

Shooting Activists!

*an embodied philosophy of activism
in documentary praxis*

an essay on the documentary, Noble Bohemia

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I declare that the material contained in this thesis is the my own account of the research that I have conducted and has not previously been submitted for any other degree or study,

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date

for the good souls at East Perth City Farm

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abstract

This paper offers a discussion of the role activism plays in shaping our relationship to the world. Activism is considered here as a way of being, acting and engaging with the world that assumes a degree of agency in effecting social change.

Activism is often defined in negative terms as a position born out of an opposition to the world. And indeed activism implies a stand *against* apathy, resignation, cynicism and blatant pessimism. Yet the whole point of this project is to take a positive look at what *is*. We need to get beyond placards and megaphones if we are going to look at activism seriously. One difficulty with defining 'activist practices' is that they are so diverse and cut across so many other everyday actions. Here I am more concerned with understanding what *activists* are about. This task demands that we appreciate what motivates these practices, how activism enriches our lives, and how we understand our purpose in life.

Activist practices are implicitly structured by an 'embodied philosophy'. It is the expression through vigorous practices of a deep visceral care for others and the world that supports them. It will be considered here as first and foremost a mode of being, an integrity of character rather than mere instances of deed. Nor is activism governed or enforced under duties, obligations or laws. As a mode of being, activism contains a practical logic that stems from our embodied and relational experience of the world.

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It is not the theoretic question
if life has any purpose.
It is the practical question
which purpose do we put into life.

- Margit Spira

preface

This paper is the written component of a project which focuses on my documentary video, *Noble Bohemia*. Ideally readers will be able to view the documentary before reading this text, as these two portions of my thesis are complementary. This text sets out the contexts and theoretical frameworks from which the documentary was shaped.

The project grew from my intention to collaborate with others in making films concerning social change. This was meant to culminate in an international but non-competitive film festival focused on activism. This was the beginning of the 'Shooting Activist! Project', or 'SAP!'. My ideas took shape through sessions with Martin Mhando, Stewart Hadfield and Janine Boreland at a cafe in early 1999. While plans for a festival remain tentative, two documentaries have been produced. The first, *Ngully Yaddaguai (Us Dreaming 1999)*, is about a landcare project on the remote Aboriginal reserve of Pia, where I met both John and Cassie. The second, *Noble Bohemia*, takes a more personal look at activists themselves.

Activism is extremely important. This project was motivated by my desire to 'make a difference on issues that matter' as a contribution to the activist communities of Perth. As a student with wide-ranging interests and concerns, my ability and opportunity to impact on the world nevertheless feels, quite frankly, insignificant. Not being in a position of authority my voice alone is weak, but it is strengthened by engagement with environmental groups and community television. While environmental conservation and social justice issues are being

promoted widely, even becoming prominent in public consciousness, only a small minority take an active role in these concerns.

The 'Shooting Activist! Project' began with the simple premise that pursuing social change was worthwhile, and that more people should be engaged in this form of practice. It is vital that we believe we can make a positive contribution to the world. Thus the goals of the SAP! were threefold: one, to affirm that each and every individual has the ability to make a valuable contribution to society; two, to show that making such a contribution is worthwhile, and three, to inspire others to do so.

Film is a wonderful medium for expressing ideas to a large number of people. I want to reach out to those who sympathise with a particular project or social movement yet who feel disempowered, for any reason, from taking an active role in debate. These people could be called 'concerned citizens', people who see the issues on television but are yet to see what role they can play in making a difference. The documentary, *Noble Bohemia*, was intended to provide inspiration that would encourage people out of their chairs and onto the streets.

While my personal concerns for the environment weigh heavily in this paper, that particular area of concern is not the key issue within my project. The intention of the SAP! is to get people active in *whatever* it is that they care deeply about. The three 'subjects' of *Noble Bohemia* are positioned as that because their committed actions illustrate how people can make a positive contribution to the world around them. My focus is on their internal motivations for action and how that affects their lives, not on whether specific imagined goals are achieved in the external world.

Activism is framed by issues of power and disempowerment. It is generally concerned with that which is without power, without a voice. Plants are yet to develop a larynx. Our energies, ideas and passions are most vehemently roused when issues are precariously situated between positions of power and impotence. For example the public was mobilised by the proposal for a uranium mine at Jabilluka.

Before proceeding, one problem that arises in arguing for activism should be noted. In Australia many of those who speak out against oppression of the poor come from positions of privilege. It is difficult dealing with the subject of personal empowerment within oppressive situations. There is nothing more sobering than staring into the crushing facts of poverty, repression and coercion. Here I am treating activism as a mode of agency which is life-affirming. Doing so may be vitally important for many in our context, but for those living a hand-to-mouth existence this may seem of very little importance.

However this project is not just aimed at professionals with a social conscience in rich nations. Indeed it is hoped that activism can be reclaimed within practices that we all engage. Of course, oppression cannot be dismissed as merely a 'perceived problem', one which could be overcome simply through theory or imagination. I want to stress the importance of agency even under some of the most oppressive circumstances. Through the relational understanding of practice, developed in the following chapters, social agency (conceived as the ability to contribute and make a difference to social life) is inextinguishable. I concede that an activist philosophy can never provide an 'answer' to oppression, as though it could eliminate the issue. It does not proscribe particular actions or provide a

formula for liberation. What focus on *embodied* activism does do is provide an affirmative grounding to inspire engaged action in the world as valid in itself.

introduction

This paper offers a discussion of the role activism plays in shaping our relationship to the world. Activism is considered here as a way of being, acting and engaging with the world that assumes a degree of agency in effecting social change. As a way of life, activism does not offer any easy answers. It is not a magic wand to bring happiness or cure all ills. It is more like an ordinary walking stick that steadies us on our way forward through some pretty steep terrain. Rather than pointing proscriptively to a path we must take, I am asking for consideration of unfamiliar routes. Some are rocky, many are steep and few are paved, but the journey can be well worth it.

Activism is often defined in negative terms as a position born out of an opposition to the world. And indeed activism implies a stand *against* apathy, resignation, cynicism and blatant pessimism. Yet the whole point of this project is to take a positive look at what *is*. We need to get beyond placards and megaphones if we are going to look at activism seriously. One difficulty with defining 'activist practices' is that they are so diverse and cut across so many other everyday actions. Here I am more concerned with understanding what *activists* are about. This task demands that we appreciate what motivates these practices, how activism enriches our lives, and how we understand our purpose in life.

Activist practices are implicitly structured by an 'embodied philosophy'. It is the expression through vigorous practices of a deep visceral care for others and the world that supports them. It will be considered here as first and foremost a mode of being, an integrity of character rather than mere instances of deed. Nor is activism governed or enforced under duties, obligations or

laws. As a mode of being, activism contains a practical logic that stems from our embodied and relational experience of the world.

cracks in the ceiling

Activism is not usually an abstract rebellion against a theoretical concept but a response to something that is real, specific, and concrete. This response is embedded in a particular space and time, usually having a well defined history, to something we feel personally and intensely affected by. For the activist, global issues are not abstract but have direct effect on their lives or the lives of those they care for. This project does not examine these global issues *per se*, but rather focuses on the people who take personal responsibility for dealing with them.

It is within communities that people straddle the personal realm of intimate relations and global events and processes. It is within the context of community where apparently alien laws of bureaucratic politics resonate with unnerving clarity. Activism emerges out of a realisation of our connectedness to the laws that govern us and our need and ability to take responsibility for their inadequacy. Within a liberal-democratic system we are led to imagine we have a say in the way we are governed. Activism is about claiming this promise. If we do not like a law, we imagine in our context, we can challenge it and try to make it more appropriate.

There are many shared experiences of oppression in all parts of the globe. Activism is frequently associated now with what has been described as the 'anti-globalisation' movement. The term 'globalisation' is highly contested. It has become a catch-cry for a multitude of ideas, policies and processes that integrate economies and cultures. Criticism has come from many fronts

claiming that 'globalisation' has widened socioeconomic inequalities,¹ subjugated local cultures and governance including from humanitarian, environmental and nationalist sectors.²

So many of the laws that govern our lives appear alien and incomprehensible. This sometimes leaves us, despite our 'democratic' and 'participatory' ideology, feeling disconnected from the global polity. Many resign to the belief that the faceless and amorphous policy-makers are untouchable, beyond reproach. This leaves us completely disempowered and cut-off from the very structures that govern our lives. Many activists question the idea that decisions are best left to the experts, believing that we all need to take responsibility for those decisions. This means that if we are not happy with a decision, we should challenge it by any peaceful means necessary. To recognise that we legitimise the social, cultural and political institutions that govern us - by voting, consuming and participating - is to concede that there is a crucial role for us to play in shaping these institutions.

In this context, Geráld Berthoud poses some pertinent questions confronting activists today, and have yet to be answered adequately:

[H]ow are we to preserve what is properly human in each of us when our modes of action and our ways of thinking are subject to ... powerful constraints? How are we to avoid becoming individually and collectively the instruments and the victims of systems of our own construction, systems which we have taken as the expression of our own aspirations? (Berthoud, 1995, 86).

1 The St. Vincent de Paul Society report, 'Two Australians - Addressing Inequality and Poverty' (Terry McCarthy and John Wicks, 2001) found that five million Australians are living in poverty (20 per cent of whom are considered part of the 'working poor'). The gap between the richest and poorest 20 per cent has grown 20 per cent from 1982 to 1999.

² Examining the historical development of globalisation, Paul Hirst (1996) observes that the recent circumstances are not unprecedented. Hirst identifies that in some respects, markets were actually freer between 1870 and 1914 (prior to the Bretton Woods agreement) and that what is happening is not really happening globally but rather regionally, where capital is being concentrated within North America, Western Europe and Japan (Hirst (1996), Phillip Cerny (1996), Richard Higgott (1998), Andrew Wyatt-Walter (1995), John Zysman (1996)).

I will not linger on defining the 'Good life', the 'Good state' or even the 'Right philosophy'. As an environmentalist, I believe that the degradation of the earth should be a primary concern of all who inhabit it, individuals and states alike. I also hold that communities with a low incidence of prejudice and injustice will be more productive, sustainable and generally more fulfilling for its people than one with more prejudice and injustice (Eva Cox, 1995).

Activists are scrutinised for inconsistency more than most. As activists are generally more outspoken about their views, we are judged accordingly.³ Setting an ethical standard exposes us to judgement. Activist movements are not without hypocrisy. Whilst we balance our ideals with the institutional realities we live under, we at times fall foul and stumble upon our word. This is something that we all grapple with. What is important is that our ethics are drawn from our experience of the world and that we act as best we can.

from theory to the screen

My inquiry will focus on the role of activism in respect to self-identity. I wanted to understand how our identity relates to the wider social and environmental spheres. *Noble Bohemia* is thus a personal portrait of three activists. The intent of the documentary was to convey something about the individual within a very limited time-frame. I wanted to give faces to the angry-mob so often depicted in mainstream media. Activists have been stereotyped, bound by a prescribed homogeneous identity. I aimed to dispel some of these fallacies by portraying activism in three-dimensional form.⁴ I to make it clear to audiences that activists are generally well informed, not 'rent-a-

³ The same could be said for religious followers. However, as the practice of religion often differs from the original texts (and interpretation is everything), judgements should be made upon personal beliefs (rather institutional authoritative texts).

⁴ but admittedly, the technology is not yet there.

crowds' or school-children deceived into protest rallies by extremist anarchists.⁵ As it was the visual medium that constructed 'activist' identity, the medium is well placed to reconstruct. Thus, the visual form served the aims of the Shooting Activist! Project well.

