

# Disarray of Life

A zine reissue revels in a riotous mix of art and attitude

GWEN ALLEN

**DESTROY ALL MONSTERS MAGAZINE: 1976–1979** BY CARY LOREN, MIKE KELLEY, NIAGARA, AND JIM SHAW

NEW YORK: PRIMARY INFORMATION (DISTRIBUTED BY ARTBOOK DAP). 278 PAGES. \$30.

In a 2008 interview with Mike Kelley, writer Glenn O'Brien described the experimental art and music collective Destroy All Monsters—which Kelley founded in 1973 with fellow University of Michigan students Niagara (Lynn Rovner) and Jim Shaw and filmmaker Cary Loren—as “a mythic band. . . . It almost seemed like a great publicity stunt because . . . they never came to your town and there were no records.” Indeed, the Ann Arbor “anti-rock band” performed only a handful of times, staging impromptu gigs at parties they were usually thrown out of. Their first release was a sixty-minute cassette tape of “distorto, psychedelic, chaotic, insanity, high energy level music,” advertised for two dollars in their similarly riotous zine.

Now, the nonprofit publisher Primary Information has compiled all six issues of this magazine into a vividly colored and richly textured book. The new reprint volume lacks any introductory or explanatory text; true to Destroy All Monsters’ anarchic spirit, it plunges the reader straight into a frenzied dystopic world. *Detourné* comic strips, images pulled from pulp magazines, film stills, and tabloid news clippings clash with saccharine greeting cards, family Polaroids, and children’s coloring-book pages, while Op-art backgrounds, scrawled doodles, stickers, and rubber stamps compound the visual pandemonium. All of this is faithfully reproduced in the new facsimile, which is hand-bound and printed on paper of different weights, colors, and finishes—from coated stock to copy paper in elementary-school pastels. Each copy also includes a unique original spray painting by Loren, giving this lavish reproduction an authentically DIY accent.

The magazine’s graphic form mirrored the rawness of the band’s sonic production, but it was more than just a visual analogue to the music. Rather, both were traces of a larger aesthetic and social project. Like other punk and art bands that were emerging elsewhere, the group attempted to invent new models of collectivity and creativity that would free them from bankrupt, alienated forms of consumer culture and from the tyranny of high art. As Kelley explained in “What Destroy All Monsters means to me,” an editorial typed on two scraps of paper crookedly arranged on the page in the inaugural issue of the zine: “The main intention is not to produce music but to be engaged in an activity that provides an instantaneous feedback of powerful cleansing noise.”

The group was disillusioned with the failed utopias and slick co-optation of ’70s rock, and was inspired by bands such as the Velvet Underground, Kraftwerk, and Sun Ra, as well as Detroit’s own MC5 and the Stooges. Destroy All Monsters’ music was largely improvised: a squall of distorted guitar, scratchy violin, tape loops, amplified squeaky toys, a vacuum cleaner, and Niagara’s monotone vocals, which Loren described as a combination of Betty Boop and Nico singing off-key. The band rehearsed in Kelley’s green-and-pink-painted bedroom in the basement of a large rundown Victorian known as God’s Oasis Drive-In Church (named after a sign nailed to the front porch). They riffed off of old records while science-fiction films played on a 1950s television set in the background, dressed in bizarre used clothing, went trash picking, and made art and movies. As Loren wrote of this raucous DIY scene in the suburban Rust Belt: “A sense of gloom, disaster, and apocalypse, mixed with doses of anarchy, comedy, and absurdity kept us together.”

The magazine was part of this *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which encompassed more than just art and music—it evoked a way of life. It most strongly reflected Loren’s offbeat, surreal aesthetic, sharing an affinity with the gorgeous, delirious cinema of Jack Smith, an acquaintance and mentor of Loren’s who is referenced throughout the magazine. Cultivating a trashy, campy sensibility, culled from grade-B horror flicks, Stanley Mouse hot rods, and Japanese monster movies (such as the one the band was named after), *Destroy All Monsters* magazine cannibalized a vast, disparate array of visual culture: Bettie Page pinups, Superman comics, and photos and drawings of transvestites, strippers, corpses, spaceships, and, of

course, all kinds of monsters. In opposition to mainstream culture, this menagerie of sex, violence, and comedy was meant to reawaken real desires instead of nurturing false ones.

While the magazine’s format recalled early punk zines such as *Sniffin’ Glue* (founded in London the same year), its saturated color and visual overload was distinct—less a rejection of mainstream media than a grotesque exaggeration of its spectacular pleasures. Abrupt changes in scale and orientation and miscalibrated, degraded images suggest the publication’s affinity with the band’s distorted, amped-up noise. In both cases, the group was interested in disrupting and disturbing the processes of communication. Destroy All Monsters invited scrambled signals, mixed messages, and a jarring lack of continuity, welcoming serendipity into the process.



