# INFORMATION WAR

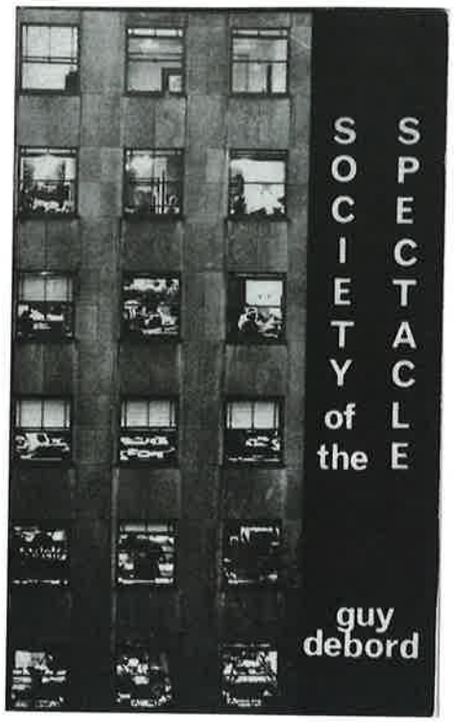
## Daniel Marcus on Danielle Aubert's *Detroit Printing Co-op*

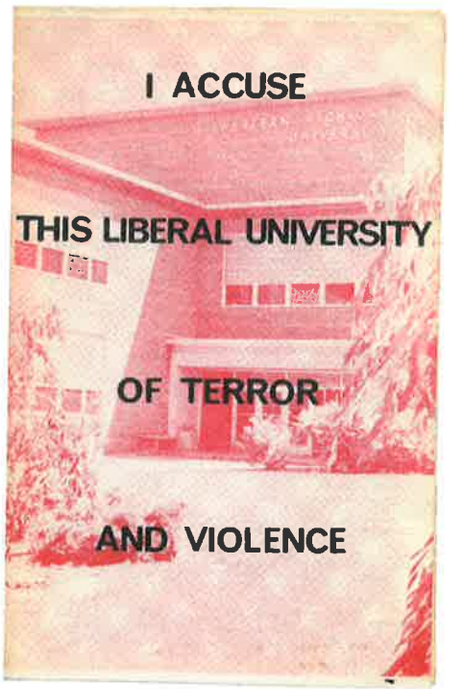
*The Detroit Printing Co-op: The Politics of the Joy of Printing*, by Danielle Aubert. Los Angeles: Inventory Press, 2019. 240 pages.

**A YEAR AFTER** the May 1968 uprisings in France, essayist Maurice Blanchot defended the revolt—which, beginning as a student movement, had culminated in a near-cataclysmic general strike—as an expression of social treason: "In the so-called 'student' action, students never acted as students but rather as revealers of a general crisis, as bearers of a power of rupture putting into question the regime, the State, society." In breaching the norms of the ruling order, this rupture also shook the foundations of personal identity; many of the uprising's protagonists found it impossible to snap back into alignment. Over the course of the rebellion, writes historian Kristin Ross, "real participation—much more than a vague, formal solidarity, much more even than shared ideas—altered the course of lives."

One of those lives was Fredy Perlman's. A professor in economics at Western Michigan University, he had been teaching a course in Turin in the spring of 1968, and caught a train to the French capital shortly before the general strike shuttered the rail system. Joining the cohort of militants occupying the Sorbonne campus at Censier, an annex of the Université de Paris, Perlman immersed himself in the ferment of organizing. Recalling the experience in *Worker-Student Action Committees: France, May '68*, a pamphlet cowritten with fellow militant Roger Gregoire, Perlman noted the importance of communications—the production and dissemination of information—at Centre Censier, where ad hoc groups called *comités d'action* operated a grassroots media service, churning out leaflets, tracts, and reports at a breakneck pace. Thrust into the maelstrom of revolt, Perlman and Gregoire observed, "all the occupants of Censier [become] workers. There are no longer upper and lower class jobs; there are no longer intellectual and manual tasks, qualified labor and unqualified labor; there are only socially necessary activities."

