The Detroit Printing Co-op

The Politics of the Joy of Printing

Danielle Aubert
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>INTRODUCTION: THE DETROIT PRINTING CO-OP</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>FREDY PERLMAN IN NEW YORK 1961–62</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>THE BLACK &amp; RED GANG KALAMAZOO 1968–69</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66</td>
<td>THE DETROIT PRINTING CO-OP OPENS 1970</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74</td>
<td>FREDY PERLMAN AND THE OFFSET PRESS 1969–72</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### RADICAL AMERICA 1970–75
- Radical America vol. 4 no. 2 through vol. 9; D. Montgomery, What's Happening to the American Worker; d. a. levy, Stone Sarcophagus; d. a. levy, To Be a Discrepancy in Cleveland; D. Lourie, Lies; T. L. Kryss, New Majiks; American Labor History pamphlets

### SITUATIONISTS AND THE CO-OP 1970–73
- G. Debord, Society of the Spectacle; R. Vaneigem, The Revolution of Daily Life (excerpt); To Nonsubscribers of Radical America; Sl, On the Poverty of Student Life

### BLACK STAR 1970–72
- J. Forman, The Political Thought of James Forman; J. Forman, Control, Conflict, Change; brochures for Black Star Productions; 1971 Vietnam calendar; US Out of Africa poster

### THE GNOMON 1970–72
- The Gnomon vol. 1 through vol. 3

### JUDY CAMPBELL 1971–74
- J. Campbell, Free for All; J. Campbell, My Torrid Affair With Three Doctors and One Research Assistant Cost Me My Job; J. Campbell, Open Letter From a White Bitch to the Black Youth Who Beat Up On Me and My Friend

### COMMUNITY AND FRIENDS 1971–76
- Lookin' In; Rebels' Voice; 1971 and 1972 Cass-Trumbull Community Calendars; riverrun; ETR Gang, To Serve the Rich; Wildcat; ETR Gang, Ms. Interview: Gail Garrot, Big City Cop; Fuck Authority poster; A. Franklin, D. Watson, Fli-back

### BEWICK/IED 1971–80
- M. Glaberman, Union Committee and Wildcat Strikes; P. Romano, R. Stone, The American Worker; C. L. R. James, Modern Politics; M. Glaberman, Punching Out; K. Marx, A Worker's Inquiry; C. L. R. James, Facing Reality; C. L. R. James, Mariners, Renegades and Castaways; M. Glaberman, Wartime Strikes

### BLACK & RED 1970–88
The Detroit Printing Co-op

In the fall of 1969, a group of friends active in radical left politics drove from Detroit to Chicago to pick up a fifty-year-old Harris offset printing press. They had received information that equipment from a recently closed print shop was for sale. The friends worked quickly to borrow money, rent a work space in Southwest Detroit, and arrange transport for the industrial printer. They founded the Detroit Printing Co-op and declared the equipment social property, available for use by anyone who wished to learn how to operate it and contribute to its maintenance. Over the course of the next ten years the Co-op would be the site of production for tens of thousands of leftist books, pamphlets, posters, and brochures.

The Co-op drew a wide range of people from across the city, most involved in movement politics. Some of the publications printed over the course of the 1970s include the first English translation of Guy Debord’s Society of the Spectacle; the Black Star publication The Political Thought of James Forman; the poetry and art magazine riverrun; five years’ worth of issues of Radical America, the journal of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS); and Rebel’s Voice, an unofficial newspaper made by high school students. All books published by Black & Red, the radical left press that Fredy and Lorraine Perlman founded in 1970, were printed at the Co-op while it was open.

This book is an attempt to collect in one place the publications printed at the Detroit Printing Co-op. It is unlikely that it is complete, as hundreds of individuals passed through the Co-op and there was never any official “management.” However, the range of printed materials represented here indicate a rich and vibrant political world that emanated out of the Co-op building on Michigan Avenue.

