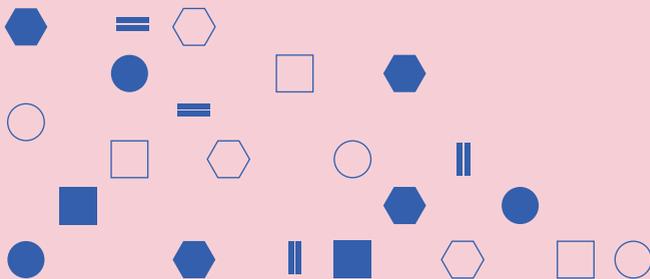


# Curating artist's zines, DIY and alternative publications



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# Curating

artist's zines,

DIY &

alternative

publications

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## CURATORIAL CONTEXT

The exhibition lo-fi street cred: artist's zines, DIY and alternative publications was held at the Jack Ginsberg Centre for Book Arts (JGCBA), Wits Art Museum (WAM), University of the Witwatersrand between 4 June and 30 August 2024. Its remit was to explore the porous definitions and descriptions of objects that occupy the contested territory of 'alternative publications.' In engaging with this contestation, a visitor to the exhibition might initially ask, 'alternative to what?' By way of an answer, the curatorial remit was first, to seek out publications that unhinge the conventional expectations associated with published art literature - such as art monographs and catalogues - as items of particular interest. Second, the exhibition must contain publications that were unlike anything seen in conventional academic museum spaces. It is somewhat ironic, however, that it is from the edges of the academic space that many publications shown on the exhibition originated, and thus, third, the work of university students, often considered too raw for inclusion in formal museum collections and exhibitions, would occupy much

of the real estate of the exhibition. Fourth, the exhibition must consciously exclude works that characterise the JGCBA Collection, i.e. fine-press and limited-edition artists' books that foreground excellence in book design and production values. Fifth, to select ephemeral items from the JGCBA Collection that have been excluded from previous exhibitions or that have typically constituted only a fraction of an exhibition when they have appeared - such as those exhibited on *Samplings: South African Artists' Books*, the exhibition held in conjunction with the founding of the JGCBA in 2019. Last, to seek out examples of contemporary zines, DIY and privately made publications across a range of genres, forms and distribution channels which lay outside the Collection.

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## FIGS. 1 A&B.

Entrance section of the exhibition lo-fi street cred: artist's zines, DIY and alternative publications. Curated by the author, Jack Ginsberg Centre for Book Arts (JGCBA), Wits Art Museum (WAM). 4 June and 30 August 2024. Photographs: David Paton.

Having established the curatorial premise for lo-fi, it seems necessary to acknowledge that these publications primarily occupy equally 'alternative' spaces in which they have a life of their own, a committed following, and enthusiastic reception.<sup>1</sup> Yet from time to time, they also appear in more formal exhibition spaces such as at No End Contemporary Gallery in Johannesburg, or A4, a philanthropic laboratory for the arts established in 2017 in Buitenkant Street, Cape Town. Yet despite

such exhibition venues and the growth of zines and alternative publications in academic collections, these are obviously not their natural homes. Janice Radway (2012:29) states that

*... book history suggests that the now familiar question "What's a zine?" ought to be reformulated in both a more social and a more performative way. We ought to ask not what a zine is but what zinesters do with them, how, and in what contexts. At the same time, we ought to ask how the practices of zine-ing reciprocally act*

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*upon all those who engage in them. We need to know how zine-ing works and how the forms it generates exert their multiple effects.*

It is often at artist- and student-led gatherings such as Keleketla Library's Lephephe Print Gatherings or those organized by Ituba Arts Gallery, Moyé Magazine, PULP Paperworks and Alphabet Zoo, in various informal pop-up and open-mic venues, through which zine activities and sharing are able to generate 'their multiple effects'. So, in the aftermath of lo-fi and its roundtable in which artists, teachers and students engaged with the topic: What value do printed zines and DIY publications offer in a digital age?, Radway asks us to focus less on the well-trodden question of what zines are and discussions on "the coherence and consistency of the ideas conveyed in zines" and more upon what she calls "zine-ing ... generated not solely by anger, rage, disappointment, or depression but also by profound hope that alternative ways of being in the world might be created" (Radway 2012:fn#10:43).

