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The Art(s) of Non-violent Activism

MARTY BRANAGAN explains the role of the arts in promoting causes.

THE ART OF PEACE-MAKING

The arts played a prominent role in the February 2003 peace marches. A unique feature in Australia was the number of puppets of Bush and Howard, and the media focus on these. A theme taken up by many artists was that Howard is a mere lackey of Bush, who in turn is heavily influenced by the oil multinationals. Making puppets of them seemed a logical satirical step, although Sydney puppeteers took it one step further and made Howard into Bush's dog, with his nose in frequent proximity with Bush's rear! In Armidale a similar device had Howard looking in the same region for Colon Bowel. The puppets were immensely popular with children and the media seemed enthralled by them, featuring them in TV coverage, front-page newspaper photos, and interviews with the puppeteers. They were thus a media focus showing something creative and humorous, and redirecting media away from 'freaks', police clashes or other sensational images that encourage a stereotypical view of protestors.

Banners featured prominently: they were clever, poignant or funny, like 'Axis of Evil? Access to Diesel!' or 'There is no Path to Peace. Peace IS the Path.' or even 'Bush is a servant of Sauron. We hates him!' Some of the best were emailed from overseas and adapted; others, like 'NO hoWARD' originated here. One newspaper featured a photo of and interview with banner painters on the front page. Another paper printed a list of slogans, a sign that the mass media is beginning to heed protestors.

Drummers, saxophonists, guitarists and singers led marches, and played free concerts afterwards. Vigils were invigorated by the presence of impromptu choirs, singing hackneyed sixties favourites and adapting new words

to old tunes. A CD called *Peace Not War*, featuring artists like Billy Bragg, was given airplay.

Of the range of media used, the most sensational featured the naked body. These occurred around the world, with one near Byron Bay using 750 women to spell out NO WAR within a heart. A peace sign was created at Terrigal using clothed people, and by US researchers at the South Pole, using snow. In Warsaw faces were painted; in Sydney it was pregnant bellies. An Armidale overpass was graffitied with 'Smart Bombs=Dumb Leaders'. Turkish marchers carried candles, French people held posters depicting the 'gun' of a petrol pump being held to an Iraqi child's head. Actors like Tim Robbins lent their fame. Sydney marchers carried polystyrene white doves, or wore hats shaped like Pine Gap. There were also the Grim Reaper, a stilt walking group 'Friendly Fire' and the white satin-gowned and white-winged 'Peace Angels' adding to the carnival atmosphere. The colour of the weekend was purple, with feminist and spiritual connotations.

The most telling sign of the power of the arts is the effort that has gone into censoring it. A poetry reading at the White House was cancelled because poets intended to use it as a forum to protest. And Picasso's anti-war painting *Guernica*, at the UN in New York, was covered up. This however has caused international outrage, and marchers in Barcelona carried a full-sized replica of the painting. Protest art will never be silenced.

THE AUSTRALIAN PROTEST MOVEMENT

I believe that Non-violent praxis has been a key ingredient in the successes of the Australian Protest Movement, and that where it has been implemented poorly, or not at all, there have been conspicuous

failures. The Franklin River blockade is a good case study. Because the Tasmanian Wilderness Society controlled the only access (a boat) to the blockade site, they were able to require potential blockaders to undergo a comprehensive, 3-day training course in Non-violence. As a result, all blockaders were well trained in Non-violence, and Non-violence was a constant topic of conversation. It permeated the whole action. More than 1300 people were arrested in civil disobedience actions – making it one of the largest actions of its kind in the world – yet there were almost no reports of violence by protestors, including violence towards property. A contrasting case study is the North East Forest Alliance (NEFA) blockade of old growth forest logging at Carrai circa 1996. Here there was no Non-violence training, little discussion of Non-violence, and even a disdain for Non-violence by some. Sabotage of a bulldozer was carried out one night. As a result of the backlash created in the media, and by loggers, State Forests and locals, NEFA felt obliged to withdraw their support for the blockade, which subsequently collapsed. The area was logged.

Because Non-violence training at the Franklin and elsewhere was compulsory, it has come to be seen by some as an inflexible set of rules imposed from above, rules that were developed by Gandhi and Martin Luther King decades ago, and which are no longer appropriate for this day and place. My view is of Non-violence as a developing, constantly evolving praxis, which is not set in stone or owned by a particular bunch of theorists. There are many activists and theorists working today both overseas and in Australia to make Non-violence continue to be relevant and effective. And many



examples of the effectiveness of Non-violence – which have long been ignored by history – are now emerging into the mainstream through books and television shows like the recent *A Force More Powerful: a century of non-violent conflict* (Ackerman & Duvall 2000). These show that contrary to much popular opinion, Non-violence is effective even against ruthless opponents like the Nazis, and if better resourced and not so *ad hoc* as usual could even prove more effective against such opponents than military action, particularly in the long-term.

