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This presentation looks at editorial approaches and design choices employed by the East London group part of the political organisation Big Flame to produce a selection of their publications.

I am going to consider how the group developed design and editorial processes consistently with its political vision — with the overarching aim of embodying and enacting ideals of democracy, social justice and solidarity.

p. 2] This entangled relationship between the political vision and the organisational and production practice of East London Big Flame is discussed through an analysis of 3 publications. And looking at different aspects of the pamphlets, I will argue that the group interpreted and developed ideals of democracy and solidarity towards experimental approaches to publishing.

Considering design and layout as a manifestation of the group's ideology, I have been interested in how visual qualities and the chosen production processes, provide a way to read and possibly nuance histories of publishing, design, and political activism.

This presentation draws from research produced one year ago during my master in History of design. Titled *The Collective production of Radical Politics in Print: Libertarian culture and publishing in the 1970s*, my dissertation connected an interest in the political context of the time, with a broader interest in publishing as a form of knowledge production, knowledge dissemination. And in the role of political publications as agents of group formation, group identity and coherence.

Considering these pamphlets part of the broader history of radical publishing in the 1970s, the publications here fit within the narrative developed by cultural and (alternative) media historians. This narrative describes the booming of radical publishing as symptomatic of two main factors:

— On the one hand is a fragmented political left-wing scenario populated by independent groups active outside the political party spectrum.

p. 3]

— On the other hand is technological change in printing. As electric typewriters and small-scale offset lithography became common office equipment to fulfil the growing demand for document duplication — these tools also provided the means for radical publishing to grow.

p. 4] A government study from 1977 titled *Periodicals and the Alternative Press* — suggests that fundamental to this growth was a widespread dissatisfaction with an ‘insufficiently diverse established press’ — unwilling or unable to provide ‘space for the opinions of small minorities’.

Figures illustrating the proliferation of radical publishing are considered in a pamphlet titled *Here Is the Other News: Challenges to the Local Commercial Press*. Published in 1980 by the research organisation Minority Press Group, the book indicates an increase in the number of community newspapers from 10 to over 60 between 1969 and 1975.

While notes from 1979, and part of the *Publication Distribution Co-operative’s* archive at MayDay Rooms in London, list around 90 periodical and 200 publishers of books and pamphlets (including Big Flame), that were distributed across the radical and community bookshop network.

Going back to the first point — a description of the fragmented left-wing scenario in Big Flame’s journal *Revolutionary Socialism* (from winter 1979) — explains the emergence of many independent groups as a consequence of widespread disillusionment with traditional left parties and their way of organising.

A survey of these groups is part of another pamphlet from the same year. Titled *Beyond the Fragments, Feminism and the Making of Socialism*, the text lists the women’s movement, solidarity movements with international struggles, shop stewards’ combines and local action committees, the antifascist movement, theatre groups, tenants association, squatters, community groups and alternative newspapers — whose political action focused on personal concerns, histories and experiences.

p. 5] Shown here is the first pamphlet that I want to discuss. From a design and editorial perspective, the 16 pages publication is striking because of the extensive number of quotes constructing the narrative across the pages. Ultimately the use of quotes is determined by the participatory process which the group developed — aiming to produce a publication including the highest number of participants.

Titled *People’s Food Co-op*, the pamphlet was produced in 1975 by a group of women part of Big Flame, together with members of the cooperative. The publication explains the project, its collective organisation around the Lincoln housing estate in Bow (east London) — while also providing documentation of people’s everyday life in the area.

The cooperative formed in 1974 as a reaction to constantly rising inflation, food prices, and around the necessity of procuring affordable food in one of the country’s most deprived areas.

p. 6] The pamphlet provides an overview of the different tasks involved in running the co-operative, so that the initiative of the Lincoln estate could be replicated elsewhere: the group met every 2 weeks, orders were agreed collectively and everyone received the same food. Participants aimed to share jobs ‘as equally as possible’ (not always successfully), and tasks included buying food, organising it in boxes and fetching the orders.

Together with the aim of procuring food more cheaply, key to the food co-op was finding ways of sharing and building solidarity through collectivising aspects of daily life. Considering issues related to isolation in the home, health and childcare, personal relationships, housing, rent, food and energy prices. Members of East London Big Flame vividly describe these aspects as ‘the political of everyday life’.

Influenced by socialism, feminism, and theories of the New Left — East London Big Flame considered how aspects of capitalist production had increasingly invaded areas of social life (including the home, schools, social services), and how work and family were both playing a role as part of one system, ‘the social factory’.

p. 7] The food cooperative is described as an independent initiative from Big Flame — whose contacts are printed small at the back — emphasising the fact that anyone could join without being a member of Big Flame.

The pamphlet was primarily distributed in the neighbourhood and across the women movement. The hand-written logo on the cover illustrates its political rationale, while the subtitle — ‘Lincoln Estate, Bow’ — positions it within East London’s tradition of working class militancy of trade unions and tenants’ unions.