The unauthorised, unedited and sometimes incendiary ideas

of artists and students (still so prevalent and strident across the globe today in response to climatic, financial, political and military catastrophes) are produced quickly and cheaply by hand, through collage, via copy machines and silkscreens. Their seeming disregard for 'conventional aesthetic merit' is often the point of the publication's existence as something to be taken seriously only by those who recognise the rough-hewn quality of image and text as exactly the message being shared. Radway (2012:40) describes that as a

*driving desire to create new social networks through a web of citation, connection, reprinting, and circulation ... engaged ... in the practice of utopian social construction, an attempt to bring into being an elsewhere where lives might be different.*

In like manner, Berin Golonu (2005:9) describes such publications, and especially zines, as "a site of community building intended to counter the social conditioning of mainstream media ... their status as extraordinary

<sup>1</sup> A4 have recently released alternative publications such as *Photo Book! Photo-Book! Photobook!* - for the exhibition curated by Sean O'Toole (11 February-21 May 2022) - and Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse's *Ponte City book tower residency* (9 January 2023-20 February 2024) See also Jonah Sack's essay in Part Three of this publication.

containers of original ... works of art commissioned specifically for the page". Yet, as the life of tracts, zines, posters and alternative publications is often short-lived - by promoting current polemical positions and produced wherever a cause seems worth fighting for - Claire Lehmann (2005:13) describes these self-published and DIY forms' power as constituting "an idiosyncratic up yours ... in the face of mainstream authority".

## A HISTORY OF SUCH OBJECTS

A.M. Scott (2005:13) states that since the invention of the printing press, the existence of publications such as tracts, chapbooks, flyers, posters and leaflets describes a search for an alternative to what the ruling classes printed as truth for a lemming-like society to consume. Scott cites Thomas Paine's pamphlet titled *Common Sense* (1779) - that urged Americans to gain freedom from England - as an early form of alternative publishing prefiguring more recent forms such as the Dada Manifesto and the mail art of Fluxus. Fredric Wertham (1973:n.p) states that zines have their roots in the term 'fanzine', a type of science fiction publication first published in the 1930s, then during the

1970s punk rock revolution and later, notes Stephen Duncombe (1977:n.p), in the rise of feminist and queer zines the 1990s. <sup>2</sup> Scott (2005:13) states that "these social shifts ... all shared one thing ... [a] response to an overwhelming feeling of discontent with the status quo, and a need to take matters into one's own hands.

The period between 1956 and 1978 in South Africa is described by Michael Gardiner (2005:n.p) as "a golden age of lively, independent and 'alternative' publishing that was available to a wider range of readers than books were". <sup>3</sup> This history saw the rise of independent publications such as *Wurm* (1966-70) which John Christoffel [J.C.] Kannemeyer (1988:405) described as "avant garde" and in which Gardiner (2005) found "novelty, the unorthodox and that which challenged the conventional".

Another publication from this period was *Izwi/Stem/Voice* (1971-74), in whose 20 issues editors Stephen Gray, Phil du Plessis and Wilma Stockenström, amongst others, found "a space to explore and express what their repressive society sought to forbid them" (Gardiner 2005:n.p). In the editorial to the first issue of *Snarl* (August 1974), Joyce Ozynski writes: "The primary intention of *Snarl* is to disturb the prevailing torpor reigning over the relationship

between artists and audience by providing honest, informed criticism uninhibited by the desire to please either artist, audience or editor". After only 6 issues - and the events of June 1976 that violently demonstrated that "it could be dangerous to hold and express ideas" (Gardiner 2005:n.p) - it was clear that *Snarl's* aims were unachievable. But this was not the case with *New Classic* (1975 - 1978) whose five issues were edited by Siphos Sepamla, Donga and Inspan (1976 - 1978) edited by Welma Odendaal and Isabel Hofmeyr respectively, and the 46 issues of the legendary *Staffrider* (1978-1993 (1996)) edited by Mike Kirkwood, Mthobisi Mutloatse, Chris van Wyk and Andries Oliphant which "tackled ideas head on" (Gardiner 2005:n.p).

