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HIST 7110

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ALT:

on art zines, conjectural history, and ranting “alternative”

This text accompanies the zine “ALT,” which was submitted in lieu of a formal academic paper for the graduate HIST 7110 “Advanced Historical Methods” course, and is intended to serve as bibliography and supporting explanatory document for the piece. I am grateful for the opportunity to pursue an alternative format. Where I ultimately decided against specifically focusing my entire paper on a historiography of zines, I did approach the production of this piece with the intention to historically contextualize zines as artistic and cultural media. I devote a section to just that; to that end, *Copy Machine Manifestos: Artists Who Make Zines* serves as my central secondary reference.¹ *Copy Machine Manifestos* refers both to a 2023/2024 exhibition held at the Brooklyn Museum and an accompanying publication edited by Branden W. Joseph and Drew Sawyer. The publication includes six historiographic essays, which roughly chronologize art/artists’ zines (a type of zine) in North America from 1969 to 1993, and includes selections of zines from the 120 artists and collectives represented in the exhibition. Joseph and Sawyer situate art zines in the latter end of the twentieth century and twenty-first century thus far in relation to communities of race, gender, sex, and other cultures/subcultures positioned against mainstream and normative discourses.² By way of overarching historiography in *Copy Machine*

¹ Branden W. Joseph and Drew Sawyer (eds.), “Copy Machine Manifestos: Artists Who Make Zines,” in *Copy Machine Manifestos: Artists Who Make Zines*, (Phaidon & Brooklyn Museum, 2023), 11–12.

² Gwen Allen, “Artists’ Zines: The Fanzine as an Artistic Medium,” in *Copy Machine Manifestos: Artists Who Make Zines*, eds. Branden W. Joseph and Drew Sawyer (Phaidon Press, Brooklyn Museum, 2023), 17–18; Joseph and Sawyer, “Copy Machine Manifestos,” 12, 430–443.

Manifestos, art historian Gwen Allen's "Artists' Zines: The Fanzine as an Artistic Medium" examines the underpinnings of fanzines in 1930s American science fiction magazines and connects the zine's capitulation as alternative to the medium's use in anti-authoritarian punk and queer subculture in the 1970s.

I use this perspective on zines to question the notions of alternative, counter-, and sub-culture. Against colonial and state structures of oppression, one must consider the dynamics of power at play in the articulation of alternative discourses and the politics of accommodation that ascribe them as such in relation to a normative ideal of society.³ The term "alternative" becomes a function by which a dominant discourse peripheralizes certain ideas and practices in relation to itself, effectively subjugating an alternative and countercultural Other and affirming its hierarchical position as normal. Considering Shahid Vawda's "Museums and the Epistemology of Injustice," the particular position of North American museums and collections underscores the epistemic dimension of "alternative" as codified according to a colonization of knowledge and thought hierarchically stratifies certain groups as Other against prescribed, acceptable standards.⁴ What is normal is largely decided beyond us.⁵ Thus, the production of zines must be understood within relational contexts that define alternative/normal. In this case, I use zinemaking as an alternative to a "normal" comparative historiographic essay. This instance of normalcy is structured by North American academia and fomented on rigour, the production of knowledge, and credibility.

³ See Glen Sean Coulthard, "The Politics of Recognition in Colonial Contexts," in *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (University of Minnesota Press 2014), 25–26.

⁴ Shahid Vawda, "Museums and the Epistemology of Injustice: From Colonialism to Decoloniality," *Museum International* 71, no. 1–2 (2019): 74.

⁵ This line of thinking draws strongly from the work of Lewis R. Gordon; particularly, the idea of the coloniality of norms in "Decolonizing Philosophy," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 57 (2019): 22–24.

