as a condemnation of consumerism but as an easily co-opted and reproduced aesthetic. Once the acme of countercultural self-expression, zines have since proven to have a certain mass appeal, and their signature style can be easily appropriated to lend mainstream culture and advertising much-sought-after marketable “street cred”. In a recent case discussed on independent media spokesman Jim Munroe's website *No Media Kings*, an Ontario youth brought a lawsuit against an advertising firm hired by Coca-Cola. The television ad the firm created rather unabashedly lifted the style of *The Winking Circle*, a “DVD zine” made by a group of Ontario kids attempting to “eccentrify their lives” (Munroe), even going so far as to borrow certain images almost directly from the original video. Popular culture has witnessed of late a similar “mainstreaming” of zine culture, often to the dismay of those deeply invested in the scene. The idea of zine preservation, then, is more than a means of conserving memorabilia of an interesting period in the history of popular communication – it is a matter of protecting a cultural form whose very materiality is both its strength and its potential limitation.

The term “zine” tells us as little about the object in question itself as does the term “new media”; both categories are necessarily broad and vague, working to describe a loose grouping of materials (or media) that are not satisfactorily articulated under any other heading. Thus, zine preservation, falling under the larger designation of new media preservation, presents a double abstraction. Just as a preservation strategy for a new media artwork must take into account not only the work’s material components but some notion of what constitutes the artwork itself (that is to say, some attempt to theorize the work’s “meaning” and how to best conserve it), zine preservation is not only a matter of holding onto the paper, toner and binding that make up the majority of zines, but to consider issues of access, circulation, and institutionalization in regard to keeping the work viable. This study will consider some of the strategies involved in preserving zines, and how these strategies contribute to a working definition of that category itself. As electronic or online publishing becomes the *lingua franca* of independent and alternative media, the question of the artifact, the “thingness” of zines, becomes a locus through which to consider how, and why, zines are to be preserved. Further, there are theoretical presuppositions about what (or where) zines are that lie behind any preservation strategy; making these presuppositions visible is a necessary part of constructing a viable, supple approach. I will attempt to tease out some of the assumptions behind various approaches taken to zine preservation, and what they might indicate about zine culture itself, what of it may be worth preserving, and how this might be done. In addition to both academic and popular writings on zine culture and preservation, I will draw on my own experience as a founding member of Montreal’s Bibliograph/e Zine Library particularly, as this

experience contributes to an understanding of social and economic factors affecting zine preservation.

A Minor Media

Any approach to zine preservation must make some attempt to define and classify zines, not simply in terms of the works themselves, but also their relationships with the community they come from (and in many cases hope to affect or influence). The popular discourse around zines tends to use terms like “underground” and “counterculture”; while these notions are often useful terms to describe zine culture, especially when speaking of origins, history, and social uses, they have lately become unstable, and can be prescriptive as well as descriptive. Rather than purely illustrating “where” zines are (i.e. they are “underground”), these ideas have become rather culturally weighted, and are often used as scales to measure a work’s authenticity within a narrow definition of DIY culture. But can we really describe zines as strictly countercultural when several public libraries, such as Albany’s, house large collections of them, or when they appear as part of the curriculum in a university or secondary school course? Although independence from corporate influence and a DIY ethos are important features of zine-making and study, these fairly recent developments in “mainstreaming” should not be seen as degradations of the purity of zine culture; they ought to be regarded as moments on a continuum of independent media development, instead of being viewed through the somewhat paralyzing binary optic of under- and aboveground. I would like to suggest an alternate mode of viewing, which is based on Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of minor literature as outlined in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986).

Applying the definition of “minor media” to zines allows many of the salient features of zine culture to be retained without the implicit value judgment that lies within popular conceptions of the underground. Here I will outline the most relevant elements of Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of minor literature, the consideration of which will dovetail nicely with aspects of zine culture and communities, helping to draw out a flexible, non-totalizing definition of zines.

Deleuze and Guattari are helpful in their careful enumeration of the three defining characteristics of minor literature. For the most part they correspond to zine culture with a high degree of transparency, and with the aid of a few examples, it should be clear how the notion of a “minor media” is a very useful lens through which to consider how zines work.

