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Are You Okay?

Mental Health Narratives in Art
Zines from the Zineopolis Collection

JACKIE BATEY

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University of Illinois Research Park

2001 South First Street, Suite 202

Champaign, IL 61820 USA

Ph: +1-217-328-0405

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Are You Okay? Mental Health Narratives in Art Zines from the Zineopolis Collection

Jackie Batey,¹ University of Portsmouth, United Kingdom

Abstract: This article explores art zines that contain visual narratives about mental health from this special collection. It questions how visual narratives about issues such as general anxiety disorder, burnout, and post-traumatic stress disorder can communicate to a reader through art zines. It will consider authorial illustration within self-publishing and how personal stories can be shared in an ultimately positive context. Well-being has become a particular focus for higher education in the UK with many students struggling with anxiety and depression. Art zines have an immediacy and democracy of production that means more stories can be shared beyond what is available in the mainstream. Ethical issues of circulating these art zines within a collection is also commented upon. Mental health issues have often been portrayed through the popular media unsympathetically creating stigma, whereas these selected art zines show care and understanding offering an alternative narrative.

Keywords: Zines, Mental-Health, Self-Publishing, Illustration, Graphic Medicine

Art Zines and The Zineopolis Collection

Zineopolis is the art zine collection at the University of Portsmouth, UK. It focuses on zines where the content is mostly conveyed through sequences of images. The majority of the collection is by illustrators, artists, photographers, and designers of all ages, genders, and abilities. Since the collection is primarily image-based we hold zines from makers in a variety of languages. Although it is outside the scope of this article to define in any depth the genre of zines, a short description from *Cite This Zine* (Giari 2009) may be useful at this point, “What are Zines? Short for magazine or fanzine, a zine is a self-publication, motivated by a desire for self-expression, not for profit. Zines are excellent primary resources that give a voice to under-represented demographics.”

For context, a general survey of zines, *Fanzines* (Triggs 2010), is fully illustrated and covers a wide array of titles and genres from the 1950s through to contemporary publications as does *Zines* (Farrelly, Dorrian, and Recchia 2001). A more political approach is seen in *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (Duncombe 1996) which covers the essential qualities of the zines asks the question whether it is possible to rebel culturally in a modern consumer society that eats up rebellious culture. A feminist perspective is explored in *The Riot Grrrl Collection* (Darms 2014). A few titles focus more on production methods and distribution such as the excellent *Whatcha Mean, What's a Zine?: The Art of Making Zines and Minicomics* (Watson and Todd 2006) and *Make a Zine!: A Guide to Self-publishing Disguised as a book on how to Produce a Zine*. Due to the ephemeral and limited-run nature of zines, much material is available online via the makers' blogs and websites which includes many collectives and review sites. The total authorial control of the zine from concept through to final artifact is what makes zines unique within publishing; they sit with independent press, self-publishing, and pamphleteering and we can view the whole uncensored narrative as it was intended by the author.

Zines are often cited as being outside mainstream publishing and can give a voice to underrepresented groups, which is why libraries are collecting and cataloguing them currently in

¹ Corresponding Author: Jackie Batey, Eldon Building, Winston Churchill Ave, Art, Design, and Performance, University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, Hants, PO12DJ, UK

their thousands, which now includes many sub groups such as art zines; perzines; queer zines, punk zines, football zines; fanzines; etc.) This article focusses specifically on art zines, which are more closely defined in my earlier paper, *Art-Zines—The Self-Publishing Revolution: The Zineopolis Art-Zine Collection* (Batey 2012). Art Zines contain primarily image-based content and the tactility and aesthetic of the self-published artifact is an important consideration for the creator. They are mostly created by individuals who are visual communicators. This often includes illustrators, artists, photographers, and designers. The Art Zine collection I curate at the University of Portsmouth has many selected examples of this genre created by students, staff, and people working in the creative industries. Themes covered are expansive but all use illustration and imagery rather than text to communicate their primary message.

