

FAR OFF THE STREETS OF CLEVELAND: HARVEY PEKAR NOW

punk planet

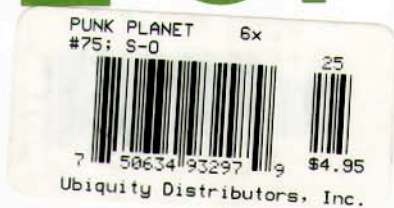
NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND

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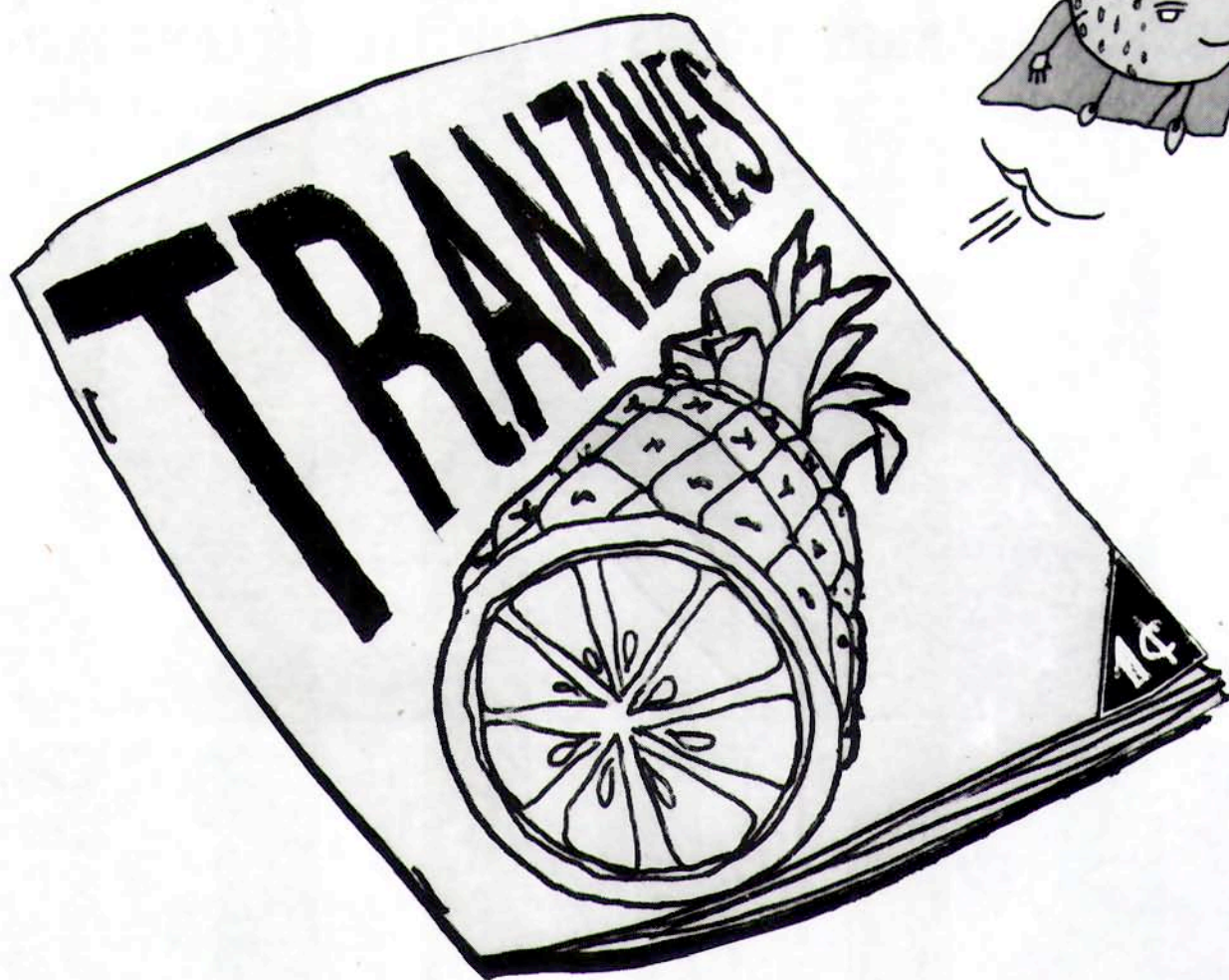
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THE REVENGE OF PRINT 2