Deleuze and Guattari’s first characteristic of minor literature describes how the language it employs is “affected with a high degree of deterritorialization,” (16). This might at first seem contradictory to a general sense of the zine ethos, which is often deeply bound up in the actions, locales, and concerns of local communities, as opposed to the medium of the internet, for instance, which fosters a broader, more global (deterritorialized) consciousness. However, *deterritorialization* refers not simply to a wandering, displaced identity, but to what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as “the impossibility of writing” and “the impossibility of not writing” (16) delimited by the status of the writer (and his or her identity) within a larger social context. Deleuze and Guattari speak of this possible impossibility in terms of Kafka as a Czech Jew writing in German: “Kafka marks the impasse that bars access to writing for the Jews of Prague and turns their literature into something impossible – the impossibility of not writing, the

impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing otherwise,” (16). Here we might draw a parallel with zine writers, whose non-canonic writing does not contribute to a sense of national identity, or even a sense of personal identity with reference to the nation, but rather uses the language of the majority to articulate a politics of displacement, smallness, and minority. According to Melissa Deem (525), minor literatures make the language of the majority “stutter”; such is the effect of zines like *Bikini Kill*, which incorporate kitsch images of womanhood from the 1950’s advertising lexicon in jarring contrast with words like “rape” or “slut” in the interest of interpolating popular ideas of femininity in the public sphere. This brings us to Deleuze and Guattari’s next feature:

(2) The second characteristic of minor literatures is that everything in them is political. In major literatures, in contrast, the individual concern (familial, marital, and so on) joins with other no less individual concerns, the social milieu serving as a mere environment or a background... Minor literature is completely different; its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it. (17)

Superficially, the idea that “everything in a minor literature is political” relates quite closely to zines, a large number of which deal with explicitly political subjects, such as anarchy and anarchism, class revolt, gentrification, police brutality, and the rights of workers, women, gays and lesbians, and people of colour. There is a second category of zines that operate with a less overtly activist bent but are still political in nature; these are personal zines (often called “perzines”) that deal with political issues on the level of the individual rather than the social group. A few examples are *Doris*, whose author writes about surviving abuse, incest, and gang violence, *Tim Tum*, which deals with transgender identity and Judaism, and *Fuzzy Heads Are Better*, a personal narrative that discusses

racism, queer identity, and class politics (alongside art school and crushes). These works fall more along the lines of life-narratives or journal confessions than political tracts, but both categories seem to be driven by the idea that (1) zines can inform others about important social and political issues, and (2) this sharing of information helps to build community, alleviate feelings of alienation and isolation for both the creator and the audience, and hopefully foment positive social change from within the “cramped space” of a minor media.

There are many zines, however, that contain no trace of political content, but can nonetheless be identified under Deleuze and Guattari’s rubric. Once the idea that “the personal is political” is taken to be a linchpin of zine culture, it becomes clear that the production of zines is in itself political. The act of creating a work without any financial motivation (any zine-maker will testify to the fact that “zines are a great big hole into which you throw your money”¹), from materials that are cheap, commonplace, and often illicitly come by (many zine-makers are experts at scamming photocopies from big-box stores), is a de facto critique of a materialist consumer culture, and also a rail against a taste culture that tends to esteem high production value. Further than that, zine-making (with its absence of editors, critics, and concerns for marketability) assumes as implicit the idea that everyone’s voice has value, and factors such as money, status, and even talent are not limiting to one’s ability to create a zine. The story that “vibrates within” each work, whether it is about feminism or foozeball, is not only about that individual but about their claiming a space from which to speak, and the radical nature of such a

¹ From a personal conversation with Hal Niedzevecki, founder of Broken Pencil and author of several zines and small-press publications.

position-taking to extend beyond the scope of the individual into the social sphere. This point brings us neatly to Deleuze and Guattari's third element:

(3) The third characteristic of minor literature is that in it everything takes on a collective value. Indeed, precisely because talent isn't abundant in a minor literature, there are no possibilities for an individual enunciation that would belong to this or that "master" and that could be separated from a collective enunciation. Indeed, scarcity of talent is in fact beneficial and allows the conception of something other than a literature of masters; what each author says individually already constitutes a common action, and what he or she says or does is necessarily political, even if others aren't in agreement. ...It is literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism; and if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility. (17)

This definition recalls the slogan "no gods, no masters", a rallying cry for counterculture disciples from anarchists to crust-punks (and also the title of a zine by David Lester); in relation to zine culture specifically, it speaks to the generally populist form that zine fandom takes. Although certain zine writers like Al Burian, Aaron Cometbus, and Pagan Kennedy have achieved considerable fame (if "fame" is taken to be something quantifiable, here determined through having a book professionally published, rather than self-published), for the majority the goal is not individual distinction, and there are very few institutions within zine culture that officially recognize exceptional talent and dedication (unlike the awards and fellowships that are a given aspect of book and magazine culture). The ability to "express another possible community" is directly contingent on the careful maintenance of a populist ethos, where an "active solidarity" is committed to forging an alternative discursive space, free from market-driven interests.