The subjects were chosen not merely on the basis of what they have done, but on their understanding of why they are doing it. An important part of my hypothesis about activism, is that activists are strongly driven by a sense of personal satisfaction gained from such work. I wanted to question the common notion of 'selfless' altruism. This understanding is predicated on the belief that our personal interests are clearly distinct and that benefits of helping another are confined to that individual. In other words, this traditional conception of activism is based on an atomistic social philosophy (Mathews, 1991).

Activism would not be sustained if the activist was not gaining significant benefits themselves. Thus I wanted to know what were the benefits gained through activism. To uncover this interior world, I wanted to explore some of the more life-changing experiences that have shaped their lives. I wanted to know what affected them most in grounding their sense of self in the world and their sense of purpose (both positively and negatively). The stories told in *Noble Bohemia* are therefore about the identity of activists rather than their activities *per se*.

What inspires me to attempt to make a difference in the world (however small) are the effective efforts made by others throughout history. As well as Mahatma Ghandi, Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King Jr., are many of the less public heroes whose pursuit of justice inspires me. I will briefly introduce a

⁵ John Howard made such a claim in 2000 in regards to the 'S11' (2001) protest in Melbourne.

few of these people over the course of this paper: Henry Spira, an animal rights campaigner; Catherine Sneed, who has worked on rehabilitation projects with gaol inmates; and the subversive pacifist protester, 'Carnival Against Capital'. Friends working in environmental causes, indigenous land rights and in the alternative media who are given little recognition for their work also give me hope and encouragement. Since I was inspired by these people, so too others may be. It is from this premise that *Noble Bohemia* took shape.

The practical approach taken in producing the video *Noble Bohemia* will be treated in Part III. However, it is worth describing in brief the general structure of the documentary. As mentioned above, I am inspired by living people's lives, and thus chose to use the stories of real people to convey the Shooting Activist! message. To uncover the interior world of activism, I elect to explore some of the formative experiences of activists. Rather than boasting about exploits, I aim to expose what affected them most both positively and negatively. It was also vital that the documentary contained a dramatic narrative. To do so I narrowed my areas of questioning to four 'moments': (1) morning ritual; (2) turning point; (3) lowest point; and (4) satisfaction.

1. Morning ritual
What is your morning ritual? What gets you out of bed in the morning?
What usually drives your thoughts in the morning - your fears and loves?

Question one serves to introduce the activist to the audience but also gives an insight into how they approach their life. Morning is often a time where we consider the day ahead within the perspective of our life as a whole. The time between our dream-state and full-consciousness is a time when ideas

percolate.⁶ As reflection provides the narrative form of the documentary, this question I believe, is a fitting opening.

2. Turning point
Has there been a significant turning point that has influenced your life as an activist?
(2.a) Describe the turning point and, if possible, give an anecdote that illustrates how you feel about it.
(2.b) How do you think it has impacted on your present life?

Question two examines a major experience that has left a lasting impression on the way in which they now live their lives. The question provides an example of the kind of experience that most affects them as well as giving the audience an idea of what drives them. It is an opportunity for the audience to gain a sense of the subject's personal history, where they have been, and how that has affected what they are doing now.

3. Lowest point
Describe a time when you were at your lowest, most hopeless.
(3.a) What happened?
(3.b) How did you feel at that point?

Similar to the previous question, this question provides a springboard to delve into character of the subjects. It when we are most insecure and vulnerable that we are most humble. Humility in others allows us to identify and relate to them as people. By knowing what these people have gone through, the audience is also able to appreciate the depth of their commitment.

4. Satisfaction
How did you get through your lowest point; what drives, motivates and sustains you in the face of adversity and disappointment?

The last is an explicit question as to what kind of satisfaction they gain from being involved in activism. Their responses provide an interesting understanding of the kinds of goals and aspirations that drive their lives. It also relates back to the first question of what gets them out of bed each morning.

⁶ Originally, I was going to begin the documentary with the sound of coffee percolating. However, I soon discovered that this would be an inaccurate portrayal of the subjects as none are big coffee drinkers.

topography

This thesis is structured around the content and form of the documentary, along with a discussion of the concept of activism more generally. Part I explore the idea that activism embodies an ontology; that it inevitably shapes issues of self-identity and our relationship to a wider social and ecological world. The following chapters, in Part II, draw out the experience of activism for each of the three subjects in *Noble Bohemia*. Cassie Newnes embodies a deep regard for the more-than-human world; John Tawhai's caring work with the AIDS Council embodies an ethic that is grounded within his personal ethnic history; Toby Whittington embodies activist practices that are expressed through his street performance. Part III explores how *SAP!* has been translated onto the screen in *Noble Bohemia*. The process of making a pointedly political documentary will be examined and compared with other genres. Finally, I will reflect upon the implications of this study and consider some of the possibilities that a critically engaged citizenry may bring to social change.

Part I

activism

Chapter 1

conceptual framework

It is not the theoretic question if life has any purpose. It is the practical question which purpose do we put into life (Margit Spira, quoted in Peter Singer, 1998, 183)

Margit Spira's words, from a letter to her son Henry stand at the beginning of this essay and of *Noble Bohemia* because they provide the gestalt I want to begin with. This is to say it is not essential to know what life means to others, what it is supposed to mean, or whether it holds any inherent meaning at all. These remarks emphasise that what *is* important is the value we give to our lived experience. Margit Spira was asking her son to develop a meaningful life through practical means. Henry seemed to have indeed heeded these wise words, living by an ethic grounded in his grass-roots activism, first in promoting social justice, then later in animal welfare issues.

What is absent from this view is any clue as to the political content. In outlining a conception of activism, I have been unwilling to identify a particular political view for fear of limiting the practice too narrowly. However, I do not believe this to be honest or indeed possible. This project is by its very nature political, and carries with it my own political biases. These remarks made below should be read as, like the spectacles I wear, the lens that colours my world. What could be said is that my ethics are drawn not from abstract logical thought or from some omnipotent being, but from lived experience of what nourishes me as a human being. And what nourishes me is that which makes me proud to be human. Perhaps Aldo Leopold best expressed his ethics through his experiences in the Wisconsin woodlands. Similarly, my love of the more-than-human world has been shaped by experiences in the West-

Australian south-west and travels overseas, particularly to the Canadian Rockies and in the mountains of East Java. With all values it is essential that they are expressed through the practical reality we operate in.

It will be argued in this essay that activism plays an important role in forming selfhood. Regardless of ideological perspective, activism is viewed here as 'embodied philosophy'. This means that our understanding of the world and our role in it is internalised and becomes an integral or constituting aspect of our self-identity. The elements of this 'embodied philosophy' will be outlined in the following chapter. Here I focus first on the frameworks I use to conceptualise activism.

meaningful experience

It is within the dialectic of world and self that I wish to draw out the individual character of activism. The unity of self and world has been discussed in many popular spiritual⁷ and ecological discourses⁸. I will draw upon phenomenological, existentialist and feminist discourses as fruitful wells for understanding our relationship to the world.

The development of self-identity is rooted in our relationship to the world at large. Phenomenologists like Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty have provided a logic of understanding that grounds meaning in consciousness rather than the world itself. Contrary to the belief that the self is moulded at conception, it is believed that the self is developed through lived experience.⁹ They saw that our knowledge of others is largely determined by our knowledge of ourselves; and, that we only know ourselves through our

⁷ such as Taoist traditions (see Po-Keung Ip (1993)), Buddhist traditions (Kenneth Kraft (1996)).

⁸ including, gaia theories and the deep ecology literature of Arne Naess (1986) and Joanna Macy (1993).

⁹ This idea that the self that we know exists only in experience or situation is expressed by Sartre when he wrote: "The concrete consciousness arises in situation, and it is a unique, individualised consciousness *of* this situation and (of) itself in situation. It is to this concrete consciousness that the self is present, and all

knowledge of others.¹⁰ It is within this paradox of consciousness that 'the self' and 'the world' are given meaning.

From this standpoint, the world does not possess an intrinsic or universal meaning. Thus, we do not merely observe the world, but through our very consciousness, we are active participants who in crucial ways constitute it. It is not that the world demands our action, but rather that we perceive the world in such a way that action is demanded. Activists trying to save blue whales do so, not because the whales have 'SOS' printed on their foreheads. Activists try to save blue whales because they believe them to be immensely valuable, as magnificent giants of the deep. In other words, not only do our values dictate our perception of the world, but our values are ultimately shaped in the world, and therefore by our experiences. It is within this dialectic that I would argue activist motivations should be understood.

There are a number of concepts from the existentialist tradition that form an important component of the activist identity considered here. One notable idea is Martin Heidegger's ([1929] 1998) notion of *Dasein*. Literally translating to 'being', *Dasein* can be understood in phenomenological terms as the becoming or unfolding of things, where meaning is created, constructed and mediated through our unique perspective. Similarly, it is possible to view the deeds of activism as a process of becoming. That is, activism is not an *a priori* essence that is fixed and constant, but a dynamic and evolving construct. It is from this position of freed meaning that I hope to draw empowering possibilities for real

the concrete characteristics of consciousness have their correlates in the totality of the self." (Sartre, 1947, 91)

¹⁰ It is through our knowledge of others that we identify ourselves with or against the other. This is to say that we identify ourselves both by the commonalities we share with others, and the differences that we define ourselves against. In the latter case, we can observe how protest movements are defined and united by their opposition. That is, we can define ourselves in negative terms by what we oppose, such as anti-whaling protester.

social and environmental change. This will be further explored in Chapter 2 with respect to Jean-Paul Sartre's (1947) ideas on social responsibility.

Most activists operate on the embodied level within the context of the wider, social-picture. That is, the actual practice of activism involves very immediate activities, including weeding, writing letters and talking to people. It is this connection with the wider world that gives meaning to these simple actions.¹¹ The activist mantra, 'think globally, act locally' does indeed have resonance here. Very little activism occurs on the global level because this is where the interconnections between people and events are most complex, ambiguous and impersonal. Activism thrives in the strong local community where the relations between events and people are clearest and most tangible.

The activist mantra mentioned above also has resonance with the concept of the hermeneutic circle. This is an interpretation of the world whereby the whole of something (a system or object for example) is understood with respect to its individual parts, and vice-versa. Thus the self, and the world are inseparable propositions that gain their meaning with reference to the other. What we do in our local communities must be considered within the wider context. To appreciate this encourages those of us concerned about global issues who work on a local level.

Our individual actions in the embodied realm should not be understood in isolation. Activism is about dealing with large issues whilst operating within our local or regional community. It is crucial to clarify that the embodied and the social realms should not be considered as a dichotomy, where the social is

¹¹ To follow Heidegger's definition of world, "that in terms of which human reality makes known to itself what it is", we can understand how the world is filtered through our awareness (or *Dasein*). (quoted in Sartre, 1947, 104)

prime¹². When dealing with environmental degradation for example, it is important to understand the broader or macro context of ecosystems and the systematic cause of the problem. However, this means very little unless something is done at the local level. It is more useful to consider this as a dialectic, for when the wider social and ecological realm is synthesised with the embodied world, the meaning generated is magnified. It is only when the broader understanding of the problem is applied to action on the ground that the matter can be addressed. In other words, actions taken locally are given credence when considered within the context of the wider issues that they address.

To attempt to solve issues like poverty, deforestation and global warming is like trying to eat through an entire sardine ball. As a protection against predators, sardines cluster together into a tight ball, circling each other at incredible speed, thus making a very difficult target. Similarly, many environmental and social justice issues are tightly interwoven, thus making it difficult to deal with any issue separately. It is far more practical and effective to single out one sardine, or one small issue, and chew on it thoroughly.

