

Nicholas Thoburn's *Anti-Book: On the Art and Politics of Radical Publishing*:

An Extended Review

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When I was finishing my reading of Nicholas Thoburn's *Anti-Book: On the Art and Politics of Radical Publishing*, I happened to be at a party in a small town in southern England. The party lasted over two or three days and I had my copy of *Anti-Book* out with me in the garden on several occasions, finishing my reading in the sun during the afternoons. On returning from the party, on the flight back to Copenhagen, I picked up my copy of the book to go over some of the notes I had made in the margins of the text, only to discover the book had been altered in different ways, not only by me, making my notes, circling certain concepts, underlining sentences I felt needed to be highlighted, but by somebody else. Minor defacements had been made, illegible scribbles had been added, drawings had been inserted, an assorted selection of vegetation (foliage, straws of grass, etc.) now complemented the bound pages of the book. Presumably, the group of children present at the party was guilty of these transgressions, although I say this with the reservation that I've not had the time to duly investigate the matter. In either case, compiling my notes on the Copenhagen flight into an early draft of this review, it seemed to me, the modified object I now held in my hands (and I deliberately say object rather than book), was the result of a somewhat serendipitous coincidence, given the context, interconnecting these acts of reading: my own reading, a primarily content-oriented one, focussing on academic publishing, this review and resulting in various notes, and those *other* readings; ones that probably had a lot more to do with the book as a media form and a form of materiality (an object that happened to be there on the patio, but one with very particular connotations and material features) and with the book's situatedness within a social context (the party; the craft, drawing and sketching activities of

the children; the adult person reading on the patio then leaving his book behind as if asking for an intervention; the various resources offered by the landscape and the environment that we co-inhabited for those days (leaves, straws of grass); etc.). At that point, it seemed to me, this object – no longer a book in its *inactive* sense, if there is such a thing, but in its *activated* sense – could not have been a more appropriate starting point for writing about the themes explored in Thoburn's *Anti-Book*. In fact, Thoburn's book – defined at one point, somewhat ironically, as a book about anti-books very much in the form of an authored monograph and, indeed, a book – had become, through the various registers of discursive and material interaction, and the various social contexts through which the book had passed during my reading and material handling of it, something other than a book, a object akin, indeed, to the very concept of the anti-book introduced by Thoburn.

In *Anti-Book*, Thoburn very convincingly demonstrates, through the impressive array of cases he brings to his readers' attention, how the anti-book operates precisely as such an activated and, indeed, activating object – an object that we activate and that activate us – not only in foregrounding the social production of the anti-book, although that too, but in placing the emphasis firmly on its sociomaterial existence as a complex object. Thoburn's book is full of cases and examples of these activated and activating functions of the anti-book, ranging from the choreographed, ritual handling of *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung*, better known, perhaps, as *The Little Red Book* (p. 130), to the constructivist 'object as comrade' (p. 65), to the 'polysensuality' of futurists books (p. 140) and, one of the most interesting examples, 'the evental existence' of objects such as London Psychogeographical Association's 1994 pamphlet produced specifically to accompany a trip to the standing stones at Calanais in the Outer Hebrides to commemorate the death of Asger Jorn – indeed, 'an artifact exclusive to its event' (p. 108). Considering my copy of *Anti-Book* – defaced, annotated, with all its added layers and its cover now stained and creased from my travelling extensively with the book – it has, in a sense, become an object similar to the cases drawn

upon in *Anti-Book*, although indeliberately so, and needless to say, in a much less sophisticated fashion. Put differently, it is in its current state not the quite the same object that was sent to me a few months ago. Itself the cause and consequence of a set of activities and actions – some conscious, some ritual or ceremonial, some playful or even mischievous, some reflective – it now testifies to the book as an activated and activating object that pushes its own form towards a *beyond* that may never be reached but that opens up to a plethora of wonderful transgressions.

This notion of a book that seeks to push to its limits its own sociomaterialities, and thus also those of publishing practice, seems to me to be integral to the concept of the anti-book. In fact, this relationship between the book and publishing practices, and the concept of the anti-book, is constantly at stake in Thoburn's book and although the blurb on the back of *Anti-Book* states, in no uncertain terms, that this is 'not a book about books,' I would challenge that claim. *Anti-Book*, to me, is most certainly a book about the book – its ontologies, histories and futures – but it is also something else. It is also a book about *specific* books and book- and publishing related practices that, to quote *Anti-Book* itself, 'push to their limits their *full materiality* [...] where the materiality of a book comprises the dynamic interplay of textual content and media form' (p. 1). We are not, then, operating in a space *beyond* books, print and publishing but in a space that allows the concept of the anti-book, discursively and sociomaterially, to emerge *in relation* to books, print and publishing. The tension this relation implies seems crucial to me in that it generates the sites where experimental processes become viable in relation to the political domain of radical publishing.