I hope this rather lengthy examination has helped not only to locate zines along a cultural continuum, but to begin to build a case for their preservation, which I will

continue to elaborate below. It also brings to the forefront some of the biggest concerns of zine preservation, which will naturally affect the success of any preservation strategy.

We're Little But We're Small: A Case Study of Bibliograph/e

Here I will present a short outline of the Bibliograph/e Zine Library – its history, mandate, and some of the driving forces behind it – in order to lay out some possible points of relevance for a study of preservation practices. The Bibliograph/e Zine Library began in February of 2005 as a project to collect, archive, and provide public access to independent bookworks created outside the mainstream. Each of the four co-founders had some experience in the world of independent media, as writers, visual artists, self-publishers, community radio members, volunteers with other independent media initiatives such as Projet MOBILIVRE/BOOKMOBILE Project, and general fans of book culture. Our sense was that independent media had the potential to effect positive change within the public sphere, and that, given the current climate of increasing corporate influence found in mainstream media outlets, it was extremely important to nurture a critical approach to media and to encourage people to think of themselves as potential media producers and not just consumers. In addition, we each had a very deep-seated personal love for independent bookworks, and thus together had garnered a very large collection of them, and felt that such a body of work should be doing something other than collecting dust in our bedrooms. We hoped that by creating a community resource based around zines, we would be fostering a productive relationship between bookmakers and the public, and that by taking zines seriously, as something worth holding onto, we would also be promoting an approach to media that identified and valued individuals as potential active members of a community, rather than passive absorbers of information.

In our call for submissions, we stated that we were seeking artist books, comics, and zines to be archived in our collection and made accessible to the public. We deliberately opted not to jury the works in order to encourage as broad a collection as possible; the BOOKMOBILE Project, which I had worked with previously, had a rigorous selection process to determine which books would be part of the yearly collection, based mainly on characteristics like innovative approach to the idea of a book, formal experimentation, lack of mainstream distribution, and relevance to a particular community or subculture. Very text-heavy books, poorly-executed books, or books of very limited public interest or artistic merit did not usually make it past the selection committee. While this approach made sense considering the Bookmobile's limited space (the books are housed in an Airstream trailer which tours across North America), at Bibliograph/e it was determined that our mandate would be more about preservation and access than about maintaining a high calibre of work. Since our call for submissions in early 2005, we have amassed over 500 bookworks, some donated by the creators themselves, and others from longtime zine collectors looking to free up some closet space, who donated stacks of bookworks to which they no longer felt any strong attachment. This methodology resulted in a rather eclectic collection, with books ranging from hand-bound offset-printed chapbooks to photocopied and stapled zines to artist works that challenge the category of "book" itself, such as collections of postcards or folding fans inscribed with drawings and text. Indeed, the collection can be viewed as something of a microcosm of zine culture itself, in its broad, unsophisticated, and democratic scope.

As of this writing in April of 2006, Bibliograph/e exists as an archive and reading room located in the corner of a café. Books are not lent out and can only be read on-site, due to the inherent difficulty in replacing zines if they are lost or damaged. There is a paper catalogue listing the works and their authors, but no online database exists, and zines are not cross-referenced by subject, so they can only be searched physically, by a dedicated, patient reader. We consider the library to be a work in progress that will hopefully remain structurally flexible enough to change with the demands of time. As we approach the one-year anniversary of the library's opening, the idea of "zine preservation" has gone from being an abstraction to a weighted consideration.

