Destroying the Feminine Ideal:

How 1990s Girl Zines Constructed Femininity in the United Kingdom

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This research analyzes how girl zines in the 1990s United Kingdom constructed femininity. These self-publications offered girls and women an alternative channel wherein they could challenge traditional patriarchal depictions of femininity. The study situates these zines within the larger field of third wave feminism, which is characterized by a greater freedom of gender expression, a reclamation of hyperfemininity, and DIY (Do-It-Yourself) activism. Within the pages of these zines, femininity is constructed as a multifaceted and layered concept; women are constructed as beings in their own right rather than objects for the 'male gaze.' This analysis is framed through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque literary theory, which posits that such materials hold a revolutionary potential to overturn the dominant world order. Through a qualitative analysis of fifteen zines from the 1990s United Kingdom, this research aims to understand how these materials utilized the carnivalesque elements 'the grotesque body' and 'the upside-down world.' It additionally examines how these zinesters explored realms which have historically been reserved for men, such as anger, humor, profanity, and obscenity. Through this qualitative analysis, certain recurring themes are identified, such as body image, eating disorders, 'girl power,' menstruation, and more. Key findings reveal that the constructions of femininity in these girl zines contributed not just to an ever-evolving feminist body of work, but to a carnivalesque canon of literature. Through this analysis, a nuanced picture comes into focus about how '90s third wave feminists enacted a wide range of visual and linguistic resistance. Although the girl zine movement of the 1990s had declined by the end of the decade, their constructions of femininity continue to hold significance for modern day feminists. By reconceptualizing this media as a subversive, feminist, and revolutionary art form, these 1990s publications can act as a guide and inspiration for fourth wave feminists to understand how their struggle fits into the larger feminist discourse.

KEYWORDS: Girl zines, third wave feminism, DIY feminism, carnivalesque, anger, humor, male gaze, resistance, visual culture

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As feminist liberation tools, the elements of anger and humor hold within them the potential to challenge the Western patriarchal order. Historically denied to women, anger and humor can work in tandem to criticize the existing social order, constructions of femininity, and expectations placed upon women.[1] This is exemplified in the subversive art form known as 'girl zines,' an international self-publishing phenomenon of the 1990s in which girls and women created, distributed, and read widely the works of like-minded individuals.[2] These zinesters' usages of anger and humor in depicting femininity situates their work squarely within the carnivalesque, a literary theory developed by Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin.[3] Through this lens, a nuanced picture emerges about the visual and linguistic forms of resistance enacted in these third wave feminist zines, as well as their revolutionary potential.

The proliferation of girl zines originated in part with the explosion of Riot Grrrl, an international punk feminist movement of the 1990s.[4] Although American punk band Bikini Kill's zine first popularized the term 'girl power' in 1991, the British girl group Spice Girls catapulted the phrase to global recognition in 1996.[5] Many zinesters were dismayed at the appropriation of this revolutionary slogan that had provided hope and carried them through the first half of the decade.[6]

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[1] Kristen Schilt, "'I'll Resist With Every Inch And Every Breath': Girls and Zine Making as a Form of Resistance," *Youth & Society* 35, no. 1 (September 2003): 77; Sevda Caliskan, "Is There Such a Thing as Women's Humor?," *American Studies International* 33, no. 2 (October 1995): 49; Amy Marvin, "Feminist Philosophy of Humor," *Philosophy Compass* 17, no. 7 (July 2022): 4.
[2] Kimberly Creasp, "Zine-Making as Feminist Pedagogy," *Feminist Teacher* 24, no. 3 (2014): 157.
[3] Sefer Kalaman and Mikail Batu, "Carnivalesque Theory and Social Networks: A Qualitative Research on Twitter Accounts in Turkey," in *New Media and Visual Communication in Social Networks*, ed. Serpil Kır (Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2020), 273-74.
[4] Alison Piepmeier, *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 2.
[5] Kristen Schilt, "'A Little Too Ironic': The Appropriation and Packaging of Riot Grrrl Politics by Mainstream Female Musicians," *Popular Music and Society* 26, no. 1 (2003): 14.
[6] Schilt, "'A Little Too Ironic,'" 14.

Stripped of its power, the term 'girl power' became a source for derision by those who felt that they lived in a postfeminist world in which third wave feminists were clamoring for rights that had already been won.[7] By characterizing girl zines as carnivalesque, third wave feminism can be evaluated anew for its revolutionary potential in the context of 'DIY feminism' as opposed to era-defined waves.[8]

As a medium, the historically small and underground distribution of zines lends itself to facilitating subversive depictions of femininity for the female, as opposed to male, gaze.[9] This 'male gaze' refers to a voyeuristic divide between men as active lookers and women as passive objects, a common practice in mainstream visual media.[10] So pervasive is this gendered gaze that the female consumption of ostensibly innocuous media can internalize misogynistic beliefs, turning visual media into a contested battlefield for feminists.[11] Girl zines often defiantly constructed femininity to provoke outrage through language, such as profanity or reclaimed slurs, and imagery, such as grotesque, ridiculous, or controversial representations of women.[12] Such publications furthered the revolutionary concept that depictions of women in media can exist outside of the male gaze; here, girls are not dismembered and consumed, but are constructed in their own right.

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[7] Piepmeier, *Girl Zines*, 136-37.
[8] Michelle Kempson, "'My Version of Feminism': Subjectivity, DIY and the Feminist Zine," *Social Movement Studies* 14, no. 4 (August 26, 2014): 460-61.
[9] Stephen Duncombe, *Notes From Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Microcosm Publishing, 1997), 10-11; Sheri Klein, "Breaking the Mold with Humor: Images of Women in the Visual Media," *Art Education*, Pre-service and In-service, 46, no. 5 (September 1993): 61.
[10] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (London, England: Oxford University Press, 1975), 808-09.
[11] S. Craig Watkins and Rana A. Emerson, "Feminist Media Criticism and Feminist Media Practices," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Feminist Views of the Social Sciences, 571 (September 2000): 156.
[12] Michelle Comstock, "Grrrl Zine Networks: Re-Composing Spaces of Authority, Gender, and Culture," *JAC* 21, no. 2 (2001): 389-90.

As compared to the first wave of feminism, which focused on women's suffrage, and the second wave, which championed women's legal and social rights, third wave feminists of the 1990s reconceptualized ideas of femininity and gender. They also began to center their work around the concept of intersectionality, which considers how overlapping social identities create different experiences of oppression.[13] Having grown up under certain beliefs made possible by earlier feminist waves, many '90s zinesters were outraged and disillusioned by how much further they had to go to reach gender equality.[14] Over the course of the decade, their more abstract and complex goals, especially in contrast with the concrete objectives of previous waves, were often trivialized.[15] This was especially prevalent when put in comparison with the disenfranchised positions of women in the non-Western world, a problem within feminism which persists to this day.[16] By considering '90s girl zines as an example of the carnivalesque, they join a unique literary canon that affirms the revolutionary potential of women taking ownership of their anger and humor.

Despite predictions of the disappearance of zines in a technologically advanced twenty-first century, zines continue to be produced and exert influence, especially as a space for feminist thought.[17] The explosion of the internet has additionally created digital spaces, such as social media, podcasts, and blogs, for women to create media outside of the male gaze. In the 2010s, these alternative channels have engendered movements for body positivity and awareness of sexual harassment. In the current political climate, looking to earlier feminist thinkers to understand how they organized, shared ideas, and expressed themselves could

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[13] Liz McQuiston, *Suffragettes to She-Devils: Women's Liberation and Beyond* (London, UK: Phaidon Press, 1997), 18-19; Piepmeier, *Girl Zines*, 8-10.
[14] Piepmeier, *Girl Zines*, 44.
[15] Toril Moi, "'I Am Not a Feminist, but...': How Feminism Became the F-Word," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 121, no. 5 (October 2006): 1735-36.
[16] Moi, "How Feminism Became the F-Word," 1735-36.
[17] Piepmeier, *Girl Zines,* 2.

inspire and vitalize the modern feminist movement. Despite advancements in gender equality, girls and women across the world continue to be a marginalized group, especially when that identity intersects with those of class, race, and sexuality.

By harnessing anger and humor in their publications, these women stepped into Bakhtin's carnivalesque, a space in which they could question, destabilize, and retaliate against prevailing visual objectifications of femininity. Bakhtin posits that in the same way that the festival of Carnival creates a space for the temporary reversal of traditional power structures, so too exists a form of literature that can destabilize the existing societal norms.[18] In contrast with the 'safety value' theorists of Carnival, such as Max Gluckman and Victor Turner, Bakhtin understands these writings to be subversive beyond the context within which they exist, as they hold space for unique and creative ways of thinking about one's current world order.[19] In line with Bakhtin's carnivalization of literature, this research will primarily explore how women employed the 'grotesque body' and 'upside-down world,' as well as profanity, obscenity, and laughter, to visually and linguistically construct femininity in girl zines in the United Kingdom during the 1990s.[20] This two-part analysis will investigate zinesters' chosen topics, which include visual dismemberment and sexualization, a range of taboo subjects, body image, girl power, violence towards and by women, feminist tensions, and women pop stars. In classifying girl zines as carnivalesque, it imbibes them with a revolutionary significance, making them an ideal setting to search for constructions of femininity during the third wave, as

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[18] Mikita Hoy, "Bakhtin and Popular Culture," *New Literary History*, History, Politics, and Culture, 23, no. 3 (Summer 1992): 770-71.
[19] Edward Muir, "Carnival and the Lower Body," in *Ritual in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 98-99.
[20] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 122-27.

well as to contextualize the evolution of feminism over the course of the 1990s in the United Kingdom.

Literature Review and Theoretical Concepts

While much of the secondary literature about zines has favored the American perspective, this research aims to explore how girls and women in the United Kingdom conceived of girl power, femininity, and feminism through an analysis of their zines.[21] Zinesters themselves drew attention to their rage with the stylization 'grrrl zines' to denote an angry growl.[22] Scholars Alison Piepmeier, Anita Harris, and Janice Radway, among others, have subsequently paid specific attention to the usage of anger within the published works.[23] Humor, however, is less commonly examined by scholars of zine culture. This could be due to humor's historical association with a male, rather than female intellect, or to the subjective nature of humor being more difficult to study, especially when compared to concrete expletives of anger.[24] To recognize the unique blend of anger and humor utilized by '90s zinesters in the United Kingdom, it is necessary to combine the field of girl zines with Bakhtin's carnivalesque literary theory, third wave feminist perspectives, and gender theory.

The debate about the origins of '90s girl zines is divided among scholars that argue that they diverged from a male tradition, those that believe they were a

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[21] Piepmeier, *Girl Zines*; Mary Celeste Kearney, *Girls Make Media* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006); Anita Harris, *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004); Janice Radway, "Girl Zine Networks, Underground Itineraries, and Riot Grrrl History: Making Sense of the Struggle for New Social Forms in the 1990s and Beyond," *Journal of American Studies* 50, no. 1 (February 2016); Comstock, "Grrrl Zine Networks."
[22] Comstock, "Grrrl Zine Networks," 385-86.
[23] Piepmeier, *Girl Zines,* 53; Harris, *Future Girl*, 153; Radway, "Girl Zine Networks, Underground Itineraries, and Riot Grrrl History," 7; Marion Leonard, "'Rebel Girl, You Are The Queen Of My World': Feminism, 'Subculture' And Grrrl Power," in *Sexing The Groove: Popular Music And Gender*, ed. Sheila Whiteley (Oxfordshire, England: Routledge, 1997), 231-33.
[24] Klein, "Breaking the Mold with Humor," 63; Caliskan, "Is There Such a Thing as Women's Humor?," 49.

continuation of earlier feminist movements, and those that claim they came from a practice of girlhood. The prevailing idea within the field, supported by scholars Stephen Duncombe and Michelle Comstock, positions girl zines as a revolt by women in punk against their male-dominated subculture.[25] Duncombe remarked that girl zines had emerged from the male tradition of music zines, but additionally noted that Riot Grrrl zine networks were part of an effort to recreate the feminist communities of earlier waves.[26] He attributed this in part to many girls and women within the punk movement loudly refusing to be relegated to the part of girlfriend, prompting a sudden outpouring of their participation in zine culture.[27] Comstock, meanwhile, traced zines to male pamphleteering of the eighteenth century, as well as to the male-dominated science fiction of the 1930s and punk zines of the 1970s.[28] Her analysis, like Duncombe's, relied on form rather than content; she observed that these documents shared characteristics such as self-publication and limited circulation.[29] When content is taken into account, however, girl zines can be examined as part of a feminist, rather than male, tradition.

In opposition to Duncombe and Comstock, other scholars understood girl zines as a tradition of feminism or girlhood. Piepmeier proposed that girl zines were actually a continuation of earlier waves of feminist participatory media.[30] By analyzing their content, purpose, and aesthetics, she compared the suffragette scrapbooks and sexual health brochures of the first wave of feminism, as well as the mimeographed pamphlets of the second wave, to the girl zines of the third wave.[31] She identified zines as a form of resistant media, something which, even

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[25] Duncombe, *Notes From Underground*, 71; Comstock, "Grrrl Zine Networks," 389.
[26] Duncombe, *Notes From Underground*, 74, 71.
[27] Ibid., 71.
[28] Comstock, "Grrrl Zine Networks," 389.
[29] Ibid., 383-85.
[30] Piepmeier, *Girl Zines*, 29.
[31] Piepmeier, *Girl Zines*, 29.

today, academics and the public alike do not associate with women.[32] In understanding resistant media as publications which question and defy expectations, Piepmeier changed the conversation to one of a long-standing feminist, rather than male, tradition. Other scholars, like Mary Celeste Kearney, conceived of girl zines as a continuing tradition of girlhood. She linked '90s girl zines to the long history of teen magazines marketed towards girls, as well as to self-published girls' newsletters beginning as early as the 1930s.[33] Rather than examining form or content, Kearney considered how the participatory nature of such media has facilitated a unique connection with girls, who have historically been restricted to private writings like letters and diaries, and excluded from taking part in public, mainstream publications.[34] Her proposition that '90s girl zines had originated in the private sphere of girlhood was therefore not directly aligned with Piepmeier's connection to the organized waves of feminism. While the two stood together in their rejection of zinemaking as historically male, they disagreed on whether the predecessors of '90s girl zines were a private or public affair. Regardless, their work has prompted a recent trend of scholars more seriously considering girl zines as an inherently feminist and/or female practice.[35] By analyzing the visual and linguistic choices of this corpus through a carnivalesque lens, this research aims to further situate '90s girl zines as a specifically feminist art form which challenged patriarchal authority, tradition, and rules.

As the term 'girl zines' inherently links the publications to girls and women, an understanding of girlhood and gender will provide insight into how

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[32] Ibid., 25.
[33] Kearney, *Girls Make Media*, 142.
[34] Ibid., 152.
[35] Red Chidgey, "Hand-Made Memories: Remediating Cultural Memory in DIY Feminist Networks," in *Feminist Media: Participatory Spaces, Networks and Cultural Citizenship*, ed. Elke Zobl and Ricarda Drüeke (Transcript Verlag, 2012), 88-89; Creasp, "Zine-Making as Feminist Pedagogy," 157.

these socially constructed concepts exert considerable influence on the content and themes of these publications. As girls and women have historically been restricted to the home, girlhood often occurs in private, within domestic spaces, and likely in the company of other girls.[36] In contrast with the subcultures of boys, those of girls have often been rendered invisible.[37] This girlhood is elevated to a unique status within third wave feminism specifically, as these feminists often returned to their youth to revise the category of 'woman,' which manifested in playful reclamations of 'girly' activities rejected by earlier feminists and expressions of hyperfemininity.[38] The concept that gender is a revisable social construct was elaborated upon by Judith Butler, who proposed that gender is not a fixed identity, but is instead constructed through repetitive and performative actions.[39] The socialization into girlhood and boyhood therefore wields influence over people's self-perceptions and general worldviews, regardless of how they later identify their gender. Understanding gender as a fluid, rather than static, social construct holds space for how '90s zinesters retaliated against confining depictions of femininity by men.

The climate within which these girls and women produced their work can be contextualized through an understanding of feminism and its backlash in the 1990s. Following the legal and social successes of the first two waves of feminism, the 1990s saw a rise in tensions surrounding the feminist movement both internally and externally.[40] Alongside third wave feminism arose postfeminism, which was a reactionary movement that viewed feminism as

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[36] Jenny Garber and Angela McRobbie, "Girls and Subcultures," in *Resistance Through Ritual - Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, ed. Tony Jefferson and Stuart Hall (Routledge, 1977), 108.
[37] Garber and McRobbie, "Girls and Subcultures," 106.
[38] Kempson, "Subjectivity, DIY and the Feminist Zine," 462; R. Claire Snyder, "What Is Third‐Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 34, no. 1 (Autumn 2008): 179.
[39] Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 523.
[40] Moi, "How Feminism Became the F-Word," 1736-39.

outdated and stigmatized the word 'feminist.'[41] Women engaged in postfeminist thought as well as men, and began to distance themselves from the movement, an issue which has continued into the twenty-first century with the oft-uttered phrase "I'm a feminist, but…"[42] Intersectional feminist theory also came into popular consciousness during this decade, which aims to understand the ways in which women of overlapping social identities, such as ethnicity, class, and sexuality, experience discrimination.[43] Many third wave feminists critiqued previous waves, especially their second wave predecessors, for not considering intersectionality; between these waves, there existed a tension that zinesters scrutinized throughout their work.[44] As third wave feminism additionally focused on the deconstruction of womanhood and encouraged greater freedom of gender expression, girl zines are an ideal setting to search for subversive depictions of femininity.[45] These varying strands of feminist and anti-feminist thought in the 1990s converged in zinesters' chaotic and playful depictions of femininity.

In mainstream Western visual media, there exists a long tradition of constructing women and femininity for a male audience.[46] The visual value of women has historically been defined by their appearance and sexual worth in religion, literature, and art.[47] The 'male gaze,' coined by Laura Mulvey in 1975, refers to this creation of visual media for the male, heterosexual audience, and is centered around the objectification and sexualization of women.[48] Women's

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[41] Piepmeier, *Girl Zines*, 9.
[42] Moi, "How Feminism Became the F-Word," 1736.
[43] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1244-45.
[44] Piepmeier, *Girl Zines*, 27.
[45] Snyder, "What Is Third‐Wave Feminism?," 179, 183; Kempson, "Subjectivity, DIY and the Feminist Zine," 462.
[46] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 809; Rosemary Betterton, "Introduction: Feminism, Femininity and Representation," in *Looking On: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media*, ed. Rosemary Betterton (London, England: Pandora Press, 1987), 7-8.
[47] Betterton, "Feminism, Femininity and Representation," 7-8.
[48] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 808-09.

bodies, therefore, become sites of contention for feminist artists. Lisa Tickner asserted that women have two choices when faced with this visual tradition: either ignore it or "take the heritage and work with it - attack it, reverse it, expose and use it for their own purpose."[49] By subverting magazine and newspaper images created by the dominant male culture, zinesters grounded their work in the knowledge that humiliation and objectification are the historical norm in visual representations of women.[50] This understanding of dissident feminist art is complemented by Sheri Klein's 1993 comparative analysis of mainstream and underground portrayals of femininity in Western art and comics.[51] In opposition to male humor, which has historically reduced women to objects for visual consumption, Klein understood feminist humor as a disruptive visual tool for liberation.[52] The subversive constructions of femininity in '90s zines thus retaliated against a visual practice which deemed women incomplete and dismembered objects for the male gaze.[53]

Through their usages of humor and anger, girl zines embodied the destructive and provocative spirit which is essential to Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque literary theory.[54] This theoretical framework provides concrete characteristics which categorize these zines as carnivalesque, and therefore as revolutionary feminist media which resisted the feminine ideal. While Bakthin concentrated his analysis on the works of sixteenth-century French writer François Rabelais, he asserted that any writing can be carnivalesque.[55] Scholars

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[49] Lisa Tickner, "The Body Politic: Female Sexuality and Women Artists Since 1970," in *Looking On: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media*, ed. Rosemary Betterton (London, England: Pandora Press, 1987), 239.
[50] Klein, "Breaking the Mold with Humor," 65.
[51] Ibid., 60-61.
[52] Ibid., 65.
[53] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 808-09.
[54] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 10.
[55] Hoy, "Bakhtin and Popular Culture," 765-66.

have therefore applied his literary theory to a range of texts such as the works of feminist comic Julie Doucet, contemporary Gothic literature, and Twitter.[56] In recognizing the centrality of laughter to the carnivalesque, it becomes relevant to consider how 'playing the fool' and constructing femininity in humorous rather than 'proper' ways can challenge prevailing ideas.[57] In relation to the patriarchal desire for control over women's bodies, the distortions of comedy have historically been deemed inappropriate for a 'well-behaved woman' to engage with.[58] Similarly, women's anger, which has historically been discouraged and suppressed, wields a unique power in resisting dominant systems.[59] As the element of anger has already been studied extensively within '90s girl zines, it is the innovation of this research to integrate the studies of humor and anger simultaneously to understand the genre as carnivalesque.[60]

Within the current academic discourse, this research intends to provide a fresh perspective about how humor and anger were employed concurrently by '90s girl zinesters to construct femininity in a carnivalesque space. In defiance of the male gaze, these publications envision femininity as a multifaceted and ever-changing concept. As carnivalesque literary theory has not yet been applied to the '90s girl zine genre, this innovation offers a counter to the patriarchal dismissal and trivialization of girl zines.[61] The frequent utilizations of humor and anger by '90s zinesters situates their work within a canon of resistant and

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[56] Frederik Byrn Køhlert, "Female Grotesques: Carnivalesque Subversion in the Comics of Julie Doucet," *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 3, no. 1 (June 2012): 19-21; Catherine Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic* (London, UK: Reaktion Books, 2006), 66-69; Kalaman and Batu, "Carnivalesque Theory and Social Networks," 276-77.
[57] Helga Kotthoff, "Gender and Humor: The State of the Art," *Journal of Pragmatics* 38, no. 1 (January 2006): 5; Marvin, "Feminist Philosophy of Humor," 4.
[58] Kotthoff, "Gender and Humor," 5.
[59] Alice A. Keefe, "Tending the Fire of Anger: A Feminist Defense of a Much Maligned Emotion," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 39, no. 1 (2019): 69.
[60] Piepmeier, *Girl Zines,* 53; Harris, *Future Girl*, 153; Radway, "Girl Zine Networks, Underground Itineraries, and Riot Grrrl History," 7.
[61] Piepmeier, *Girl Zines*, 85.

revolutionary art which challenged prevailing misogynist narratives surrounding femininity during the 1990s in the United Kingdom. From the present vantage point of fourth wave feminism, an understanding of the methods employed by '90s girl zinesters can serve women today in reconceptualizing how to retaliate against oppressive patriarchal ideas of how they should look, speak, and behave.