A similar and related area is that

of the Arts which are used as part of protest actions. These too have been at the centre of many actions, yet little credit is given to their role. They have been little studied, and even within the protest movement they are considered by many as not being radical, revolutionary or hard-core frontline activism. Yet the latter view condones both a dualistic philosophy which sees direct confrontation as being effective, and the machismo of patriarchal politics, continuing the paradigm that regards war and violence as acceptable means of conflict resolution. Many feminists have rightly been critical of such a

view (see Hutton & Connors 1999). The Arts have been and continue to be an extremely important part of protest and social change movements, and there are many ways in which use of the Arts fits in with Non-violence theories.

There are many different arts used in the protest movement. Before an action, the visual arts in particular are used to advertise and promote the action's whereabouts, time and purpose. Posters, newsletters, leaflets, mailouts and increasingly emails and websites feature photographs, graphic design and computer-generated art.

At protests, music – both live >

> and recorded – often features. Live music is one of the most basic of the Arts in that at its simplest it requires nothing more than the human voice or hands to clap, yet it can be very effective. Because music requires little equipment and anyone can join in, it is an example of the inclusivity advocated by non-violence theories. Recorded music was used to good effect at a Roxby Downs uranium protest in 1983, when a car stereo played a Midnight Oil album, leading to mass dancing at (and an effective blockade of) the mine's gates. Poetry readings, and lately 'rapping', are related arts, with a 'Refugee Rap' being part of the 2002 Rally for Refugees in Canberra.

Street-theatre has long been an important element of protests, from the Franklin to the 1998 Jabiluka uranium blockade. It is colourful and thus media-friendly, and enables messages (environmental, social justice, peace etc) to be imparted in ways that can be humorous, clever and satirical. A policeman at Roxby gave good feedback about the theatre I was involved in there; the theatre enabled him to see me as a thinking, non-violent activist rather than one of an angry mob. He also at least heard our message, and may have been influenced to change his mind in some way about uranium mining.

The Visual Arts are also often used by protestors, and they include banners, t-shirts with messages and pictures, sculpture (especially at Jabiluka), theatre props like Benny Zables' famous 'radioactive' barrels, and enormous puppets (also used at Jabiluka). Often large protests will be filmed by the media without many (or any!) people being interviewed as to why they're protesting, so banners are a vital way to get a message across, and to indicate the plethora of groups usually represented.

Dance is also common, as with the Midnight Oil episode related above. It was used similarly in Canberra at the week of protests

surrounding the 1983 ALP national conference, and at the blockade of the AIDEX armaments 'fair' in 1992, where the band Earth Reggae played live. A particularly innovative use of dance was when belly dancers halted logging trucks for a day at Bulga, NSW circa 1995.

Circus skills have also featured prominently; fire twirling and juggling can entertain crowds of protestors, workers and police, creating a carnival atmosphere, multiple foci of attention rather than a single conflictual one, and can help diffuse tensions and prevent violence. I witnessed a clear example of this at Roxby in 1984 when a line of police guarding the mine was confronted by a line of protestors. Emotions of anger and fear were running high, and the scene appeared to be spiralling towards scuffles and arrests, when a gay Maori activist calmly strolled down the space between the two lines, playing his guitar and singing. The groups moved back, confused by this action by a third party. Then followed an acrobat, flinging himself down the line in a series of somersaults and flips, further disrupting the dualistic confrontation. The bravery and breathtaking skill of those actions defused the tension, and no violence occurred that day.

Creating multiple foci of attention through the Arts can also be a tactical tool in a non-violent blockade. Having a single focus, such as a mob shaking a gate, is centralised, confrontational and easy for police (and armies – the army was used at a Nurrungar protests in 1984) to control. Multiple foci – for example of musicians, street-theatre, sculpture – decentralise the action, making it less confrontational and also harder to control. In my experience, police are also less likely to arrest a clown than an angry demonstrator, even if they are both 'trespassing'. However, such diversification of tactics also makes the protest more complex, and thus harder for the mass media – inclined to simplification – to report. Thus, involvement in writing for

mainstream media and creating new media outlets, is an important aspect of the Arts. (The Federal Government defines journalism as an Art).

