

WoMEn-pROdUced zINes MoVing into

by Brandi Leigh-Ann Bell

Cet article nous montre les difficultés rencontrées par les femmes qui veulent inscrire leurs « zines » dans le courant culturel régulier. Elle examine certains compromis acceptés par les créatrices et essaie de déterminer quelles sont les possibilités et les limites de cette démarche qui se veut une action féministe.

Zines reflect many of the central elements of third wave feminism and are an important part of third wave feminist activities. As a form of cultural production, zines provide many women (generally from their teens to thirties) with an outlet for their own personal stories, a means to reclaim culture and language through their writing, and the ability to critique mainstream media with their own publication. This paper will look at how some women-produced zines, as third wave feminist activity, are currently becoming more mainstream.

Trend Towards Mainstreaming Zines

While zines continue to be part of alternative and underground culture and are rarely found or discussed at length in mainstream culture, they are much more visible than they were in the past. Mainstream magazines and newspapers began to cover the phenomena of zines and brought some aspects of this underground culture closer to the surface of cultural life in North America. Zines traditionally are “non-commercial, non-professional, small-circulation magazines which their creators produce, publish, and distribute by themselves” (Duncombe 6). But now

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some zines do not look like zines anymore: “Some zines are getting so high-end that it’s hard to tell where a zine stops and a magazine begins” (Herr).

Out of this mainstreaming trend have evolved *BUST* and *Bitch*, two examples of what Orr calls “interesting hybrid publications” (39). Both of these publications began as women-produced zines. According to the editors of *BUST*, the “very first issue of *BUST* was nothing more than a Xeroxed-and-stapled little number that shyly slipped its way onto the zine scene” (Hex, Boob and Henzel 4). But *BUST* and *Bitch* have both come a long way since their zine beginnings and are now considered to be situated somewhere between women-produced zines and women’s magazines. They are both printed in magazine format, have glossy covers and magazine-style layouts, and are sold in popular book, music, and magazine stores in the

United States and Canada. However, they remain different from mass-produced mainstream magazines for women in various ways. Notably, both *BUST* and *Bitch* are published by their creators, *BUST* Magazine Enterprises, Inc. and *Bitch* Publications, respectively.

Selling Out Zine Culture

Zine culture has very specific characteristics. To many zine producers, the trend towards mainstreaming zines is worrisome because it contradicts various elements of the zine ethic. *New Musical Express* defines zines as publications “unfettered by commercial constraints” (qtd. in Vale 4), which would mean zines that accept advertising do not fit this definition. There is an element of purity many people find important in zines and fear that advertising corrupts this purity (*The Big Sellout?*). Duncombe argues,

Saying whatever’s on your mind, un beholden to corporate sponsors, puritan censors, or professional standards of argument and design, being yourself and expressing your real thoughts and real feelings—these are what zinesters consider authentic. (33)

Accepting advertisements threatens this authenticity.

Sut Jhally believes that “culture ... cannot be understood ... without understanding the economic context that surrounds and shapes it” (67) and states that “the actual contents of media products is severely effected [*sic*] by their integration into a commodity marketplace” (76). In her

the mainStReAM

discussion of *Ms.* magazine (at a time when it accepted advertisements), McCracken argues that “besides enabling the magazine to continue publication and providing money for women’s causes, the advertisements in *Ms.* promote a consumption-based model of women’s liberation and sometimes undercut the magazine’s positive editorial messages” (279). If these scholars are correct, the fear of zine producers that the purity of zines is corrupted by advertisements is justified. So, even if zine producers include advertisements for alternative products or independent businesses, they are still promoting consumption—a characteristic that threatens the zine ethic of their publication.

Advertisements in zines may also have the power to alter the meaning of zines themselves. Jhally states that “one aspect of advertising’s importance to the cultural realm ... has to do with advertisers’ revenues setting the context within which popular culture production takes place” (77). This could have dramatic effects on zines:

The context of reception is particularly important in the case of zines since ... their politics reside less in what they say and more in what they are: repositories of nonalienated creation and media for nonalienated communication. (Duncombe 166)

Zines are, in their purest form, supposed to represent alternatives to mainstream culture, especially in their attempts to encourage do-it-yourself cultural production instead of the

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consumption encouraged by the mainstream. Zines with advertisements and glossy pages, and books created from zines, do not promote productivity. As Duncombe states, they send “a clear but quite different message: Everybody can *not* be a producer” (166).

Many zine producers do not create zines in order to make a profit: “for most zine writers, money is beside the point. If you make it, great. If you lose it, it’s to be expected” (Duncombe 95). Zine producers who appear to be attempting to make a profit, are often accused of selling out. As Duncombe states, “the very idea of profiting from a zine is anathema to the underground” (13). But while zine producers attempt to resist the trend towards mainstreaming their publications and try to preserve zine culture, they are restricting their reach and limiting the amount of change they can provoke in the population at large.

The Purity of Zine Culture vs. Reaching a Large Audience

While many zines are still produced out of a simple desire to express ideas and communicate with others, some zine producers have set higher goals. *Green* is one of those zines: “We ultimately want someone to buy the magazine” (Packel qtd. in Mediati). While the desire to have people buy your cultural product, and perhaps even to make a profit at the same time, may be antithetical to zine ethic, it is a natural sentiment for many zine producers.

