

Playing with Wild Fire:

Art as Activism

Deborah Barndt

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BRING TOGETHER PEOPLE WITH PASSIONS FOR ART, FOR POLITICS, FOR community, people with fire in their bellies, and things are bound to heat up. This book wasn't so much envisioned and planned, as it emerged through a kind of spontaneous combustion. The flames were fanned, however, by three different moments around my dining-room table which connected the contributors.

AROUND THE TABLE: A BOOK IS CONCEIVED (2003)

In the fall of 2003, I invited recent graduates with Masters in Environmental Studies (MES) to a celebratory dinner. As we toasted the completed MES projects (a mural produced on food security, a book produced by Muslim women questioning their misrepresentation in the West, among others), we were struck by how all of them were related to art and activism. The stories told were definitely too rich to sit on a library shelf but cried out to be used by educators, artists, activists. "Let's make a collective book ...!" we decided, and the sparks began to fly.

York University's Faculty of Environmental Studies had indeed already laid the groundwork for such a project. Known since the 1960s for its interdisciplinary and praxis-oriented graduate program, FES attracts mature, socially conscious and creative students who want to put diverse ideas to

gether in new ways, explore alternative ways of knowing, communicate to a broader public and contribute to environmental and social justice. Built around individualized plans of study, the FES program encourages collaborative learning and university-community links. Courses and student projects often integrate the arts as modes of inquiry and forms of communicating knowledge. This was definitely fertile soil for a collaborative project around art and activism.

I put on the table my own interest in looking at the contradictions engaged in projects, in particular the “creative tensions” often present in alternative art and popular education practices, such as the tension between process and product, between aesthetics and ethics, between cultural reclamation and cultural reinvention, between the spiritual and the political, between the body and the Earth. These resonated with those who were at that first dinner, and I was charged with pulling together a book proposal. Now the heat was on.

I sought proposals from the more than twenty graduates I had supervised since 1993, whose work at the time and since then fit under the rubric of art and activism, as well as from others connected with my courses (Popular Education for Social Change and Cultural Production Workshop) or the VIVA! Project (a collaborative research project on community arts in the Americas).¹ I knew that many of them had continued to use the arts in their activist work once they left the academy. I invited potential contributors to gather around my dining-room table in late March to review the proposals. The response was overwhelming.

AROUND THE TABLE: A BOOK TAKES SHAPE (2004)

One Sunday afternoon in March 2004, thirteen people arrived at my door to read the eighteen proposals submitted and to offer their own visions of this collective project. While we didn't concur on everything, we agreed that the tensions within our work were rich sources of critical and creative discussion.

One tension we shared was our multiple and overlapping identities as artists, activists and academics. Each of these labels evokes strong reaction: feelings of passion and exclusion, of commitment and threat, of stimulation and alienation. Each is contested terrain: none of us could (nor wanted to)

pin down a definition for art, for activism or for academic work. But we could identify the tensions within and between these practices. While they may sit uneasily one next to the other, each is critical to our varied practices (though we may identify more with one than with another). Artist, activist, academic: three multi-faceted and sometimes seemingly contradictory identities that can interrogate, challenge and enrich the other.

This tension resonated with my own experiences doing doctoral research in Peru in the mid-1970s when I struggled to reconcile these same aspects of myself, what I called in Spanish *la pensadora* (the thinker), *la poeta* (the artist) and *la política* (the political person who must act). As a graduate student, I was expected to focus on the critical thinking side and cordon off my artistic practice as well as my political activity. As an artist using photographs as research tools, however, I felt images could speak to people in ways that most academic writing could not. As a social movement activist, I was challenged by my Peruvian colleagues to take a stand on behalf of the marginalized majority, to not perpetuate colonial relationships by packaging their knowledge for Western academic purposes and personal gain. I agonized over these contradictions but eventually concluded that these three identities — the artist, activist and academic — would have to co-exist, as each needed the other and I was unwilling to give up any one.

In many ways, the essays in this book challenge conventional understandings of art, activism and academia. We question, for example, the elitism and individualism of conventional art practices and the internalized oppression that most of us suffer from when we say “I can’t draw.” We question how art has become increasingly separate from daily life, and ever-more commodified as a consumer good in a global marketplace. We are more interested in the processes than the products of artmaking.