Methodology

Girl zines are uniquely situated to understand perceptions and constructions of femininity in the 1990s. They were created in an underground self-publishing movement which operated apart from mainstream male-dominated publications.[62] In this alternative space, zinesters were far more able to disagree with, poke fun at, and outright ridicule societal expectations of women than, for example, writers working for a mainstream magazine.[63] By gathering zines from a variety of creators, cities, and years, this research aims to place a range of perspectives in conversation with one another about views of feminism and depictions of femininity over the course of the decade. As zine authors only refer to themselves by name and location, it is difficult to apply a truly intersectional approach to this study. However, two of the zines in this study were explicitly made by queer women, and others explore queer themes.

Thirteen of the fifteen zines were collected from the London College of Communication at the University of Arts London (UAL). As zines are expressions of visual culture created by subjugated or ostracized groups, they are often categorized as trivial by the world of academia.[64] For this reason, there are few zine archives, and even less so for the specific category of '90s girl zines. Of this corpus, nine were created in 1995 or earlier; this is typical of zine culture in

[62] Comstock, "Grrrl Zine Networks," 389.
[63] Kearney, *Girls Make Media*, 137.
[64] Piepmeier, *Girl Zines*, 85.

the 1990s, as there was an explosion in the first half of the decade following the publication of Riot Grrrl's manifesto in 1991.[65] Three were created in 1996 or later, which will be useful to understand a change over time with respect to the commodification of girl power. The remaining three were undated but confirmed to have been made in the 1990s by the archivists at UAL. Six of the zines were created by two or more people, which contributes a unique angle about the collaborative nature of the medium. The collection was created in ten different cities across the United Kingdom, and with four zines, London is the most popular location. The inclusion of zines from small towns like Melton Mowbray and Boughton-under-Blean illustrates that women across the United Kingdom participated in the girl zine movement, and had shared experiences and sentiments about femininity.

This collection of fifteen zines has a total of 359 pages, which averages out to twenty-four pages per source. Although the DIY (Do-It-Yourself) nature of zines does not dictate a preferred length, this is a typical quantity for this particular collection. Zines are dense with content, as they incorporate multiple images on each page in a variety of formats. However, as they tend to focus on repeated themes, the selected corpus is a manageable size for a focused, in-depth analysis that does not overwhelm the research with thematic saturation. By identifying the thematic and methodological similarities of these zines, this research can reach a greater understanding of the recurring issues within '90s girl subcultures. The research narrows the scope from hundreds of images to twenty-four figures, which consist of a range of pages and formats such as covers, manifestos, comics, collages, reprinted works, original drawings, and more. Through a detailed visual, textual, and comparative analysis of a variety of perspectives and formats, this research can draw out a more nuanced and multifaceted picture of femininity.

[65] Schilt, "'A Little Too Ironic,'" 6-7.

To analyze this collection, this research will focus on two sites of a critical visual methodology: the site of production and the site of the image itself.[66] The site of production considers how the image was made and by whom.[67] This is further developed by analyzing the technologies used to create the image, the genre and its visual hallmarks, and the social identities created or reflected in the image.[68] This analysis will also draw on the mid-twentieth century Situationist International technique of détournement, a method that repurposes preexisting media in order to achieve new meanings.[69] Détournement can be applied to a wide range of literature, from 'low culture' photographs, headlines, and comics to 'high culture' films and philosophical quotes.[70] This research will examine how the technique of détournement is utilized in girl zines, where zinesters frequently cut images, texts, and headlines from magazines and newspapers in order to subvert patriarchal depictions of women. The site of production additionally searches for repeated themes of the genre, such as body image and girl power, and considers how these constructions of femininity reflected the power structures of the decade.

The second site, the site of the image, concerns itself with visual effects and meanings.[71] This is understood practically through elements such as size, placement, texture, and layout, as well as the cultural context, symbolism, and intertextuality of the image.[72] In applying these concepts to '90s girl zines, this research will consider the significance of differently sized images, the placements

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[66] Gillian Rose, "Towards A Critical Visual Methodology," in *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*, 4th ed. (London, England: Sage, 2016), 24-25.
[67] Rose, "Towards A Critical Visual Methodology," 27.
[68] Ibid., 27-32.
[69] Gabriel Zacarias, "Détournement in Language and the Visual Arts," in *The Situationist International: A Critical Handbook*, ed. Alastair Hemmens and Gabriel Zacarias (London, England: Pluto Press, 2020), 214.
[70] Zacarias, "Détournement," 218.
[71] Rose, "Towards A Critical Visual Methodology," 24-25.
[72] Ibid., 32-34.

of preexisting texts and images to create new meanings, and the direct references to other feminist thinkers and comics of the twentieth century.

Chapter 2: The Grotesque Body

Introduction

In Western visual media, femininity has long been defined in relation to appearance and sexual worth.[73] Voyeuristic constructions of the feminine ideal in magazines, advertisements, and film have historically placed a high value on white, straight, youthful women who adhere to male-ordained beauty standards.[74] In such a society, depictions of women as monstrous, grotesque, and dismembered can become acts of carnivalesque resistance. These representations provoked laughter through Bakhtin's conception of the grotesque body by relying on "exaggeration, hyperbolism, [and] excessiveness."[75] Within this laughter is the power to question and temporarily overturn the existing hierarchy.

In this collection, zinesters resisted an unattainable feminine ideal by constructing femininity as a grotesque and multifaceted concept. Some zinesters combatted the mainstream dismemberment and sexualization of women by performing the operation in reverse. Rather than visually reducing women to objects for male consumption, these women employed dismemberment to comment on themes like body image, women's intellect, the feminist movement, and taboo subjects like masturbation. Many zines devoted their attention to other taboo subjects such as menstruation, motherhood, and eating disorders. Although Bakhtin's framework focused on the phallus in the ability of the grotesque body to "conceive a new, second body," the concept can more aptly be applied to cisgender women in their ability to give birth and literally create new life.[76] By representing menstruating women as outlandish monsters, zinesters defied the societal silences surrounding the topic. Similarly, these women used depictions of

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[73] Betterton, "Feminism, Femininity and Representation," 7-8.
[74] Ibid., 10-11.
[75] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 303.
[76] Ibid., 317.

the grotesque body to challenge the silences around the uglier issues of maternity. Depictions of eating disorders can also be linked to Bakhtin's conception of the body as open and unfinished.[77] In the withholding of food and drink, disordered eating has much in common with Bakhtin's focus on "the gaping mouth," which he emphasized as a "wide-open bodily abyss" at the center of the grotesque.[78] Finally, musings about women's bodies and intellects factored prominently into the pages of these self-publications.

Many of these zines relied on the Bakhtinian hallmarks of 'marketplace speech' and 'carnival laughter' to express their discontent with how women and femininity were typically represented in mainstream media. Zines operated as a forum for women to engage with marketplace speech, which referred to "abusive language, insulting words or expressions" and contained an "atmosphere of freedom, frankness, and familiarity."[79] As profane language has historically been considered improper for women to use, zines held a revolutionary potential for women to reclaim misogynistic and derogatory words. In conjunction with this, zinesters' snarky and unusual constructions of femininity elicited a therapeutic carnival laughter, something which is indiscriminately directed at the subjects, the self, and the world.[80] By creating grotesque women as subjects for laughter, zinesters realized that a truly carnivalesque grotesque form should be affirming and humorous, as opposed to distressing.[81]

By performing these grotesque versions of femininity, zinesters replaced the mythic flawless woman with a monstrous, screaming one, and expressed their anger about being held to an unattainable feminine ideal. Through détournement, as well as specific choices about the sizes and placements of photographs,

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[77] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 281.
[78] Ibid., 316-17.
[79] Ibid., 16, 152.
[80] Ibid., 11-12.
[81] Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic*, 68.

drawings, and cartoons, zinesters used hyperbolic renderings of women's bodies to communicate their anger about the way that women were depicted in visual media. Through musings about body image, women's intellect, a range of taboo subjects, and the feminist movement, these zines deftly questioned and mocked popular portrayals of the time.

Dismemberment

The process of visual dismemberment offered zinesters a unique and explicit chance to express their anger about societal expectations about women's bodies. Popular advertisements often severed women's heads in favor of body parts like legs, hands, and feet.[82] In opposition to this mainstream tendency, one 1993 zine surrounds a mutilated body with newspaper advertisements for weight loss, diets, and liposuction (Figure 1).[83] Unlike advertisements which sexualize to sell, the removal of limbs and head forces the reader to consider the body as it is: a wounded body. This technique of détournement functions as an angry response to the bombardment of ads which sell dangerous and damaging ways to lose weight. Although three of the surrounding texts specifically reference women, the body's mutilation obscures its own gender. By choosing to focus the piece around a decidedly non-gendered body, the zinester thus elevates the piece to more widely comment on the destructive power of impossible standards for women and men alike.

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[82] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 809.
[83] Linus, *Linus* (London, England, 1993), London College of Communication, 4.

Figure 1: Mutilated body surrounded by advertisements, Linus, *Linus* (London, England, 1993), London College of Communication, 4.

In contrast to this tradition which isolated women's body parts to sexualize them, some zinesters defiantly detached women's heads from their bodies to encourage them to scream. This choice focuses readers' attention on the woman's head, linked to her intellect, as opposed to her body. This is evident in the manifesto of a zine from 1993, which features a drawing of a woman's head and shoulders (Figure 2).[84] Above the sketch is a text which contemplates being a girl in a male-dominated world, and ends with a declaration that "we change the whole fuckin world." Together, the page highlights not only women's intellect and strength in numbers, but also the feminist momentum of the first half of the decade. In line with Bakhtin's conception of the grotesque, several features are

[84] Bela, Jane, Kairen, Karren, Sarah, Cruella, and Tracey, *Leeds & Bradford Riot Grrrl!*, (Leeds, England, 1993), London College of Communication, 10.

exaggerated: a gaping mouth, big eyes, and wild, disheveled hair. Above her, the zinesters pasted the cutout words, likely from a women's magazine, "You're worth more than you think." While she screams in terror, someone 'reassures' her about her worth; this technique of détournement creates a condescending juxtaposition which prompts a sardonic laughter in the spirit of Carnival. Despite the pasted affirmation, this woman clearly does not fit neatly into any patriarchal standards of beauty, but rather verges on grotesque and monstrous. By featuring a severed head in conjunction with a passionate feminist text, these zinesters challenge the reduction of women to bodies, and instead concentrate on their intellect.

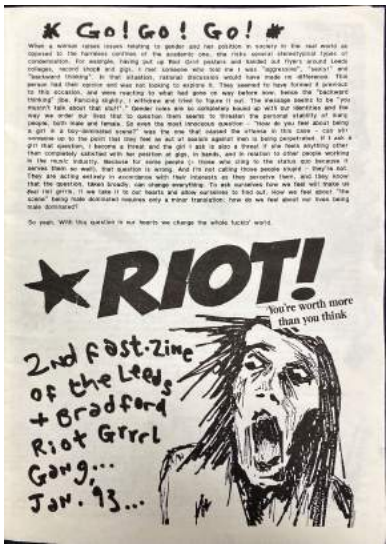

Figure 2: Screaming woman below feminist text, Bela, Jane, Kairen, Karren, Sarah, Cruella, and Tracey, *Leeds & Bradford Riot Grrrl!*, (Leeds, England, 1993), London College of Communication, 10.

The sizes and placements of these severed heads can convey specific emotions of hopelessness or empowerment. In the opening pages of a 1997 zine, zinester Katie sets the tone with a pessimistic piece titled "the definition of monsters" alongside a photo of a screaming woman's head (Figure 3).[85] The small size of the photo is striking, as it is overshadowed by the writing and

[85] Katie, *Werewolves #2 Of Menace and Jeopardy*, (London, England, 1997), London College of Communication, 3.

metaphorically conveys her feeling of helplessness. Katie verbally affirms this sentiment by tying the plight of subjugated women in the 1990s to that of women accused of witchcraft: "an aggressive woman is a 'bitch' - burn the witch." The statement links this wave of feminism to a conflict between women and the patriarchy that stretches over not just decades, but centuries. She ends the piece by suggesting that freedom can be found when "*they have given up trying*." By the time this was written in 1997, girl power had already been largely stripped of its original revolutionary intent; such a bleak opening to the zine fits into the dwindling hope among late '90s feminists.[86] In contrast with this, zinester Vanessa from the village of Harwell utilizes the full page for a joyful, screaming woman's head beside a text about masturbation (Figure 4).[87] Her large mouth draws attention to Vanessa's expressed frustration about the silence surrounding the topic. Her zine becomes a safe and empowering space for her to discuss such taboo subjects with her readers. This becomes especially meaningful in the context of the small village in which Vanessa produced the image, as zines likely allowed her a greater degree of expressive freedom. Although both zines employ the same type of severed, shouting head, they generate very different effects. Such heterogeneity exemplifies the diversity of zine culture; this one visual motif is used effectively to convey both despair and empowerment. This versatility reflects the strengths of both zine culture and the third wave feminist movement, wherein pessimism and optimism could coexist and engage in conversation with one another.[88]

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[86] Schilt, "'A Little Too Ironic,'" 14.
[87] Vanessa Sparkle, *Girls with Guns*, (Harwell, England), London College of Communication, 16-17.
[88] Piepmeier, *Girl Zines*, 179; Moi, "How Feminism Became the F-Word," 1739.

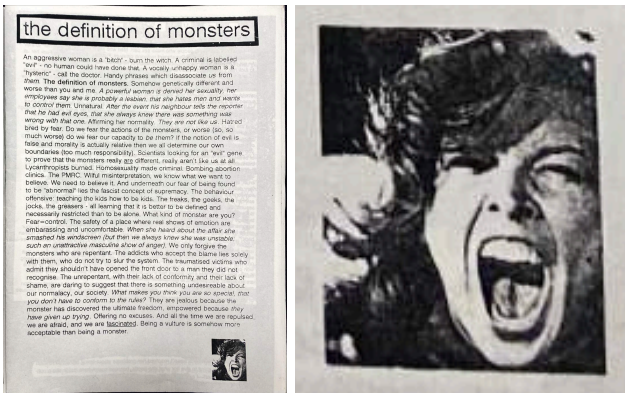

Figure 3: The definition of monsters, Katie, *Werewolves #2 Of Menace and Jeopardy*, (London, England, 1997), London College of Communication, 3.

Figure 4: Showerpower, Vanessa Sparkle, *Girls with Guns*, (Harwell, England), London College of Communication, 16-17.

Menstruation

Taboo subjects are often explored in zine culture; alongside masturbation, '90s girl zinesters in this corpus expressed sentiments about menstruation.[89] In doing so through a grotesque body, these women reflected upon an internalized revulsion about the subject, as well as attempts to reckon with that internalization. In a zine from 1993, zinester Jane wrote a two-page piece titled "A Load of Bleedin' Twats (A polemic on periods)" which begins with "FUCK this natural,

[89] Schilt, "'A Little Too Ironic,'" 6.

mother earth bollox."[90] Her tirade against the pain and embarrassment of periods is complemented by two drawings, each defiant of the societal embarrassment surrounding menstruation. The first is borrowed from Julie Doucet's 1989 comic "Heavy Flow" and depicts a monstrous Godzilla-sized woman towering over a city (Figure 5). Above her reads, "Nobody will know you're having a period." The clashing text and imagery creates a simultaneously humorous and angry effect; everyone is certainly aware of her period as she terrorizes the city, grabbing citizens and filling the streets with blood. The second is a hand drawn cartoon, likely by Jane herself, of a naked woman with her mouth agape, similarly with blood pouring onto the floor (Figure 6). She is in the center of a jeering mob, who calls her "red knickers" and "dirty cow." Both figures feel monstrous, as they are positioned as unnatural relative to others in the drawings. In reprinting and emulating Doucet's "Heavy Flow," Jane positions herself among other women similarly struggling with the silence surrounding menstruation. She additionally situates her piece as a successor to second wave feminism by including three quotes about menstruation from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949). Before Jane reflects upon her "mortification of people knowing," she references de Beauvoir's contemplation that "it is not easy to play the idol, the fairy, the faraway princess, when one feels a bloody rag between one's legs." In an intertextual dialogue with a feminist text published over forty years prior, Jane candidly considers how patriarchal constructions of femininity clash with the lived experiences of actual women. Rooted in this dissonance, and with public forums denied to them, zines functioned as alternative spaces for women to express and work through this internalized disgust. These two playful portrayals of menstruating women as grotesque invite everyone to laugh at this little-discussed feeling of monstrosity. This laughter is directed at everyone: towards society for enforcing a silence, towards women for obeying and

[90] Jane, *Shag Stamp #2*, (Bradford, England, 1993), London College of Communication, 10-11.

internalizing, and towards menstruation itself. By weaving other feminist thinkers into her own musings about the stigmatization of menstruation, Jane positions her work within the enduring struggle against the patriarchal desire to police women's bodies.

Figure 5: Heavy Flow, Jane, *Shag Stamp #2*, (Bradford, England, 1993), London College of Communication, 10.

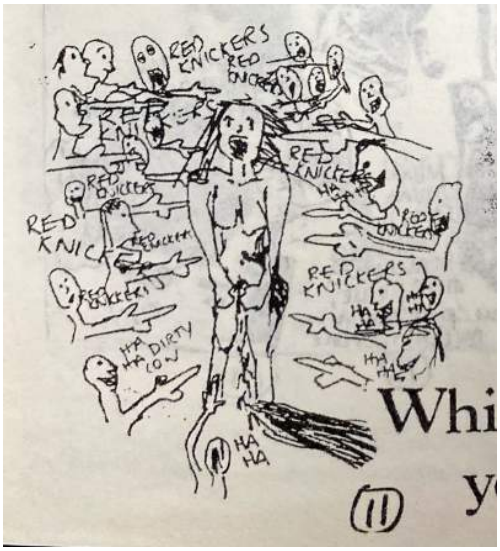

Figure 6: Woman and jeering crowd, Jane, *Shag Stamp #2*, (Bradford, England, 1993), London College of Communication, 11.

Through dark humor, other zines similarly reflected how a societal silence surrounding menstruation is rooted in a patriarchal control over and disregard for women's bodies. In another zine from 1993, a comic pokes fun at 'safe sanitary protection' as a girl jumps to her death and hopes that the wings on her pads will save her (Figure 7).[91] It ends with "there's only safer sanitary protection," which is likely a cheeky reference to contraceptives, an important development for second wave feminists in career and family planning.[92] As the girl in the comic is described as "little sis," this functions as another example of third wave zinesters' aligning themselves as successors to second wave feminists. The comic additionally prompts a carnival laughter from its readers with the idea that 'wings'

[91] *Bad Attitude #3*, (London, England, 1993), 56a Infoshop, 3, 10.
[92] Claudia Goldin, "The Quiet Revolution That Transformed Women's Employment, Education, and Family," *The American Economic Review* 96, no. 2 (May 2006): 18-19.

on a pad would save someone from falling to their death. In line with Bakhtin's conception of the grotesque, this dark humor references "the grave and the crib," as the comic is centered around both death and the ability to reproduce.[93] By linking the inadequacy of her menstrual hygiene products directly to her death, the comic creates a wider commentary about the frequency with which women's health issues are trivialized or ignored. Such humor situates the comic within a larger feminist discourse about menstruation, women's health, and reproduction.

