

Handmade or photocopied, handed out or posted through the mail, zines operate outside of traditional publishing networks—and counter the preciousness of the print.

The Troublemakers

Jesse Dorris

If you got lucky in the summer of 1947, your hands might have wrapped themselves around a mimeographed collection of typewritten thoughts called *Vice Versa*. Edited under the nom de plume Lisa Ben, it was among the first of what we now think of as zines. It was almost certainly the first queer one. Small in scale and big in voice, *Vice Versa* defined itself from page one as "a magazine dedicated, in all seriousness, to those of us who will never quite be able to adapt ourselves to the iron-bound rules of Convention. . . . Please keep in mind that the entire publication was originated and compiled by one person."

That one person, "Lisa Ben," was actually Edythe Eyde, an employee of the film production company RKO, presumably living in the Los Angeles area. Given the long history of alienation from mainstream culture queer people have, perhaps Eyde saw the independent science-fiction publications on drugstore racks and found inspiration in their longing for other worlds. But she made *Vice Versa* more or less on her own, publishing film and

Paul P. and G. B. Jones, *Untitled*, 2002
Courtesy the artists

Reproduction of *Untitled*, 2002, in Paul P. and G. B. Jones, *Zine* (Andrew Roth, 2013)
Courtesy the artists

theater reviews and thrillingly sentimental, and horny, poetry. From the start, then, zines—handmade collections of often-appropriated art and text, run off via mimeograph or copy machine, and usually handed out or otherwise distributed outside of traditional publishing networks—have offered a way around waiting for the future. They are a way to make yourself a present, and to share it within a like-minded community.

"Zines are repositories of oppositional energy," says Branden W. Joseph, a professor of art history at Columbia University. "They're made by people who feel outside of some larger conventional institution." Today, of course, they are institutions in their own right, racking up sales at buzzy art-book fairs and stuffing influential anthologies such as Lisa Darms's *The Riot Grrrl Collection* (2013) and AA Bronson and Philip Aarons's *Queer Zines* series. Museums are finally taking the medium seriously. In the fall of 2023, Drew Sawyer, a curator at the Brooklyn Museum, and Joseph will mount a comprehensive retrospective of zines as a form of artistic production. "It's turning into a kind of photo show," says Sawyer, to his surprise. "From the 1970s through, say, the early 2000s, the photocopy machine was the main technology for zines. That's a photographic technology. And it's also a reproduction technology, intentionally going against the sort of value that was placed on the gelatin-silver print." Zines rely on the documentary authority of the photograph, while destabilizing the preciousness of the print.

The Canadian queer-punk polymath G. B. Jones has made a career out of authoritative destabilization.

The Canadian queer-punk polymath G. B. Jones has made a career out of that kind of authoritative destabilization. As a young





Page from *G. B. Jones* (Feature Inc., 1995), designed and edited by Steve Lafreniere, with a photograph of Jones by Jena von Brücker originally from *Jane and Frankie's Joy O' Sex* (Jena and Klaus von Brücker, 1990) Courtesy the artist

woman in 1980s Toronto, she led the post-punk, proto–riot grrrl band Fifth Column while working at Just Desserts, the city's answer to New York's Florent, the mythic all-night meatpacking-district hangout that shuttered in 2008. Jones had encountered Candy Parker and Caroline Azar's zine *Hide*, which used a photocopier as a camera to build blown-out assemblages rivaling the murky surrealism of the graphic designer Vaughan Oliver and the psychosis of David Lynch, at a fraction of their time frames and budgets. *Hide*'s first cover, for example, feature a kind of nightmarish, swollen-chested clown. Jones eventually joined the team and *Hide* began including cassette compilations of punk and experimental music with the printed issues.