Similarly, we question a narrow understanding of activism that frames mass protests as the primary mode of political action. How we think, converse, write, draw, sing, move (in other words, how we tell our stories as well as the stories we tell) can unveil power relations and transform knowledge production and everyday actions. Finally, our arts-based research counters within academia the dominance of rationalist and linear thinking, of text-based knowledge, of purportedly neutral theorizing and of theory disengaged from practice.

Not only do we challenge you, the reader, to reconsider how art, activism and academics are framed and practised, but we also ask you to rethink their interrelationship. Why is there often a divide between academics and artists? Between artists and activists? Between activists and academics? What are the roots of these splits? What can each offer the other? The contributors to this book blur the boundaries between these modes of engagement.

The air was electric that Sunday afternoon in March as potential authors began to make connections between their work and their thinking, as one idea sparked another. In the kind of work we do, the *how* is as important as the *what*, so we fantasized the creation of this book as a rich collective educational process, spinning off dialogues. We also wanted to break through the verbal domination of texts, including images that would bring our stories alive.

Fuelled by the energy of the gathering of thirteen co-creators, we each retreated to our respective corners to take on the somewhat solitary task of writing our own chapters (though three essays were collaboratively written). As these trickled in, were edited and revised, they were again distributed to all contributors, in time for another dinner-table conversation.

AROUND THE TABLE: A BOOK IS NAMED (2005)

In April 2005, six of us gathered to review the final draft chapters, to consider how the pieces spoke to each other and to collectively conjure up a title. Narrative was a recurring theme: all pieces tell stories, indeed are *about* telling stories, yet are not about reifying any story. In fact, the authors here actively interrogate the stories told by themselves as well as by others, what is told, to whom, how, for what and with what consequences. There is a recognition that stories are fragmentary and contradictory. In fact, part of our attraction to art (the multiple forms through which we tell stories) is its capacity to “hold paradoxical truths, like an egg in each hand,” as Heather Lash framed it.

Most of our conversation focused on the processes of our artmaking and activism: the risks, the messiness, the surprises. A strong reflexivity runs through the essays, as we question our roles as artists, as facilitators, as theorists. Power is central to all of these undertakings, and these authors embrace a complex notion of power, one that is multi-dimensional and constantly shifting. The processes described in this book at the same time claim and question power.

What, then, draws us to this messy, unpredictable work? When someone suggested that it was like “playing with wild fire,” the metaphor resonated strongly with us.

Playing. Play challenges boundaries, the way things are. It can be a creative way of engaging people, ideas, power. Artmaking can offer a playful response to academia and to political activism. At their most creative, art, activism and academic work are about challenging the old and ossified, about making new. Moving into unknown terrain requires both humility and humour, as Leah Burns suggests.

Several authors refer to a trickster type figure as a model of this daring playfulness, as one who can play with contradictions, can help us laugh at ourselves, one who can potentially destroy or create. Many of the practices explored in these stories involve playing with symbols of power: through phototherapy, culture jamming, adbusting, guerrilla theatre, gigantic puppets, reclaiming the streets movements. Play combines the critical and the creative, challenging what is while allowing us to imagine what could be.

Wild Fire. When we imagine wild fire, we may think of it as a natural force, out of human control. In an interdisciplinary environmental studies, however, we learn to see natural disasters as anything but natural, as shaped by human agency, by social and political forces. We question the nature/culture split, explore the symbiotic relationship between the human and non-human, and consider ourselves as part of, not separate from, nature. We need to embrace the wild and passionate in ourselves in order to make change.

The authors in this book share a passion for life itself, for its diversity and struggles, its endless challenges. A passion that is not only an expression of life but also a way of living. A passion for truth (not as a singular truth but as a search for understanding), for beauty (not as a given but as something historically grounded which we must daily construct), for justice (not as a rationalist adherence to an ideology but as a commitment to being part of an evolving struggle).

Many of the stories in this book unfold in heated life-and-death contexts: whether in Chile of the 1970s or Nicaragua of the 1980s, or more currently in detention centres in Toronto or working with youth in post-conflict Bosnia. They amplify the voices of those threatened by globalization, whether it's the struggle of salmon to survive industrial farming or the struggle of students to resist the corporatization of the university. The art

processes described are tools for examining myriad hot issues: from clear-cutting and food security to racism, sexism and war.