While poverty is a truly mammoth problem with great complexity, it is still possible to make a positive difference to people living in poverty. It should be remembered that the figure of approximately 841 million people suffering from malnutrition is not just a number, but refers to actual people (*State of the World*, 1999, 117). To approach poverty as a numbers problem, is to bite off far more than any one person can possibly chew. In terms of numbers, helping one or two people is not going to dent that awesome figure. Alternatively, if we

¹² The macro world includes the regional financial capital flows, the 'new international division of labour' (Jeremy Clegg (1996) and Gary Gereffi (1994)), and all of our national laws. The micro world includes our intimate relations of family and close community.

view poverty as a human problem and deal with the issue at the 'coalface', all help is valuable.

Living an embodied philosophy of activism is to embody the very change in the world that we stand for. That is, the change that we seek in society is reflected in the very way in which we live our lives. It is to assume a life that reflects the kind of world we want. In this sense, we identify ourselves, not only as a part of the world, but also as an aspect of the world. Therefore, as an activist, to care for the self is to care for the world, and to care for the world is to care for the self.

practical wisdom...

As an embodied philosophy, activism is an engaged and informed mode of practice that is expressed in word and deed. Activism evokes what Aristotle (1908) referred to as *praxis*, that is, the unity of theory and practice. Therefore, the practices of activism can only be properly understood with an appreciation of their intent and the rationale that guides them. Enmeshed with Aristotle's understanding of *praxis* is his idea of practical wisdom or *phronesis* (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1962, 152-54). To understand the *praxis*, we need to know the wisdom that informs it. Practical wisdom is aligned with our common-sense reasoning. Thus, it is not abstract thought but a reasoning grounded in our actual experience of the world that is applied to achieve tangible outcomes.

land ethic...

One of the early pioneers of such practical wisdom in the modern environmental movement was the American forester, Aldo Leopold¹³. He was one of the first ecologists to articulate a philosophy that he lived by. In his

landmark book, *A Sand Country Almanac* (1949), Leopold showed an understanding of ecological processes that was well ahead of his time. He was a duck-shooter who relied on the wood in the forest to see him through the winter. As a forester who experienced living in the wilderness, his dependence on the land was obvious to him, and so never took more from the forest than it could sustain. The respect he had for the ecological processes around him showed a rare and admirable sensitivity to the land.

Leopold articulated his understanding of the more-than-human world in terms of a 'land ethic'. This view upholds the "integrity, stability, and beauty of the community, and the community includes the soil, water, fauna, and flora, as well as people" (Leopold, [1949] 1991, p. 345). His ethics stem logically from his deep appreciation of the earth. As an ecologist, Leopold soon understood that life was supported by a complex system of interrelationships between the organic and inorganic world¹⁴. From this biotic view of Land, and with a land aesthetic, Leopold believed it to be logical to develop an 'ecological conscience', whereby we attune ourselves to live with respect for the Land.

care for the world...

Many social and ecological movements are responding to a perceived alienation from each other and the earth. Beginning with the Cartesian mind/body dualism, Freya Mathews (1991) argues that many cultural institutions have privileged a form of reasoning that is abstracted from the body (namely, instrumentalist rationality). Mathews shows how modernity has

¹³ Founding a wilderness group in Wisconsin (the precursor to the 'Wilderness Society'), Leopold was definitely a radical reformer of his time, whose legacy lives on. He taught forestry at the University of Wisconsin. It is this synthesis of word and deed that made Leopold a true activist.

¹⁴ He called the sum of these components which comprise life, 'the land'. He called this understanding of nature - as characterised by interdependence - , the 'biotic view of land'. From this, comes a 'land aesthetic', an appreciation where one's thinking and senses are tuned to the complexity and *intrinsic* 'beauty' of nature.

rendered the self to be largely atomistic, that is, perceive one's self to be independent in thoughts, needs and interests.

To this end, many technologies have been designed to manipulate, control or conquer the perceived failings of the physical body (be it too slow, too tired, too old). As the body has come to represent our most 'base' needs, it has been subjugated by the primacy of the reasoning mind. Relating this rationale to patriarchal ambitions, Mathews presents much of our culture as severing our relations with our own bodies. This is to undermine activities of mere existing (eating, sleeping, walking, dying, talking) and privilege abstract thought such as science. It is from this mind/body split that we have advanced 'pure reasoning' from which it is argued that the species, *Homo Sapien* is better and therefore more valuable than all other species (also see nature (Val Plumwood (1991 and 1993), Karen Warren (1990).

ethic of care...

Environmental ethics based on practical wisdom inhabits emotional states of care and responsibility. Carol Gilligan distinguishes two conceptions of responsibility (1988, 4). The first is that of "commitment to obligations" and the second is "responsiveness in relationships" (*ibid.*). It is the latter that Gilligan explores in developing an ethics of care. She locates care as a fundamental source of values and judgement. It is this kind of "moral agency" empowered through relations that is of interest to this discussion of activism (1988, 7).

Following a similar track to Gilligan's ideas on our need for attachment, Michael Sandel (1984) contrasts two notions of selfhood, the 'unencumbered' and 'encumbered self'. He argues that the former is a consequence of the modernist project, where freedom from obligations and restrictions is the goal

of the enlightened individual. The 'unencumbered self' can be compared with Issiah Berlin's (1984) concept of 'negative freedom' or Freya Mathews' (1991) notion of the 'atomistic self'.

The 'encumbered self' perceives these 'obligations' and 'restrictions' quite differently. In this case, the self is developed within embedded, reciprocal social relationships (more in tune with Berlin's notion of 'positive freedom'). Gilligan identifies this notion in terms of an "enlarged conceptual framework" whereby our

...connection or interdependence ... overrides the traditional contrast between egoism and altruism... (p 8) ...self is known in the experience of connection and defined not by reflection but by interaction, the responsiveness of human engagement. (Gilligan, 1988, 7)

Chapter 2

the character of activism

I look around me - I'm typing on a plastic and metal and glass computer perched on a desk made from cut down trees and toxic paint. I sit in a building made of wood and bricks that were taken from the earth on a street made of poisonous asphalt that was laid over an ecosystem that had thrived for hundreds of thousands of years. I'm clothed in cotton that was saturated with pesticides while it grew and treated and dyed with toxic chemicals while it was being processed. All of my possessions were made hundreds of thousands of miles away and shipped in styrofoam and plastic wrap via gas burning engines and destructive road and air ways to me. My food, although organically grown and completely vegan, is shipped from where it was grown to my local store and is often packaged in paper, plastic, metal, and toxic inks... I live in an apartment building where nobody is on a first name basis. I know more about idiot actors in Hollywood that I've never met than I do about the womyn who lives next door to me (and is probably more interesting)... People struggle all of their lives doing work that they hate just to be a functioning member of a system that is wasteful, destructive and unhealthy.

What I advocate is ... a sensible, pragmatic, and non-destructive approach towards existence. We need to re-evaluate our practices... I advocate change; massive, massive change.

Basically we should stop doing those things that are destructive to the environment, other creatures, and ourselves and figure out new ways of existing. (Moby, 1995, *Everything is Wrong* cover sleeve.)

The destruction that Moby identifies is what the New York musician refers to as 'all wrong'; it is a world that he simultaneously loves and loathes. Moby is a conscientious vegan who surrounds himself in "plastic and metal and glass": the technology he employs to create his music. Does this paradox mean that he is a hypocrite? I think not. This paper seeks to explore 'new ways of existing' that navigate this world with power, and the due respect and consideration it deserves. This is what activism is about.

The omnipresence of the global problems raised by Moby emphasises the enormity of a situation that leaves many feeling powerless. The other side of the coin is that these problems are not entirely distant or removed from our lives. Quite the contrary, the most pressing of global concerns appear in every aspect of our everyday lifestyle (such as global warming, deforestation, genetically modified foods).

Activism is not a magic bullet, where riding my bicycle will prevent global warming. It is perhaps more accurate to talk about activism as an evolving process or a path on which to travel. Activism is more of a state of becoming than it is a fixed state of being. It is a general approach to life that assumes a significant degree of responsibility for the way in which we engage the world.

Activist practices are not simply motivated by an interest in improving the world. A key motivating factor is our own sense of personal satisfaction. Activism cannot be properly grasped when imagined as 'an expression of oneself', as though separate from it. It must be understood as a defining aspect of selfhood. That is, activism is a foundational attitude to life. Activism is a way of living that gives a particular meaning to our lives. It is not driven by universal principles, or a sense of duty as though one is obliged to by society. Activists are motivated by an attitude of care and a recognition of responsibility as part of the world they care for. Activists are people who do what they do because they gain satisfaction from it. Activism may be altruistic but is not selfless. Our sense of self is deeply embedded in our relationship with the world. To care for and respect the world is to care for and respect the self.

The time and energy spent should be understood not as sacrifice but as acts of generosity. In understanding the satisfaction gained through activism, it is useful to draw upon Marcel Mauss' study, *The Gift* (1970)¹⁵. David Graeber draws on Mauss to suggest that generosity is not a sacrifice, but an act of power, thus enlarging rather than diminishing one's self (2000). A gift for instance, from one to another is an expression of that person's ability to give. Whether it be a gift of labour or love, acts of generosity were found to carry

immense importance in some of the cultures that Mauss studied. Such ideas of generosity live on today - even under capitalist forces. In Japan for instance, the exchange of gifts among business partners is common practice. This idea has indeed been adopted through the everyday relations within an active and engaged civil society¹⁶.

Social generosity is not reliant on spiritual foundations but common practical wisdom. A vibrant community with a strong social capital base of social trust, generosity, compassion and reciprocity is not utopian but underpins the strength of our economic capital (Putnam, 1993). As we undergo changes during the course of our life (including our appearance, outlook, attitude and health), our communities are themselves susceptible to change. The health of the community (based on social capital indicators), depends upon the strength of relationships and the reciprocity of its people. In other words, the community is only as strong and supportive as the generosity of those who constitute it. It is important to realise that our community depends on us. The relationship we have with our community is vital.

The activist character consists of five aspects that I will sketch below: (i) acting, (ii) an ethic of care, (iii) taking a stand, (iv) a pursuit for justice, and (v) taking responsibility. This is not a definitive list but an outline that suggests some of the key factors that constitutes activism. These five aspects are not listed in order of importance, and nor are they mutually exclusive. Indeed, all of these aspects are all interrelated and complimentary. It is only when these five aspects are considered together that the activist character is brought to life.

i. acting...

¹⁵ Cultures included Somoa, Maori, Andaman Islands, Melanesia, North-West America, Ancient Rome, Hindu (Classical period), and Germanic peoples.

¹⁶ see Cox, E. (1995), David Korten (1996), Robert Putnam (1993), Michael Walzer (1994) for analyses of social capital and community reciprocity.

... to act is to modify the *shape* of the world; it is to arrange means in view of an end;... an action is on principle *intentional*. (Jean-Paul Sartre, 1947, 433, original emphasis)

In the epigraph above, Sartre is not speaking of earth-shattering revolutions, but everyday actions that intend to alter the world in the most ordinary but nonetheless meaningful ways. Activism is a practical pursuit, in means and ends. With such an understanding of action in the realm of the micro, the idea that activism seeks to 'change the world' is no longer so unrealistic. This is the way I would like people to understand their relationship to the world. That is, that our actions count, that what we do in this world actually has some effect. While there are certainly many grounds for questioning the degree of power we have, the fact that our actions have some affect at all is one point that can and should be made.

