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Remember Zines? Look at Them Now

By JESSICA PRESSLER

THE traditional magazine model is dead.

It wasn't the most inspiring statement, but it was the start of happy hour on a Wednesday last month and Kevin Grady, a creative director at Arnold Worldwide, a Boston ad agency, and his two partners in the independent pop culture magazine *Lemon* were just warming up.

"Which is why I wanted to do something different," Mr. Grady continued. "Something that would make print an experience, like a short film or a movie."

Colin Metcalf, seated along with Mr. Grady and their third partner, Adam Larson, at Stella, a sleek restaurant in Boston's South End, jumped in: "Not just a magazine but a sensual object."

Lemon No. 1, which appeared on store shelves in February and promises "pop culture with a twist," has an unusual square shape, a thick textured cover and glossy full-color pages containing poems to Bill Murray, gothic horror novels and Polish movie posters. And it smells like, well, lemon.

With the \$7.95 cover price and \$35,000 worth of ads from corporate sponsors Puma, Paul Frank, Adobe and Canada Goose, Mr. Grady and his partners will probably break even on the first issue's 4,500 copies, which cost about \$45,000 to produce. But, Mr. Grady said, "I don't know if we'll ever pay for our time."

"It's a labor of love," Mr. Larson added.

Eventually, however, they hope it will be for more than that, perhaps even a viable business. And they are not alone in this quixotic magazine quest.

Though there is no official body that tracks the number of small-circulation glossy magazines with obscure sensibilities and arresting design like *Lemon*, those who pay attention to these niche publications say they are multiplying in bookstores, boutiques and high-end grocery stores.

"It's a growing sector, and it's going to keep growing," said Samir Husni, a magazine analyst and a journalism professor at the University of Mississippi who lauded *Lemon* as

"one of the groundbreaking launches of 2006."

Created in apartments or after work at the office by writers, graphic designers, artists and grown-up skateboarders, the magazines tend to be expensively produced quasi art objects published two, three or four times a year with the intent that they will be collected and saved. They sell for anywhere from \$3.95 to \$14.95.

"It's like this whole culture," said Chris Young, an account manager at the Westcan Printing Group in Winnipeg, Canada, which prints many of the alternative publications. Over the phone, he cited a handful of titles he has helped start up in the last six years: "The Believer, *Lemon*, *Clamor*, *Swindle*, *Anthem*, *Beautiful/Decay*, *Bidsou*, *Ra-Up*, *Archetype*, *The Drama*. There's so many."

Though he wouldn't say how many copies he printed of each magazine, he said the runs are anywhere from 4,000 to approximately 30,000.

Susan Willmarth, the periodicals manager at St. Mark's Bookshop in Manhattan, who has been ordering magazines for the store since 1987, credited the recent crop of glossies to army members of Generation Y. This crowd, she said, has an affection for British youth culture titles like *The Face* and *Dazed & Confused*, whose defiantly inscrutable coverage of

'Not just a magazine but a sensual object.'

British fashion, music and art seems bracingly unusual stateside.

She also underscored the role of computers, which have made the publishing process easier. "It's similar to what people are doing with music," she said. "You can make your own CD, and you can make your own magazine." (Not that everyone feels limited to standard reading material. "I had someone come in recently with a magazine made out pieces of bread stapled together," she said.)

But the creators of the new magazines see their mission as a result of more than convenience. Eye-straining graphics with content that can kindly be called eclectic make these magazines at times seem intentionally inaccessible. Then again, their makers aren't trying to fad wide ap-



J. Justin Flom for The New York Times



NOVEL Shepard Fairey, left, and Roger Gastman, of the quarterly *Swindle*.

peal.

"I'm sure we could get press releases from Nike and write about what they're doing," said Roger Gastman, 28, the former publisher of *White Youth Were Sleeping*, a graffiti fanzine. He now runs *Swindle*, a Los Angeles-based quarterly started in 2004 that bills itself as "the definitive popular culture and lifestyle magazine for women and men ages 18 to 34."

