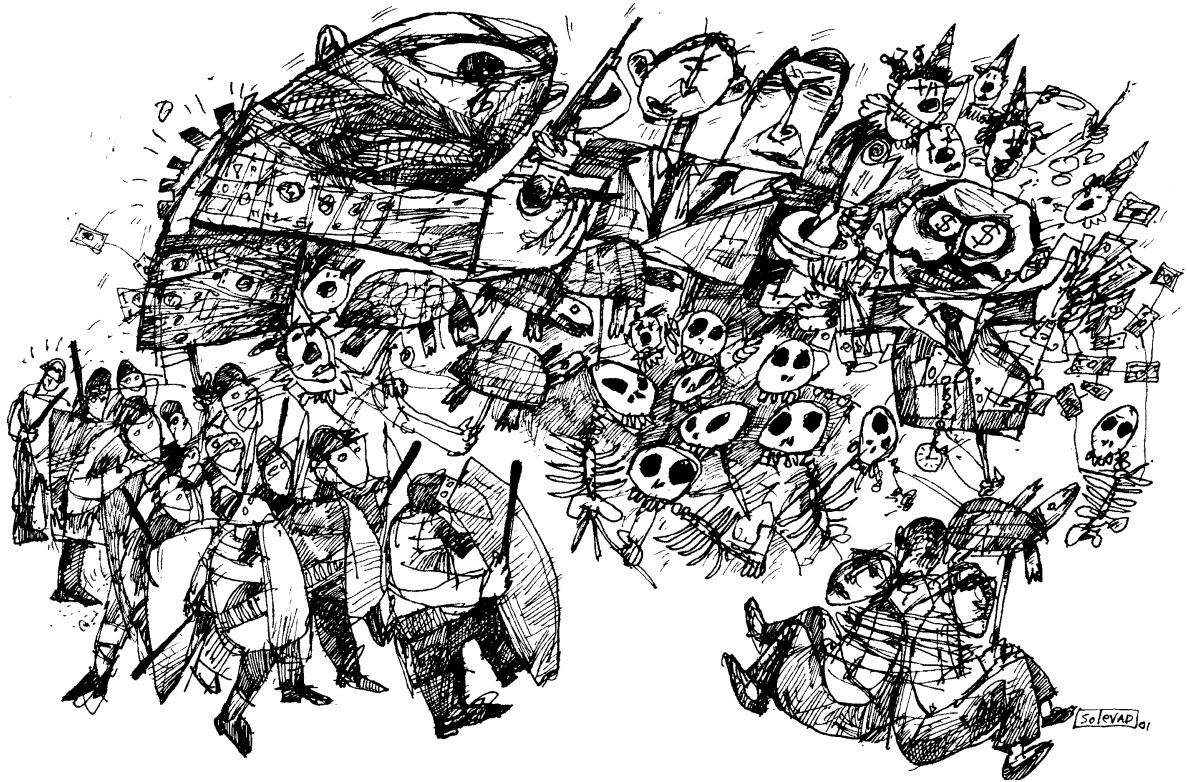


# Puppet Masters



by Martin John Brown  
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When police raided a Philadelphia warehouse on the evening of August 1, 2000, they probably weren't intending to make a big artistic statement.

The Republican National Convention was beginning, and demonstrators as well as delegates were getting ready for the big show. According to the Philadelphia Inquirer and other news sources, the raid targeted suspected protest ringleaders and their possible "instruments of crime." Seventy-five people were arrested, but when police searched

the building, they failed to find anything more damning than paint and PVC pipe ~ unless you count 137 skeleton figures the activists had constructed, to represent Texas prisoners executed under then-Governor George W. Bush. The warehouse functioned mainly as a factory for protest puppets.

The next day, city workers executed a few more prisoners ~ the confiscated puppets. It took more than four hours to crush the skeletons in a trash compactor. In the process Philadelphia authorities became instant art critics. They gave the activists a review that might make a gallery artist stammer with jealousy. They

said implicitly that these papier-mache and scrap wood creations were so powerful the public needed to be protected from them. And with the trash compactor bit ~ a piece of comedy surreal and vicious enough for Ionesco or the Coen brothers ~ these civil servants were, for a fleeting moment, geniuses of the theater.

In the past few years, a genuine spectacle has flowered from the compost of progressive activism, so much that I'm starting to appreciate political protest on a purely artistic level. All sorts of expression can be called "protest art," but I'm most interested two kinds of work. First, there are

things like the skeletons ~ puppets and pageants designed to be more protest than art, to make temporary political impressions, not to be preserved in museums or performed in opera houses. Despite its limited artistic ambitions, this kind of street theater often manages to produce images that are deeper than the issues of the day. Second, there is a subtle but very significant kind of drama in roadblocks, tree-sits, and other civil disobedience. When real people act out their convictions and responsibilities in front of an audience, it becomes symbolic performance whether they intend it or not.

There's nothing particularly new about puppetry and other protest performances, but of late the field has surged with gorgeous, loony ambition. Portlanders still reminisce about the group of inspired wits who vomited red, white, and blue to commemorate a visit by Dan Quayle. More recently and maybe more typically, anti-sweatshop activists marched on a Canadian university campus behind the satirical lead of their "Profit Prophet," a cigar-smoking capitalist. It took one puppeteer to hold up each of his huge fists, half Rodin and half Toxic Avenger, the fingers grasping bouquets of dirty dollar bills.

