theories and methodologies

We Write with Scissors

TERRI KAPSALIS

ON OUR FRIGID FIRST DAY OF CLASS, ONE WEEK AFTER DONALD TRUMP'S INAUGURATION, MY COTEACHER, CHRISTA DONNER, AND I began our course Community Zine Projects at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago with the question, Why zines now? In this era of blogs and *Twitter*, these tiny-edition handmade paper publications might seem irrelevant. So why take this class? The answers offered by this group of undergraduate and graduate student artists, writers, scholars, and educators were inspiring.

Zines allow us to control the means of production, they said. They are DIY, handmade, homegrown. There is a local-food movement, so why not a local-publishing one? The zine format can be your own container garden.

Zines are tangible. Making them is a physical act, not simply a cerebral one.

Zines can be intimate, small, covert. They can hide in a pocket and be passed between people easily and discreetly.

Zines lend themselves to collaboration: a single zine can contain multiple voices, and many communities of zine makers regularly meet and swap zines.

Zines can inspire conversation through face-to-face or, rather, hand-to-hand distribution. But, then again, like prayer cards, they can be left on buses and trains or just about anywhere a chance reader might find them.

Zines are democratizing, another student said, and don't cost much to make. They can be given away.

Zines are immediate; agile responses, they can be made quickly.

Zines can be a tool for "outsiders" or the "underground." The term *zine* has origins in sci-fi and punk subcultures. Some people who don't feel they have a voice in mainstream culture have found one through zines.

Zines are a way for marginalized people to get their voices out there right away. Many more people have access to a copier and a stapler than they do to a computer.

TERRI KAPSALIS is the author of *Public Privates: Performing Gynecology from Both Ends of the Speculum* (Duke UP, 1997), *The Hysterical Alphabet* (WhiteWalls, 2008), and *Jane Addams' Travel Medicine Kit* (Jane Addams Hull-House Museum, 2011). Her most recent essay, "Hysteria, Witches, and the Wandering Uterus: A Brief History; or, Why I Teach *The Yellow Wallpaper*," appeared in *Literary Hub*. She is a founding member of Theater Oobleck, a longtime collective member of the Chicago Women's Health Center, and adjunct full professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

© 2018 TERRI KAPSALIS
PMLA 133.1 (2018), published by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.1.146 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Zines offer a kind of permission. A zine maker does not need to be considered a master or authority to make a contribution. Zines champion the particular and, by their humble nature, eschew false claims of expertise.

Zines can be used to legitimate individual and group realities. Zines can be antidotes to the hegemonic presumptions of mainstream media.

Zines don't usually have a digital trail. Writers can be completely anonymous. "Safety," one student said, and others nodded. This class was made up mostly of students of color and students who identified themselves as female, trans, and/or queer. If safety hadn't already been a concern, it was on their minds in January 2017.

Zine trolls are hard to find. Unlike its digital cousin, social media, zine culture tends to be a gift economy and is not as prone to toxic comments and attacks.[1] We recognized the medium to be incredibly diverse and cautioned one another against making too many utopian generalizations but agreed that we are drawn to zines for a reason.

We talked about the urgency we felt now. Zines are frequently political. Some of the students talked about artists and protests. What can makers do? Some mentioned their conflicted feelings about Day without Art and the closing of galleries and museums as a form of resistance. Others mentioned artists who had ceased aspects of their art practices in favor of direct political protest. I told them about my cousin Thomas H. Kapsalis, a painter who taught at our school for fifty-two years and who, at ninety-one, continues to paint brightly colored geometric abstracts. In his first year of art school, he was drafted into World War II. Taken prisoner in the Battle of the Bulge, he nearly died of starvation. During the Vietnam War my cousin, by then a devoted pacifist, gave up color in protest, and for ten years his canvases held only black, white, and grays. There was a hush in the classroom as I finished my story.

