

MAGAZINEHOOD

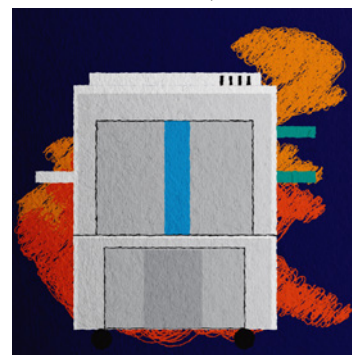


From Beirut to Brooklyn and – yes, even – Bangkok, there’s never been a better time to luxuriate in the latent power and tactile pleasure of lovingly produced print. We explore the scrappy, intrepid and resilient subculture that is independent publishing.

BY MAX CROSBIE-JONES / ILLUSTRATIONS BY ISSARES MONGKOLPHUK

One of the bright hopes for the future of Bangkok's independent magazine and self-publishing scene is only four feet tall. And made of bulky, reinforced plastic.

The Risograph, or Riso, as it's known among fans, is a Japanese stencil printer intended for high-volume copying in an office environment, but when I first spot one it's in a corner of a dishevelled gallery. Occupying a shophouse on Charoenkrung Soi 21, Speedy Grandma has walls covered in street-style murals and an anti-establishment attitude that separates it from the city's more well-behaved art spaces. Such is the screwball conceptualism of the shows that it tends to stage that the Riso printer could be a piece of found



junk in some feral installation, except a quick look round reveals that's clearly not the case. When I walk in on a Wednesday morning in late September, the gallery is posing as a guerilla publishing studio. Near the Riso and a bogstandard photocopier, piles of scrap paper are strewn on shelves, and on a low table in the middle of the room sit piles of a dozen or so hand-made zines. Together, they form a lurid paper rainbow of raw and unfettered self-expression.

Just as I'm flicking happily through a particularly visceral zine in which a backpacker recounts a near-death encounter with a machete while travelling in Borneo, in walks Chris Grisana, the bespectacled guy behind the Riso's recent spurt of activity. A Thai "art practitioner" with a passion for conceptual graphic design, Grisana, 24, has a soft Aussie twang and shoulder-length hair tucked beneath a black cap. Within seconds of meeting, he is giving me the backstory behind all this: Bangkok's first self-publishing month.

"For the past three years," he tells me as he switches on the lights, bringing the scale of the operation into sharper focus, "I've been trying to give print and self-publishing as a medium exposure within the younger Thai community." He started trying because, on returning to Bangkok after years of studying and kicking around in Melbourne, he felt an absence. "When I first came back here I couldn't find any art books or any amateur-publishing or independent-publishing scene," he says, walking me over to the Riso, which he picked up on the second-hand market with some friends, one of whom co-runs the gallery. Self-publishing month is a primitive grassroots attempt to fill that absence. "This project is a kick start," he says, "for anyone who has never published anything or has no knowledge of how to print or put together a book."

This isn't his first attempt at fostering an independent publishing culture here in Thailand. Before self-publishing month there was the self-publishing pop-up that Grisana staged at King Mongkut University. And until June of this year there was CEO Books, a space on Sukhumvit Soi 49 where you could buy back issues of his favourite independent magazines, have him explain what he liked

about them, and even put your own attempts at self-publishing up on the shelves with a view to selling them commission-free. It was a one-year project – a modestly successful one. "While I got a lot of interest and a lot of people coming in," he says, "the one thing that was lacking was the amount of people participating in making books. Slowly it dawned on me that that's because there are a lot of students and photographers who want to make one but don't know where to start. They don't know where to go."