Detroit in 1969 held palpable revolutionary potential. Radicalized students were dropping out of college and moving to working class manufacturing cities where they saw possibility for enacting system change. Various leftist groups were active in Detroit, and labor unions were strong. Facing Reality, an offshoot of the Trotskyist Worker’s Party, had been a worker-intellectual hub in Detroit from the 1950s. The effects of the 1967 rebellion—quelled only when the National Guard was called in—were felt widely. The League of Revolutionary Black Workers organized in auto factories and some of their members made use of the Co-op equipment. The Republic of New Afrika was founded in Detroit in 1968, and the city also had a vibrant chapter of the Black Panthers. The underground newspaper Fifth Estate was thriving, publishing biweekly issues out of their Cass Corridor offices with a circulation reaching into the tens of thousands.

Fredy and Lorraine Perlman, founding members of the Detroit Printing Co-op, were a part of a wave of radicals who moved to Detroit in the late 1960s seeking to participate in Detroit’s active political climate. Fredy was born in Czechoslovakia and had immigrated, via Bolivia, to the United States, where his family ended up in Kentucky. Lorraine grew up in Iowa City. They met in New York, where they lived for several years, then moved to Belgrade, Yugoslavia. When they returned to the United States, they found themselves in Kalamazoo, Michigan, where Fredy had a two-year teaching position at Western Michigan University. The Perlmans finally made their way to Detroit, which was racially and ethnically diverse, inexpensive, and not too far from Ann Arbor, where Lorraine was enrolled as a graduate student at the University of Michigan. Lorraine wrote of Detroit, “In many ways this city resembled Belgrade: it was sprawling and unpretentious, a melting-pot for arrivals from other regions, a place where factory work was held in high regard.”

1 Lorraine Perlman, Having Little, Being Much (Detroit: Black & Red, 1989), p. 56.

Setting up the print shop

Upon arrival in Detroit, the Perlmans immediately connected with friends at Fifth Estate and an assortment of leftists, including Martin Glaberman of Facing Reality, Jon Supak and Hannah Ziegellaub, Don Campbell and Judy Campbell, League of Revolutionary Black Workers member Carl Smith, and others. Fifth Estate had typesetting equipment and their office was next door to the independently-run Community Print Shoppe, which housed an offset press. The Perlmans and friends printed several things there before the Detroit Printing Co-op opened in 1970.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was difficult to find presses willing to print left publications. Offset presses had been used commercially for many years by then, and printers started replacing their early twentieth-century machines with new ones. As secondhand offset presses arrived on the market, independent groups of radicals were able to acquire them cheaply and set up their own print shops. At the same time, typewriters such as the
IBM Selectric Composers were being manufactured. These used a technology that made it possible to set type with different fonts, where previously one would have had to set type on a letterpress jobbing printer for a professional look—or settle for setting text in Courier on a typewriter. The IBM Selectric (and competitor products like the Veratype machine) allowed people to set pages of type much more cheaply. As a result, the late 1960s and 1970s bore a “means of subsistence” with the equipment made available through the cooperative, they did not see it as an “efficient way to survive.”

Several of the individuals involved in the Revolutionary Printing Cooperative would soon re-organize into the Detroit Printing Co-op when a friend of Fredy & Lorraine’s from Chicago, Bernard Marszalek, helped them acquire the large Harris offset press. Marszalek was a young graphic designer and activist who had been working at a print cooperative in Chicago called J. S. Jordan Press, which printed many of the Yippie fliers and leaflets that were distributed during the summer of 1968 for protests against the Democratic National Convention. He introduced the Detroit group to a dealer who had a huge warehouse full of second-hand printing equipment. Marszalek encouraged them to choose a smaller press, knowing that running a large offset printer was a big undertaking. People apprenticed or went to vocational schools for years to learn how to operate industrial presses. He was concerned that while the Detroit friends had noble intentions, they did not have a clear plan for running a large offset machine. The press they chose was hubling and industrial-sized, and printed 22 x 29-inch press sheets. At this size, they would face the challenges of getting ink across long rollers, moving unwieldy stacks of paper around the print shop, and using blowers properly to separate the sheets of paper as they were fed into the machine.4

