viewpoint

Collecting the pieces

As befits a journal for art libraries I shall begin this opinion piece with Max Ernst's quote on exhibiting Dada: 'What's the matter with everyone, wanting to make a museum piece out of Dada? Dada was a bomb. . .can you imagine anyone. . .wanting to collect the pieces, sticking it together and displaying it?'[1]

Or, to put it in a more zine-relevant way: 'Punk died the day the Clash signed to CBS' (Mark Perry, *Sniffin' Glue* fanzine founder)[2]

That there is a tension inherent in collecting the material culture of radical or subcultural movements is not a new dilemma. Questions of not only how but whether we should collect the fragments of lived experience underlies the creation of zine collections in institutional libraries, and certainly were issues I wrestled with when founding the London College of Communication (LCC) Library Zine Collection. Would *Sniffin' Glue* die the day I assigned it a library location? Or would its addition to the collection enable a new audience to be inspired by its impulse of D-I-Y expression?

I founded the LCC Library zine collection in 2009. There was a genuine curriculum need for the collection, as students were being set projects to create zine-like publications and would benefit from viewing examples, but this was also a rare instance where a personal love of mine merged with my librarian-life. Like many librarians who have initiated zine collections I had been reading zines since my youth. They formed an important role in how I learnt about the music I loved, and the politics in which I believed. I saw myself as part of the culture surrounding zines.

Whilst I was therefore thrilled that I was free to develop a zine collection I was also, painfully at times, aware of the contradictions and compromises that might arise in doing so. When including self-published, D-I-Y publications in an institutional library there is an unavoidable sense of appropriation, of co-opting a culture that has no interest in the library's aims and methods, and of fetishizing its artefacts. The methods and systems of library organisation that exist to analyse and incorporate formally published works do not necessarily translate to publications that are the product of personal experience rather than academic articulation. What would happen to, for instance, the energy and meaning of a publication such as *Crowbar,* created to support and advise squatters, when housed in an acid-free folder, on a library shelf, and scrutinised for its cut-and-paste aesthetics?

I feel there is no way to avoid these tensions, rather it is important to acknowledge and ameliorate them as far as possible. The idea of appropriation, reuse and, in library terms, plagiarism, are well-used elements in much zine creation and it is perhaps in a similar spirit that we can consider including zines in institutional libraries, albeit without negating sensitivity to the original material. Original intent may be altered, and a new meaning found.

Activist libraries can provide examples of how radical or non-mainstream collections can be reactivated rather than just collected and preserved for posterity. MayDay Rooms in London's Fleet Street state that they consider their collections to be 'an active social resource more than a repository'[3]. Whilst the structural nature of grassroots libraries is obviously more sympathetic to this view, and indeed the production and original intent of the materials they 'harbour' (to use another MayDay word),[4] I believe institutional zine collections can learn much from this attitude.

At LCC, the library is part of a wider college and university environment. The staff and students within the academic community come from diverse backgrounds and express a variety of views and opinions. Academic libraries are no different; they are shared, rather than neutral, spaces. I found that the zine

1. C.W.E. Bigsby, *Dada & Surrealism* (London: Methuen, 1972), 4.

2. Pat Gilbert, *Passion is a Fashion: the Real Story of the Clash* (London: Aurum, 2004), 139.

3. MayDay Rooms, "Archives", http://maydayrooms.org/archives [Accessed on October 1, 2017]

4. ibid.

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collection rapidly gained a role in the reflection of a plurality of experience, both through formal and informal channels. Early in the collection's existence, the University of the Arts London Diversity Team came to visit the collection as they were looking for queer resources to support LGBTQ+ staff and students, while individual readers accessing the collection often requested items that were of personal rather than academic importance, such as zines discussing aspects of mental health.

Over the years the collection developed a multi-use functionality which enabled me to feel that some of the tensions between original creation and eventual use were lessened. Students and non-students sat side-by-side at the special collections reading desk. PhD students researching Northern English cow punk or punk networks; journalists describing the fan reception of David Bowie; non-library members reading and reminiscing about their Riot Grrrl youth; and teenagers from local schools searching for emotional support via perzines, all found what they were looking for within the collection.

Not long after the founding of the collection, news was circulated that Kathleen Hanna, 'early instigator of the Riot Grrrl movement'[5] had bequeathed her papers, which include zines, to New York University's Fales Library & Special Collections. As a creator, Kathleen Hanna would be vitally aware of the potential compromises of allowing an external organisation to house her collection, but her decision to remove them from personal to collective ownership reflects a desire for them to be used and read by a new audience. As she said 'Fales Library was making it all available for the next generation, who will do better than we did'.[6]

Similarly, at LCC, as we contacted zine creators informing them we housed their zines, it was heartening that the vast majority not only did not have any issue with their work being housed in an academic library, but many were positively happy, if somewhat surprised, about it. Understandably, however, we found that zine creators did appreciate the library remaining sensitive to the original creative impulse and environment, and this consideration formed the basis of zine collection decisions we made at LCC Library, some of which are discussed in an article later in this issue.

I found my experience working with the LCC Library Zine Collection an extremely emotional one, not only because zines form part of my own history and memory. Zines are often seen as being labours of love and Jennifer Sinor describes them as 'self-published souls';[7] their genesis within personal or collective experience imbues them with an urgency and emotional impact that can be hard to deny. Tony Drayton, from influential punk fanzines *Ripped and Torn* and *Kill Your Pet Puppy*, co-ran a library zine session with us at LCC during which a student asked him why he thought zines still exist in this age of online communication; were they still necessary? Tony replied, and I paraphrase: zines are no longer technologically necessary, but they are emotionally essential.

It is a view with which I concur and believe that, with consideration and awareness of the tensions, academic libraries can provide important harbours for this essential emotion. However, I am quite glad I am no longer the one navigating those tensions and can relax back in to the happy position of just reading zines for pleasure.

5. Fales Library & Special Collections, "Guide to the Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015 MSS.271", http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingaids/html/fales/hanna/ [Accessed on October 1, 2017]

6. Kathleen Hanna, "This is My Thing: an Interview with Kathleen Hanna", Interview by Lena Singer, *Rookiemag,* http://www.rookiemag.com/2013/09/kathleen-hanna-interview/3/ [Accessed on October 1, 2017]

7. Jennifer Sinor, "Another Form of Crying: Girl Zines as Life Writing", *Prose Studies: History, Theory, Criticism.* Vol. 26, issue 1-2 *Women's Life Writing and Imagined Communities* (2003): 260-264

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