

II WITNESS

two-dimensional, soapbox affair but a multi-faceted, multi-purpose form of expression.

Reference

Malpede, Karen (1996) 'Thoughts on a Theater of Witness and Excerpts from Two Plays of Witness,' in Charles Strozier and Michael Flynn (eds) *Genocide, War, and Human Survival*, Lanham, MD: Rowen & Littlefield.

Chapter 8

Steven Durland

WITNESS: THE GUERRILLA THEATER OF GREENPEACE

DURLAND CITES THE QUAKER PRACTICE of bearing witness as the source of the environmental activism of Greenpeace. Quaker meetings feature silent meditation followed by telling the congregation what one has heard inside, understood as a manifestation of the presence of God. Quakers believe that this inner voice guides their actions, including speaking out against social wrongs.

In 1968 a dozen members of the Yippie movement, led by Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, went to the visitors gallery of the New York Stock Exchange and threw money on the brokers below. 'We didn't call the press,' wrote Hoffman, 'at that time we really had no notion of anything called a media event.' But the press was quick to respond and by evening the event was being reported around the world. Within the month the stock exchange had spent \$20,000 to enclose the gallery with bullet-proof glass.

Hoffman continues, 'A spark had been ignited. The system cracked a little. Not a drop of blood had been spilled, not a bone broken, but on that day, with that gesture, an image war had begun. In the minds of millions of teenagers the stock market had just crashed. . . . Showering money on the Wall Street brokers was the TV-age version of driving the money changers from the temple.'

In 1971 an ad hoc group of activists in Vancouver who for two years had been protesting American nuclear tests on Amchitka Island in the

STEVEN DURLAND

Aleutians without success, decided they too needed to ignite a spark. Their plan was to sail a broken-down boat named the *Phyllis Cormack* to Amchitka to 'witness' the next bomb test. Hampered by storms and the US Coastguard, they were forced to turn back, with expectations that their venture had been a failure. But thousands of supporters who had been following their efforts in the newspapers greeted their return and a second boat was immediately sent out. The second boat was still 700 miles from the island when the bomb went off and it appeared that all had been for naught. But as a result of the worldwide media attention the US announced an end to tests on Amchitka and the island was restored to its prior status as a bird sanctuary. It was the first victory of Greenpeace.

For Hoffman and the Yippies their actions and the ones that followed were part of the long history of guerrilla theater, 'probably the oldest form of political commentary,' says Hoffman. 'We would hurl ourselves across the canvas of society like streaks of splattered paint. Highly visual images would become news, and rumor-mongers would rush to spread the excited word.'

For the Canadians their Alaskan Sea adventure grew out of a Quaker belief called 'bearing witness.' A person who bears witness to an injustice takes responsibility for that awareness. That person may then choose to do something or stand by, but he may not turn away in ignorance. From this belief and a modest first adventure has grown the organization that claims over 1.5 million contributors and offices in seventeen countries. The organization's name was coined in preparation for that first adventure, *green* to signify the activists' conservation interests, and *peace* to signify their second goal.

The 'actions' of Greenpeace have always been discussed in terms of the organization's ecology concerns, but it seems appropriate to include it in the history of protest theater, and in fact, Greenpeace might well lay claim to being the largest and most successful guerrilla theater of all. During the past seventeen years they have conducted innumerable actions around the world and can take or share credit for such accomplishments as the reduction of international whaling by 84 percent, a ban on disposing of nuclear garbage in the Atlantic Ocean, the near elimination of mass slaughter of nursing harp seals, and significant reductions in acid rain production, nuclear weapons testing and toxic waste disposal.

Of course Greenpeace is much more than a theater company, but its strength, and the element that differentiates it from other environmental organizations, is the impact of its visual and theatrical actions. According to Steve Loper, Action Director for Greenpeace USA, 'Greenpeace believes that an image is an all important thing. The direct actions call attention to the issues we're involved in. We put a different point of view out that usually ends up on the front page of the paper. Then we have people who've done research and people who are lobbying so that once the attention is there it gets more done. We've embarrassed people for not doing their job, or we've called attention to facts that the general public wasn't aware of so

THE GUERRILLA THEATER OF GREENPEACE

they question their local politicians. If we just did research and lobbying and came out with a report it would probably be on the 50th page of the paper.'²