In justifying his decision for getting a larger printer, Perlman told Marszalek that it would be economical for them—they could gang up more pages on a large press sheet, for example.5 Perlman was specifically focused on the ability to print books, rather than only flyers and leaflets. There were other groups in Detroit with printing abilities—notably Black Star, which had a Gestetner press which they used to print newsletters and countless flyers. But the offset press at the Co-op would make it possible for the Perlmans to run every aspect of Black & Red, their publishing house—from writing, editing, and layout, to printing, binding, and distribution. They could also more easily print for others—they had already begun printing issues of Radical America at the Community Print Shoppe.

They secured a space on the ground floor of a building in a working class, industrial neighborhood at the corner of Vinewood and Michigan Avenue, across from a Cadillac factory. Upstairs from them was REP, which had its own facility. Dozens of people poured energy into making the Co-op functional. A Chicago printer came out to give them a day of instruction on operating the Harris press. They also had a manual. A comrade of Carl Smith’s from the League of Revolutionary Black Workers worked in a large printing establishment. He brought a professional electrician to the Co-op to wire the machines.6 Fredy Perlman had previous printing experience running a mimeograph copy shop in New York City and working on mid-size
offset printers. Other skilled individuals came through the Co-op in the early years and helped troubleshoot the Harris press as they got to know its quirks.

Setting up cameras and a darkroom were critical to making the Co-op functional. Lorraine Perlman described Fredy Perlman’s approach to designing the space: “Fredy read books about darkroom design and drew up plans for adjacent darkrooms, one for each camera. Then the layout of the rest of the shop was decided on. With the same meticulous care he had used on statistical analyses in Yugoslav classrooms, Fredy now used flow charts to determine where to place the equipment, the goal being to avoid moving the paper unnecessarily from the time it was loaded onto the press until it was packed in boxes at the cutter. (Paper-moving was no trivial concern.)”

One friend, Judy Campbell, installed plumbing in the darkroom. Another friend helped them acquire an enormous supply of film, plates, and darkroom supplies—purchased for $500 at the auction of a bankrupt print shop. Lorraine wrote that a single lot of panchromatic film lasted them through the 1970s, permitting Fredy, “sometimes with Carl Smith, sometimes with me, to experiment with color reproduction without thought to expense of supplies.” She said of this period at the Co-op, “Fredy was exhilarated by all aspects of the new activity … he frequently asserted that never before had he felt so intellectually stimulated as he was by the challenges and gratifications he found in mastering the graphic arts equipment and techniques.”

The Harris press only accommodated one metal image plate at a time, so printing multiple colors required that the same sheet of paper pass through the machine once for each color, with the need to carefully align the page so it registered properly. They printed on whatever discounted or free paper that was available to them, often acquiring remaindered stock from other printers or paper distributors. Different print runs make use of different kinds of paper—sometimes coated or uncoated stock, with oddly textured or colored heavier weight paper for the covers.

Marszalek would describe Fredy’s inventive approach to printing, “[H]e came to Chicago with one of his first color pamphlets and proudly told himself and my printer partner at J. S. Jordan Press that he got his press to register pretty well and managed to mix inks to approximate full color printing. As I remember he used three colors: yellow, red and dark blue but not black. He was shocked when we told him that the four-color process was exactly what he was trying to achieve. He had never heard of that before!”

Soon after setting up the Co-op, its users wrote up a set of shared guidelines which established that no single person or group controlled access to the equipment:

The equipment of the Printing Co-op is social property. It is and shall be controlled by all individuals who need, use and maintain it.

It is not and shall not be owned or controlled by any individual or group of individuals, whether they claim to serve, represent, or speak for society, whether they are elected or self-appointed.