When speaking of power in this context, I am thinking of Michel Foucault's (1980) notion of neutral relational power. This is to argue that there are power relations within every situation involving two or more people¹⁷. The power of activism comes from an effective navigation of these relationships in working towards our goals. As activists, we are generally not powerful people. On the contrary, it is our distinct lack of power that motivates much of our action. However, by acting in such circumstances, power can be generated.¹⁸

Hannah Arendt demonstrated the value of action in her work, *The Human Condition* (1974). Her book is designed around Aristotle's concept of *Vita Activa* (*bios politikos*), meaning, "a life devoted to public-political matters" (Arendt, 1974, 12). Arendt divides the *Vita Activa* into the three categories of

¹⁷ This notion of power as neutral (neither benevolent or malevolent) contrasts with Max Weber's understanding of power as 'the possibility of imposing one's will upon the behaviour of other persons' (1986, 29).

'labour', 'work' and 'action' (*praxis*). It is this last category that Arendt places the greatest emphasis¹⁹, and is most relevant here. She describes action as an unfolding process (1974, 230-35) that is inherently powerful (1974, 199-206, 236-47).

Power is actualised only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities (Arendt, 1974, 200).

Arendt could well have been referring to activism rather than power. Indeed, Arendt locates power in the process of action when people "act together" (1974, 200). Action then becomes both a constituting factor of selfhood, and powerful means of change.

ii. *an ethic of care...*

The predicate of caring is relating. All that it takes to empathise with another is experience. It is when we relate our experience to another's that we can appreciate what they may be going through. We know the other as far as we know ourselves. And, it is through relations with others that we come to know ourselves. It is through this basic mutuality that we care for others. We rely on others to validate our world and ourselves. Therefore, caring for others is by no means selfless or in any way irrational.

A developed sense of care for the earth is derived from a search for one's self. As people, we seek a bedrock to ground meaning and make sense of who we are. Our identities can be considered constructs that are created in the quest to express perceived virtues that aid our navigation in the world around us. Our identities are founded through experience, our relations and interactions

¹⁸ In this way power is similar to courage. Courage is not the absence of fear but the ability to act in the face of fear. Likewise, power is not simply the application of power but the ability to achieve beyond that which is expected.

with others, and the environment in which we traverse. It is therefore quite understandable that we should value the world, as without it our identity quite literally loses its distinct character.

To articulate who we are is to compare ourselves, or situate ourselves, within the cultural and natural world, where the hegemonic discourses define the terms of reference. Capitalism could be said to define its people as consumers, where who we are and what we own, is almost synonymous. The example of consumer culture within capitalism highlights the latent conflation of identity and consumption identification. Consumer culture undermines our relationship with the natural world by placing the source of our values in consumption rather than on our supportive relationships with others and the more-than-human world.

Taking this further, we can see the importance of having a moral ground (the foundation and framework of our values) that supports and nourishes a positive identity. We are not isolated, free-floating individuals but interdependent and situated people, relying on the world to make sense of ourselves (see Mathews, 1991). This interdependence, this reciprocity of self and world, demands an identification with the world at large.

The more the world reflects and operates according to what we value, the more at peace we are with our place in it. Disjunctions, fissures, or to echo Derrida, *differance*, that occur in our values push us to heal, harmonise or at least more deeply understand these situations. This is done either by changing ourselves or changing the world. It is the latter option that concerns us here. However, we need to be wary of setting up a false dichotomy, for the desire to

¹⁹ Patricia Moynagh writes, that of the "three fundamental human activities" that comprise the *Arendtian vita activa*, action reigns supreme over both "labor" and "work." (1997, 28).

come to terms with the world of values is essentially an issue *of the self in the world*. That is, to change the self is to change the world, and vice-versa.

If the terms of reference for defining the self are located in the world, then the world is the primary source of meaning. To live as an activist is to construct the self through relationships with the other, whilst being embedded in a situated ethic of care and generosity. It is a liberal tradition to rest faith in the 'invisible hand' and emphasis the primacy of the individual above that of the social sphere. However, Michael Sandel (1984) asks us to embrace the social. He argues for an 'encumbered self', that is, a self that embraces its attachments and interdependence with the world. In other words, it is to accept our "enduring attachments and commitments" (of family and community) that "partly define the person [we are]" (1984, 90). Therefore, to care about these attachments is not separated from the self but indeed defines the self.

Environmental discourses have examined the way through which our care for the world can be just as strong as our care for each other. This is particularly evident in deep ecology and the gaia theory writings. Deep ecology defines the world as possessing an inherent value (Naess, A. (1986), Macy, J. (1993)). An alternative understanding of the way in which we are all interconnected is to say that value is generated through its relationship to the community, ecosystem or world in which it inhabits. I would suggest that Aldo Leopold (1949) shares this approach. Rather than alienating value as a universal absolute, such an ethic supports an engagement with the world and encourages an appreciation for the rich complexity of the world.

iii. *taking a stand...*

Activism is often confused with 'protesting', as it is frequently expressed as an opposition to the status quo. The image of the angry mob protesting has

become synonymous with activism since the Vietnam War. Activists are often dismissed by economic elites as protests against 'reality' with no practical vision of an alternative. However, activism must be understood in both senses, as standing for something that is different to the present reality implies standing against its antithesis²⁰.

An activist is someone who not only takes a stand on issues of justice but also demand that their concerns are heard. What are often labelled 'advocacy groups' (such as Amnesty International), must be included in this conception of activism. When advocates take up a cause that they are passionate about, they are embodying the activist character. The means of expression can be as diverse as the issues they stand for. What is important is that they act.

In *Noble Bohemia*, expressions of activism are considered through Toby's street performance. As he does not generally speak during his performances²¹, he takes a stand through the very process of imagination that has gone into his statue creations. Toby upholds an anti-consumerist philosophy that is subtly conveyed through his recycled creations. However, this is far from explicit advocacy that attempts to sway his audience. While this mode of activist communication is implicit, it remains a form of expressing Toby's stand, and is thus a kind of advocacy. Advocacy is thus the advancement of ones position through a public form of expression.

To take a stand is to express our commitment to that which we care about. Making ourselves accountable means to maintain that position, to own it and take responsibility for it. That is, to take the necessary steps towards

²⁰ To use the example of the abortion debate in the United States, there are situations where people lobby either for or against the status quo in that state. It is not merely the 'Right to Life' lobby who are activists in a state where abortions are legal, but also the 'Pro-Choice' lobby who fight to keep the law. Such contested sites illustrate how people stand by their principles regardless of the status of the issue.

²¹ One of his six characters, a Secret Agent, does speak to the public in engaged forms of street theatre.

advancing that stance. The degree to which we commit ourselves is a question of priority and passion.

Commitment is the energy, passion and dedication that the activist devotes to justice. An activist is not simply somebody that shows up at a protest rally as a one-off event. It is the sustained incorporation of values of justice into their life. This is to say that the ethics of an activist are translated through their entire way of life: their income, their expenditure, their leisure and interests. It is again impossible to adopt absolutist position with such notions, as rules are always broken. As an activist takes personal responsibility for justice issues, activists are naturally inclined for sustained commitment. While the practices may change, our conviction in justice remains steadfast.

iv. *a pursuit of justice...*

It is difficult to find a term that accurately embraces the diversity of goals pursued by activists. One word that comes close is 'justice'. However justice is a notion that can and should be understood in a variety of ways. Here I am using the term to focus on what we believe is right, fair or humane. It is the aim of the activist to advance justice within their organisation, community or society. In other words, activism must actively address injustice. However, justice is a notion that is as slippery as they come--as the phrase 'infinite justice' suggests in recent usage.

Justice is a key motivating force behind the actions of the activist. However, it is worth noting that many concerns for justice, like ethnic conflicts, have accumulated an immense history of animosity that is beyond any clear, black and white sense of 'right' and 'wrong', or 'good' and 'bad'. While justice motivates activism, it also motivates ecotage, ecoterrorism and other terrorist forms alike. The recent example of the al-Qaeda group in Afghanistan is a case

in point--in his own terms even Osama bin Ladin has great conviction that he is acting for justice.²² Similarly, while I sympathise with the concerns of the Earth Liberation Front, for instance, I strongly oppose their conception of justice.²³

The environmental organisations, 'Earth First!' (EF!) and the 'Earth Liberation Front' (ELF) for instance, uphold many shared beliefs with mainstream lobby groups like 'Friends of the Earth', 'The World Wide Fund for Nature' and 'Greenpeace'. However, their diverging notions of justice are expressed in the ecoterrorist methods that the EF! and ELF employ (such as arson attacks, Olivia Roseau, *Dateline*, 10.10.2001).

Very recently retaliatory air-strikes against Afghanistan started, following the tragic events of September 11, 2001. The Islamic militant, Osama bin Ladin is the prime suspect, although he is unlikely to ever be put on trial in a courtroom (he has already experienced a 'trial by media'). However, as leader of al-Qaeda, he is seen by many of his followers to be fighting for a just cause as a hero of the oppressed.

It is here that a I want to draw clear line needs to be drawn between 'fighting for a just cause' and 'fighting'. Pursuit of 'justice' alone is not sufficient grounds for being classed as an activist within the terms of this discussion. The embodied philosophy that motivates bin Laden is one of righteousness that vilifies opposing views. This was demonstrated by the well planned acts of

²² For a good analysis of 'terrorist' constructions, see Noam Chomsky's *Pirates and Emperors* (1987). "St. Augustine tells the story of a pirate captured by Alexander the Great. "How dare you molest the sea? asked Alexander. "How dare you molest the whole world" the pirate replied. "Because I do it with a little ship only, I am called a thief; you, doing it with a great navy, are called an emperor"." (1987, 9) Chomsky's point is that there is a great deal of terrorist activities occurring on both sides. However, only the smallest party are labelled as terrorists.

²³ As John Pilger (2001) points out, there is no "good and bad terrorism". We cannot persecute one and condone another. Terrorism refers to violent or threatening methods, not motivations. Here, I am reminded of Mahatma Gandhi's famous observation that "an eye for an eye leaves us all blind" (quoted in 'Homepage', www.9-11peace.org/, accessed 16.11.2001). Clearly justice should be more sensible than this.

terrorism on the American east-coast.²⁴ In my view, 'activism' must be understood as engagement in practices that affirm, nourish and respect life. Violence separates 'terrorists' from 'activists' in this context. Violence, whatever rhetoric of 'justice' it is clothed in, is contrary to what I call 'activism' here.²⁵

One independence cause that I have some empathy for is the Zapatistas in Mexico. However, the use of violence by their military arm, EZLN cannot be condoned. They have named neo-liberalism as their enemy²⁶, and have found that there is much sympathy for this view. The Zapatistas have become a highly organised group that have utilised the internet to develop a wide support network. They have held protests outside World Trade Organisation meetings since 1996. The Zapatistas have provided a platform and rallying point by which many activists of different persuasions are being heard, if only by proxy.

To the People of Mexico: We, the men and women, full and free, are conscious that the war that we have declared is our last resort, but also a *just* one. The dictators are applying an undeclared genocidal war against our people for many years. Therefore we ask for your participation, your decision to support this plan that struggles for work, land, housing, food, health care, education, independence, freedom, democracy, *justice* and peace. We declare that we will not stop *fighting* until the basic demands of our people have been met by forming a government of our country that is free and democratic. (General Command of the EZLN, 1993, taken from www.fzln.org.mx/archivo/ezln/index.htm, accessed on 12.10.2001, my emphasis)

The Zapatistas provide an example where the lines between activism and terrorism have blurred. It is important to distinguish the diversity of dissenting movements, as they are neither homogeneous in aim, structure or method. The way in which terms such as 'activists', 'protesters' and 'terrorists' are used by the media, often interchangeably, is highly problematic.²⁷ There

²⁴ Similarly, the response from Capital Hill has displayed an ignorance or denial of the resentment and reasons that motivated the terrorist acts, and a complete lack of respect for the lives of the innocent Afghani civilians.

