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Jess Baines looks back at London's printmaking workshops of the 1960s and 70s, DIY sites of political and community activism that rejected the role of the artist to participate in a network of campaign groups, radical publishers and distributors.

The Poster Workshop was set up in London in the summer of 1968 and closed in 1971. It was inspired by the Atelier Populaire, set up in the École des Beaux Arts, Paris, in May 1968.

Between the late 1960s and 1970s numerous alternative printshops were set up across the UK, with the founding objective of producing, providing or facilitating the cheap and safe printing of radical materials. They were started by libertarians, aligned and non-aligned Marxists, anarchists and feminists, and as such were constitutive of the fractured and fractious politics of the post-1968 left. Emerging mostly at the tail end of, or just after, the 1960s underground culture, they arose in a period that saw not just the extension of political concerns to cultural ones but also the rise of community activism and feminism. Despite their differences in position, those involved in the various printshops shared common left/libertarian ground: they were, in general, anti-capitalism and anti-'the state', anti-imperialism, anti-hierarchy, anti-racist and pro-feminist. The London-based [Poster Workshop](#) (1968-1971), which recently uploaded its archive to the web, provides a snapshot of some radical concerns of the time: the political situations in Vietnam, Cuba, Zimbabwe, Angola, Iran and Ireland; apartheid; housing; racism and rights for workers. Their rhetoric was one of resistance, solidarity, fight, strike, occupation, revolution and freedom. Later, starting in the mid-1970s, the posters of screen-printing workshops such as [See Red Women's Workshop](#) and the [Poster Collective](#), while similarly based on principles of solidarity and revolt, became, in the main, less direct calls to action and more attempts to provide alternative and critical representations of political concerns.

The 'radical printshop' itself was not a new phenomenon in Britain; printers of contentious material have been in existence in the UK - often at the risk of imprisonment - since at least the seventeenth century.

However the workshops referred to here came out of a new historical constellation of technological possibility and political and cultural imperatives.¹ Their aim was not just to produce politically radical materials but also to enact those politics through their organisational and production practices. Liberation and equality would not just occur at some future event - i.e. the revolution - but through ongoing practice in everyday life. The printshops were a nodal point in a network of activist groups, radical publishers and alternative distributors, many of whom put their politics into the way they worked and organised. A significant numbers of those involved in the printshops had been to art school and were critical of the dominant cultures of both art and mass media - a critique reflected by the Poster Collective's statement that 'In most respects we have rejected the traditional cultural role of the artist. The artist is a kind of emblem of freedom, someone who is negatively free to do anything in the name of art'.² In a period where radical social change seemed imminent and the critique of everything essential, the move by artists to collective practice and machine printing can, in our historical imagination, be seen to resonate with the productivist turn by artists in early twentieth century Russia/USSR.

Participation and access were key concerns in the early days and articulated through an ethos of self-help and skill-sharing. An entry for a 'self-help printer', as they were initially known, in the 1974 edition of the handbook *Alternative London* reads, 'Crest Press [...] have meetings anyone can attend on Fridays at 3.30 to decide what to allocate their printing time to the following week - they only print what they like and give preference to political posters and pamphlets. They will teach you how to print and expect you to help. You pay cost price.'³ In the same year Jonathan Zeitlyn, who was involved in Inter-Action Trust, a community arts project in North London, began producing the booklet *Print: How You can Do It*, a guide to DIY printing in which he describes how by taking charge of the means of print production, we 'the people' could begin to articulate a new culture. Zeitlyn continued producing these guides until the early 1990s, when he declared that with the development of desktop publishing the DIY idea of self-publishing had become commercialised: the activity was no longer attached to collective emancipation but to individualised self-sufficiency.

For feminists, learning the technology of print, a traditionally male domain, was as empowering as the material they produced. **Onlywomen Press**, a group of radical lesbian feminist writers who set up their publishing house in 1974, initially operated their own printing presses, having trained in printing at Camberwell College of Art. This was not only pragmatic but felt by them to be a 'physical, material' manifestation of their feminism, along with their commitment to training women in the production process. Other women-only printshops - e.g. **Women In Print**, See Red Women's Workshop and **Lenthall Road** - shared a similar view, although in reality the capacity for training was often limited by economics. In 1986, the Greenwich Mural Workshop produced an exhibition and catalogue called *Printing Is Easy...? Community Printshops 1970-1986*, with work and statements from 32 different printshops. The first part of the title is indicative; the organisers had noticed that the self-help ethos had emerged as much more problematic than initially conceived and that by the mid-1980s many printshops had become essentially service points for radical or community organisations as opposed to spaces of participatory empowerment.

By the mid-1990s most of the printshops had either folded, been incorporated into other organisations or acquired conventional (that is, hierarchical) management structures.⁴ Currently only two collectives survive, **Calverts** and **Aldgate Press**, both London-based offset litho printing businesses. Speculative explanations for the disappearance of the printshops would no doubt point to a number of factors, the most obvious perhaps being that print is no longer the essential media form for radical communications, and that emerging digital technologies seemed to offer a democratisation of production without the need for collectivism - although of course they are facilitating new kinds of collaborative activity. There is little written about these organisations; the only significant published source at present is the previously mentioned *Printing is Easy...?*. Alongside academic research project on the subject I have set up a wiki to initiate a collective history of the printshops at <http://www.radicalprintshops.org>. Anyone who was involved in the radical printshops is welcome to contribute.

Footnotes

1. The popularisation of screen-printing and the development of

offset-litho meant that printing technology became much more accessible both in terms of cost and skill.↑

2. From *Printing is Easy... ?*, ed. Carol Kenna, Lynne Medcalf and Rick Walker, London: Greenwich Mural Workshop, 1986, p.18.↑
3. Nicholas Saunders, *Alternative London*, 1974, p.91.↑
4. For example, Paddington Printshop, which started in the 1970s has evolved into londonprintstudio, still working with a 'community' but of students and artists producing their own work. <http://www.londonprintstudio.com>↑

Comments