No More White Gloves: The Double-Edged Sword of Preservation

One of the books donated to Bibliograph/e was an original artist work, a three-dimensional fold-out collage book called *Niente Zuccherò*. In the letter that accompanied the book, artist/author Larry Thomas wrote "I have been making artist books for several years. They usually sell for about \$400 US. I am donating this book to your library, which you may display on the condition that it NOT be handled using white gloves." This sentiment succinctly encapsulates one of the major double-edged swords of zine preservation – the divide between preservation and accessibility. Zines can be treated as art objects, rare books, or manuscripts, and their preservation handed over to museums, library rare books departments, or galleries, all of which have at least some resources, processes, and funding to incorporate the preservation of zines. In this model, actually handling the zines in order to read them, thereby exposing them to oil from fingertips, potential food and moisture damage, and stress on fragile bindings, becomes counterproductive to the conservationist goal of the institution. Access becomes

somewhat restricted, and zines begin to resemble things to be looked at and aesthetically admired, but not actually read or used as resources. The opposite end of the spectrum is the decentralized individualistic approach, where zines are viewed as a kind of currency, meant to be read and re-read, photocopied, traded, mailed, carried in backpacks, and occasionally left on the bus, perhaps to be discovered by another party. In this model there is a much higher quotient of actual use occurring, but the likelihood of the works becoming damaged, lost, and otherwise inaccessible is also considerably elevated. So on which side is it better to err? There is obviously no simple answer to this question, but its very consideration requires an articulation of what the most important features of zines (and thus what aspect of them needs to be preserved) might be. Keeping in mind the notion of a “minor media”, I will consider some of these key features below.

The adjective most often used to describe zines in the context of preservation is “ephemeral”, and *ephemera* is in fact the library term used to describe occasional publications, one-off or small-run imprints and periodicals, and other zine-like materials (Cvetkovich 243). Zines are not generally made to last physically, often being printed on cheap, acidic paper with quick-to-fade ink and fragile binding, or no binding at all. Beyond the material components, the way zines are thought of and treated in some ways encourages this mythology of impermanence. The inherent “cheapness” of zines not only contributes to their fragility and impermanence, but is also a strong determinant of their importance as a minor media, as the possibilities for “expressing another possible community” are greatly increased by the inherent low-quality means of reproduction. Asking zine-makers to keep long-term preservation in mind when creating their works is a rather unrealistic expectation, as it presumes access to the funds, time, and materials

needed to stave off decay, all of which are limiting factors in creating a zine. Zines are not just typically cheaply made; they are *definitively* cheap.

The “preserving ephemerality” aspect, itself more than a little vexed, is complicated by the concern for preserving the “aura” of a zine, which comes not just from the hand of the author but from the interwoven histories of the zine’s currency, from conception to creation to dissemination to further dissemination via trading, lending, and borrowing. Any zine has likely passed through at least a few hands, and the history of one zine is in part the history of zine culture in general, incorporating aspects of circulation and dissemination that occur outside mainstream structures. While wear-and-tear could devalue a zine in the eyes of a traditional library or artistic collection, for an individual involved in zine-making such decay might be testament to the zine community’s continued vitality and presence. Zines store “traces” of their attendant cultural context in their very objecthood; in a sense their ephemerality and frailty is the source of their strength. Unlike the world of traditional comic-book collecting, where having a comic in “mint condition” (that is to say, essentially unread) increases both its material worth and its cultural capital, in Pierre Bordieu’s sense, in zine culture a “well-loved” item, while having no more or less material value than its mint counterpart, carries a high amount of cultural capital due to its having “lived through” the ebb and flow of minor circulation processes.

In the case of Bibliograph/e, when we were no longer able to afford an autonomous space out of which to run the library, it was relocated to a corner of a local café, where patrons and interested parties could have access to the books for the duration of the café’s opening hours. This meant that we relinquished a certain amount of control

over what actually happened to the zines – we were no longer able to monitor their use, and as a result we’ve incurred a higher rate of books being stolen or damaged. Although we regard such incidences of misuse as unfortunate, the alternative of having the books closely guarded but less accessible seemed less in line with our purpose than accepting a certain amount of loss as the trade-off for increased visibility. There are very strong economic factors behind the situation we found ourselves in; had we been able to afford to maintain our independent space, and had we been able to pay ourselves or hire others to staff the space, we could have found a more acceptable balance between accessibility and preservation. But, since running a zine library does not have in itself any source of income, and acquiring outside funding requires a very high amount of dedication and perseverance, we were forced to maneuver within a rather “cramped space” of negotiation between time, money, preservation, and access, and we opted to make access the key feature. This kind of dilemma is bound to face almost any independent cultural organization, but the ephemeral nature of zines can be viewed as a strong factor limited the economic sustainability of structured access, and successful, long-term preservation in a form that serves their character as “minor media”,