²⁵ For a good analysis of violence, see Hannah Arendt's *On Violence* (1970).

²⁶ Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, quoted in *New Internationalist*, September 2001.

²⁷ There is further confusion when this terminology incorporates the *zeitgeist*. As John Pilger (2001) observed, there cannot be "good and bad terrorists" (referring to the current vilification bin Ladin).

needs to be careful consideration of aims, motivations and methods. Activism should uphold peace consistently in aims and methods.

We need to develop a more personal, practical and respectful conception of justice. Gilligan (1987) observed how the French psychologist, Jean Piaget perceived contrasting mental processes of moral judgement between the girls and boys that he studied. The girls showed “a greater tolerance, a greater tendency towards innovation in solving conflicts, [and] a greater willingness to make exceptions to rules...” (Gilligan, 1987, 22) While Piaget saw these traits as signs of inferior moral judgement, I agree with Gilligan who views this tendency as a different approach to justice. It is important to bear in mind that justice must be situated and must address the human consequences, that is, consider relevant aspects of care.

v. *taking responsibility...*

Drawing from Sartre's (1947) notion of freedom, where choice is always an option, the idea of having the 'ability to respond' takes on considerable weight. If we propose for a minute that we have agency over our lives, that we are already engaged in the state of the world around us, what kind of responsibility is thrust upon us? With a presumption of agency, the possibility of enacting change is immediate, tangible and ever present. By giving us freedom to choose who we are, how we live and in what surroundings, Sartre is throwing up a challenge to us. We can by all means take our freedom to Wall Street, to confine our energy to our direct self-interest. However, if we choose to use our ability to respond to situations around us, we are accepting the challenge of the agency that we do have.

Just like our freedom, our responsibility has no limits, that it extends to the world which we carry the full weight, for in our choosing ourselves we choose all that is around us. (Lafarge, 1967, 83).

Sartre's construction of freedom has been vigorously contested in philosophical and political discourses (Anderson (1979), Lafarge (1967), Merkel (1987)). Space does not permit an engagement with this debate here, however, some consideration is demanded. The most pressing concern about such a freedom, is when applied to the most impoverished, marginalised and disempowered of peoples. The notion of choice to those who live from hand to mouth must seem a sick white, bourgeois joke. What can be said, is that while are choices may be limited, the fact of choice remains.

Even at the most basic level of human interaction, we make choices about how we relate to those around us²⁸. To have freedom does not imply that we all have the power to bring about world peace with a magic wand. Freedom does mean that we can encourage peace amongst those around us, through our families, communities, and social institutions. The challenge of freedom is to push the boundaries of possibility. It is to see how far away the bars of oppression are, and test them to see exactly how strong they are without getting bruised. To own our freedom is to find out exactly how free we are, to look beyond our present condition. In other words, to be free, is to accept what responsibility we do have. Freedom is not a morality, it does not oblige us to help others. Freedom merely gives us the opportunity to do so.

By raising the spectre of freedom, it is to open up the question of our unfreedom or oppression. This dialectic is the battle ground waged within civil societies the world over. It is at the sharp-end of activism, where battles are most hotly contested. To know how we are free is to know how we are not free. Here, I am arguing that we engage and contest these areas. For this area is the nexus between repression and the capacity for freedom. Karl Marx saw that our

²⁸ "Choice and consciousness are one and the same thing." (Sartre, 1947, 462)

struggle for freedom is a truly revolutionary practice, both for the self and for society.

The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*. (Karl Marx, [1845] 1968a, 28, original emphasis)

As argued above, our concern for the world is grounded in our very conception of self. I argue therefore, that this concern can be converted into effective action. This is a matter of 'integrity'. Integrity is a virtue that helps us understand how the identity of the activist is bound to the way in which they live their lives. I use integrity to mean both a holism and totality, and as a virtue of honesty and candour. This integrity is expressed not merely on weekends, but is reflected in most of what we do. An integrity of spirit, whereby ethics are translated into way of life is evidence of activism. This is what I mean by taking responsibility for our freedom (that is, to see the possibilities available to us to deal with the world around us).

The above description of activists is not, and does not aspire to be, universally comprehensive. It is difficult to draw comparisons between hunger strikes by Buddhist monks in Tibet and middle-class youths living in trees in old-growth forests of the South-west of Western Australia. The intention of this thesis is simply to open up understandings of activism. However, if the definition is too loose, the term becomes meaningless. Returning to the old-growth forests of the south-west, the notion of activism was questioned when the debate was thrust into the mainstream by the support given by local sports personalities, Mick Malthouse and Luc Longley.²⁹ Some in the green movement have pointed to these moments as crucial turning-points in the campaign (that

²⁹ Mick Malthouse was at that time coach of the local Australian Football League club, the Westcoast Eagles. Luc Longley is a successful local 'product', who has played basketball in the NBA. Both personalities were very popular and well respected.

led to the forests being a key election issue at that time). From the above characteristics attributed to activism, this action taken by Malthouse and Longley does not qualify them as serious activists. However, such acts were deeds of activist advocacy.

As a *praxis*, activism names deeds that are expressions of our deepest convictions. It is an embodied philosophy that translates a particular relationship with the world into a way of life. Activists are united by their passion and dedication to a life that they care about. A world that we know nourishes our very being. The diversity of forms that activism is manifested is as broad as it is rich. *Noble Bohemia* dabbles in the lives of just three such activists. These individuals are not perfect exemplars but merely examples to illustrate the relationship between activism and self-identity.

Each character featured in *Noble Bohemia* personifies a different conception and expression of activism. Cassie's story demonstrates how a particular understanding of the world can develop into an embodied philosophy of social responsibility. John's Maori heritage and tough upbringing has culminated in an ethic of care that has led to his work with the AIDS Council. Toby expresses his concerns about the world through his creativity in his street performances. The thoughts that they express in *Noble Bohemia* will be discussed in the next chapter, with emphasis on the role their activist practices play in orientating their lives.

Part II

embodied theory

Chapter 3

cassie: earthling ethics

Pubescent chemicals

*chemicals, plastic everywhere
on the food, in people's hair
in the water, through the earth
The time has passed of chemicals' birth
Its growing old, its taking control
Nature is losing her nurturing hold
'Let me be,' it says with a scowl
'I don't need you, all dirty & fowl
I'm clean, I'm white &
I glare out so bright
You wont smell the earth
if I'm anywhere in sight
who needs clean rivers,
oceans and streams
when with me on your dishes
everything gleams
I'll get rid of that dirt from
your body & hair
where my thick lather goes
you need not care
for I'll give you water
you can drink from a tap
or buy from a shop with
a bottle & cap
finite I know, & not as alive...
But dollars are made
& that's my drive'*

by Cassie Newnes

Cassie has a free and easy personality that is very warm and compassionate. She is a very sensuous person being down to earth in the most literal sense possible. Cassie is never happier than when she has her hands in the earth. Dividing her time between the city and country, Cassie is never far from the soil. As an 'activist', Cassie is the closest of the three subjects in *Noble Bohemia* to conform to traditional definitions. Toby refers affectionately to Cassie as a 'hippie', for she articulates an idealistic philosophy of environmentalism. However, she is not naive enough to believe in an overnight utopia. Despite representing what the mass-media have largely defined as the most 'stereotypical' form of activism,³⁰ Cassie has provoked the most controversy. Before I explore this, I would like to discuss a little of her world.

convictions of an earthling

Sometimes I so much wish that I could say, 'I give up, I'm out of here, I'm going to go and get a nine-to-five job and have a house and all that kind of stuff'. Sometimes I really wish I could. But this is life... this is living, might as well make the most of it.

I really try to bring myself back into to doing things that are nourishing for my soul and make the most of this opportunity to be alive. There's just this inner drive to do so much, and I'm in this world that feels that it doesn't really want to do too much, it just wants to continue living in this consumer, easy - supposedly easy kind lifestyle. But it's definitely this connection to the land that drives and sustains me. (Cassie: Morning ritual.)

Given our saddening earth, there is a need for an eco-conscience, a rethinking of what it is to be human. The present Occidental conception of being human has been informed by phallogentric and eco-destructive metaphysical dualisms such as those of culture/nature, human/animal, reason/emotion, mind/body, self/other, subject/object, activity/passivity, form/matter, and man/woman. As Carol Bigwood explains, modernisation has celebrated public activities to the exclusion of other attributes like "receiving,

internality, empathy, and caring for otherness" (1993 p. 189). A great deal of Cassie's activism involves precisely these alternative capacities.

Cassie's integrity as an environmentalist is what made her such an appropriate subject for *Noble Bohemia*. There is a direct line between the way she understands the world and how she lives within it. Some may claim that she has a romanticised view of the world akin to a 'benevolent godmother'. Such an idealistic belief is easy to dismiss as fantastic or irrational. However, Cassie's ideals and ethics are by no means irrational, but follow a practical logic that she lives by. At the centre of this embodied philosophy that I am referring to is 'integrity'. That is, that our relationship and understanding of the world is translated into actions in our day-to-day life. This harmony of *praxis* is made explicit in Cassie's life.

Cassie engages in a diversity of activities that reflect what she loves about life. She participates in what nurtures her relationship to the world. Her introductory caption mentions but a few of her interests. She is given credit for being an 'acrobat, masseur and environmental volunteer'. Other interests are shown in the documentary, such as gardening and yachting. While it was her work as an 'environmental volunteer' that I wanted to emphasise in the documentary, it is important that the audience recognise that her life is rich and diverse. Most of what she does revolves around her participation in community life. It was important to show the audience that the people in Cassie's life were as important to her as her work on behalf of the more-than-human world.

It is precisely this connection with the world that posits 'people' as worthy and valuable. Her love of the world is no more evident than in her relationship with the body. In the opening scene with Cassie eating the fruit in

³⁰ Here I am referring to the common image of the young, white, 'unkempt' 'hippie' in the forest or

the garden, she makes her love and enjoyment of food plainly clear. Cassie tries to live as organically as practical. When in the country, Cassie only washes her hair with rainwater, and uses as little chemicals as she can in the city. As she does not use a car, she travels by foot, and more recently, by bicycle. Cassie likes to feel the earth under her feet and so rarely wears shoes, even during winter months in Perth. Thus the scene where Cassie walks over dried leaves barefoot is symbolic of connection with the earth. Scenes of Cassie 'out in the world' - in the garden, in the bush, on the yacht in the river - reflect how her ethics are translated into her life.

Cassie's love and respect for life is admirable and commendable. Yet the point of the documentary was not for the audience to pat Cassie on the back for what she has done. What can inspire all of us about Cassie is not so much what she has done but the way she has set about doing it, in other words, her attitude to life. We are moved to consider how such an attitude could make a difference to the way we relate to the world and for their own well-being. The scenes depicted in *Noble Bohemia* are by no means revolutionary. Her activities are quite ordinary. However, once her actions are understood within the framework of her organic philosophy, they take on a moral weight of integrity that I find most commendable.