Playing with wild fire. Fire is potentially both a destructive and a creative force. And wild fire can suddenly rise up and spread quickly. The work of art as activism can ignite a spark and fan the flames; it both stimulates desire and courts danger. To embrace the passion of art, the intensity of activism and the creation of new knowledge is to play with wild fire. No guarantees, no innocents; we are all implicated. The co-authors of this book have chosen to take the risk. To embrace the contradictions, to plunge into the "uncertain waters," as Petra Kukacka describes this journey. They realize that change often demands dramatic action, fuelled by passions of the spirit, mind and body. Playing with wild fire is part of a transformative process, an openness to change and to being changed.

ART AS ACTIVISM

In challenging narrow definitions of art and activism, we reframe art *as* activism. Whether the modes are verbal or non-verbal, artmaking that ignites people's creativity, recovers repressed histories, builds community and strengthens social movements is in itself a holistic form of action.

The modes of expression are endless. Most important is that they are appropriate to a particular group, time or place. Look carefully within these stories and you will find storytelling, gossiping, chatting, poetry writing, zines, street theatre, guerrilla theatre, theatre of the oppressed, masks, puppetry, drums, horns, meditational chanting, protest singing, community radio, drawing, painting, graffiti, murals, homemade postcards, sidewalk chalk drawing, origami, banners, textile art, sewing, weaving, photo-stories, phototherapy, adbusting, billboard transformation, digital imagery, video, websites. The mediums themselves are not as important as their relationship to the context, the way they are produced and how they are used. The more important questions, then, are the *why* and *for whom* of artmaking.

INTRDDUCING OURSELVES AND OUR ESSAYS

Aside from sharing the York University context and similar approaches to art, activism and academia, there is diversity among the authors of this book. Although most of us are women (save for one) and primarily young,

we come from diverse origins (from Aboriginal nations on Turtle Island to descendants of European colonies, from Toronto to British Columbia, from Pakistan to Korea, the U.S. to the U.K., Hong Kong to Chile); we are, in one sense, representative of the multi-ethnic and diasporic Toronto context where our paths crossed. Some are trained as artists or consider themselves artists, while others might more comfortably call themselves educators, organizers or writers.

The seventeen essays are grouped around four themes: Art in Social Movements, Art as Activism, Eco Art and Art Heals. In the section one, "Art in Social Movements," Leah Burns reflects on her efforts to engage youth in participatory art processes in "Seriously ... Are You *Really* An Artist? Humour and Integrity in a Community Mural Project." She playfully confronts sticky moments that challenge her own assumptions and reveal inevitable tensions between aesthetics and participation, theory and practice. Heather Chetwynd, in "Releasing Voices, Reclaiming Power: The Personal and Collective Potential of Voice," examines two quite different experiences with voice as an empowering process: meditative chanting in exploratory voice workshops, which releases the physical voice while developing the social voice, and the singing of protest music with Latin American exiles to build community and promote solidarity with political causes.

In "Whose Nicaragua? Popular Communications across Eras, Regions and Generations," Christine McKenzie and I reflect on our work as internationalists working in Nicaragua, myself in the 1980s and Christine in the early 2000s. We compare two distinct experiences, emphasizing how all activist art is shaped by, and attempts to shape, very particular historical, political and cultural contexts.

Gabrielle Etcheverry, in "Ediciones Cordillera: An Exile Community's Role in Cultural Production," revisits the experiences of her parents and their friends, exiled Chilean writers and translators, who created a literary press in Canada that both kept them connected to their political and cultural roots and mapped their struggle to recreate themselves in a new context. Finally, in "The Strawberry Tasted So Good: The Trickster Practices of Activist Art," chris cavanagh raises two key questions: What is art and who is an artist? Claiming that everyone has the power to create, he emphasizes play, trickster pedagogy, the carnivalesque and storytelling as ways to challenge power.

Section two, "Art as Activism," offers experiences and reflections on the processes of artmaking as political in their own right. In "Demechanizing Our Politics: Street Performance and Making Change," Maggie Hutcheson proposes public theatre as a collective demechanization of our commodified culture. With examples ranging from agit prop to utopian performances, from giant puppets representing the plagues of the New World Order to phoenixes rising from the ashes, she challenges dominant rationalist practices of protest to embody the change they advocate, to better integrate emotion and intellect, the personal and the political.