When we reconvened after a short break, I passed out scissors. Some of the students needed a tutorial, but many of them already knew how to fabricate a minizine: a single piece of paper folded many times with a single cut on one fold that results in an eight-page booklet. Seven days later, our students arrived with small stacks of the minizines they had composed and constructed, dealing them out like packs of cards. We each sat with our own pile of twelve minipublications in front of us. Siobhan Thompson, a graduate student in the writing program, held her zine up in the air, a spirited tract titled *A zine for disappointed kanye west fans*, and exclaimed that, for her, this was a liberation, to go from spark to object in hand all in one week!

I came to zines as a writer who loves scissors. I have always envied makers who push materials around with their hands. The cut-up method came to my attention through the writings of William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, who declared writers to be decades behind painters and insisted that the cut-up was an opportunity to catch up. Whenever I have wanted to reimagine a draft of a story, I have followed Burroughs and Gysin's lead, taking scissors and dutifully cutting a page of text into quadrants and rearranging them. Inevitably, I discover something of note. As Burroughs and Gysin write, "You cannot *will* spontaneity. But you can introduce the unpredictable spontaneous factor with a pair of scissors" (29). I found that the reassembled quadrants often revealed secrets. As Burroughs and Gysin promised, cutting through a text was akin to cracking open a lock on space and time. Breaking up "word lines" is a technique I return to again and again.

Scissors are for fiction only. Or so I thought, until I was commissioned by the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum to write an "alternative label" for Jane Addams's travel medicine kit. The Alternative Labeling project, brainchild of the activist, scholar, and curator

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.1.146 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Lisa Lee, was conceived as a way to question standard museum labeling and its didactic conventions. My label would be installed in Addams's bedroom near her little leather kit with its four vials of pills and powder.

It wasn't the length of museum labels that I resisted. Being a fan of short forms, including flash fiction, I wanted to embrace brevity. After months of research I had written pages of short paragraphs. Bits regarding Addams's health and medical history. Short imagined conversations between Addams and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a frequent Hull-House visitor. Field notes I took while observing the pharmacist and forensic scientists who agreed to investigate the contents of the pills and powders in the kit. Inspired by Addams's writings, I created miniature meditations on social justice, on domesticity, on peace and antagonism, on medicine and poison. Pages and pages of these short bits with no order in sight. I had to find a way to sort, to understand the arc of what I had done. I needed to push the words with my hands. I found my friend, the scissors, and cut up my pages into more than 120 discrete bits and used the whole surface of the dining-room table to stack and fan and swap and reassemble.

I imagined the resulting text as a long folded-paper accordion of labels that might be affixed to the museum wall, but instead the long prose poem was published in book form,[2] set on a shelf in Addams's bedroom next to her open leather medicine kit, which sat under a small glass dome (fig. 1). There visitors could sit and read and have a "slow museum" experience, encountering passages such as these:

> To be at war with social expectations. To be at war with one's own mind. When we battle ourselves, just who is battling whom? How to be a pacifist here too? (29)

> Addams often quoted John Stuart Mill: *There is nothing, after disease, indigence, and guilt, so fatal to the pleasurable enjoyment of life as the want of a proper outlet of active faculties.* (31)

> What if this medicine kit contains Mill's remedy? How might "proper outlet of active faculties" appear under a dissecting microscope? (31)

Marc Fisher, a cofounder of Half Letter Press, visited our zine class during our second month together. He talked about the fact that prisoners have no access to the Internet and are not allowed to communicate with one another by letter. But printed materials are allowed. Marc has made a number of self-published books and booklets for prisoners and by prisoners, and Half Letter Press has distributed them.

Marc told us about the press's recent reprint of a 1975 feminist booklet titled *Consciousness-Raising Guidelines*, with a new forward by the organizer, educator, and abolitionist Mariame Kaba and an afterword by the historian and writer Jaqui Shine. The booklet includes sections titled "Supplemental Guidelines for Black Women" and "Supplemental Guidelines for Youth Women (14–19)." Marc explained that Kaba's and Shine's extensive social-media following