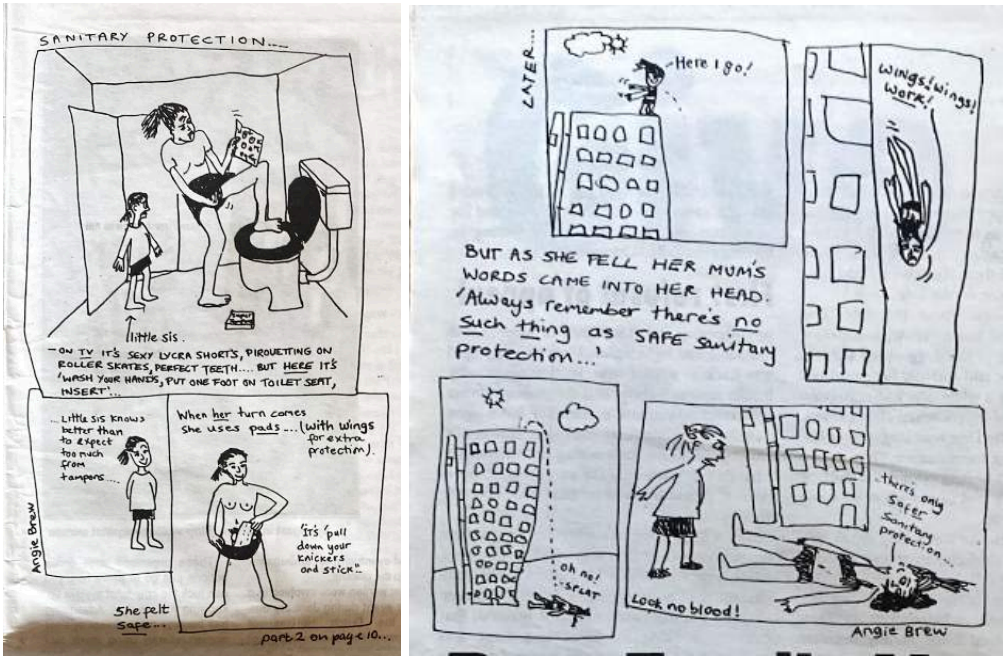

Figure 7: Sanitary Protection, *Bad Attitude* #3, (London, England, 1993), 56a InfoShop, 3, 10.

Motherhood

In the same spirit of challenging patriarchal silences, zinesters attacked a divine image of motherhood by explicitly linking childbirth and childrearing with excrement. On the cover of a zine from the small town of Melton Mowbray, two zinesters defy the romanticization of maternity by pasting an adult woman's face

[93] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 26.

onto a statue of a baby sitting on a toilet (Figure 8).[94] Carnivalesque attributes like marketplace speech and vulgarity appear in the pasted 'Poop! Poop!' alongside this combination of mother and child.[95] By constructing their cover page in this way, these zinesters immediately mark their zine as a space for women to deconstruct prevailing ideas about motherhood and femininity. This is also explored on the final page of a zine from the city of Bradford, where the zinester has pasted the individually cut out words "'we are born between faeces and urine' (St. Augustine)" over a photo of a woman holding a baby (Figure 9).[96] Through détournement, these images are transformed into challenges to traditional depictions of motherhood; rather than emphasize a loving and sacred bond between mother and child, birth here is represented as just another process of the lower stratum, a central feature of Bakhtin's carnivalesque.[97] These zinesters' utilization of détournement calls attention to the historical separation between women and 'impolite' imagery and language. By elevating women to a trophy-like status, Western media disallows them the vulgar luxuries afforded to men. By repurposing words and images from preexisting media, these zinesters reclaim agency over their motherhood. As alternatives to mainstream media, zines offered women the space to work through the more complicated and ugly feelings that come with maternity.[98]

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[94] Michelle and Joey, *Bananas and Custard*, (Melton Mowbray, England), London College of Communication, 1.
[95] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 148.
[96] Jane, *Shag Stamp #2*, (Bradford, England, 1993), London College of Communication, 23.
[97] Muir, "Carnival and the Lower Body," 99.
[98] Piepmeier, *Girl Zines*, 119.

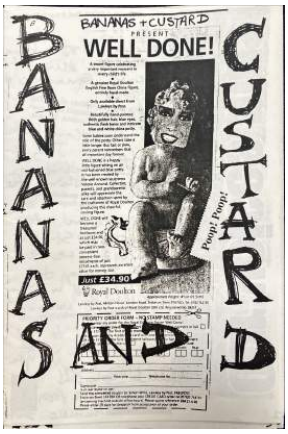

Figure 8: Woman-baby on toilet, Michelle and Joey, *Bananas and Custard*, (Melton Mowbray, England), London College of Communication, 1.

Figure 9: St. Augustine quote on woman and baby, Jane, *Shag Stamp #2*, (Bradford, England, 1993), London College of Communication, 23.

Eating Disorders

When applying Bakhtinian elements of eating and drinking to this collection, it is more often the lack of consumption that resonates with the 1990s experience. Two zines from 1993 feature collages related to eating disorders; by repurposing texts and imagery from mainstream magazines, the collages invoke the technique of détournement to create new meanings.[99] Rather than validating the patriarchal internalization which equates weight with beauty, these collages represent the societal obsession with women's bodies as an oppressive and violent act. In a 1993 zine from London, phrases related to weight and appearance ("she's overweight - they'll all laugh," "cosmetic surgery changed my life," and "he says I'm fat and ugly,") are placed in conversation with phrases which feature violence towards women, such as "my boyfriend keeps hitting me," "serial rapist," and "what makes a man rape" (Figure 10). By pasting these texts into the same space, zinester Hannah comments more widely about how women's appearances are often linked to the violence enacted against them, such as the victim-blaming idea that a woman could be 'asking for it.' Visually, the collage pieces together a

[99] Hannah, *Girls' Annual*, (London, England, 1993), London College of Communication, 6-7; Jane, *Shag Stamp #2*, (Bradford, England, 1993), London College of Communication, 14.

Frankenstein of women's body parts to subversively mimic what mainstream depictions do in their beheadings of women. Rather than sexualize them, the literal cutting of advertisements and photographs of real women keeps this violence at the front of readers' minds. It is visually overstimulating, with multiple instances of women's mouths, eyes, and genitals, all of which are key features in Bakhtin's understanding of the grotesque body.[100] Although on their own, these images would be more sexual than grotesque, the layout combines so many images with such violent words that it becomes grossly overwhelming.

A collage from another 1993 zine, this time from Bradford, similarly invokes violence through the inclusion of aggressive texts like "don't **kid** yourself" and "your body, you can't overthrow it… your body still <u>controls you</u>" (Figure 11).[101] By including a quote from Simone de Beauvoir, zinester Jane again situates herself within a larger conversation about the patriarchal policing of women's bodies and the subsequent disconnection from the self: "from puberty to menopause woman is the theatre of a play that unfolds within her and in which she is not personally involved." In concert with naked images of thin women and dismembered body parts, these collages swirl themselves into anger. By abstaining from writing or drawing anything original, both Hannah and Jane succinctly condemn the way that popular magazines sexualize women amidst a culture of violence. The inclusions of photographed women, as opposed to cartoons or drawings, remind readers of the link between seemingly innocuous popular magazines and violence enacted against women.

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[100] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 317.

[101] Jane, *Shag Stamp #2*, (Bradford, England, 1993), London College of Communication, 14.

Figure 10: Collage of women's body parts, Hannah, *Girls' Annual*, (London, England, 1993), London College of Communication, 6-7.

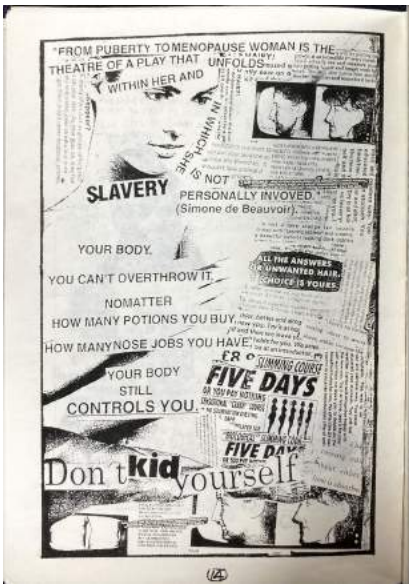

Figure 11: Collage don't kid yourself, Jane, *Shag Stamp #2*, (Bradford, England, 1993), London College of Communication, 14.

As a pervasive and deeply internalized issue, disordered eating was often represented casually, in a manner that suggested it was so part of everyday life that it became an afterthought. On the page following Figure 10 in the 1993 *Girls' Annual*, a skeletal woman is drawn so thin that she stretches across the entire

page; her mouth hangs open as she says to the viewer, "God, I need to go on a diet. I've gone up to a size 10" (Figure 12).[102] The title for the page, with hearts dotting the i's, cheekily reads, "Cool stuff - Dig it girl!!" The text is not about eating disorders; instead, it is a series of reviews of records, bath creams, and zines. The image is entirely disconnected from all the text on the page, and functions as a parody of the miscellany pages of '90s mainstream women's magazines, which frequently juxtaposed serious with lighthearted content.[103] This imitation satirizes how this presentation style trivializes the seriousness of eating disorders, embeds them within everyday life, and enforces not only the taboo silence surrounding them, but the illness itself.

Figure 12: Skeletal woman size 10, Hannah, *Girls' Annual*, (London, England, 1993), London College of Communication, 8.

Body Image and Intellect

Alongside their critiques of mainstream perpetuations of disordered eating, zinesters also expressed frustration with how patriarchal societies simultaneously revere women's bodies and dismiss their intellect. In one zine from Melton Mowbray, the zinesters paste a larger image of a woman's head onto a smaller

[102] Hannah, *Girls' Annual*, (London, England, 1993), London College of Communication, 8.
[103] Kearney, *Girls Make Media*, 141.

image of another woman's body (Figure 13).[104] The size difference between head and body critiques the societal praise for small women's bodies by representing it as misshapen and grotesque. Although a larger head might initially indicate a greater emphasis on intellect, the hand-written scrawl "am I pretty enough?" on her forehead signifies an externally imposed, and subsequently internalized, obsession with looks over intellect. Much like the combination of a grotesquely thin woman alongside unrelated text (Figure 12), this image is placed beside a rant about alcohol. Such contrast suggests an informality with which women internalized patriarchal expectations and accordingly questioned the worth of their bodies.

Figure 13: Am I pretty enough, Michelle and Joey, *Bananas and Custard*, (Melton Mowbray, England), London College of Communication, 7.

The cover of *Female Itch (The Maiden Voyage)* presents a more optimistic vision of how the fragmentation of women's identities is an opportunity for a feminist construction of femininity.[105] In this bizarre depiction, the woman's face and feet are human, while her body is a mannequin (Figure 14). This choice, much like the previous image, simultaneously focuses readers' attention on her

[104] Michelle and Joey, *Bananas and Custard*, (Melton Mowbray, England), London College of Communication, 7.
[105] *Female Itch (The Maiden Voyage*), (United Kingdom), London College of Communication, 1.

intellect and criticizes unrealistic body standards for women. By placing this playfully absurd depiction on the cover, the zinester invites readers into a space where they can collectively laugh at mainstream representations and then imagine how those depictions can be repurposed to serve a feminist end. It calls to mind the dismembered and mutilated torso in Figure 1 in its confrontation with the fragmentation of women's bodies and identities. However, here, by pasting a woman together on her own terms, the zinester suggests that femininity can always be reconstructed in one's own image. This manifests in a pioneering sea captain setting sail for a battle with hell; the destination is located through a hand-written quote from Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*. For feminists, this clash with hell could take the form of conflict with patriarchal values or other societal pressures. *Inferno* concludes with Dante's escape from hell and therefore on a note of hope. While the woman is clearly fragmented, she still faces forward and remains intent on scratching her "female itch" as a "crusading feminist" on "the maiden voyage." The imagery here reflects the optimistic impulse of the feminist movement; rather than despair in women's dismemberment, the zinester considers how to create an empowered and feminist identity for herself by using the tools at her disposal.

Figure 14: Crusading feminist, *Female Itch (The Maiden Voyage)*, (United Kingdom), London College of Communication, 1.

Conclusion

In their constructions of women and femininity as grotesque, '90s zinesters in the United Kingdom contradicted and rebelled against depictions of women in mainstream media. These zines produced images of women imbibed with the spirit of Carnival: women who mocked and laughed at their oppressors, women who cursed frequently, and terrifying women. Screaming, severed heads, dismembered bodies, and bizarre, pasted-together Frankensteins filled the pages of their work. Through profanity, obscenity, and laughter, these images resisted patriarchal assumptions about what women should look like.

By constructing femininity as grotesque rather than beautiful, zinesters attacked the mainstream dismemberment of women, openly discussed taboo subjects like masturbation, menstruation, motherhood, and eating disorders, and opposed the dismissal of women's intellect. Through détournement, these women seized the capitalist media being sold to them, and repurposed it to create a resistant and feminist art form. Depictions of women as grotesque thus function as acts of resistance in a society which glorifies a silent and agreeable feminine form fit for male consumption.[106]

[106] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 808-09.

Chapter 3: The Upside-Down World

Introduction

In an era just before the explosion of the internet, girl zines offered like-minded individuals a unique space to exchange ideas, especially ones deemed unusual or eccentric by mainstream society.[107] This space functioned as a 'carnival square,' which is located in an upside-down world where societal norms are overturned for a short span of time, and socio-hierarchical barriers are removed to facilitate widespread communication.[108] Such a reversal creates a space which is inherently linked to but exists in opposition to the dominant worldview.[109] Rather than solidifying the hierarchy, Bakhtin understands the upside-down world as an opportunity for liberation through this organization and exchange of ideas.[110] Within the pages of their zines, on their version of the carnival square, these women were free to explore angry, humorous, and defiant forms of self-expression that resisted patriarchal ideas of femininity.

In this collection, zinesters playfully reinvented a patriarchal and misogynistic society into varying utopias. In the early '90s, zinesters violently idealized what girl power might achieve, while others in the late '90s despaired at the slogan's commodification. Several creators reimagined well-known Western fairy tales and employed fantastical elements to comment on violence towards women, feminist tensions, women pop stars, and women's intellect and body image. At the center of these discussions is an angry discourse about the complexities of living in a woman's body, whether that be through an uplifting of women's physical strength and intellect, or a rejection of the traditional emphasis on physical beauty.

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[107] Duncombe, *Notes From Underground*, 7-8.
[108] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 128, 122-23.
[109] Ibid., 124-25.
[110] Muir, "Carnival and the Lower Body," 99.

By nature, the carnivalesque upside-down world is one that is ripe for absurd profanity and humorous jabs; as with the grotesque body, Bakhtinian elements like marketplace speech and carnival laughter were employed in the angry feminist humor of these zines. As women have traditionally been discouraged from cursing and engaging in inappropriate behavior, these zines offered women the chance to indulge in male-oriented practices like debasement and profanity. Carnival laughter followed this profanity naturally, whether it was written explicitly into the zines or through exchanges between creator and reader.

In Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, the upside-down world holds the capacity for liberation beyond the time frame within which it exists.[111] Unlike 'safety valve' theorists of Carnival, who viewed the festival as an annual societal release and reconfirmation of the existing world order, Bakhtin focused on its potential for liberation.[112] Rather than reinforce traditional values, this upturned reality becomes a revolutionary way to question the existing world order.[113] By indulging in chaos and lawlessness within the comics and collages of their work, zinesters engaged with Bakhtin's conceptualization of an upside-down world where eccentricity, inappropriate behavior, and profanity were encouraged, especially in displays of contempt for the ruling class.[114]

Girl Power

In this collection, some zinesters envisioned girl power as something violent and powerful. In the 1990s, such adjectives had not typically been associated with women's movements, which frequently anchored themselves in a maternal and

[111] Muir, "Carnival and the Lower Body," 98-99.
[112] Ibid., 98-99.
[113] Ibid., 98-99.
[114] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 123.

peaceful ideology during the twentieth century.[115] Many zinesters utilized the upside-down world to dream of a vicious female utopia, as realized in two comics of a 1993 queer women's zine.[116] In both comics, a group of boys harass girls, who then band together to threaten or fight them. Each artist calls upon girl power, whether by literally calling up her "grrrl" friends (Figure 15) or by writing the phrase on a t-shirt (Figure 16). Marketplace speech abounds in the insults hurled at the girls, such as "ugly bitch, freak, slag," "gypsy, little freaky bitch," and "dykes." A carnival laughter accompanies the sight of "thousands of grrrls brandishing different weapons" and the pasted lyrics "we're so pretty, oh so pretty…" beneath a scene of two girls, likely a couple as they are holding hands, who batter a group of boys. The lyrics, taken from English punk band Sex Pistols' 1977 song "We're So Vacant" are repurposed to critique and mock the patriarchal significance assigned to women's beauty. In these utopias, girls band together to challenge the idea that a woman's appearance is more important than her strength. By claiming instead that men are "the weaker sex," the latter comic situates itself within an upside-down world that subverts patriarchal assumptions about how strength correlates to gender. Both comics emphasize that women's strength can be located in collective solidarity, something which third wave feminism and the carnivalesque highlight as ways to overturn the existing hierarchy.

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[115] Rachel L. Einwohner, Jocelyn A. Hollander, and Toska Olson, "Engendering Social Movements: Cultural Images and Movement Dynamics," *Gender and Society* 14, no. 5 (October 2000): 686-87.

[116] Cathy, Erica, and Kerry, *Angel: A Fanzine for Grrrrls, Bitches, Barbies and Dykes #3*, (United Kingdom, 1993), London College of Communication, 14-15, 9.

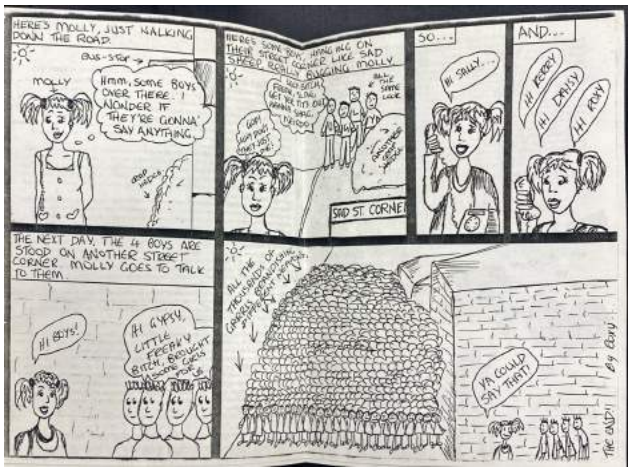


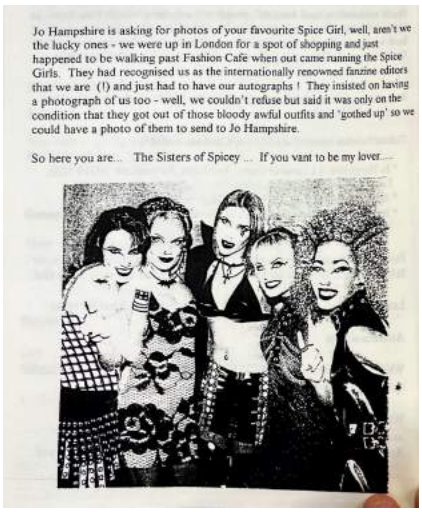
Figure 15: Riot grrrls attack their harassers, Cathy, Erica, and Kerry, *Angel: A Fanzine for Grrrrls, Bitches, Barbies and Dykes #3*, (United Kingdom, 1993), London College of Communication, 14-15.

Figure 16: Queer couple attacks their harassers, Cathy, Erica, and Kerry, *Angel: A Fanzine for Grrrrls, Bitches, Barbies and Dykes #3*, (United Kingdom, 1993), London College of Communication, 9.

In contrast with this belief in girl power in the early '90s, zines in the late '90s depicted a collective dismay at the capitalist commodification of girl power. After the British girl group Spice Girls internationally popularized girl power with their song 'Wannabe' in 1996, many third wave feminists expressed their frustrations with new public understandings of girl power and feminist theory.[117] In a 1997 zine, zinester Rhona steps into an upside-down world as she reimagines the Spice Girls as vampiric goths (Figure 17).[118] She expresses a strong distaste for the Spice Girls' style, which has often been critiqued for fitting neatly into patriarchal expectations of women and femininity.[119] The feminist concern with the Spice Girls questions the group's capitulation to the male gaze, as "they are intimately connected to a long history of employing girls as figures for, rather than just instances of, consumption."[120] Rhona's imposition of the goth style upon

[117] Catherine Driscoll, "Girls Today: Girls, Girl Culture and Girl Studies," *Girlhood Studies* 1, no. 1 (Summer 2008): 22.
[118] Rhona, *Black Planet*, (Boughton-under-Blean, England, 1997), London College of Communication, 36.
[119] Catherine Driscoll, "Girl Culture, Revenge and Global Capitalism: Cybergirls, Riot Grrls, Spice Girls," *Australian Feminist Studies* 14, no. 29 (April 1999): 188.
[120] Driscoll, "Girl Culture, Revenge and Global Capitalism," 177.

the Spice Girls therefore recontextualizes the group's expressions of femininity. The additions of heavy makeup, a fishnet top, and crucifix, choker, and bat necklaces are hyperfeminine and artificially constructed, drawing the reader's attention to the performative, rather than fixed, nature of gender identity.[121] With only her pen, Rhona rejects the male gaze and caters instead to a gothic femininity; through this détournement, Rhona redefines the Spice Girls as an expression of third wave gender exploration. Such imagery defied expectations of women in 1990s Western media, as well as the Spice Girls' own self-presentation.


