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Making a Loss

The Unsustainable, Unprofitable,
and Unruly Creativity of Do-It-Yourself

For over twenty years, an Australian artist using the pseudonym Luke You has been handwriting a letter every week. *Dear You*, the letter always begins. The letter is rarely longer than a single page of text. Luke photocopies the letter, places each copy inside a paper bag, and staples the bags closed. He then stamps the bags with the word *YOU* and decorates each bag—sometimes with paint, sometimes by pasting an image to it or attaching a small object to the front with staples or tape. Each batch of bagged letters is then distributed by mail to an evolving international network of artists, acquaintances, and friends. Like Luke, these people leave the letters in small piles in public places for members of the public to encounter. Over the years, *YOU* has documented the birth of Luke's two children, his reflections on popular culture, his decision to learn the saxophone, everyday encounters with people, animals, locations, music, films, television, art, literature. *YOU* is a project sustained by the ethos of do-it-yourself cultural production. It is a zine, and it is the practice of creativity enmeshed in everyday life.

In 2002, I embarked on a research project to try to understand if zines were literature. I wanted to read zines as life writing rather than as sociological documents or examples of alternative media production, which is how they had been previously studied (Poletti 2008). My aim was to try to understand how zines worked as a life-writing form and what kinds of stories and reflections on lived experience were produced and shared in zine culture. The project focused on the photocopied, small-scale publications themselves (presenting formalist readings of many zines) and on their modes of distribution—in artist-run spaces (sometimes sitting alongside artist books and poetry chapbooks), anarchist bookstores, at specially organized zine fairs, at gigs, through mail order, and informally among zine makers through the postal system. At the time, zines appeared to me as an amazing example of literature having escaped the bounds of the book and the literary field. Zines evade the regimes of value canonized literature has been assigned in

national ideologies (Anderson 2006) and education (Guillory 1995); their ephemeral and democratic principles of production run counter to attempts to organize creativity and culture into resources that can be consolidated toward some greater end. The practice and form of the zine is particularly resistant to creating value or having its value transferred via the cultural industries to the more “general economy of practices” that James English (2008: 10) describes as involving “interested participants, with their varying mixtures or portfolios of capital, in the struggle over various collectively defined stakes, and above all in the struggle for power to produce value, which means power to confer value on that which does not intrinsically possess it.” What value can be extracted from *YOU*? Zine making helps us consider two things about creativity and the humanities: how humanities scholarship is a practice that assigns value to creativity, and creativity’s capacity to challenge existing ways of assigning value through scholarship.¹ Zine making adheres to the fundamental principles of literature. In the words of Audre Lorde’s (2017: 8) conceptualization of poetry, zines are “the way we give name to the nameless so that it can be thought,” while disregarding both professional publishing and literary scholarship as spheres that have the power (and the right) to recognize someone as a writer, and to consecrate writing as an act of creativity. Zines are motivated by a surprisingly contradictory set of impulses: that creativity is deeply important, an act the writer is almost compelled to undertake, and that creativity can be enacted through ephemeral media and practices that make that importance difficult to hold on to. I read these contradictions as an invitation to creativity within the practice of literary scholarship, which also opens up new questions about how creativity is understood within humanities research (Poletti 2019). I begin with an overview of the rise of the concept of the “creative industries” during the early part of the twentieth century, as it was an important moment in which the spheres of scholarship, creative practice, and policy making intersected, with the shared goal of determining what creativity is and why it matters to society.

Industries, Fields, Capital, Value: Literature at the Intersection of the Cultural Industries, Art, and Education

Prior to the global financial crisis of 2008, the creative industries were the focus of significant research and policy activity that aimed to identify and amplify cultural production as a vital contributor to society and to the economy. A vibrant space of cross-disciplinary research, the creative industries combined economics and social science approaches

to the study of culture, with a broadly humanities-based perspective on creativity as an act of innovation (Florida 2011: 6). As a framework, the creative industries influenced economic and cultural policy at all levels of government in many parts of the world—from highlighting the potential impact of the creative class (Florida 2011) on economically depressed regions of a city to demonstrating the importance of creativity in shifting a national economy to a postindustrial setting and foregrounding the role of cultural policy in economic development (Oakley and O'Connor 2015: 1–6).