Is Grisana, with his wish of turning Thailand into Zineland, noble or naive? That depends, I guess, on who you ask. However, one thing is clear: he's not alone in his passion for print. Across the globe these sorts of stories – the stories of creative people fearlessly doing selfless things to further the art of print in a digital age, and without expectation of big financial returns – are being repeated. Yes, magazines that once helped shape the zeitgeist, such as *The Face*, *Spin* and *Sleazenation*, have gone. Yes, many mass-market magazines are in trouble. Yes, the days of enormous circulation are over. But worldwide, new print titles, from crude cut-and-paste zines to sumptuous independent magazines, and covering a kaleidoscopic range of topics, are thriving within their own modestly ambitious parameters.

Some of these publications plough soft-focus leisure terrain such as the art of entertaining (*Kinfolk*), horticulture (*The Plant*) and the past (*Pretty Nostalgic*). Others are aimed at foodies, be they women (*Cherry Pie*), vegans (*Chickpea*) or people who think food warrants long-form features and profiles (*Put A Egg on It / Tapas*); or creatives who want some verve and wit from their architecture (*Pin-Up*) or interior design (*Apartmento*) magazines. A few are even high-minded affairs that embrace slow journalism, go longer and deeper into topics that mainstream media has ignored or too quickly forgotten, such as *Delayed Gratification* from the UK, which prides itself on being "the last to breaking news," or *POSTRmagazine*, a free pamphlet "keeping an eye on what the 9 o'clock news doesn't show you."

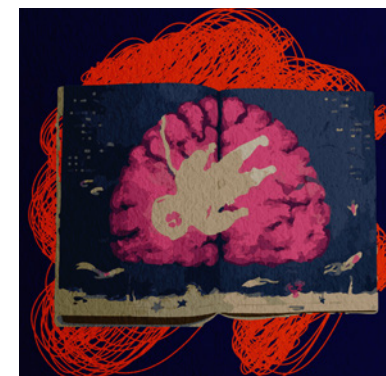
Even travel magazines, a species of print decimated by the advent of travel blogs and apps, and recently thought borderline redundant, are basking in the rays of sunshine. Notable titles include *Boat*, a nomadic travel mag focussing on a different city each issue (Issue 9 was Bangkok, with stories on transgender fashion models, emergency-response volunteers and a 93-year-old orchid master); and *Holiday*,



a venerable US publication recently brought back from the dead by a Paris publisher.

"Beautifully curated and printed on thick, uncoated paper, these tomes are more than just magazines: they are luxury products for a discerning reader, a respite from the frenzy experienced by the always-on generation,"

Proof of print's staying power can also be found, somewhat perversely, on the Internet. The medium that was set to eviscerate print with the cool and ruthless efficiency of a blood-thirsty samurai is now its most rapt young acolyte.



wrote Rena Niamh Smith in a recent piece for *The Telegraph*. "This is a revolution against the digital revolution, an organic farmers' market to rival the supermarket culture of online media."

"We're in a golden age of magazines," agrees Andrew Losowsky, a respected British editor, writer and commentator who recently spent a year at Stanford University investigating future trends in journalism and technology. "There are more magazines than ever and they are filling niches and doing very interesting things." A passionate advocate for print, one who has given the world a magazine about the aftermath of a volcano and a book about doorbells, Losowsky believes that a magazine is an "emotional experience" and that the best of them fuse font, image and paper stock in surprising and imaginative ways. Titles that he thinks achieve this, that add up to something more than the sum of their parts, include UK title *The Gentlewoman*, which has this "calmness and elegance and space" and makes you "feel like you're breathing in and out as the pages get more crowded and then less," and *The Newer York*, an experimental literary zine from Brooklyn in which "every page is energising and terrifying and strange and you keep saying they shouldn't be able to do that."

Putting one of these titles together isn't easy, of course. At the root of most, if not all, of these magazines is a certain idealism, an urge, an irrepressible and earnest impulse to improve or change the world in some small yet significant way. And often that hope is quickly dashed – or at the very least compromised – by the cold hard realities of trying to sustain a magazine that is niche, largely ad-free, ideas-led, design-focused and reader-funded.