Jo Hampshire is asking for photos of your favourite Spice Girl, well, aren't we the lucky ones - we were up in London for a spot of shopping and just happened to be walking past Fashion Cafe when out came running the Spice Girls. They had recognised us as the internationally renowned fanzine editors that we are (!) and just had to have our autographs ! They insisted on having a photograph of us too - well, we couldn't refuse but said it was only on the condition that they got out of those bloody awful outfits and 'gothed up' so we could have a photo of them to send to Jo Hampshire.

So here you are... The Sisters of Spicey ... If you want to be my lover...

Figure 17: Spice Girls go goth, Rhona, *Black Planet*, (Boughton-under-Blean, England, 1997), London College of Communication, 36.

Fairy Tales

In the fantastic, zinesters found a space which was both immediately recognizable to their readers and very different from the real world. Some zinesters played around with the plots of well-known Western fairy tales in order to make larger points about girl power and feminism. In a 1993 queer women's zine, the zinester parodies the fairy tale 'Little Red Riding Hood' in a story titled "Little Red

[121] Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 519-20.

Riding Dyke" (Figure 18).[122] The wolf, or "Big Bad Hettie," represents patriarchal society and tells the queer heroine that "what she really needed was a 'real man.'" At the end of this version, the bored heroine uses the wolf's genitalia to kill him; these inclusions of profanity and elements of the lower stratum further establish the story as carnivalesque.[123] In contrast with the traditional ending, in which Red Riding Hood is eaten by the wolf and the moral is to be wary of strangers, this zine positions women not as helpless victims, but as figures capable of brutal self-defense. Alongside this reversal is a collective display of unity and glee in the wake of violence; the cutout image placed directly below the story is a crowd of women cheering with their hands interlocked. By including this photo below the surprise ending, the zinester prompts a carnival laughter from their readers. Although the women cheer for Little Red Riding Dyke's violence, the story's twist serves as a reminder that violence *towards* women is far more prevalent; readers may laugh, but it is a grim laughter directed at everyone. As a queer women's zine, the story is also uniquely positioned in its utilization of marketplace speech, namely the reclamation of the derogatory 'dyke.' The zine thus utilizes a well-known story to defy expectations of women, reconstruct femininity as strong, queer, and violent, and invite the reader to both laugh at the wolf's fate and consider that the real world version of this story is more likely to end in the demise of the woman.

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[122] *Subversive Sister #2*, (Manchester, England, 1993), The Sparrows' Nest Library and Archive, 9, https://archive.org/details/sparrowsnest-4884/page/9/mode/2up.
[123] Muir, "Carnival and the Lower Body," 99.

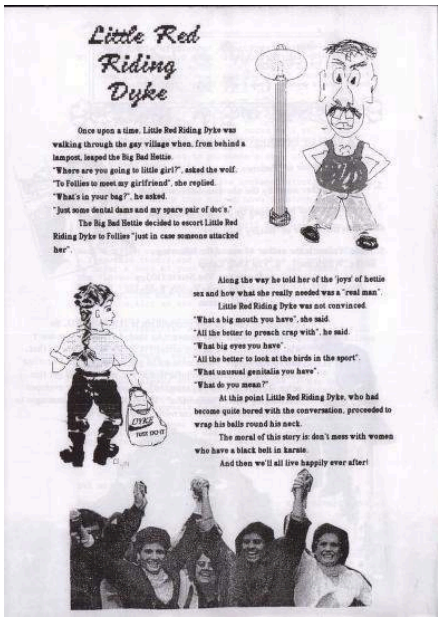

Figure 18: Little Red Riding Dyke, *Subversive Sister* #2, (Manchester, England, 1993), The Sparrows' Nest Library and Archive, 9, https://archive.org/details/sparrowsnest-4884/page/9/mode/2up.

Subversions of popular fairy tales were also used to comment on frustrations and tensions felt by third wave feminists. Having been brought up under certain beliefs made possible by earlier feminists, many '90s zinesters felt disillusioned and outraged by pervasive acts of sexism.[124] In one 1993 zine, the zinesters depict Cinderella quoting Robin Morgan, a radical second wave American feminist: "I want a women's revolution like a lover. I lust for it, I want so much this freedom, this end to struggle and fear and lies…" (Figure 19).[125] Contrary to some third wave feminists who viewed their work as a rupture from previous waves, this zine explicitly places the creators' desire for revolution in conversation with an earlier feminist thinker.[126] Of all the fairy tales, the choice of Cinderella, a story in which her life returns to normal at the stroke of midnight, situates the zine firmly within the temporary space of the carnivalesque. Although

[124] Moi, "How Feminism Became the F-Word," 1735-36.
[125] Bela, Jane, Kairen, Karren, Sarah, Cruella, and Tracey, *Leeds & Bradford Riot Grrrl!*, (Leeds, England, 1993), London College of Communication, 28.
[126] Piepmeier, *Girl Zines*, 26-27, 40.

within the original story, the fairy godmother grants Cinderella's every wish, the character here is a deceptively misogynistic figure who responds with "wouldn't a prince do instead, dear?" The scene emphasizes frustrations felt by young '90s feminists in their clashes with other women, such as their mothers and grandmothers. The zinesters thus contradict a myth of girlhood, which tells 'good girls' like Cinderella that they will be rewarded with whatever they desire.[127] Within the revolution-oriented Bakhtinian framework, this fairy tale becomes a tool with a purpose. As this image appears on the back cover of the zine, the zinesters leave readers to consider what a feminist revolution might look like without the support of all women.

Figure 19: Cinderella's revolution, Bela, Jane, Kairen, Karren, Sarah, Cruella, and Tracey, *Leeds & Bradford Riot Grrrl!*, (Leeds, England, 1993), London College of Communication, 28.

Fantastical Elements

Alongside fairy tales, zinesters engaged with fantastical elements, something which placed them immediately in a world outside of, and sometimes in direct opposition to, reality. Similar to Cinderella's clash with her fairy godmother, a comic titled "A Visit to Grannies" employs fantastical elements to muse about

[127] Piepmeier, *Girl Zines*, 100-01.

generational differences between women (Figure 20).[128] In the comic, Erica uses psycho-kinesis to turn her grandmother from a stereotypically disapproving matriarch into a 'Cosmic Granny' who shares Erica's taste in clothing, piercings, and music. Erica cheekily makes her utopia into a reality with the help of superpowers, and is well aware that this upside-down world is unrealistic, something which she references with the closing lines of the comic, "and the moral of this tale is: GET PSYCHO-KINETIC AND YOU TOO CAN HAVE A COOL GRANNY!!!!!!! (or something like that)." In articulating her struggle with her grandmother, the zinester relies on carnival laughter and marketplace speech in the forms of profanity and slang. She derides the traditional view of femininity that her mother and grandmother hold by referring to their magazines as "bollocks" and "woman shit stuff." She repeatedly positions her grandmother as the antagonist, especially when she asks Erica, "you're so un-lady like in those things, why can't you be more feminine?" In their postmodern conceptualizations of gender, third wave feminists rejected the idea that there was a specific way to express femininity.[129] As this is the question which prompts Erica to begin psycho-kinesis, the comic emphasizes the importance of being able to define femininity for oneself, and even correlates this ability to a superpower.

[128] Cathy, Erica, and Kerry, *Angel: A Fanzine for Grrrrls, Bitches, Barbies and Dykes #3*, (United Kingdom, 1993), London College of Communication, 6-7.
[129] Snyder, "What Is Third‐Wave Feminism?," 186-87.

Figure 20: A Visit to Grannie's, Cathy, Erica, and Kerry, *Angel: A Fanzine for Grrrrls, Bitches, Barbies and Dykes #3*, (United Kingdom, 1993), London College of Communication, 6-7.

In the late 1990s, the increasing pushback against the feminist movement drove some zinesters to despair.[130] In one 1998 zine, zinester Chris describes a dream about "standing on a clifftop with a muleclops, wondering if I should… jump or live to be a chainsaw murderer, and kill every townie I know (wankers) or don't know" (Figure 21).[131] This dream is simultaneously linked to and inverted from reality, placing it in the upside-down world. The stormy scene has a fantastical violence about it, with lightning striking alongside Chris and the mythical muleclops. This portmanteau of 'mule' and 'cyclops' symbolizes a creature who performs difficult and menial work, but is perceived as abnormal or

[130] Moi, "How Feminism Became the F-Word," 1735-36.
[131] Chris, *Does My Bum Look Big In This?*, (Cambridge, England, 1998), London College of Communication, 22.

monstrous. Such a metaphor links the muleclops to the perseverance and alienation felt by the feminist movement. Chris expresses a frustration so visceral that her dream self contemplates extreme violence, but then asks her readers to decide for her, indicating a disinterest in the outcome so long as there *is* violence. In contrast with previous depictions, which envision optimistic alternative world orders, this sketch centers around suicidal ideation and mass murder. Although this violence does not fit into the more optimistic impulse of carnivalesque liberation, it does belong to the Bakhtinian model's frank liberation from societal norms. This upturned world holds space both for the optimism and nihilism of '90s third wave feminism.[132] As many of the Riot Grrrl feminist punk bands began to disband starting in 1997, and the Spice Girls sterilized the once-revolutionary girl power in 1996, this piece can be contemplated in connection with the late '90s stalling of feminist hope for change.[133]

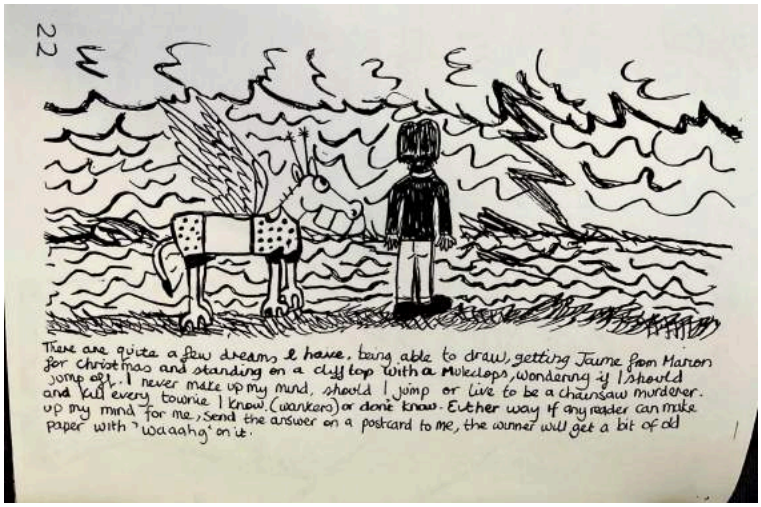

Figure 21: Chainsaw murderer and a muleclops, Chris, *Does My Bum Look Big In This?*, (Cambridge, England, 1998), London College of Communication, 22.

[132] Piepmeier, *Girl Zines*, 179; Moi, "How Feminism Became the F-Word," 1739.
[133] Gayle Wald, "Just a Girl? Rock Music, Feminism, and the Cultural Construction of Female Youth," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 23, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 607-08.

Throughout the 1990s, third wave feminists often critiqued popular media and called for more multifaceted portrayals of women's lived experience.[134] Mainstream perceptions of women pop stars acted as guideposts for how ordinary women could expect to be treated; in one 1992 zine, a comic about Madonna considers how women's power is so often shaped by their physical appearance and sexual skill (Figure 22).[135] Robots land on "Planet Vague," which is populated with women who are all named Madonna since they "couldn't um think of um any other thingy um I mean names…" As the Madonnas are discovered with bags on their heads, the creator begins with a feminist commentary that even the pop star Madonna, renowned as a sex symbol, comes into contact with oppressive expectations of women's chastity. The Madonnas are portrayed as timid and unintelligent until the robot teaches them how to speak, sing, and pose like Madonna, specifically using her 1992 album *Erotica* to do so. In a display of early '90s girl power, the Madonnas band together to build a spaceship; this intelligence, however, is framed firmly within the context of their femininity, as the spaceship they build is an "elastic powered bra ship." Throughout the comic, zinester Erica repeatedly draws the focus back to female sexuality and its potential power to overturn the existing world order. When the robots realize what has happened on Planet Vague, they cry out, "Oh no! Not again!" "And this time there's hundreds of them." Although Planet Vague functions as an alternate reality, this patriarchal fear of women realizing their power, whether it be sexual, intellectual, social, or otherwise, ties the world back to the real United Kingdom of the 1990s. Much like 'Little Red Riding Dyke,' this exhibits a key aspect of the carnivalesque: the absurdity and liminality of the space forces participants to remember the true social order.

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[134] Driscoll, "Girls Today," 22.
[135] Erica, *Girlfrenzy #4*, (Hove, England, 1992), London College of Communication, 22-23.

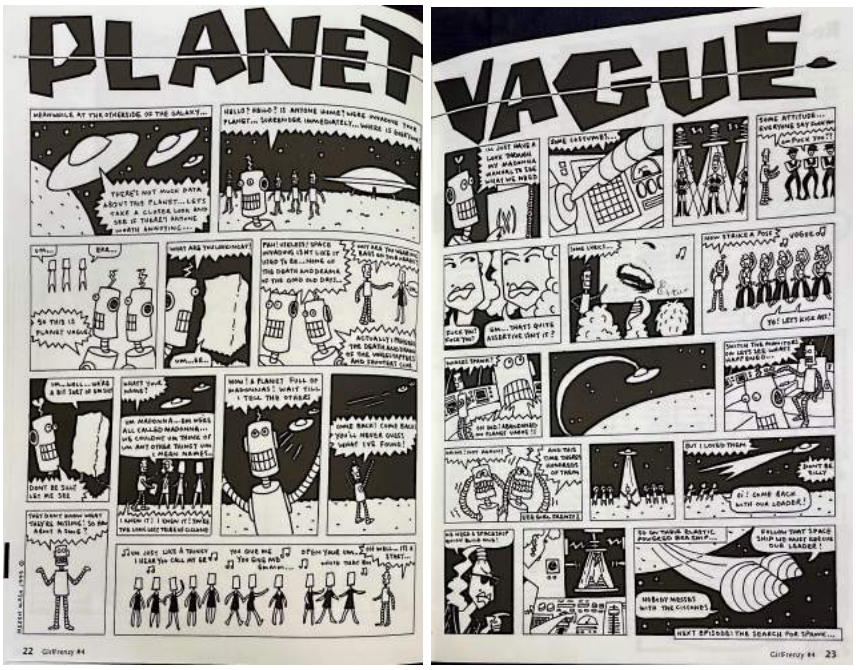

Figure 22: Planet Vague, Erica, *Girlfrenzy #4*, (Hove, England, 1992), London College of Communication, 22-23.

Fantasy offers women the chance to step into an alternate world wherein they can critique the internalization of misogynistic beauty standards. In the same 1992 zine, zinester Erica reprinted American comic Mary Fleener's "Abustrix," which cheekily depicts a woman's weight loss program after her parents become "devil-worshippers" and she turns to food for comfort (Figure 23).[136] Such carnivalesque absurdity continues as she is chased by crocodiles in a self-described "sensible exercise program" with a dominatrix coach. Unlike many of the zines in this collection which idealize girl power, Fleener's comic presents a picture of internalized misogyny. The protagonist believes that her thin body has finally earned the respect of those around her, as well as her own self-love. In reality, although the other women compliment her, they are all secretly thinking something rude about her body. The comic observes that though women may chase respect in relation to their bodies, it is a fruitless and losing battle. Such an

[136] Erica, *Girlfrenzy #4*, (Hove, England, 1992), London College of Communication, 8.

ironic piece holds space for women to consider the absurdity of the feminine ideal, and critiques an imposed and internalized misogynistic expectation that women must be thin to have value.

Figure 23: I lost weight, Erica, *Girlfrenzy #4*, (Hove, England, 1992), London College of Communication, 8.

Through mocking rejections of male-ordained beauty standards, other zinesters laughed in the face of this internalized misogyny, and chose instead to celebrate bodies which were not aligned with the feminine ideal. In another zine from 1992, two large women atop a flying pig escape this "cruel world" (Figure 24).[137] The sarcastic Western idiom "when pigs fly" refers to a situation so absurd that it is deemed impossible; here, two zinesters comment on the likelihood that society will accept larger women's bodies. The women stare directly at the reader,

[137] Layla and Sassy, *Are You Phony? Drop Babies*, (Brentford, England, 1992), London College of Communication, 10.

their gaze and laughter challenging not just men who endorse fatphobic sentiments, but other women as well. The words "reckless laughter" add a literal layer of carnival laughter to the image, encouraging readers to laugh along as they leave a "cruel world" which shames women outside the feminine beauty ideal. The message is clear: if society will not accept them, they will create their liberation elsewhere. An upturned fantastical world thus offers women the opportunity to deconstruct, reimagine, and uplift body image, something which becomes revolutionary in a society that expects compliance with and internalization of the status quo.

Figure 24: When pigs fly, Layla and Sassy, *Are You Phony? Drop Babies*, (Brentford, England, 1992), London College of Communication, 10.

Conclusion

Zinesters' playful reversals of misogynistic beliefs and structures, as well as their optimistic visions of utopia, situated their work within Bakhtin's carnivalesque upside-down world. By positioning themselves, and by extension women as a social group, as 'the fool' or butt of their jokes, they crowned women the 'kings' of their upside-down world. Usages of foul and reclaimed language and 'unladylike' behavior intensified this upturned world order, affording it a feeling of utopia where women could exist outside the constraints of oppressive expectations of femininity.

Through the upside-down world, zinesters found a space where they could simultaneously draw attention to and mock patriarchal norms. These women employed fairy tales and fantastical elements to comment extensively throughout the collection on the once-revolutionary girl power, violence towards and by women, the presence or absence of female solidarity, depictions of pop stars, and body image. As they converged upon and shared ideas on the carnival square, zinesters created an ultimately unrealistic and utopian alternative to the dominant world order. Although the upside-down world is contingent upon its own liminality, it creates a unique space for revolutionary thought, which can have implications that reach past the 1990s, and into the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

Girl zines occupied a unique space for women to construct and deploy femininity as a weapon of empowerment. By challenging expectations about gender and sexuality, zinesters became active participants in an international feminist rebellion intent on dismantling patriarchal depictions of femininity. Carnivalesque elements like profanity, obscenity, and laughter were utilized throughout this collection to embody the rebellious spirit of Carnival, reclaim misogynous language, and seize control of male-dominated realms of vulgarity. Zinesters' employments of anger and humor, both of which are historically reserved for men, facilitated tongue-in-cheek constructions of femininity which encouraged readers to laugh along with them.

The visual and linguistic resistance enacted within these zines frequently utilized carnivalesque elements, such as the grotesque body and upside-down world, to question and resist the patriarchal structures of the 1990s United Kingdom. While mainstream magazines often dismembered women in order to sexualize them, zinesters restored women's agency by constructing them as severed, shouting heads and Frankensteinian concoctions. This grotesque body was additionally employed to examine taboo subjects like masturbation, menstruation, motherhood, and eating disorders, as well as to question the patriarchal elevation of women's bodies over their intellects. In a world which caters to the male gaze, the act of constructing women as monstrous embraces a revolutionary and joyfully defiant spirit. Similarly, transporting oneself into the upside-down world requires a playful envisioning of utopia; it is not enough to simply dream of alternate world orders, but to rejoice in doing so. Zinesters relied upon fairy tales and fantastical elements to conjure up visions of violent and powerful girl blocs, solutions to feminist tensions, reimaginings of beloved pop stars, and musings about body image. By gleefully constructing women and

femininity in direct defiance of patriarchal expectations, '90s zinesters reclaimed ownership of their bodies and laughed in the face of the existing hierarchy.

As the 1990s waned on and postfeminists declared a need for feminism to be in the past, this allegorical carnival came to an end.[138] Mainstream media in the following decades continued to produce images of women as thin, beautiful, and nonviolent; it was primarily in these peripheral spaces that such dissonant images of femininity existed. However, Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque extends past its existence. Although Carnival is a temporary upheaval of social hierarchy, Bakhtin posits that this upside-down world can demonstrate revolutionary ways of thinking and organizing to its participants.[139] Piepmeier similarly concludes that these zines functioned as "pedagogies of hope, showing the zines' readers ways to resist the culture of domination."[140] While third wave feminists have been dismissed by men and other feminists alike for being too frivolous, disorganized, and overly sexual, such critiques become strengths when interpreting their work through the carnivalesque lens.[141] These challenges to patriarchal constructions of femininity continue to directly and indirectly influence young women today, such as the variety of ways in which young pop stars construct and reclaim their own femininity, ranging from the hyperfeminine Chappell Roan to the more androgynous Billie Eilish.