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TRANSGENDERED ZINESTERS



With trans issues entering the mainstream, trans zinesters look to keep the debate radical

BY MAYA SCHENWAR

ILLUSTRATIONS BY NADINE Y NAKANISHI

There's the Oscar-nominated hit, *TransAmerica*. There's the new book *Self-Made Man*, in which author Norah Vincent tries on maleness for a year and a half. And even the often-less-than-risk-taking *The L Word* features a transgender character this season. Trans issues have hit the big time. However, despite mainstream media's slowly increasing interest in—and occasional thoughtful exploration of—trans issues, many big-time portrayals don't get past stereotypes and jokes. (Take, for example, TBS's reality TV show, *He's a Lady*, in which super-macho guys dress in heels for a day to get the true “female experience.”)

Fortunately, another rapidly growing sector of the media is stepping up to broaden and complicate the picture: print zines. A huge range of publications are devoted to trans issues, each of which may include editorials, poetry, art, fiction, interviews, even musical compositions. Trans-focused zines have been steadily multiplying in recent years.

Why? As public interest in gender variance increases, it's important to show that it's about people—not simply newsworthy phenomena—said Red Durkin, who produces four zine series and tours with the Tranny Roadshow, a traveling group of performers, artists, and writers.

"Zines are an almost perfect outlet for us," Durkin said. "Being trans is personal. There's no instruction manuals. I think the failing of any broad sweeping analysis is that it could never encompass all of us. The only way for all of us to be heard is for each of us to have our own voice, and that's what the zine world offers." Many zines are produced and distributed by a single author or artist. Others are collaborative efforts, but most zines are never shipped off to an outside publisher or distributor, so zine writers need not worry about misrepresentation.

The complete freedom of self-identification that a zine offers is especially important for trans populations, noted Jamez Terry, a co-founder of the Tranny Roadshow.

"Zines are the ultimate DIY media, which means you're totally free to define yourself and no one can challenge your right to identify however you want within your own zine," said Terry, who has produced more than 50 zines, including *Transcendence*, a zine by and for trans youth. "No one else is going to edit you and get your pronouns wrong."

And while we're on the topic, no one can assign your zine any pronouns either. Since zinesters don't gear their products toward a particular section on a Barnes & Noble shelf, they don't need to grant them identities that fit into culturally predetermined categories. Trans zines are instead characterized by fragmentation, mixture, parody, and ambiguity. According to Doug Blandy, a University of Oregon professor and zine scholar, zines are the perfect example of postmodernism, throwing all the identities and definitions we thought we knew into question, including our definitions of gender—and of magazines.