Community, the ground beneath your feet

Cassie's philosophy stems from a rich tradition of theory that connects self-identity to the wider context of the natural world. Arne Naess (1986) and other supporters of deep ecology have played an important role in observing the connection between practical philosophy and life satisfaction. Supporters of deep ecology would argue that we can only know one's self by understanding

waving placards in an angry protest rally in the city.

and embracing our connection with the world at large. It is through this hermeneutic circle³¹ that we understand ourselves and gain sense of belonging, a deeper sense of community.

And another time that was an incredibly low point for me was when I was down in the forest involved in activism against the destruction of old growth forests and seeing these.. - oh my god, it makes me cry just talking about it - ... seeing these incredible ancient forests being totally-mercilessly destroyed and trucks leaving this forest with trunks of trees so big that they could only fit one on the back of these huge immense trucks and then leaving behind everything else in the forest just devastated. And then just being a mess on the forest floor so that a few people could have woodchips to make paper with. (Cassie: Lowest point)

Deep ecology has drawn on many spiritual ideas, especially from Taoist philosophy, which posits that we live in accordance with the laws of nature. There are also parallels between Naess' deep ecology and ideas of self-actualisation expressed in the works of the psychologists Carl Rogers (1961) and Abraham Maslow (1971). More recently, Freya Mathews drew upon this idea in her work, *The Ecological Self* (1991), where she argues against atomistic conceptions of self in favour of one that it is fundamentally connected to social and ecological processes. It is within this framework of ideas that Cassie's life can be more fully understood.

A human community is not simply a particular place or location³². Nor is it a homogeneous collection of people. Like the community of the non-human world, the human community is the nexus in which individual beings connect to others. Such a community is like a glue that binds these intimate, and even symbiotic relationships³³. A community does not necessarily subjugate the self,

³¹ the whole must be understood by appreciating its individual parts, and each part must be understood by appreciating the whole (the wider context that it inhabits).

³² Technology has transformed the traditional community defined by a specific physical location. This is of course most evident in information technologies like the internet. See Manuel Castells (1996) for an extensive analysis of the development of net communities.

³³ The acronym for the 'Shooting Activist! Project' is 'SAP!', invoking this idea of a sticky substance that binds society (and in this case, the environmentalist community).

but indeed nurtures the life of the self, providing sustenance and the very structure by which our ideas and values are formed.

Plant communities share a common soil of a particular form (or chemical balance) and structure (sand, loam or clay) that determine the types of plants that can grow in it. Similarly, a human community shares a particular form and structure that is often referred to as 'social capital'. Social capital is the trust by which society functions, the reciprocity of generosity in word and deed (see Robert Putnam (1993) and Eva Cox (1995)). It is the quality of the social capital that determines the quality of the community.

When I was *umm*, eighteen, and I was really lost in the world - I'd spent my teenage years drinking and smoking and-to amazing excess, it was like, *phwah!*, it was stupid - (*laughs*), crazy (*laughs*). - And just basically abusing myself, totally lost in this world because that was what society was teaching me, that was how you deal with any sense of dislocation or isolation or pain, you go and drink and smoke as a teenager.

And then I went to my first blockade-forest blockade, and oh my god was I touched! (*laughs*). Both by the beautiful people who were there - they were there because they loved the earth and they want to protect the earth. And it was the first time I had been in a community--a community where they were all coming from their hearts and supporting each other and supporting the planet and living in the best way that they know how. (Cassie: Turning point.)

food for the soul

It should be pointed out here that the satisfaction that will be outlined here does not preclude activists from sadness or depression. The life of an activist is by no means an easy one. As Cassie admitted, she often wonders if her life would be any easier in "a nine-to-five job" ('Morning ritual', *Noble Bohemia*). What keeps many of us going is our internal compulsion to do something about what we feel most passionately about. As Cassie said, "[t]here's just this inner drive to do so much," ('Morning ritual', *Noble Bohemia*). Activists are certainly not immune to bouts of depression and disillusionment.³⁴ The fact that we deal with issues on a large scale can be both

³⁴ Depression will be discussed in Chapter Six. See 'depression and creative expression', page 48.

overwhelming and awe-inspiring. To be a part of something larger than ourselves is humbling and ennobling. Humbling because our own lives are put into the context of larger (but not necessarily more important) affairs. It is ennobling because our sense of place in the world is bound to something that holds significant meaning for ourselves and others.

For in every action what is primarily intended by the doer, whether he acts from natural necessity or out of free will, is the disclosure of his own delight in doing; since everything that is desires its own being, and since in action the being of the doer is somehow intensified, delight necessarily follows. ... Thus, nothing acts unless [by acting] it makes patent its latent self. (Dante quoted in Arendt, 1974, 175)

As people, we united by our universal quest for happiness, satisfaction and fulfilment. However, just as importantly, our diversity is expressed through conceptions of what these terms mean to us. Aristotle's (1908) notion of *eudaimonia* is useful in thinking about this kind of human flourishing. This idea of well being or happiness does not stop us feeling sad, overwhelmed or depressed. Rather it is living life in accordance with what is Good, not in one act, or over the course of one week but for our entire lives³⁵. This happiness can only be achieved when one has come to know the Good through experience and practice. It is an authentic happiness expressed in activity from one's Good character rather than some external and passive emotion.

Aristotle saw *eudaimonia* as the 'chief good' for people because it is the ultimate goal to which all else should be directed.³⁶ He believed all other intentions were merely instrumental in achieving *eudaimonia*. What I find so insightful about this concept is its emphasis on a good that is not confined to any one deed; but rather, it is conceived within a pursuit for what is good. The

³⁵ Everything in life has a particular purpose and once it is performed in accordance with *arete*, we shall find the Good life and eventually reach *eudaimonia*. Practicing the Good and *being* Good are two sides of the same coin, as to be Good, one must act in accordance with the Good, and for one to perform Good acts, one must be of Good character in order to know one is performing a Good act.

³⁶ *Eudaimonia* is the greatest Good which provides the greatest happiness in life. And so, according to Aristotle, all goals should be directed towards it. *Eudaimonia* is almost unattainable in that it is something which obtain once having lived the Good life, understanding the Good, and acting authentically from Good character.

nourishment gained through a lifetime of activism cannot be described simply as joy or happiness but should be considered to be a satisfaction that is more akin to this notion of *eudaimonia*.

To illustrate how *eudaimonia* translates into somebody's life, I will give an brief account of one such individual. *Noble Bohemia* was dedicated in part to Henry Spira, a passionate animal welfare campaigner. I have taken great inspiration from Peter Singer's biography of this man, *Ethics into Action* (1998), and there are parallels between the way in which Henry incorporated his work into his life and Cassie's approach to life. However, it would be foolish to push the comparison too far, as their activism is expressed very differently. Henry campaigned very much in the public arena, whereas Cassie takes a more personal stand. Like Cassie, Henry sought the Good life, a life devoted to that which he cared most deeply about. His life was not built upon traditional forms of life satisfaction like a secure job, supportive family and a loving wife, but on doing what he felt compelled to do.³⁷ Singer saw this clearly in Henry when he wrote:

To say that life is essentially meaningless is to express an attitude, not to state a fact. For that reason - and unlike the assumption that an individual cannot make a difference to the world - it is not an assertion that can be refuted simply by pointing to the facts of Henry's life. But if, when we face the end of our life, we can look back on it with the satisfaction and fulfilment that come from believing that we have spent our life doing something that was both worthwhile and interesting to do, then perhaps that is enough to show that we have found a way to make life meaningful. That has been Henry's experience. (Singer, 1998, 192).

Henry expressed this enthusiasm for his work when he told Singer,

I've never felt that I've sacrificed for others. I just felt that I'm doing what I really want to do and what I want to do most. And I feel most alive when I'm doing it. (Spira quoted in Singer, 1998, 196).

Henry Spira is a man that worked tirelessly on dozens of important campaigns not out of a sense of duty, but because he wanted to, he enjoyed it. He enjoyed it because it meant something to him. Singer refers to a quote from

³⁷ Henry's life has lacked many of the things that most of us take for granted as essential to a good life. He has never married or had a long-term, live-in relationship. He has no children. His father and one of his sisters committed suicide, and his mother was mentally ill for much of her life. His relationship with Renee, the sole surviving member of his immediate family, is not close. His rent-controlled apartment, while spacious and well situated, is spartan. He doesn't go to movies, to concerts, to the theatre, or fine restaurants. He hasn't taken a holiday for twenty years. Yet at the age of sixty-eight he was able to contemplate his own imminent death with no major regrets about the way he had lived. (Spira quoted in Singer, 1998, 195-96).

Emma Goldman, an American anarchist who loved to dance. When she was told by fellow anarchists that it was improper for a revolutionary, she responded, "If I can't dance, I don't want your revolution" (quoted in Singer, 1998, 197). Henry shared this sentiment.

The point [Goldman] is making is, you've got to enjoy what you're doing to be effective. What you're doing is what you've absolutely got to be doing, not because you feel you've got to do it, but, rather, because this is what your life is about. You feel good when you're doing it... I feel best when I'm doing something that's going to make a difference. When I go, I want to look back and say, "I made this a better place for others." But it's not a sense of duty, rather this is what I want to do... I feel best when I'm doing it well. (Spira quoted in Singer, 1998, 197).

Cassie's convictions as an activist form an integral part of her character. Like Henry, Cassie does what she does because she *needs* to. This is not the same as the *need* to survive, but stems from the embodied philosophy (that was discussed in the previous chapter) and her own deep understanding of the world.

The only way I know how to make effective change is in my own life. And I know I can adjust my own life to minimise the impact on the earth. But I would love to be able to help-be a part of helping the world to minimise the global impact on the earth. When you look at the whole scale of things, its so important to just come back to community isn't it? Like sometimes I get overwhelmed, I go, "Oh my god!, there's this going on here and this going on there and how can I possibly be a part of the whole *shmanji*, but it all starts with community - and that's what I have to keep coming back to so I can hold on to my dreams. And there is a lot of people doing a lot of good things, a lot of fantastic things being done. (Cassie: Satisfaction)

Chapter 4

john tawhai: reciprocity of care

John is made of hard Maori stock: of solid build and solid personality. I met John on my first trip to the Aboriginal reserve of Pia in 1998. John is a magnanimous soul who immediately drew me into his story. After moving earth and pulling out weeds, John would tell stories by the campfire. These stories oscillated between anecdotes of the day, personal stories and stories of his Maori ancestry. John's large stature and strength as a storyteller combined to create an enormous screen presence. I told John on that trip that I wanted to make a documentary about him.³⁸

To understand John demands an appreciation of his ethnic roots. John is not short of a good story. The depth of his character and background provide rich material from which to draw. When John came around to my home for the interview, we talked over lunch for well over three hours. I recorded more than an hour as I tried to direct our conversation towards the four questions. John was generous with his answers, often telling a number of stories related to each question. John's life is a full one. He is not one to slip into autopilot, he carries his integrity into all aspects of his life: family, friends, communities, work and volunteer work. In other words, John is John, whether you have known him five-minutes or your whole life. As he talked, I realised how interconnected his world is. John always returned to his cultural roots, and more specifically, his own personal cultural awakening. My challenge was to try to draw out key metonyms that convey the integrity of John's character.

³⁸ Indeed on the 1999 trip to Pia, the documentary that we made featured a cameo of John talking about the relationship of traditional Maori culture with the land.

John would not dispute that he is first and foremost a family man. His own upbringing in his working-class family was turbulent. As a Maori in his forties, John's generation has had a serious identity crisis. John's parents were forbidden from speaking their native tongue and (when threatened with serious consequences) did not pass it on to their children. John was brought up as white and took a long time to recognise his ethnic heritage. Throughout much of his schooling years, John's closest family were his fellow gang members. Living amongst a world of testosterone, drugs and violence, John's sense of the world was detached, lacking nurturing and supportive relationships.