Perlman carried with him the lessons of Censier when he returned to Michigan later that year. Together with his wife, Lorraine, and a band of coconspirators, he founded the journal *Black & Red*, militating in its pages against enemies large and small, from the military-industrial complex to campus administrators and student-government bureaucrats, and urging a total break with the rules of everyday life. Dismissed from his teaching post at the end of 1968, Perlman announced his separation from the academy in a scorching pamphlet, *I Accuse This Liberal University of Terror and Violence*; soon thereafter, he and the other members of the "Black & Red gang" (as their group was affectionately known) pooled their resources to buy a Harris offset-printing press. In the autumn of 1969, the Detroit Printing Co-op opened its doors in a rented garage across the street from a Cadillac plant in a southwestern neighborhood of the city. It was to become the nucleus of a decade-long adventure in antinomian self-expression and an improbable bearer of the "power of rupture" into the heartland of twentieth-century capitalism.




Above: **Cover of the English edition of Guy Debord's 1967 *La société du spectacle* (Society of the Spectacle)** (Black & Red / Radical America, 1970). Below: **Cover of Fredy Perlman's *I Accuse This Liberal University of Terror and Violence*** (Black & Red, 1969).

**AS DOCUMENTED** in design historian Danielle Aubert's richly illustrated book *The Detroit Printing Co-op: The Politics of the Joy of Printing*, the co-op was more than a mere publishing facility: It embodied Perlman's belief in the liberatory power of "combined daily activities," such as book design, typesetting, and printing, which required ongoing cooperation. Anchored by the hulking printing press, the co-op declared its facilities "social property" and offered free use of its equipment to anyone with the requisite know-how; the co-op's members provided training enthusiastically, introducing militants and local teenagers alike to DIY printing and offering a platform for numerous editorial ventures, from the Perlmans' own Black & Red imprint to the journals *riverrun* (a literary magazine) and *Radical America*. Crucially, the co-op paid no wages to its membership; per the guidelines adopted by its founders, it was "not the purpose of the Printing Co-op to solve the problem of unemployment, nor to provide business opportunities for enterprising capitalists." Making no secret of its founders' ambitions, the co-op's union bug, a decal emblazoned on the inner cover of its publications, stated proudly ABOLISH THE WAGE SYSTEM—ABOLISH THE STATE—ALL POWER TO THE WORKERS.

Aubert's research into the co-op's legacy, conducted in close collaboration with Lorraine Perlman, who has maintained Black & Red's operations since Fredy's death in 1985, reveals the project's surprising scope. Equipped to handle large-volume book production, the press churned out numerous left-wing titles during its decade in operation, few of which were likely to have found an audience otherwise. Best known is *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Guy Debord's magnum opus, which Lorraine and Fredy translated collaboratively with a group of friends in 1970. Breaking with the dryly academic design of the original French edition, the Black & Red translation features an array of illustrations and collages based on photographs sourced from the Detroit Public Library. In a photo announcing the chapter "Separation Perfected," a diminutive worker files the tooth of a massive gear; in a photocollage introducing


Illustration from Fredy Perlman's *The Incoherence of the Intellectual: C. Wright Mills' Struggle to Unite Knowledge and Action* (Black & Red, 1970).

the chapter "Time and History," a jumble of consumer electronics is superimposed over the hero of a ticker-tape parade. The first Black & Red edition of *Society of the Spectacle* bore on its cover the image of a dismal apartment complex; however, in a second edition, published in 1977, this design was updated with a 1952 J. R. Eyerman photograph of moviegoers wearing 3D glasses—an image that has since become a visual shorthand for Debord's critique of representation.

Fredy Perlman was a novice printer at the project's outset but soon came to relish the creative potential of the Harris press, interspersing illustrations and photo-collages in numerous co-op publications. Exploiting the process of color separation in ways that recall the work of his contemporaries Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg, Perlman undertook an array of visual experiments in his book designs. Writing about the layout of Perlman's 1970 book *The Incoherence of the Intellectual*, a critique of the work of sociologist C. Wright Mills, Aubert observes that the images operate "as a kind of extension of Perlman's argument." CMYK color separations overlap and combine to suggest the patterns of dialectical thought: In one of the book's many photocollage illustrations, a smiling woman holds a sign bearing the message SEE THE U.S.A. IN YOUR CHEVROLET; below, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg (American citizens who were charged with spying for the Soviets and executed in 1953) stare out from behind prison bars. None of these images straightforwardly illustrates the book's analysis; rather than subordinate image to text, Aubert observes, Perlman approached the printing process as a totality, and saw himself as occupying the role of "intellectual craftsman," a position that unified the mental and the manual.