Many facets of the Arts are also used in recording protests; they include video- and film-making, photography, audio recording, and journalism – all of which are now often used in tandem with computer systems, so that protests can be online and international in scope. Cartooning is also used to depict what happened at actions. All of these recordings are then used in mainstream media (if possible), in community media: radio, print and websites, for grassroots information sharing, and for personal records. Some writings are fictionalised into novels (like Simon Ellis's [pseudonym] *Horizontal Lightning* about the Penan rainforest blockades) or radio plays, others are turned into songs like Penelope Swales's *Black Carrie* or Judy Small's *Women of Greenham Common*. Recording actions can also be useful in court-cases – video footage at Jabiluka clearly shows a gate being opened by police rather than torn down by protestors as a policeman had alleged, in a court case where I and an elderly woman pleaded not guilty successfully to trespass charges. Such footage can also be useful in Non-violence training, by showing what would-be protestors may be faced with, to enable them to better prepare in order to remain non-violent under the most extreme of circumstances.

During direct actions there is often associated cultural activity in the wider community, again an example of Inclusivity, where anyone can help the protest in whatever capacity or Arts they wish, and where there should be no hierarchy putting those chaining themselves to bulldozers above people organising art exhibitions. A number of exhibitions were organised for the Jabiluka campaign, including in Darwin and Wagga Wagga. For the Franklin campaign, the band Redgum toured, and Goanna recorded a

It took the Prime Minister only a few minutes to realise that someone had painted the peace signs on to his glasses but it was wonderful while it lasted



Oh my god - it's a vision. Quickly George - help me...

horacek

song. Concerts and 'Brackets and Jams' nights (open microphone performance evenings) contribute to awareness-raising and fund-raising, and they are able to reach hitherto unaffected members of the community and disseminate information. At such grassroots events, people can be affected on a one-to-one basis by activists and their ideas, rather than just see protestors as a mob (sometimes frightening or even violent), which is a typical portrayal by the mass-media, who tend to seek out violence and sensationalism. Such cultural events can be at least as effective as direct actions, and perhaps more so.

Thus, a related use of the Arts is by those who may be inspired by a campaign, but not have any official part in it, or even see themselves as part of any movement. My research indicates a huge number of people in all facets of the Arts who create work with particular underlying messages or themes, be they eco-feminist, indigenous, environmental, lesbian and gay rights, disability advocates, animal liberationist, pacifist or justice for prisoners, like the theatre company

'Somebody's Daughter.' These artists may work individually or in groups; I believe they all contribute to social change by expressing challenges to the dominant paradigms and affecting the cultural and intellectual bases of human actions. Again their actions are just as valid as those 'on the front-line'; indeed, it may take more bravery for an individual artist to express an unpopular opinion, than to march as part of a large group of like-minded protestors.

The use of the Arts in creating multiple foci of protest, at actions, in the wider community, and amongst unaligned artists addresses a key tenet of Non-violence, relating to decentralisation and grassroots activism rather than change through seizing power and reforming from top down. Creating artistic works also works best when done in an egalitarian, non-hierarchical manner within groups of a manageable size. This suits Non-violence guidelines, which favour non-hierarchical group structures, radically democratic decision-making forms like 'consensus decision-making', and

networks of 'affinity groups'. As in Non-violence again, artists favour openness (except in some cases like graffiti) rather than the secrecy of hierarchical or militaristic groups; in fact, they seek out audiences for their theatre and other art forms, there being no point in creating political artworks without an audience in mind. As with other non-violent activists, artists seek to persuade rather than coerce.

By engaging in the Arts, non-violent activists are using a powerful medium, one that affects the whole of society. There can be almost nobody in Australia (indeed, the world) who is unaffected by the Arts used in advertising, film, magazines, to name a few. Such arts are not neutral; in fact they often contribute to what Galtung (1971) has characterised as 'structural violence', which is violence that kills insidiously, for example when Third World people die of starvation because of economic structures, despite there being enough food to feed them. Such economic structures are reinforced through advertising, employing sophisticated art forms. Art forms can also be part of 'cultural violence', where they inspire violence (eg racist literature) or they are psychologically violent.

