



Satirical zines about computers, apps and social media: Art-zines from the Zineopolis Collection

Jackie Batey¹

jackie.batey@port.ac.uk

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Abstract

Established in 2007 Zineopolis has a wide range of art-zines made by illustrators, artists, designers and photographers from the UK and abroad. This paper highlights selected examples that respond satirically to the theme of our relationship with changing technologies. An overview of general zines and special collections in noted libraries provided. Examples from the Zineopolis collection are shown that comment on photocopyers, working with computers, mobile devices, apps and social media. The examples in this paper explore how the illustration and text can function in harmony to provide humour and social comment. Debates around changing technologies are contextualized by anthropological (Auge & Augé, 1995) and medical research (Carr, 2010). Given the very quick, concept to print to distribution that defines all genres of zines, this paper seeks to capture contemporary satirical thoughts and illustrations about using new widely available technologies, and considers the potential of art-zines to add to social debate.

1. Introduction

The Zineopolis art-zine collection [1] was established in 2007 at the University of Portsmouth, located within the Illustration Department. Whilst lecturing on the BA(HONS) programme I noticed more and more students making independent press publications and zines, in an attempt to archive these for future students and researchers I established the School of Art & Design's art-zine collection. The curated collection has now expanded to include over 300 art-zines by creative professionals, researchers and students. From about the 1990s onwards more and more print material on zines has become available. For a general survey of zines *Fanzines*, Triggs, T. (2010)² is well illustrated and covers a wide array of titles and genres from the '50s through to contemporary publications as does *Zines* (Farrelly, Dorrian, & Recchia, 2001)³. A more political approach is seen in *Notes from underground: zines and the politics of alternative culture*

¹ University of Portsmouth, MA Illustration, School of Art & Design, Winston Churchill Avenue, Portsmouth, PO1 2DJ, Hants, UK.

² Triggs, T. (2010). *Fanzines*. London: Thames & Hudson.

³ Farrelly, L., Dorrian, M., & Recchia, D. (2001). *Zines*. London: Booth-Clibborn Editions.

(Duncombe, 1997)⁴ which covers the essential qualities of the zines and asks the question “whether it is possible to rebel culturally within our modern consumer society that eats up rebellious culture”. A feminist perspective is explored in *The riot Grrrl collection* (Darms, L. (Ed.). (2014))⁵.

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 & Todd, 2006)⁶ and *Make a Zine!: When words and graphics Collide*, (Brent, Biel, & Taylor, 2008)⁷. For a larger context *Indie publishing: How to design and produce your own book*, (Lupton, 2008)⁸ is a good example that includes zines but also hand made books, art folios and chapbooks. Due to the nature of zines much material is available online via the makers' blogs and websites which includes many collectives and review sites, such as the excellent *Zine World* (“About Zine world,” n.d.)⁹ which was active between 1996 and 2012.

Many of us, teaching and working within the creative industries, are familiar with the genre of punk zines¹⁰, the cheap black and white, haphazard aesthetic produced via photocopier but it's not my intention to discuss the history of zines in this paper¹¹. With the desktop publishing boom of the '90s and the affordability of home computers, inkjet printers and scanners, more complex colour self-publications by illustrators were produced in limited editions. The democratization of self-publishing has raised the profile of the zine with many libraries around the world collecting examples specifically to represent unheard voices. Libraries are seeking to collect a more diverse range of opinion than traditionally available often from a younger audience. Many libraries and universities have specialized their collections, for example some collected sub-categories are; feminist; riot grrrl; transgender; zines by grrrls of color; lesbian/queer zines; football; punk, activism, music; autobiographical, science-fiction and beyond. Notable collections include the Barnard Zine Library¹² at Columbia University in the U.S.A that holds over 7000 zines. The Barnard collects zines written by women (cis and transgender) with an emphasis on zines by women of color. The Denver Zine Library¹³ also in the U.S.A has perhaps the largest collection with over 15,000 zines, this non profit organization's mission is to protect and promote the culture of zines and

4 Duncombe, S. (1997). *Notes from underground: zines and the politics of alternative culture*. New York: Verso Books.

5 Darms, L. (Ed.). (2014). *The riot Grrrl collection*. New York, USA: Feminist Press at The City University of New York.