The purpose of the Printing Co-op is to provide access to printing equipment to all those individuals in the community who desire to express themselves (on a non-profit basis), with charges made only to maintain the print shop (rent, utilities, materials, maintenance of the machinery).

It is not the purpose of the Printing Co-op to solve the problem of unemployment, nor to provide business opportunities for enterprising capitalists.

There were numerous discussions about the role of wages—and wage labor—as it related to printing. There were some who would have liked the Co-op to provide employment, and others who hoped to earn income through the Co-op. But the Perlmans doubted from the beginning that it could ever function as a commercial enterprise—the equipment

---

7 Ibid., 62.
8 Ibid., 64.
9 Lorraine Perlman read this statement at a panel discussion at 9338 Campau Gallery, October 9, 2016.
10 Email from Bernard Marszalek, October 5, 2016.

These guidelines were taped to the wall at the Detroit Printing Co-op.
was too old, and trying to make the Co-op profitable would limit the flexibility of letting anyone come in and use it freely. Ultimately, the group that first set up the Co-op aimed to make it a place where participants could engage in printing and simultaneously resist having their labor transformed into what Fredy Perlman might call “indifferent activity” undertaken as a means of survival. While profit was never a motive, they did have bills. It was important for the Co-op to take on paying jobs in the first few years in order to settle their debts. They had borrowed $5,000 to acquire the equipment and space necessary to get things up and running. Lorraine Perlman kept track of the Co-op’s accounts. They had a list of debtors taped to the wall and recorded who had been paid off. It took them most of two years to pay back what they owed, which they did by collectively taking on paid jobs for others. After that period, most of the work done at the Co-op was self-defined by people who bought supplies themselves and contributed to the maintenance of the print shop. They calculated that the upkeep of the Co-op cost an average of $800 per month, or $30 per working day. Co-op users could contribute to the maintenance of the print shop by bringing in paying work, paying a share of the $800 monthly expenses, or helping on paid projects. This work was different from wage labor—people were free to come and go and no one was profiting from their work. The labor that any individual put into working at the Co-op on paid projects went directly toward meeting the basic financial demands of the print shop (rent, supplies, debts).

Users were also expected to schedule use of equipment, clean up after themselves, and do their own ordering and purchasing: “Those who take it for granted that secretaries, maids, janitors and errand boys ‘will take care of all that for a small fee’ would do well to rethink their ‘radicalism’ and to take a post in a capitalist corporation, where such behavior is institutionalized.”

After the Co-op opened, they created a price list. A note at the top reads, “All payment is made in advance because, not being a capitalist enterprise, the Printing Co-op cannot extend credit, does not have liquid funds, and does not stockpile inventories of materials.” The Co-op rules are printed on the back of the price list along with further explanations about the nature of work at the Co-op, which was done by “one or several users of the Printing Co-op who are willing and able to carry it through competently.” There is no reference to Co-op “members,” although I use the term sometimes in this book—people are referred to as “users” of the Co-op.

People were explicitly discouraged from trying to use the Co-op equipment to turn a profit—“a person who does work at ‘cut rates’ is not beneficial to the Printing Co-op, since such ‘service’ takes away the work—from typesetting to printing to trimming and folding—were performed by union labor. Union bugs were first placed on printed material produced by the International Typographical Union (ITU) in the late nineteenth century. These have a precedent in printer’s marks, which have appeared in books since the late fifteenth century. At the time, a printer’s mark represented both the publishing house and the print shop, which were one and the same place. As the work of the typesetter and the printer became separated from that of the publisher—one worked with machines and the other with ideas—printers fell more cleanly into the category of “workers” than “thinkers,” but there has always been some overlap. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, many anarchists were printers, and many printers were anarchists. Political scientist Kathy Ferguson has written of the centrality of printers in the physical and social reproduction of the anarchist movement.

