

How to print zines, posters, flyers, and stickers

The Old Fashion Way...A reminder that printed matter was often the key to social change in earlier years

Peter Werbe

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a review of

Cheap Copies! Cheap Copies! The OBSOLETE! Press Guide to DIY Hectography, Mimeography, & Spirit Duplication by Rich Dana. Obsolete Press, 2022

The first question many people have when looking at a how-to manual like this one is, why bother? What's the motivation for doing something the hard way with antiquated techniques and materials? Scouring junk shops and the Internet for the equipment and supplies, that, in printing, have been made obsolete by the machines that produce what you're holding in your hands—computers.

Rich Dana, a frequent *Fifth Estate* contributor, answers the question in an opening essay. He writes, "Zine makers appreciate the commitment and physical work involved in their craft. They embrace their obscurity and celebrate the ephemeral. They are about process and not product."

That Dana adheres to these definitions is obvious in the pages of *Cheap Copies!* He's not thinking in terms of mass circulation publications in this book, but small batch, highly crafted reproduction that will have limited distribution. More art than mass media.

Fewer and fewer people under 40 probably even know (or care) what the duplication methods explained here in such exacting detail are, although the history of each technique has its own interesting tale. These are methods that predate going to Kinko's for punk fliers in the 1980s or sneaking out leaflets for your next demo on the boss's photocopying machine in the '90s, by at least a century. But, even those now ancient methods are almost 50 years old, so imagine what had to be done when it was the hand cranked mimeograph machine that had to be turned 5,000 times so an anti-war or civil rights group could flood the town with announcements of a meeting or rally.

The details of how to prepare stencils, where to search for materials, and how to operate an antique machine probably can be skipped, but there is something fascinating about imagining someone following these precisely described procedures to print leaflets, for instance, for the 1963 civil rights March on Washington, and know that mimeo machines were whirling like this all across the U.S.

When the *Fifth Estate* had a physical office and published weekly or every other week in the late 1960s and 1970s, the paper had a Gestetner Mimeograph machine that was in constant use by high school activists, union dissidents, as well as women's, civil rights, community, and anti-war groups. It allowed those rebels, cut off from communication by large institutions to, as what was said back then, "get the word out."

Dana's personal history that begins the book, of his involvement in the fanzine movement from where he started in New Orleans, emits something palpable for what has been lost before those who made up its core "eschewed pamphlets and broadsheets in favor of tweets and memes." Almost all publications strive for an increase in circulation, the larger the better. But, not Dana and his fellow zinesters who think small. The author jokingly refers to his manual as a "small-batch artisanal technical manual."

Since *Cheap Copies!* is meant for practical usage, it's spiral bound, allowing the practitioner to spread out the pages while following the "Hecto Step-by-Step" guide, for instance. "Pour mixture slooowly into the tray." state the instructions. "Coax the bubbles to the edge of the tray..." Not fascinating to you since you'll never actually do this (I read them all just out of curiosity)? Skip to some of the biographies of practitioners contained in the text.

There's the brief story of Diane Di Prima and Leroi Jones (later known as Amiri Baraka) teaming up to publish the first edition of *The Floating Bear* in 1961 as a mimeograph newsletter that gave space to some of the great, yet marginalized voices of the era. Or, the obscure hectographer, Mae Stretlkov, whose life travels from homes in China and Argentina, didn't stop her from being a prolific producer of zines sent across the world around the same time.

A limited-edition *Cheap Copies!*, prior to the one now available, used examples of the method discussed to print a particular page describing how to use them, so that some are not as easy to read as what is spit out of your HP computer printer. But, no matter. The reader gets the feel of what it must have been like to get one of these texts in a much bygone period. Or, looking at a printed page in an archive.

It's not just art or keeping alive old techniques for their own sake, although that's part of it, sort of like growing heirloom tomatoes. Dana reminds us that printed matter was often the key to social change in earlier years. That the tyrant always suppressed the printing press. That small printing methods is where unrepresented communities, artists, and political dissidents could express their thoughts, their creativity and criticisms, and their dreams.

Dana dedicates his book "To the Weirdos." To those who still want to hold paper in their hands upon which are written words of enjoyment or importance without having to stare into a computer screen.

Cheap Copies! is available from the author at **obsolete-press.com**

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