Authorial Illustration and the Art Zine

“Authorial illustration” can be described as a body of artistic expression that has been defined and developed by an illustrator with no direction or censorship from external sources. This may resemble a visual diary and contain biographical or autobiographical information. Unlike commercial illustration, it is up to the authorial illustrator to develop their practice with a view to defining and identifying their own audience; this may happen at the latter stages of a project or in a few cases, the audience may be the author themselves. “The Authorial Illustrator seeks to reassert illustration as a developing practice; working against the tendency for the discipline of illustration to be seen as a repetitive commodity where the illustrator is presented with an already clearly defined concept” (Braund, Osmond, and Morgan 2012, 15)

This genre of illustration can often find a means of dissemination through self-publishing, more recently in art zines. The rise in interest in all zines, more libraries initiating collections and zine festivals, events, and workshops becoming more prevalent around the world has helped the authorial illustrator find a new audience.

I would like to suggest authorial illustration could be seen as a means of communication for more visually orientated people. As an illustrator/educator I often hear myself saying, when struggling to verbally explain something, “let me draw it for you.” It is this act of drawing, the creation of images that can capture the subtleties of situations that we may not be able to find the right words for. Drawing is the process through which we can visually describe emotions, moods, sequences, thoughts, hesitations, and anxieties with immediacy.

As the course leader of MA Illustration at the University of Portsmouth, UK, I saw the value of collecting and archiving art zines when I setup the Zineopolis Collection originally intended as a student resource in 2007. More recently, I have been struck by the number of wellbeing and mental health issues that are being explored through this format, some key examples of which I will share in this article. I have sought to explore the question, “What do authorial narratives about mental health in zines teach us?”

The portrayal of mental health issues in popular culture has historically been unsympathetic and exaggerated in order to add tension and excitement to a narrative. Mainstream literature, horror film, and thriller genres often make use of tropes such as the “twisted serial killer,” “oddball loner,” and “crazy cat lady.” Generic characters are often the result of reselling similar stories, and these tropes become embedded into popular culture, much as the witch, evil step-mother, and handsome prince have been through fairy tales (Luomala and Campbell 1950). Authorial illustration is autobiography and biography where the illustrator is also the author and the designer; most commonly within the genre of zines (both online and in print), they are also the producer, marketer, and distributor.

Mental health is a large and complex subject and the examples I have selected cover a range of issues all written and illustrated mostly from the perspective of the person experiencing the symptoms. The visual narratives selected have varying amounts of text, but the sequential nature of the images remains the priority.

When considering mental health issues, it is important to note there is a lot of work being done to try and understand and lessen “stigma” (Goffman 1963). Some good contemporary examples include *Asylum Magazine* (published by PCCS Books in the UK) and *Hyperbole and a Half* (Brosh 2013). In the UK media, many high-profile names have been positive in stepping forward to share their experiences, often with the aim of encouraging others to also share and talk. Visual narratives have a unique place within this debate as some of us are more visually orientated than others and for some, “seeing” the story can connect more successfully than reading about it. This article highlights examples from Zineopolis, but more importantly I have interviewed the creators and want to share their own words and thoughts on drawings, creativity, and mental health.

Mental Health Narratives in Art Zines

Visualising Anxiety

Anxiety is a human trait that is biologically necessary, altering the individual so that they are able to perceive and overcome potential obstacles (Rycroft 1968). However, there are also many anxiety disorders, the main ones being generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, phobic disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Kitchener and Jorm 2016). Anxiety is often described as an emotion that is concerned with the future, with what “might” happen. *Anxiety Comics* (Bru 2015) beautifully illustrates this aspect. The emotion of anxiety is personified as a floating tormentor that constantly seeks to undermine the protagonist.