**“You said this library was underground, but it’s on the twelfth floor,”² :
Institutionalizing Counterculture**

It seems to be only fairly recently that zine preservation has become an issue worth consideration for large and small organizations alike. During the 1980’s, in what is now generally agreed on as having been the “zine boom”, where increased access to desktop publishing and photocopiers gave everyone the means to be a published writer (Gunderloy and Goldberg 2), zines were still considered to be too far under the radar to

² This comment was made by Melissa, a teenage visitor to Bibliograph/e, who came with the rest of her after-school program to participate in a zine workshop.

have their preservation taken seriously. In fact, preservation would have seemed in some ways counter to the movement's ideals, which purposefully chose rapid, cheap dissemination over stability and canonization (Chepesiuk 70). Only since the mid-90's have zine-makers, public and university libraries, and independent organizations begun to consider what might be gained from including zines among works to be archived and maintained. The movement toward institutionalizing zines curiously corresponds with, if not an actual downturn in zine production, then at least a sense that the scene was in decline. Indeed, when Mike Gunderloy, founder of zine review newsletter *Factsheet Five*, decided to donate his collection of over ten thousand zines to the New York State Public Library in Albany in 1992 (Chepesiuk 68), the move seemed to both herald an increase in mainstream appreciation for zine culture and announce the beginning of the end of its viability as a living "scene". I am curious about what this mainstream attention means, and how it corresponds to changes in public attitudes to zines and independent media. I am also curious about the efforts of organizations with very limited funding – independent zine libraries like Bibliograph/e – to engage with zine culture and attempt to preserve it. How do each of these institutions serve the "minority" of zines, and what kind of relationships do they enable? Can zine libraries be living organisms, or merely storehouses of dead media from eras past?

As the situation from which the title of this section arose illustrates, showcasing "underground" media in the context of a library, even a minor, marginal one, does not necessarily have any relevance for people who nonetheless constitute the zine's "target audience" (if such a thing exists). Even though Melissa, as a "disenfranchised youth", represented the quintessential person poised to have her life altered by zines (see

Footnote 2), her reaction to the library suggests it was just another one of those things adults were always trying to tell her would be good for her personal development. Discovering zines on your own can be a powerful spell against alienation and disempowerment, as Kristen Schilt points out in *I'll Resist With Every Inch and Every Breath*, her study of young women and their relationships with zines. But these relationships are not entirely analogous to the ones young women, or people in general, have with libraries and organizations. If zine preservation must necessarily include preservation of zine *culture* (in addition to artifacts), an additional layer of consideration must question what this culture is, what forces and motivations lie behind the institutionalization of so-called “countercultural” objects, and how this effort toward canonization affects the relationships people have with such objects.

In “The Zine Scene: Libraries Preserve the Latest Trend in Publishing” (American Libraries), Ron Chepesiuk argues for the importance of preserving zines as crucial small-scale records of contemporary culture. He quotes Laila Miletic-Vejzovic, of Washington State University, who says “Zines are an important part of popular culture because they reflect the attitudes and values of the masses,” (Chepesiuk 69). Chepesiuk’s article also points out the growing number of public and university libraries that hold zine collections, such as Bowling Green State University, Michigan State University, and the San Francisco Public Library. Julie Bartel, who is the zine collection librarian at the Salt Lake City Public Library (and the author of the book *From A to Zine – Building A Winning Zine Collection in Your Library*), seems to agree with Chepesiuk’s sentiment that zines are historically interesting, but goes further in her case for their inclusion in public libraries, arguing that “Zines can be an invaluable resource in reaching out to

underserved patrons and ensuring materials diversity. There are many marginalized and disenfranchised groups who have been alienated from mainstream culture for one reason or another and who often do not patronize the library,” (Bartel 233-4). Bartel’s article deals specifically with the particulars of creating a zine collection in a public library, taking into account the difficulties zines present for a mainstream library collection, including access to materials, cataloging, processing, storage, and publicity. She states that

In order to provide zines and other alternative publications, librarians must be truly engaged in the effort and must often be willing to do a lot of extra work in seeking out and in evaluating new materials and formats. ... Personal networking within the alternative community is perhaps the most common and effective way of gathering selection information, but it definitely takes more work, and much more time, than simply highlighting reviews out of *Publishers Weekly*. (Bartel 234)

Her analysis pays a good deal of attention to the minor status of zines, and recognizes the artifact itself as being deeply nested in a broad network of alternative communication practices.