This faith in the creative potential of manual labor aligned Perlman's project with the hardscrabble ethos of the American counterculture, while setting it apart from the increasingly sectarian milieu of Parisian radicals. Perlman's embrace of visual illustrations drew particular ire from the Situationist International; a broadsheet written by members of the group's New York chapter rejected the "repeated introduction of unresolved esthetic images" in the Black & Red edition of *Society of the Spectacle* and urged Perlman to cease collaboration with *Radical America* and other non-Debordian organizations. Perlman resisted these entreaties; he regarded the co-op as an experiment in uncensored speech and defended its autonomy against "toadies" from all corners of the Left. Accordingly, among the shop's most visually lavish productions was 1972's *Manual for Revolutionary Leaders*, a parody of left-wing authoritarianism aimed against the leader/follower binary. Coauthored by Fredy and Lorraine under the pseudonym Michael Velli, the book mashes together New Left rhetoric with quotations from Hitler, Mussolini, and Lenin, accompanied by photo-collages conjoining images of American ultramodernity with scenes from Stalin's USSR. (The parody went unnoticed by many readers, and citations had to be added in the book's second printing.)

**BY THE END OF THE 1970S,** the co-op had run out of steam, its energies sapped by political demobilization; when the co-op's landlord sold the property in 1980, Perlman and his collaborators called it quits on the project. Taking stock of the Left's failures, he developed a jaundiced view of civilization writ large, and, inspired by the work of anthropologists Marshall Sahlins and Pierre Clastres, set about assembling the fragments of a grand narrative of human alienation and domination: the pursuit privileged the struggles of indigenous, enslaved, and colonized peoples against the ruses of progress (including women's resistance to patriarchy). Assembled in Perlman's best-known book, *Against His-story, Against Leviathan!* (1983), this research recasts the story of humanity as a struggle of free peoples, called "zeks," to resist the depredations of Leviathan, as Thomas Hobbes termed the sovereign nation-state (in Perlman's account, a monster antithetical to nature and freedom alike). Continuing this exploration in his final book, *The Strait* (1988), which Lorraine Perlman published after her husband's death, Fredy focused his attention nearer to home, diving into the history of indigenous communities in the region now known as Detroit and dramatizing their encounters with Leviathan's white-faced emissaries. Among the most remarkable documents reproduced in Aubert's compendium are Perlman's copious—and painstakingly organized—notes on the Great Lakes tribes and their histories, which, jotted in colored ink on large sheets of graph paper, chart an epic pattern of resistance and subjugation.

Perlman's shift in focus from present to past marked a political shift as well: Dispensing with the slogan "All Power to the Workers," and thus with the leftist pursuit of cooperative production, his late work rails against the entire world of modernity, its creative side included. After the revolts of 1968, he had held out hope that communications technology—printing presses, Risograph machines, etc.—might be repurposed toward collective ends. Submitted to the co-op's program of "combined daily activity," individual photographic images became fragments in an encompassing CMYK totality. The New York Situationists tarred Black & Red as image worshippers, yet the group misunderstood the significance of images for Perlman and his collaborators: Nothing was to be left "unresolved" in their choice of photographs—every illustration was calculated to make its point. Often, this worked to brilliant effect, as with the pamphlet *The Fetish Speaks!* (1969/1973), Perlman's cartoon treatment of Marx's *Capital*; but as his faith in left-wing insurgency waned, so too did his belief in the dialectical function of images.

It is fitting, then, that he turned to the art of William Blake in his later years, illustrating *Against His-story* with plates from Blake's illustrations of *The Divine Comedy* (1824–27). On the book's cover, an eagle-headed monster—Leviathan's avatar—assaults a nude male, clasping his muscle-bound torso with claws and coils. Amid tooth-and-nail combat, the bodies of man and monster converge and congeal, the predator becoming its quarry and vice versa. The engraving's demonic ambiguity sums up Perlman's argument: History, a rictus masquerading as order, holds us in its death grip; it can't be called to reason—can't be neatly detourned, as the Situationists had hoped. The demon is called progress, and we must pierce its heart. □

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