The eight issue of *Wurm* displayed on lo-fi (from a total output of 12) <sup>4</sup> demonstrated some of the complexities with which literary publications were grappling during the last years of the 1960s. Initially conceived of as an avant-garde Afrikaans-language magazine

initially edited by P.A. de Waal Venter, *Wurm* rapidly began incorporating contributions by Flemish (and other) poets including sophisticated concrete poetry which, with the exception of Michael Macnamara and Wpoko Jensma, seemed to encourage an overly European-focused editorial stance which "overwhelmed the entire magazine" and "unwittingly ... led to the demise of *Wurm*" (Gardiner 2005:n.p). Rather than seeking political change, *Wurm's* battles were domestic, pursuing "literary and cultural alternatives to the dreary, deadly, decent orthodoxies of their time" (Gardiner 2005:n.p). <sup>5</sup> But *Wurm* did succeed in bringing an avant-garde appeal to Afrikaans literature and poetry in a post-Sestiger era. <sup>6</sup> *Wurm* was responsible for producing some fine graphic work, including Walter Battiss's *Antinöus* (issue #89, March 1968) and works by Wopko Jensma (especially the covers of issues #8-10), while elsewhere (Paton 2000), I have argued that, in the addendum that accompanies the final addition - *Wurm* 12 titled *Hulde Uit 1970* - Phil du Plessis produced one of South Africa's first artists' books.

<sup>2</sup> For a more comprehensive history of fanzines and their influence upon contemporary zine culture see Teal Triggs, *Fanzines: The DIY Revolution*, San Francisco: Chronical Books, 2010 pp6-19.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Gardiner's remit in writing the introduction for the exhibition *South African Literary Magazines 1956 - 1978*, Warren Siebritz *Modern and Contemporary Art*, Johannesburg, 15 March - 14 April 2005, was to "bring together a representative range of South African literary magazines of the 1960s and 1970s" including "from the advent of *The Purple Renoster* in 1956 to the first *Staffrider* in 1978".



**FIG. 2.**  
A selection of issues of Wurm (1966-70). Photograph: David Paton

Jensma's graphic presence across Snarl, Wurm and Izwe and later Ophir (1967-76) unifies this diverse poetic/artistic period and is represented on lo-fi by not only his poetry and covers but also by the original woodblock that became the visual byline of Snarl (from its second edition in November 1974) and reprinted, 50 years later, for the lo-fi exhibition by Artist Proof Studio, Johannesburg.

<sup>4</sup> Issues #1, 2, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 & 12 were included on lo-fi.

<sup>5</sup> Gardiner, *ibid*, n.p. concludes this statement by saying that "Wurm never published work by black writers. They were outside the laager and too un-European."

<sup>6</sup> The Sestigters, founded by André Brink and Breyten Breytenbach were a dissident literary movement of Afrikaans-language poets and writers. Between 1963-65 their publications were edited by Batho Smit and André Brink.

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**FIG. 3.**  
A selection of issues of Izwi/Stem/Voice (1971-74). Photograph: David Paton

The full title Izwi/Stem/Voice speaks of this publication's multi-lingual reach. Apart from English and Afrikaans, the editors (Phil du Plessis, Stephen Gray and Wilma Stockenström) published translations in Owambo, Shona and Zulu. Gardiner (citing Steven Gray 1977:43-49) states that "[t]he Izwi community had access to many networks of people and writers, much more diverse and extensive than Wurm ever had." But what is revealing in the issues of Snarl and particularly Wurm and Izwi shown on the lo-fi exhibition, is their means of production. Typed and mimeographed pages,

accompanied by monochrome and simply reproduced images, were hand-collated and stapled, indexing both the period in which they were made, and their modest DIY means of production.

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**FIG. 4.** A selection of issues of Snarl (1974-76). Photograph: David Paton

What is clear from this partial view of independent and alternative publishing is that South Africa has always nurtured such practices.<sup>7</sup> When hegemonic constrictions are encountered, the “free-thinking mode of human expression and a do-it-yourself alternative to the mainstream” seep out of every available crevice and crack (Scott 2005:15). In this space of seepage, young artists, writers and designers have found a rich conduit for the publication of their ideas and visual forms in unique or limited-edition publications. Despite limited access to funding, established printing facilities and markets, these creative producers have fashioned some profoundly challenging zines and self-published works.