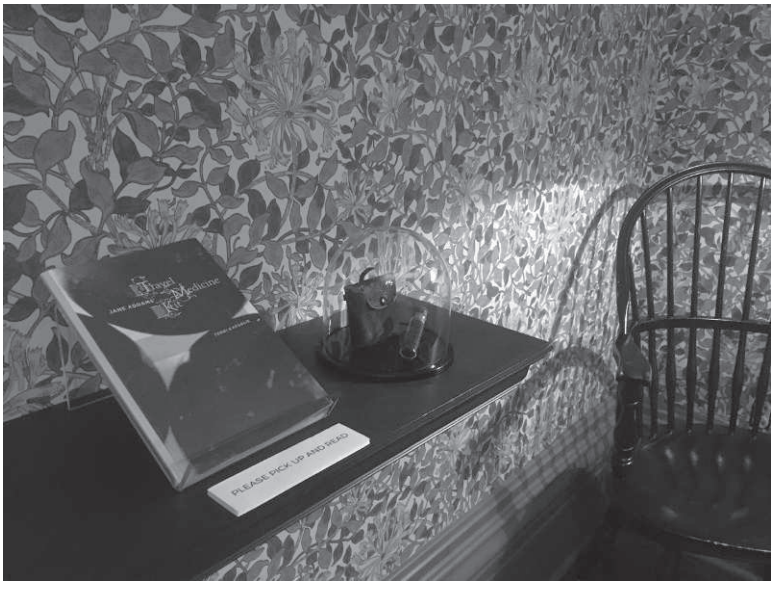


FIG. 1
Jane Addams's medicine kit (right) and Terri Kapsalis's *Jane Addams' Travel Medicine Kit* (left) on display at the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum, University of Illinois, Chicago.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.1.146 Published online by Cambridge University Press

caused the publication to sell out immediately. He described his scramble to print and mail booklets to keep up with the demand. Yes, the publication had been available as a PDF file all along, but people ordered paper.

We discussed the importance of leaving our own paper trails. We discussed the fact that if we don't tell our own stories we risk having others do it for us. And with a zine, we don't need any green light to make our work. We don't need to wait for permission. We are the only permission we need.

At a Chicago reading of *Lincoln in the Bardo*, George Saunders talked about scissors. In making his magnificent novel, he cut apart pages of "close historical accounts" of Lincoln and his son, most of them actual, but some of them fabricated. In a *Bomb* interview with Sam Lipsyte, Saunders says, "I remember sitting in my shed having typed everything up, cut it up with scissors, and moved it around. I had a long day of that, and thought, God, what would my writer friends think? I'm not *writing*. But when I looked at version ten or eleven, it was a lot better than the one I'd started with. It's a form of curation, really." I would add that it's also a way to contemplate relations among various modes, genres, and disciplines. Scissors can be a great party host, instigating introductions between history, fiction, interview, theory, poetry, epitaph, instruction manual, store ledger, and anything else that uses words. Ironically, scissors aid us in bringing unlike things together. Scissors are a tool for grafting hybrid forms, for making chimeras and monsters and other creatures that regenerate tales.

Is this even writing? Is it curation? Perhaps it is both. In *Writing with Scissors: American Scrapbooks from the Civil War to the Harlem Renaissance*, Ellen Gruber Garvey asserts that as far back as Civil War times, and probably before that, scrapbooks were a form of writing and curation. They were a common way in the nineteenth century to manage a growing barrage of newspapers and magazines. Lincoln had a scrapbook. Frederick Douglass had one. Sarah Bernhardt too. Garber writes that for many who kept them, including African Americans and women's-rights activists, scrapbooks were a way of making their own stories out of news sources: "They collected, concentrated, and critiqued accounts from a press they did not own, to tell their own stories in books they wrote with scissors" (4). Not unlike zines, scrapbooks were a means of telling one's own stories when mainstream media wasn't doing so.

The self-publishing impulse has a long and complicated history, which has included everything from scrapbooks to street preachers' broadsides to political pamphlets. As Anne Elizabeth Moore writes, "The Underground Railroad produced coded maps in the form of bed-covers just as the Vageniuses popularize their appearance in town with wheat-pasted flyers. Both groups work against mainstream culture to bring their unique voice to people; both use whatever available means they can muster to do so." Scissors and glue were the means primarily available to makers of early zines, which often had the look of ransom notes. If a maker wanted a particular font or look or image, cutting and pasting was the only way.

