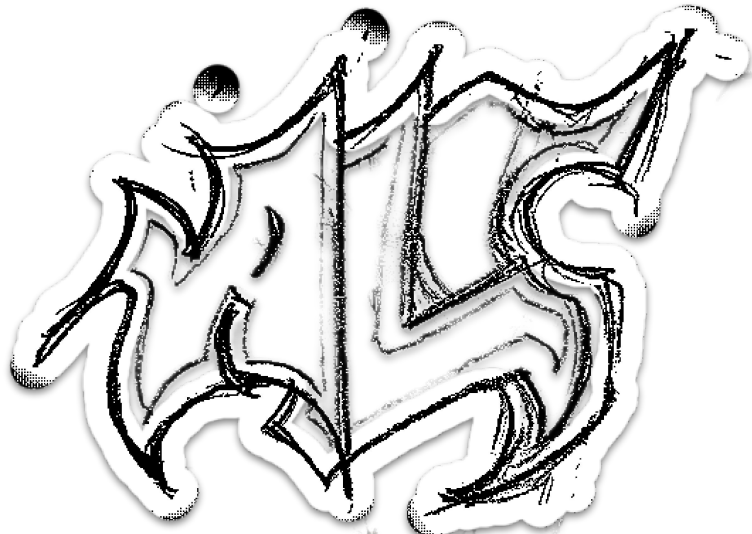




ALT
on art zines, conjectural
history, and ranting
“alternative”



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 for David Churchill's 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. 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. my main source for zine history is

COPY MACHINE MANIFESTOS

ARTISTS WHO MAKE ZINES

Branden W. Joseph
and Drew Sawyer

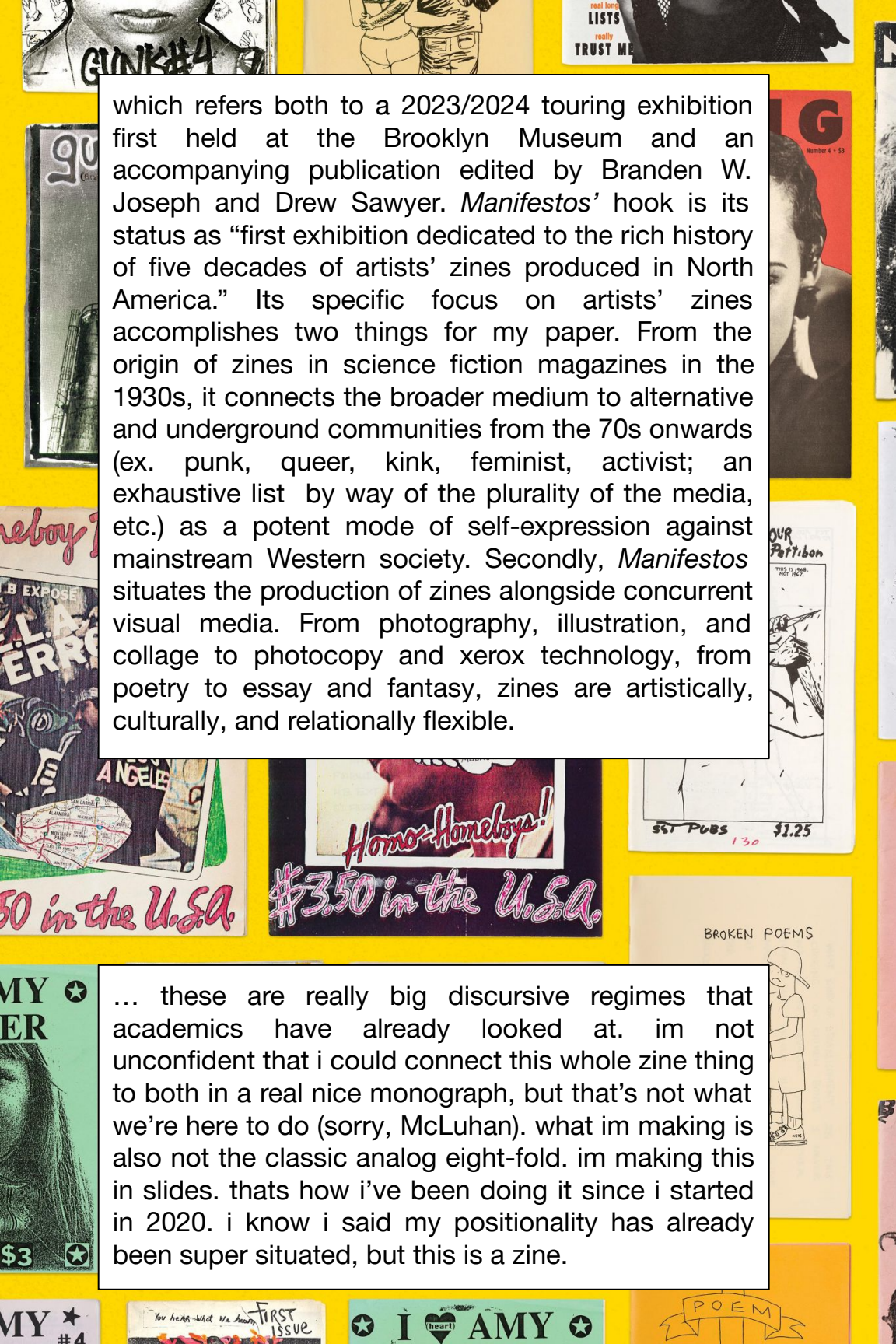
(they got em from
archives and special
collections)