<sup>7</sup> Not on this exhibition but worthy of mention is Willem Boshoff's *KykAfrikaans*, published by Uitgewery Pannevis in 1980.

## HISTORY INTO TEACHING

Earlier I mentioned one of the contributing factors to lo-fi's remit was to be found at ‘the edges of the academic space’ and it is some of these publications that formed a powerful and accessible element of the exhibition. As the heir of Wurm, Izwi appeared during the period just prior to the profound turbulence that erupted from 1976 onward reflecting the political turmoil that saw the emergence of the Black Consciousness movement and the writings of Steve Biko alongside censorship and political violence (Gardiner 2005:n.p). It was not within the curatorial remit of lo-fi to unpack this political turmoil - simply setting these publications in the context of others for the visitor to explore within their time and socio-political milieu. Where the exhibition did acknowledge these tensions, however, was in the section devoted to Rangoato Hlasane's third year university student project titled *Ephemeral Collectives*.<sup>9</sup> Premised on the place and role of collective publishing by artists, Hlasane contextualises this publication-based project upon the historical Medu Art Ensemble Newsletters which represent one of the many collectively made

print publications grounded in the resistance framework during apartheid and after. Such publications include Staffrider, Pathways to Free Education, Chimurenga and many more (Rosen 2013). Underpinning Hlasane's brief and the work of his students is the understanding of the Medu publications' sharing of a spirit of defiance against toxic hegemonies and a commitment to self-determination (Kujichagulia in Swahili). Hlasane's brief tells the students that it has been 40 years since the then South African Defence Force (SADF) raided the house of the Medu Art Ensemble in Botswana, killing 12 members/fellow artists/activists on 14 June 1985, but what the SADF failed to eliminate is the spirit, the memories, the practices and the philosophies of Medu. Working out from this context and its associated materials, Hlasane's asks his students to deepen their editorial collectives' publications by mastering the Risograph printer “to create beautiful, brave, inspiring and unique publications” (Hlasane 2023) and “to remix Medu posters by inserting burning issues of your time to link ‘history’ with the plight of yourselves ... [s]ummoning history into not only your present, but your classroom, your department, your

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school, your faculty, your campus" (Hlasane 2024). What was shown on the lo-fi exhibition was a set of alternative<sup>10</sup>Risograph responses by the student collectives of 2018 and 2023, a body of publications that have been brought into the permanent collection of the JGCBA. These publications are powerful records of young peoples' responses to South Africa's troubled past and how this past is reflected in the contemporary concerns that Radway (2012:40) describes as "an attempt to bring into being an elsewhere where lives might be different". This project and its publications are discussed in greater depth in Part Two.



**FIG. 5.** Thanduxolo Mwelase, Tammi Mbambo, Omphemetse Ramathlatse, Kglalelo Shoni, Lindelwa Masuku, Queenzela Mokoena, Bill Kouelany & Oratile Papi Konopi, Invade Collective, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (2018). Photograph: David Paton



**FIG. 6.** Rebecca Boulet, Genevieve Matter, Pearl Monaheng, Nhlanhla Tshabalala, Ashley Brown, & Jessica Steele, Terms and Conditions Collective, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (2023). Photograph: David Paton

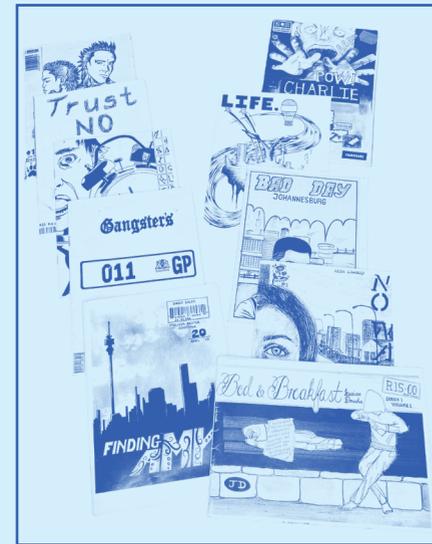
<sup>8</sup> Accessibility is always a constricting curatorial problem when exhibiting book art. The lo-fi exhibition, however required that access be made to a range of publications and the body of tertiary student and publicly produced work - such as those made by participants at several WAM Make-a-Book workshops with both children and adults on Saturday mornings - was considered to be most suitable and engaging work for visitors to the exhibition to unclip from the walls and read in the exhibition space.