Figure 1: *Anxiety Comics*, Vol.3, 16–17
Source: Bru 2015

As can be seen in Figure 1, the phone rings and “Anxiety” tells the author, “That must be your phone! Probably someone calling to tell you they hate you” followed by “They probably want to tell you you’re fired and that you’re a failure!” (Bru 2015, 16). The zine is a collection of drawings, not necessarily in sequence, that explore the relationship with the author and her anxious inner voice. When asked about the motivation for this zine Stacey says:

Anxiety Comics came about as a result of art therapy! Whenever I was stuck on a negative thought or having a difficult time articulating my feelings, I would doodle myself and the anxiety monster. Making the comics not only provided a way for me to explore my feelings, but also allowed me to turn my struggles into something positive

...*Anxiety Comics* was actually done in a purposely unplanned way. Since I used *Anxiety Comics* as a coping method, they were made with whatever I had on hand, and published as-is in most cases. After I had a few comics built up, I would start to plan the zines. The zines follow a very loose structure, placing similar comics next to each other. (Stacey Bru, author/illustrator of *Anxiety Comics*, interviewed by Jackie Batey, personal communication, August 2018)

This method of illustrating incidents and episodes is often referred to (within UK University Art and Design, Degree Program Specification documents) as a “visual diary.” Drawing daily incidents or moments can be a way of describing mood and memories, often this unplanned immediate way of recording events can be very honest, almost raw. There is less time for the tempering of feelings, and drawings are not corrected or re-drawn.

Figure 2: *Anxiety Comics*, Vol. 3, 14–15
Source: Bru 2015

Stacey’s line work often reflects mood varying from sure solid strokes to tentative gestural lines, as can be seen in Figure 2 where the protagonist is crying with frustration.

Another good example of employing the visual diary methodology can be seen in *Sad Sack* (Roberts 2016). This risograph zine seeks to visualize “paranoia,” including drawings about wakeful nights, strong anxiety about the dentist, and questions about appearance or self-image. Figure 3 shows social anxiety that affects the author when entering a room full of unknown people. With the lines “Here’s to the fist clenching stress and the overwhelming nausea...of walking into a room full of strangers” (2016, 8). The text is handwritten with “stress” double-underlined and “nausea” emphasized with gestural lines to suggest that the word is flashing, much like a neon sign. The attention that is placed on the text on the left-hand page is contrasted abruptly with the illustration of the “room full of strangers” on the right-hand page. The seven strangers are looking away from the viewer, mostly with eyes closed. They are illustrated as unthreatening with gentle expressions and most are softly smiling. This is an effective rebuff to the text opposite, which represents the author’s internal fears. In this illustration, the author is aware that the anxiety of meeting the strangers is overblown and she is showing us how the emotions experienced prior to the event are not a true reflection of that event. This has come from her experience, and in this zine she is sharing her innermost feelings with the reader. This duality of expectation and reality are captured using the informal format of the zine, in particular the mechanism of the double-page spread. Roberts says of her creative process during her periods of depression and anxiety:

Drawing was the one place I felt like I could articulate what I was thinking and feeling without have to actually talk to people. Fortunately, as I started to draw all of the sad things I had been thinking/telling myself, I started to feel more inspired and wanted to draw a lot more, which made me feel, well not happy, but like the fog was lifting a bit. (Blair Roberts interviewed by Jackie Batey, personal communication, August 2018)

Figure 3: *Sad Sack*, 8–9
Source: Roberts 2016

Figure 4: *Generalized Anxiety Disorder; A Crash Course in Understanding*, 7–8
Source: Macalister 2016

A more explanatory approach is shown in *Generalized Anxiety Disorder; A Crash Course in Understanding* (Macalister 2016). This follows the design and layout of a more traditional comic with text panels interspersed with the illustrations. This is very much a sequence illustrated in hindsight where reflections on the diagnosis and subsequent treatment are offered, clarity is uppermost, and the text uses short sequences which are easy to follow. The zine ends with a page listing additional online resources such as Canadian Mental Health Organisations, Calm Clinic, Guides to Meditation, and the Anxiety and Depression Association of America. The zine is described by the author as providing narrative detail about her personal journey when she was diagnosed with GAD including her “fights with the monster within,” and her “somewhat tumultuous” journey through treatment options. The zine can be seen as a step-by-step personal narrative although there are occasions where the author speaks directly to the viewer about seeking medical advice. The inward looking and outward looking are blended so the experience of the illustrator is there to inform the reader, should they be experiencing something similar. Macalister created this zine in the spirit of sharing and supporting others and has also made this zine available on her website so it can be widely read for free.