"I have to take on side editing and writing jobs to survive," says Ibrahim Nehme, the young and intrepid Lebanese journalist behind *The Outpost*, a semi-annual publication founded in the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring and featuring long-form articles about the Middle East.

The past four years have been tough going, for his magazine as well as the region. Despite boasting slick production values and infographics that are on a par with weeklies such as *Bloomberg Businessweek*, convincing advertisers to sign on has been difficult – so difficult that Nehme has given up. As a result, *The Outpost* lives, like so many independent magazines, a hand-to-mouth existence. It pays for the production of its next issue using revenues reaped from its last – and by him working other jobs. Yet still he perseveres. "The mission is to help ignite the much-needed and long-awaited cultural renaissance in this region," he writes via email. "It's a tall order, I

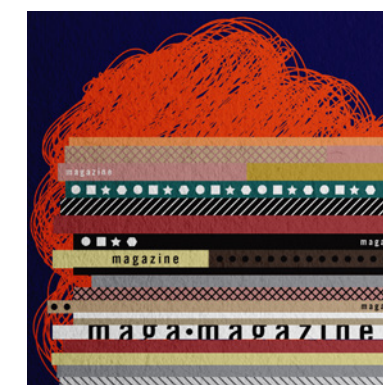
know, but we think it's possible."

Lessons such as these are usually learnt the hard way. "The reality is, no independent magazines survive on the traditional model of magazine and ad sales," writes Steve Daniels in a post outlining the ones he learnt during the first four years of *Makeshift*, which he started after a successful Kickstarter campaign back in 2011 garnered US\$42,718 from 626 backers. "You will become a B2B company as much as a B2C company." *Makeshift*, which is about as niche as magazines come, focusing on global manifestations of the informal economy, from "homemade aircraft in Nigeria to drug smugglers in Mexico," had to do some soul-searching in the early days of financial struggle. After wondering what differentiates it from other publications, it came to realise that its 400-strong contributor network spread across more than 80 countries was its biggest and most bankable asset. "As a result," says Daniels, "we recently launched *Makeshift Studios*, an agency that produces content for clients in collaboration with the contributors and creatives we've worked with and vetted over the years."

There are many creative revenue strategies open to independent magazines, he adds: "*Makeshift*, along with other titles like *Offscreen*, also generates significant revenue from sponsorships. As well as using advertorial content to position brands for its high-income readers, *Monocle* also sells products through brick-and-mortar retail. *Hello Mr.* forms brand partnerships on Instagram. *The Bold Italic* runs live events. In each of these cases, the magazine has become a platform on which to build other businesses."

Proof of print's staying power can also be found, somewhat perversely, on the Internet. The medium that was, as the naysayers had it, set to eviscerate print with the cool and ruthless efficiency of a blood-thirsty samurai is now its most rapt young acolyte. To enhance their storytelling, some digital platforms are looking flagrantly magazine-y.

One example is US music website *Pitchfork*, which runs "Cover Story" profiles of acts such as Bat for Lashes and Daft Punk – picture-heavy, Sunday supplement-style ones in which images



and pull-quotes pop up and dissolve in surprising ways as you scroll through the text. (In the Daft Punk piece, pull quotes initially appear corrupted with 1s and 0s before becoming decipherable. This is cheeky – an attempt to out-print print using digital bells and whistles.) Other websites doing similar things include

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Narratively, *Aeon* and *The Verge*, all of which run long-form stories engineered for maximum readability rather than ad click-throughs. Massively popular apps such as Flipboard also mimic the rhythm, soul and flow of print.

“This is stuff that we taught them,” says Losowsky. “In a way we’ve won. We said, ‘Typography needs to mix with images and illustrations and pull quotes,’ and they’re like, ‘Yeah, you’re right.’ And they’ve taken it onboard and are moving it in other different directions.” To survive in light of these online evolutions, which are only likely to erode the readership and advertiser base of traditional mass-market magazines even further, he thinks indie magazines must embrace innovation, lateral thinking and a reader-first mentality. “If you’re going to keep making them you need



to boldly keep making them,” he says.