The various quotes come from interviews conducted by members across the group. Interviews were then transcribed, edited and selected — and the page layout intentionally draws attention to this participatory process.

Extracts are loosely positioned on the page as single blocks, while B/W illustrations fill the gaps in between. The speech bubbles on the cover, also appearing sporadically inside the pamphlet, further highlight the idea of multiple voices speaking, and of the narrative developing as a conversation.

The process of producing the publication is explained at the back as follows:

‘As soon as any group starts to write anything, problems of who is best at doing it, and who has [had] most experience come up. Those who don’t participate in writing feel left out and distanced from it, those who do [participate], feel over-responsible. We tried to get round this by ‘interviewing’ each other on tape and putting what we all said in the pamphlet’. ... ‘This makes the pamphlet a product of all of us, if still an unequal one in some respects’.

... ‘We also think that this way of writing makes the pamphlet more lively and real than many political documents.’

From this description, interviewing emerges as a methodology to overcome issues related to skills, confidence, and experience — aiming to develop a democratic process ‘as inclusive as possible’.

Rooted in a primary need such as food supply, the cooperative transformed the routine of procuring food for a single household into a public process, where collective shopping became a form of resistance to the capitalist market. And the pamphlet’s production followed a similar process.

These collective processes are a way of prefiguring ideals of democracy and social justice, and ultimately shaped the pamphlet’s visual language.

Discussed across alternative media and social movement studies, the concept of prefigurative politics was key to East London Big Flame's work.

Central to prefigurative politics is the consideration of the present as a space to test and rehearse ideas of solidarity and democracy. The present becomes a space to prototype the desired vision of the future — allowing its development over time.

Across literature from the period, *prefiguration* is described as strategy bringing immediate change to people's lives, beginning from personal relationships. In the same issue of *Revolutionary Socialism* that was introduced earlier, activist Lynne Segal expresses the concept of *prefigurative politics* using the libertarian catch-phrase 'you must live your politics' — and stating that 'to change your own life and the world about you now is an important part of building for socialism in the future'.

Fundamental to *prefigurative politics* was that 'a vision of the future is meaningful only if it is acted upon in the present', as Barbara Epstein writes in the book *Political protest and Cultural revolution*.

Affirming that the desired socialist society 'cannot be separated from the process of its making', Sheila Rowbotham explains in *Beyond the Fragments* how *prefigurative political forms* were used as a way to develop non-hierarchical and egalitarian approaches to organisation: as a way of refusing the reproduction of power relationships typical of capitalism.

In relation to publishing, prefigurative politics informed approaches that challenged the centralisation of power in the hands of writers, editors and designers. Considering these as authoritarian figures, *prefigurative politics* functioned as a way to democratise and demystify the printed medium, favouring collective and open ended processes.

Discussing the technologies that transformed publishing into a do-it-yourself production while working at Centreprise — one of the first community bookshops in East London in the early 70s — Ken Worpole suggested that tape-recorders and new reprographic printing processes, typewriters, duplicating machines, photocopies and the development of relatively cheap offset litho printing, took 'the mystery out of the newspaper, the magazine and the book'. Allowing untrained people to access the means of text composition and print for the first time.

p. 8] The second publication that I want to show is titled *Fact Folder*, produced by members of East London Big Flame in 3 issues between 1972 and 1973.

Conceived as a counter-information archive of research material for militant organisations, *Fact Folder's* dense textual content extends over 100 pages, it is organised in single case studies, and packaged inside a paper envelope.

There are 2 distinct editorial strategies characterising the production process and the design of the publication.

p. 9] The first strategy consists in the appropriation and re-purposing of information from 'official' sources. The introduction to issue 1 lists Government and company reports, trade union papers, maps and newspaper articles published by the mainstream press. Cut outs of this material stand out visibly against p. 10] the typewritten pages.

The second strategy is called Workers' Inquiry, a collaborative research process where militants and workers were both involved, workers lead the production of knowledge.

From the pages of *Fact Folder* is possible to gain an overview of Big Flame's thinking around working class struggles. The focus on East London communities foregrounded in *People's Food Co-op*, extends here to a number of national and international connections.

Research around the river Thames area — described as a geopolitical space of production and transportation — extends from the port of London to its industrial surroundings. And from the disputes of Ford workers at the Dagenham's factory plant, to the struggles of employees in Cologne (Germany), the United States, and Latin America.

Together with monitoring the social fabric and industrial development of East London, this research looks at the changing conditions of working-class communities, considering different aspects: industry's expansion and contraction during the years of the crisis; industry's geographical relocation and relationships with other industries; changes in work organisation and the impact on workers; changes within the profession because of technological change, the de-skilling of job roles as a consequence of automation; change affecting the relationships between skilled and unskilled workers; and migration and unemployment in specific areas.

These themes are explored through workers' inquiries: conversations with workers were recorded outside the factory gates early in the morning, and this content was used to produce agitational material: leaflets, bulletins and newspapers to distribute back at the factory the following day.

Key to this process was the intention of producing knowledge about work and exploitation, class relations and capitalism from the perspective of workers themselves.