A key focus of the creative industries framework was to examine, among other things, how contemporary cultural practices—design, fashion, popular music, youth subcultures, working class and migrant cultures—contributed to a transformation of national culture and economy. Yet, as Kate Oakley and Justin O'Connor argue, when researchers shifted their focus from the cultural industries (a formulation indebted to the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies and the political economy framework of the Frankfurt School, Walter Benjamin, and Antonio Gramsci [Hall 1990: 16]) to “the creative industries” and later “creative economies,” they

stripped these practices of any collective meaning other than that of aggregate consumer choice (revealed preferences) and of any overarching cultural or political values other than enhanced competitiveness. It thus undermined—sometimes explicitly—the basic critical thrust of the political economy of culture approach and those strands of cultural studies that remained committed to some notion of culture as a collective value. (Oakley and O'Connor 2015: 8)

For Oakley and O'Connor, thinking of creativity as an output generated by an expanding group of creative individuals positions it as a process that attaches symbolic value to products and services, the success of which is judged purely by uptake among audiences (6–9). To remedy this disconnection of creativity from an understanding of culture as a shared resource of meaning, they argue that “the creative industries” should be conceptualized as “the cultural industries,” and this term should be applied to the study of “those industries primarily involved in the mass production, circulation, and consumption of symbolic texts” (10). One proposed benefit of this definition is that it excludes “the ‘arts’—whose products tend to be singular or limited, and/or presented in live formats and . . . ‘design’—whose products involve more func-

tional rather than symbolic considerations” (10). However, following the field theory framework of Pierre Bourdieu (1993: 50–51), which highlighted the necessity of paying attention to relationships *between* different approaches to cultural production, we might argue that defining the cultural industries by amputating the restricted field of production of avant-garde practice from the industrial production of culture merely reinstates a division central to way the field itself functions. It also diminishes a core part of the scholarly tradition inaugurated by cultural studies, a major precursor to contemporary scholarship on the cultural industries. Cultural studies, particularly the Birmingham School model, intervened in humanities and social sciences’ understandings of culture and creativity through its commitment to leveling the playing field between aesthetic forms, particularly as they are transmitted through education. With this intervention, cultural studies responded to the blindness of the humanities to its own functioning as a social technology. As Stuart Hall (1990: 15) explains: “When cultural studies began its work in the 1960s and ’70s, it had . . . to undertake the task of unmasking what it considered to be the unstated presuppositions of the humanist tradition itself,” which unconsciously positioned “art” as the branch of culture that is ideologically bound to the national culture through the class politics of education.

The early work of cultural studies sought to reshape the understanding of the theory and practice of creativity and culture by relativizing elite cultural forms and the myth of the artistic genius who contributes to the national culture through those forms. It did so by turning its attention to the creativity of contemporary life (e.g., de Certeau 1984; Hall 1990). This intervention built on post-structuralism’s reframing of creativity as lying with the reader rather than the author of a text (Barthes 1977; Foucault 1984) and feminist work that repositioned the dominant theories of artistic creativity as theories of white male or masculine creativity (e.g., Gilbert and Gubar 1979; Du Plessis 1990; Lorde 2017). These diverse scholarly traditions mounted a multipronged, and by no means unified, assault on the idea that the study of texts consisted of the disinterested, objective examination of a great tradition of artistic innovation driven by the creativity of select individuals that constituted a core part of a nation’s heritage and identity that must be transmitted to future generations through education. Oakley and O’Connor’s suggestion that we excise art from our understanding of the cultural industries because it does not adhere to the principles of mass distribution leaves untouched the challenge cultural studies, post-structuralism, and feminist work brought to the humanities, and to the study of literature in particular.

While literature has a privileged relationship to national ideology and education, which makes it a limit case for thinking about the cultural industries,² the question of how literature fits into a model of the cultural industries that focuses on the mass production of symbolic texts is also complicated by its materiality. At the height of print culture, literature had a metonymic association with the book, an object that has the potential for mass producibility and mass distribution and whose material stability allowed individual literary works (taken to be identical despite design differences between editions) to be accessed by a multitude of dispersed readers. The long and complex process of print culture's emergence involved stabilizing an understanding of where, precisely, literary creativity lay and with whom. This process brought about the convergence of the social prestige associated with artistic creativity (the artist as distinguished from the craftsman) and intellectual property rights (Johns 1998; Piper 2009; Turnovsky 2003; Woodmansee and Jaszi 1994). This extended process of stabilizing the symbolic and financial properties of print culture culminated with the following positions being clearly established: the author as the artist, the publisher as the business executive, and the printer as the craftsman. Yet, as Jessica Pressman's (2020) work has shown, the book has recently gone through a change in status, from an invisible and taken-for-granted media object to an auratic analogue object whose bookishness is networked with the digital into a new literary sphere. Thus, the question of literature's material and symbolic scale (and scalability) within the cultural industries has recently evolved: Is a novel published in codex form by Semiotext(e), a small-scale avant-garde American publisher, a mass-produced object, or does its limited print run and the absence of an e-book position it more on the side of "art" in Oakley and O'Connor's definition? And what of self-published e-books sold on Amazon and other platforms, where there is a high potential to reach an audience, but limited cultural or symbolic capital? And what of my case study, the zine, which is low reach and low status, and therefore potentially invisible when a would-be surveyor takes a snapshot of the cultural industries? These issues of scale force us to contend with what it means to think about the relationship between industry and creativity, and the implied hierarchy of media forms inherent in a focus on mass production and distribution in the study of culture as a shared practice for making meaning.