Both these articles attest to a growing sense that zines at the very least are worth preserving as pieces of popular history, and at their best can foster an active engagement between libraries and the public, including and incorporating marginal factions. The Salt Lake City library in particular seems exemplary in the care it has put into creating a “living archive”, largely due to Bartel’s commitment to and enthusiasm for the works. She cites one example of a young woman who discovered zines through a library presentation at her high school, and has since gone on to become not only an active member of Salt Lake City’s zine community but a library staff member (Bartel 238). This story articulates an ideal relationship between institutions, zines, and the public, and Bartel’s book provides a model through which like-minded organizations can attempt to

follow her lead. As Bartel points out, however, starting a successful zine library requires funding, staff time, and most of all a strong interest on behalf of the institution, all of which are potential hindrances to the actual execution of zine collections within large-scale, publicly funded libraries, many of which are already overrun with space and funding issues. Independent organizations, then, are left to close the gap between zine culture and preservation.

Ann Cvetkovich's book *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003) explores the role of the archive in preserving the ephemera of marginal subcultures, specifically lesbian ones, and the ability of these "archives of feelings" to provide access to histories and mythologies largely ignored by the mainstream. Her analysis is very relevant to independent zine libraries in its consideration of the challenges of preserving ephemerality, and the questions raised about who gets to be preserved, whose voice matters. Cvetkovich cites the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) in New York City as an example of an "archive of feelings", created through its preservation of lesbian memorabilia and ephemera, such as buttons, flyers, t-shirts, and stickers:

LHA functions as a ritual space within which cultural memory and history are preserved. ...Organized as a domestic space in which all lesbians will feel welcome to see and touch a lesbian legacy, LHA aims to provide an emotional rather than a narrowly intellectual experience. ... [Gay and lesbian archives'] principles of selection and inclusion are not the same as those of a public research archive that defines value according to historical or research interests, (241-3).

Independent zine libraries and archives often involve a similar merging of public and private spheres in order to encourage more than a purely intellectual or historical relationship with the material. The Anchor Zine Archive in Halifax is run out of the home of the two of the volunteers and archivists, and is open four hours a week; visiting

the archive necessitates interacting directly with the archivists in their home, and points to interpersonal communication as being at the centre of zine culture. New Orleans' Aboveground Zine Library, operating as part of the Iron Rail Bookstore, invites visitors to "Come daily and read the thousands of zines while sitting down on a sofa couch with your favorite beverage." As previously mentioned, Bibliograph/e exists as part of a café and social club where visitors are invited to browse, read, and converse in an informal atmosphere. Bigger organizations with more formalized structures, such as the ABC No Rio zine library, still maintain a strong grassroots ethos and ties to a particular community of minor media activity through punk shows, readings, and skill-sharing workshops. As Cvetkovich points out, this kind of decentralized archive can often have a disorganized, haphazard feel to it that is less conducive to productive research or canonic preservation than it is to affective relationships (240); this, she suggests, is exactly their purpose. What all the above-mentioned zine archives have in common is a commitment to what I will call "the politics of small" – the sense that minor media are not steps on the road to broader cultural recognition but ends in and of themselves, that their minoriness serves to establish a network, the strength of which is a flexible, modal design, and which stands as a critical counterpoint to more rigid market-bound structures.

Zine Culture/Zine Clutter: The Case For (and Against) Digital Preservation

Despite the arguments given above, I hesitate to present an idealized vision of independent zine libraries and archives, and feel it is important to consider the actual use these spaces allow. Will Straw's analysis of "failed cultural commodities" suggests another mode of viewing zine collections of any type: "In a country like Canada, the richest evidence of cultural production is often to be found in those repositories of

cultural commodities which are dead, their life cycles exhausted, the social desire which once brought them into being extinguished,” (Straw 2000). Might zine archives be the very repositories of exhausted material Straw speaks of? For while an individual or a community might have a very real relationship with a particular zine, or the idea of zines in general, that relationship does not necessarily carry over into a box or shelf of un-filed, un-indexed material which in itself repels a certain degree of casual engagement, no matter the gems it may contain. Further, an increase in zine preservation does not necessarily indicate an increase in the kind of cultural critique that zine culture has come to imply. As North American culture comes more and more to resemble the home of the Collyer brothers, who were crushed to death under 103 tons of “memorabilia” they accrued over their lifetimes,³ the clean “immateriality” of the internet and the potential for digital storage begins to look very appealing. Here I will consider how digital archiving practices might serve zine culture, and what sense of “zine” they are most likely to retain.