In 1985, Jones applied her virtuosic talents to a new publication called *J.D.s*, an eight-issue collaboration with Bruce LaBruce, now



Spread from Ho Tam, *Hotam #12: The Yellow Pages* (88Books, 2016)

an underground film legend, but at the time an aspiring artist and local bon vivant who had served as Fifth Column's go-go boy. The zine's name referenced "juvenile delinquents" and lay claim to a constellation of homocelebrities that didn't quite exist, but should. "We were trying to merge different worlds that were isolated from each other," Jones says. "We just invented this scene, and we took pictures of all the people who worked at the restaurant." Like a dyke Oscar Wilde, Jones declared the genius of her friends. They became stars because, in the universe of *J.D.s*, they were. Eventually, the friends would also become stars of the underground film scene in Super 8 shorts such as the picaresque *The Troublemakers* from 1990 and 1992's *The Yo-Yo Gang*, a tale of rival girl gangs teeming with sex, violence, and wild joy.

Jones also began a long and fruitful collaboration with the Canadian artist Paul P., whose own work recontextualizes gay porn as intimate portraiture. Their dyadic collages blur the boundaries between archive and activism, drawing from sources including Canada's sordid history of raiding bathhouses and the police brutality around the 2010 G20 summit in Toronto. The work builds on Jones's 1980s output, fearlessly confronting misogyny, antiporn second-wave feminism, and the Canadian government. "We did it because we wanted to have fun. It was a way of interacting with the culture and developing a culture that was kind of more fun than, you know, standing on the street corner with a sign and yelling at the police," she says.

And the police didn't like *J.D.s*. "We were sending out hundreds of copies," Jones says, "and almost all of our mail would be opened." In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Canadian post office was "at the height of what you could only call a persecution campaign against LGBT bookstores," she says. "They routinely seized almost everything coming to bookstores. You had to make

Left:
Cover of Ho Tam, *Hotam #1: A Brief History of Me* (88Books, 2013); right: Cover of Ho Tam, *Hotam #5: Hot Asian Men* (88Books, 2014)
Courtesy the artist

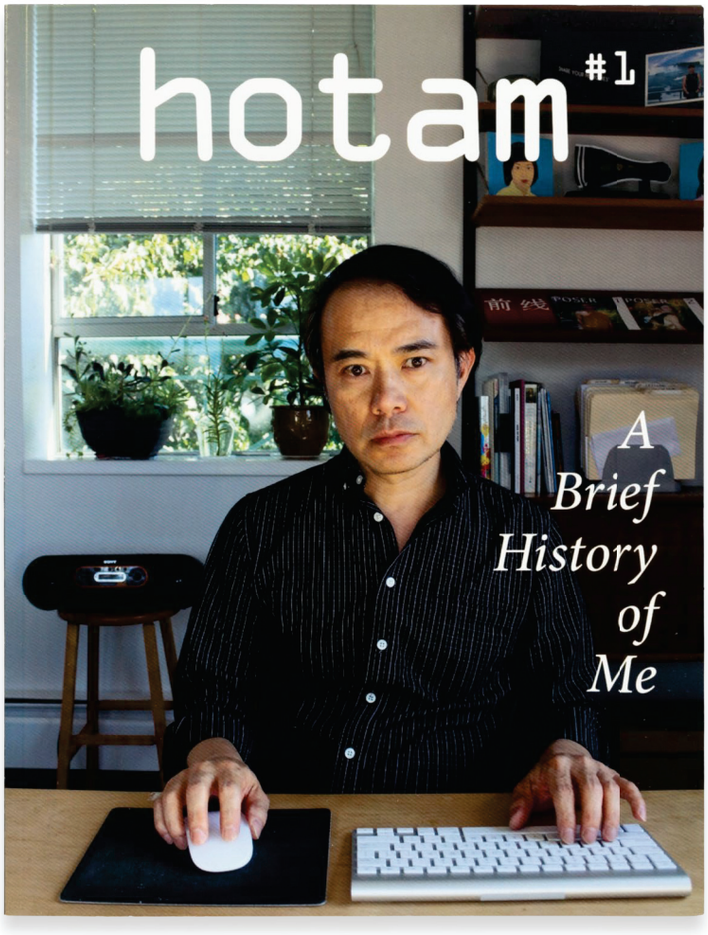
packages as boring, as uninteresting as possible." Closeting queer publications was, she notes, a familiar survival mechanism.