Alongside these findings, it is evident that many '90s zinesters situated their work within a larger feminist discourse. Through direct quotations of second wave feminists Simone de Beauvoir and Robin Morgan, references to witch hunts centuries earlier, and reprints and imitations of comics by their feminist contemporaries, these zines contradict the assessment that the third wave was a clean break from previous women's movements. Through this intentional

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[138] Piepmeier, *Girl Zines*, 136-37.
[139] Muir, "Carnival and the Lower Body," 98-99.
[140] Piepmeier, *Girl Zines*," 157.
[141] Snyder, "What Is Third‐Wave Feminism?," 182-83, 188.

intertextuality, these zines assert themselves as a continuation of a larger feminist tradition. Piepmeier focuses on the creation of these private, feminist sites as stepping stones for young feminists to spark interest in activism and engage with "the possibility of making cultural changes, even tiny ones."[142] This demonstrates how feminist thinkers continually build upon the work of their predecessors and can provide a blueprint for future generations of feminist thinkers to push the movement forward.

Although the zine archive at UAL was greatly instrumental to this research, the fact that over eighty-five percent of the corpus originates from the same place is a clear place to improve the research in a future study. Several of the zines in UAL's collection were donated by one specific woman, Jennifer Denitto, whose personal preferences and biases likely influenced her selections. Another improvement could be made with respect to intersectionality; although women of color were active in '90s zine culture, their zines and experiences have often been left out of the historical narrative, as many of the donations to zine archives come from white women.[143] Drawing upon archives that overrepresent white women has resulted in historians constructing a vision of '90s zines as a white woman's pastime.[144] Although the selected corpus does not combat this, an intentional inclusion of a diverse array of perspectives through the zine-making element of the museum exhibition, which follows this research, will address this gap. This interactive exhibition aims to create an archive for future historians to study conceptualizations of femininity in the 2020s.

Further research can consider other theories with which to analyze these zines, such as the political art theory of Dadaism, which rejects all reason and

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[142] Piepmeier, *Girl Zines*, 197.
[143] Michele Hardesty, Alana Kumbier, and Nora Claire Miller, "Learning With Zine Collections In 'Beyond The Riot: Zines In Archives And Digital Space,'" in *Transforming the Authority of the Archive: Undergraduate Pedagogy and Critical Digital Archives*, ed. Andi Gustavson and Charlotte Nunes (Lever Press, 2003), 146-48.
[144] Hardesty, Kumbier, and Miller, "Learning With Zine Collections," 145-47.

logic in favor of chaos.[145] In studying zines through this lens, it is possible that the revolutionary potential would be stripped entirely from these sources with the application of a nihilistic worldview. In reproducing this research, a larger selection of zines could generate different results, especially if specific time and care is taken to collect zines that intentionally include women of color, transgender women, and other such marginalized groups. Rather than mine the biased existing archives, a project with more time and resources could potentially source zines directly from '90s zinesters of color, as many of them are, in theory, still alive.

As third wave zinesters constructed femininity through a playful, angry, and humorous approach, their work entered the revolutionary category of Bakhtinian literature. The continued popularity of zines in the digital age, as well as the enduring need for feminist thinking and activism, makes such a research project socially and academically relevant for fourth wave feminists. The interpretation of '90s girl zines as carnivalesque injects them with a unique and revolutionary significance, and reconceptualizes them as media which resisted and destroyed the feminine ideal.

[145] Leonard, "'Rebel Girl, You Are The Queen Of My World,'" 236.

Destroying the Feminine Ideal in '90s Zines:

A Museum Exhibition Proposal

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Destroying the Feminine Ideal in ‘90s Zines:
A Museum Exhibition Proposal

This project proposes a museum exhibition in partnership with the University of Arts London to engage with a wider audience about the revolutionary potential of 1990s girl zines in the United Kingdom. The exhibition will be made up of twenty-four objects, or zine pages, split into two spaces: ‘the grotesque body’ and ‘the upside-down world.’ Visitors will be engaged on a highly participatory level. The accompanying object labels all contain open-ended questions, which visitors can respond to on themed bulletin boards nearby. Reproductions of the full zines will be made available to restore the tangibility that zinesters cherish about their medium, so that museumgoers can flip through at their leisure. The final space will be a zine-making station, where visitors can create a page(s) of a zine in response to the themes of the exhibition. The aim is to create an archive for future historians to study constructions of femininity in the 2020s. This immersive and interactive approach will engage with visitors on a highly personal level, and encourage them to connect the historical context of the exhibition to contemporary feminist issues and individual experiences. By creating their own zines, visitors will document current perspectives on feminism and femininity, thereby contributing to an ongoing dialogue that bridges past and present feminist thought.

KEYWORDS: Girl zines, third wave feminism, DIY feminism, carnivalesque, anger, humor, male gaze, resistance, visual culture, museum

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Applied Project Introduction

In order to engage with a wider audience about the revolutionary and carnivalesque nature of '90s girl zines, the accompanying project is a proposal for a museum exhibition titled *Destroying the Feminine Ideal in '90s Zines*. This hypothetical exhibition will be in partnership with the University of the Arts London (UAL), which contains the London College of Communication, the primary zine archive for this research. The exhibition will consist of twenty-four objects, which will be specific pages of zines preserved in glass display cases. These will be divided into two rooms titled 'the grotesque body' and 'the upside down world.' The content will be contextualized through a few panels at the start, which cover topics such as girl zines and the waves of feminism. In order to restore the materiality of zine culture, photocopies will be made of each full zine so that visitors can explore the content at their own pace. Object labels will pose questions to immediately engage visitors in a unique and participatory experience, and themed bulletin boards will be distributed throughout the space to encourage museumgoers to add their voices to the exhibition. This will culminate in an interactive zine-making station where visitors are encouraged to create a page(s) of a zine. This station will have several prompts related to the feminist themes of the exhibition. Visitors will take away an understanding of these zines and their constructions of femininity within the context of third wave feminism. The exhibition will then encourage viewers to create a zine which connects these ideas to their present day experiences, thus documenting contemporary sentiments about feminism and constructions of femininity.

Purpose and Objectives

Logline: Explore the revolutionary feminist potential of girl zines of the 1990s United Kingdom at the University of the Arts London. Through a variety of participatory techniques, visitors will be encouraged to think critically about the evolution of feminism and depictions of femininity over the last thirty years.

The primary goals of this project are to educate, engage with the community, and leave a historical record about perceptions of feminism and femininity in the 2020s. Rather than simply explain the content from omniscient historian to passive visitor, this exhibition seeks a creative collaboration with its audience. This corresponds to a twentieth century shift to consider museums as "places that can mediate change" rather than a one-way transmission of information.[1] Although museums are perceived as 'neutral' and 'objective' places of knowledge, they are often organized by systems which reflect entrenched social hierarchies.[2] In recognizing the museal power to *construct* culture, rather than simply reflect it, this research will apply a Participatory Action Research (PAR) to the exhibition.[3] PAR conceives of the community as active, rather than passive, participants and seeks collaborative ways to incorporate them into the research.[4]

Feminist Patricia Maguire viewed PAR as a three-pronged approach involving investigation, education, and action.[5] This exhibit will activate the first two elements by engaging critically with feminist themes and artistic choices. This will be accomplished through participatory techniques involving open-ended

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[1] Elizabeth Crooke, "The Migrant And The Museum: Place And Representation In Ireland," in *Museums and Migration: History, Memory and Politics*, ed. Laurence Gouriévidis (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 198.
[2] Jade French and Emma Curd, "Zining As Artful Method: Facilitating Zines As Participatory Action Research Within Art Museums," *Action Research* 20, no. 1 (2022): 82-83.
[3] French and Curd, "Zining As Artful Method," 83, 78.
[4] Ibid., 80.
[5] Patricia Maguire, *Doing Participatory Research: A Feminist Approach* (Amherst, MA: The Center for International Education, School of Education, University of Massachusetts, 1987), 30.

object labels and zine-making stations. Many of the object labels prompt visitor reflection about the themes of this collection; one example asks, "What does femininity mean to you, and how can we create it on our own terms beyond the physical?" Visitors will then be able to respond to these questions immediately by way of sticky notes and themed bulletin boards, creating a two-way conversation between museum and visitor. Such interaction is not typical of museums, but this innovation further cements the PAR multivocal approach, as the goal is to create ongoing conversations directly within the exhibition. The final component of PAR, collective action, will rely upon the exhibit's creation of zine networks, as did the feminists of the 1990s, and hold space for events such as feminist zine fests, readings, and swaps. Rather than treating the museal space as an unquestionable titan of truth, this exhibit will engage with visitors and, in the resistant spirit of zines, encourage them to create art which challenges traditional hegemonies.

In conjunction with PAR, the exhibition aims to incorporate feminist pedagogy in line with the research. As described by Kimberly Creasp, "zine-making employs three principles of feminist pedagogy: participatory learning, validation of personal experience, and the development of critical thinking skills."[6] One object label reflects these principles as it asks visitors to link their own experiences with those of '90s zinesters: "How does the nonchalance of such a grotesque depiction sit with you? Does the speech bubble ring true to how some women speak about their bodies today?" By incorporating carnivalesque language such as 'grotesque,' the label pushes visitors to continually consider these publications within Bakhtin's revolutionary theory. It also invites them to locate their own sentiments within a larger discourse by women, and begin thinking about how they can express these feelings in the zine-making station.

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[6] Kimberly Creasp, "Zine-Making as Feminist Pedagogy," *Feminist Teacher* 24, no. 3 (2014): 156.

In order to immerse visitors in this subject matter, this exhibition will call upon three self-described strengths of the zine medium: its materiality, open dialogue, and creation of networks. Although the original zines will be preserved behind glass, photocopies will be made so that visitors may flip through them, restoring the tangible connection that zinesters cherish about their art form, even in the present digital age. Although haptic learning has long been understudied, a 2020 experimental exhibition demonstrated that visitors recalled objects more clearly when they were allowed to touch them.[7] Reproductions of the zines will therefore increase knowledge retention and help visitors feel more connected to the '90s zinesters' experiences. The exchange between creator and audience, often represented through reviews of other zines and inclusions of work submitted by readers, will be enacted through the zine-making station and critical thinking activated by object labels.[8] To facilitate the creation of zine networks, visitors will have the opportunity to leave contact information for future zinesters, as well as to attend events held in conjunction with the exhibit's feminist themes.

The ongoing feminist struggle, especially with respect to the oft-ridiculed #MeToo movement and encroachment of abortion rights, makes such an exhibit socially relevant. As postfeminist ideas, such as the 'tradwife' trend of embracing patriarchal gender roles, continue to hold sway in the popular consciousness, this exhibition is a space for people to recognize and connect with previous feminist movements. Ideally, the creative element will encourage politically-averse visitors to consider their stance on feminism, as zines "personaliz[e] politics."[9] In the classroom setting, Creasp found that assigning a zine project, as compared to a

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[7] Magdalena Novak and Stephan Schwan, "Does Touching Real Objects Affect Learning?," *Educational Psychology Review* 33, no. 2 (August 19, 2020): 637-38.
[8] Michelle Comstock, "Grrrl Zine Networks: Re-Composing Spaces of Authority, Gender, and Culture," *JAC* 21, no. 2 (2001): 395.
[9] Stephen Duncombe, *Notes From Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Microcosm Publishing, 1997), 28.

research paper, was immensely beneficial; she wrote that "zines became labors of love as students began the writing process, allowing them to connect with feminist theory in personal and meaningful ways."[10] Although museumgoers will undoubtedly spend significantly less time on this activity than a student would for a graded assignment, the intention here is to create a single image or page rather than a multi-page zine. By implementing this realization on a larger and more public scale, the exhibition aims to include a larger and more diverse amount of voices in the creation of zines.

This exhibition is relevant in the museal sphere as well, as the Brooklyn Museum in New York recently hosted the "the first exhibition dedicated to the rich history of five decades of artists' zines produced in North America" from November 17, 2023 to March 31, 2024.[11] This exhibit, titled *Copy Machine Manifestos: Artists Who Make Zines*, displayed over eight hundred zines from an extensive range of subcultures and decades.[12] This is in stark contrast with *Destroying the Feminine Ideal*, which will focus on one type of zine in one specific decade. This choice, however, can be beneficial in directing visitors' focus; some reviewers of *Copy Machine Manifestos* felt overwhelmed by the sheer amount of content.[13] Both exhibits appear to share the interactive zine-making station, although possibly not to success, as it is not mentioned in any review of *Copy Machine Manifestos*. The most consistent critique of *Copy*

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[10] Creasp, "Zine-Making as Feminist Pedagogy," 166-67.
[11] "Copy Machine Manifestos: Artists Who Make Zines," *Brooklyn Museum,* accessed May 1, 2024, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/copy_machine_manifestos_artists_who_make_zines.
[12] Cassie Packard, "Copy Machine Manifestos: Artists Who Make Zines," *The Brooklyn Rail,* December 13, 2023, https://brooklynrail.org/2023/12/artseen/Copy-Machine-Manifestos-Artists-Who-Make-Zines.
[13] Debra Thimmesch, "Get into the Zine Zone at the Brooklyn Museum," *FF2 Media,* February 12, 2024, https://www.ff2media.com/blog/2024/02/12/get-into-the-zine-zone-at-the-brooklyn-museum/.

Machine Manifestos was its lack of materiality, as the zines were exclusively preserved behind glass.[14] To address this, the exhibition included "a variety of engaging media, including photos, collage, videos, projections, installations, and sculptures."[15] In choosing to focus on the tangible photocopies over these additional elements, *Destroying the Feminine Ideal* will simultaneously keep its scope manageable and bring something valuable to the visitors' experience.

The more intimate and student-oriented setting at UAL lends itself well to the objectives of this exhibition. The space is smaller than the Brooklyn Museum, which makes it suitable for the quantity of objects. As compared with a larger venue, visitors can engage with the content at UAL on a deeper and more relaxed level. This is aligned with zine culture itself, which emphasizes a grassroots and personalized approach.[16] By holding it at UAL, a university for art and design, the exhibit can easily be marketed towards students who are already interested in these alternative art forms. A university setting is additionally an ideal space to foster creativity, critical thinking, and open discussion. It is also a highly accessible location for non-students, as it is located near bus and metro stops. Geographically, an exhibition in London has the potential to draw additional, unexpected visitors as compared to some of the smaller cities and towns across the United Kingdom.

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[14] FT, "'Copy Machine Manifestos: Artists Who Make Zines' Memorializes A Forgotten Archive," *Document Journal*, March 25, 2024, https://www.documentjournal.com/2024/03/copy-machine-manifesto-brooklyn-museum-zine-fair-archive/.

[15] Kaitlin Crockett, "Copy Machine Manifestos: Artists Who Make Zines at the Brooklyn Museum," *Creative Pinellas*, April 10, 2024, https://creativepinellas.org/magazine/copy-machine-manifestos-artists-who-make-zines-at-the-brooklyn-museum/.

[16] Duncombe, *Notes From Underground*, 7.

Intended Audience

Rather than simply conveying ‘90s history to an audience, this project will utilize the zine-making element to create a public history record for future historians to analyze feminism and constructions of femininity in the 2020s. Audiences are therefore active participants in the research, and will be treated as such. Although certain groups may connect more easily to the themes of the exhibition, the overarching goal is to involve as many voices as possible in the creation of this contemporary zine archive.

The primary intended audience of this exhibition will be women and girls, as they are the most likely members of society to connect with the themes of feminism, sexualization, and reclamation of women’s bodies. As queer identities are explored several times throughout this collection, it would be fitting to specifically advertise to queer women to understand how queer women of varying identities, such as queer women of color, trans women, butches, femmes, and more, construct femininity. Furthermore, the ideal audience would be women and girls under the age of 30, who may find commonalities between themselves and the young zinesters of the 1990s. As this exhibition deals with several mature and potentially triggering themes, great care must be taken in the advertising to ensure that visitors understand the content of the exhibition. Specific warnings about eating disorders, body image, and violence towards women should be included in invitations to and advertisements for the exhibition. Trigger warnings and parental warnings should also be placed at the start of the exhibit to give visitors the option to abstain until the very last moment.

A more hands-on and participatory approach should be taken in order to appeal to a younger demographic. A discussion between American art museums and student groups revealed that Generation Z “want[s] to see cultural institutions

flatten organizational hierarchies, disengage from the 'cult of the curator,' refocus programs on humans rather than objects, and increase access to be more broadly and holistically inclusive."[17] These values are already in line with the alternative and anti-establishment attitudes of '90s zinesters, and will be kept in mind when advertising the exhibition and its associated programming. Although many museums attempt to engage with millennial and Gen Z audiences through digital elements, such a proposal could ring false for an exhibition centered around zines, which continue to be a physical medium despite an increasingly digital world. Therefore, this exhibition will appeal instead to the experience economy, which "incorporates four unique aspects: education, entertainment, esthetic, and escapist."[18] It will draw upon a 2018 study of millennial engagement, which suggested on-site after-hours programming as a way to connect more genuinely with these younger generations.[19] This can easily be implemented here by hosting evening events in conjunction with UAL and youth community organizations. In targeting these groups, the exhibition will therefore frame itself as an *experience* with emphasis on the creation of zines and contributions of visitors to an in-progress, contemporary archive. This can also be used to advertise to universities, who can arrange field trips in conjunction with courses about feminism, DIY activism, queer studies, and the 1990s. In comparison with more traditional collaborations, this exhibition can market itself to professors as an experience which seeks to engage with students on a highly creative and participatory level.

With that said, this exhibition will not restrict itself in audience, but will instead advertise to feminists of all genders and ages, and encourage widespread

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[17] Sadiya Akasha, "Want to Appeal to Gen Z? Lose the 'Cult of Curator' Mindset," *Museum-iD,* January 6, 2022, https://museum-id.com/how-to-appeal-to-gen-z/.
[18] John Bello and Sarah Matchette, "Shifting Perspectives: The Millennial Influence on Museum Engagement," *Theory and Practice: The Emerging Museum Professionals Journal* 1 (2018): 4.
[19] Bello and Matchette, "Shifting Perspectives," 4-6.

participation in creating zines. This will create a larger wealth of information for the exhibit to understand how feminism and feminist themes today are perceived across a range of identities like age, gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity. While feminism is often perceived as a woman's issue, and additionally a white woman's issue, this exhibit seeks an intersectional approach to perceptions and depictions of feminism and femininity in the 2020s. This can be accomplished by partnering with organizations that represent a wide range of interests. Potential groups include the LGBTQ+ charity London Friend which hosts creative writing events, the Feminist Library which functions as a community space and archive, and the social center Dear Black Women and Girls which hosted a festival centered around self-love and empowerment in 2023. By working with these community organizations and hosting specific evenings for their members to visit, the exhibition aims to widen its reach past traditional advertising. It additionally breathes life into the camaraderie found in zine culture through workshops held by specific organizations.

In considering the already-established museumgoing patterns in the United Kingdom, this exhibition can further its reach beyond the ideal audience of young women. According to an April 2019 - March 2020 survey conducted by the United Kingdom's Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 33% of people over age 16 visited a museum or gallery.[20] In a further breakdown by the same department in 2022-2023, the most likely age groups to attend a museum or gallery were 40-44 (39%), 65-69 (37%), and 35-39 (37%).[21]

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[20] "Participation in the Arts, Culture and Heritage," *GOV.UK,* February 23, 2024, https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/culture-and-community/culture-and-heritage/taking-part-in-the-arts-culture-and-heritage/latest/#by-ethnicity-visiting-museums-and-galleries.
[21] "Museum Attendance in England by Age 2023," *Statista,* October 11, 2023, https://www.statista.com/statistics/418323/museum-galery-attendance-uk-england-by-age/.

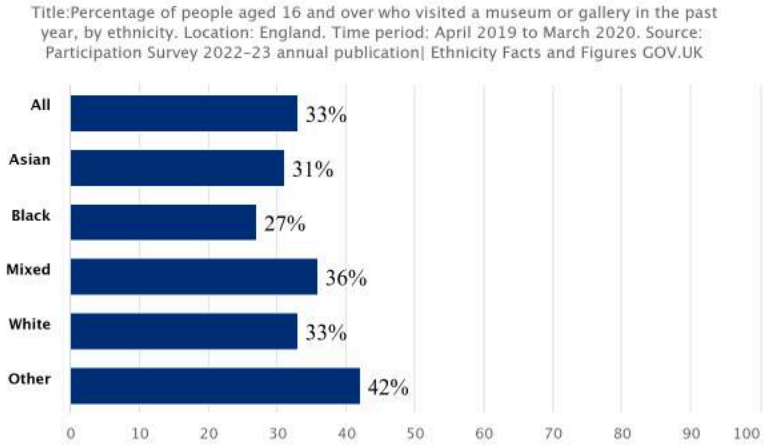

Figure 1: UK Museum Attendance by Ethnicity, "Participation in the Arts, Culture and Heritage," *GOV.UK*, February 23, 2024.
https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/culture-and-community/culture-and-heritage/taking-part-in-the-arts-culture-and-heritage/latest/#by-ethnicity-visiting-museums-and-galleries.