6 Watson, E. P., & Todd, M. (2006). *Whatcha Mean, What's a Zine?: the Art of Making Zines and Minicomics*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

7 Brent, B. (1997). *Make a zine!: a guide to self-publishing disguised as a book on how to produce a zine* (1st ed.). San Francisco, CA: Black Books.

8 Lupton, E. (2008). *Indie publishing: How to design and produce your own book*. Baltimore: Maryland Institute College of Art.

9 About Zine world. Retrieved April 25, 2016, from <http://www.undergroundpress.org/>

10 The British Library, U.K., has an extensive zine collection including large sub-collections of punk zines and football zines.

11 For a more detailed account of zines and the defining characteristics of art-zines see, Batey, J. (2012). Art-Zines-The Self-Publishing Revolution: The Zineopolis Art-Zine Collection. *The International Journal of the Book*, 9 (4), 69–86 words are their ship in include textons ions as does the Tate Britain and makers blogs and websites, too numerous to list here.

12 <https://zines.barnard.edu/> - This is an excellent site for links and further information about zines.

13 <https://denverzinelibrary.org/>

self published original work through archival collection, workshops, and events. In the U.K, the British Library, the V&A Library, Tate Britain and Iniva have large collections. There are some excellent University collections of zines and independent publications such as LCC and UWE.

At this point Zineopolis is one of the few collections of specifically art-zines, although we have some common ground with existing comic book collections for example the extensive Comic Art Collection at Michigan State University, U.S.A.

Art-zines are essentially the same as zines except that the author/s consider the visual element as important, if not more so, than the textual element. These often take the form of limited edition, independently published, slim magazine-like booklets often created by artists, illustrators, designers or other more 'visually orientated' people, they are often highly illustrated and may or may not include text. Zines as a whole generally employ production methods that are democratic and cheap with photocopiers most commonly used, closely followed by inexpensive A4 home printers. Art-zines also employ methods such as screen print, lino print and letterpress.

2. Art-zines that Comment on Technology

When reviewing the collection recently I started to notice emerging themes, such as relationships, monsters and advertising but one in particular stood out - how humans interact with new technologies both hardware and software (such as smart phones, computers, tablets, apps and social media). Thinking about how many libraries had made a point of stating that zines were representative of unheard voices¹⁴, it was interesting to note that within our art-zine collection the commentaries about technology seemed to be overwhelmingly satirical. Marshall McLuhan is well known for his insights of how advances in technology can have an effect on the content offered. [2] More recently Nicholas Carr has researched brain plasticity and shown how the distracted nature of the way information is often delivered online is revealing physical changes in long-term (or explicit) memory and the ability to concentrate. [3]

A single web page may contain a few chunks of text, a video or audio stream, a set of navigational tools, various advertisements, and several small software applications, or "widgets", running in their own windows, We all know how distracting this cacophony of stimuli can be. We joke about it all the time. A new e-mail message announces its arrival [...] our mobile phone plays the ringtone that signals an incoming text message. Simultaneously, a Facebook or Twitter alert blinks on-screen. (Carr, 2010, p.91)

In this paper I will show some examples of humour used through the art zine to make us question our relationship with new technologies. The art-zines included in this paper are all part of the Zineopolis collection.

¹⁴ Definition from Barnard Zine Library USA, <https://zines.barnard.edu/definition>

2.1. From Photocopier to Computer

Considering hardware first, let's look at the photocopier (becoming a familiar feature in offices from the late '60s onwards), we have become used to using them (even proficient at un-jamming them) but not many of us would be able to describe how they actually work beyond vague attempts that mention electrostatic, photography, electricity etc.

In the art-zine, *Thomas the Human Photocopier* by Thomas Blanchford F.1 the photocopier becomes a machine of intrigue. In Blanchford's illustrations, it is revealed that actually a live human is concealed within the machine, who then hurriedly draws a poor copy of the image placed on the glass. This updated take on the 'Mechanical Turk'¹⁵ reveals the bathetic secret of the photocopier.

Blanchford's illustrations compare the photographic image with a deliberately badly and seemingly hastily drawn copy. The comparison of the two is humorous in that the photocopier is trying to pass off an inadequate copy. This reminds us of Blanchford's premise, that a human is somehow squashed into the machine whilst trying to draw quickly.