However, as shown above, the Arts can also have many uses for non-violent activists. Additionally, fashion like clothing, hairstyles, tattoos and body piercing, as well as art forms like badges and bumper stickers can help protestors identify like-minded people, creating large informal networks. Within protest groups and movements, art forms like music can be important in introducing activists to each other, in 'breaking the ice' and helping them to 'bond' and build solidarity. Music can inspire, encourage and fortify at moments requiring courage, such as prior to acts of civil disobedience. Such was the case at Roxby Downs, when the music of Midnight Oil helped us make a decision to sit down before the gates of the mine and consequently be dragged away painfully and arrested.

Art forms can help communicate ideas and information, both within >

> and outside the movements, and they can help deal with intra-group issues like sexism, homophobia or smoking. They can provide a channel for anger and nervous energy. Music can be introduced to calm an angry crowd, as during a 2002 rally by Kooris over police brutality at Armidale Police Station, where a woman Elder began a soothing song and effectively prevented a riot.

Since there is a huge variety of art forms available, potential activists have a diverse range of activities in which they can engage, employing creativity, teamwork and different skills. As well as making the action more inclusive, the burnout that can be produced when working tirelessly in one area may be avoided. One can also often see tangible results of one's work, such as banners or paintings, which can be satisfying when other work like initiating and sending off petitions, writing articles and submissions and doing radio shows often seems to disappear into a black hole – there is little feedback, economic reward or recognition, and one's effectiveness can only be guessed at.

Making artworks can also be the 'flipside' of protest, providing a balanced approach. As well as being critical of a particular policy or activity, artist/activists can be creative and productive, thus balancing negativity with a positive element. This fits with what Gandhi advocated – creating parallel or new institutions as well as acting against corrupt ones, to help create a new future through positive action.

Outside the protest group, the Arts have many functions. They can help to build bridges with opponents, by finding common ground like humour or love of music, and show a common humanity, rather than a dehumanised rabble. They can also impact on various levels, emotional and physical as well as intellectual, whereas activities such as speechmaking and pamphleteering, while valid, do not utilise so many levels. The Arts used thus can be

seen as what Shields (1993) describes as Heart Politics, where politics is not viewed as divorced from emotional life; rather the two are intimately connected. Even on an intellectual level, arts can provoke different areas of thought, perhaps reaching into areas of the brain which think in symbols or archetypes rather than words, or holistically rather than linearly, or intuitively rather than rationally.

If the artworks are professionally created (a constant difficulty in resource-poor and/or nomadic activist communities) or at least demonstrate some dedication to their craft, they can impress audiences, who may see protestors for the first time as passionate, hard-working people. The artworks can also provide a diversity of topics with which to engage onlookers, and attempt the Non-violent process of 'conversion', or bringing an opponent around to your point of view through persuasive reasoning.

Often, the better resourced an artwork is, the more professional it is and the greater the impact it has. If it reaches a large audience, so much the better. Activist art need not be fringe to be radical – it may be more effective in the mainstream. However, some pitfalls include compromise of one's ideals through engagement with institutions which may seek to promote Arts or actions to camouflage their own less-than-ethical or ecological activities, a process known as 'Greenwash' (an example being McDonalds' sponsorship of Clean-up Australia Day while continuing to use disposable over-packaging). If one produces radical cartoons for a conservative newspaper, does it help legitimise and sell that newspaper, and reinforce a conservative paradigm? Or is it worth that compromise to reach a large and conservative audience? Similarly, if a socially progressive film is shown on commercial television, does it attract viewers who may then be influenced by advertisements for cars and junk food? One cannot avoid some

engagement with structural violence, but one can minimise it. Most such decisions need to be made on an individual basis, weighing up the pros and cons of funding (and financial survival) versus remaining ethical.

TO CONCLUDE, I believe that the use of the Arts by activists has been and continues to be an effective method of protest and social change in Australia. Many different forms of the Arts are used, and they have many different functions. It is difficult to quantify the effectiveness of the use of the Arts in changing people's perceptions and philosophies, but that work is now beginning with David Curtis and Lynn Everett at UNE, and presumably elsewhere. However, there have been great changes in society's attitude to the environment in the last twenty years, which is being translated into action at the local level with extensive recycling, and to a lesser extent at the national level, with projects like Landcare and Greening Australia (although these are struggling to overcome continuing clearing, logging and unsustainable mono-cultural practices). Although governments and corporations are still largely unethical, I am hopeful that they will eventually be forced to reform by sustained community action and grassroots changes. I believe that these grassroots changes have been influenced by Non-violence and the educative use of the Arts, both within and outside the Australian Protest Movement.

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