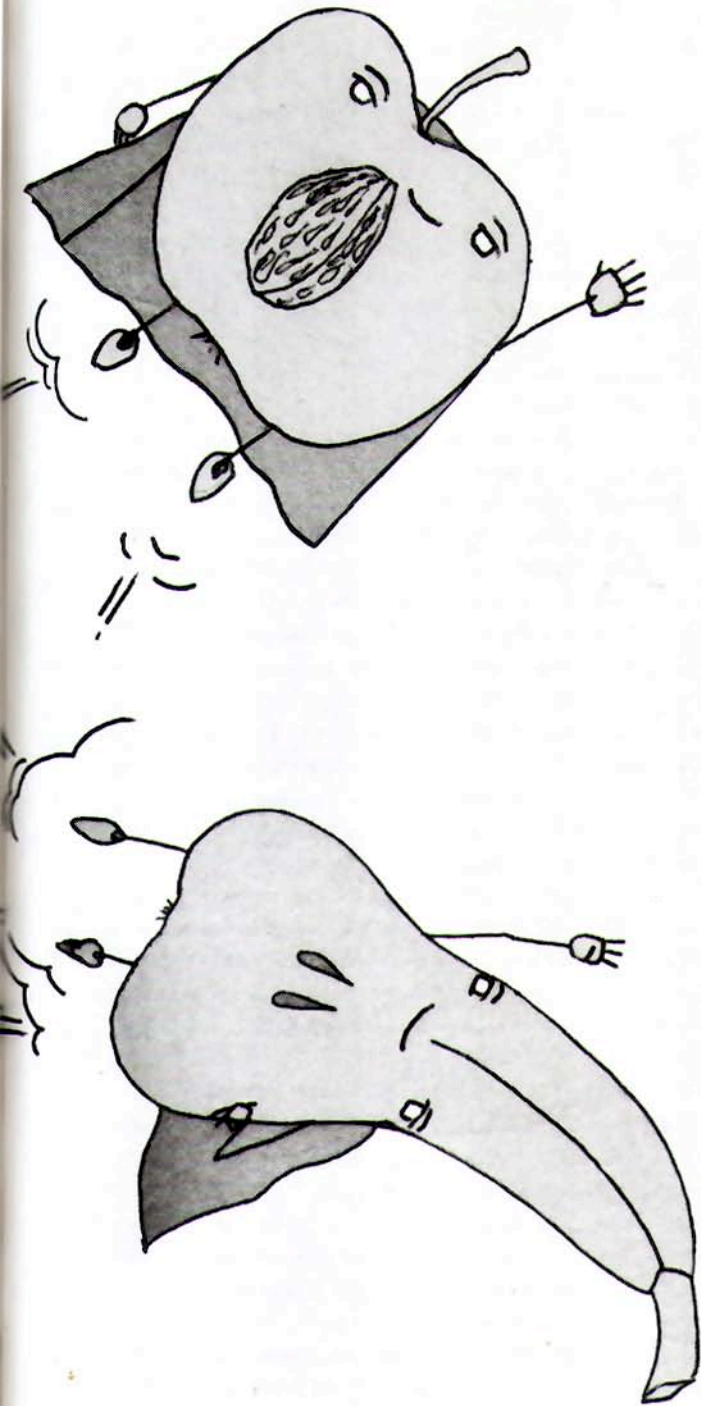
DIY Democracy

Blandy doesn't see zines as merely a good example of postmodernism in the midst of a rigidly structured society. He sees them as a route to changing that society.

"I believe strongly that people, through their artistry, can participate in the public dialogue essential to democracy," Blandy said. Zines allow radical ideas—many of which would never appear in a mainstream magazine—to emerge onto the printed page. They then spark discussion between zinesters and their audience, both directly and indirectly, leading to more zines and more conversations—a do-it-yourself chain of democratic participation.

This means that, unlike TV and mainstream print media, which produce a static stream of "information," zines foster a dynamic forum for discussion, in which readers are just as important as writers. The barista who plucks a stray zine off the café floor can write to the creator and debunk her column, or take up one of the zine's rallying cries and publicize it to a much wider audience than the zine might reach.

This also means that, in the zine world, the connection between personal and political is constantly blurred. Elke Zobl, creator of the Grrrl Zine Network, which publicizes and promotes connections be-



tween feminist, queer, and trans zinesters, says that simply putting one's uncensored voice into the world makes a political statement. For trans people, speaking and writing as themselves may be a radical act.

"It's a truly democratic form of media," Zobl said. "Anyone who reads a zine can create one. Insofar as [people's] thoughts and experiences are made public, zines are not only an important personal outlet and means of empowerment but also have a significant social and political function."

Take the experience of Jackie O, a performance artist, sex worker, and "SMBD aficionado" whose zine, *Crazy Pink Revolver (CPR)*, was first churned out on a manual typewriter and photocopied "by any means necessary." (One issue was scanned and copied illegally at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.) The zine spans a broad range of topics—some of Jackie's favorite pieces include "The Adventures of Tampon Boy," "The Few, the Proud, the Queer Tranny Vampires," and "Wigs 101." Jackie began by handing out *CPR* "brick by brick and queer by queer," then distributed some copies to independent bookstores across the country. Now in her 11th year of producing *CPR*, Jackie says she sees it as a mode of inserting herself into a society that has marginalized her.

"I always felt that I could carry my zines with me wherever I go as an extension of my selves," she said. "Oh, and I get around!"

Like Thomas Paine did back in the day, today's zinesters often distribute or sell their zines by hand, lending a face to their ideas—direct representation in its purest form. Durkin, Terry, and other Tranny Roadshow participants tote their zines across the country, displaying them wherever they perform. Often, the zines become part of the performance through readings, onstage references, and even semi-subliminal messages (Terry sports a tattoo that reads, "Zinester").

