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A Small Recipe for Anarchy

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You already have an opinion about this book, whether you've seen it or not. You already know the content. You know the authors (or worse, people like them). You know the readers. Or so you think.

This is the latest effort from Crimethinc., who are by now notorious in anarchist circles and happily describe themselves as such. The very word Crimethinc. is enough to inspire shudders, accusations, and the worst breed of ad hominem attacks. Despite the vilification of Crimethinc., this will book will be one of the most important anarchist publications of the year. Its text will be seen and read by untold numbers, its suggestions will be tried, its ideas will permeate the anarchist milieu.

This is Recipes for Disaster, a six hundred page compendium of concepts, skills, pranks, and actions that for better or worse comprises an anarchy-as-most-people-know-it 101. The essence of the book is direct action, a misunderstood and polymorphous term that is described in the preface as such:

“Practicing direct action means acting directly to meet needs, rather than relying on representatives or choosing from proscribed options. Today the term

is applied to the use of illegal protest tactics to pressure governments and corporations to make certain decisions, which at bottom is not much different than from voting or making campaign contributions: but it most properly describes actions that cut out the middleman entirely to solve problems without mediation.”

A precise and useful definition. But here’s the first problem: some of the entries here don’t meet it. Floating banners inside malls, for example, seems more like requesting corporations to change their behavior (although less polite requests) than acting to meet needs directly. Same with sections on banner hoists, mainstream media, pie throwing, and a few of the sections related to mass demonstrations. But many entries do meet the definition, and there are some surprises. In guerilla performances, for example, where you would expect instruction in tired street theatre, you get an inspiring tale about the trashing of a convenience store in a 3 a.m. punk show.

This book proclaims itself a working manual, a book of instruction, not of theory. Inevitably, though, the editors choose by what they include. Much has been said of the Situationist influence on Crimethinc. You’ll find more of that here, along with surrealist thought — check the behavioral cut-ups section. There is also an element of yippie pranksterism. It’s not surprising that Abbie Hoffman’s *Steal This Book* is referenced in the further reading section. The influences are all over the place, as you would expect from a book of this size with dozens of contributors. From liberal notions of speaking truth to power, to traditional anarchist notions of solidarity, to pagan ritual and spell casting, it’s all here.

The undermining oppression section, which includes a subsection on identity politics, is likely to inspire contentious discussion. I found it a useful point of departure for that conversation. The

basic concepts are soberly explained in a concise way, including various helpful metaphors.

The design and layout of this book are superb. It is eminently more readable in layout and aesthetic quality than any Crimethinc work to date. The headings are bold, the sections are arranged alphabetically, and the notes in the margins are useful but not overdone. The “design anarchy” influence seems to have been toned down. Also, the Further Reading section is a nice addition, placing the book in historical context with its antecedents.

This is not a groundbreaking work, nor does it intend to be. As the editors admit, every cookbook or gardener’s guide is a direct action manual. But this book may inspire even seasoned veterans of anarcho-cynicism (myself included) to hit the town late at night with a plan to directly meet my most pressing needs: the need to fuck with the system, the need to adapt and try new skills, the need to have adventures. In that sense, this book is a success.