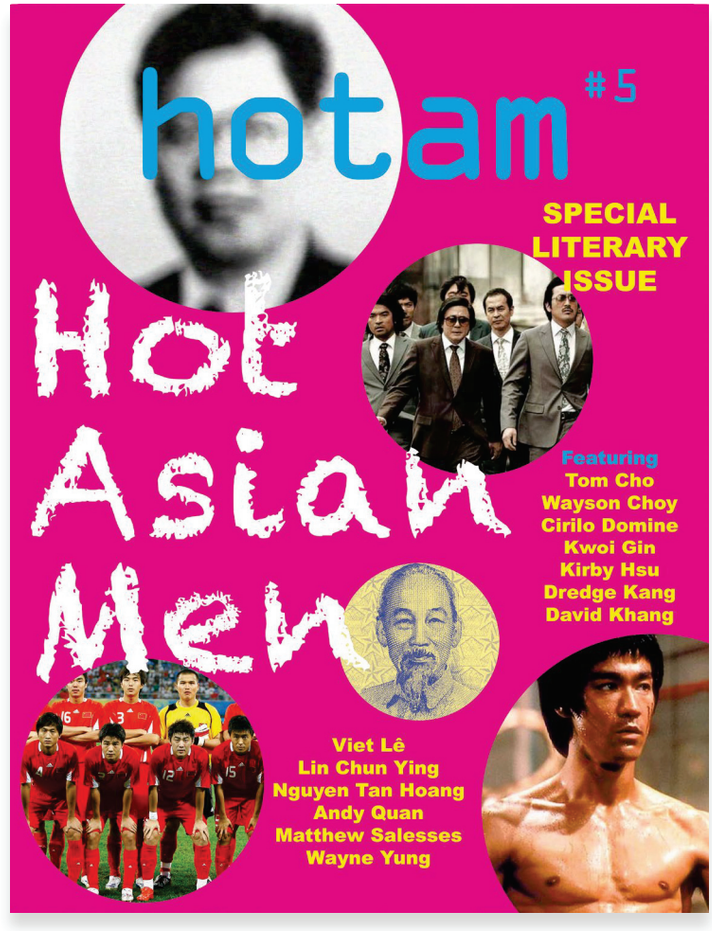
The artist and filmmaker Ho Tam is also familiar with government censorship. Growing up in Hong Kong, he says that he "was always cutting up magazines to create my own kind of little play books." In 2019, he opened a bookshop and gallery in Vancouver, where he relocated in 2010, in part to show work on newsprint by Hong Kong dissidents who had embraced newsprint for its lack of a digitial footprint. "I don't think I can go back to Hong Kong without being arrested," he says. "We think of zines as being ephemeral, but they're so weighty."

"I wanted to turn everything around," Ho Tam says, and "laugh at myself, make trouble."

Tam left Hong Kong to attend college in Ontario, where he taught himself to paint. Then he moved to Toronto, perhaps lured by the work of figures such as Jones and the influential collective General Idea, which in the 1980s had fused AIDS activism with a range of art practices. "There was a lot of discourse about racial representations," he says of his arrival in the early 1990s. He began exhibiting his paintings, which often explored idealized depictions of Asian male idols, but soon shifted direction. "I wanted to turn everything around," he says, and "laugh at myself, make trouble." That trouble became *The Yellow Pages*, a 1993 artist book he made into a color-Xerox-on-parchment-paper edition the following year and, later, a silent video.

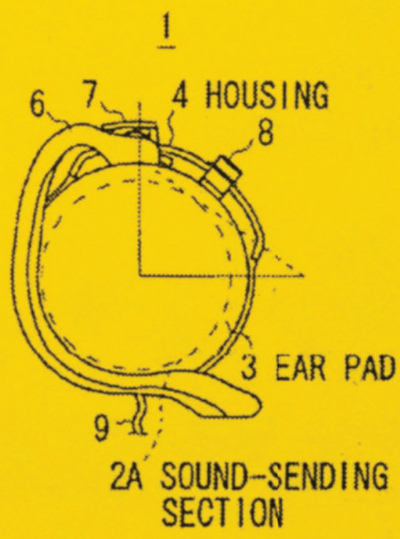
The work juxtaposes pictures that display stereotypes of Asians (a smiling woman serving a steaming plate of food) or the impact of U.S. imperialism (the explosion of an atomic bomb) with a slur (the words *Dog Meat* under the former; *Zen* paired with the latter). Over the next few decades, Tam issued various editions of *The Yellow Pages*, along with books and zines, some by other artists. His fifteen-issue *Hotam* (2013–17) begins with a fifty-page memoir, *A Brief History of Me*, in which each page lines up photographs from a single year of his life with a time line of political events. Page 32, for example, situates a portrait of the stylish, smiling Tam in winter





