

The RATS library

Ruben Pater, January 2023

Books are meant to be read. It sounds cruel, but if I see my own books unread they feel dead to me. I prefer copies that have been read and read to the point that they almost fall apart. Books with earmarks, scribbles, notes, and bookmarks. Signs of passionate reading, of deep scrutiny. After all, isn't that how you truly value a book? I mean, there is the cost of making a book, and there are obviously limited editions that are expensive. But sometimes books are priceless simply because of the memories they carry. A book given by a friend or a lover, or even better; a book that gave you a reading experience you won't ever forget.

Nowhere I have found such a dedication to books as in the RATS library. Inconspicuously tucked away in a multicultural neighborhood in the east of Rotterdam, it is perhaps the smallest public library in the Netherlands. Two stairs take you up to an attic with a bookcase and a table with zines. The collective which call themselves RATS (*Rotterdamse Anarchisten Tegen Supermarkten*, or Rotterdam Anarchists Against Supermarkets) began the library when they received a donation from an anarchist archive. People would drop by and read the books during the weekly public eatery in their squat. When one of the members wanted to print 200 copies of a theatre play, a friendly tutor from university generously provided printer logins. Since then they began printing their own volumes and have added dozens of self-produced books to the library.

The RATS library has one copy of each book and one copy alone. No lending register is kept, and no fees are charged. Books are downloaded from the internet in PDF format and then printed at the university. Covers are made onsite from discarded paper, glued and title and author information are added by hand. Cover illustrations and designs are done by different members, sometimes collectively. Layers of tape are added to protect the covers. Notes are added in the book, helping the reader along on their journey if necessary. Among the self-produced books are many black feminist authors like bell hooks, Sara Ahmed and Octavia Butler. Themes like queer theory, revolutionary theory, abolitionism and anarchism dominate the selection.

For outsiders, these self-produced books may not seem particularly valuable. They are printed on cheap paper, have production mistakes, and their hand drawn covers have an amateurish feel. But to the members of RATS these books are extremely precious. Each book is selected carefully, and only after close reading the decision is made to produce them. A member told me: 'reading a book is a fucking dedication, don't underestimate it'. This is why they chose against building an outside bookcase, because the books are too valuable to risk theft or damage. These books are valuable because there is only one copy, but also because the texts in them are deemed so profound and influential.

When I think about the future of books, I think about RATS. It is estimated that one million books are published each year, and that seemingly endless supply of paper and resources is

going to run out sooner or later. Books will have to be reread, spines fixed, covers plasticized, ready to be passed it on the next reader. The RATS library treat their books with a similar devotion that with which monks treated manuscripts. The books in this library are not commodities, they are part of a curated knowledge commons. As member told me: 'the people who read them really have to respect the books'. There is something about their dedication that made me think about the most important books in my life. You know, those books that really change you. When I tried to find them in my bookcase I realized that most of them are missing. That made me first sad and then happy. Happy, because it reminded me that if you truly care about a book, you don't hold on to it, you want to pass it on to be read, and read, and read again.