

BORDER/LINES

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Breaking boundaries on the 'zine scene

by Doug Saunders

Academics usually approach magazines as a slightly shameful fetish, to be hidden in the back of the desk drawer beside the whisky bottle. On top of the desk go the much more respectable scholarly journals.

There's a sad dilemma to this. Magazines are attractive, approachable and mildly addictive. They are written and produced to excite the mind and fill it with information. Unfortunately, that information is most often useless fluff and advertising.

And then there's the journals. Inside these inch-thick volumes you'll find all the latest achievements of thought and research, all the secrets of the world revealed in a vigorous interplay of rhetoric and method. That is if you can get through the numbing prose and the grey rivers of unadorned type — even if you've got the time to bother trying.

It's bad enough for readers. For periodical-seeking writers, the situation is dismal. You're caught between walls of conventionality: the thought-starved conventions of journalism on one side, and the style-starved conventions of scholarly writing on the other. In between you've got a pretty small space to wander with your pen and your imagination.

Fortunately, that nether-space isn't exactly a literary limbo. In it you'll find the innovative core of the alternative press.

Ioan Davies must have wandered around that space for years before he came up with *Border/Lines* magazine. Stationed in York's sociology department since the early 1970s, his writing had appeared in numerous journals, the *New Left Review*, the punk, underground and postmodern presses. In 1987 it all came together.

"At the time I was working with a guy called Arthur Kroker [author of *Panic Encyclopedia* and *The Postmodern Scene*] on a magazine called *Canadian Journal of Minds*. And I realized that Arthur was really getting into some post-apocalyptic bullshit. So we had some discussions, and we fell out.

"It seemed to me that out of York, with the Environmental Studies de-

partment, the program in Social and Political Thought, Sociology, English — they had more resources than either Arthur or I did.

"It was important to have a magazine which crossed boundaries between being a magazine and an academic journal — without, in a sense, reducing either the content of academic thinking or the idea of having a visual magazine."

A collectively-run quarterly, *Border/Lines* is very much a visual magazine. Its articles and reviews share space with quotes, blurbs, graphics and innovative typographic design on wide, airy pages. But the content owes little to *Saturday Night* or *Toronto Life*.

The latest issue contains three feature articles. Alexander Wilson explores the social economy of the suburbs by chronicling the history of landscape design; James Gillespie offers a detailed reading of the subversive photo-collages of French artist Sorel Cohen; and in a rambling first-person exploration, Jane Kalbfleish decries the un-messiness of feminist discourse and calls for its "playing up, de-sanitization and deconstruction."

None of this should be unfamiliar to those in touch with the fringe press. These articles would fit comfortably in cultural theory, art criticism and post-feminist publications, respectively. (Although it is unusual to see all three together under one cover).

What really makes them stand out is what stands beside them. The opening section of *Border/Lines*, "Excursions," offers a post-journalistic spin on some truly unfashionable forms of writing: the report, the rant, the travelogue.

The Excursions are short bits of "straightforward" writing. They serve an important purpose: to nail the magazine down to the World Out There, to prevent the often flighty philosophies of the features from losing touch with the very real struggles and experiences of human subjects.

Sometimes this nailing-down takes a direct editorial form: in the Spring issue, Davies reminds readers that their literary and philosophical

speculations cannot be isolated from the threat of a very tangible Brian Mulroney.

But *travelogue* is the best word to describe the most unique elements of the *Border/Lines* style (the magazine's other dominant style — the poststructuralist rhetoric of cultural theory — forms a more familiar backbone).

In the latest issue, David Kattenburg explores the classrooms of Managua and witnesses the white-washing of the Sandinista vision; Stan Fogel tests his own identity travelling within the "cultural intersections" of Israel; and Phil Kummel wanders the streets of Toronto to find the sites of subversive street art.

This isn't mere travel-writing: it is an editorial strategy. By placing writers from 'our' Canadian culture within a 'foreign' context (or vice versa), *Border/Lines* gives us a view of the world complete with an alienated human perspective; writers ready to play with their own fluid subjectivity.

"That's crucial," Davies says. "Most magazines don't do that — they have one article by somebody who visited Croatia, who is an 'expert.' Whereas we're all experts in different ways. We're experts in getting by, experts at viewing the other experts who're viewing the other through us. It seems to me its absolutely crucial to keep all these voices open."

Sometimes the travelogue form expands to fill entire issues. The Winter 1990/91 issue, subtitled "Tourists of the post-revolution," was a dazzling collection of letters from Eastern Europe, ranging from the observational to the historical to the intensely personal to the brilliantly intertextual.

This polyglot perspective — what Davies calls "a kind of sideswipe against the culture" — allows *Border/Lines* to devote itself to entire cultures — including, and always implicitly, its own — without smothering them in smug scholarly expertise or glib journalistic dismissals.

The slogan of the magazine is "Cultures Contexts Canadas" — and *Border/Lines* truly deals in all three, in plural.



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We regret any difficulties and inconvenience this situation may have caused.

Director,
Financial Aid Office

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