Zines in a way resemble an early version of the internet; there is a strong likeness in the way that each medium proclaims itself to be democratic, giving every voice equal weight through access to low-budget production and dissemination. The importance of networking is also analogous, and in the same way that one web page invariably leads to another, contact with one zine or zine-maker inevitably opens up a plethora of diverse access points. If zines are the predecessors of the internet, must we now recognize that, having birthed the new generation of minor mediaphiles, they are now dead, or have at least outlived their usefulness? Certainly this is not a new concept; several zine luminaries have announced the death of zines (Broken Pencil #12, Bad Subjects 1999)

³ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collyer_brothers

and the notion that online publication and archiving will supercede print is widespread. When the *Hour* (a free community paper in Montreal) ran a story on Bibliograph/e, two of the six responses posted on the *Hour.ca* online forum suggested that digital archiving was the direction to be pursued:

- It would be a major undertaking, but they should try and scan every magazine they have, page by page, into a computer. For the sake of cataloging (*sic*), letting their collection be available online and most importantly so the collection can be preserved. (Oliver Domenchini)
- Magazines have a short life span because of the thin paper used and can get torn or damaged from just regular day to day handling. ... I have noticed that some computer clubs no longer have paper copies of their monthly newsletter which is expensive to print but instead have pdf file versions on their web site that can be read or downloaded by anyone at any time. This is the real future of the print media. (Stephen Talko)

If these responses are in any way indicative of prevalent attitudes toward archiving practices, it seems that paper is commonly assumed to be the more fallible medium, whereas the internet is believed to provide long-term stability, which is an interesting reversal of the popular idea of paper as being the medium of history and the internet being the medium of the immediate and everyday. In addition, it is presumed that a digital format would serve the works' intent as much as a material, thereby deriving the work's *meaning* directly from its *content*.

With reference to the first assumption, library crusader Nicholson Baker makes a strong case for re-evaluating paper's supposedly frail nature. Responding to extensive moves on the part of libraries to transfer newspaper collections to microfilm, thus allowing the institution to dispose of warehouses worth of material, Baker argues that the way libraries define "usable" is motivated more by self-interest (that is to say, the strong possibility of obtaining funding for digital or microfilm archiving) than by actual concern for providing the public with a functional, historical paper archive, as libraries are

mandated to do. In his book *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper*, Baker describes the eponymous double-fold test, used to determine a book's "usability" based on how many times it can withstand a page corner being bent forward and backward (152-157). Different libraries have different standards, but the general rule is that if a page cannot withstand a certain number of double folds (usually three to five), it is deemed "not suitable for library use," (156). Baker responds to this conclusion with fervent scorn:

This is of course utter horseshit and craziness. A leaf of a book is a semipliant mechanism. It was made for non-acute curves, not for origami. If you wanted to test the effective springiness of a watch spring or a Slinky, would you bend a short segment of it back and forth until it broke? If you had a tree in your yard that survived storms by bending and dipping in the wind, would you consider cutting it into firewood because one of its twigs snapped when you bent it in two? Would you check the resilience, and hence the utility, of a diving board by counting how many times you could fold it back on itself before it failed? No, you would not. (157)

Baker's deconstruction of prevailing attitudes toward paper – he seems to feel that a massive conspiracy between libraries, funding bodies, and the Microfilm Corporation of America is afoot – does warrant some consideration. In addition, anyone who has ever experienced a system crash or severe eyestrain while perusing online archives knows that digital media have liabilities all their own. Jen Stevens's article *Long-Term Literary E-Zine Stability: Issues and Access in Libraries* (Technical Services Quarterly, 2004) outlines her experiment in determining the actual permanence of online publications. Although the conclusion of her study has not yet been published, the very fact that such a study exists gives the lie to the myth of the eternally stable online archive. Both paper and digital formats, as poet and NYU librarian Michael Basinski points out, have their own strengths and weaknesses: "UBUWEB crashed only last year – years of work and material gone. But then again libraries burn," (Wright 137).