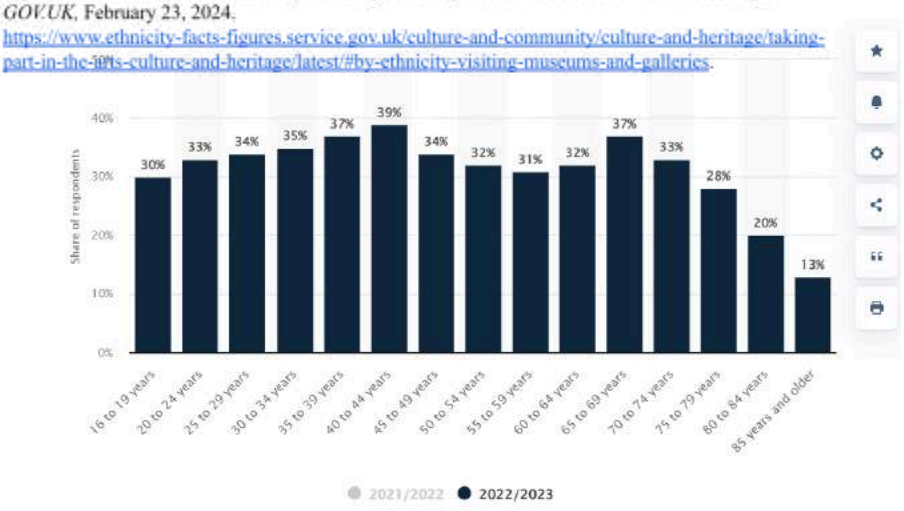

Figure 2: UK Museum Attendance by Age, "Museum Attendance in England by Age 2023," *Statista*, October 11, 2023.
https://www.statista.com/statistics/418323/museum-galery-attendance-uk-england-by-age/.

It is important to appeal to these groups that are already keen on museum attendance. Visitors aged 35-44 would have been children and young adolescents at the beginning of the 1990s, meaning they may have participated in zine culture either as readers, creators, or younger siblings or cousins of those involved. The exhibition thus takes on additional significance for such an age group. In targeting

this group, the exhibition would highlight 1990s nostalgia alongside zine-making, and offer these visitors a chance to creatively revisit themes of their youth.

Returning to the 2019-2020 survey, by ethnicity, 'Other' was the most represented category of museumgoers among the provided choices of Asian, Black, Mixed, White, and Other. In descending order, attending ethnic groups were listed as Other (42%), Mixed (36%), White (33%), Asian (31%), and Black (27%).[22] Such a survey counters the oft-uttered assumption that white people make up a majority of museumgoers.[23] This assumption is rooted in the long colonial and patriarchal traditions of many museums, which have marginalized the stories of people of color, LGBTQ+ people, and women.[24] It is possible that as museums encourage plurality and involvement with the community, the ethnic makeup of museum visitors is shifting accordingly towards diversity. This is especially relevant in the large multicultural city of London, as compared to a provincial English town, which may draw a less diverse crowd. Although girl zinesters of color were active in the 1990s, the archives are biased towards white women.[25] This has led to a historiography that draws repeatedly on the perception that zines are a white, middle class tradition, when in reality they are inherently polyphonic.[26] In holding space for anyone to create a zine, and to have it immediately archived, this exhibition seeks to overturn that archival bias. In the spirit of the DIY nature of zines, this exhibition will apply a public history

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[22] "Participation in the Arts, Culture and Heritage," *GOV.UK,* February 23, 2024, https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/culture-and-community/culture-and-heritage/taking-part-in-the-arts-culture-and-heritage/latest/#by-ethnicity-visiting-museums-and-galleries.
[23] EunJung Chang, "Interactive Experiences and Contextual Learning in Museums," *Studies in Art Education* 47, no. 2 (Winter 2006): 172.
[24] Chang, "Interactive Experiences," 172.
[25] Michele Hardesty, Alana Kumbier, and Nora Claire Miller, "Learning With Zine Collections In 'Beyond The Riot: Zines In Archives And Digital Space,'" in *Transforming the Authority of the Archive: Undergraduate Pedagogy and Critical Digital Archives*, ed. Andi Gustavson and Charlotte Nunes (Lever Press, 2003), 146-47.
[26] Hardesty, Kumbier, and Miller, "Learning With Zine Collections," 146-47.

approach to not just transmit information, but to also produce and record history with its audience.

Storyline

This exhibition will consist of three spaces: the first two consist of 'the grotesque body' and 'the upside-down world,' and the third space will host the interactive zine-making station. Twenty-four objects will be divided into two rooms: fourteen for 'the grotesque body' and ten for 'the upside-down world.' At the entrance, there will be four informational panels about the following subjects: girl zines, the waves of feminism, Carnival, and the zine-making station. This fourth panel is placed at the start to prompt visitors to begin thinking about what themes they will later explore in their own zine at the end of the exhibition. A panel explaining the grotesque body and the upside-down world will be placed at the beginning of their respective spaces.

To encourage visitors to begin participating right away, bulletin boards related to the themes of each space will be strategically located near the relevant groups of objects. These themed boards will provide space for visitors to answer the open-ended questions found on the object labels. As noted by Simon, posing questions is most effective when visitors feel there is value in answering them, whether that be a personal motivation or to add one's voice to a larger collection.[27] For this reason, there will be colorful sticky notes and pens beside themed bulletin boards (menstruation, body image, eating disorders, girl power, etc) throughout the space to encourage visitors to respond and engage with other answers. By using brightly colored sticky notes, the idea is for visitors to begin engaging with the material in a way that resembles the colorful and chaotic nature of zines; Simon cites such "comparable aesthetics" to the likelihood and success of visitor responses.[28] These question-and-answers will serve as a warm-up for visitors to make connections to their own lives and spark ideas for the zine-making station. Just before the final space, a bulletin board with large reproductions of the

[27] Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (San Francisco, CA: Museum 2.0, 2010), 139-40.
[28] Simon, *Participatory Museum*, 150.

zinesters' first names (as seen in the object labels below) will encourage visitors to add their own names. This places participants immediately and directly within the larger feminist discourse which is woven throughout this collection.

The final space is an interactive zine-making station, which consists of supplies such as paper, magazines, writing utensils, scissors, glue, paint, glitter, and more. There will also be a contact form which serves two purposes: to facilitate the creation of feminist networks and to obtain the informed consent of participants for the archival process. In bowls, there will be prompts related to the contents of the exhibit to inspire visitors. The first few prompts relate directly to zines featured in the exhibition, while the rest more generally reference feminism, carnivalesque elements, anger, and/or humor.

- What topics are considered taboo today? What would you like to say about them?
- Is menstruation a taboo topic today? Why or why not? How does that look/feel in your everyday life?
- What comes to mind when you hear the phrase 'girl power'? How does it make you feel?
- Draw or describe yourself with the women in your family. Think of similarities and differences. What tensions exist there?
- How are women pop stars represented today? How does this compare with past decades?
- How do the '90s discussions around body image and eating disorders compare to today?
- Draw a picture of what the patriarchy looks like to you. Write a message to it. Profanity is encouraged.
- Consider how others see you, as compared to how you see yourself. Hold these two versions of yourself up like a hologram and rotate them in your

mind. How do they differ? What do they share? Make a bulleted list, poem, drawing, etc.

- Draw what your anger feels like. What does it feel like in private? In public? How do you express it in different scenarios? (Among friends, at work, with your mom, etc)
- Write a diary entry about the last joke you heard made at a woman's expense. How did you react in the moment? React again now, through language and/or imagery.
- Think about a woman you look up to. Draw or write yourself into conversation with her. What do you have in common? What might you disagree on?

There will also be a list of suggested activities. Some examples could include:

- Cut and paste images from a magazine. Write your commentary, jokes, musings, etc around them.
- Write a poem or stream of consciousness. Treat this as you would a private journal.
- Make a word cloud. Put one word (examples: feminism, women, girls, joke, funny, angry, you, me, her) in the center and write words that you associate around it.

Below are some example zine pages made from these prompts by a group of American women aged 23-27 in Los Angeles, California on April 6, 2024. This is followed by more examples made from these prompts by an international group of people aged 23-27 in Rotterdam, the Netherlands on May 15, 2024.

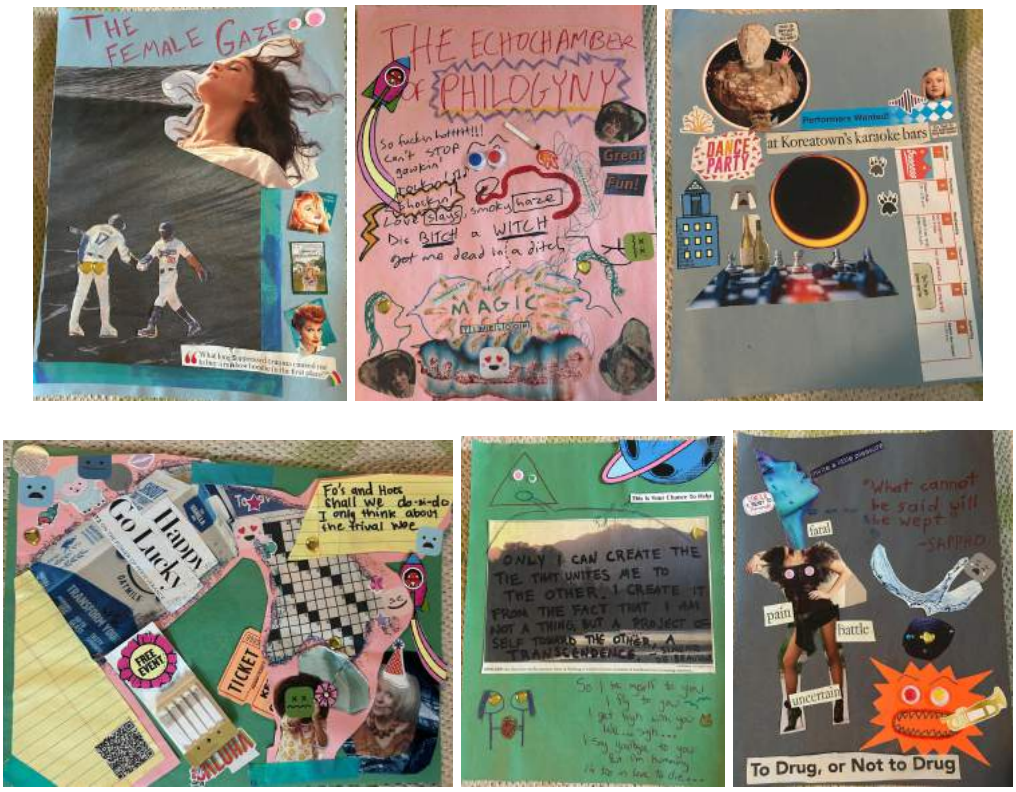


Figure 3: Zine examples made in Los Angeles, USA, April 6, 2024, mixed media, private collection.

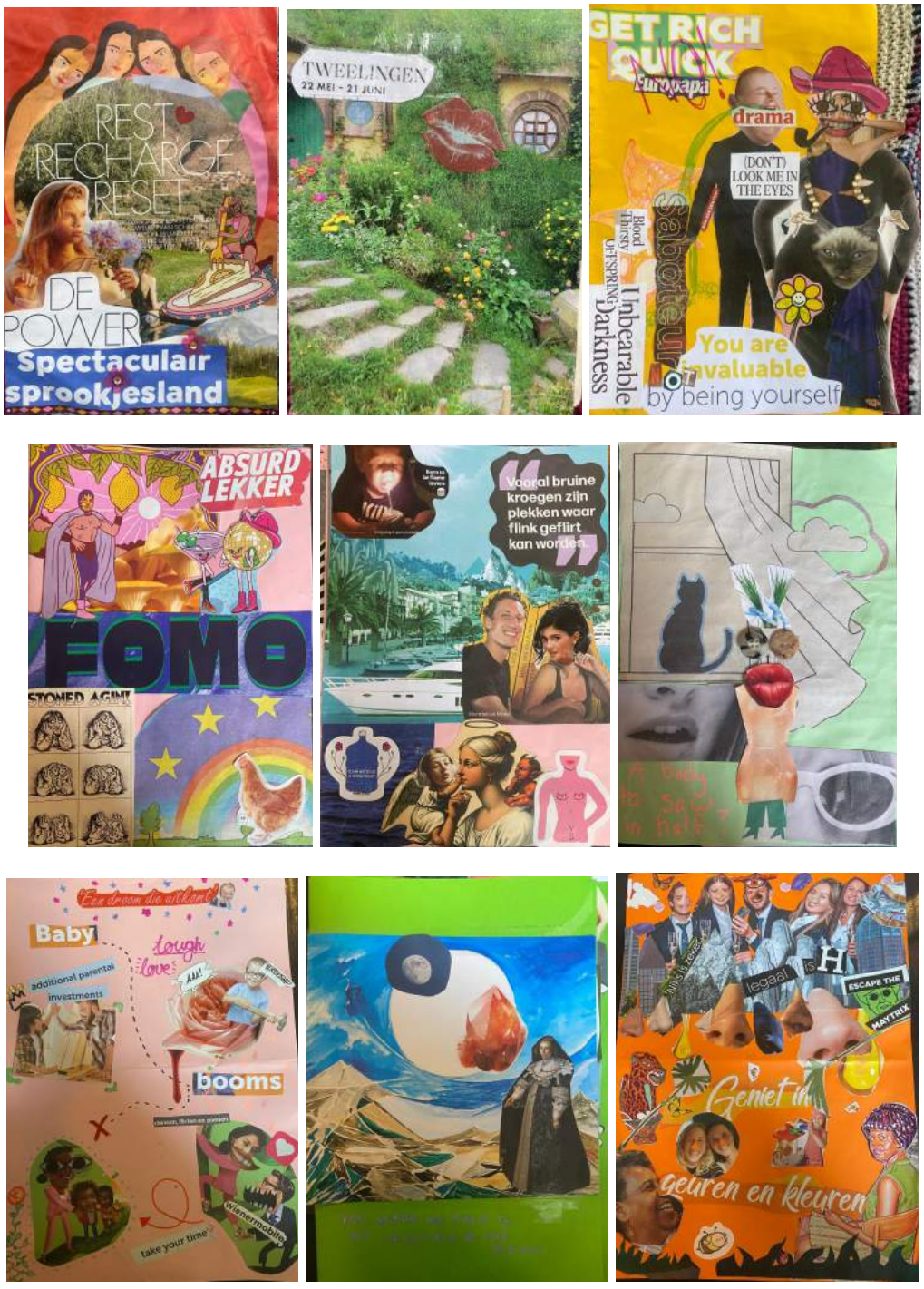


Figure 4: Zine examples made in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, May 15, 2024, mixed media, private collection.

Panel Texts

To contextualize the content of this exhibition, the first four panels will be presented in the following order at the start of the exhibition. The final two will be located at the start of their respective spaces. Below is a mockup of the first panel about girl zines.

Figure 5: Museum panel mockup design.

Girl Zines

Zines, pronounced like **'magazines**,' are self-published photocopied works which circulate among a small network of people. Some zines have a political or musical tilt to them, while others are 'perzines,' or personal zines, which have no specific agenda.

'Girl zines,' often stylized as '**grrrl zines**' to denote an angry growl, became an **international movement** with the 1991 publication of the Riot Grrrl manifesto by American feminist punk band Bikini Kill. A surge of homemade girl zines followed across the world, tackling topics like sexism, discrimination, homophobia, mental illness, sexual assault, and more.

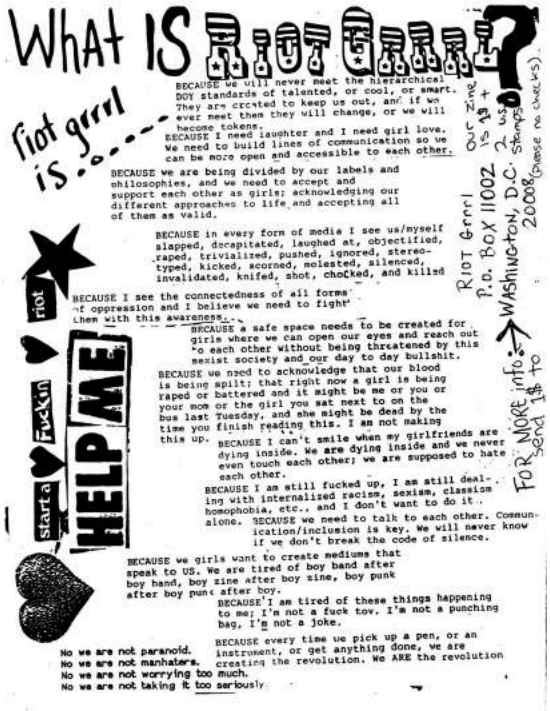


Figure 6: Riot Grrrl manifesto, *The Riot Grrrl Revolution*, Equality Archive, October 12, 2017, https://equalityarchive.com/issues/riot-grrrl-revolution/.

Figure 7: Kathleen Hanna 1990, Hannah Stemstein, *An early Bikini Kill gig at the Mushroom House in Olympia, Washington*, photograph, The Guardian, 1990, https://www.theguardian.com/music/article/2024/may/13/bikini-kill-kathleen-hanna-riot-grrrl-girl-power.

Figure 8: Collection of girl zine covers, London College of Communication.

Caption 1: The Riot Grrrl manifesto published in 1991 by Bikini Kill.

Caption 2: Kathleen Hanna, lead singer of Bikini Kill, in the early 1990s.

Caption 3: Covers of girl zines from the United Kingdom in the 1990s.

The Waves of Feminism

The fundamental goal of feminism is to achieve equal rights and opportunity for all genders. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the **first wave of feminism** concerned itself with achieving women's suffrage. The **second wave** championed women's legal and social rights in the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1990s, **third wave feminists** focused on self-expression, bodily autonomy and questioning gender roles. It was the first of the waves to consider intersectionality, which examines the overlapping of multiple social identities, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. During this time, **postfeminism** became a popular counterviewpoint. Postfeminists considered feminism to be outdated, as their goals had already been achieved, and stigmatized the word 'feminist.' This continues to the present day, as we hear people say, "I'm a feminist, but…" **Fourth wave feminism**, which began in the early 2010s, is characterized by a focus on sexual violence, internet activism, and intersectionality.

Figure 9: Suffragette Daisy Dugdale, *Daisy Dugdale leading a suffragette demonstration in London*, December 19, 1908, photograph, *Vox*, Museum of London, https://www.vox.com/21356259/19th-amendment-suffragists-alice-paul-pankhursts.

Figure 10: Miss World protest, W. Breeze, *Women's Liberation Movement protest against the Miss World contest*, photograph, *The Guardian*, Getty Images, 1970, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/feb/23/ie-1970-driven-by-chaos-and-energy-we-felt-like-pioneers-in-female-protest.

Figure 11: Bikini Kill 1995, Alice Wheeler, *Queercore band Bikini Kill performing*, photograph, *The Guardian*, 1995, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/sep/20/queercore-punk-revolution-documentary-yony-leyser-bruce-labruce.

Figure 12: Women's March 2018, Daniel Leal-Olivas, *Protesters hold up placards and chant during the Women's March in London*, photograph, *Slate*, January 20, 2018, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2018/01/britains-metoo-movement-is-uncovering-a-culture-of-rampant-sexism-and-harassment-in-londons-corridors-of-power.html.

Caption 1: Daisy Dugdale leading a suffragette demonstration in London on December 19, 1908.

Caption 2: Second wave feminists from the Women's Liberation Movement protest against the Miss World contest in 1970.

Caption 3: American feminist punk band Bikini Kill onstage in 1995.

Caption 4: Protestors at the Women's March in London on January 21, 2018.

Carnival

Figure 13: Two Fools of Carnival, Hendrick Hondius I, *Two Fools Dancing from Two and Three Fools of the Carnival*, engraving, The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, *The Met*, 1642, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/334132.

By interpreting '90s girl zines as carnivalesque, a new understanding can be reached about their **revolutionary** quality. Carnival is a celebration which dates back to the Middle Ages. Although it began as a pagan tradition, it has evolved alongside the rise of Christianity. It is a festival which takes place in an upside-down world, one in which kings become fools and fools become kings. Real life is temporarily suspended, and **excess, parody, and chaos** are encouraged. In the Carnival tradition, scholars have identified a few key elements:
the grotesque body, a temporary upside-down world, open dialogue, carnival laughter, and marketplace speech (slang and foul language).

The themes of Carnival can be applied to literature, an idea developed by Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin. Through the carnivalesque, texts can **subvert, mock, and challenge dominant ideas.** Girl zines in the 1990s United Kingdom provided a space for women to push back against sexist, racist, homophobic, and otherwise discriminatory rhetoric.

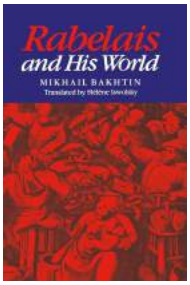


Figure 14: Rabelais and His World, *Rabelais and His World*, 1984, in Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), front cover.

Caption 1: Two fools dance in the engraving *Two Fools of Carnival* by Hendrik Hondius I, 1642.
Caption 2: Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1965) which analyzes the novels of sixteenth-century French author François Rabelais as an example of the carnivalesque.

Create Your Own Zine

Figure 15: Zine-making station in Los Angeles, USA, photograph, April 6, 2024, private collection.

At the end of this exhibition, you will have the opportunity to create a page (or more!) of a zine. There is no prerequisite to become a zinester - **this medium belongs to everyone.** As you walk through, consider how the zines relate to your own experiences today. What similarities and differences do you see between their realities and yours? What topics do they discuss that are still relevant? What is not?