Salima Bhimani, in "Reconstructing Our Culture of *Ilm* (Knowledge): Muslim Women Represent Themselves," invites other Muslim women in Toronto to explore their common struggle against Islamophobia by deconstructing the ways they have been (mis)represented in Western media. She explores how Muslim women can take on the challenge of representing their own more complex stories, reflecting not only a common history of colonialism but also the tremendous diversity in beliefs and practices among Muslim people. Yukyung Kim-Cho in "Jamming with Women's Rights Activists in East Asia: A Process of Critical Reflection" revisits her project of exploring the internal contradictions of women's rights movements by juxtaposing interviews, photos, drawing, typography, lines of text and blank space in a process she calls "jamming."

In "Mixing Metaphors: Risk in Art and Activism," Petra Kukacka explores the risks we take as artists and activists. She argues we must engage with "monsters" in "uncertain waters" and that we cannot remove ourselves from the inevitable tensions that are both in the broader social context as well as within the ways we have internalized it.

The third section, "Eco Art," features projects that engage directly with the non-human, and challenge the anthropocentrism of much social movement activism and art. Melanie Kramer in "Garden the City: Activism through Interventionist Art" emphasizes the element of surprise that is central to interventionist art. She reflects on her project that challenged the use of public space in downtown Toronto by drop lifting postcards around the city. The postcards encouraged unsuspecting readers to grow their own food on the rooftops and balconies of their urban spaces.

In "Salmon Tales: Eco-Art Activism," Aileen Penner, Jacinda Mack and Lee Bensted write about their collaborative art project. The production of

silk-screened banners allowed each to represent both personal and political stories about salmon in the context of neo-liberal globalization; in the process, they revalue regenerative as opposed to reductionist thought, the sacred significance of salmon as opposed to its commodification. Sau Wai Tai also reflects on a collaborative undertaking in "Confessions of a Community Artist: A Letter to My Fellow Earthworkers." She revisits the collective experience of creating "earthballs" and installing them on the York University campus to mark sites of hidden histories; she reflects on her own struggle to "let go" as a facilitator and to allow other group members to shape the project, while also allowing the Earth herself to speak.

To end this section, Pariss Garramone challenges academic writing practice in "Tellingsmiths: The Work of Planting Trees and the Politics of Memory." She interrogates her own experience of creating an environmental autobiography on forestry work in the form of a zine and reflects on images and metaphors that have been clear-cut from academia.

The final section, "Art Heals," reveals the healing power of creative practices, whether for individuals or communities, an element of art and activism often glossed over in social movements. In "Arts in Detention: Creating Connections with Immigrant Women Detainees," Oona Padgbam and other members of the No One Is Illegal group have a conversation about how they use art as a medium of expression with immigrant women and their children in detention. Their insights confirm the healing power of group artwork as well as its capacity for cutting across language and cultural barriers. Equally important is the use of the detainees' art as tools for a broader political project advocating their release.

Heather Hermant recounts her three years of work with youth from the three ethnic groups in post-conflict Bosnia in "Language as Landscape: Navigating Post-Conflict Reconstruction with Bosnian Youth." She problematizes the use of English as a common language, or a "mediating bridge," in producing theatre pieces and a school newspaper, projects intended as healing processes for Bosnian youth.

Stephanie Conway and Julia Winckler put themselves in the picture in "Acts of Embodiment: Explorations in Collaborative Phototherapy." They create an egalitarian therapeutic context in which to share stories and re-enact scenarios for the camera that provide an alternative to the family album and conventional snapshots.

To end the collection, Heather Lash reflects on the process of theatre production with refugees from diverse origins in "You Are My Sunshine: Refugee Participation in Performance." She distinguishes between testimonial work and spectacle and problematizes the role of the animator, in particular one's responsibility as a "witness" to horrific histories.



Most of the contributors to this volume are young and their energy is reflected in the spirit of these essays, giving us all hope. *Wild Fire: Art as Activism* speaks to new activists, artists, educators, students and community workers who are daily crossing borders, blurring boundaries, dissolving dichotomies and embracing contradictions. We hope it will inspire both critical and creative response, deeper reflection and bolder action. And that it will ignite many other sparks that will spread like wild fire.

NOTES

1. See www.vivaviva.ca