When I was in third-form in high school, one of the subjects we were studying in social studies was the history of the Maori people; and in a textbook there was this section in the textbook that was written in.. in Maori. The teacher asked me if I would get up and read this to the class. Of course I couldn't because no one had ever taught me to read Maori. I felt this shame about not being able to.. to read what I knew was my own language. And I said, 'No Miss,'. And she kept on at me and I exploded, I literally exploded, I got up and said, 'I can't read this fucking thing because I don't know how to read this fucking thing!', and I stormed out. That shocked me, tears were coming down my face. And it was at that point when I knew I had to do something. My teacher came out and I knew then that I had to go out and find out who I was. My auntie and my uncle showed me what being a Maori was all about and who I was. The teachings that my auntie and uncle gave me as I was growing up.. they became the bedrock to... for the person I am now. (John: Turning point.)

This anecdote is highlighted in the documentary and hints at the cultural dislocation that he experienced at that time. During this soul-searching period in his adolescence, John became aware of some of the implications of being Maori. As his parents experienced a great deal of shame for practicing their traditions, John lacked positive role models. Much of the Maori community of his age were caught up in some kind of delinquent behaviour. At this time he admits to being an incredibly angry and violent young man. In a Friday night session during a trip to Pia in 2000, John gave a powerful performance that expressed this torment. There is now a great body of work that documents this cultural dislocation experienced during adolescence by

aboriginal peoples.³⁹ While I believe this is an integral part of John, the story proved to be outside the scope of this short documentary.

John followed many New Zealanders West across the Tasman Sea. Beginning in Sydney, he continued west to check out the scenery but fell in love with a 'sandgroper' (his wife Sandy) and stayed. He has a large and close family but has not had children of his own. John is a father to his wife's children and supports them as his own. John's final scene sees him at a family barbecue, and is typical of his family relationships.

I take forever to get out of bed sometimes. It might take me five- to ten-minutes to throw my legs over the bed and think, 'do I want to do this?', then I think 'no,' but I've got to get up, I've got to work. So, I go and do my Tae-Bo - I love doing Tae-Bo 'cos that just energises me in the morning; and the thoughts - those negative thoughts of the day before, all that crap that you sometimes think about: they just *pfss* just go away and I think, 'OK, its time to face another day' (John: Morning ritual.)

Out of the three people in the documentary, John is involved in the most traditional form of paid work. Coming from a blue-collar background, he has taken on many different but often physically demanding jobs. For many years now, he has worked for P&O cold stores. He is now in the position of supervisor, setting a high standard of dedication and long-hours. He works six days a week and regularly works more than fifty-hours a week, with few holidays. Over the past four years, much of his holiday time has been spent at Pia. John's virtues of hard work, dedication and commitment have not been lost on his employer.

the art of generosity

One person who reminds me of what John does and why he does it, is the American gaol councillor, Catherine Sneed. She is somebody that gave everything she had for those she cared for. While I do not want to compare

³⁹ See 'Australia Now', Australian Social Trends 2000 (Australian Bureau of Statistics. Taken from www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs, accessed, 11.11.2001); Eva Skock's, *et al* (eds.) *Personality Development in Adolescence* Anne Kershaw (1998); and Anne Kershaw's (ed.) *A Question of Identity* (1998).

John's efforts with that of Sneed's, there remains a similarity in their *motivations* for what they do. Sneed's story is important because it illustrates how social reciprocity operates to gain a positive and fulfilling sense of self. Her story is indeed an amazing one that continues to inspire me.

Catherine Sneed worked in the San Francisco Sheriff's department providing legal advice to women caught up in the prison system. While there, she witnessed first-hand the disempowering effects of the prison environment. The stress of this work brought on an untreatable kidney disease. After being in and out of hospital for two years, Sneed decided to go back to work.

Sneed then embarked on a garden project that was designed to give inmates something positive and constructive to do. What began as a small-scale vegetable patch developed into a full-scale market garden that employs many former inmates and supplies produce to many in the area, including a number of schools. The program encouraged education, employment and drug-rehabilitation. All of these aims were supported through appropriate programs and counselling services. Sneed had enormous success with many participants. While this woman in a wheelchair inspired the inmates, she inspired by their efforts and personal transformation. As the program flourished, Sneed's spirits and health improved. The moral of the story is that such generosity was not wasted, Sneed gained as much as she gave. This is the art of generosity.

real work..

There was one point where.. I was.. put on this palliative care team, *ah* to look after this guy and... My friend couldn't talk much, he-he was not a very outspoken person: he-he hardly said anything to the volunteers that came and so after going there a couple of times I thought to myself, 'what use am I here?' - it doesn't seem to be.. - you know? All I'm doing is maybe doing a few dishes you know, vacuuming up, you know? ah.. You-you need to be able to have that communication.. but communication happens in more ways than words. And I found out that he was a Trekker fan like me. And so I used to take up videos to his place and I'd go up there and do a bit of cleaning up and then we'd sit down and watch an old Star Trek movie... and I turned around to him and I said, (*cough*) "You know, when we die we go into the stars - you know that don't you?" and he looked at me and he

smiled and he nodded his head. Well it got to the point where he couldn't look after himself very well... I got him into my car with all his clothing for the next few days, and I said, 'I'll take you down to respite house now this afternoon. And of course, the nurse said, 'John, you've done really well - you've done really well to get him to come down there!'. And I took him down to respite house and he died three days later in respite house and not at home. And I knew.. I knew how much he wanted to be at home with his.. (excuse me).. And that really really.. really cut my heart, and I was the one who took him down to respite house and he never got back home where he wanted to die. And I thought then that why.. why did I do that but that was a very very low point ah, where I then questioned whether this is really what I wanted to do." (John: Lowest point.)

To put food on the table he works for P&O, but according to John, it is not his real work. For many years now, his wife Sandy has volunteered her time to the AIDS Council (WA). The idea of working with 'junkies' and 'poofs' was not something that John found easy to deal with at first. He admits to holding prejudices, after his own experience with the drug community and having very little contact with homosexuals generally. When he found literature from the AIDS Council on the table he began looking at it. After talking with his wife about her experiences with the work, he started to consider lending a hand himself.

Since that time, John has worked with Sandy in palliative care and is now running needle-exchange vans. Both of these fields are heavy subjects that are highly sensitive. As such, I was not able to record any direct operations⁴⁰. Compromises were then made to give some sense of this amazing work that John does. John tells the story of the death of one an AIDS patients he was close to. Two scenes illustrate the powerful and traumatic story of the 'Trekker' fan dying in the respite house. The scene where the ship comes into port does not merely relate to his work but also acts as a metaphor with the tug nursing the ship through the final stages of coming into port. The power of the carer (or tug) is limited (as it could not push the ship back out to sea) but plays a crucial

⁴⁰ Neither John or Sandy work in palliative care at this time. The needle exchange van could not be filmed for concern over jeopardising the confidentiality of its clients.

role in ensuring the comfort (safety) of the patient. The tug offers an appropriate symbol of the way in which John operates, quietly but effectively with discrete humility.

John refers to his work with the AIDS Council as his "real work" because his labour is rewarded not by paper notes but by reciprocation of care and respect. It is at these times when we are weakest, at our most vulnerable that we are most fully sensitive to the world and able to express the most love to our friends. He has moved on from palliative care not because he felt unappreciated but because he became so close to his patients that it was too painful to let them go. This is evident in the story of the Trekker fan that brought me to tears. The work he does in the needle-exchange vans may not be as emotionally draining, he is no less committed and is still able to reach out and touch them.

You mightn't see any hope for anybody for a long-long time, all they want to do is just get enough money to find their next fit. But you might get that one person who will come along and they'll come up and say, "I've been clean for so many months and I'm feeling really good" - and you think, "Yes, Yes it is worth it, just that one person and it happens, and they'll still drop by the van and have a talk to you and let you know how their life is getting on. You can see it, that programs like this do work, that there is hope for people out there. (John: Satisfaction.)

Although John's work for the AIDS Council is centred on people, he has also worked on land projects. He has a deep connection with the land that he traces back to his ancestors. Over the past four years, John has joined a group of volunteers on a trip up to the remote Aboriginal reserve of Pia for a land-care project. On his first trip, John sought the permission of the spirits of the land to be in Pia. He performed a traditional Maori ritual that introduced himself to the spirits by shedding his clothes at dawn and chanting atop a rocky outcrop. Since that morning he has felt completely at home in Pia. It could be said that he gains spiritual nourishment for his work with the local Wadjarri community

on the land. John's charismatic virtues of compassion, commitment, hard work and a passion for storytelling are really able to shine at Pia. He is now considered an integral member of the Pia trip.

John's involvement with the AIDS Council is a direct expression of who he is and the culture from which he came. This ethic of care is rooted in traditional Maori beliefs about the importance of family relations and attitudes to death. The amazing work that John does is not achieved by a wealth of privilege⁴¹ but a wealth of generosity. Going back to Mauss, John gains his satisfaction from giving. It is through this social reciprocity that John's ethic of care takes shape. The embodiment of John's activism is expressed on a daily basis with his family, his abundant love and generosity of spirit is obvious if humble.

⁴¹ It must be said that John is not living hand-to-mouth. His secure job allows him to help out with AIDS Council.

Chapter 5

toby: sublime subversion

I met Toby in primary school, but since then we have seen very little of each other. However, Toby has been performing in Fremantle over the past few years, and so we have caught up on a few occasions. He had told me about his travels in the eastern-states where he spent a great deal of his time at forest blockades along the coast. Toby has been politically active and engaged in the visually arresting practice of street performance that I find quite intriguing. In *Noble Bohemia*, I wanted to represent different forms and expressions of activism. And Toby indeed offers a most unconventional approach. Knowing that he has an uneasy relationship with the term 'activist', he provides an interesting counter-point to the more conventional 'activist' approaches taken by the other two.⁴²

Toby is well suited to the visual medium. His height (c 6'6') is well exploited in his performances. His long-lithe frame makes him stand out in a crowd. Toby provides an element of pure theatre. Without uttering a word, Toby communicates with the audience. As an expression of his activism, his street-performance and recycled art is quite unique, thus pushing the boundaries of what form activism may take. He therefore represents somebody who was involved in old-school activism and after becoming dissatisfied, searched for something different.

⁴² He refers to his former lifestyle as that of 'hippie', but denies that it accurately describes the way he currently lives. Toby maintains many friends in the 'hippie' community, including Cassie and his older brother.

the art of making a difference

It was during his travel around Australia that Toby began taking his street performance art seriously. Although his interest in art was there as long as I've known him. Since primary school, art and self-expression have been almost synonymous. His alternative primary school, Lance Holt School in Fremantle, had a limited budget and thus practiced the three 'R's' of recycling out of necessity. This meant that our artistic creations generally involved painting egg-cartons with poster paints rather than painting canvas with oils.

These two ideas of art: self-expression and recycling, compliment each other perfectly in Toby's present work in street performance. His awareness concerning the relationship between consumer waste and the environment features dominantly in his work. Toby has chosen to be an entertainer who expresses his philosophy through his art. There are many ways to earn a living and this is certainly not a career for everyone. Toby has to work very hard at what he does, constantly developing and improving his six different characters that he performs. People who are able to earn a living from what they are passionate about are all too rare. Earning a living from something positive is perhaps even more rare.