For our course's midterm project, Christa and I asked students to create a zine based on one or more interviews. One student, Greg Ruffing, interviewed an artist whose installation was banned from a neighborhood art fair because of its powerful critique of local gentrification. Zuri Washington's zine, *Talk to Me*, focused on fellow autistic adults and the sparse resources available to them. Ana Maria Gonzalez Sierra's *We Were Shaken* was based on interviews with four Ecuadorian students who were living abroad during the devastating 2016 earthquake and looked at how they responded to this collective trauma from a distance. The zine-course participants had created writing that listens and asks questions, that calls us to

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.1.146 Published online by Cambridge University Press

action, that encourages the reader to make a contribution rather than to be a docile recipient. Writing that makes us aware of our frailty as people, as a planet, as nations.

When undergraduate and graduate thesis students are lost in a long draft, I tell them: take a scissors to it! I channel Burroughs and Gysin with some incarnation of their question "How many discoveries have been made by accident?" and their pronouncement that "we cannot produce accidents to order" (32). But we do have scissors. Students' eyes routinely light up when I mention scissors because the very suggestion of that level of destruction is just the ticket. These are artist-scholars, so the intention is clear to them. Break it up, mix it around, and see what arises. They are used to an artist's sharp tools, and many other professions have similar instruments—the surgeon's scalpel, the barber's razor, the cook's knife. Why shouldn't writers have one too?

Taking scissors to something I have written is often thrilling. It is a defamiliarization, a way to undo assumptions and to see writing anew. It is a relinquishing of preciousness. Words are not owned by us. Gysin made a permutation poem titled "No Poets Don't Own Words." Words exist to be undone. They are malleable material, not gospel. And even gospel is there to be messed with, as the musician, composer, mystic, and wordsmith Sun Ra did in his Thmei Research group, permuting passages from the Bible to decipher coded language that had protected the scriptures' actual meanings from distortions of translation. Those old texts contain layers of signification, and breaking things apart can help us get at deeper revelations.

In the Joan Flasch Artists' Book Collection at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, there are many examples of works made with scissors—hundreds of zines, as well as beautifully constructed books by Barbara Kruger, Simon Morris, and Ann Tyler. In these artists' creations, the use of a sharp tool is clearly visible. However, there are writers in whose work the use of scissors is not obvious at all, and yet I suspect that cutting utensils are an important part of their processes. I would like to ask the poet Harryette Mullen about scissors. Maggie Nelson, Michael Ondaatje, and Claudia Rankine, as well. I would have liked to ask Theresa Hak Kyung Cha about scissors too.

"From Andersen's shears / the fairy tale appears!" Hans Christian Andersen once wrote about the cutouts he made (Andersen 142). From the curator Hendel Teicher, I learned that Andersen carried around a pair of scissors and would tell stories while practicing the art of papercutting.[3] Andersen's paper artworks were elaborate and intricate, sometimes picturing Andersen himself with miniature people dancing around his nose or head. Story and paper cut would often finish at the same time.

Jane Addams's bedroom contains another label. I had forgotten about it completely until some years after writing the one for her travel medicine kit. This other label is the facsimile of a column titled "Ask Miss Benedict" from a Hull-House newsletter published in 1939, about four years after Addams's death. The column begins "Miss Benedict knows:" and details how Addams wrote a book. Addams

> took a long piece of butcher string. She knotted one end and put the other through a big needle. Whenever she had an idea she would put it on a scrap of paper, no matter what she was doing. When she had time she went back and threaded the scraps of paper on to her string. After a while she had a garland of ideas, as full of flavor as the strings of garlic we see on Halsted Street.
>
> Then came the great moment. She took them off and began to sort. She had them on the table and on the bed, all around her as far as eye could reach. Whenever anyone went by she would ask, "Do you think this belongs

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.1.146 Published online by Cambridge University Press