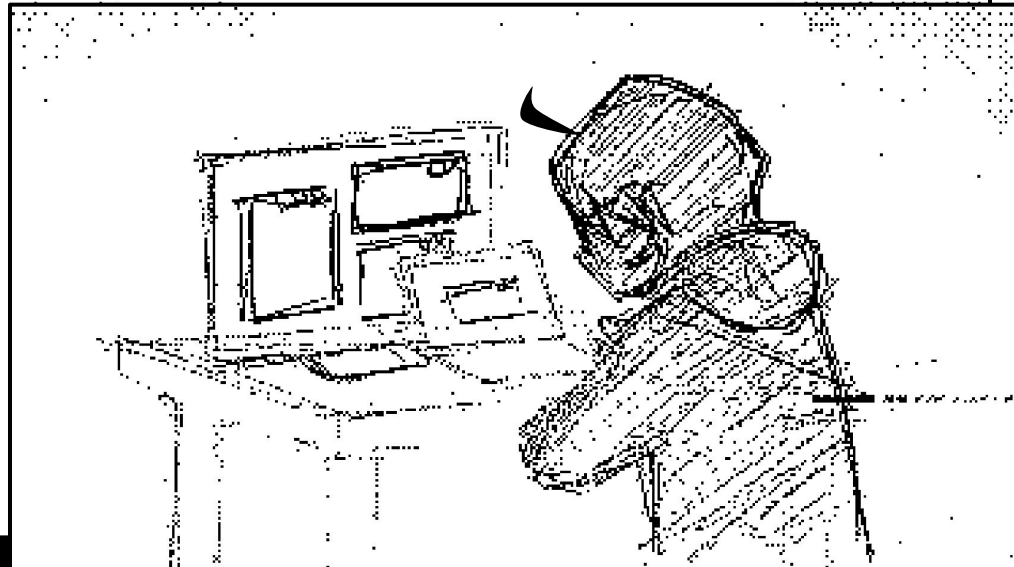
PHAIDON

Brooklyn Museum MY #4

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." 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.

... 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.





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. 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.

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:" (p11)

When this project was initiated in 2019, its working title was "An Incomplete History of Zines by Artists." Indeed, a comprehensive survey or canon of such publications would be impossible because of the sheer volume, variety, and often private and anti-institutional nature of zines by artists (let alone zines more broadly). In one of the first detailed studies of zine production, *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*, media scholar Stephen Duncombe placed "Art zines" last in a lengthy taxonomy of subgenres, just before "The Rest" (designated simply as "a large category") and well below such subgenres as "Music zines," "Travel zines," "Health zines," and "Comix." Duncombe, *Notes from Underground*.