If you feel inspired, **grab a few sticky notes and answer some of the questions** posed by the object labels. There are themed bulletin boards throughout the space. The questions are there to get you thinking about various themes of the exhibition, and prepare you for the zine-making station. There will be a bowl of prompts related to the themes of this exhibit at the station, but here are a few to get you started:

Figure 16: American participants in Los Angeles, USA, photograph, April 6, 2024, private collection.

What does the word 'feminism' mean to you?

What about 'girl power'?

How do you conceive of femininity?

How do you perform gender?

Caption 1: A zine-making station at Pan Pacific Park in Los Angeles, California in April 2024.

Caption 2: American participants who responded to the prompts of this exhibition.

The Grotesque Body

Figure 17: Gargantua, Gustave Doré, *Prologue*, 1854, in François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1952), 1.

In Bakhtin's theory, the grotesque body is one of **excess and exaggeration.** It is often dismembered, or focuses heavily on features like the mouth, eyes, and genitals. Many mainstream depictions of women in the 1990s severed heads from bodies in an effort to sexualize them. Zinesters parodied these **fragmented visuals** with angry, screaming heads and by constructing women in bizarre styles through a **cut-and-paste.** They also used the grotesque to create space for taboo subjects like masturbation, menstruation, motherhood, and eating disorders. By drawing women as **monstrous, distorted, and highly visible figures,** zinesters combatted these societal taboos.

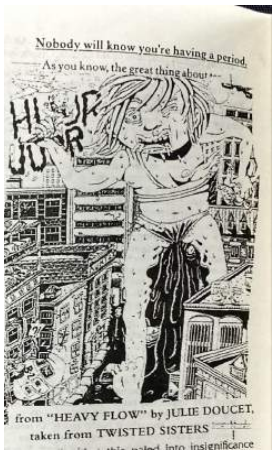


Figure 18: Heavy Flow, Jane, *Shag Stamp #2*, (Bradford, England, 1993), 10, London College of Communication.

Caption 1: An illustration of Gargantua, a character from Rabelais' most famous work. Sketch by the French graphic artist Gustave Doré (1832–1883).

Caption 2: A page from the 1993 zine *Shag Stamp #2*, which depicts a menstruating woman as a Godzilla-like monster.

The Upside-Down World

Figure 19: Carnival in Rome, Johannes Lingelbach, *Carnival in Rome,* painting, *The New York Times*, Getty Images, c. 1650, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/17/opinion/the-lord-of-misrule.html.

During Carnival, fools become kings and kings become fools. This upside-down world is a **limited utopia** that reverses back once the festival is over. In Bakhtin's theory, the upside-down world is a place for like-minded individuals to meet and exchange ideas on the 'carnival square.' '90s feminists found this freedom in the pages of their zines, where they frequently employed fairy tales and fantastical elements **to dream of alternate world orders.** Common topics included girl power, violence towards and by women, female solidarity, familial tensions, beloved women pop stars, and body image.

Figure 20: Spice Girls go goth, Rhona, *Black Planet*, (Boughton-under-Blean, England, 1997), 36, London College of Communication.

Caption 1: The fools have just been crowned kings in Dutch painter Johannes Lingelbach's *Carnival in Rome,* ca. 1650.

Caption 2: Zinester Rhona's gothic take on the Spice Girls in her 1997 zine *Black Planet*. By drawing heavy makeup, a fishnet top, and various necklaces, she rejects the male gaze and caters instead to an artificial, hyperfeminine identity.

List of Objects

In dividing the twenty-four objects into two distinct spaces, the goal is for visitors to immerse themselves in these chosen themes. Throughout the 'grotesque body' space, Figures 22, 23, 24, 26, 27, and 18 will be reprinted very large so as to give a looming, monstrous effect. Similarly, in the 'upside-down world' space, Figures 35, 38, 39, 20, and 43 will be printed twice - one very large, and once flipped upside down to create a disconcerting effect.

Whenever possible, the object label contains the creator's name in the way it was written in the zine. Since zinesters did not include photos of themselves, seeing their names as they chose to write them is a way for audiences to connect with these women of the past. This connection is important for visitors to feel a more personal connection to the exhibition, as making museal objects more 'social and personal' facilitates greater engagement with the content.[29] American exhibition curator Nina Simon indicated the importance of this in her case study of an exhibition about families who lived in one house over 118 years.[30] Photos and audio recordings were embedded throughout the space so that as visitors touched different household objects, they unlocked different stories in which they could see and hear directly from the families themselves.[31] In reflecting on the success of this approach, "researchers found that visitors engaged in high levels of conversation about their connections to the exhibition, with the average visitor relating personal histories to at least three objects on display."[32] With this in mind, and with the dual purpose of retaining the tangibility of zines, two reproductions of the full zines will be made available next to each object, so that visitors can flip

[29] Simon, *Participatory Museum*, 132-33.
[30] Ibid., 132-33.
[31] Ibid., 132-33.
[32] Ibid., 133.

through them. As discussed, this tangibility additionally works well to deepen the connection between object and visitor.[33]

The objects are arranged in a specific order to guide visitors through the many themes of this exhibition. Objects that relate to multiple themes are placed strategically to guide visitors through the exhibit.

[33] Novak and Schwan, "Touching Real Objects," 637-38.

The Grotesque Body

In the first space, fourteen objects are organized around the themes of body image, intellect, taboos, menstruation, motherhood, and eating disorders. There will be six bulletin boards throughout the space with these titles. The objects have been organized in such an order which facilitates a narrative flow from one theme to the next. For example, the comparison of screaming heads in Figures 25 and 26 will transition the viewer from intellect to taboo subjects. Notes in italics underneath the label explain why the objects were placed in a certain order. Below is an example of Figure 22's object label.

Figure 21: Object label mockup design.

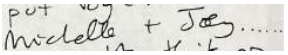
Figure 22: Mutilated body surrounded by advertisements, Linus, *Linus* (London, England, 1993), London College of Communication, 4.

Linus - *Linus* (1993)
London, England
London College of Communication; Donated by Jennifer Denitto

Body image was a popular topic for '90s zinesters, who often challenged the mainstream media's sexualization of women's bodies. Here, newspaper advertisements for weight loss, diets, and liposuction surround a mutilated and dismembered body. The image repurposes these ads to express anger about the dangerous ways in which women try to lose weight and conform to a feminine ideal. The obscured gender of the body makes an even larger statement about the destructive power of popular magazines, and the ways that media can affect people's perceptions of their bodies, regardless of gender. What impossible standards created by the media do you feel have affected you?

Two bulletin boards titled 'body image' and 'intellect' will be located by the first five objects (Figures 22-26) for visitors to answer the questions posed on these object labels. This object (Figure 22) will be one of the large reprints to give a looming, monstrous effect.

Figure 23: Am I pretty enough, Michelle and Joey, *Bananas and Custard*, (Melton Mowbray, England), London College of Communication, 7.



Michelle and Joey - *Bananas and Custard* (Unknown)
Melton Mowbray, England
London College of Communication; Donated by Jennifer Denitto

Some zinesters used their medium to comment on the simultaneous praise for women's bodies and disregard for their intellect. This zine pastes a larger image of a woman's head onto a smaller image of another woman's body. On her forehead is a hand-scrawled note asking, "am I pretty enough?" This Frankensteinian cut-and-paste of the woman's body, along with the text on her forehead, suggests Michelle and Joey's frustrations with how women have internalized an unattainable feminine ideal. The image is placed next to an unrelated stream-of-consciousness vent about alcohol. Such a choice indicates an informality with which zinesters scrutinized unrealistic body standards. What does this approach say about the way that women are socialized to think about their bodies?

This object will be reprinted large. Boards nearby: body image and intellect.

Figure 24: Crusading feminist, *Female Itch (The Maiden Voyage)*, (United Kingdom), London College of Communication, 1.

Female Itch (The Maiden Voyage)
United Kingdom
London College of Communication; Donated by Jennifer Denitto

This zine cover visualizes women, and feminists specifically, as pioneers setting sail for hell. The woman is pasted together messily with a mannequin body, which represents an unattainable body shape. The zinester mixes this critique of unrealistic body standards with a focus on intellect: she references a "maiden voyage" for a "crusading feminist" with a "female itch." The image questions how femininity is constructed artificially, both physically and intellectually. What does femininity mean to you, and how can we create it on our own terms beyond the physical?

This object will be reprinted large. Boards nearby: body image and intellect.

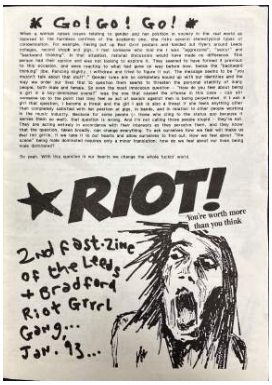
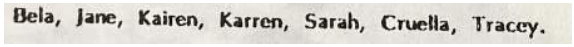


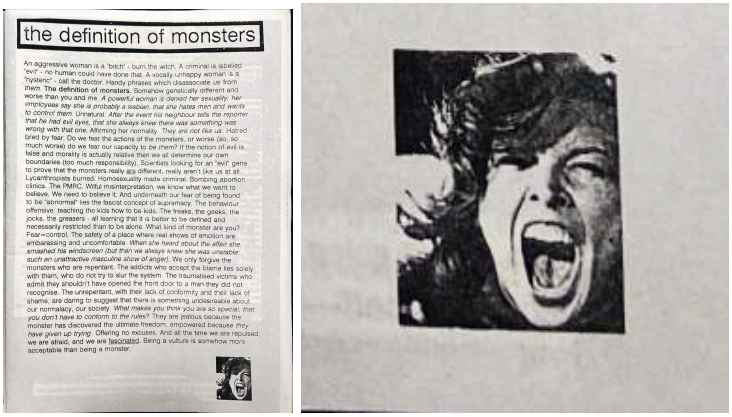
Figure 25: Screaming woman below feminist text, Bela, Jane, Kairen, Karren, Sarah, Cruella, and Tracey, *Leeds & Bradford Riot Grrrl!*, (Leeds, England, 1993), London College of Communication, 10.



Bela, Jane, Kairen, Karren, Sarah, Cruella, Tracey - *Leeds & Bradford Riot Grrrl!* (1993)
Leeds, England
London College of Communication; Donated by Jennifer Denitto

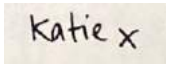
In the spirit of the early 1990s, this zine is hopeful about girl power. The block text at the top of the page considers the courage it takes to question the patriarchy. The text ends by saying "with this question in our hearts we change the whole fuckin world." Underneath the text is a hand drawn woman who screams in terror, emphasizing again the bravery it takes for women to question their place in a "boy-dominated scene." She is a monstrous and wild counter to the perfect, docile images of women in mainstream media. What emotions are elicited when you think about how the patriarchy affects you? Why is it so important to question it in the first place?

Boards nearby: body image and intellect.


the definition of monsters

An aggressive woman is a 'bitch' - burn the witch. A criminal is labelled "evil" - no human could have done that. A vocally unhappy woman is a "hysteric" - call the doctor. Handy phrases which disassociate us from them. **The definition of monsters.** Somehow genetically different and worse than you and me. *A powerful woman is denied her sexuality: her employees say she is probably a lesbian, that she hates men and wants to control them. Unnatural. After the event his neighbour tells the reporter that he had evil eyes, that she always knew there was something was wrong with that one.* Affirming her normality. *They are not like us.* Hatred bred by fear. Do we fear the actions of the monsters, or worse (so, so much worse) do we fear our capacity to be them? If the notion of evil is false and morality is actually relative then we all determine our own boundaries (too much responsibility). Scientists looking for an "evil" gene to prove that the monsters really are different, really aren't like us at all. Lycanthropists burned. Homosexuality made criminal. Bombing abortion clinics. The PMRC. Wilful misinterpretation, we know what we want to believe. We need to believe it. And underneath our fear of being found to be "abnormal" lies the fascist concept of supremacy. The behaviour offensive: teaching the kids how to be kids. The freaks, the geeks, the jocks, the greasers - all learning that it is better to be defined and necessarily restricted than to be alone. What kind of monster are you? Fear=control. The safety of a place where real shows of emotion are embarassing and uncomfortable. *When she heard about the affair she smashed his windscreen (but then we always knew she was unstable, such an unattractive masculine show of anger).* We only forgive the monsters who are repentant. The addicts who accept the blame lies solely with them, who do not try to slur the system. The traumatised victims who admit they shouldn't have opened the front door to a man they did not recognise. The unrepentant, with their lack of conformity, and their lack of shame, are daring to suggest that there is something undesirable about our normalacy, our society. *What makes you think you are so special, that you don't have to conform to the rules?* They are jealous because the monster has discovered the ultimate freedom, empowerist because *they have given up trying.* Offering no excuses. And all the time we are repulsed, we are afraid, and we are fascinated. Being a vulture is somehow more acceptable than being a monster.

Figure 26: The definition of monsters, Katie, *Werewolves #2 Of Menace and Jeopardy*, (London, England, 1997), London College of Communication, 3.


Katie x

Katie - *Werewolves #2 Of Menace and Jeopardy* (1997)

London, England

London College of Communication

Over the course of the 1990s, postfeminism became a popular viewpoint – that the goals of feminism had been achieved and feminism was no longer necessary. Girl power was stripped of its original revolutionary intent and third wave feminists began to lose hope in the Riot Grrrl revolution. In the opening pages of this zine, Katie laments that “an aggressive woman is a ‘bitch’ - burn the witch.” Here, she connects this struggle to the centuries of conflict between women and the patriarchy. The small photo of a screaming woman beside the text, however, suggests that the scale of the issue overwhelms her own voice. How do you express feminist thought? In what ways do you think feminism is or isn't taken seriously today?

Boards nearby: body image and intellect. Between this object and the next, large reproductions of the screaming heads transition the visitor from intellect to taboo subjects.

Figure 27: Showerpower, Vanessa Sparkle, *Girls with Guns*, (Harwell, England), London College of Communication, 16-17.

Vanessa Sparkle - *Girls with Guns*
Harwell, England
London College of Communication

Zinesters often used their art form as a safe place to discuss taboo topics; here, Vanessa discusses her frustration with the stigma surrounding women's masturbation. She writes that men are "unable to accept the fact" that women can sexually satisfy themselves without them. To the left of the text, a woman's head takes up the entire page. In contrast with other screaming heads in this collection, who are angry or fearful, this woman seems to be shouting with joy – perhaps even orgasmic joy. Outside the constraints of mainstream publishing, zines gave women the space to choose topics without censorship. Does an uneasiness around masturbation, especially for women, persist today? What taboo subjects might you write about if given such a chance?

A large reproduction of this head will face the previous head, creating a visual dialogue. The third bulletin board, titled 'taboos,' will be placed between this object and the next.

Figure 18: Heavy Flow, Jane, *Shag Stamp #2*, (Bradford, England, 1993), London College of Communication, 10.

Jane XXX. **Jane** - *Shag Stamp #2* (1993)

Bradford, England

London College of Communication; Donated by Jennifer Denitto

In this zine, Jane rages against societal taboos surrounding menstruation in a two-page piece titled "A Load of Bleedin' Twats (A polemic on periods)." This cartoon, borrowed from the 1989 comic "Heavy Flow," is a monstrous example of the grotesque body, with blood pouring down from a Godzilla-sized woman. Above her reads, "Nobody will know you're having a period." The clashing text and imagery creates space for an ironic reflection on menstruation. Although her period greatly affects her physical and emotional wellbeing, she must keep it a secret from a society that stigmatizes it. How does this resonate today? How can depicting menstruation like this be a liberating experience?

A very large reproduction of this object will be placed above to give the effect of a looming monster. The fourth bulletin board, titled 'menstruation,' will be placed nearby for the next three objects (Figures 18, 28, and 29).

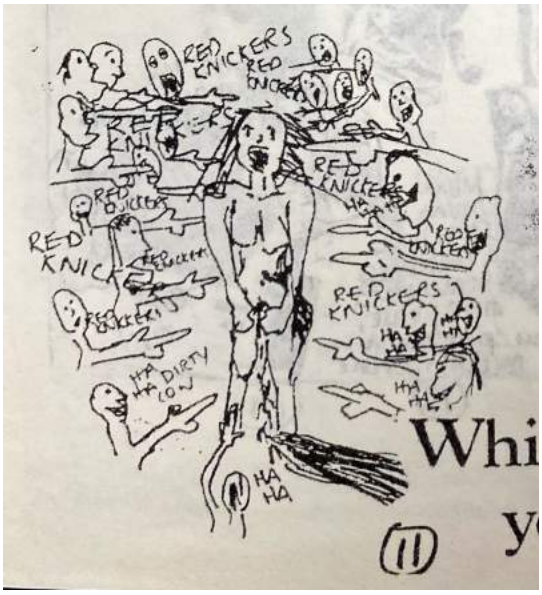


Figure 28: Woman and jeering crowd, Jane, *Shag Stamp #2*, (Bradford, England, 1993), London College of Communication, 11.

Jane XXX. **Jane** - *Shag Stamp #2* (1993)

Bradford, England

London College of Communication; Donated by Jennifer Denitto

Along with the previous image, the zinester adds her voice to the larger discussion around menstruation. This page features a hand drawn woman on her period who is at the center of a jeering crowd. Similar to the Godzilla-like figure, the woman here feels monstrous and unnatural in comparison to others in the scene. Considering the historical silence surrounding menstruation, zines provided women an alternative space to express and work through internalized disgust. How would you illustrate your feelings and experience with menstruation? How might a grotesque body hold space for women to confront feelings and stories they'd internalized long ago?

Board nearby: menstruation.

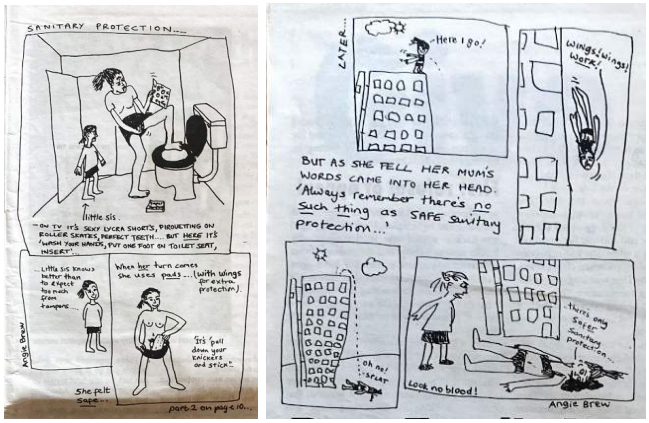


Figure 29: Sanitary Protection, *Bad Attitude #3*, (London, England, 1993), 56a InfoShop, 3, 10.

Bad Attitude #3 (1993)
London, England
56a Infoshop

In this comic, a girl jumps to her death because she believes that the wings on her pads will save her. This gruesome death pokes fun at 'safe sanitary protection,' a cheeky reference to contraceptives, which were a key development for second wave feminists to plan their families and careers in the 1960s and 1970s. The girl is described as 'little sis,' possibly aligning this '93 artist with her second wave feminist predecessors. Are the subjects explored here still relevant today? What issues do you think current feminists share with earlier waves?

Board nearby: menstruation. The fifth bulletin board, titled 'motherhood,' will be placed between this object and the next.

Figure 30: St. Augustine quote on woman and baby, Jane, *Shag Stamp #2*, (Bradford, England, 1993), London College of Communication, 23.

Jane XXX. **Jane** - *Shag Stamp #2* (1993)

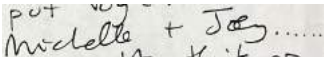
Bradford, England

London College of Communication; Donated by Jennifer Denitto

In this zine, Jane laughs at the idea that maternity is a sacred connection. By pasting this St. Augustine quote over the image, readers are forced to think of the realities of birth, even as they look at a beautiful mother and her baby. This clash is typical of zine culture; what other dualities of womanhood and motherhood come to mind for you? What adjectives might you use to describe the bond between mother and child?

Board nearby: motherhood.

Figure 31: Woman-baby on toilet, Michelle and Joey, *Bananas and Custard*, (Melton Mowbray, England), London College of Communication, 1.

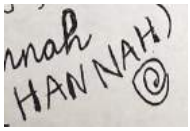


Michelle and Joey - *Bananas and Custard* (Unknown)
Melton Mowbray, England
London College of Communication; Donated by Jennifer Denitto

Some zinesters used a cut-and-paste method to challenge a divine image of motherhood. On the cover of this zine, an adult woman's face is pasted onto a statue of a baby sitting on a toilet. Such a combination cheekily places women in a vulgar realm typically reserved for men. Motherhood here is not elevated to a saintlike experience. Instead, the zinesters use their cover page to protest the romanticization of maternity seen in mainstream media. Is motherhood still presented as this sacred experience today? What adjectives would you use to describe motherhood?

Board nearby: motherhood.

Figure 32: Collage of women's body parts, Hannah, *Girls' Annual*, (London, England, 1993), London College of Communication, 6-7.