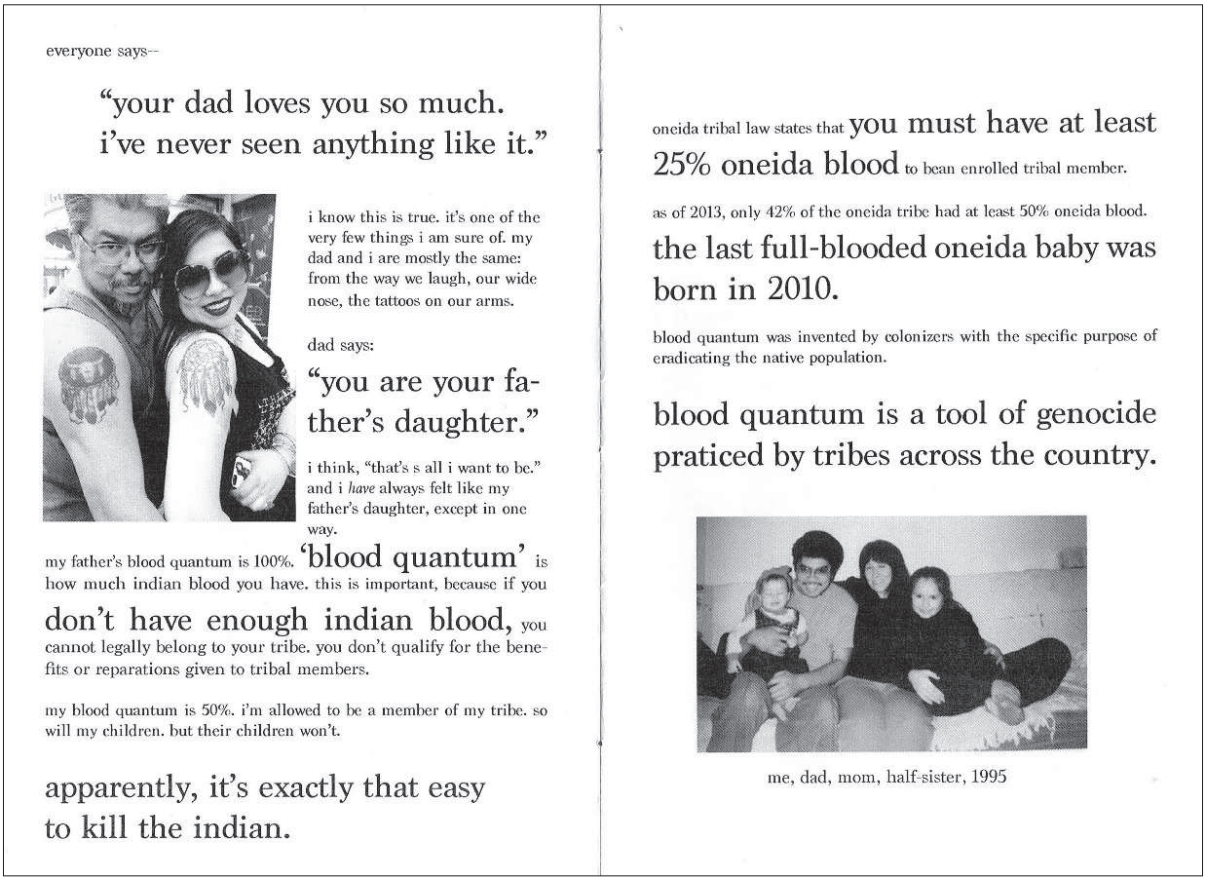
> with this? Which comes after that?" Everybody helped. Or felt they had. (That in itself was one of Miss Addams's great gifts.) (Benedict)

With my scissors, I had unwittingly cut through time and found my way into Addams's writing process. I had even asked readers of early drafts of my label, "Do you think this belongs with this? Which comes after that?"

Burroughs and Gysin did not invent the use of scissors in writing, nor did Addams. I do appreciate Burroughs and Gysin's expansive definition of the cut-up, which includes scissor-based creations with no text whatsoever. I am drawn to consider Addams's books in relation to the innovative quilts of the women of Gee's Bend and the story cloths of Hmong refugees, some of which recount tales of escaping Laos into Thailand across the Mekong River.