This overview of the larger intellectual history regarding the status of creativity and culture in humanities research raises the possibility that in taking the products of the publishing industry as its focus, literary

studies has been remiss in its mission of valuing literature—that is, of consecrating specific cultural practices and objects *as* creative, *as* culture, *as worthy of study*—because it fails to look beyond what has been established by the industry as worthy of publication. I offer this very broad, and partial, overview to emphasize that a return to the question of how we conceptualize creativity has been brewing in the humanities since the middle of the twentieth century and that literature—as a linguistic and material form—remains a provocative case study for its consideration. This question of whether literary studies has been creative enough in selecting its objects is an urgent one if we dare to compare the diversity and vibrancy of the literary field with what is given priority within the vast majority of literary scholarship and teaching, which still largely focuses on the products of the global publishing industry or the catalogs of a small number of prestigious independent publishers (such as Graywolf).

But this reliance on an increasingly small number of publishers for our primary material reflects a larger issue regarding the relationship between theory and practice. From my perspective, working within English departments in Australia and the Netherlands, feminist, postcolonial, and queer theory have done more to intervene in the study and teaching of literature as a form of creativity than cultural studies, which was more easily integrated into emerging film and media studies departments than into English departments that were loath to abandon the symbolic capital the study of literature—professionally produced prose, poetry, and drama—affords them within the university and society at large. In recent years, queer and affect theorists in American English departments have adapted the early investments of cultural studies to proclaim the study of aesthetic categories of the everyday as essential to understanding how popular culture is driven by creative responses to social, political, and economic pressures (Berlant 1997; Halberstam 2011; Ngai 2011). Often this scholarship is itself an example of Vlad Glăveanu's (2015: 168–69) theory of creativity as involving the ability to adopt differing perspectives on an object. Like cultural studies scholars before them, queer scholars take texts from popular culture and subcultures as seriously as their training in English studies taught them to take the works that constitute the literary canon.³ Bourdieu's field theory helps us frame the confrontation of established methods of assigning value in the humanities that cultural studies, feminism, and queer approaches initiate, because it clearly establishes how academic attention is itself a means of generating and attaching cultural and symbolic capital to specific forms

and practices of creativity. The work of some cultural studies, feminist, postcolonial, and queer scholars demonstrates that scholarship that attends to the ideological role that the humanities play in consecrating culture must also be creative. We must be prepared to adopt different perspectives on the practice of knowledge production if we are to respond to our own position within the systems that generate and assign value to culture as a social technology.

I am suggesting, then, that, as well as studying creativity, the humanities are, and must be, creative in two senses. First, as scholars we are players in the field of cultural production who have a specific position in relation to generating and bestowing cultural and symbolic capital on acts of creativity. We also make knowledge about creativity that can be consequential for artists, students, and society at large because of our role in framing and interpreting creativity as a core element of culture. Second, humanities scholarship is also, at times, a “creative situation” (Glăveanu 2015) in which we must engage in knowledge production by adopting other perspectives on our objects of study, making it possible to formulate new knowledge about creativity.

In this article, I combine the two approaches by asking what the production and distribution of zines tells us about literary creativity. I ask this question to resist the bracketing of spheres of limited and local sites of cultural production from our understanding of the cultural industries (as Oakley and O’Connor propose) and to try to enact creativity as a method in humanities research. Because of zines’ inherent ephemerality, researching and writing about them as literature requires creativity on behalf of the researcher. To look at historical uses of zines—as I do in the first two case studies—the researcher can visit archives or seek out traces of zines in other media. In my first example, I examine a narrative of Kathy Acker’s zine making presented by writer and publisher Chris Kraus in her biography *After Kathy Acker*. The second case examines a remediated zine, the publication *In the Shadow of Forward Motion* by David Wojnarowicz, released by the art publisher Primary Information in 2020 in an edition of twenty-five hundred copies (now sold out). My final case study comes as a personal narrative of direct contact with a zine made by a poet in my home city of Utrecht, in the Netherlands. In this final example, I bring you, my reader, as close as I can to an encounter with a zine, but it is still, at base, a remediation dependent on my skills as a creative writer. Across all three case studies, I explore the obdurate ephemerality of the zine as core to what it can teach us about thinking about literary creativity without the framework of capital, without sacrificing an understanding of its value.