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

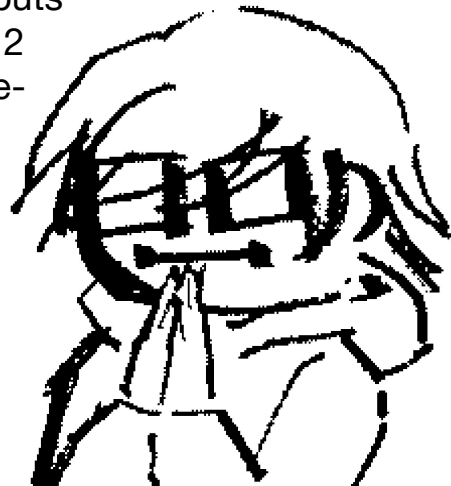


Occlusion in this way poses problems for cultural practices and scenes that are identified as alternative. Considering the work of scholars like Glen Sean Coulthard, engaging with zines from the pearly domains of academia and cultural institutions involves the risk of reenacting longstanding politics 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)? where zines emerged as a mode of communication in science fiction fandoms and later used 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-

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 factors had been different. he vests historical and logical necessity in doing so and puts forward 2 main pre-mises: (p88)



argument.

A number of points emerge when we consider these. Firstly, what actually happened was often *not* the outcome which the majority of informed contemporaries saw as the most likely: the counterfactual scenario was in that sense more 'real' to decision-makers at the critical moment than the actual subsequent events.

Secondly, we begin to see where determinist theories really do play a role in history: when people believe in them and believe themselves to be in their grip. As noted above, the difference in support of Ferguson —

Niall Ferguson quits Stanford free speech role over leaked emails

British historian resigns after urging 'opposition research' be done on a leftwing student



actually nevermind that

Niall Ferguson has stepped down from Cardinal Conversations, a debating platform at Stanford University. Photograph: Sean Gallup/Getty Images

Niall Ferguson, the conservative British historian and political commentator, has resigned from a key position on a US university free speech programme after leaked emails revealed that he urged a group of Republican students to conduct "opposition research" on a leftwing student.

reason now to fall into utter dejection? But what alarmed them most was the proximity of ruin, in case the enemy, flushed with their late success, should stand immediately into the Piræus, now utterly destitute of ships. Not a moment passed but they imagined they were only not in the very harbour; which, in truth, had they been a little more daring, they might easily have been. Nay, had they made this step and blocked up the city, they must infallibly have increased the seditions within it; must have necessitated the fleet to come over from Ionia, though averse to the oligarchy, in order to prevent the ruin of their own relations and the total destruction of their country; and, in the mean time, Hellespont, Ionia, the isles even up to Eubœa, in a word, the whole empire of Athens must have been their own. Yet, not in

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.

Terrified, however, at these tidings, the Athenians made a

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.