Fig.1. Blanchford, T. (2015). *Thomas the human photocopier*. Australia: self-published

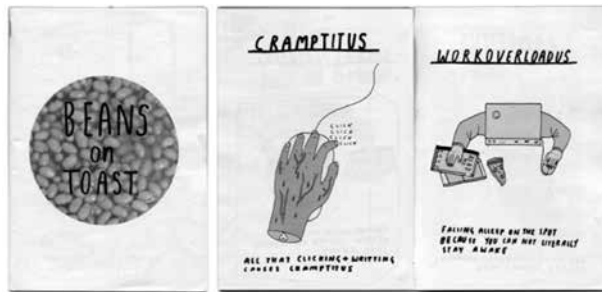
New technologies can inadvertently leave the user feeling inadequate at their own lack of expertise, there is an expectation that we all *know* how to use a computer, whether we have been formally taught or not. Much the same exasperation was exploited to comic effect regarding setting the timer on a VHS video recorder during the '80s. The psychological concept that machines that can have some control over humans, as opposed to demonic voices, is first recorded in the writings and drawings of the James Tilly Matthews (1770-1815) psychiatric patient of Bethlam [4]. The machine of Matthews' nightmare was called the 'Air Loom', it was, according to him, controlled by a cast of people who sent magnetic rays to stop him talking or make him sick. Humans can be suspicious of things they don't understand with television rays and more recently mobile phone masts causing anxieties.

The notion of enslavement to a machine is the subject of Megan Bell's illustrations in *Beans on Toast* F.2 by the Illustrator's Collective. The theme of the zine was 'real student life' and it's interesting to note that

¹⁵ Standage, T., & St, T. (2002). *The mechanical Turk: The true story of the chess-playing machine that fooled the world*. London: Allen Lane.

Bell chose to illustrate fictional words such as ‘Camptitus’ where the hand has frozen due to constant clicking (rather akin to RSI), and ‘Workoverloadus’ where the student has fallen asleep at their laptop, hand on mouse. The illustration of the disembodied mauve hand with bulging blue veins and frantically clicking finger reminds us of the genre of zombie movies where severed hands repeat tasks *ad infinitum*.

Fig.2. Illustrators’ Collective. (2013). *Beans on Toast*. Portsmouth, UK: self-published



Her illustration of the the sleeping student conceals the face with only the smiley face sticker on the laptop lid left in its place. Hand drawn text is often used within art zines giving the page a harmony as the line is often the same as the line within the drawing. The heavy underling draws a parallel with school work where it was often the protocol to underline the titles.

These illustrations are interesting to those of us in education as it highlights how accessibility of information has radically changed. It has become increasingly easier for students to find research sources via online searches but the volume of ‘hits’ has been increasing (as more academic journals and other digitized sources are made available), making it more and more time consuming to search through the volume of what is offered. Anthropologist Marc Augé gives a name to this phenomena. “*This need to give a meaning to the present, if not the past, is the price we pay for the overabundance of event corresponding to a situation we would call ‘supermodern’ to express its essential quality: excess.*” [5].

Working with computers has become ubiquitous with the majority of us having a work email address. When computers have a fault and pathetically ask us, the user, what we want them to do about it, quite honestly most of us haven’t a clue. It’s this lack of control from the point of view of the ‘controller’ that can lead to the creation of satirical illustrations. In his essay on laughter Bergson [6] describes how recognition of absurdity can trigger comedic reactions. “*What makes us laugh is alleged to be the absurd realized in concrete shape, a ‘palpable absurdity.’*”

F.3 is from *Future Fantastek! No.16* shows a parody of the ‘dialogue box’ or ‘on screen alert’ that is demanding user action about an issue that utterly unintelligible. The absurdity of the creator being chastised by their precocious progeny is comedic. Like all comedy it is ideally rooted in truth and observation in order to communicate. The hand drawn text resembles an advertisement and reads, “Google ALGORYT(H)MS [*sic*] PROTECT-

ING you from REALITY...Now stop fussing about climate change and do some shopping”. The text is hand drawn in a wobbly parody of the neatness of screen text. Heavy pink felt pen is used to create the hand drawn text with thinner black line for the tiny people being carried away in their own bubbles. The text is miss-spelled and crossed-out, contrasting with the auto corrected text we have become accustomed to on phones and computers. The people in their bubbles however, seem delighted they are isolated. Eli Pariser’s 2011 TED talk ‘Beware Online ‘Filter Bubbles’ [7] highlighted the concept of internet algorithms and alerted people to how our online preferences are recorded, then data filters applied in order to ‘keep us happy’ as opposed to inform or challenge.