Greenpeace focuses its efforts in three major campaign areas: toxic waste, nuclear issues and ocean ecology. It has been the organization's efforts to save the whales that has brought Greenpeace much of its attention. Since the initial exploit of the *Phyllis Cormack*, the organization has built an 'econavy' ranging from converted fishing trawlers to inflatable rubber dinghies called Zodiacs. They have used their fleet to document and interfere with illegal whaling as well as toxic dumping and nuclear testing and transport on the seas. Their most famous vessel, the flagship *Rainbow Warrior*, was sunk in 1985 off the coast of New Zealand by French military intelligence. The *Rainbow Warrior* was in the Pacific to protest French underground nuclear weapons testing near the Mururoa Atoll. The incident created an international scandal for the French government, and in October 1987 an international arbitration tribunal headed by UN Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar awarded Greenpeace \$8.1 million in damages from France for the sinking. Two French agents were sentenced to ten years in jail by the New Zealand court after pleading guilty to sabotage and manslaughter.

One of Greenpeace's more potent images was created in England in 1985 where internationally known photographer David Bailey directed a sixty-second film showing a glamorous fashion show in which one of the models comes out in a fur coat which suddenly begins spurting blood until the whole audience is splattered. In the final shot the model exits the ramp, dragging her fur coat and leaving a wide swath of blood behind her. The last image has also been produced as a billboard with the caption, 'It takes forty dumb animals to make a fur coat. But only one to wear it.'

Greenpeace's actions frequently consist of plugging pipes that discharge toxic waste or climbing structures and hanging banners from such places as nuclear cooling towers, smoke stacks, buildings and such famous symbols as the Statue of Liberty and Mt. Rushmore. The Mt. Rushmore action in October 1987 was an acid rain protest; the plan was to stretch a banner shaped like a gasmask over the mouth of George Washington. The banner said, 'We the People Say No to Acid Rain.'

Local authorities interrupted the Mt. Rushmore action before it was completed but the image still appeared in numerous papers across the country and had its impact. 'A symbolic image like Mt. Rushmore is a very powerful image,' said Loper. 'It lends a great deal of weight. It's almost like those Presidents against the Reagan administration. These people gave us this clean, beautiful country and we're not caring about it.'

In 1984 Loper was involved in hanging a banner on the Statue of Liberty that read 'Give Me Liberty From Nuclear Weapons, Stop Testing.' 'That picture went around the world,' Loper said. 'Every August 6th [the anniversary of the Hiroshima atomic bomb] the media is looking for an image that

STEVEN DURLAND



Figure 8.1 Greenpeace action at Belgium's largest municipal incinerator to stop waste from being burnt (photo by Buyse).

denotes protests against nuclear weapons. What we did in '84 was give them the perfect image. It was one of the most enjoyable I've done.'

Greenpeace's actions often are directed at specific problems and specific companies. Loper helped plug an underwater pipe at a CIBA-Geigy chemical plant in Lavallette, New Jersey, that was dumping over 200,000 gallons of chemicals a week into the ocean. 'A lot of toxic chemicals are odorless and

THE GUERRILLA THEATER OF GREENPEACE

colorless so it's hard to convince people they're dangerous,' he said. 'But the effluent from CIBA-Geigy looked like spent motor oil. We brought big water jugs of it ashore where people were sitting or swimming or sunning. Their mouths just fell open. They knew just by looking that this stuff didn't belong in the water. A guy from the Chamber of Commerce tried to steal a bottle of the effluent. After the action an organization started in the community called the Ocean County Citizens for Clean Water.'

'Sometimes it seems like the government, the Environmental Protection Agency, is more like a defensive organization for the industry than it is a protection agency for the people. For example, Dow Chemical in Midland, Michigan, has a risk assessment for the plant. Someone decides that it's okay, for instance, for five people or ten people in every million to die because the plant is there. That's not realistic in our opinion.'

New York governor (and then presidential candidate) Mario Cuomo was the focus of a Greenpeace action last spring when it was learned that New York was going to permit Occidental Chemical to open an incinerator in the Niagara region, an area already suffering from an overdose of toxic waste. 'We're fighting to have people reduce the production of toxic waste at the source if it can't be dealt with,' said Loper. 'Currently there is no technology that does anything but put it somewhere else.'

Loper and fellow activists climbed the state house in Albany at night and attached a banner that read 'Niagara: Still Toxic After All These Years. Why, Governor Cuomo?'