afterwards held, in which they appointed *Nomotheta** and filled

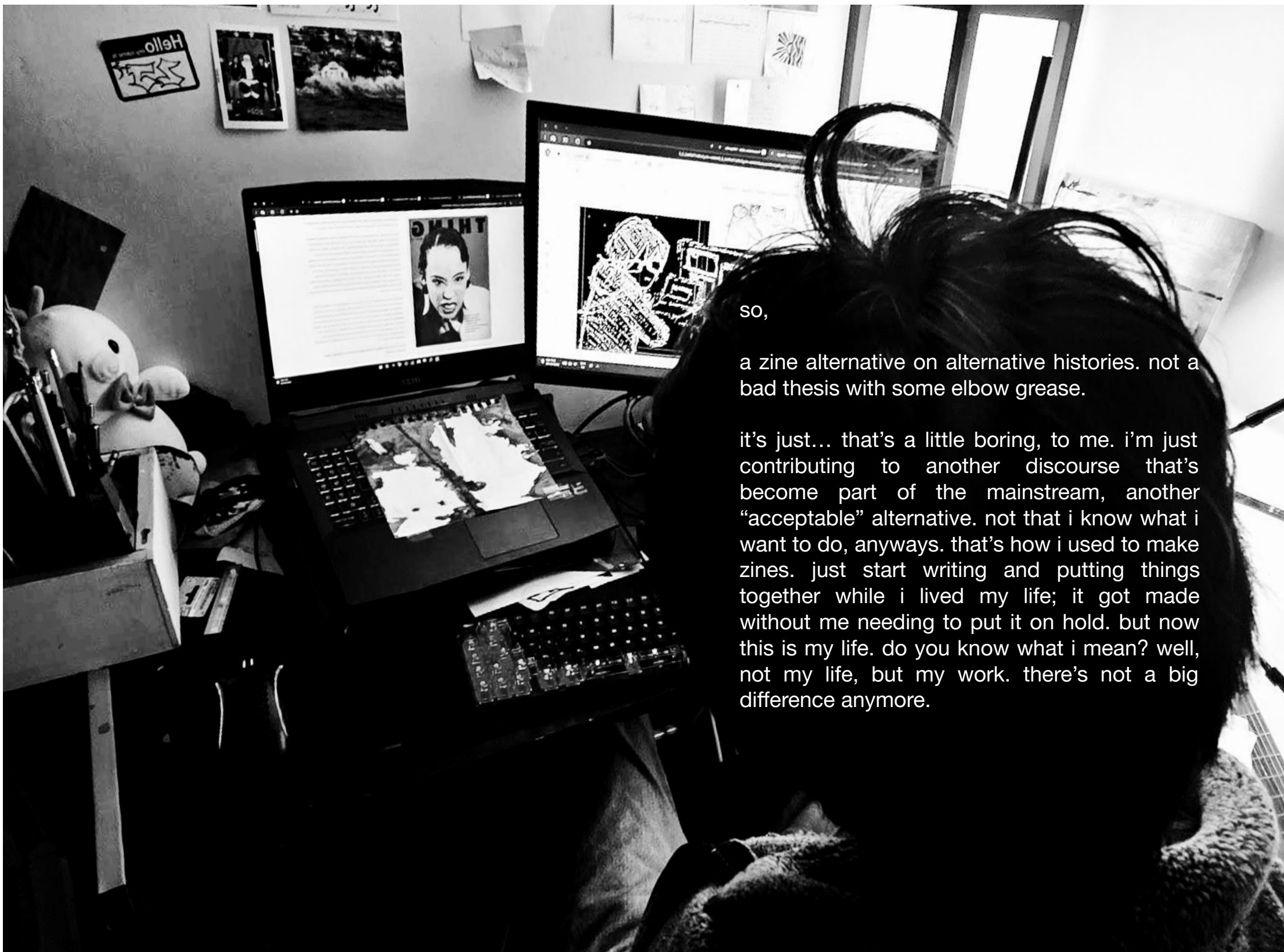
“Alternative,” as it applies to historiography, is not that alternative after all. Deluermoz and Singaravélou note *Virtual History's* precedence in American (*What If?*, 1999) and German history scholarship (*Ungeschehene Geschichte*, 1986) among other international cases. There are journals and conferences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

from the low situation into which their affairs were now plunged, this enabled Athens to re-erect her head.

They decreed, farther, the recalment of Alcibiades and his adherents; and, dispatching a deputation to him and the army at Samos, exhorted them to exert their utmost efforts for the public service.