It is not surprising that the dream of some zine producers is to turn their zine into a full fledged magazine that they can run as a business. Marcelle Karp and Debbie Stoller of *BUST* make it clear that the original intention of *BUST*’s editors was to create a viable alternative to women’s magazines: “With *BUST* we wanted to start a magazine for women like ourselves—women who couldn’t relate to the body sculpting tips of *Cosmo* or the eyebrow tweezing directions of *Glamour*” (xiii). For *BUST*’s editors, and those of other zine producers hoping their publication will make it into the mainstream, the higher production standards, pre-sence of advertising, and widening distribution are welcome changes, bringing them closer to their dream.

The producers of zines moving into the mainstream are still likely to have concerns about controlling content and remaining true to their zine origins. However, many of them realize the opportunity they have to create their dream job and disregard the zine ethic to shun all advertising

and profit-making possibilities in order to remain pure. *ThriftScore's* producer, Al Hoff, makes this clear:

Why not be paid to do what you want, what you enjoy doing, what you're good at? Isn't that everyone's dream job? The idea of refusing such an opportunity because the money comes from corporate sources seems bizarre. (qtd. in Futrelle)

As a zine grows and becomes more professional and more widely distributed, it is more likely to be carried and sold at mainstream cultural vendors such as magazine, music, and book stores. On those shelves a zine can greatly expand its readership outside of the zine network and reach people unaware or uninterested in underground culture. As Duncombe states, "like it or not, most people's access to culture and media is limited to mainstream channels" (164), so:

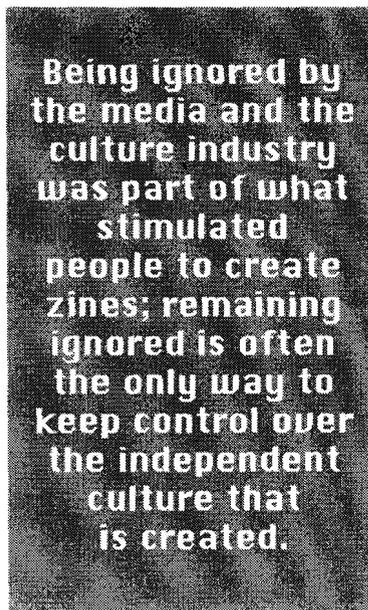
I you want to get your magazine on a newsstand where some kid who is not already part of the Scene will read it, you have to collaborate with the powers that be. (161)

So while some zine producers are satisfied to continue distributing their zines underground, others see possibilities for both ideal jobs and having a wider impact on society through mainstreaming their publications:

Being ignored by the media and the culture industry was part of what stimulated people to create zines; remaining ignored is often the only way to keep control over the independent culture that is created. But this self-ghettoization is problematic if part of the ideal of an alternative culture is to promote your alternative message, to spread your critique where it may do some good. (Duncombe 155)

BUST and *Bitch*: Two Hybrid Publications

As mentioned earlier, *BUST* and *Bitch* are two publications that began as women-produced zines and have, in recent years, transformed into more mainstream publications. This brief examination of these publications will



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demonstrate some of the elements of zine culture that remain while highlighting some deviations from that culture.

Both *BUST* and *Bitch* continue to be published by their creators, maintaining the self-produced aspect of zines. Both publications are professionally printed and follow a magazine-style layout with easy-to-read and logically flowing type and clear distinctions between articles. Both contain common magazine elements: editorials, tables of contents, letters to the editor, advice columns, book and music reviews, etc. They also have regular columns, such as *BUST's* "Susie Q's" and *Bitch's* "Love it / Shove it." *BUST* and *Bitch* also have glossy covers, and *BUST* has glossy, coloured pages (*Bitch* continues to have black-and-white pages and graphics). To a certain extent, both the format and contents of these publications reflect their increasingly mainstream nature and

their desire to be situated alongside mainstream women's magazines in the cultural marketplace. They are, however, not always provided the opportunity to blend in with women's magazines as vendors place them with the alternative or feminist publications. Despite these mainstream elements, *BUST* and *Bitch* each reflect the third wave feminist notion of reclaiming culture. The editors of *BUST* and *Bitch* do not simply replicate elements of women's magazines, but alter them and use them for their own purposes, attempting to make them more exciting and valuable to young women. Advertising alternative products and cultures, and incorporating personal writing and interviews help these publications to maintain some of their zine qualities.

An aspect of both *BUST* and *Bitch* that is obviously antithetical to zine culture is their acceptance of advertising. Both publications frequently have full-page colour advertisements on the inside and back covers. They also have full and partial pages of ads within the publications. As discussed previously, the appearance of these advertisements may affect the content of the publications and undermine the messages in the writing. This problem was highlighted in a letter to the editor in the January, 2000 issue of *Bitch*. In "Actually, no; I think context is everything," McGee takes issue with the advertisement that appeared on the back cover of the previous issue:

I think that's a dangerous ad for a magazine like *Bitch* not to analyze in and of itself You make so many insightful analyses, and that ad definitely confused me. (7)

While *Bitch* is promoting itself as the "feminist response to pop culture" it is sending conflicting messages by filling its advertising space with controversial advertisements. The editors continue to address this issue in their publication: In issue 13, published in 2001, they printed

numerous letters in response to an editorial in which they had encouraged reader response concerning an advertisement they had rejected.