In regard to the conflation of content and meaning that digital archiving implies, my personal sense is that a PDF or other scanned format of a zine, even if it is entirely readable (which scans are not necessarily), is not a true preservation of the work but a different version of it, akin to the idea of “migration” in the realm of new media preservation. Although I do not wish to downplay the importance of content, I believe that content works in conjunction with form to construct the “meaning” of a zine, with reference to the idea of the “traces” or “aura” bestowed on a material zine through its circulation. Although online zine archives, such as the Queer Zine Archive Project – where visitors to the site can access hundreds of scanned zines that fall under the broad heading of *queer* – offer an incredible resource for access to and research, discovery, and preservation of marginal cultures, they alter the material relationships individuals have with minor media. Additionally, they narrow the definition of what can be included in the archive, as three-dimensional works like fold-out books or works that come with “peripherals” like buttons, stickers, CDs, and DVDs, cannot be included, or must be altered to fit the scanner’s dimensions.

But the correlation between print and digital media is not so binarist as this discussion implies; it is not entirely a question of print’s doomed authenticity versus digital technology’s shallow stability. In his dissertation *From Zines to Ezine: Electronic Publishing and the Literary Underground*, Frederick Wright concludes that

[T]he relationship between electronic and print publishing is far more complex than it is commonly characterized. Zine publishers used the Internet to distribute printed material, zine publishers published material from ezines in print, ezine publishers collected material from their publications in print volumes, and a host of other activities occurred that were unanticipated by most critics. (155)

Wright's study discusses publication issues explicitly, but much of his analysis can be carried over into the area of preservation, as there are similar concerns over access, stability, vitality, and authenticity. The sense he arrives at is that "Clearly, there are differences among media, but often too much significance is attached to these differences rather than to the similarities of the functions they can serve. In short, the spirit of zines is not bound to print," (194). According to Wright's analysis, the "zineness" of zines can exist outside the material object; minor media are not irretrievably nested in print, though, as Baker argues, print objects proffer a different sort of engagement with their content than digital media.

Although Baker's passion for paper can be contagious, the largely-unquestioned assumption behind his analysis is that if libraries take paper seriously, the funding – and the public support and use – will follow. But while it is nice to imagine holding in your hand a paper published the day your grandparent was born, to use one of Baker's examples, his conclusions seem highly contingent on a sort of fetishistic reverence for materiality that may be losing public support in favour of the convenience and immediacy of online works. At the same time, the embodied experience of reading a zine should not be overlooked, especially if the book has been silk-screened, hand-bound, hand-coloured, or involved in any other material, time-based process that articulates the "politics of small". People have different relationships with objects than they do with computers; this detail is irrefutable. We need not conclude, however, that the two media can never work to the same purpose; it is rather a question of ensuring that a critical stance that refuses easy co-optation is maintained through circulation of alternative discourses in either format.

Conclusion: Circulation as Preservation

The ephemeral quality of zines makes their economic sustainability difficult; like rare books or manuscripts, which are kept in public archives, they require the dedication of increased resources for actual preservation and access. This kind of long-term preservation and limitation on access, however, is inherently antithetical to zines' character. The practical implications are that preservation is a balancing act between access and preservation that may be too costly, but small scale operations such as Bibliograph/e, the Anchor Zine Archive, and possibly the example of a public library with a dedicated professional and available funding, can sustain the zine dynamic to a greater or lesser extent while preserving for a time the actual artifact.

Whether the medium is digital or material, and whether the work is stored in a public institution or an independent archive, zines are small markers of a minor consciousness that has the potential to educate, disrupt, empower, and even liberate. Although there may be (varying) ideological forces behind them, however, zines are not ideology; their material existence opens up a multiplicity of possible interpretations, uses, and readings. This materiality is what makes zines powerful, but it is also what allows them to be misused; the very nature of late capitalist society's commodity market often results in any potentially disruptive object being appropriated and sold back to those who created it in the first place: Riot Grrrl becomes Riot Grrrl™, and bike rallies are revamped as soda shills. Any party interested in preserving what really matters about zines, not just their haphazardly-appealing aesthetic form, must take into profound consideration the circulation of alternative discourse that zines encourage, and ensure that these discourses remain tenable and relevant, that the "currency" of zines does not

become devalued. Otherwise zines will indeed become relics, historical detritus from a time when a minority of individuals sought a place from which to speak.

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