Fig.3. Damp Flat Books. (2015). *Future Fantasteek! No.16*. Brighton, UK: self-published

2.2. Portable Devices

The long running serial zine *Future Fantasteek!* by Damp Flat Books [8] explores themes around how we ‘interface with technology’ on a regular basis, drawn in a loose line (during the author’s commutes) the illustrations are a direct reflection of the world that surrounds, often including current issues or commentaries.



Fig.4. Damp Flat Books. (2013). *Future Fantasteek! No.15*. Brighton, UK: self-published

F.4 from *Future Fantasteek! No.15* shows a drawing on sketchbook page that takes the form of an advertisement. The central illustration shows a figure tightly hunched over their tablet or smart phone, one can see a rough x-ray of their back and neck with the hand drawn text stating “TRENDING NOW i-ache” there is a sales-style star with “WOW STORE UP YEARS OF PAIN FOR YOUR FUTURE” the special offer, parodying many such deals is “FREE Physiotherapy after downloading 150 Apps!”

The author of Damp Flat Books mentions that whilst commuting the vast majority of passengers are crunched into the most extraordinary positions whilst squinting at tiny screens¹⁶.

“It seems that many of us sit at a computer or fiddle around with a tablet for a major portion of our working days or leisure hours and it’s this uncomfortable symbiotic dependency that I wanted to illustrate. [...] The working methodology for *Future Fantasteek!* emerged from using my commuting time, to draw in a sketchbook a summary of the week’s irritations and frustrations. As an artist I have always felt more inspired to create artwork when it’s concerned with some kind of commentary, I feel I have to have something to communicate in order to make images. Exploring social commentary through illustration sets up a dialogue with the reader and issues that lie hidden can sometimes be revealed in through satire in order to help us as humans share our experiences.”

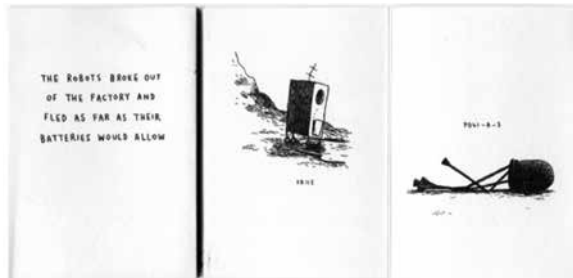
Damp Flat Books (2015)

The illustration also contains some smaller drawings of hands in contorted positions as if squashed or broken to show hand pain from RSI, meanwhile a cheerful character on the right is warning of ‘Rays’. The layout parodies the type of advertisement that appears on junk mail with too many elements on the page, such as main image, headline, insert, flash, supporting text and additional images, exclamation marks and stars. To recall Marc Augé - an overabundance of details.

To support this illustrative observation the Harvard School of Public Health, particularly the research of J.T Dennerlein [9] have examined the use of tablets, and touchscreens. The conclusions suggest repeated use can lead to an increase in neck injuries with ‘ipad shoulder’ and ‘ipad neck’ being caused by holding the tablet low down on the lap.

One reoccurring commentary when looking at mobile devices is about battery life and how it foils the user’s attempts to be mobile. Many jokes include ‘flat battery’ annoyance as can be seen in *Three Very Small*

Fig.5. Gauld, T. (2004).
Three Very Small Comics, Vol.2. London, UK:
self-published



¹⁶ Andy Kunka, & Derek Royal (2015). *Episode 153: Reviews of the Dharma punks, my hot date, Tokyo ghost #1, and FutureFantasteek! #16*The Comics Alternative. Retrieved from <http://comicsalternative.com/episode-153-reviews-of-the-dharma-punks-my-hot-date-tokyo-ghost-and-futurefantasteek/>

Comics F.6 by Tom Gauld (2004). His concertina book extends to the right as the robots flee, through a number of pages they each break down and stop, some falling over. The concertina structure is a great design to communicate this concept and as the pages are turned the humour builds as more and more robots die. Gauld also chooses to hand draw the text with the same line that the illustrations are drawn with adding personality to the narrative and the machines which makes us almost feel sorry for them and want them to escape.

