Reflecting culture diversity through the printed page

The case of OWK Zine

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Abstract: The politically unstable culture and the economic and social crisis that hit Cyprus—and the Mediterranean area in general—in 2013 have driven local art and design scenes to search for and find new non-traditional publishing forms. The current exploratory case will present the cultural diversity of Cyprus' art and design scene through the experimental type and image of OWK zine. The case study will focus on the contributions that have been submitted to the zine so far, spanning one and a half years and numbering five issues (2015-2016). The results of this case study should allow us to better understand the importance of zines and independent publishing to the diverse art and design landscape of Cyprus.

Key words: zine, culture, diversity, type and image

1.Intro

In the same era that witnessed the decimation of the big newspapers operating in the print medium, saw the rise of the digital book market and gave birth to the saying "print is dead", a new wave of independent/self publishing was born. As opposed to high-end, luxury books and magazines, zines and the independently printed publication allowed small publishers to cater to enthusiasts and aficionados by dropping all the extravagant printing features that were once considered *de rigueur* and moving towards a more content-oriented and honest experience.

The term "zine" refers mainly to independent, small-run publications that are commonly reproduced via photocopy machine or any other economical form of printing. Zines can be distributed face to face, picked up from local cafés or bought at local independent bookshops. They can be the work of one person or a group of people and can take the form of a simple sheet of paper photocopied in black and white and folded in half.

Zines are also an individualistic medium, but as a medium their primary function is communication. As such, zines are as much about the communities that arise out of their circulation as they are artefacts of personal expression. (Duncombe,1997)

Whether in the form of a single voice, personal dairies, comics anthologies, writers' words, zine content is a pure form of expression of the subculture. As Duncombe (1997) argues, zines are independent and localised, coming out of cities, suburbs and small towns and are unmatched by any commercial, mainstream publication in their freedom of expression.

2.Zines

Figure.1 (left) *The Comet* fanzine published in the 30's by Science Correspondence Club and edited by Raymond Arthur Palmer (right) The cover of the first *Riot Grrrl* 'zine. Courtesy of The Riot Grrrl Collection; The Fales Library & Special Collections New York University.

Zine history can be traced back to the 1930s' science fiction boom in the US, where sci-fi fans needed a way of interacting and trading their own stories with each other (fig1). In an attempt to pit themselves against mainstream, printed publications, zines gained popularity years later, in the disturbed and subversive punk decade of the 70's, where the Do It Yourself (DIY) revolution began, peeking with the *Riot Grrrl* movement that emerged in the early 90's. It was, for many, the "voice" of the underground scene. As with every new revolution, the digital age overshadowed zines and the print medium by creating a virtual hub of social media that made communication accessible for everyone. Ione Gamble (2016), the editor of *Polyester Magazine*, states that the most impressive thing to come out of the zine renaissance has been its ability to re-establish physical communities

in the thrust of the digital age. Disenfranchised by email communication and one-click online payments, zines have manifested themselves physically within a real-life scene as diverse as the publications themselves. (fig.1)

3.OWK zine

OWK zine emerged out of my personal need to explore the printing capabilities and different aspects of the Riso printing technique. I wanted to see how I could use it on the printed page and how far I could take it. *OWK* (Oi Wraioi Kypraioi) is an ironic acronym for "the Beautiful Cypriots" in Greek, spelled using Latin characters. *OWK* is an independent visual library for words and images that create linear or abstract stories, providing a structure for publishing and archiving projects. Through its own idiosyncratic and often "monotonous" renderings of printed colours, each issue attempts to express a random story, or mash-up, built by the contributors' submissions. Or as the opening page text puts it: "Culturally aroused art & design dialogues."

OWK's artistic and visual style is formed by its contributors themselves. Each page follows its own stimulus and personal aesthetic rules, free to any political or ideological view. Counting 5 issues and over 40 contributors, the submissions to OWK vary from photography to illustration and from pottery to poetry. As mentioned above, OWK uses the Risograph printing technique, which is very similar to silkscreen. The machine burns a single colour image onto a paper stencil that is then wrapped around a printing cylinder drum, which will transfer colour through the drum to the paper. Every colour needs to be printed in a separate run, so each colour must be applied individually.

4. The submissions

The following examples present a sample of work that has appeared in past OWK issues or submissions where type and/or image played a significant role in the final composition. Each artist/designer was asked to submit a piece of their choice, having in mind only the limitations of the Risograph printing technique. The submissions could be literally anything they saw fit.

Natalie Yiaxi's (fig.2) submission for Issue no.2 uses language as a medium for engaging readers. Yiaxi submitted two photographs of two cacti with the captions "THE TRUTH SYMPTOM ISLAND SYMPTOM" and "TO RIOT, TO COPY…" scratched in with needles. For the latest issue, no.5, Savvas Xinari's (fig.3) proposed experimental typeface is an homage to the ancient Cypriot syllabary that was used in Cyprus from as early as 1500 BC. In the

same issue, Lefki Savvidou submitted her daily poetry using only a black marker, without any concern for kerning or tracking, to deliver a more radical and raw feeling.