Hannah - *Girls' Annual* (1993)
London, England
London College of Communication

This collage combines images of dismembered women with predatory and violent words, such as "my boyfriend keeps hitting me," "serial rapist," and "he says I'm fat and ugly." Hannah uses a cut-and-paste method to take a defiant stand against the mainstream sexualization of women. Although she also dismembers women, she does so alongside persistent verbal reminders of the violence that women face. The effect is ultimately one of anger. What about today's magazines makes you angry? Is it similar or different to Hannah's experience?

The final bulletin board, titled 'eating disorders,' will be placed nearby for these last three objects (Figures 32, 33, and 34).

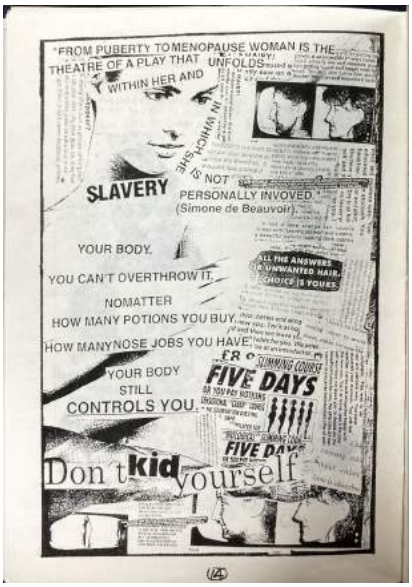


Figure 33: Collage don't kid yourself, Jane, *Shag Stamp #2*, (Bradford, England, 1993), London College of Communication, 14.

Jane XXX. **Jane** - *Shag Stamp #2* (1993)

Bradford, England

London College of Communication; Donated by Jennifer Denitto

Compare this collage with the previous one. Each mixes previously unrelated images and texts to create angry commentaries about body image and disordered eating. Here, in the top left corner of the page, Jane references second wave feminist Simone de Beauvoir. Many zinesters in this collection directly quote their predecessors. What does this say about a larger feminist discourse? How do you understand your own struggle within such a discourse?

Board nearby: eating disorders.

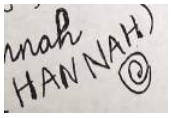

Cool Stuff - Dig it girl !!

"SUPERMODEL SUPERFICIAL"
The COOLEST slice of vinyl, by the VOODOO QUEENS, this record just made me so excited. Why don't we organise a nationwide smash up of all those crappy 'Vauxhall Nova, The New Supermodel' posters? YEH, like a woman is just another piece of merchandise like a car. Actually, that reminds me of that infamous judge who fined a rapist £500, to give the girl he'd raped 'a good holiday', then fined a motorist £500 later that afternoon, for some kind of traffic offence, yeh, a woman has the same price as a speeding ticket. Kill the sick bastard. (Yeh! I do mean it! Fuck you! "If you can't see the problem then you're probably part of it", to quote a very famous source). On a much less PC note, that hip silver dress that Angali wore on 'Raw Soup' was to DIE for girls, like seriously!!

Blueberry and Melon and Pawpaw flavour bubbly, creamy bath stuff, or by its official title on the bottle, 'Moisturising Cream Bath', you can get these from BOOTS- and these flavours smell so yummy you just wanna eat them, they smell so DELICIOUS!! and fill the bathroom with a lovely cloud of fruit-flavoured mist. Boots own products aren't tested on animals either (sorry, you probably know this already, Animal Rioters!) which must make these doubly COOL!!

"CHEMICAL SMILE", a really cool RIOT ZEEN, packed with groovy stuff, issue one includes an interview with Dale from

Figure 34: Skeletal woman size 10, Hannah, *Girls' Annual*, (London, England, 1993), London College of Communication, 8.



Hannah - *Girls' Annual* (1993)

London, England

London College of Communication

Disordered eating was a popular topic within these zines. As a deeply internalized issue among women, it was often represented casually, in a manner that suggested it was an unavoidable part of everyday life. Here, the text on the page, which is a series of reviews of records, bath creams, and zines, is completely unrelated to the skeletal woman drawn alongside it. The title, with hearts dotting the i's, cheekily reads, "Cool stuff - Dig it girl!!" How does the nonchalance of such a grotesque depiction sit with you? Does the speech bubble beside the depiction ring true to how some women speak about their bodies today?

Board nearby: eating disorders.

The Upside-Down World

In the second space, ten objects are organized around the themes of girl power, feminist tensions, gender expression, and body image. There will be four bulletin boards throughout the space with these titles. The objects have been organized in such an order which facilitates a narrative flow from one theme to the next. For example, Figure 38 transitions the viewer from ‘girl power’ to ‘feminist tensions,’ as it deals with both themes. Before viewers move into the zine-making space, a final bulletin board will encourage participants to add their first names alongside reproductions of the names of the zinesters in this collection. Notes in italics underneath the label explain why the objects were placed in a certain order.

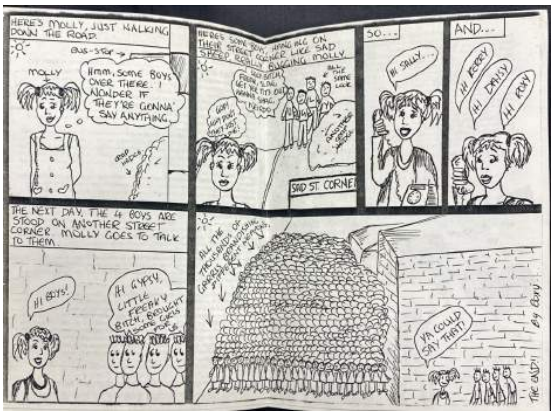
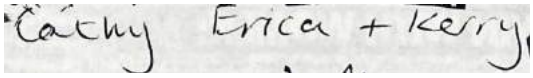


Figure 35: Riot grrrls attack their harassers, Cathy, Erica, and Kerry, *Angel: A Fanzine for Grrrrls, Bitches, Barbies and Dykes #3*, (United Kingdom, 1993), London College of Communication, 14-15.

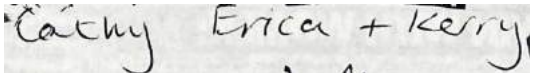


Cathy, Erica and Kerry - *Angel: A fanzine for grrrrls, bitches, barbies and dykes* (1993)
United Kingdom
London College of Communication

In the early '90s, girl power was a revolutionary, unifying, and powerful idea. Many zinesters used the phrase to call for violence against men. It was an ideological shift from women's movements throughout the 1900s, many of which preferred peaceful protest. In this comic, the artist calls on girl power by literally phoning her 'grrrl' friends, who show up with weapons. The idea that girl power could and *would* change the world echoes throughout these early '90s zines. What does this phrase mean to you today? What are women's movements associated with now?

A bulletin board titled 'girl power' will be placed near the first four objects. Two large reproductions of the final panel (one flipped upside down) will welcome visitors into the second part of the exhibit.

Figure 36: Queer couple attacks their harassers, Cathy, Erica, and Kerry, *Angel: A Fanzine for Grrrrls, Bitches, Barbies and Dykes #3*, (United Kingdom, 1993), London College of Communication, 9.



Cathy, Erica, and Kerry - *Angel: A Fanzine for Grrrrls, Bitches, Barbies and Dykes #3* (1993)
United Kingdom
London College of Communication

In the same zine, another comic idolizes what a violent and united girl power might accomplish. Here, a queer couple, one sporting a T-shirt that says 'girl power,' attacks a group of boys for harassing them. Although the couple emerges victorious, the absurdity of the situation reminds readers of the more common violence towards women. Below the scene, pasted lyrics from the English punk band Sex Pistols read, "we're so pretty, oh so pretty…" This addition critiques and laughs at the importance society assigns to women's beauty. How does girl power enable women to laugh at patriarchal society? What is the value in this laughter?

Board nearby: girl power.

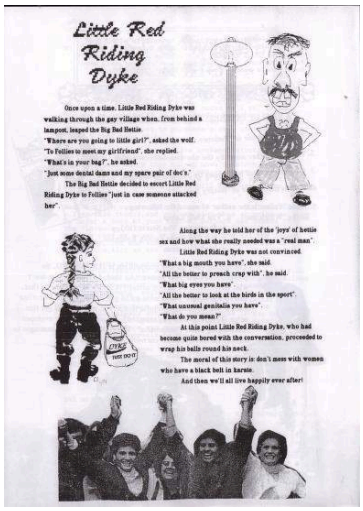


Figure 37: Little Red Riding Dyke, *Subversive Sister #2*, (Manchester, England, 1993), The Sparrows' Nest Library and Archive, 9, https://archive.org/details/sparrowsnest-4884/page/9/mode/2up.

Subversive Sister #2 (1993)

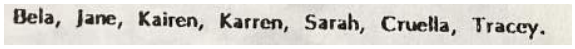
Manchester, England

The Sparrows' Nest Library and Archive

Well-known Western fairy tales provided an easy way for zinesters to reverse an ending and make a larger point about feminism. Here, the zinester parodies the fairy tale ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ in a story titled “Little Red Riding Dyke.” The original story ends with Red Riding Hood being eaten by the wolf - the moral is to be wary of strangers. In this version, ‘Red Riding Dyke’ is not a helpless victim - she is a fearsome figure who easily (and with an air of boredom!) kills the wolf. The twist reminds readers that violence *towards* women is more prevalent than women committing violence. It defies expectations of women, choosing to construct femininity as strong, queer, and violent. Beneath the story is an image of women cheering - a united, gleeful display in the face of violence. How does this celebration resonate with you today?

Board nearby: girl power.

Figure 38: Cinderella's revolution, Bela, Jane, Kairen, Karren, Sarah, Cruella, and Tracey, *Leeds & Bradford Riot Grrrl!*, (Leeds, England, 1993), London College of Communication, 28.



Bela, Jane, Kairen, Karren, Sarah, Cruella, Tracey - *Leeds & Bradford Riot Grrrl!* (1993)
Leeds, England
London College of Communication; Donated by Jennifer Denitto

This zine chose the Western fairy tale Cinderella to convey a specific conflict between feminists and their families. Cinderella quotes Robin Morgan, a radical second wave American feminist of the 1960s, saying "I want a women's revolution…" In the original story, the fairy godmother grants Cinderella's every wish, but here, she ignores her plea and condescendingly offers her a prince instead. Can you relate to this conflict? What patriarchal expectations persist in your life? How does this image create a conversation, rather than a confrontation, between second and third wave feminists?

Board nearby: girl power. The next board, titled 'feminist tensions,' will be placed near this object and the next, which thematically bridges the gap between 'girl power' and 'feminist tensions.' Two large reproductions of the object (one flipped upside down) will be placed above the glass cases.

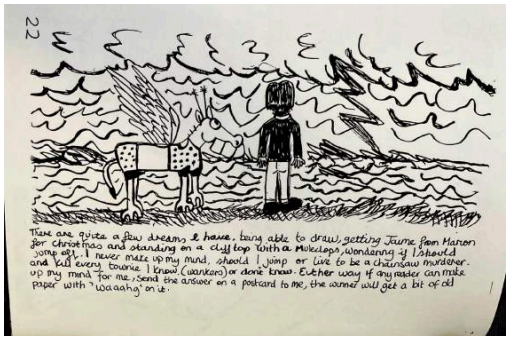


Figure 39: Chainsaw murderer and a muleclops, Chris, *Does My Bum Look Big In This?*, (Cambridge, England, 1998), London College of Communication, 22.

Chris - *Does My Bum Look Big In This?* (1998)
Cambridge, England
London College of Communication

By 1998, as Chris is drawing this comic, the phrase ‘girl power’ is losing its revolutionary potential. She describes a violent dream complete with a mythical creature and thunderstorm. Although Chris contemplates violence towards herself and others, she ultimately chooses neither. In asking her readers to decide for her, she expresses a lack of interest in the outcome - so long as there *is* violence. As Riot Grrrl feminist punk bands disbanded in the late ‘90s, their fans began to lose hope in the movement. The ‘muleclops’ beside her represents the undervalued and overworked status of the mule, the monstrous nature of the cyclops, and the strength of both creatures. How can you relate this to the dwindling feminist hope of the late ‘90s? What animal might you choose to represent the feminist movement of today?

Board nearby: feminist tensions. Two large reproductions of the object (one flipped upside down) will be placed above.

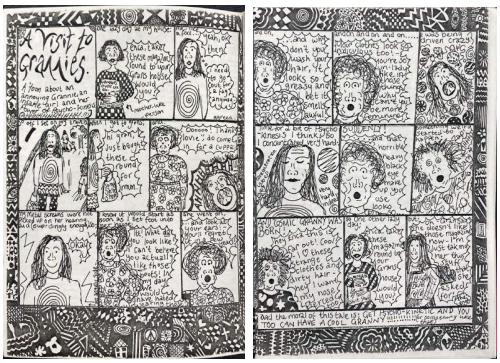
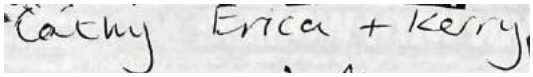


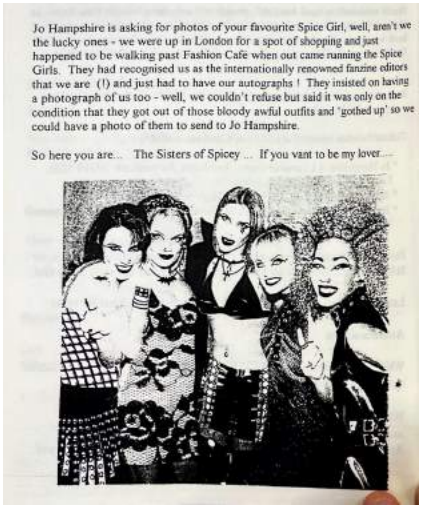
Figure 40: A Visit to Grannie's, Cathy, Erica, and Kerry, *Angel: A Fanzine for Grrrrls, Bitches, Barbies and Dykes #3*, (United Kingdom, 1993), London College of Communication, 6-7.



Cathy, Erica, and Kerry - *Angel: A Fanzine for Grrrrls, Bitches, Barbies and Dykes #3* (1993)
United Kingdom
London College of Communication

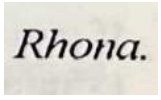
During a trip to her grandmother's, Erica becomes increasingly frustrated by critiques about her appearance. She reaches her tipping point when her grandmother asks her, "why can't you be more feminine?" In the comic, Erica does not appear particularly masculine - her hair is long, and she wears a skirt and makeup. However, in expressing her femininity in a way that her grandmother does not understand, she is deemed not feminine enough. The zinester uses fantastical elements to flip the world upside down - soon, Erica is using psycho-kinesis to turn her grandmother into 'Cosmic Grannie,' who shares Erica's taste in clothing, piercings, and music. Can you relate to this interfamilial struggle about gender expression?

A bulletin board titled 'gender expression' will be placed near this object and the next two (Figures 20 and 41).


Jo Hampshire is asking for photos of your favourite Spice Girl, well, aren't we the lucky ones - we were up in London for a spot of shopping and just happened to be walking past Fashion Cafe when out came running the Spice Girls. They had recognised us as the internationally renowned fanzine editors that we are (!) and just had to have our autographs ! They insisted on having a photograph of us too - well, we couldn't refuse but said it was only on the condition that they got out of those bloody awful outfits and 'gothed up' so we could have a photo of them to send to Jo Hampshire.

So here you are... The Sisters of Spicey ... If you vant to be my lover....

Figure 20: Spice Girls go goth, Rhona, *Black Planet*, (Boughton-under-Blean, England, 1997), London College of Communication, 36.



Rhona - *Black Planet* (1997)
Boughton-under-Blean, England
London College of Communication

The Spice Girls skyrocketed to popularity and famously popularized ‘girl power’ with their hit song ‘Wannabe’ in 1996. A year later, zinester Rhona reimagines the group as vampiric goths. With only her pen, she draws heavy makeup, a fishnet top, and crucifix, choker, and bat necklaces. The Spice Girls have often been critiqued for presenting a restrained and more ‘acceptable’ picture of girl power and femininity for a global audience. Rhona’s additions reject the male gaze, choosing to focus instead on a hyperfeminine, gothic presentation. How does this relate to the idea that gender is a construct? How do you perform gender?

Board nearby: gender expression. Two large reproductions of the object (one flipped upside down) will be placed above.

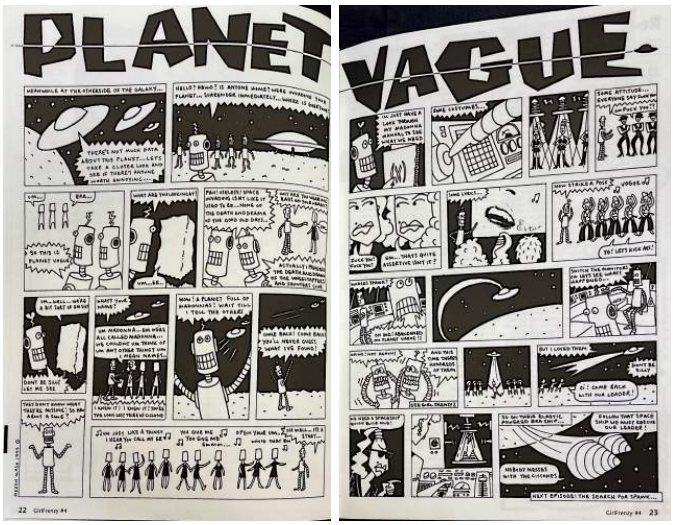
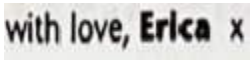


Figure 41: Planet Vague, Erica, *Girlfrenzy #4*, (Hove, England, 1992), London College of Communication, 22-23.



Erica - *Girlfrenzy #4* (1992)

Hove, England

London College of Communication; Donated by Jennifer Denitto

In this comic, robots land on “Planet Vague” - population: Madonnas. They are discovered with bags on their heads, suggesting a repression of female sexuality. Erica explores this theme further as the robot teaches the women how to act like ‘90s pop star Madonna by way of her 1992 album *Erotica*. The Madonnas then band together to build a spaceship - an “elastic powered bra ship.” The joke here is not that the women cannot build a spaceship - indeed, they are immediately successful - but that their intelligence is framed so firmly within the box of their femininity. Why is a woman’s intelligence, independent of sexuality, so threatening to the existing world order?

Board nearby: gender expression.

Figure 42: I lost weight, Erica, *Girlfrenzy #4*, (Hove, England, 1992), London College of Communication, 8.

with love, Erica x **Erica** - *Girlfrenzy #4* (1992)

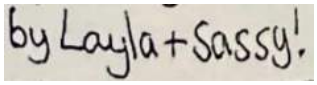
Hove, England

London College of Communication; Donated by Jennifer Denitto

This reprint of American comic author Mary Fleener's "Abustrix" follows a woman's weight loss program. The tongue-in-cheek story involves the narrator being chased by crocodiles in a "sensible exercise program" with a dominatrix counselor. Although the protagonist believes she has earned respect by losing weight, the reality is that the women around her are all secretly thinking something rude. This misunderstanding shows how chasing an impossible standard is a losing battle for women. The story presents a realistic picture of internalized misogyny, one which tells women they must look a certain way and in doing so, pits them against each other. In what ways do you experience internalized misogyny?

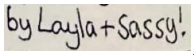
The final bulletin board titled 'body image' will be placed between the final two objects.

Figure 43: When pigs fly, Layla and Sassy, *Are You Phony? Drop Babies*, (Brentford, England, 1992), London College of Communication, 10.



Layla and Sassy - *Are You Phony? Drop Babies* (1992)
Brentford, England
London College of Communication

When pigs fly… women might be released from the feminine ideal. This sketch visually uses the sarcastic Western idiom (‘when pigs fly’) to refer to an extremely unlikely scenario, which in this case is a society that accepts all women’s bodies. This image laughs at an internalized fatphobia and imagines women’s liberation through their literal escape from this “cruel world.” How does fatphobia look today? In what other ways can women free themselves from an unattainable feminine ideal?

Board nearby: body image. Two large reproductions of the object (one flipped upside down) will be placed above. Just before entering the zine-making space, a final bulletin board will have reproductions of all the zinesters’ names in this collection (ex:  *). A short explanation will encourage museumgoers to write their own first names on the colorful sticky notes, and add them to the board before moving into the final space to create a page of a zine.*

Conclusion

Through this museum exhibition, girl zines of the 1990s can be understood as a feminist art form which concerns itself with many of the same issues that women contend with today. The aim of this proposal is to encourage visitors to consider how these zines relate to their own contemporary perceptions of feminism and constructions of femininity. In doing so, these '90s zines can be recognized as visual links to a larger, feminist discourse. The immediate archival of zines created by visitors will enable future historians to have a larger and more intersectional archive at their disposal to study feminism and femininity in the United Kingdom during the 2020s. By incorporating participatory museum techniques, this exhibition can combat common visitor complaints, such as a lack of creativity, cultural relevance, and social comfort, as well as an annoyance with a monophonic, one-way dissemination of information.[34] Through an audience-centered and dialogic experience in which visitors can engage with constructions of femininity, this exhibition can achieve the dual purpose of contributing to the existing body of girl zines and connecting visitors with women thirty years earlier.

[34] Simon, *Participatory Museum*, iii - iv.

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