

UC SANTA BARBARA

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Documenting names crafted in public places with nails, tar, bark and bubblegum, artist Alex Lukas releases 12th edition of his fanzine

Charlie was here; and Joe was here; and somebody wrote, “Mom.”

In the late 1960s, people started hammering their names in nails on the wooden railroad ties near where artist [Alex Lukas](#), an assistant professor of publishing and printmaking at UC Santa Barbara, grew up in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He walked by the string of names for years, but it wasn’t until 2016, upon learning the old rail ties were being removed, that he returned to photograph them.

The photos became the source material for the first issue of Written Names Fanzine, Lukas’s publication dedicated to documenting and transcribing occurrences of hyper-localized, unsanctioned public name writing. This summer, he released his 12th edition, featuring found names stuck in bubble gum in San Luis Obispo.

“It’s about an appreciation and investigation into places where people gather, and places where people are interested in commemorating their time there by writing their name,” said Lukas. Producing the work in his studio, he publishes limited edition zine releases on a Risograph duplicator.

Through 12 issues, starting with the Cambridge nails, Lukas has explored found names etched in aspen trees by sheepherders in Sawtooth National Forest; on abandoned bicentennial-themed trolleys in Pennsylvania; in beach tar on rocks in Carpinteria; in soot on Mammoth Cave's Gothic Avenue in Kentucky; and carved into cacti at Enchanted Rock in Llano County, Texas; among other places.

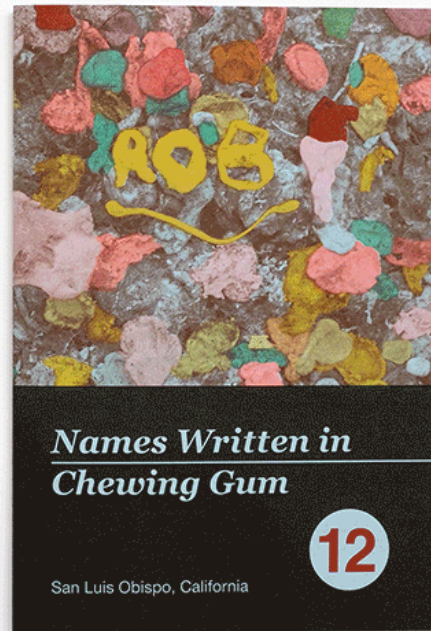


Photo Credit: Alex Lukas

Written Names Fanzine Issue #12: Names Written in Chewing Gum, San Luis Obispo, California, 2023

As with the names that zig-zagged across a roughly 20-foot section of the train tracks, it is often difficult to decipher if the geographically succinct clusters of names are from people who knew each other or if they are signatures of a spontaneous happening among strangers at different points in time. Without any intervention,

Lukas photographs and transcribes the names for his fanzines.

For one issue, Lukas documented dozens of names spelled out in rocks outside Amboy, California, population 5. “It’s a ghost town but there are hundreds of names written in rocks along Route 66,” he said. “It was another iteration of people responding to a site. They’re pulling their cars over and there’s an engagement with the place and with its materiality.”

Fanzines, also known just as zines, are hard to pigeonhole. They emerged as early as the 1930s among science fiction fans. Their roots are informal, outsider and underground. Small run, self-published rags of counterculture, zines were created by political and social radicals of the 1960s and the punk rock circuit of the ’70s — then, breaking into mass culture as a subversive form of self-publishing in the ’90s.

“It’s a tradition of using the tools at hand to make publications that either nobody else will publish or you don’t want anybody else to publish,” Lukas said. “It’s a history of folks using photocopiers, right? It’s the experience of going to Kinko’s late at night when the person working the overnight shift was always some punk who was there to make their own zines.”

It’s not lost on Lukas that he is following a tradition that’s history intersects with the rise of the common copy shop; and the king of copies, Kinkos, started as a print center in Isla Vista, serving UC Santa Barbara students. When the photocopier became an accessible tool, a new generation of zine makers — including teenage Lukas in the late ’90s — were able to bypass the cost of offset printing and its high count minimums, usually upwards of 5,000 copies, and release titles with small edition sizes.

That potential for a low print run is important. “We (zine makers) are making things that are for and about subcultures or niche interests,” said Lukas, who makes about 100 copies of each zine. “Because there aren’t a thousand people who are interested in this. It’s a small community where maybe a hundred folks want this stuff, but those folks are passionately interested.”

Lukas took partial inspiration for the design of Written Names from old national park guides, “printed objects to help you navigate a space that you are visiting was the aesthetic cue,” he said. The Risograph, which prints only two colors at a time,

further the sense of archival functionalism.

At the San Francisco Art Book Fair and at the Los Angeles Art Book Fair, Lukas has presented “Written Names” among publications that span from \$5 pamphlets to case bound artist monographs.

“My publication sits somewhere in between,” he said. “That idea that it’s just folded and stapled paper is important to me but they are also conceptual art objects.”

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