At the 2000 Democratic party convention, one puppet tableau appeared that aspired to represent not just a nemesis, but a whole ecology of malaise. The central figure was a candidate in the traditional blue blazer and red tie - but sporting two heads, one for Bush, one for Gore. The Gore-side arm tossed a scroll (Democracy) in the direction of a convenient toilet (the toilet itself required one puppeteer), while the Bush-side arm hoisted an ugly

shaft (the Death Penalty). As the procession moved past, the side view revealed that this candidate was literally two-dimensional. The whole scene was lorded over by a gaunt giant (Corporate Power), whose massive fist directed the candidate's spine with a stick like a gear shift.

There can be craft in these pieces, but obviously not a lot of subtlety. The works are big, crude, and made from scavengings. The creators are rarely credited, and are rarely professional artists. The works are not intended to be sold or even to last very long. Their purposes are more transient and temporary. First and foremost, says a Seattle-area activist and creative protester who prefers to remain unnamed, pageantry serves to get attention in a world of information overload. She is too savvy to think that puppets could change someone's mind about a complex issue, but thinks they make the first step ~ showing someone that an issue exists ~ an engaging experience.

At the same time, making the pieces can empower budding activists. "Art has this unique ability to affect change," says Bruce Orr, Education Director for Philadelphia's Spiral Q Puppet Theater, an organization that was involved in making the ill-fated skeletons. People learn to trust their own voices as they conceive and design puppets; they learn to collaborate as they fabricate them.

The Seattle activist sums up her view of the place of puppetmaking with an astounding statement. "It's not generally designed to be good art," she says. "It's generally designed to meet a goal."

This humble quality might be the exact thing that has liberated the genre. In a culture that praises

putrefying introspection and admires "Survivor"-style selfishness, protest puppets and costumes are remarkable for their outward rather than inward focus. The ambition may be to make a temporary political point or provide therapy for the maker, but often enough, visual poetry is the byproduct. The best works bring myths and nightmares into our concrete world, or, as the 137 skeletons would have, stand as solid witnesses to realities we choose not to discuss. If those skeletons had survived, in a thousand years we could arrange them in a public space and they would still horrify and fascinate us, even if we had no idea what Texas and the electric chair were.

Protest pageants are obviously meant to be street theater. With their rampaging colors and gleeful stereotypes, they are the Commedia dell'Arte of dissent. But just down the block there is a darker kind of spectacle that plays more like Greek drama: civil disobedience.

While no one calls them entertainment, direct actions like human barriers and tree-sits have theatrical as well as tactical value. One of the defining qualities of civil disobedience is that "the act has to be public ~ done in the presence of other people," says Terence Ball, a professor at Arizona State University and author on civil disobedience. As the nonviolent protesters use their bodies to literally obstruct the status quo, they symbolically claim the moral high ground. They sing out for justice as they set up a high-stakes dare: to remove the protesters, the authorities will have to hurt or kill them, under the judgmental eyes of spectators. When the authorities sing back, they can sound like those

immobile figures in the opera chorus, as they recite once again the laws of the land.

The ritual sound of the dialog may come from the fact that both parties rehearse beforehand, to deal with the stress, suggests Ball. Still, the suspense of the scene comes from a Houdini-like reality.

It's no trick ~ the protesters actually are at the mercy of their counterparts. At the Seattle WTO demonstration I observed police trying to persuade demonstrators to disperse with techniques that varied from smooth talking to shooting pepper spray in the eyes at point blank range.

Protesters have bolstered their position by inventing more elaborate ways of locking themselves in place, and fixing themselves in the public eye. In the past few years, protest devices - especially for environmental actions, where there is a need to actually protect tracts of land ~ have gotten fabulously complex. In England, warrens of unstable tunnels and their human occupants blocked the construction of airport runways. In Indiana, protesters disrupted a timber auction, their arms locked together with unseen mechanisms inside mysterious gray tubes. Don't try to cut these tubes open with power tools, they warned pleasantly ~ the tubes contain flammable materials. In Cascadia Forest Alliance's action at Eagle Creek, Oregon, a strategic roadblock was constructed from a spider web of climbing lines, suspending a protester in a vulnerable nest more than 60 feet above the ground.

These devices hold amazing and artistic contradictions. They are military engineering, meant for a nonviolent war. In

appearance, they seem medieval, with the rudimentary look of things made by hand, with care only for function ~ a fascinating style, in a time when even the cheapest engineered devices are faultlessly finished. Yet these innovations are hardly primitive in service. With their help, "it requires fewer and fewer activists to occupy more and more federal officials," quips Donald Fontenot, spokesman for the Cascadia Forest Alliance.

Watching the devices in action can also be poetic, a combination of sculpture, performance, and out and out mechanical mystery. The first time I saw one of the most common protest devices ~ a tripod ~ I had no conception of its tactical purpose as a road block. All I saw was an elemental arrangement of three metal legs, like the frame of large teepee ~ topped with a strangely modern symbol, an American flag. Twenty feet above me, an unshaven young man dangled from the apex in a climbing harness. When the clouds changed, the bars and ropes disappeared, and he seemed to float against a field of sky.

If anything was a better metaphor for the contradictions of human existence ~ and the quest of the environmental movement ~ I couldn't think of one. Here was a man pulling himself up against the eternal force of gravity, as it were, by his bootstraps. He was foolishly, bravely refusing the path of least resistance, the path that would see our species consume the world and all the wonder in it. Those kind of impossible ambitions ~ like trying to rise above ourselves and our nature, in order to save ourselves and the rest of nature ~ are the real masterpieces of

dissent, and no trash compactor can destroy them.