In the spirit of Addams, the Gee's Bend quilters, and the Hmong story-cloth makers, the "We" in my title—"We Write with Scissors"—asserts that composition always takes place in community. "We" is not prescriptive. "We" is not a royal singular, but a pluralistic collaborative. There is no such thing as a scissor. No matter how alone our writing practice feels, we don't write in isolation. We are always, whether we like it or not, part of a writing gang that includes past memories, present communities, and all the language we have ever encountered.

Sharp tools are required. In the documentary *BaddDDD S* , the poet, playwright, and legend of the black arts movement Sonia Sanchez says, "We had to splice up many a thing, to scrape the veneer that was on America, the veneer that was on


everyone says—

"your dad loves you so much.
i've never seen anything like it."

i know this is true. it's one of the very few things i am sure of. my dad and i are mostly the same: from the way we laugh, our wide nose, the tattoos on our arms.

dad says:

"you are your father's daughter."

i think, "that's s all i want to be." and i *have* always felt like my father's daughter, except in one way.

my father's blood quantum is 100%. 'blood quantum' is how much indian blood you have. this is important, because if you

don't have enough indian blood, you cannot legally belong to your tribe. you don't qualify for the benefits or reparations given to tribal members.

my blood quantum is 50%. i'm allowed to be a member of my tribe. so will my children. but their children won't.

apparently, it's exactly that easy to kill the indian.

oneida tribal law states that you must have at least 25% oneida blood to bean enrolled tribal member.

as of 2013, only 42% of the oneida tribe had at least 50% oneida blood.

the last full-blooded oneida baby was born in 2010.

blood quantum was invented by colonizers with the specific purpose of eradicating the native population.

blood quantum is a tool of genocide praticed by tribes across the country.

me, dad, mom, half-sister, 1995

FIG. 2
Excerpt from Siobhan Thompson's zine *Indian Blood*. Image courtesy of Siobhan Thompson.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.1.146 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Harlem, the veneer that was on the entire country. And as we scraped we got to some real blood and began to spit out words that the country was paying attention to." She says that she writes because she "wants to tell people how I became this woman with razor blades between her teeth."

For her final zine project in our class, Siobhan Thompson created *Indian Blood*, a personal document asserting that blood-quantum law is a form of genocide (fig. 2). She had never written about her Oneida heritage before, not even in her fiction.

Joo Young Lee's final zine, *Exit 10 Archive*, was the culmination of a year-long project. In May 2016, a woman was murdered by a man near the crowded Gangnam Station in Seoul. The murderer stated that he killed her because he hated women. Lee documented station gate 10 as it became a memorial site (fig. 3).

I keep a handful of copies of *Tom Kapsalis's Protest* in my bag. The zine contains Christa's ink drawings and my text, most of the words drawn from an interview we did with Tom in February 2017, a few weeks after our class discussion about this decorated war veteran's Vietnam protest. Each copy costs a little over one dollar to produce, so I hand one to anybody I think might be interested. I took twenty of them to Tom and his wife, Stella. They phoned the next day to tell me how moved they were by the zine, that it just seemed to happen in a flash and that books never work that way. Would I send copies to some of Tom's colleagues, and would I give one to this person and one to that? Yes, of course.

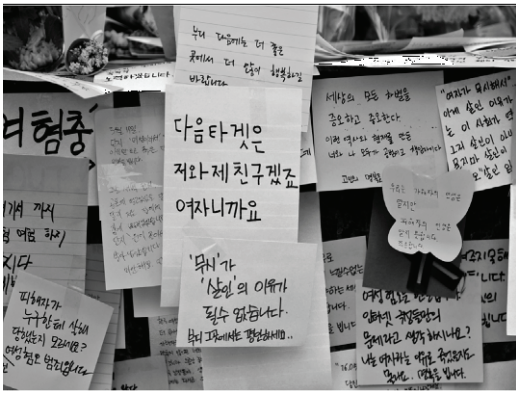
Tom particularly appreciated the way the text was fragmented. "It looks very modern," said the abstract painter. The zine's designer, Mulan Leong-Suzuki, had used one of Tom's paintings as a layout grid, cutting and pasting his words into unconventional geometric blocks (fig. 4), recalling Burroughs and Gysin's proposal to apply the painter's technique to writing and suggesting one way that writing might finally catch up (13).