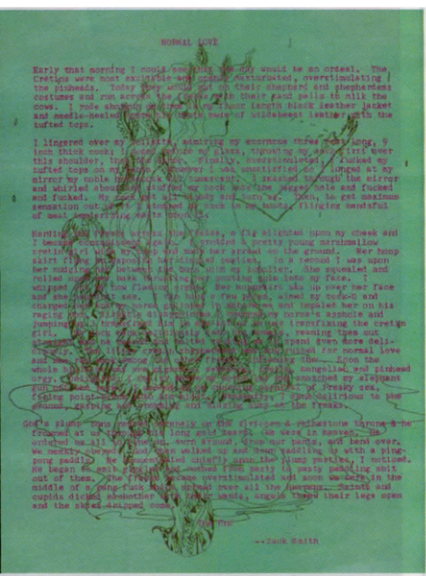
*Destroy All Monsters* magazine dovetailed with other revolutionary media practices of its day. Loren cites Detroit’s legendary leftist underground paper, *Fifth Estate*, as an important inspiration, and both he and Kelley helped distribute the late-’60s antiracist White Panther Party’s literature as high school students. Loren was influenced by conceptual art’s alternative forms of distribution, and, like other experimental artists and musicians, was involved in the mail-art scene. Indeed, the magazine’s strategies resonated with mail art’s similarly antielitist approach to consumer culture, rooted in appropriation and montage.

In the fifth issue of *Destroy All Monsters*, we see Antonin Artaud’s 1938 manifesto for a “Theater of Cruelty” cut straight out of an old drama magazine and pasted onto the page amid images of Artaud, clip-art poodles, and underwear ads. The French playwright’s desire to transform language and release it from its “proper” use as a servant to plot, narrative, and mise-en-scène was a precursor to Destroy All Monsters’ effort to emancipate sound and image from their instrumentalization in capitalist society. Not only did the group free words and pictures from their conventional roles as couriers of meaning, but it also divorced techniques of reproduction from the usual objective of straight duplication, upsetting the idea of a uniform, mass-produced consumer culture.

Loren printed much of the magazine on offset presses at local colleges, where he was an occasional student. He experimented with split-fountain techniques and overlays to create the magazine’s trippy, kaleidoscopic look, and had friends working after hours at copy shops make color Xeroxes. To save on paper costs, Loren superimposed his imagery on top of recycled flyers and discarded photocopies, further adding

to the magazine’s layered, discordant character, and integrating it within the visual detritus of his world. Issues were often hand-edited, with drawings, tipped-in photographs, and inserts, such as unique spray paintings—abstract fluorescent patterns that Loren composed rapidly and intuitively on lined notebook paper. Such personalized production correlated to the magazine’s small distribution: Published in small editions (from a hundred to a thousand), it was sold in local bookshops and record stores, traded with other zine makers, and sent to fellow artists.

The handcrafted nature of the magazine makes a single authoritative facsimile unfeasible. Primary Information’s reprint has compiled different versions of each copy (pages from a seventh, unpublished issue are also included), giving



a fuller, more accurate picture of the publication than a single complete set of the magazine could. The imprint has also reissued artists’ magazines such as *REAL LIFE* and *Avalanche*, the *Great Bear Pamphlet* series, and writings by artists such as Lee Lozano and Dan Graham, as well as contemporary artists’ books. *Destroy All Monsters Magazine*’s lack of critical text reflects the publisher’s mission to make rare, historically important art publications available in a way that encourages differing interpretations and narratives to emerge. It invites the prospect that its books may not only shore up previous historical accounts, but radically destabilize them. This new volume illustrates both of these possibilities. It sheds light on the history of the intersection between art and experimental music in the late ’70s, yet also insists on the unassimilability of this history, challenging neat teleological progressions, categories of authorship, and academically defined ideas of influence and artistic movements.

In the fourth issue, Loren published a semiparodic history of the band in *fumetti* comic style. He detailed its evolving permutations and described his experiences with heartbreak and mental illness. Nearly illegible in places, the handwritten account meanders around images, and leaps across the page, as if giving graphic form to the history it narrates—fragmented, riddled with omissions and gaps, and profoundly subjective. While most books try to contain or explain this kind of chaos, *Destroy All Monsters Magazine* leaves things messy. As Loren wrote of the zine in its final issue: “As ever you will find it obsessed with time, age, beauty, death, and the maze of life.” □

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