2.3. Software and Apps

F.4. also shows a parody advertisement shouts ‘are you FEELING BRASSIC¹⁷ just ignore it’ The image shows how to buy the ubiquitous in-app purchases that come with many ‘free’ games. The scruffy drawing of this screen has made the household pets cry. The main tactic in *Future Fantastek!* is to redraw what is often seen onscreen both text, icons and images



Fig.6. Anders, L., & Murphy, J. (2007). *Like Dislike*. Bellingham, USA: self-published

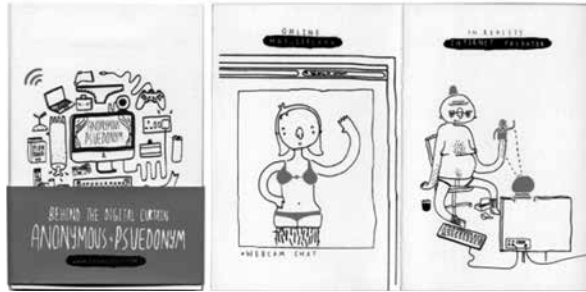
and present them altered through a messy and distressed line undermining our confidence in what is presented to us. Suggesting a bad copy or obvious forgery. The horror stories about children racking-up large bills whilst playing harmless games on their parent’s iPad was also a satirical subject for Matt Groening in Simpsons’ episode ‘MyPods and Broomsticks’¹⁸ where Lisa gets stuck with a \$1200 ‘MyBill’ by Steve Mobbs after becoming obsessed with a ‘MyPod’ game.

Like Dislike art-zine F.5 contains many computer themed annoyances, such as kittens on Youtube, online quizzes and wasting hours on Ebay. The illustration above features ‘Noblemen from Zimbabwe’ a spoof of the wave of phishing emails that purport to offer you a million pounds if you will just provide your bank details. These scams have been widely reported but add another anxiety for the user. The drawing of the ‘Nobelman’ shows a casual character with bare feet and torn trousers with lots of extension cables under his small desk - in contrast to the wealthy businessman suggested by the uneven text. The ‘iTunes upgrade’ illustration shows the bossiness of various apps demanding you download this

17 ‘Brassic’ is cockney rhyming slang for lack of money (Boracic (pronounced brassic) Lint = Skint (broke)).
18 Dean Moore, S. (Director). (2008). The Simpsons episode 427 ‘MyPods and Boomsticks’ [TV]. United States: Fox.

and upload that, the pop-up advert cries out ‘HEY! BUY MORE SHIT!’ The hand drawn type, like the previous example *Future Fantasteek!*, seeks to parody the neatness of the on-screen menus. Rubber stamps are used for page titles that are deliberately uneven with erratic kerning (ironically something more difficult to achieve on a page layout app).

Fig.7. Reed, C. (2012).
Anonymous Pseudonym.
Portsmouth, UK: self-
published



2.4. Social Media

Social media has boomed since the introduction of LinkedIn (2003), Facebook (2004), MySpace (2005), Twitter (2006), Instagram (2010), Google+ (2011) and Snapchat (2014) *et al.* with many of us members of more than one platform or network. This social membership connects us to our friends but the phenomena of the, ‘virtual friend’ is ripe for comedic expression and is a great example of the ‘absurdity’ mentioned by Bergson.

F.7 *Anonymous Pseudonym* by Carl Reed (2012) looks at the issue of online identities with pairs of illustrations showing virtual identities against real identities. The ‘Online Hot-GirlXXX’ bikini-clad young woman offering webcam chat, is in reality, an ‘Internet Predator’ sitting in his underwear working a glove puppet. Reed takes the notion of tangible/virtual a step further by employing comedic absurdity when illustrating a goldfish in a bowl whom in turn, has an online presence as a fish-business man. Pacing the absurdity through a sequence of pages the sinister morphs into the surreal, thus making us question our own fears and suspicions. In these screen printed images Reed uses black line and a pink spot colour, the text is hand drawn but replicates the dialogue box we are familiar with. The drawing works perfectly to elucidate this concept adding humour to an otherwise dark topic.

The online friend can be a person you don’t actually know, but that you chat to, akin to a modern day ‘pen pal’. With frequent exposés in the popular press about virtual friends being not what they seem and online identities being suspect, the connotations of ‘friendship’ has broadened.