Some zinesters have combined forces with another direct-democracy institution: libraries. Terry and the Tranny Roadshow's other co-founder, Kelly Shortandqueer, founded the Denver Zine Library, which boasts over 70 specifically trans-focused zines, not to mention all the queer-related zines which include trans perspectives.

Similarly, by collecting queer and trans zines, the Milwaukee-based Queer Zine Archive Project (QZAP) aims to help marginalized folks get noticed, so that their views become part of more widespread conversations. "This will then (hopefully) engender them (pun intended) to take action, and also to make zines so that others can do the same," said Milo Miller, co-founder of QZAP. "In some ways, it's viral action and self-publication."

At the same time, library projects remind us that zine-style democracy is just as much about reaction and self-reflection. The action of making zines only goes as far as people are willing to put in the time to read them, process them, and make their realities part of their lives. When you take a zine out of the Denver Zine Library, you may be carrying away one of just a few copies of the publication. Your time with that zine—falling in love with its artwork, having imaginary conversations with its author, reenacting childhood memories, falling asleep—counts as a democratic movement in its own right: reclaiming your turf as a responsive reader.

Building Community, One Scrap at a Time

Being a responsive reader doesn't mean simply nodding emphatically at a well-argued editorial. In the zine world, it often means

making friends. Elke Zobl, founder of the Grrrl Zine Network, a resource site which provides an expansive listing of print zines, says that many trans zines have the same underlying message for their readers: "You are not alone!"

"For many, especially those living in small towns in the middle of nowhere, zines are a great way of connecting with like-minded folks around the world, without ever meeting them in person," Zobl said. "This is important for queer and transgender youth who often feel like outsiders and have a difficult time in school and at home."

Though Elke notes that lots of zines may fall under our radar because they don't have a website, aren't explicitly called "zines," or are written in languages we don't speak (she mentioned zinesters in the United Arab Emirates, Peru, and Israel with whom she's corresponded), they're still circulating in local networks and bringing people together.

In certain situations, zines are practically the only way of overcoming isolating circumstances and uniting trans people. Just ask Amanda Armstrong, creator of *Transsexuals in Prison*. Armstrong thought up the idea while working with Books Through Bars, a Philadelphia organization that sends books to incarcerated people. She noticed that, although trans folks are overrepresented in the prison system, the organization wasn't getting any requests for books about trans issues. So the zine began as an attempt to promote the exchange of trans books, as well as the work of people on the inside. Armstrong forged connections with several organizations that work with incarcerated trans people and together they spread the word. Before long, Armstrong was receiving dozens of submissions. The zine came out in the summer of 2004, chockfull of poetry, art, critiques, info about the legal system and how to obtain medical treatment, and lists of resources.

"One of the most common things that incarcerated people who have read the zine say to me is that it helped them feel like they weren't alone," Armstrong said. "Many prisons in the United States don't allow inmates to send mail to other prisons, meaning that it's very hard for incarcerated trans people to be in touch with other people in their situation. Even if the zine wasn't a way for people to talk directly with each other, at least it allowed people to share a little bit about themselves with people in a similar situation, and to read about other people in their situation."

Transsexuals in Prison also includes advice for free-world activists looking to support incarcerated people. This brings up an important issue: "trans communities" and "zine communities" usually are not exclusive entities whose covers are shut to people that don't consider themselves transgender or zinesters.

In an effort to include folks besides seasoned trans zinesters, Red Durkin plans to develop a trans-educational zine. It's an attempt to begin filling the void left by mainstream media in terms of information about gender variance. This won't constitute a single-authority textbook, but rather a collection of different trans experiences.

"I'm not an expert on how to deal with trans people," Durkin said. "There's an assumption that you have all the answers because you are trans, and that's just not the case. I want to do something that really expresses the diversity amongst trans people, because the truth is, not all of us even read zines."

Why Paper's the Way

The need for zines in the trans community seems undeniable. But why is Jackie O holed up in the Children's Hospital, frantically copying scraps she banged out on a manual typewriter? Why are Terry and Durkin cutting and pasting while traveling with the Roadshow, using *pencils* to scribble out poems? And how could the Denver Zine Library staff even *think* about collecting all those little booklets, giving up their free time to worry over checkout dates and bent covers? Why don't they all just get websites and change the date next to the "update" bar every couple of months?