Figure.2 *Natalie Yiaxi's submission for Issue no.2.*

Figure.3 *Savvas Xinari's proposed experimental typeface based on the ancient Cypriot Syllabary*

To communicate one of his poems, poet Stavros Lambrakis used his own handwritten letterform on top of people's portraits, stressing the complexity of semiotics within words and images. In order to visualise potential upgrades of human technology, Nicos Stephou created an 8-bit arcade feel and typography from the 80's. Issue no.1's back cover featured Evelyn Anastasiou's custom silkscreen typography message "The tune is mentally insane", depicting her connection to past work with youth punk musical festivals. Myria Konnari's project of found written typography from her mother's notes is a personal record and diary of their private post-it communication system.

Figure.4 *Peter Eramian with Maria Toumazou "Zaha Dinosaur Park"*

Phanos Kyriakou's "fake" job vacancy was presented using a screenshot of our email exchange. Peter Eramian created a digital collage with Maria Toumazou titled "Zaha Dinosaur Park" (fig.4) using the Sony AR effect mobile phone application, while Marios Constantinides' illustration of marble patterns are in constant search of identity and culture. Mihàlis Intzièyanni (fig.5) explores the relationship and the attachment of the body to objects and people to spaces. Finally, Mary Argyrou, an industrial designer, submitted a church chair she proposed for the Church of Cyprus during her MA studies.

Figure.5 *Intzièyanni Michalis "Celestial Bodies"*

5. Cultural Diversity in Cyprus

Looking more closely at the examples above, we can identify the past, current and future voices of the local art and design scene and find links to the island's millennia-old art history and cultural heritage and to its status quo. Eramian and Toumazou's piece is a socio-political statement criticizing the government's decision to build a modern multi-million public square designed by the late Zaha Hadid in the centre of Nicosia bridging the ancient city's Venetian moat. Along the same lines, Kyriakou's ironic "vacancy" emphasises the people's perceptions of the efficiency and productivity of the public

sector, while Intzièyanni portrays the difficulties Cyprus' LGBT community faces expressing their sexuality identities in public. Konnari's (fig.6) post-it notes are an example of the Mediterranean countries' collectivist* cultures. According to *Georgas et al*, Cypriot families tend to extend their family structure into a larger kinship network.

Figure.6 *Myria Konnari "Notes of a Mother"*

In Constantinides' work, the distinctive illustrative patterns are clearly influenced by the patterns found in Cypriot children's marbles ("Pirilia" in Cypriot) that were popular in the 80s, conveying a melancholy and nostalgic message. From the same perspective, Xinari is asking if the island's cultural heritage can shape the ground for the development of distinctive typeface design, while Argyrou's church chair tries to strengthen the object's origins and cultural significance by exposing the modesty that was once exemplified in the work of local craftsman. (fig.7)

Figure.7 (left) *Marios Constantinides' illustration of marbles* (right) Mary Argyrou "The Solitude Chair"

Lastly, in Yiaxi's message scratched into the cactuses we can see the symbolic use of the Cypriot cactus fruit as a blank canvas in her on-going journey to explore our everyday objects and their connection to words.

The 2013 economic crisis sparked a period of enlightenment for the art and design scene in Cyprus. It motivated locals to look back at their own culture and heritage and express it in new and exciting ways. More than half of OWK's contributors decided to present work that derives at least part of its inspiration from the local culture of Cyprus. It was an attempt by the contributors to speak to their own micro-communities, communities that are rarely represented by the big shiny magazines or mainstream media. As Duncombe (1997) puts it, "a network of zines, embedded within a larger underground culture, creates a forum through which individuals may become able to construct their identity, formulate their ideals of an authentic life, and build a community of support, without having to identify themselves–either positively or negatively–with mainstream society".

6.End notes
Meeting and collaborating with people for the first time is always one of the most stimulating parts of preparing each issue. Being able to interact with people, their ideas and work makes the process of creating artwork specifically for a Riso print challenging and interesting for me. *OWK* aims to increase awareness and understanding of the advantages and possibilities that new or altered printing technologies can provide for artists and designers and of how we can explore and have an impact on Cyprus' culturally diverse and intellectually stimulating art and design scene. In a series of briefing papers, *Maria Rosario Jackson* argues that one sign of a healthy community is its simultaneous ability to preserve and invent its culture—that is, to conserve its history and heritage while developing new expressions for current times. She also underscores the importance of diversity, which is often considered the hallmark of an innovative creative city. The influence of zines and the independent publishing on the preservation of the cultural heritage can be outlined briefly in the current case-study of OWK zine. For Cyprus, alternative print-based zines like OWK operate on the fault lines of heritage and innovation, providing an unbiased venue for a diverse group of artists and designers to renegotiate Cyprus' identity on their own terms.

As this is an exploratory case study, the findings are meant to be used to further investigate the importance of independent print culture in Cyprus and the social impact it can ignite.

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