Ruth Jamieson, author of the excellent *Print is Dead. Long Live Print*, a sumptuous coffeetable book in which many of these publications get their moment on the soapbox, agrees. “Producers of print indie magazines don’t try to beat digital media at its game,” she writes. “They focus on the things only print can do. And they do them very, very well. They revel in the physicality of the magazine. They play with format. They mix paper stocks. They lovingly craft issues that are beautiful, collectible and timeless objects.”

The Internet, she adds, has the capacity to be a friend as much as a foe. “Approached in the right way, technology removes barriers to making magazines,” she writes. “The fundamental tasks of putting a magazine together, such as finding suppliers, wooing contributors, getting it printed, connecting with retailers and collecting subscriptions, have all been made easier by the Internet. It can help even the most niche of magazines find readers.”

Here in Bangkok, people mightn’t be reveling in the physicality, nor playing with format, nor mixing paper stocks as much. Nor has local creative talent yet fully harnessed the power of the Internet. But print is, judging by the volume produced at least, in rude health. Go look at the shelves of AsiaBooks or Kinokuniya, peek between all the glossy mainstream publications such as this one, and you’ll find imported publications selling at stiff prices (upwards of 400 baht usually), from *Kinfolk* to *Frankie*. A handful of domestic independent magazines that range in cool quotient (the hipper and less staid ones includes local art and design scene bible *Art4d*, the lifestyle and travel orientated *Aday*, and the street-savvy

teen fashion mag *Cheeze*) are well-established. And then there’s the rough-and-ready, wild-at-heart DIY stuff.

Turns out that Grisana is merely stoking the embers of the self-publishing scene in the hope that it will catch fire, not building one from scratch. This becomes apparent when, after telling me all about self-publishing month and then segueing into a discussion of how the Riso printer has a warm-textured, happy-accident aesthetic that has won it a global cult following, he dashes out to his car. Minutes later he reappears carrying a plastic box containing some of the local zines and magazines he has accumulated. I have a good rummage. Some are throwaway – mere germs of an idea teased into primitive zine form, fleeting screams in a vast print universe. In a series of ‘struggle zines,’ for example, Grisana has also been using print to vent his bitterness about personal creative struggle in Thailand. Others are more fleshed-out. The art photographer Miti Ruangkritya, for example, has been using it to present an ongoing series about Thai politics in a cheap and accessible book format.

Really catching my eye, though, is *Khlong*, a lovingly-produced 32-page, A5-sized booklet in which outlandish illustrations and photojournalism mix with freeform poetry and prose. A 31-year-old Australian expat, Chris Clarke, came up with the idea after hanging out with “incredibly talented artists and writers” at local art venues like Speedy Grandma, Soy Sauce Factory, Jam, Bridge and CEO Books. “I not only wanted to provide a greater degree of exposure for these artists but also offer them a paying gig,” he says.

The second issue is due soon – and he’s excited about it. Featuring the work of writers based in the Philippines, poets from Australia, a photographer shooting construction-site graffiti left behind by Khmer and Rohingya labourers, and photojournalists who’ve covered rebel militias like the Karen National Liberation Army in Myanmar, it will be a step up – bigger and more diverse. It will also be more widely distributed, Clarke adds, and have “a much darker vibe that reflects the creeping state of totalitarianism in Southeast Asia, as well as issues like people-smuggling and modern-day slavery, *dek wen* (motorcycle gangs), the methamphetamine epidemic and the social isolation that many

experience while living in suffocatingly overpopulated megacities like Bangkok.” With a proposed print run of only 2,000, *Khlong* may – for now – only be a tadpole among independent magazine minnows, but it is yet more proof that wherever untold stories and a printer exist, print still thrives. ✖