Case Study 1: Kathy Acker and *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*

According Chris Kraus (2006: 192), in life, feminist experimental writer Kathy Acker achieved what seemed impossible for a feminist literary writer: “notoriety that only certain literary men enjoy.” Yet in the narrative Kraus (2017) tells of Acker’s artistry in her biography, this achievement began not by following the well-worn path of amassing a pile of rejection slips from publishers but by self-publishing under the pseudonym of Black Tarantula. *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula* was released as a six-part self-published series in 1973–1974. In *After Kathy Acker*, Kraus explains and dramatizes how a young Acker took encouragement and inspiration from her older friend, the artist Eleanor Antin, who shared Acker’s seemingly intractable problem of being creative and female (a central concern of Kraus’s own oeuvre). In Kraus’s (2017: 82) telling, Acker’s move to self-publishing was sparked by an early rejection of her work by an editor Antin had recommended:

She showed her work to the Antins, and they were impressed. Eleanor insisted on sending the piece to her friend Carol Bergé, who edited the popular literary magazine *Centre*. When Bergé wrote back that the work had no merit and its author was most likely schizophrenic, they devised a new plan.

The plan involved encouraging Acker to adopt Antin’s use of mail art as a means of putting her photographic work in front of an audience. Antin, Kraus tells us, “mailed postcards of frames from her ongoing photographic series *100 Boots* to a list of six hundred friends and acquaintances. She mailed the cards out once a month. It didn’t cost much, and it gave her a deadline” (82). While Kraus notes that mail art has since been theorized by art history and mail artists themselves, she paints Antin’s practice, and Acker’s adoption of it, as a pragmatic response to the problem of access to exhibition (and in Acker’s case, publishing) spaces. Celebrating self-publishing as a creative response to the art and literary world’s strategies for restricting production, Kraus quotes Antin’s husband, David, who “would later explain [of] mail art: ‘It was poor people’s art . . . anybody could do it if they had the intelligence and the energy’” (83). This linking of DIY publishing with poverty, intelligence, and energy, is not, in Kraus’s telling, a restatement of the romantic narrative of the triumph of artistic genius over the conservative forces of business. Rather, it narrates creativity *as work*, and as *strategies of work* that creative people can gift to each other.

The Antins shared the mailing list for *100 Boots* with Acker, who set to work writing the series and negotiating cheap (or free) printing. “Almost immediately Acker talked the Solana Beach newspaper into letting her print the pamphlets for free on their press” (83), Kraus tells us. But later in the project, Acker’s luck changed, and by the final installment, Acker “approached three print shops—all of which declined to print the text-only pamphlet because ‘it offended their morals’” (91). Kraus juxtaposes the responses of editors and printers to Acker’s work with the mail she begins to receive from the recipients of the series: “Your phenomenology is phenomenal,” writes experimental poet Jackson Mac Low (90). The story Kraus tells of zine making focuses on how, in sharing the mailing list, the Antins passed on not only a ready-made audience who appeared to be receptive to experimental art and writing but also a method of working. Self-published serialization had proven an effective way for Eleanor Antin to keep making work, and Kraus’s biography is—among other things—a considered and detailed celebration of the work ethic that Acker’s writing demanded. Unlike publishers who need to believe in a reader-consumer who will help them cover the investment by purchasing a book, making a zine allows the writer to install an implied reader in their practice in order to keep working. In Kraus’s telling, the audience of DIY—by not sending back Acker’s pamphlet by return mail or labeling it schizophrenic—agrees, at minimum, to act as a necessary projection that sustains Acker’s daily commitment to writing.

This returns us to the question of being industrious and being commercial raised by the contestation over the terms *creative industries* or *creative economies*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of industry highlights the vagueness of speaking of creative or cultural industries, telling us that “industry” refers to both a key characteristic of artistic creativity (“exertion, effort, hard work; diligence or assiduity in the performance of a task; close and steady application to the business in hand”) as well as to manufacturing with a profit-based motive (“productive work, trade, or manufacture. In later use especially manufacturing and production carried out on a commercial basis, typically organized on a large scale and requiring the investment of capital”).⁴ To exclude small-scale production from our thinking about the cultural industries is to exclude a set of practices that explicitly ignore the profit motive encapsulated by the latter definition of industry while celebrating being industrious as a form of creativity. Kraus’s narrative of Acker’s self-publishing emphasizes the writer’s industriousness in contrast with its noncommercial nature. Making a loss and being prepared

to lose are central to the account of creativity Kraus offers us by writing Acker's life. My next example considers attempts to mitigate these losses by examining two attempts to insert zines into the discourses of art criticism and philosophy.

Case Study 2: *In the Shadow of Forward Motion*

In 1989, fifteen years after the publication of *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula*, artist David Wojnarowicz made fifty photocopies of a zine titled *In the Shadow of Forward Motion* to accompany an exhibition of his work at P.P.O.W gallery in New York. The zine includes notes by Félix Guattari that offer a theory of Wojnarowicz's creative practice. I bought my copy of the facsimile in the Athenaeum Bookstore on Amsterdam's Spui square in 2021, where it was shelved (facing outward) in the art books section, alone in its explicitly photocopied aesthetic (faithfully reproduced in the nonphotocopied reprint) among the high-gloss art magazines and quartos.