Turning to disciplinary history, a major text on alternative historiography can be found in Niall Ferguson's 2003 *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*.⁶ Therein, the editor argues for a counterfactual "chaostory" approach that considers the plausible probabilistic outcomes of historical narratives if particular moments diverged from reality. For example, if the American Revolution had never happened or if Nazi Germany had defeated Soviet Russia during WWII.⁷ Historical probability is never explicitly defined, as pointed out by Quentin Deluermoz and Pierre Singaravélou, but *Virtual History* nevertheless supported Ferguson's subsequent rise in popularity in academic and professional spheres.⁸ The co-authors Deluermoz and Singaravélou identify Ferguson's attempt to situate alternative histories scientifically (in the social sciences sense) against a precedent French literary tradition of *uchronie*, as well as Ferguson's overt "neoconservative sympathies."⁹ In response, Deluermoz and Singaravélou situate counterfactual history by exploring the diversity of counterfactual thinking in time and space and the specific problems they pose to historiography. Their text, *Past of Possibilities: A History of What Could Have Been*, situates the methodical considerations of counterfactual history in a more temporally- and spatially-diverse framework than Ferguson's "chaostory." These considerations, the co-authors argue, include the role of imagination/interpretation in historiography, a binary of historical determinism and agency, the rigour and joy of learning history, and recognizing a plurality of futures within past and present structures.¹⁰ Counterfactual

⁶ Niall Ferguson (ed.), "Introduction," in *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (Pan Press, 2003), 79, 84, 88.

⁷ See J. C. D. Clark, "British America: What if there had been no American Revolution," in *Virtual History*, 125–174; see Michael Burleigh, "Nazi Europe: What if Nazi Germany had defeated the Soviet Union?" 321–347.

⁸ Quentin Deluermoz and Pierre Singaravélou, *A Past of Possibilities: A History of What Could Have Been*, trans. Stephen W. Sawyer (2016; reis. Yale University, 2021), 23–24.

⁹ Ferguson (ed.), "Introduction," 8–9; Deluermoz and Singaravélou, *A Past of Possibilities*, 2, 23, 24–25.

¹⁰ Deluermoz and Singaravélou, *A Past of Possibilities*, 302–303.

historiography, given its own context, offers an application for disciplinary historians to speak on the present.

I use screenshots of online sources and camera photographs of physical references. My illustrations are drawn in pencil and photographed using a phone camera. The line art is converted into pixel artwork using the premium version of script-based Android application entitled “8bit Photo Lab.”¹¹ All image processing takes place within Android’s built-in photo editor (AI-modified tools were not used) or Google’s reformatting options. Where my historiography of zines is based on art/artists’ zines, “ALT” is not an art zine. I am not an artist. It is a zine, to be sure, but that is the only descriptor I can comfortably ascribe to it.

An appendix in this document includes a text-only version of the zine. It omits text depicted in the images of sources. The appendix also provides footnote citations where they do not appear in the zine itself. I settled on this method of referencing my sources due to the zine’s production as an assignment.

¹¹ “8bit Photo Lab,” Ilixa, last accessed 9 April 2026, <https://www.ilixa.com/8bitphotolab.php>

Appendix: Text-only

i feel strange feelings as i try to make another one of these godforsaken things. it's not as easy anymore. there are more points to consider. not that there wouldn't be. this is one of those infinitely regressive things. this is for a final assignment in [REDACTED] 7110 "Advanced Historical Methods."

my positionality has been situated to death, but i'm a digital archivist in a history program (hi, i'm LJ! you knew that). my undergrad training was in sociocultural anthropology, though, so i'm ~~worse~~ more obnoxious than a usual grad. you gotta do what you gotta do, right? there are another two final papers i've got to do besides this one. you'll have to pardon me, but i'm abandoning all the pretense of a university essay. this might not be academic at the end of the day. look at my grammar. that's up to the rigours of scholarship; of you. i guess that's the premise of this assignment as i try to finish it: a need to balance. my desire to create something that'll get a good grade against the joy of doing something for fun. it's a simple binary.

this is a zine, short for "magazine" or "fanzine." for all its hip indie alterity in the current moment, zines have existed in relation to mainstream Western discourses since the 1930s and 40s.¹² A historiography of zines isn't my thesis here—in hindsight, that would have been way easier—but i still intend to recognize the medium as a historically- situated art. for alternative and oft marginalized communities, the self- publishable aspect of zines has made it a potent method of expression.¹³ my main source for zine history is

[BACKGROUND: Cover of *Copy Machine Manifestos*]

¹² Allen, "Artists' Zines: The Fanzine as an Artistic Medium,"

¹³ Joseph and Sawyer, "Copy Machine Manifestos," 11–13.