19 Another descendent of the printer’s mark is a publisher’s logo.
in the United States between 1871 and 1945: “Because the technology of publishing required many skilled printers, because commercial print shops often rejected anarchist materials, and because of a general anarchist reverence for the written word, printing was one of the most common occupations of anarchists.” In writing about the role of the printer in the development of socialism, French philosopher Régis Debray describes the printer as “quintessentially a ‘worker intellectual or an intellectual worker,’ the very ideal of that human type who would become the pivot of socialism: ‘the conscious proletarian.’”

While the Perlmans did not explicitly identify as anarchists or socialists (or any “-ist,” for that matter), they followed in the tradition of radical left printers. As Ferguson writes, the anarchists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had “less money to spend on new technology, and thus printers. As Ferguson writes, “Labadie, of an anarchist printer is Joseph (August 2014), p. 393. One example of an anarchist printer is Joseph Labadie. Ferguson writes, “Labadie, whose collection of anarchist materials forms the basis of the University of Michigan archive of radical literature bearing his name, had been in the same office in Chicago since the 1920s and the space was full of literature and materials that dated back to those days. Members included older Wobblies who tended toward democratic socialism, and younger activists who leaned toward anarchism. At some point in the spring of 1970, Fredy Perlman designed a mark for the Detroit Printing Co-op. The language around the bug—“Abolish the wage system / Abolish the state / All power to the workers!”—is part of the preamble to the IWW constitution. The Perlmans had a copy of Joyce Kornbluh’s 1964 graphic history of the IWW, Rebel Voices, which may have provided inspiration for the label. The Co-op bug communicates both information about the print shop and an idea for system change. The IWW is a radical union, and in calling for the abolition of the state and the wage system, the Co-op bug demonstrates the ways in which the aims of the IWW (e.g., “One Big Union”) are different from traditional labor unions that seek primarily to negotiate fair wages and working conditions for the workers they represent.

Unlike some other IWW union bugs from this time period, such as New York City’s hand-drawn badge for Come! Unity Press (with the tagline “Survival by Sharing”) or even the Oberlin, Ohio New Media Workshop’s “An injury to one is an injury to all,” the Detroit Co-op’s bug directly commands the reader to act (“Abolish the state!”). It eschews cuteness or any romanticizing of what it means to upend the wage system. It isn’t hand-drawn—it isn’t something you can do at home—it is machine made, all caps, insistent.

Printing at the Co-op
The Harris offset press was an enormous, ancient, cast-iron machine with wooden wheels. One Co-op user, Ralph Franklin, recalled, “There were open gears that you were certain would grab your elbow at some point.” At least one person, Peter Allen, did get his shirt caught in the gears while printing and narrowly avoided serious injury.) In addition to the large Harris press, the Co-op had a smaller Davidson 863 two-cylinder offset press that could print 16 x 18 inches and a smaller Multilith 1250 offset duplicator that could do 11 x 14 inches, a large sheet folder for folding book signatures, a...
stitcher for stapling the spine of smaller publications, and a Harris Seybold paper cutter. In 1973, they acquired a hot glue perfect binding machine which enabled them to print thicker volumes.26

Bill Bryce spent a fair amount of time at the Co-op with his partner, Elaine Crawford. They mostly used the Multilith 1250, which was easier to use than the Davidson, but not without its own hazards. One night Crawford’s ponytail was caught in the Multilith, and she was rescued by the same upstairs neighbor who had saved Peter Allen from the Harris press.