To read *In the Shadow of Forward Motion* in 2021 is to know you are not present at the exhibition that it originally served. The numbered entries in the zine refer, presumably, to the items on the wall in the exhibition space: paintings and sculptures you cannot see that are rarely described in the text. A single image of the original exhibition is on the P.P.O.W gallery website, but it merely confirms that the exhibition is of the past. The original zine is also of the past. The facsimile published by Primary Information is professionally bound, 8.5-by-11-inch format, and has an International Standard Book Number. Unlike the zine, then, *In the Shadow of Forward Motion* as facsimile is an object inserted into two institutional circuits used for amplifying and reifying creativity: the publishing industry and the art world. This is evidenced by the reframing of the zine in a short review of the publication in the *New York Times*, titled "Five Art Books to Read This Summer" (Sokol 2020). Brett Sokol frames his review in terms of the questions facing "the cultural industry" during the second summer of the COVID-19 pandemic, positioning the question of whether spaces should reopen during the pandemic as one that also connects directly to political economy: "Where is the art to help us make sense of this moment, or to at least freshly question the way our current contemporary art has been produced, bought, and sold? And what would that alternative art world look like?"

Sokol refers to the original zine *In the Shadow of Forward Motion* as "handmade," suggesting Wojnarowicz "grossly undersold" the zine when he states in the foreword that "his samizdat exhibition catalog

was simply ‘rough notes, late night tape recordings, things spoken in sleep and fragmented ideas which at times contradict each other.’” Detached from the exhibition, the facsimile zine is read as additional evidence of the documentary value of Wojnarowicz’s work, the opening sentence of Sokol’s review claiming Wojnarowicz’s relevance to readers looking for art books to read during the COVID-19 pandemic: “Few modern artists have been as closely associated with art-making in a time of plague as David Wojnarowicz.” Coincidentally, the short recommendation of *In the Shadow of Forward Motion* is followed by Sokol’s brief recommendation of issue number fifty-nine of the long-running punk zine *Cometbus*, by Aaron Cometbus.⁵ Now self-published in codex form rather than as a photocopied pamphlet, *Cometbus* is a serial life writing project (similar to *YOU*) drawing on Cometbus’s experiences as a punk musician and zine publisher. It is widely read and much-loved in the zine community. Sokol’s overview of *Cometbus* continues his avoidance of the term *zine*, leading Sokol to characterize Cometbus with the somewhat clumsy phrase “punk rock enthusiast” and to frame Cometbus’s work as having had a “similarly modest cut-and-pasted start” as that of *In the Shadow of Forward Motion*. The inclusion of a text-based zine in a review dedicated to art books evidences the peripatetic tendency of the zine form: legible in the context of an anarchist bookstore (where *Cometbus* is often sold because of its interest in left politics as expressed in punk), a column dedicated to art books, and a bookstore such as the Athenaeum in Amsterdam. Sokol’s studied avoidance of the term *zine* demonstrates the unsettling effects of the zine’s lack of fungibility; to incorporate the practice into the discourse of art criticism and its regime for assigning value to creative practice, Sokol’s writing contorts around two core elements of zine practice that hinder a transfer of value: material ephemerality and context dependence.

Like Sokol, Guattari is also working to insert Wojnarowicz’s zine into a different discourse. Guattari enters the space of the zine to consider its relationship with philosophy. The first page of *In the Shadow of Forward Motion* is a title page for Guattari’s notes-cum-introduction, which is presented in the same typewritten font as the rest of the zine, suggesting that the text was retyped from an original document for inclusion in the publication. It is titled “David Wojnarowicz by Félix Guattari,” both names centered and written in capital letters, evoking the informational genres John Guillory (2004) argues are central to modernity and to the transformation of facts into information, a point I will return to shortly.