Visualizing Panic Attacks

Frustration at the quality of the existing medical support material drove Riley James to create an alternative visualization of PTSD and panic attacks in the zine, *Panic* (James 2012). He discusses his motivation here:

I am a visual learner as I have learning difficulties and wanted to find information booklets that were easier to process, but I found the resources limited, and in some cases, didn't seem appropriate. (An NHS booklet had a section about phobias with pictures of spiders and injections, which if you're looking for help, using pictures that people might be scared of isn't a good start). I felt like it was produced by someone who had only ever read about anxiety and mental health issues but had no real-life experience and it frustrated me. (Riley James, interviewed by Jackie Batey, personal communication, August 2018)

Riley goes on to describe his working methodology of writing a diary of actual events as they occurred and then creating thumbnail illustrations of key elements. This was placed in sequential order to create a narrative through the panic attack. The illustrations accompany typewritten text presented in the first person (Figure 5); it is immediately urgent and engaging, and conveys the author's emotions. “I felt around for the coffee table and found my phone...” followed by reflective comments such as “If you lose your vision, smart phones are useless. I couldn't unlock it, let alone dial 999” (James 2012, 6). The illustration opposite shows the author sitting on the stairs sweating and shaking trying to call an ambulance. The figure is drained of color and gestural lines above the head depict dizziness. The character is drawn with bare feet, wearing night-clothes adding to his vulnerability.

Riley comments on the process of image-making or drawing as a method for making sense of difficult emotions, “I think it [visualizing by drawing] helps me process those lived experiences, I get to understand why things happened the way that they did by breaking down those written experiences into illustrations” (James, personal communication 2018). Riley found, after publishing the zine, that he had an influx of messages from people sharing their own stories. He used social media to share images from *Panic* online and was also contacted by Time to Change, a campaign run by UK charities Mind and Rethink Mental Illness, supported by The Department of Health and Social Care. Time to Change asked permission to share Riley's illustrations and comments to support others experiencing similar issues. It is positive to see how a very personal narrative can be developed through sequential illustration in an art zine to speak to a much broader audience than first imagined.

Figure 5: *Panic*, 6–7
Source: James 2012

Visualising Burnout

In my own serial zine, *Future Fantasteek!*, starting with Issue no. 1 in 2006 through to *Marshland*, which is the twentieth issue, I have sought to draw a visual diary of what is going on around me, synthesized through illustration, humor, and characterization. These visual diary drawings are created in sketchbooks and scanned directly to form the art zine, with very little digital intervention. Through this serial, I have sought to retain the immediacy of the original sketch, including spelling mistakes, corrections, and wobbly lines. I see these sketchbook drawings akin to confused conversations that contain many idiosyncrasies that would get edited out of a final typed version.

The most recent issue *Marshland* (Batey 2018) was created via a drawing exercise called *Inktober* (where illustrators draw an image each day throughout October and share this on social media). I shared drawings via Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook as part of *Inktober*, and interestingly during this process, I was contacted by several mental health professionals requesting permission to share my illustrations. I had already been sharing this illustrated diary on social media which illustrated many of my day-to-day internal thoughts whilst undergoing CBT support for burnout. It became apparent that these visualizations connected immediately with an audience and often elicited the ‘you too?’ response which became a gentle entry point for more difficult conversations. I sought to use illustrated humor through the sequence to add a level of approachability and try to remove the fear that can be associated through feeling a loss of control.

This process was not only cathartic for the artist, but also helped explain complex emotions to the CBT counsellor. As can be seen in Figure 6, I sought to visually show the “internal chatter” I was experiencing when trying to action simple tasks, often referred to as “overthinking.” In this illustration, the internal dialogue fizzles out in order to watch Columbo on TV, a much easier option than arguing with yourself. This helped explain to others my “inaction” which was a particularly frustrating and unusual state. When I look back at the sequence of illustrations I am clearly reminded of how I felt at that time, more so than if I were to read my own textual account of the same experiences.