This process combined 'knowledge production and political intervention' together. And content produced in such a way — was considered valuable to understand capitalism, while being helpful to organise against it.

p. 11] Looking at some of the material produced using workers inquiries, it is possible to identify some of the concerns of East London Big Flame in solidarity with Ford workers.

The leaflet here shows a job advert published by Ford, repurposed to raise a number of personal issues faced by workers in dealing with stress and health problems from working on the line; anti-social hours affecting family life and relationships; and issues with mobility unsettling workers — by breaking up friendships, solidarity networks and people's sense of place.

The purpose of the leaflet was to develop relationships across workers who felt unsupported by the traditional trade union structure, especially immigrant workers from different racial and ethnic groups.

In the top right corner of the leaflet is printed a subverted version of Ford's logo reading 'Fraud'. The same logo appears across pages of *Fact Folder*, and of many other publication from the period — reproduced on signs, leaflets and t-shirts worn by protesters during pickets and go-slow across different Ford plants, nationally and internationally.

p. 12] The re-purposing of graphic elements emerges as a consistent feature of *Fact Folder* beginning from the cover, suggesting the intention of presenting *Fact Folder* as the parody of a Government report.

The crest at the top right corner shows the British Royal coat of arms with a worker (to the left) and a protester (to the right) attacking the lion and the unicorn. While the band running across the Royal emblem shows Mao Tse-Tung's quote: 'If you don't hit it, it won't fall'.

p. 13] The same version of this logo was used across pamphlets of the Claimants Union in the same period. The one on the left is titled *Claimants Handbook for Strikers*.

The pamphlet at the centre is the third journal of the National Federation of Claimants Unions, also designed as a facsimile of a Government document. Titled *A load of bullshit: a counter-report on the right to live*, the publication is a response to Henry Fisher's inquiry into social security benefits abuse.

* And to the right, *Women and social security*, published by the Claimants Union in Manchester, shows a variation of the same logo at the back. And the fact that the protester wearing the balaclava is here replaced by a woman, indicates how the design of the logo was adapted in solidarity to the struggles of different social groups.

So far the first pamphlet (*People's Food Co-op*) offered a starting point to talk about *prefigurative politics* as a rationale to challenge the structure and design of a conventional publication; while *Fact Folder* used workers enquires as a collaborative process, and presented different ways in which East London Big Flame appropriated content subverting its meaning.

Moving towards the end of my presentation, the last pamphlet illustrates a different aspect of the group's practice — introducing the difficulties faced by members as they attempted to prefigure, or put into practice, their vision for the future.

p. 14] Titled *Red therapy*, the pamphlet was named after the leaderless therapy group founded by members of East London Big Flame with other participants.

Instead of describing therapy as a remedy to aid recovery from illness, therapy is introduced as a form of empowerment, self improvement, and as a means to resist emotional stress and fight internalised capitalist ideology.

According to the text, therapy best exemplifies the relationship between 'the personal self' and 'the political self', connecting people's personal issues and their political commitment.

The cover of *Red Therapy* illustrates in detail this combination of the personal and the political: the raised fist extends the shape of a heart, and the 2 symbols (the heart and the fist) draw a silhouette framing a group photograph of men, women and children of different ages. While punching through a surface, the fist recalls a liberating gesture rather than a violent one.

The publication records the experiences of the group — including the emotions, difficulties and contradictions faced by members in working together and providing help to each other. The production of the pamphlet is described as a long, ‘confused and contradictory’ process — involving people in writing and re-writing sections while others preferred not to be involved. People left the project after a long time and others joined at a later stage. This troubled collaboration reflected the ‘different levels of expertise and confidence in writing, layout, [and] general articulacy’ of the group members — and resulted in a process ‘not fully collective, or fully democratic’. This criticism and reflective tone is also part of the printed text.

Other notes from East London Big Flame’s archive describe the group’s struggle in pursuing prefiguration as a viable strategy — particularly in relation to the perception of personal life and political activism as elements impossible to set apart.

The pamphlet reports anxieties and the discomfort of group members in relating politics to every area of their life. The need for self-help and *Red Therapy* stems from these internal conflictual relationships.

To conclude, similarly to the way in which prefiguration provided the group with a method to experiment with alternative ways of living and relating, creating the communal and collective processes in which they believed — discussions around writing and designing pamphlets, define editorial and design processes which are also prefigurative.

And Ideas of democracy and solidarity that the group strove to embody in this way — illustrate approaches to publishing which might also be considered experimental.

If we consider the publications’ visual qualities as a manifestation of these ideas, graphic design can be interpreted as a tool to visualise prefigurative political forms enacted by the group. At the same time, graphic design provides a way to interpret and understand specific details of this radical history.

Spreading across all aspects of East London Big Flame’s practice, political ideology informed the linguistic meaning, the production processes and visual forms of these pamphlets — offering also a renewed understanding of publications as designed objects. Because these pamphlets can be considered as physical manifestations and tangible prototypes of the left-libertarian current of the period.