Guattari enters the space of the zine to wrestle with the question of what is transferrable from Wojnarowicz's artistic practice. He begins by stating, "Wojnarowicz's creative work stems from his whole life and it is from there that it has acquired such amazing power" (Wojnarowicz and Guattari [1989] 2020). Emphasizing the individuality of perspective articulated in Wojnarowicz's practice, Guattari claims it is "a singular message that allows us to perceive an enunciation in process; a singular vocation can thus be transferred on another plane." The individuality of speaking, then, is somehow fungible: it can move from its originating instance to other contexts. But how? Guattari sees the value in Wojnarowicz's practice as residing in its ability to act as a "trigger" that can inspire "an existential movement . . . existential creativity" in the audience: "When everything seems to be said and repeated at this point in Art History, something emerges from David Wojnarowicz's chaos which confronts us with the responsibility to intervene in the world." This intervention that must come from singularity, Guattari goes on to suggest, is a much-needed counterpoint "in a universe that has too much of a tendency to give in to universalist comfort." What can be transferred from the zine, then, is the specific philosophy of creative practice, rather than a specific meaning or point of view Wojnarowicz's work develops.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that in the discourses of law and finance, to be fungible is a property "of a product or commodity that has been contracted for: that can be replaced by another identical item without breaking the terms of the contract. More generally: interchangeable, replaceable,"⁶ a property we are currently seeing explored and reframed through the emergence of nonfungible tokens (NFTs) in the art market.⁷ In language, this relationship of substitution among words is designated as metaphor or metonymy (Johnson [1984] 2014). Linguistic and poststructuralist literary theory was particularly interested in the flexibility of the contract between users of a language. Depending on the genre (a business e-mail or a poem), one could treat many words as interchangeable without breaking the contract implied in communication, which is the construction of meaning based on the collaborative use of an existing system of signs. The study of literature is the study of the creative use of language: uses of language that seek to test the capacity of the sign system and, in so testing, contribute to its ongoing evolution. When Carol Bergé classified Acker's literary experiments as *schizophrenic* she refused the form of substitution Acker was attempting—produced through a process of plagiarism and rewriting—and claimed a breach of contract by refusing to accept

there was meaning in Acker's utterances, choosing to pathologize the speaker instead. The substitutions were rejected. Guattari, however, works harder, positioning himself as a reader eager for substitutions that might help him, as a philosopher, understand the contemporary moment. While the contract might be intact, the materiality of the zine and Wojnarowicz's reflections on living and dying within the AIDS pandemic lead Guattari to emphasize that the good that is delivered through the zine is merely the beginning, rather than the end, of the transaction. Framed by Guattari as a "revolt against death and the deadly passivity with which society deals with this phenomenon" (Wojnarowicz and Guattari [1989] 2020), the zine registers, at both the material and the linguistic level, Wojnarowicz's rage at the ongoing losses and brutality of institutional responses to AIDS.

Indeed, Guattari's interest in the potential fungibility of Wojnarowicz's individuality is materialized and recontextualized by the layout of the zine, which uses specific aesthetic strategies of personalization and depersonalization that are characteristic of zine aesthetics. On the side of depersonalization, Guattari's two-page introduction is not signed, but a stamp reading "Paris 1989" sits on a slight angle at the bottom of the page. In the reissued facsimile of the zine, the stamp is printed in red ink, reinforcing the association with bureaucracy and the processing of paper documents, and the eerie hyperfocus on the individual of the institutional gaze associated with the medical file or legal file. Both file formats, strategies of institutional biography (Coletu 2019), are mentioned in the text and registered as traces in the typewritten font, the use of the stamp, and the title's use of proper names and their relation (Guattari writes Wojnarowicz). These material elements gain prominence, for example, when we read the following entry in the zine:

7. UNTITLED (Bandaged hands and nest)

I recently was in the courts fighting eviction from my apartment which was the home of my friend Peter Hujar who died over a year ago. There is an increasing number of cases jamming the court system involving rights of surviving partners in relationships; til recently two men or two women living together; who are unable by law to marry if they so desire in order to be granted rights ordinarily granted to heterosexual couples (such as the simple right to continue living in a home when one or the other partner dies)—these relationships are not recognized by the courts and frequently the surviving partner of the relationship is evicted almost immediately

after the death of the person whose name is on the lease. After months of court dates, affidavits, monies paid to lawyers and the stress of dealing with illness and loss of home in this city, the landlord settled out of court with a contractual agreement that I had to sign that stated that I could continue living in the apartment on a yearly basis as long as my health was in decline; and more importantly that if there were ever a cure for Aids discovered I would have to leave the apartment within thirty (30) days. I laughed when I was told this; did they expect I would be the first person in New York to hope they would find no cure for Aids in order to save my apartment? They also had me sign a slip of paper guaranteeing that I would not turn the apartment over to another person with Aids before I die. (Wojnarowicz and Guattari [1989] 2020)

Wojnarowicz's uses black humor to register the refusal of his landlord and the legal system to sanction forms of care within the gay community that involve the transfer of resources (such as housing) between people affected by AIDS. He narrates his success in keeping the apartment as a dangerous precedent that must be explicitly blocked by the legal system: Wojnarowicz must promise to not integrate the apartment he shared with Hujar into the wider network of care upon his death. His right to remain in his home is contingent on denying him the opportunity of cohabitation. This right is also restricted to a contract renewed on a yearly basis, an offer predicated on his health continuing to be in "decline." The landlord would prefer to have the apartment back sooner but is prepared to wait until Wojnarowicz makes his final trip to hospital.

