

Better Books, Bomb Culture, and Beyond: Two Radical Bookshops in the 1960s

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This paper examines two London bookshops of the 1960s, Indica and Better Books, and examines how they operated as what Kimberley Kinder describes as 'counterspace(s) for social movements' (Kinder, *The Radical Bookstore*, 2021). Both functioned as key venues for the radical counterculture of the 1960s, which resisted the Cold War agenda and supported various political causes such as the anti-nuclear movement and resistance to the Vietnam War. Both demonstrate the overlap between radical politics and avant-garde aesthetics that is such a marker of this kind of bookshop.

Better Books had been founded in 1947 by Tony Godwin but it was only after he visited City Lights bookshop in San Francisco in 1964 that the London bookshop established itself as a location for radical ideas, with a redesigned interior, meeting rooms, and spaces for events. In addition to selling books Indica and Better Books staged readings, film screenings, exhibitions, and 'happenings', operating as key countercultural spaces for experimental writers and artists whose cultural politics offered a challenge to the political establishment of the time. One key figure linked to Better Books was Jeff Nuttall, a peace activist and author of the anti-war memoir, *Bomb Culture*, who described the 'happenings' at the bookshop as having a 'curious mixed atmosphere. Part Quaker, part Anarchist, part decadent.' A series of events associated with Gustav Metzger's 'auto-destructive art' symposium were held in the bookshop, using an aesthetics of destruction to highlight the negative effects of capitalism and militarism in the postwar world.

Indica was also linked to an art gallery, displaying the work of the Fluxus group, including an exhibition by Yoko Ono. As well as stocking many of the works of the American beats, concrete poetry, and mimeo-magazines, the influential underground newspaper *International Times* (IT, 1966-73) had its offices in the basement of Indica books, and were subjected to several raids by the police. As Barry Miles, one of the owners of Indica, later stated, 'the function of a bookshop was the propagation of ideas' (Miles, *London Calling*, 2010), and this paper will explore how these two bookshops were crucial 'counterspaces' in the promotion of radical ideas in London in the mid to late 60s.

Hauptautor: THACKER, Andrew (Nottingham Trent University)

Vortragende(r): THACKER, Andrew (Nottingham Trent University)

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