<sup>9</sup> This project has run every year since 2018 as part of the Drawing and Contemporary Practice III course in the Department of Fine Arts, Wits University.

<sup>10</sup> Risograph printing is a technique best described as a 'digital screen printing'. The process is similar to screen printing, but with the convenience of an office copier. It's known for its vivid colours (that other printers can't produce) and its specific textures. These machines deliver 'perfect imperfections' and provide a cheap and easy method for reproducing work at large quantities, such as posters, prints and zines (Riso Pop online).

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In the afterlives of Rhodes- and #FeesMustFall, recent other tertiary-level programmes have included the teaching, reception and production of these concerns in the form of zines and publications in which student lived experiences and voices are given a platform from which these experiences can be powerfully and graphically conveyed. These are discussed in greater detail in Part Two. But in terms of my own teaching, I instituted the production of a drawn and self-published graphic novel in my first year Drawing program at the University of Johannesburg back in 1998. This project naturally encourages excellent drawing and illustration skills, along with familiarity of the history and conventions of these visual forms, but serial thinking and narrativity were also problems that students needed to solve - in only eight pages and a cover design. Ten of the most compelling of these drawn, photocopied and stapled graphic novels were selected for lo-fi and were available to visitors who wanted to read them. They have also now been included in the JGCBA's collection.



**FIG. 7.** Various graphic novels from 1st year Visual Art students, University of Johannesburg, (1998-2014). Photograph: David Paton

In early 2019, in collaboration with the Design Department of the University of Sunderland, UK and the second-year students of the Department of Graphic Design from the University of Johannesburg, my second year Visual Art students embarked upon a posterzine project through which they explored aspects of their sense of belonging (or not) in the gritty life of the city of Johannesburg. These collaborations were exhibited at

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the University of Sunderland in November of that year. The Sunderland students and faculty members were fascinated, confused and not unimpressed by the directness of the UJ students' engagement with their city, and they promised to reciprocate by sending their own zine-based responses to the city of Sunderland to UJ in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic unfortunately put paid to that idea. But 15 A2 posters and their accompanying zines made up a compelling wall of accessible scripto-visual urban commentary with which school groups who visited lo-fi were keen to engage. Both the posters and zines have also now been incorporated into the JGCBA collection.

## THE EXHIBITION AND ITS ROUNDTABLE

By coupling my students' existing graphic novels and posterzines - along with invited zines from third year Graphic Design and Publication students from the

University of Johannesburg and Open Window (Centurion) - with suitable publications already housed in the JGCBA collection, an early curatorial premise arose: exhibit only those items that have a DIY, hand-made or lo-fi aesthetic, and possess the necessary<sup>11</sup> street cred to attract those who find conventional publishing somewhat stuffy. Claire Lehmann (2005:1) reminds us of the path such objects have travelled before appearing on an exhibition such as lo-fi when she states:

*However a zine came into your possession, its passage did not likely include mainstream commercial channels. Sheets were pulled from a Xerox platen; folded, stapled, passed out at a concert in smoky darkness; rescued for a few dollars from the back of a tiny bookshop; dented during a media-mail journey through the postal service; traded underground.*



**FIG. 8.** Various posters and posterzines from 2nd year Visual Art and Graphic Design students, University of Johannesburg, originally shown at the University of Sunderland (2019). Photograph: David Paton

Sonja Commentz (2011:4) describes objects such as these on exhibition as “always personal and stuffed to the gills with plenty of passion, the resulting leaflets, magazines and books are invariably shaped by their means of production - and resulting limitations.” Such limitations seem implicated in the very aesthetic I sought for inclusion on lo-fi, as anything smacking of high production values, coupled with a large enough budget to ensure fine printing and secure commercial distribution channels, disqualified it/them from inclusion. Bitterkomix, a long-term creative partnership between artists Anton Kannemeyer (Joe Dog) and Conrad Botes (Konradski), however made the cut, not only for its longevity in a notoriously fickle South African publication environment - after all, Bitterkomix No.1 was published in 1992 - but particularly for its controversial and influential stature. The new democratic government had banned Kannemeyer’s Gif (Afrikaner Sekskomix) on 15 December 1994 and this ‘badge of