Figure 6: Marshland, 44–45
Source: Batey a.k.a. Future Fanstasteek! 2018

Figure 7: Marshland, 56–57
Source: Batey a.k.a. Future Fanstasteek! 2018

It can be seen that more visually orientated people can use drawing/illustration as a way of recording emotions, thoughts, and reality. This capturing of a moment on paper, can offer a way to clear the mind, since the feeling has been trapped in the sketchbook. In Figure 7 I was trying to capture external pressures that were exacerbating the feelings associated with burnout. In this

drawing email is visualized as falling weapons that are striking the two alarmed figures as they run for cover. The figures have heads collaged from 'post-it' notes situating them in an office environment. The ongoing emotion of running to keep up with emails and tasks was shown as a hostile environment that was overpowering the couple.

Through the sharing of this visual diary as an art zine I feel it has allowed me to not only to better consider my own mental-health but discuss with others how drawing can be a tool for capturing emotions, visualizing issues and drawing solutions/options. As a senior lecturer in Illustration looking at drawing as a positive action that can support mental health has been very valuable to the student experience, staff development and curriculum design.

In conjunction with this, it is positive to see emerging networks such as Graphic Medicine (established in 2015 by Dr. Ian Williams), publishing in the area of visual narratives on a variety of medical issues. Graphic Medicine is described as “graphic medicine narratives can engage members of the health professions with literary and visual representations and symbolic practices that offer patients, family members, physicians, and other caregivers new ways to experience and work with the complex challenges of the medical experience” (Czerwec et al. 2015, 13). The greater awareness of visual narratives that can share health and wellbeing experiences outside mainstream publishing will broaden the debate and allow more voices to be heard and increase engagement and support.

Mental Health Issues within Higher Education in the UK

There has been a rising awareness of mental health issues within UK universities; often narrative stories in the media highlight example cases. Mental Health training for Higher Education teaching staff has become more widely available in the UK. As a senior lecturer for around twenty years, my colleagues and I have noticed the pressures on students and staff have changed and increased. Issues such as rising fees, living costs, independent living, loneliness, workload pressures, and expectations to succeed have all added to the burden of studying and working at University. The IPPR, a registered charity and the UK's pre-eminent progressive think tank, released a report *Not by Degrees: Improving Student Mental Health in the UK's universities* (Thorley 2017) where it is stated, “In 2015/16, 15,395 UK-domiciled first-year students disclosed a mental health condition – almost five times the number in 2006/07. This equates to 2 per cent of first-year students in 2015/16, up from 0.4 per cent in 2006/07.” In addition, Universities UK, a collective of 137 universities in the UK have researched and published information about mental health matters. The recommendations encourage universities to adopt a strategic and holistic approach to supporting the wellbeing of staff and students with a project called #stepchange.

Through research and clinical education, universities already play an important role. But as participation in higher education has expanded, national trends in mental ill-health among young people have materialized in student populations, and there are sharp increases in demand for support services. The focus has turned to how universities look after their own communities of students and staff, to support them through mental health difficulties and help them to thrive and succeed. (Professor Steve West, Chair, Universities UK Mental Health in Higher Education Working Group, 2017)

It is in this context that the Zineopolis collection of art zines can add to the support available to students in Art and Design, who are more likely to be visual learners. The visual narratives contained within the zines may help students to share stories and accept support; it is interesting within illustration that reading the narratives or creating/drawing your own can ultimately lead to the same appreciation of mental wellbeing. Zine narratives and projects based around social issues have been designed into the curriculum of the Illustration course to allow for development and discussion of these themes.

