

ART & ACTIVISM THE INTEGRATION OF ART AND POLITICS

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I heard Picasso quoted on the CBC: "Art is an instrument in the war against the enemy." If the enemy was the fascism of his day, he and his works were successful. The power of his great work Guernica carried the agony of the Spanish civil war around the world. Those were different times. Today, a woven copy of Guernica hangs in the UN Building in New York. Boutros Boutros-Ghali stood before that weaving when he announced the "UN" war on Iraq. Picasso's legacy has been co-opted by the establishment of corporate consumerism; even his most political "weapons" have been bled of their meaning. A few pieces of his art that he donated are in free circulation for peace and justice groups, but most of his works are in the museums and homes of the rich and the greedy.

Mahatma Gandhi spinning on board ship in 1931. He believed that life is the most beautiful of the arts. He spun cotton everyday and encouraged others to do so
- for the pleasure of the practice of a simple art and for the political necessity of making plain fabric for clothes and not relying on imported fabric.
Photo by Rita James, mother of Theresa Wolfwood



I was looking at my arpillera collection when I heard that quote by Picasso. During the Pinochet dictatorship, poor Chilean women joined together to make folk tapestries. These arpilleras showed their daily activities - soup kitchens, communal bread baking, stealing electricity from power lines, and demonstrations for their "disappeared" and against the political oppression they suffered - as well as portraying their visions for a life of peace and justice. The arpilleras were unsigned and sold cheaply at their request (\$25 for a month's work) by church and social justice groups around the world. The women found relief for their sorrows and hardships in the communal creation of the tapestries, information about their cause was spread abroad by sales and exhibitions, and the income helped them in their survival. These works will never become expensive treasures for the rich and greedy; they are a testimony to the talents and hopes of women living in extraordinary times.

Art is part of the struggle for a better life everywhere in the world. Activist art can educate and inspire. While not replacing other activities, creativity needs to be recognized as an important part of social activism. We need to challenge the concept of "art" as an elitist and commercial activity. Claiming and developing our own creativity is an integral part of our work to reclaim control over our lives and economies. The corporate mainstream media reduce people (except the rich and elite) to dehumanized earning and consuming units. We hear it so often, we begin to think of ourselves as consumers of political decisions like healthcare and social services, rather than active participants in our society's political life.

Capitalist consumerism tries to make us willing passive consumers of mass entertainment and news. The mass media offer us television, videos, films and print that ranges from banal pap to dishonest manipulation, larded with advertisements - all

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designed to make us want to buy. The result is a steady diet of low intensity disempowerment. No matter how selective or critical we are, these media seldom move us to action or analysis.

When a group of students, community activists and musicians came together with Stacy Chappel in Victoria, B.C. to perform her musical "The MAI in OZ," we learned that we could entertain and educate ourselves and audiences at the same time. Chappel says "political theatre is important because it allows us to imagine how we would transform society, as we transform ourselves and events in the different roles and actions of plays." In her production we created a solidarity and sense of confidence in the cast that has carried over into other actions - against the Gulf War, planning an anti-MAI rally and opposing Costco's entry into the Victoria area which included clear-cutting a threatened Garry Oak forest. Some of the cast recently acted in street theatre, again created by Chappel, to oppose the lifting of the MMT ban in Canada.

At both comedy events, leaflets with the serious news about MAI, NAFTA and MMT were written and distributed by cast members. Chappel has made the video of "MAI in OZ" available at cost and the script is free on Email to encourage other communities to use or adapt her creations. The mainstream co-opts the marginal and non-commercial whenever a profit is possible, not only in Picasso's art, but in music as well. Folk music in the public domain is stolen and copied; Bob Dylan gets co-opted by banks. Nothing is sacred to capitalism so we defy the exclusiveness of art for profit by creating anew and taking back our own. "MAI in OZ" combines songs by Pete Seeger and Utah Phillips with adaptations of commercial music. Chappel converts an advertising jingle for a sticky brown beverage into a satirical song about the benefits of the MAI, the military jingoism of Gilbert and Sullivan into "I am the very Model of a Modern Corporate CEO" and the mindlessness of "There's no Business like Show Business" into "There's no Business like Big Business." The barriers around elitist music have been broken down and activists have overturned the power of the elite to own and profit. And more recently, Splice of Life ... a musical about genetic engineering.

Folk music has long been our medium in many cultures. It records, inspires and motivates us. Feminist art has breached the barrier between the private and the public. In Australian Judy Small's songs about the Montreal massacre in Montreal, December, 1998 a lesbian widow's isolation in No Tears for the Widow, and the power of developers in Charlesworth Bay, Small brings together emotion, analysis and art that can be shared by all activists. Small's feminist folk recordings are available from Redwood Records in Oakland, California - a co-operative formed to distribute the music of political activists - another necessary vehicle for sharing activist inspiration.