[BACKGROUND: David Vu, *Selections from Copy Machine Manifestos: Artists Who Make Zines*, 2023, photograph, Brooklyn Museum]¹⁴

which refers both to a 2023/2024 touring exhibition first held at the Brooklyn Museum and an accompanying publication edited by Branden W. Joseph and Drew Sawyer. Manifestos' hook is its status as "first exhibition dedicated to the rich history of five decades of artists' zines produced in North America."¹⁵ Its specific focus on artists' zines accomplishes two things for my paper. From the origin of zines in science fiction magazines in the 1930s, it connects the broader medium to alternative and underground communities from the 70s onwards (ex. punk, queer, kink, feminist, activist; an exhaustive list by way of the plurality of the media, etc.) as a potent mode of self-expression against mainstream Western society. Secondly, *Manifestos* situates the production of zines alongside concurrent visual media. From photography, illustration, and collage to photocopy and xerox technology, from poetry to essay and fantasy, zines are artistically, culturally, and relationally flexible.¹⁶

... these are really big discursive regimes that academics have already looked at. im not unconfident that i could connect this whole zine thing to both in a real nice monograph, but that's not what we're here to do (sorry, McLuhan). what im making is also not the classic analog eight-fold. im making this in slides. thats how i've been doing it since i started in 2020. i know i said my positionality has already been super situated, but this is a zine.

¹⁴ "Copy Machine Manifestos: Artists Who Make Zines," Brooklyn Museum, November 2023-March 2024, last accessed 9 April 2026, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/en-CA/exhibitions/copy_machine_manifestos_artists_who_make_zines

¹⁵ "Copy Machine Manifestos: Artists Who Make Zines," Brooklyn Museum.

¹⁶ Joseph and Sawyer, "Copy Machine Manifestos," 13.

you would probably know that without a 447 pp. publication telling you. another premise i'll be carrying forward comes from *Manifesto*'s draft title, "An Incomplete History of Zines by Artists:"

[EXCERPT FROM PAGE 11, *Copy Machine Manifestos*]¹⁷

Manifesto also makes the salient point that an academic and curatorial perspective of zines is somewhat antithetical. the canonization of a zine in these spaces without some reflexivity risks re-creating a definition of the media that occludes some over others. that many of the zines in the exhibit come from archives begs the question as to why they were preserved in comparison to different works.¹⁸ this question extends beyond the materiality of a zine as media and is inextricably connected to the context in which they are created. there's an eye-catching quality to zines as "alternative." zines are ephemeral and limited: these notions disrupt our ideas of publication and why we preserve. it requires us to re-visit our justification for longstanding epistemic ideals of credibility and value.

Occlusion in this way poses problems for cultural practices and scenes that are identified as alternative. Considering the work of scholars like Glen Sean Coulthard,¹⁹ engaging with zines from the pearly domains of academia and cultural institutions involves the risk of re-enacting longstanding politics of representation, identity, and accommodation. What does it mean for artist zines to be put on display at the Brooklyn Museum (and later, Vancouver Art Gallery)?²⁰ where zines emerged as a mode of communication in science fiction fandoms and later used

¹⁷ Joseph and Sawyer, "Copy Machine Manifestos," 11.

¹⁸ Joseph and Sawyer, "Copy Machine Manifestos," 11–13.

¹⁹ Glen Sean Coulthard, "The Politics of Recognition in Colonial Contexts," in *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (University of Minnesota Press 2014), 25–26.

²⁰ "Copy Machine Manifestos: Artists Who Make Zines," Vancouver Art Gallery, May–September 2024, last accessed 9 April 2026, <https://www.vanartgallery.bc.ca/exhibitions/copy-machine-manifestos/>

towards self- expression within the interstices of marginalized communities, there is a disjunction in the media's place in the mainstream. this is not to say zines are an ineffective way of conveying info. the personal and self- determined determination of zine- making offers a more open way of approaching a historiography.

pushing the “alternative” to disciplinary historiography, what does an alternative historiography have to offer? I turn to historian Niall Ferguson's 2003 collection *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*. The essays explore alternative paths of history in a manner that Ferguson refers to as “counterfactual analysis” towards “counterfactual histories” of how historical narratives might have happened if particular things happened differently. he vests historical and logical necessity in doing so and puts forward 2 main premises:

[EXCERPT FROM PAGE 88, *Virtual Histories*.]²¹

in support of Ferguson—

[HEADLINE: “Niall Ferguson quits Stanford free speech role over leaked emails,” *The Observer*.]²²

actually nevermind that

[BACKGROUND: EXCERPT FROM PAGE 276–277, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*.]²³

²¹ Ferguson (ed.), “Introduction,” 88.