For Amanda Armstrong, the answer was obvious. Incarcerated folks don't have web access, so the majority of her readership would be left without access to the information she hoped to provide. Other zinesters' decisions to stick to print are less clear. But Armstrong's situation points to a major reason to bypass the web: lots of people still don't have Internet access, and many young women and trans youth across the world fall into this category.

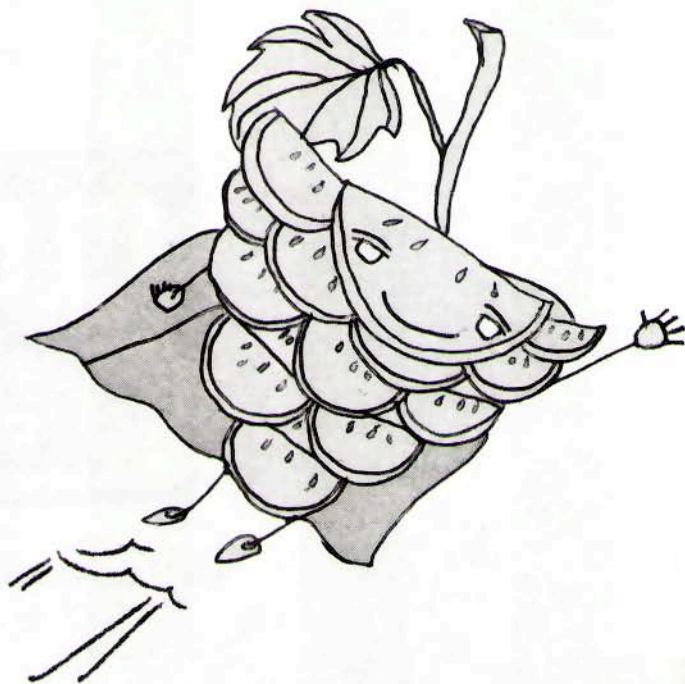
Another access block comes to mind as far as trans zines go: for many cool sites, unless you've got the URL on hand, you'll never discover them. Instead, you might find a myriad of cheap tranny porn. (Trust me: I spent a lot of time Googling while researching this article.) Strictly Internet-based zines exclude the majority of people—the ones that don't have trans-zine-savvy friends. Print zines—found in stores, at special events, on the street, etc.—have the potential for a more diverse readership. They also avoid the stream of anonymous abuse that barrages some trans e-zine message boards, forums, and e-mails.

Yet for a lot of trans zinesters, more personal motivations were key to their choice of print. The hands-on element amplifies the zine's potential for unhindered individual expression—the reason that many chose the zine form in the first place. With a print zine, not only can you ensure that your pronouns are right and your story isn't distorted, you can handsew the pages, color the binding yourself, glue on your own photos. One zine I came across even included a mini candy bar. A hard copy affords its maker total control.

"When you have a print zine, no matter what the subject, the whole point is that it's your copy," Durkin said. "You are responsible for taking care of it, you can lend it out to people, you can crumple it up and burn it if you want; it's yours."

What's more, you can touch it, as you can a person—and personhood is what many of these zines are working to express, say Durkin and Jackie O, who both spoke of the particular importance of print media in trans communities. The zine becomes an affirmation of its creator's self-identified physical reality.

"[The zine] is like a living extension of a person," Durkin said. "You can have a connection with it." Connections between people are what forge radical democracies, build communities, bring solace and strength. Zines are about emotions as well as politics, reaching middle-of-Nebraska trans youth as well as offering an alternative perspective to *He's a Lady*. All the trans zines in the world may never reach the same number of people as a TV broadcast is capable of doing in one minute. But as they are passing from hand to hand and their words go zipping from mouth to mouth and brain to brain, they're not just reaching for people—they're touching them. ©



**Your time with that zine—
falling in love with its artwork,
having imaginary conversations
with its author, reenacting
childhood memories, falling
asleep—counts as a democratic
movement in its own right:
reclaiming your turf as a
responsive reader.**