'He was having a press conference,' Loper said, 'and people were asking him "What's going on with Niagara? How come you're permitting this?" These are the kinds of questions we hoped to have asked. At the time he may have been a political candidate so he was in a position to have pressure affect him. He really got angry. He swore we were lunatics and equated us with Oliver North, but two months later we were invited by the governor's office to a signing of a toxic waste agreement at Niagara Falls. There's a grudging respect he's paying us.'

Like the best guerrilla theater, the daring escapades and visual images take a backseat to results in the Greenpeace resume. 'In some cases we do a protest and there's too much publicity on the protest itself - how high up we were, how we got there, how cold it was - so we defeat ourselves,' said Loper. 'We try to downplay the thing we've done. We tell the media that our people are professional climbers, etc. What I always say after I come down is that it wasn't much of a chance I was taking because I'm trained, and the people who are taking a real chance without any choice are the people who are having all this toxic waste foisted on them. We try to get the light off the climb, or whatever we've done, and get it on the issue.'

But Greenpeace often does get the attention on the issue and, according to Loper, they are suffering the results of their success. 'In recent years some of the things Greenpeace has done have caused retribution against us and I

STEVEN DURLAND

think that's a signal that we're being more effective. That includes prison terms and the sinking of the *Rainbow Warrior*. The more effective you are the more you piss people off. For instance the Mt. Rushmore climb wasn't successful in that we didn't get the whole banner up, but the event evidently went into 300-400 papers in the United States including the *Washington Times*, the paper Reagan reads. Who's to say that he didn't say, 'Who are these little assholes?'

'Before we climbed Mt. Rushmore our lawyer's assessment was that we'd be fined \$500 and that would be it. Then after we actually did it word came that there was high pressure from Washington to curtail our personal activities. The plea bargain the prosecution is offering right now is \$250 fine and three weeks in jail.

'What's surprising is that most people in the system that is prosecuting us support us. The policemen will tell you, "I think you guys are doing great. We respect what you did." The policeman in Albany who arrested us for the climb apologized the entire time for having to do it. Our banner was soaking wet because it rained that night. He took it out and told us, "We had it dried." We couldn't believe that.

'There was a prosecutor on the East Coast who told the judge that he refused to prosecute the case because what we were saying was true. Then he walked over to the guy from Greenpeace who was on trial, handed him \$15 for a membership and walked out of the courtroom.'

Certainly, in Greenpeace's case, its protest theater is aimed at issues that are of concern to everyone, even the perpetrators. 'I'm a philosophical person,' said Loper, 'and I don't feel that these are bad people. These are good people who are ignoring something that they know. The scientists and the government are telling them that what they're doing isn't hurting anybody and I believe they want to believe that. Anybody who's making money doesn't want to believe that they're hurting people. But somewhere inside themselves I think they know what they're doing is wrong. I think that's why when we do a protest so much energy is released because when we're down there plugging the pipes we're a part of them they've denied.'

Loper finds Greenpeace's work helps empower the rest of the audience as well. 'We always give people the feeling that something can be done. The power of individual action. When you go on the property of the company that's doing the damage and actually drape your feelings from their property it's a very distinctive defeat for them. It makes what you're saying true. The company is psychologically towering over those who would oppose it and this is like a slap in the face. It's motivating people to act. When we come along, a little three or four of us, take on the big company, it's giving the giant a whack on the nose. And it's a good thing.'

In contemporary American culture the actions of Greenpeace, like the guerrilla theater of the Yippies and all effective creativity with a mission, are rarely considered art by those given to determining such matters. Interestingly,

THE GUERRILLA THEATER OF GREENPEACE

the more successful political theater is, the less important it becomes to those affected that it is called art. It certainly isn't a problem Greenpeace is worrying about. But as the function of art in our culture drifts steadily toward becoming investment commodity and entertainment, it might well be worth the art world's time to expand its narrow definitions to include activities that have a function more in keeping with traditional art values — creating images that have an impact on people's lives.

Notes

- 1 Abbie Hoffman, 'Museum of the Streets,' in Douglas Kahn and Diane Neumaier, eds, *Cultures in Contention* (The Real Comet Press, 1985), pp. 134-140.
- 2 Steve Loper, all quotes from an interview with the author, December 1987.