²² Mattha Busby, “Niall Ferguson quits Stanford free speech role over leaked emails,” *The Observer*, 2 June 2018, last accessed 9 April 2026, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/jun/02/niall-ferguson-quits-stanford-free-speech-role-over-leaked-emails#>

²³ Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Richard Crawley (J. M. Dent & Sons, 1936), 276–277, last accessed 9 April 2026, <https://archive.org/details/historyofpelopon12thucuoft/page/276/mode/2up>.

later historians criticize Ferguson's hard science approach of statistics and probabilities, as well as his overt right-wing politics. Virtual History's popularity, however, foments how counterfactual and alternative histories are mainly focused on military and political histories.

Quentin Deluermoz and Pierre Singaravélou, in *A Past of Possibilities*, extend the European tradition of counterfactual histories to its use in ancient Greek reasoning; a notable example is Thucydides' *The History of the Peloponnesian War* from the fifth century BCE.²⁴

"Alternative," as it applies to historiography, is not that alternative after all. Deluermoz and Singaravélou note *Virtual History's* precedence in American (*What If?*, 1999)²⁵ and German history scholarship (*Ungeschehene Geschichte*, 1986),²⁶ among other international cases. There are journals and conferences and stuff.

so,

a zine alternative on alternative histories. not a bad thesis with some elbow grease. it's just... that's a little boring, to me. i'm just contributing to another discourse that's become part of the mainstream, another "acceptable" alternative. not that i know what i want to do, anyways. that's how i used to make zines. just start writing and putting things together while i lived my life. but now this is my life. do you know what i mean?

"Much has been written about the need to train PhD students in generalisable skills, for them to experience work environments outside the laboratory or the library. In short, to prepare young researchers that they may, possibly, potentially need to pursue alternatives to academia.

²⁴ Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, qtd. in Deluermoz and Singaravélou, *A Past of Possibilities*, 9–10.

²⁵ See *What If? The World's Foremost Military Historians Imagine What Might Have Been*, ed. Robert Cowley, (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1999), qtd. in Deluermoz and Singaravélou, *A Past of Possibilities*, 34–35.

²⁶ See *Ungeschehene Geschichte: ein Traktat über die Frage: was wäre geschehen, wenn ...?*, ed. Alexander Demandt (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986) qtd. in Deluermoz and Singaravélou, *A Past of Possibilities*, 35.

“I’ve grown tired of this approach, for this wording is dangerously wrong. It still frames the problem as one of finding alternatives to academia. Yet the vast majority of graduate students and postdocs can never reach a permanent job in academia, because those jobs do not and will not exist. Supply vastly outstrips demand.

“Instead we need to be clear: Academia is the alternative career path.”²⁷

most of this was written out of a general angst regarding the ways that things are “supposed” to be. i want to make good papers and do a good job and feel good about doing it, but that’s usually not the case. i just want to be done with writing papers as fast possible. trying to negotiate zines as alternative in an adequately academic fashion and exploring applications of conjectural history are fine and all, but if i do everything the way it’s supposed to be done and it’s still a chore, what’s the use? it’s still fictions and regress. what happens when the alternative is just as fallible?

i’ll probably have to resubmit this assignment as a regular essay, or you might just fail this, and those would be fine. i don’t really feel this a waste, though. i mean, what’s the alternative? hand in nothing? i’ve been thinking about that a lot, about my alternatives and “the way things are supposed to be” are fleeting and changing all the time. it’s not as if i dislike doing school. i guess i got bitter. sorry about that.

oh, a conclusion?

²⁷ Mark Humphries, “Academia Is the Alternative Career Path,” Medium, 20 July 2018, <https://drmdhumphries.medium.com/academia-is-the-alternative-career-path-106c89fc3412>.

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