"But we want to do something different," he said. "Something timeless. Like find a cool way of doing a political story that will be relevant when you pick it up in 10 years."

The 143 pages of *Swindle* No. 6, (soft cover, \$8.95; hard cover, \$14.95 respectively), features a photo spread of teenage majorettes, six pages about sharks and photos of a contributor's home.

James Truman, the former editorial director of Condé Nast Publications, said the new magazines are a sort of "update of the fanzine," the scrappy photocopied pamphlets of the 1980's and 90's in which writers cataloged their enthusiasm and disdain for everything from music and movies to grocery store products. "They have that irreverent, sometimes kooky voice, and they're sustained by attitude rather than subject matter," he said.

But perhaps because of their often hefty price tags, bookstore owners say they have a different audience from the zines. "It's not the anarchist zine crowd that's buying them," said Rachel Whang, who with her fiancé, Benn Ray, owns Atomic Books in Baltimore. "It's more the young professional, graphic design types."

There's another distinction, too, as Greg Meaux, a zine librarian at the Independent Publishing Resource Center in Portland, Ore., pointed out. "Zines were like artists and writers putting stuff together," he said. "Magazines like *Anthem*, with their big Smirnoff ads, are more akin to the dot-com start-up companies. They're selling access to cool communities."

It's true. Despite their limited circulations and unpredictable editorial content, the new magazines are attractive to advertisers who hope to reach trendsetters. *Anthem*, a culture magazine out of Los Angeles that started as a skateboarding zine and graduated into a full-fledged glossy in 2002, has a host of high-end advertisers. And smaller, younger publications like *Lemon* and *Swindle* have managed to wrangle full-page ads for major mainstream brands like Toyota and Puma.

From the advertiser's point of view, the magazines are an inexpen-

sive way to capture the attention of what Barney Waters, the vice president of marketing for Puma North America, calls "the opinion leaders, the tastemakers who ultimately set the trends that trickle down to the Maxon crowd."

Advertising in new magazines connects Mr. Waters to an affluent, educated audience on the cheap; he said Puma advertises in "about 15" of them.

Their time-making predecessors might have considered this sort of arrangement selling out, but the new indie magazines prefer to look at it as mutually beneficial.

Eric Nakamura and Martin Wong leveraged *Giant Robot*, which they started as a black-and-white photocopied zine about Asian pop culture in 1994, into a glossy magazine, an online store, five retail outlets in California and New York, a gallery and a cafe in Los Angeles.

Dustin Beatty, the Los Angeles publisher of *Anthem*, said he put \$15,000 on a credit card to take *Anthem* from fanzine to glossy; he now estimates that his company is worth about \$1.5 million. "I mostly give back in," he said. "We're not driving BMW's or anything."

Roger Gastman produces *Swindle* with Shepard Fairey, a 36-year-old street artist turned marketing guru.

"We want the advertising to sort of blend with the content," Mr. Fairey said on the phone from his Los Angeles marketing firm, Shado One, which counts 20th Century Fox and Coca-Cola as clients. "When there's an ad that doesn't seem simpatico, we think it messes up the long shot of the magazine."

Lemon also plans to find ways to integrate advertising with editorial content, an unscrutable line at many traditional publications. "Like there's a fashion spread but everyone's wearing Puma in it," Adam Larson said.

Still, those in the industry say big corporate money must be handled with care. "A lot of independent magazines start to go bad when people compromise their integrity for advertisers," said Fuhs, the one-time publisher of *Beautiful/Decay*, a graffiti-based magazine that began as a zine and evolved into a glossy with sneaker ads. "People can tell, and you lose your readership."

Ms. Willmarth at St. Mark's Bookshop said the new magazines "are starting to look the same; they always have the same ads."

Still, she added: "A lot of them don't last. But that's part of what's nice about the whole genre, is that it's ephemeral. It's of the moment."



MASTHEAD The founders of the magazine *Lemon*, designed to be experienced, are from left, Colin Metcalf, Kevin Grady and Adam Larson.