Ethical Issues Relating to Art Zines on Sensitive Issues

A zine collection that can be accessed by staff and students does raise questions of the ethics of sharing personal or sensitive material. For example, an illustrator may make a zine in order to share their story with a friend, but they may not want this shared more widely to people they do not know. Zine donations through a third party can be challenging for the collection in terms of whether to accept them/make them accessible or not. In all cases, Zineopolis requests permission from the creator to share the zine with an audience of staff and students. Permission is also sought to add the cover and indicative spread to an online searchable database. It is only when permission is gained that zines are added to the Zineopolis collection. The zine makers included in this article were contacted for interview on the understanding their words and illustrations would be shared within the research. An excellent source of reference is the *Zine Librarians Code of Ethics Zine* (Berthoud et al. 2015) that talks about respect and trust when cataloguing and sharing zines. “Zines are not mass-produced books. They are often self-published and self-distributed, printed in very small runs, and intended for a small audience. Zinesters may feel differently about having their work openly available on the internet or in print, made available to a much wider audience.” As the curator I also understand that permission to share material may be revoked at a later date and this is respected.

The Benefits of an Art Zine Collection

The history of medical illustration shows us how effective drawing can be in describing physical conditions. There are many anthologies celebrating this specific genre of illustration e.g. *The Sick Rose: Or; Disease and the Art of Medical Illustration* (Barnett 2014). I would like to see the same become true for mental health where illustration can be used effectively to help visualize often non-visible emotional states and conditions.

The majority of art zines in Zineopolis are tangible artifacts—to be held in the hands—this encourages a tactile connection between the creator and reader. Zines can be shared, shown to others, or borrowed to be read privately. The portability and tactility of these art zines can lend this format to the immediacy of sharing. Often the stylistic look, where economy of production has been a consideration, can be interpreted as informal and personal. The creator can connect directly to the reader bypassing publishers, editors, printers, or censors; one person sharing a story directly with another much like talking to a friend. Helen Spandler, the editor of *Asylum*—the radical mental health magazine—has written about how drawings/cartoon can encourage an alternative dialogue.

These cartoons are able to cut through complexity and present contentious ideas in a vivid, direct and accessible way. This makes their message visible and potentially more digestible. Therefore, it represents a form of critical pedagogy (or consciousness raising) which assumes people learn when their experience and emotions are engaged, rather than just their intellect. By engaging other ways of knowing, cartoons are able to bypass our ‘normal’ and accepted ways of thinking and help to see things in a different way. (Spandler 2019)

To underline this quote Figure 8 shows a double page spread from *Debbie Downer* (Roberts 2015). It is the visual diary of the author who is exploring the catharsis of drawing. Roberts describes her relationship with drawing in the following.

Debbie Downer, which was made about a year later, started as a way to take my mind off my depression and anxiety, and sort of force myself to be creative again, and it turned into a pretty cathartic experience for me. As I drew more sad stuff, more positive ideas for drawings came to me, so the narrative just kind of formed as I was drawing it. (Blair Roberts, author/illustrator of *Debbie Downer*, interviewed by Jackie Batey, personal communication, August 2018)

Figure 8: Debbie Downer, p.16–17
Source: Roberts 2015

The illustration shows the author on the left taking a selfie with the image showing a confident woman looking relaxed. The pages opposite ask the question, “What happens when people open their hearts?” The answer beneath reads “They get better” (2015, 17). The spot illustrations show a cup of coffee, reading glasses, and a book symbolic of the type of restful or enjoyable activity the author can now engage in.

I am considering how this research can be extended in the future; it may be possible to identify a body of art zines that respond to mental-health narratives over a number of collections internationally. This could form the basis of further research into how mental health can be supported through independent and democratic publications such as the art zine.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Jackie Batey: Senior Lecturer and Course Leader, MA Illustration, University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, Hants, UK

Information, Medium, and Society: Journal of Publishing Studies explores the nature and forms of media and information, as manifest in publishing practices. Publishing is conceived as a distinctive mode of social knowledge and cultural production. The journal is a forum for sustained investigation of the theory and practice of scholarly communication, information science, and trade, technical and scholarly publishing.

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