Stewart Shevin was a young high schooler when he began going to the Co-op. He learned all the stages of typesetting and printing, but was wary of the final stage: cutting. If you hadn’t participated in a book’s production, it was generally understood that you should not offer to cut the books and inadvertently ruin the job. Furthermore, for fifteen-year-old Shevin, the cutter was hard to use. It “had a huge fly-wheel on it, a clutch mechanism and a safety. You’d get the thing going, the fly-wheel would start going off, you’d pull up on one lever and push down to actually make the cut, and at that time I could barely work it, because I didn’t have the weight to step down and get the leverage and the height to do it.”27

Typesetting
The Co-op did not have typesetting equipment. Many of the publications were typeset at *Fifth Estate*’s offices on W. Warren Avenue.28 To lay out a page, a person would type out text then work at a light table to line it up on a sheet of non-reproducible blue graph paper. The table was back-lit which made the grid lines visible. Once the pages were made up, they were taken to the Co-op to be photographed on a large flat-bed camera to produce a film negative. The image was then transferred right-reading to a metal plate which would be affixed to the press. Ralph Franklin said that sometimes, "you’d have a long galley and in the middle of a paragraph there might be a mistake—or you wanted something that was bold, or italic. If we didn’t want to re-type the whole thing again we would type out the one line, cut it very small, put it on a light table so you could see through it, cut the other type, and replace it. You would have little bits of paper everywhere. Sometimes you might have gotten it laid out and ready to go to the printer, and a word had fallen off. And then you had to find it. It was a laborious method of doing things, but it was always a great time."29

Carl Smith, and sometimes Lorraine Perlman, typeset texts at the Black Star offices on Fenkell Avenue. Black Star had modern equipment which dramatically cut down on the amount of time it took to set pages of type. Around 1975, Fredy and Lorraine began laying out text at Dumont Press Graphix, a typesetting and printing collective in Kitchener, Ontario. Black & Red publications printed at Dumont are identifiable through their use of the typeface Melior.30

The Co-op had a lithographic camera attached to the darkroom, light tables for working with negatives, and an arc-light plate burner. The switch for the light was inside the darkroom, and whenever someone needed to use it, they’d shout, “Lights!” before flipping the switch, to give people time to turn away so they weren’t blinded by the brightness. Ideally there were two people operating the lights, because carbon from the arc-lights could fall on the floor and cause a fire.31

The Co-op equipment did not work well for printing newspapers, though Shevin printed a student paper there on sheet-fed pages. High-volume newspaper printing requires a rotary press, so underground and alternative papers like *Fifth Estate* were printed elsewhere. Hamish Sinclair, who had known Fredy Perlman in New York City, moved to Detroit and worked at the Co-op. He and his comrades published the newspaper *r. p. m.* (revolutions per minute), which was directed to factory workers. At first, they thought they might print it at the Co-op, but ended up working with a commercial printer, though they still made use of the Co-op’s light tables and darkroom.32
By the end of the 1970s, the printing industry was already beginning to decline, and print shops were closing. Publishers were no longer censoring content the way they were at the beginning of the decade. Fredy and Lorraine Perlman were often the only ones using the Co-op. Work at the print shop still brought satisfaction, but it had also become an obligation. The building was unglamorous, the ceiling leaked, it was dark. At the end of 1979 their landlord informed them of plans to sell the building. Unable to find anyone in Detroit who wanted to reopen the Co-op in a new location, they decided to close. A group of young anarchists in Ann Arbor (the Nameless Anarchists) took the Harris offset press. Other equipment ended up in the basements and workshops of friends and acquaintances.

Connected with radicals, printers, and publishers in England, France, and Canada, the Co-op was an integral and unforgettable part of the left movement in the United States in the 1970s. It had a profound effect on many who worked there. Collective projects that members engaged in were later shaped by the ideas they read about in publications printed at the Co-op, and by the discussions and arguments they generated. Foremost among these was a desire to work cooperatively, to abolish the wage system, and to abolish the state. 33

From the outset, the focus of the Co-op was to be a productive space where people could print whatever they wanted, uncensored, without anyone’s labor being exploited. Over the years, the Co-op was the site of countless forms of collective work, with groups forming and reforming, people jumping in to work on one project or another, coming to work on their own, or joining on a larger project. Typesetting and printing were often a truly collective experience, involving six or seven people in a room working, eating, drinking, arguing, and laughing.

33 Email from Ralph Franklin, June 30, 2019.