In the first moments of this new revolution, Pisander and Alexicles, with their partizans, and in general all the great sticklers for the oligarchy, withdraw privately to Decelæa. But Aristarchus, who was one of the generals of the State, took a different route from all the rest; and, carrying off a party of archers, though rank Barbarians, went off towards Oenoë; Oenoë was a fortress of the Athenians on the frontiers of Bœotia. But the Corinthians, on a provocation peculiar to themselves, having procured the concurrence of the Bœotians, held it now blocked up, because a party of their countrymen, drawing off from Decelæa, had been put to the sword by a sally of the garrison from Oenoë. Aristarchus, therefore, having in a conference settled matters with the besiegers, deceives the garrison in Oenoë, by assuring them, that, “as their countrymen in Athens had made up all their quarrels with the Lacedæmonians, they also were bound to deliver up this place to the Bœotians; and that this was an express provision of the treaty.” Giving credit therefore to him as in public command, and ignorant of all the late transactions because closely blocked up, they agree with the enemy and evacuate the fortress. In this manner the Bœotians regained possession of abandoned Oenoë: and thus the oligarchy and sedition were suppressed at Athens.

But, about the same space of time in the current summer, in regard to the Peloponnesians at Miletus;—when none of those who were substituted by Tissaphernes during his absence at Aspendus, made regular payments; and nothing could be seen either of Tissaphernes or the Phœnician fleet; and Philippus, who accompanied him, sent advice to Mindarus, the admiral in chief; and Hippocrates, farther, a citizen in Sparta, who was then at Phaselis, advised him also, that “this fleet would never join him, and in all respects they were shamefully abused by Tissaphernes;”—as Pharnabazus had made them an invitation, and declared himself ready, if aided by the confederate fleet, to engage as strongly as Tissaphernes for the revolt of what cities yet remained in subjection to the Athenians,—Mindarus, hoping to find more punctuality in the latter, with notable conduct, and by a sudden signal to the fleet, that his motions might not be



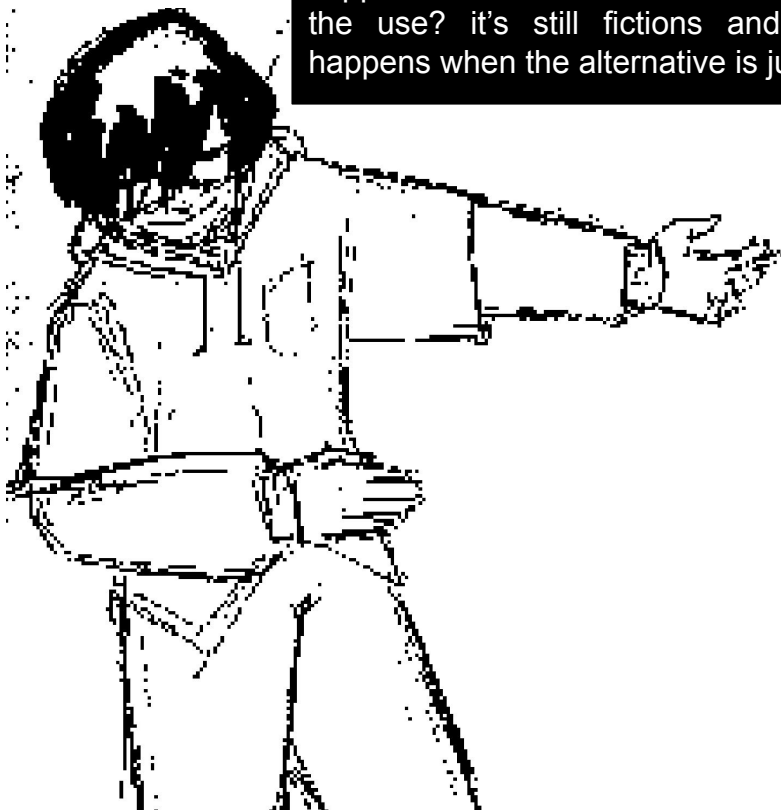
so,

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; it got made without me needing to put it on hold. but now this is my life. do you know what i mean? well, not my life, but my work. there's not a big difference anymore.

“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.

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’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.

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?

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

(Mark Humphries, “Academia Is the Alternative Career Path,” 2018)

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