In F.8 from *Future Fantasteek! #14*, Damp Flat Books has illustrated a ‘virtual friend’ that has just been accepted by the reader via LinkedIn. In *Future Fantasteek!*’s reality an awful, sweating, and overly affectionate demon now wants to follow the reader everywhere. The illustration is drawn in red crayon to replicate the scrawl of an angry child. The text is hand drawn in pencil which include scribbles. The illustration leads us

to believe the demon has written the text personally to us, the addition of the smiley face emoticon is a cheery symbol that clashes with the nasty character illustrated. Note the smiley face emoticon is also used ironically in Bell's *Beans On Toast*. F.2



Fig. 8. Damp Flat Books. (2013). *Future Fantastek! No.14*. Brighton, UK: self-published

Social media is subtly changing our word usage, words like ‘friend’, ‘follow’ now have extended connotations. In *Like Dislike* art-zine (Anders & Murphy, 2007) the illustration about social media profiles on MySpace (not shown here) is titled in messy rubber stamps “*This profile is set to private. The user must add you as a friend before you can stalk them*”.

Both *Future Fantastek!* and *Like Dislike* highlight the tendency of some individuals to collect as many friends as possible. In actuality many of us may agree to ‘friend requests’ in order to, not offend, even though the request may be unwelcome.

This strange new collective ‘friendship’ where you can ‘like’ but not ‘dislike’ seems situated in the satirical Orwellian world of newspeak [10]. Recent research led by Margaret Duffy at the University of Missouri [11] has found that using Facebook to surveil others can lead to envy, which can then develop into depression.

“Controlling for age and gender, using Facebook for surveillance leads to Facebook envy which leads to depression. What was equally noteworthy was the direct and negative relationship between Facebook surveillance use and depression symptoms after Facebook envy was accounted for.”

(Tandoc, Ferrucci, & Duffy, 2015)

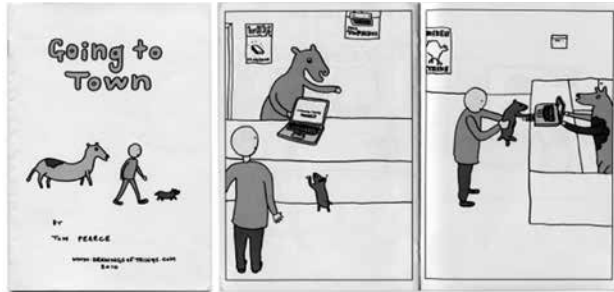
Petty annoyances, such as loud mobile phone conversations, beeping games and tinny headphones filling shared public spaces are now commonplace. We can notice ourselves holding shouted conversations with friends miles away, whilst ignoring the people we’re sitting next to - a rich vein for writers of comedy as seen from Dom Joly’s *Trigger Happy* TV character¹⁹, who continually shouted into a giant mobile phone whilst walking through a quiet location, such as a library.

19 Joly, D. (Writer). (2000-2003). *Trigger happy* TV [Television Series]. Channel 4: Absolutely Productions.

3. Conclusion

Surprisingly, given that many of the zines here are created by under 30s, technology is often questioned and lampooned along with the attitude that it will fix everything.

Fig.9. Pearce, T.
(2010). *Going to Town*.
London, UK: self-
published



One of the only examples of a narrative that described a positive relationship with technology is *Going to Town* by Tom Pearce (2010). In this art-zine F.9, a human is advised by his pet pony on how to upgrade his laptop. The human, his dog and pony visit a computer shop and buy a new laptop in order to all be able to watch the new Star Wars movie on it in the evening. *Going to Town* is a fun narrative that has a happy ending, although from an older person's perspective one can relate to the protagonist needing his pony (or child) to sort all this out for him. Pearce hand draws his own text as have many examples shown in this paper. His layout is clear and simple with line and two tones of grey, the illustration are charming, especially with the small dog trying to see over the counter and then having to be lifted up to operate the laptop. The pony takes on the role of teacher standing on her back legs whilst she points out the finer intricacies of downloading appropriate software.

As the curator of Zineopolis, it's interesting for me to compare art zines that comment on similar themes. By archiving these art-zines one can see how these satirical illustrations could be seen as potentially useful social commentary. These art zines combine illustrations, and hand drawn type, to humorous effect. They can help us see our own foolishness and folly. An art-zine can be created and published within days, unlike traditional publishing, which means that the thoughts and comments of these makers can be in the public domain almost immediately engaging with a wider debate. This selection of art zines focuses around our changing relationship with new technologies, as this advances it will be interesting to see how the illustrators/makers respond.

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