This retelling of his legal case in a zine accompanying an exhibition of his visual art raises the question of transferability and loss on several planes. The legal system grudgingly accepts the substitution of Wojnarowicz for Hujar as tenant, but only on the grounds of their similarity (both are men with AIDS). It responds with an explicit bureaucratic maneuver designed to terminate any possible continuation of that chain of substitution in which Wojnarowicz might pass on the apartment to another person. The landlord and the legal system are dealing with a new universal category of *tenants with AIDS*. What is fungible when *tenants with AIDS* are treated as interchangeable is not value but risk and stigma. At the height of the pandemic, the production of *people with AIDS* as a new universal category was unrestricted and seemingly unending, and Wojnarowicz used the zine

form to expose the perversity of the universal point of view adopted by institutions of civil society (in this case, the law) in their response to the pandemic. The relationship of substitution between Hujar and Wojnarowicz is metaphoric for the law (a substitution based on similarity) and metonymic in the context of Wojnarowicz's social world (one based on the intimacy between the two men). Wojnarowicz tells the story of a personal gain that is underscored by the loss of Hujar and the future loss of his own life. Guattari's response to Wojnarowicz's work acknowledges this singularity and the insights it might offer the reader in 1989. And his conclusions are echoed by Barbara Johnson ([1984] 2014: 123), who, writing on Zora Neale Hurston, argues that the appeal to a universal point of view inherent in metaphor and metonymy exposes that

there is no point of view from which the universal characteristics of the human, or of the woman, or of the black woman [or the man with AIDS] . . . can be selected and totalized. Unification and simplification are fantasies of domination, not understanding. The task of the writer, then, would seem to be to narrate both the appeal and the injustice of universalization, in a voice that assumes and articulates its own, ever-differing self-difference.

If the collaborative construction of meaning through communication is a contract entered into with sincerity, the loss of universality must be accepted, Guattari and Johnson argue.

In my final case study, I take up this question of sincerity—of reading a zine as though it sought collaboration—by describing how I came into contact with and responded to the zine *I Am Hakim and I Know Nothing*. I hope to demonstrate with this final case the creativity required of humanities scholars wishing to study contemporary literature in its diverse manifestations.

Case Study 3: Hakim

At the intersection of the Lijnmarkt, the Zadelstraat, and the Buurkerkhof in Utrecht, I am rushing back to work with my sandwich. In place of the usual sellers of the *NRC* newspaper stands Hakim. He is holding a small pile of bound photocopies and asks me in Dutch if I would like to buy one. "I have also in English," he says, after hearing my confession regarding my meager Dutch skills. "How much?" I say, opening my coin purse. He eyes the pile of coins. "Three euros." Clearly there is no fixed price.⁸ Hakim is in the business of selling his poetry,

but like many people engaged in self-publishing, the question of value (financial or otherwise) is part of what is being asked, rather than assumed, by the practice. I hand him the money and put the publication under my arm. It is tied with pink plastic ribbon, and I crumple the pages trying to hold on to it and my lunch as I walk back to work.

Back at my desk I eat my sandwich and read Hakim's (n.d.) poems.

I am Hakim and I know nothing
 I don't know when, go hand in hand
 But comes future, everything comes everything goes
 But a pitty, shrink now this time our goes too old
 Pitty poem, everything behind you, poem
 Everybody writes this poem, everybody reads this poem
 And all the good I do in Holland
 Much pleasure with everybody, with Hollanders,
 with Maroc people, with Africans
 But a pitty, have America attacked the whole world
 Forget Holland, I discuss over three years with the
 new president
 Thank you old president
 Unfortunately I cannot fly, I go too there
 But everything what you so is plan, big plan!
 But look forwards, look right, look in the middle
 Everything is about money
 Everything walks on money, time; death
 Our parents, I don't have a grandpa, I don't have a grandma
 Only parents
 I cry, I laugh, In play, I sleep, Attack
 What I do alone I sleep not, I got sick admitted
 As a psychiatric patient
 But what I do, I write poems, I can't live without poems.

I close the rickety booklet, held together by its two pieces of ribbon. On the back cover I read, "Hakim sells his poems, to chat and get in touch with the world."

