

Christa Donner

## Small Science Collective

When I was a kid, I'd often come across little religious tracts left on the windowsill at the YMCA where I waited to be picked up from swim class. These particular booklets were produced by comics evangelist Jack Chick, who depicted the ramifications of living a sinful life in graphic detail. Though Chick's fire and brimstone moralizing wasn't of much interest to me, I was transfixed by his drawings and intrigued by the illicit nature of their seemingly-casual placement. With their accessible format and a savvy, low-budget distribution method, these

small publications had found their target: someone who wouldn't normally go looking for spiritual guidance but was a sucker for good packaging.

Today, this rather brilliant tactic has been adopted by a group more interested in physics than proselytizing. The Small Science Collective aims to make scientific knowledge accessible, appealing, and interesting to people who might normally think it's anything but. In an era when 39% of Americans say they "believe" in the theory of evolution (according to a 2009 Gallup Poll), and scientific knowledge is patented and privatized, such an approach seems both timely and crucial.

The Small Science Collective is led by biologist and artist Andrew Yang, who cooked up the idea with astrophysicist Jeff Oishi four years ago as they pondered the woeful state of scientific literacy. Yang, who teaches classes in



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biology and visual studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, began working minizines into his science classes as a way to channel his students' learning into something that could extend beyond the walls of the school and into the public. The project has since grown to include scientific researchers, artists, grade-school students, and amateur enthusiasts from all over the world, who submit quirky, visually interesting minizines for possible publication and distribution.

The zines and pamphlets in the Small Science library are all kept to a simple standard: they must all be foldable from a single sheet of paper. This not only keeps printing costs cheap, but also allows for ever more viral modes of distribution. Most SSC zines are available online as PDF files: since each zine is cut and folded from a single sheet of 8.5" x 11" paper, anyone with the interest and internet access can easily print and fold the zines of their choice from an extensive online zine library, and pass them on from there. Yang regularly prints copies of selected zines onto brightly-colored paper and brings with him on this weekly trips throughout the city, tucking copies into vending machine slots, train windowsills, and park benches or packing them into a portable zine shop to hawk them outside science museums, aquariums, and other public venues.

Last fall, Year of Science invited the Small Science Collective to launch an international zine competition, with prizes awarded to the most scintillating science zines in every age group and topic imaginable. I was lucky enough to find myself as a juror for the contest alongside noted biologists and physicists. As an artist, educator, and zine-publisher I can't even tell you how amazing it was to pore over tables piled high with envelopes full of funny, colorful science zines from

India, Argentina, and Iowa. If it's any indication, some kid waiting to be picked up from swim class might be reading up on free radicals right about now. ♦

To print and fold your very own zines on topics such as pigeons, gut bacteria, stem cells, and the formation of diamonds, visit the Small Science Collective online at <http://smallsciencezines.blogspot.com>.

