

A history of a little Detroit printing co-op

that gave us *Society of the Spectacle* & a lot more

Peter Werbe

a review of

The Politics of the Joy of Printing: The Detroit Printing Co-op by Danielle Aubert. Artbook/D.A.P.

The text of this history of the Detroit Printing Co-op is engaging enough by itself, even without its colorful, graphic-filled pages of the work produced in the decade beginning in 1970 at an all-volunteer project amidst the city's industrial ruins.

It's a lively account of how people with no background in printing, assembled the machinery, secured a building, taught themselves the necessary skills, and self-organized a crew of co-operators and co-conspirators to publish books, magazines, leaflets, and posters with themes and ideas that were rocking the country's culture and politics.

With equipment already decades old, the co-op was committed to not just publishing radical ideas, but functioning as a prefiguring of the society its members desired by defining itself as social property without bosses or wage work. Echoing this perspective, the IWW union bug on many of the publications left no doubt as to the origins of the politics of its most active founders, Fredy and Lorraine Perlman, as well as others who participated. Along with its union designation, the bug boldly advocated, "Abolish the Wage System; Abolish the State; All Power to the Workers."

Desire to publish texts free from commercial considerations or control animated the project and serves as an inspiring story of a model for autonomous, unmediated activity that sought to do away with the division of labor with its skilled and unskilled labor, bosses and employees.

A flurry of books, printed under the shop's publishing imprint, Black and Red, erupted from the project born of enthusiasm, including several suppressed histories of the Russian Revolution such as Voline's *Unknown Revolution, History of the Makhnovist Movement 1918–1921* by Peter Arshinov, and Maurice Brinton's *Bolsheviks and Workers Control*. Books that powerfully combat the Leninist myths peddled by communist apologists for the Bolshevik suppression of the authentic revolution.

Titles such as Jacques Camatte's *The Wandering of Humanity*, *Society of the Spectacle* by Guy Debord, G. Munis's *Unions Against Revolution*, and other ultra-left authors were translated and printed. Reading Black & Red books had a marked impact on the staff of the *Fifth Estate* at that time.

Acquaintance with the new radical ideas contained in those texts invigorated the staff to continue publishing, saving it from disappearing as had the 500 other so-called underground papers of that era. Other radicals and anarchists speak in the same manner about the influence Black and Red books had on their thinking and activity.

Books such as *Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution* by Jose Peirats renewed interest in that event and others where people challenged authorities and rejected leaders. Fredy Perlman's own writings such as *Against His-Story; Against Leviathan*, and his many pamphlets rolled off the shop's huge press. Perlman wrote *Letters of Insurgents* in 1976, and at 831 pages pushed the shop's technical capacity to its limit.

Many of the books were typeset at the Fifth Estate office, and the ideas in them continue to resonate in these pages.

Today, when someone self-publishes a book, it means they pay a vanity press to do the labor involved in transforming a manuscript from a disc into a finished book.

At the Detroit Printing Co-op, self-publishing meant that everyone involved in the effort worked collectively from author to those who did the typesetting, created imaginative graphics, did the printing trades work of that era including process camera photographing, plate making, the actual printing, folding signatures, binding, trimming, and wrapping the cover on the book.

If these tasks aren't familiar, it's because they are processes of a long gone era.

Books and pamphlets focusing on history and theory were matched by material printed by activists used in their organizing. Streaming through the print shop's doors to do a decade of innovative publishing were anarchists, black radicals, high school students, poets, labor and anti-war campaigners, all anxious to redefine the reality of the world. On several occasions, leftists or budding entrepreneurs attempted to alter the character of the shop into something more conventional. They were quickly rebuffed.

The most famous book published by the Co-op was the first English translation of the Situationist International's *Society of the Spectacle*, which Black & Red continues to publish today. Much of the operating expenses for the project were paid for many years by printing *Radical America*, a Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) periodical.

Author Danielle Aubert, who teaches graphic design at Detroit's Wayne State University, brings the exciting history chronicled here to a higher level by including reproductions from nearly every publication that came off of the co-op's presses between 1970 and 1980. It is at once a radical history and an art book, so luscious are the graphics on almost every page.

Print on paper, a medium that recently celebrated its 500th anniversary, is a product of the Age of Gutenberg. It is slow and deliberate, difficult to produce, and expensive to publish, but it was done at the Printing Co-op with a sense of pride for learning skills that could bring people ideas that weren't available almost anywhere else.

The machinery and work it took to produce a book at the Printing Co-op would probably now be exhibited along with horseshoeing, having been superseded by the ease of publishing online among the billion and a half web sites that exist on the internet.

Efficiency triumphs as the collective process is no longer needed. What is gained at the expense of what has been lost? Certainly, the joy of printing.

The Politics of the Joy of Printing: The Detroit Printing Co-op is available from artbook.com.

Black and Red titles are at **BlackandRed.org**. Some of them are available as special offers with *Fifth Estate* subscriptions and renewals at FifthEstate.org.

Peter Werbe is a member of the *Fifth Estate* editorial collective.

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