Oona Padgham, a graduate student and activist at York University, organizes workshops on making hats for political events. She says that "western society is plagued with a combination of commodity alienation and commodity fetishism. There is an obsession with material acquisition, and yet we take for granted most of the objects that surround us. All these objects have a story behind them: somebody - in fact, more than likely, somebodies - made them. Under what conditions? How were they paid? Why do they do this type of work? My belief is that crafting can bring us closer to respecting and valuing the production process. When we craft something, chances are that we feel a deep sense of attachment to the finished project. It is something we made and poured energy into." Making our own hats to wear at events helps us relate to workers in distant factories and to develop our own skills. Activists at one of Padgham's workshops in Victoria were amazed they could make a hat, that each participant had a different concern to use in the hat design - from the homeless to the MAI to militarism to unemployment - and that each created a completely different form of decoration based on a simple model. This kind of workshop brings activists together in a different

atmosphere than a structured organizing meeting and allows them to exchange ideas and information in an informal and empowering environment. One activist at Padgham's workshop said she enjoyed the fun we had - an element missing from many of our events. If we believe that social activism is a rewarding activity, we need to incorporate more pleasure and humour in our shared lives - for ourselves and as encouragement for others to join us." Social movements have long used art as a statement of resistance and subversiveness through banners, union songs, chants, poetry and popular theatre," Padgham says. "Demonstrations could be argued to be complicated artistic expressions."

We can recognize and celebrate our collective creativity when we gain inspiration from carefully crafted speeches, music and a range of visual delights at the next event we organize. Many forms of private domestic art are rejected by the world of "professional art." Women have long come together for companionship and necessity in activities like food preparation and quilting in what were seen as unimportant household activities. Now, we have made food a political issue in our work to ensure access to safe nutrition. Women in Bangladesh have organized "Poison-Free Zones" where they only use their own saved seeds without the use of chemicals. Indigenous people fight to save their land and the right to grow their own food in Chiapas and elsewhere. Quilting has become a political, collective art form with quilts about AIDS and schizophrenia.

It is important that we acknowledge our art of social activism as an important historical record. Banners have been part of our activities for decades. Thalia Campbell, a banner maker and a founder of Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, was inspired on the initial march to Greenham to organize the creation of a banner from a sheet. After the women made the banner, it continued to be used as a bed, a shawl, a screen and a baby-changing place. Campbell integrates her political convictions and her artistic talent; she makes dozens of banners and encourages others to make them as well. At a recent workshop in Victoria, she showed slides of 100 years of UK Women's Banner Making," based on her years of searching through archives and attics to exhibit this neglected political art form. This record of unnamed women in co-operatives, suffragettes, suffragists, peace groups, international solidarity, miners' strikes and childhood sexual abuse movements is an inspiring testimony to social event largely ignored by mainstream historians. At her workshops, Campbell develops a collective process in which participants design their own banners. After her workshop I made my first banner - for Hiroshima Day. At our next banner making workshop we want to make a banner with the powerful words of U.S. novelist Alice Walker: Resistance is the Secret of Joy.

Our oral and written words are also part of our talent and history. In poetry we distill and intensify our experiences. This Haiku in 17 syllables - a kind of artistic shorthand - conveys two important political issues: the loss of B.C. salmon and the American use of Canada to test its maritime weapons.

GLEN CLARK

Clark wants salmon saved
U.S. eats fish and treaties
the nuclear shark.

We can use photography to record our own history and to inform, inspire and involve. A photo of women dancing on nuclear weapons silos at Greenham Common inspired many women to resist the nuclear threat. Oona Padgham's photo of an anti-MAI demonstration in Toronto became an image used on thousands of postcards mailed to

the federal government and to activists around the world. Elaine Briere's photos of life in East Timor before the Indonesian invasion transformed her into a writer, speaker, international activist and award-winning film maker.

When I serve a special meal to friends, I transform it from a private act to a political event when I read the words of Pablo Neruda: The Great Tablecloth

Let us sit down soon to eat
with all those who haven't eaten
Let us spread great tablecloths
put salt in the lakes of the worlds
set up planetary bakeries
tables with strawberries in snow
and a plate like the moon itself
from which we will all eat
For now, I ask no more than the justice of eating.

When we sing at meetings, carry our banners to demonstrations, read our poetry, tell stories at fundraising dinners and make posters with our photos and designs, we give lie to the mainstream belief that artists are a separate elite in our society. We start the work of transforming society by transforming ourselves into creative artists. We empower ourselves with creativity and confidence that we carry into our intellectual and activist work; thus we challenge the ideology that political activity rightly belongs only to powerful political elites and experts. We should consider using all our talent and energy to create a national, progressive press - a goal truly worthy of our abilities and commitment. What better way to express the triumph of our creative human spirit over the rich and powerful. Our political activism holds a vision of a world of justice and dignity, a world where all people and communities are free to express their creativity. The integration of art into our political activity will realize and enrich that vision.

In **CRAFTING RESISTANCE: The Politics of Art/The Art of Politics* by Oona Padgham, she writes about the connection between making craft objects, our ability to be artists for political action, the alienation of people in the minority world from the production of our clothing, made mainly by exploited workers in the majority world, and the need to relate our talent to provide our own creative recreation with activism. She explores the separation of art and craft - men usually make art and women make craft - useful objects with less value than professionally produced art. By developing and using our talent to create political art, we break down barriers that prevent most people from acting positively and politically as we express our ideas & interests. Oona says, "It is important that we appreciate our own creative potential and that we see the politics that surround us in our everyday life."

**Report of a Major Project submitted to the Faculty of Environmental Studies York University, Toronto, ON, CANADA (complete report, including colour photos, bibliography, and instruction on workshops and how to make a hat for social action events, is available from BBCF for \$20.)*