honour’ was considered sufficient street cred for inclusion on lo-fi. On the other hand, many a trashy tract or a poorly conceived and drawn zine was equally disqualified. Not everything must be included because it looks grungy! Educator, historian and writer Teal Triggs (2010:19) states this succinctly: “...it is also clear that when zines more latterly have made a more mainstream impact it is their DIY ‘charm’ that is at stake. If there is a stereotype of a zine ... then it is of a photocopied, roughly hewn production, probably produced by a lone and slightly awkward youth.”



**FIG. 9.**  
A selection of issues of Bitterkomiks  
(from 1992 onward). Anton  
Kannemeyer & Conrad Botes.  
Photograph: David Paton

<sup>11</sup> The term ‘street cred’ is defined as “acceptability among people with experience and knowledge of modern urban life, especially its difficulties or dangers” or “commanding a level of respect in an urban environment due to experience in or knowledge of issues affecting those environments.” Much of the students work on lo-fi came with built-in, in some cases, bullet-proof street credibility, their titles alone demanding attention and respect: *Trust No One*; *Gangsters 011 GP*; *Bad Day Johannesburg*; *Life on the Streets*; and *Pangazine: Life is a Faking Mess: A Rebellion agAinst perfection*.

No author of the many fabulous monographs on zine and self-publishing cultures claims any degree of completeness in their surveys; how could they? But with ever increasing zine-like forms appearing online, Jack Bratich (2014:4) asks the pertinent question "how does such a stubbornly tactile print medium find new relevance in a digital age?" It seems that, for young artists and designers in South Africa, it is exactly because of the intangible nature of online forms, that the stubbornness of tactile objects makes the publications found on this exhibition so relevant and urgent. At the roundtable event which accompanied the lo-fi exhibition, the students - all of whom are digital natives - agreed that online forms' accessibility and familiarity are desirable qualities of netzine culture but acknowledged Bratich's (2014:4) conclusion that "zines are precursors to social media, especially image-based blogs, which may give insight into why they are resurging." They also acknowledged that the tactile, collectable and tradable objects held an attraction that digital forms might not. After all, as Radway reminds us, any zinester reciprocally relies upon an act of zine-ing.

Where the value of the lo-fi exhibition lay was in the interface between those older items, both local and international, which were housed in the JGCBA collection and those newer objects that had been brought in from outside. Maaiké Bakker and Nina Torr's zine publication and Risograph program at Open Window that formed part of the exhibition - discussed in Part Two - was matched by a generous loan of items from their personal collections. Their connection with many local and international zinesters made a powerful contribution to the contemporary section of lo-fi and included the expansive publications from Shawn Hill (aka Bat Butt) and his contributors. Hill's compilations provide a compelling answer to Bratich's question 'how does such a stubbornly tactile print medium find new relevance in a digital age?' in that, upon opening a Bat Butt envelope, the delivery of a small exhibition of diverse posters, stickers, zines and ephemera bursts from the envelope in a tactile sea of exciting discovery. By contrast, clicking on any digital equivalent delivers exactly *fokol* to the viewer.

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**FIG. 10.**

Bat Butt Issue #5 Deluxe. Shaun Hill & various artists. Including Bat Butt No 5, Ev'78 No 2 & 3, XI Ev'78 Sticker, Bat Butt Stickers, 4 Prints, Button, Stella Fortune & other material (2017). Photograph: David Paton.

The growing body of Risograph publications is also evidenced on lo-fi by the work of Jungle Jim (Jenna Bass, and Hannes Bernard, eds.) and the collaborations between various artists and Candice Ježek at Dream Press.

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**FIG. 11.**

A selection of issues from Jungle Jim Fiction. Jenna Bass & Hannes Bernard (from 2008 onward). Photograph: David Paton.

Given what lo-fi has presented to the diverse audiences who visited the exhibition and its roundtable, it would seem that the ongoing and tenacious production of such stubborn objects might require a follow-up exhibition in the near future, showcasing the robust health of DIY and self-published materials in South Africa.

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