Spread from *Sound Aspects Part 1* (BlackMass Publishing, 2020)





FRONT SURFACE SIDE

FIG.1A

street clothes between markers for the sarin gas attack in Tokyo and the Oklahoma City bombing. The connection asserts Tam's place in history while also questioning that position. Issue #5, titled *Hot Asian Men: Special Literary Issue*, alternates spreads of beefcake Bruce Lee playing cards and covers of *OG* magazine, likely the first gay Asian softcore porn targeted at the West, with poetry and reporting by leading gay Asian writers. His publication *Poser* (2013–16) compiles disarmingly intimate solo portraits in public spaces. Its final issue, for instance, lines up snapshots of passengers sitting in the waiting lounges of Chicago's O'Hare, Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi, and Tokyo's Narita airports, charging phones or eating McDonald's, smiling indulgently or staring down Tam's lens, each navigating post-9/11 international travel, with its increased surveillance and distrust of strangers, in their own discrete way.

In the twenty-first century, artists still have to navigate bureaucracies of power just to get where they want to go, and the journey for artists of color can be particularly grueling. Rather than convincing arts and publishing institutions to support them, some take matters into their own hands. The New York–based visual artist and writer Yusuf Hassan founded BlackMass Publishing in the fall of 2018 to circulate his own work, such as the *Sound Aspects* series of zines, which programs duets of Black culture and audio ephemera: in the first volume, for instance, a shirtless, shimmering Little Richard hollers across the page from a diagram of a hearing aid. Named after the 1966 Amiri Baraka play *A Black Mass*, the collective counts the artist and poet Kwamé Sorrell among its frequent collaborators. It has amassed a catalog of publications recognizable for their restrained, minimal design. Another zine from 2021, *Stay Close to Me*, features a poem by the Guyanese poet Martin Carter



Installation view of work by BlackMass Publishing in *Greater New York*, MoMA PS1, 2021–22
Photograph by Martin Seck. Courtesy MoMA PS1



titled “Death of a Comrade,” opposite an upended photograph of the punk band Bad Brains. The photograph, printed, like the rest of the zine, in black on vibrant green paper, is its own kind of explosion—Black punks upending the white punk world with irresistible force.

Institutions, including the New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, are finally taking notice. For MoMA PS1’s 2021 survey exhibition *Greater New York*, BlackMass built a “study hall,” an archive of independent publications from their own collection. In a throwback to zines’ origins in correspondence art, and in a nod to the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, they also set up a post office box in Jamaica, Queens, and made a global call for contributions to be mailed in. (In a less inspiring echo of Jones’s trouble with the Canadian post office, Hassan and Sorrell likewise reported that packages sent to them were intercepted and opened by the authorities, without explanation.) “Reading rooms are generally quiet places,” Sorrell says. “We wanted the installation to be active. We wanted courtship and hanging out and music playing in the space. We fought for an installation where people are able to touch and experience the work, where things can be weird.” The project inspired its own network of artists and audiences, one pair of eyes at a time. “We’re not interested in mass production,” says Hassan. “Zines have this nomadic spirit, in the way information is disseminated, handed from one person to another”—just as with the earliest zines, all those decades ago. “It’s a way to hold on to culture.”

Spread from *Stay Close to Me* (BlackMass Publishing, 2021)
Courtesy BlackMass Publishing and the Center for Book Arts, New York

Jesse Dorris is a writer based in New York and a regular contributor to *Aperture*, *Metropolis*, and *PIN-UP*.

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