In thinking about the modern ubiquity of information genres (as opposed to literary and scientific writing), John Guillory (2004: 113) proposes that "literature . . . aspires to nothing less than an eternal reading, to canonicity." Under this definition, zines are clearly not literary, and therefore, I, as a scholar of the literary, need not take Hakim's

poems as within my purview. Readers are central to literature's aspirations to immortality because, Guillory tells us via Milton, literature seeks "to be 'something so written aftertimes that men shall not willingly let it die'" (113). Guillory contrasts literature with the modern meta-genre of the document, which "aspires only to a moment of interest, the moment of transmission; once transmitted, its interest falls off potentially to a zero degree, and it suffers the indignity of being filed away" (113). Perhaps in writing this article, I am seeking to transport the zines I discuss from the inauspicious (and far more ubiquitous) genre of the document to that of literature. I join Kraus and Guattari by writing about a specific zine to insert it into the archive of scientific writing that "aspires to release knowledge from the prison of its origin in the singularity of writing" (113). Does my aspiration to make zines visible as forms of literary creativity require that I detach knowledge about zines and zine making as creative practice from the zines themselves and the people engaged in making and reading them? This is certainly a criticism of scholarship about zines routinely expressed by zine makers, who are suspicious of scholarly interest in zines, which zine maker and "reluctant pornographer" Bruce LaBruce (1995: 193) argues should be allowed to fade if they are to be respected in their singularity.⁹ This concern about detachment of the zine from its context is also why a new generation of zine scholars, led by Lilith Joyce Cooper (2021), are considering the development of a "Zine Researchers Code of Ethics." In my own work on zines as a literary scholar, I seek out zines in their context whenever I write about them—in preparation for this article, I browsed the "Zines" sections of the Athenaeum bookstore and shopped the bountiful zine section of Het Fort van Sjakoo (n.d.), the volunteer-run bookstore that began in a space that was squatted in to protest a planned highway in the center of Amsterdam in 1977. Looking for zines, and letting zines find me (as Hakim's did), is part of the process of engaging with their creativity. Does this meeting in context make me capable of a sincere reading of Hakim's work? I am not sure. After I read his zine alongside eating my sandwich, I talked to others about it, I reread it, I return to it—as I do now, several years later—whenever I want to consider the challenge that zine creativity poses. Can I present a close reading of the poem I cited above? Can I fold it into a theory of zine creativity? No. Hakim's poem registers the questions of loss and profit, of what can travel and what cannot, powerfully enough. My task, as a scholar, is, perhaps, to be unsettled and to see what the losses make visible.

Notes

1. See Florian Cramer's (2021) discussion of Urgent Publishing for an alternative framing of how do-it-yourself, or autonomous, media production relates to an issue at the heart of the humanities: the relationship between rhetoric and dialectics.

2. Perhaps one way to address this is by including middlebrow and popular literature in the cultural industries, ignoring more "self-consciously" literary and experimental works. But as work on middlebrow literature has shown, the literary (which I treat here as a synonym for an encounter with creativity) *is* a core concern of audiences who read well-selling (if not best-selling) middlebrow literature published by international conglomerates and entered into literary prizes (Driscoll 2014; Gelder 2004).

3. Compare, for example, Hall's description of early cultural studies with Eve Sedgwick's (1993: 3) reflection on "promising, smuggling, reading, overreading" of "people who do queer writing and teaching" in her essay "Queer and Now." According to Hall (1990: 14), "Nearly all of us who entered the cultural studies project were actually formed in the Leavisite ethos. Raymond Williams, for instance, does a chapter on Leavis in *Culture and Society*. Or, Hoggart, in his *Uses of Literacy*, writes about working-class culture as though he were reading a text in a Leavisite way. Having no other sociological method, he uses that of practical criticism, applied, as it were, to real life." Sedgwick writes (1993: 3), "I think that for many of us in childhood the ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects, objects of high or popular culture or both . . . became a prime resource for survival. We needed for there to be sites where the meanings didn't line up tidily with each other, and we learned to invest those sites with fascination and love. This can't help coloring the adult relation to cultural texts and objects; in fact, it's hard for me to imagine another way of coming to care enough about literature to give a lifetime to it."

4. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 3rd ed., s.v. "industry," 3, 4 (March 2022).

5. I retain the zine culture tradition of referring to the author as Aaron Cometbus, rather than by his legal name (Aaron Elliott) because he publishes the zine under that pseudonym. Using the title of one's zine as a surname is a long running tradition in zine culture, and is, in my opinion, an important symbol of the approach to authorship that zine culture enacts.

6. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 3rd ed., s.v. "fungible," A.1 (March 2022).

7. See First Dog on the Moon (2021) for an overview of NFTs. With thanks to Balázs Bodó of the Blockchain and Society Policy Research Lab at the University of Amsterdam for discussions on blockchain, fungibility, and value.

8. Pers. comm., March 2017. While preparing this article, I discussed this zine with Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, who responded to the information regarding the price I paid with, "I paid him ten." A testament to Hakim's acumen in negotiating with his would-be readers.

9. "Queercore" fanzines aren't supposed to be catalogued and historicised and analysed to death, for Christ's sake. They're supposed to be disposable. That's the whole point. Throw your fanzines away right now. . . . Xeroxed material doesn't last forever anyway, you know. It fades" (LaBruce 1995: 193).

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