The advertising in both *BUST* and *Bitch* is, however, somewhat different from that in mainstream women's magazines. Excluding the glossy, colour advertisements on the covers of the publications, most of the ads are for small independent corporations such as record labels and clothing stores. There are typically very few, if any, advertisements for hygiene or beauty products, a staple in most mainstream women's magazines. Even though the advertisements may not be the same as those in women's magazines, however, it cannot be denied that the ads may affect the publications' messages.

One of the messages advertisements send to readers is that they are primarily consumers. Zines are meant to "challenge the dichotomy between active creator and passive spectator that characterizes our culture and society" (Duncombe 127), however, these hybrid publications often emphasise consumption and not production of culture. Not only is this message sent through the appearance of advertisements, but both publications also include other consumerist-oriented elements. Both *BUST* and *Bitch* include advertisements for their own products in their publications. Not only are there advertisements for subscriptions, but also for T-shirts, rings, postcards, and other marketing merchandise. *BUST* goes even further in its emphasis of consumer culture by including a column entitled "The Shit" that profiles various recommended products such as Go-Go drinks and Tony & Tina nail polish. While both publications also include calls for submissions which encourage cultural production, the message remains overwhelmingly consumerist.

It could be argued that the consumerism encouraged by *BUST* and *Bitch* is different from that en-

couraged by mainstream women's magazines. Both *BUST* and *Bitch* encourage a sort of entrance into alternative cultures with their inclusion of advertisements and discussions of alternative cultural products and independent businesses that cater to specific subcultures. According to zine culture, this en-



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couragement of consumerism is still a threat to the purity of the publications. However, when compared to mainstream women's magazines, *BUST* and *Bitch* may be encouraging a more selective form of consumerism where readers are not simply encouraged to consume, but are encouraged to consume alternative and independent products.

Despite these deviations from zine culture, there are still some remaining elements of zine ethic present in *BUST* and *Bitch* which differentiate these publications from mainstream women's magazines. Much of the writing in both publications still adheres to the zine convention of "viewing a topic through a highly subjective lens, then sharing those personal insights, experiences and feelings with others" (Duncombe 27). Both publications regularly include personal stories, reactions, and experiences as an important part of their content. There are also a lot of

interviews; a common means of making "some sort of personal connection" between the writer and the facts in zine culture (Duncombe 29). Both *BUST* and *Bitch* regularly interview successful women who challenge mainstream culture in some way, providing readers with both inspiration and role models. Interviewees in *BUST* have included musician Kathleen Hanna, author Dorothy Allison, and comedienne/actress Amy Poehler. *Bitch* has recently published interviews with radio host Terry Gross, artist Laura Lengyel, and video and film artist Sadie Benning.

BUST and *Bitch* clearly demonstrate the many contradictions between zine culture and the process of becoming more mainstream. As the editors of *BUST* state, "while we're dedicated to staying true to our main goal—to bring that hard-edged, honest and humorous voice of the New Girl Order to broad-minded girls everywhere—we can't neglect the other goal: to reach as many eyes as possible" (Hex *et al.* 4). These two goals are common to publishers who find their zines becoming more mainstream, and, as these examples have shown, they create many complications.

Into the Future

As a part of underground culture, women-produced zines have offered women an opportunity to express themselves and share their thoughts with others within the zine network for many years. When zines and underground culture gained more attention from the mainstream in the last decade, there were new opportunities for women zine producers to reach new audiences and create publications that are viable alternatives to mainstream women's magazines. As the hybrid publications *BUST* and *Bitch* demonstrate, however, this mainstreaming process has not been easy and contradictions and conflicts are common.

In the coming years, as these

publications continue to attempt to become popular women's magazines, it will be interesting to see how much control the editors are able to maintain and whether they do stay true to their original goals. It will also be important to determine whether or not these publications, and their increasing popularity, have any effect on mainstream women's magazines for better or worse.

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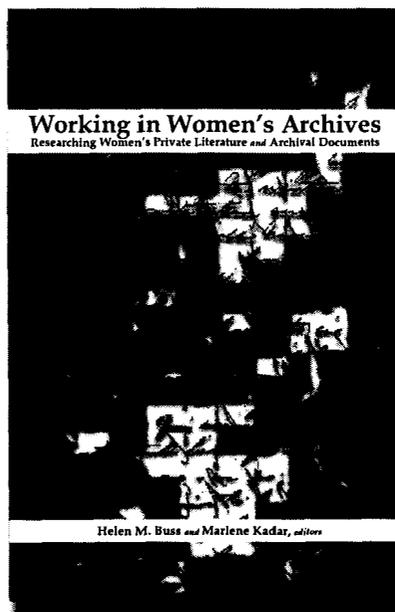
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