Notes

1. Wortham echoed some of these ideas in "Why the Internet Didn't Kill Zines," an article on our syllabus.

2. This book, *Jane Addams' Travel Medicine Kit*, can be read online at cdn.flipsnack.com/iframehtml5/embed.html?hash=fzc30utd.

3. Teicher showed Andersen's cutouts alongside Burroughs and Gysin's collaborative visual work in a brilliant exhibition titled Cut-Outs and Cut-Ups: Hans Christian Andersen and William Seward Burroughs at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin in 2008 and documented in the informative catalog she edited.



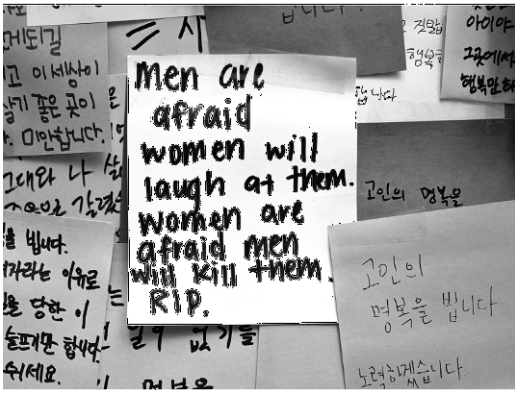


Fig. 3
Excerpt from Joo Young Lee's zine *Exit 10 Archive*. Image courtesy of Joo Young Lee.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.1.146 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Works Cited

Andersen, Jens. "The Man Who Wrote with Scissors." *Cut-Outs and Cut-Ups: Hans Christian Andersen and William Seward Burroughs*, edited by Hendel Teicher, Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2008, pp. 141–48.

BaddDDD Sonia Sanchez. Directed by Sabrina Schmidt Gordon et al., Attie and Goldwater Productions, 2015.

Benedict, Enilla. "Block News: Ask Miss Benedict." *Hull-House Newsletter*, 1939.

Burroughs, William S., and Brion Gysin. *The Third Mind*. Viking Press, 1978.

Garvey, Ellen Gruber. *Writing with Scissors: American Scrapbooks from the Civil War to the Harlem Renaissance*. Oxford UP, 2013.

Kapsalis, Terri. *Jane Addams' Travel Medicine Kit*. Jane Addams Hull-House Museum, 2011.

Moore, Anne Elizabeth. "Be a Zinester: How and Why to Publish Your Own Periodical." *Fall of Autumn*, 1 Dec. 2015, fallofautumn.com/cgi-sys/suspendedpage.cgi?option=com_content&task=view&id=175&Itemid=69.

Saunders, George. "George Saunders by Sam Lipsyte." Interview by Sam Lipsyte. *Bomb*, vol. 139, Spring 2017, bombmagazine.org/article/4871223/george-saunders.

Wortham, Jenna. "Why the Internet Didn't Kill Zines." *The New York Times*, 28 Feb. 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/02/28/magazine/why-the-internet-didnt-kill-zines.html.

The first time I saw "Guernica" was when I was in the history of art class, in a slide that the teacher put on the wall. Picasso only used black, white, and grey. He was not using color because of the seriousness of the bombing of Guernica. It's such a remarkable painting; he has this light and the suffering of the children and women. Then he has that horse. Great painting.



One part is in a pedimental shape. It was interesting because in Greek sculpture they have a pediment.

He used color and then all of a sudden when he did this painting, he got away from color because of the seriousness of what he represented. The bombing and then people suffering. How did Franco get the German airplanes? To bomb the city of Guernica. Must have paid them off.

Then I saw "Guernica" at the Art Institute. At the back, you know where the Georgia O'Keefe is now? It was there. You just stood by the stairs and there it was.

I thought, I'll do the same thing. I will not use color to protest the Vietnam war.

Fig. 4
Excerpt from the zine *Tom Kapsalis's Protest*. Image courtesy of Christa Donner and Terri Kapsalis.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2018.133.1.146 Published online by Cambridge University Press