A Lust Letter to Print: Understanding Human Carnality Through the Zines of the World

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What I choose to devour for pleasure is never stacked neatly on a shelf, but discovered on a street corner; plastered across a brick wall; advertised between sticker collages and graffiti art in the New York City subway; stolen from the backseat of a taxicab in Bangkok for no other reason than adding character to my version of the bookshelf — the stand.

And if you pursue products (or people) purely based on physical attraction, then you’d perceive the ever-so-often presence of a cover girl on the literary medium to mean that it is not a book but a magazine. While only slightly incorrect, I propose that the amalgamation of headlines, visually stimulating copy, and laminated paper can achieve so much more than any publication overseen by a billion-dollar publisher ever could. Without the commercial pressure to produce or profit, these are not magazines, but zines — independent print publications that have a face we can admire, a spine we can grip, and a gut(ter) that bleeds. Zines exist to mirror the human condition; to amplify the pieces of pink bubblegum stuck under our shoes— to highlight every imperfect, raw detail of the world’s periphery that makes people, people.

Over champagne and drunken conversation laid the scraps of “exclusive” celebrity interviews and luxury advertisements cut from the glossy, commercialized pages of Vogue UK during a moodboard-making class in London, taken last year alongside other women studying there from Australia, South America, and the States. Reconfiguring esteemed editorials to better reflect your personhood can make a girl reevaluate to whom she ascribes power—the confessions and complex questions posed by the women featured in THIIIRD’s Access issue, lying open on a coffee table nearby, seemed more compelling. Made with the “desire to celebrate and venerate people who are usurping power and emerging as forces in fields that are not used to hosting them,” the Access issue exists antithetical to the colonial empire in which it is printed.
London is a story of rebels and truths untold, as much as it is a city built on the beaten backs of others, plagued by colorism, classism, and elitism. Its history bleeds power, and even if we pretend to hate it, it’s hard to not crave power in a world governed by it. After all, we’re only human, taunts the Access issue, which explores the roles of sex, censorship, and underground rave culture as active defiances to the British empire’s institutional power.

Access, the issue, feels like breaking locks to barred doors—finding power through personal enlightenment. Reading, like travel, does that; it makes the stark realities of people and the destructive forces of power more apparent in regard to the places people call home. On my zine stand, behind THIIIRD, hides CLEARLINE: a 79-page plea to protect our shelters from the effects of unsustainable living. After six months living in London, I picked up CLEARLINE, Issue 003, on my third visit to a shabby zine store in Chicago; the zine’s burnt orange cover and headline “Fire. Fashion, Energy,” prompted a quick read-through redefining my perception of place. Written inside were stories of warmth, anger, passion, and fury; embers of emotion from amateur poets, award-winning artists, and emerging designers who forged art out of disaster as survivors of the world’s worst raging wildfires. Their dreams of clear skies and clean energy became my own; my existence in a society thriving on mass production and the destruction of the natural world repulsed me.

But that’s the sad reality of carnality isn’t it? Our propensity to abuse and deplete any physical sign of life—to destroy the natural resources that provide our basic biological needs of food, water, and shelter. The year I populated my zine stand, home looked like the window seat of a plane and plastic microwave dinners. From Western Europe to the Midwest, to both US coasts, Canada, and a final trip to East Asia, like a glutton who overate, I consumed my way through the world in boarding tickets. Hunger, for food or for more, kills enjoyment – neither
violently slurping pho or choking on massive bites of banh mi like a rabid animal in Ha Noi, Vietnam while scrolling enviously online at all the places I hadn’t been satisfied me. *Magazine F*, a Korean publication and culinary investigation on the cultural impact of everyday global food items, changed that while clenched between my greasy fingers in a Vietnamese gift shop; a fried banana in one hand, and Issue 15, *Egg*, in the other. Choosing this issue represented my favorite local delicacy, egg coffee, and was symbolic of my fresh start at the dawn of the New Year. The zine hopes its readers will start “regard[ing] the act of eating as something that transcends simply the appetite,” but to me, Egg served as a reminder to taste, chew, and savor the places I digested. Its breakdown on whipped, steamed, fried, poached, and scrambled eggs, and meticulous list of ingredients in famous global egg desserts forced me to slow my pace of consumption—to ponder what I was eating, reading, buying, watching, and why.

Questioning the reasons why we do what we do can transform a carnal experience into a spiritual one. On my final excursion in East Asia, Bangkok, Thailand, the owner of a small magazine shop handed me a reflective gold publication spanning the length of my forearm as her personal recommendation: *Sindroms*, a Danish zine that dedicates each issue to a color. It was limited edition: only 500 copies of the zine circulated around the globe—a testament to gold’s rarity and the materialistic nature of humankind. When I first opened to see—“like Midas, we all get blinded by the gilded appeal of things we believe we want. Things we believe will make us happy, fulfilled…we sober up from the highs of success as quickly as we climax. What was it all for? Do we even know what we want? Do we need it?...Is it just part of human nature to be cursed to chase something better, and so often out of reach?”—I bought it. Invaluable; the words of the editorial echoed the most pressing reflections of my year abroad collecting zines as my
souvenirs, and ultimately leaving for my final semester in St. Louis having been exposed to the rawest parts of human kind, and therefore, the most beautiful.

*Sindroms*’s Gold issue quotes philosopher Lao Tzu, who states “when I let go of what I am, I become what I might be.” In our never-ending lust for the ultimate status symbol, the zines suggest that maybe, instead, we fall in love with real emotions, real stories, and real people that give our life purpose. Our physiological needs for food and shelter will persist, but as participants in an elusive, uncontrollable digital culture that often inflates our desire for more power and influence, we need to find balance in real truth. Zines invite that tangibility through the experience of reading them, and learning about the people and places that surround us, unfiltered. In our desperate need to *feel*, print matches the moment; it creates ritual: our fingers trace its pages, our arms hold its weight. We savor images that remind us of childhood memories, we cry of laughter reading relatable interviews, and we can hear 3am conversations through featured essays as we see the crevices of our deepest thoughts published on paper. On my zine stand, the variety in typeface and in topic represents the multifaceted versions of myself, and the diversity of the people I had the pleasure of meeting wherever I acquired them. As friends, colleagues, and acquaintances frequent my apartment, and flip through the pages on the stand, I notice that print zines allow us feel in control of the pace of our consumption, and nothing feels more akin to the human condition than free will.
Bibliography