In *Anti-Book*, Thoburn refers to these sites as 'sites of [the anti-book's] emergence and intervention' (p. 3) and proceeds to list three such sites: 'artists' books or bookworks, communist writing and publishing and post-digital publishing potentials of contemporary and emerging media' (p. 3). Although these are useful sites, indeed, to consider in relation to the anti-book, I don't think the claim here is that they constitute an exhaustive list of the sites in

which the anti-book may emerge and intervene, nor do I think the claim is being made that the anti-book constitutes a specific genre (say, artists' books) or that it is limited to a specific media form. Much rather, it appears to me to operate across genres and media forms, which I believe is made abundantly clear by the veritable plethora of cases brought up by Thoburn in the chapters that follow his introduction, ranging from pamphlets, to magazines and zines, to artists' books, to anonymous and pseudonymous publishing, to mythopoetic writing and publishing.

Now, following this rather rambling preamble, and in order to delve more deeply into the work carried out in the pages of *Anti-Book*, it seems to me Thoburn's book operates across three registers that are interwoven throughout the book:

First, it maps out a concept ecology for the anti-book drawing together a wide range of disparate sources, some very familiar (Deleuze and Guattari, Marx, Benjamin, etc.), others less so, to me at any rate (Arvatov, for instance). These include references to work carried out in several disciplines ranging from philosophy to media theory, and they constitute a framework that concerns both the ontologies, histories and futures of the book as a set of media forms, and for the anti-book as a set of practices related to but pushing to their limits these media forms. Although some of these references seem less convincing to me, such as the use of Adorno, and others seem somewhat laboured or in need of further discussion – I'm thinking, for instance, of the use of Leibniz' concept of the monad – the connections made in this concept ecology is tremendously exciting and give rise to a set of transdisciplinary perspectives that are very useful to the development of the notion of the anti-book and, as we shall see, to our understanding of the cases and practices brought up in relation to the concept, as well as to the future ground for experimental publishing it opens up to.

Second, in *Anti-Book*, Thoburn connects this concept ecology to the discursivities and sociomaterialities of a series of concrete cases. This is a real strength. In fact, *Anti-Book* holds some of the arguably more abstract works referenced to account for their reluctance to engage with the actual sociomaterial and practical dimensions of the media forms addressed (books, print, publishing practice, etc.). For instance, at one point, Thoburn claims that, ‘Deleuze and Guattari offer little significant insight on *bookish* materials, on how the specificities of textual matter might be expressed in the mode of the rhizome-book’ (p. 137). This strikes me as a being a very legitimate claim and in this section – and many other sections of the book – Thoburn does an excellent job of making use of the concept ecology he develops to think seriously about its relationship to the actual sociomaterial artifacts and practices referred to, be it pamphlets, artists’ books or magazines. Noteworthy, as an example, is the use of two specific sections from *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, namely the introduction on root- and rhizome books and the plateau 587 BC-AD 70: *On Several Regimes of Signs*, in order to think through a variety of cases ranging from Mao Tse-tung’s *Quotations*, to Antonin Artaud’s spells, to Asger Jorn and Guy Debord’s *Mémoires*.

This second register of *Anti-Book* constitutes a very welcome engagement with the conditions and complexities, discursively, socio-politically, culturally and, not least, materially, of experimental book related and other publishing practices. Apart from the examples mentioned in brief above, the cases brought up in *Anti-Book* include both some very familiar examples – Valerie Solanas’ SCUM-manifesto, for instance – and some more surprising ones, such as Jakob Jakobsen’s work with pamphlets or the magazine MUTE, a well-known publishing platform, of course, but a somewhat surprising encounter in this particular context. This is, indeed, one of the major strengths of *Anti-Book* – where many other works engaging with artists’ books, bookworks, experimental and radical publishing, etc. offer at best a theoretically informed and contextual understanding of the practices engaged with, Thoburn’s book provides not merely a novel and innovative conceptual and

contextual approach, it also engages closely with the actual discursive and sociomaterial conditions of the practices addressed, ranging from economic concerns, to the use of technologies, to choices of materials. Such an understanding of practice, and of the complex interrelationships between practice and theory, makes Thoburn's work stand out as both refreshing and inspiring.

This brings me to my third point, which is that *Anti-Book*, perhaps in part inadvertently, or at any rate without the stated intention to do so, sets itself up as a future trajectory for radical publishing. This may sound somewhat contentious given that the book opens by stating that it is not to be considered 'some kind of manifesto' (p. 1) which is conventionally how such interstice between futures, practices and concepts tends to be understood. I wouldn't, however, go as far as arguing that *Anti-Book* is a manifesto, or even that it has the qualities of a manifesto. Yet, to someone involved theoretically and practically in this field, *Anti-Book* inevitably reads not *only* as a series of encounters between concepts and cases, as I've described it above. Rather, and perhaps in no small part through these encounters, *Anti-Book* appears to me to delineate a future ground for radical, politically oriented publishing. Reading *Anti-Book*, its central tenet comes across as an inspiration to continuously re-think and re-invent the notion of the book alongside the parameters of publishing practice in relation to yet beyond the concepts and cases referenced. In this sense, the notion of the anti-book shifts from being a point of connection between a series of concepts and a set of cases, to become a call to arms for future experimental book and publishing practice. It is, in this sense, an extraordinary book that deserves to be on the curricula and reading lists of any educational programme – or indeed any artist collective or activist group – that engages with books, print and publishing.