Toby took considerable convincing to be involved in this documentary for he did not consider his present life to be that of an 'activist'. However, as I wanted to explore marginalised activist meanings, he relented to my request. There are many possible readings of 'Toby-the-activist'. The way in which I see Toby is simply a guy of integrity who tries to live his life in harmony with his ideals and values. This integrity is highlighted by his off-the-cuff remark about giving up smoking: "I didn't want to be saving the forest when I was smoking

someone else's".⁴³ To argue that Toby is indeed an activist, he must be situated within the rich tradition of activist performance.

Historically, the role of comedy and street performance in expressing political views is ancient. Dating back before the days of the Ancient Greek comedies and the court jester or fool in the British monarchy, comedy (in the form of satire and parody) has been used to make pointed political criticism with humour. Today, activists the world over have incorporated a range of comedic stunts in their creative protests. This trend has subverted the traditional protest march conventions of placards and the old rally-cries.⁴⁴ Employing comedy benefits activist causes by attracting media attention and arousing sympathy from the public. (When concerns are expressed through non-violent and humorous means, we are more likely to listen with an open ear than if violence was employed.) The sensationalist mass-media thrives on drama that provokes a reaction from its audience. Reports on community protests are often only made when there is a 'media stunt' or there is an incident of violence.

These newer forms of performance protests have indeed been noticed. Over the few years, protests surrounding the World Trade Organisation (WTO) meetings have been well publicised. Unfortunately, most of this coverage has focused on violent skirmishes. One individual protester has sought to attract attention through other means. To do this he dresses up in an outrageous pink fairy costume, juggles fire, dances to samba and throws pies. He calls himself 'Carnival Against Capital' (Jordan and Whitely, 2001, 24). While his methods

⁴³ Here Toby is referring to the tobacco fields in places like Indonesia, where forests are being cleared for such cash-crops. The same could also be said about coffee. Toby and I both drink coffee.

⁴⁴ Many examples can be witnessed throughout the growing number of protests that take on the appearance of a festival. One good example is that of the 'Reclaim the Streets' movement in the UK (Natalie Moxam, 1996). These lively events where pedestrians and cyclists take over the street have become carnivals of celebration, rather than angry protest rallies.

are entirely peaceful, he has found himself on FBI's list of terrorists. I believe this says far more about the FBI and authorities generally than it does about this man who dresses in drag.

As the media thrives on the novelty factor, activists have been pushed to new heights of creative endeavour. This is not to say that violence in the name of activism does not occur, but that there are far more innovative and effective means being employed. The internet has provided a powerful medium by which to communicate and consolidate support and solidarity for a cause.⁴⁵ One popular use of the internet is email petitions that can potentially collect many thousands of signatures around the world. A more aggressive use is that of culture jamming, which has become a very popular means of protest. It is an intentionally disruptive ploy that aims to shut down the information systems of the target. This can be achieved through direct hacking of their system or by flooding thousands of emails onto their server.

Sometimes the most effective means appear the most innocuous. In Kenya for example the lack of funding for its media industries has led to a saturation of American and British television and music.⁴⁶ Recently there has been a resurgence in local music through their burgeoning hip-hop scene. While it began as a parrot industry to the US, it has grown into a strong voice for local culture. One hip-hop group, Gidi Gidi Maji Maji draws on their traditional Luo myths and wisdoms using the sounds of their birthplace on the shores of Lake Victoria (Adrian Cooper, *New Internationalist*, 2001, 25). The hip hop scene in Nairobi defies the status quo of import dependence and asserts the legitimacy of music sung in a local language about local concerns. The success

⁴⁵ See Manuel Castells' *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996) for a good analysis of the growing internet communities.

of such artists as Gidi Gidi Maji Maji, Poxi Presha and Mau Mau⁴⁷ validate the quality of local music and questions the assumed demand for globalised imports.

The fact that Toby earns his living from his performance points to an alternative mode of living. His living wage is uniquely his own. He is able to make money from his creativity, the inventions developed from his own imagination. Toby subverts the traditional notion of needing job security. Being 'self-employed' means that he instigates, creates and 'sells' his 'product'. As Toby invests so much of himself into his performances, he avoids the reification process of work that divorces us from our labour (so characteristic of so many traditional forms of work). Toby earns a 'living wage' because his performances are not merely a means to live but an end in themselves, an expression of who he is.⁴⁸ He is able to work when the sun is shining and travel during the winter months. In this way, Toby stands on the fringe of work institutions and is able to lead a life that suits his conscience.

My assertion of Toby's activism could be disputed on the grounds that his politics is largely confined to his own life. This view has merit for the great majority of his audiences are oblivious to the subversive nature of his work. This raises the question as to what political behaviour constitutes 'activism'. There is no doubt that his work has political implications (his studio is a anti-consumerist shrine). However, there is a question as to whether he is an activist in the same manner that Carnival Against Capital is. Toby's moniker, 'Humanoid Gone Mad' does bare some resemblance in its reference to social

⁴⁶ Television and music imports are cheaper to buy than investing in local talent. This is a global phenomenon but far more pronounced in nations who cannot afford to do otherwise (that is, support local productions).

⁴⁷ Mau Mau was the name of the freedom fighters from the 1950's (Cooper, 2001).

ills, both raise concern over capitalism and both use performance art to express themselves. I argue that what distinguishes them is their audience. Whilst Carnival Against Capital's claims to activism are made obvious by the locations in which he performs, Toby is far more subtle, preferring the mall.⁴⁹ In this respect, it is only a question of degree.

a place in the mall

Rather than being dogmatic about his beliefs, Toby is a reflective person, questioning his own way of living as much as he does the world he inhabits. He told me during the interview that he is "very into juxtaposition", that is, he likes contrasting opposing images and ideas. One of his first corporate performances was an installation in Aherns, within Perth's central business district. For one week he lived in a window display, adopting the character 'Blue Boy' in full costume. During that week, Toby created numerous art pieces using donated toys and many bottles of blue paint. He communicated with the outside world through performance and via email on a lap-top (that Aherns provided). The irony of working on anti-consumerist art in such a large department store conglomerate was not lost on him.

Under his business name, 'Humanoid Gone Mad', Toby takes his work very seriously, with his own ABN⁵⁰ and glossy business cards. Down-playing his work, he rejects any assertion that he is extraordinary or that he lives a perfectly ethical life. He points out that despite his distaste for Bill Gates, he uses 'Hotmail'. This is not to say that he is simply pragmatic, but that he sees his life as an evolving process.

⁴⁸ This is in contrast to the typical existence of Marx's wage labourer: "...labour, is the worker's own life-activity, the manifestation of his own life. And this *life-activity* he sells to another person in order to secure the necessary *means of subsistence*." ([1891] 1968b, 75.)

⁴⁹ While I am unaware as to how Carnival Against Capital earns an income, it can be said that Toby's dedication is demonstrated by his full-time commitment to his work.

⁵⁰ 'Australian Business Number', required for tax on all businesses.

While much of society can be questioned or obscured in a grey haze of semantics, he does draw some lines. He spoke of one example where he was asked to perform for a shopping centre. They were promoting the opening of a new Macdonald's 'restaurant'. Although he would not be working directly for the fast food giant he wanted no part in it. He is wary of terms such as 'principles' or 'ethics' for he feels that these can be limiting structures that impose a black and white utopian purity (that would therefore be an unattainable way of living). Such refusals have not hindered his success and popularity. He has been invited to festivals all over Australia and has also been flown to a number of places in South-East Asia to perform.⁵¹

The lowest I've really felt and the really most depressed I've felt, is when I was getting stoned all day, everyday. Like, you get a lot of great ideas, you know when you're stoned, and its like, like you go 'yeah, we've seen the answer to how we're going to save the world', or whatever. But that's all it is: a great idea and in reality, you, you never actually create anything. (Toby: Lowest point)

In terms of power, there are many comparisons that can be drawn between the situation of the activist and that of many oppressed minority groups. This is not surprising considering that many of the activists are from or fighting for these groups. Throughout many parts of the world the activism that I am discussing here would not be defined as activism. The rights that many fight for are quite simply the rights they need to survive (not necessarily because they a conscience). Activism in such cases is literally a matter of survival. In Australia however, activism is generally a white, educated and middle-class preoccupation. However, this does not preclude us from dealing with our own questions of cultural identity and gaining a voice in political debate. In other words, 'class' does not exclude us from the real issues of finding our place in the world.

⁵¹ Since completing the production, Toby has travelled back to Singapore, Hong Kong and Sydney.

I began this project with the hypothesis that living a life of activism would provide a vital grounding in the world for a person to be satisfied (if never quite content). I soon discovered that Toby experienced bouts of depression similar to mine. Cassie made similar confessions when discussing her thoughts in waking up for the day. These findings directly undermined my original hypothesis and led me to consider alternative benefits of the life of activism.

Depression is frequently associated with cynicism and apathy, a lack of direction and drive. An alternative understanding of this phenomenon is possible. With increasing strength of conviction, perceived failure of endeavours is correspondingly disheartening. As the majority of activists are on the margins of the system, there is a great sense of powerlessness. As the objective of activism is to effect change, inability to do so frustrates most intensely.

We need to see the self in terms other than 'the sum of our actions'. To understand how we reach a 'healthy' sense of self, it worth identifying some conceptions about what constitutes the 'unhealthy self'⁵². One explanation stems from our preoccupation with an autonomous self that is defined by 'achievements'. Kanner and Gomes discuss some of the consequences of unhealthy self in consumer society.

The overriding lesson they learn from advertisements is that buying material goods leads to love, esteem, happiness, and fulfilment. By implication, the opposite is also true: failing to buy the correct product leads to rejection, unhappiness, boredom, and despair. (1998, 431)

⁵² Psychoanalysts have conceptualised the narcissistic self within three "dynamically related processes", the 'false self', the 'symptomatic self' and the 'real/empty self' (Kanner and Gomes, 1998, 428). The 'false self' is egotistical and "committed to self-aggrandisement". In this state, focus is directed at external goals and suppress desires of "[personal] security and solitude". This is the 'empty self'. The 'real self' is one that gains fulfilment though a more complex and diverse range of interests and references of satisfaction.

Toby rejects the consumer self outright. This is certainly not the cause of his depression.

Carol Gilligan characterises depression in terms of a “response to a failure of attachment” (1988, 12). Locating this idea within the activist context, this search for ‘attachment’ is the search for place. Kanner and Gomes observe that a great deal of environmentalist discourse has aimed to displace *Homo Sapiens* from their ‘throne’ atop of nature (1998, 429). This leaves us in search for a new place to be, a new home. It is a search that many of us are on, including Toby. I would argue that his depression stems from his uncertainty as to where he fits into this world. As traditional career options have failed to inspire him, he has looked for more unconventional options.

One of the biggest things that probably does get me up in the morning is the idea of creating during the day. When I haven't got things to create, I don't really wanna get out of bed. (Toby: lowest point)

For Toby, his activist *praxis* takes the form of artistic creations. Happiness is gained through the expression of his art in his street performances. The place he has found has been the city mall. It is indeed an ironic setting for someone who despises consumer culture. However, when considering that he is performing in the heart of ‘enemy territory’ we can begin to make some sense of this. I have mentioned the fact that Toby likes juxtaposition. It is this contrast between his anti-consumerist ideas (expressed through his recycled art) and the site of his performance that makes what Toby does subversive.

Toby's place in the mall has not ensured him peaceful satisfaction. He claims that what he is doing is not an attempt to make a political point, denying that it is 'an act of activism'. Indeed, performing statues is not explicitly political. The communication he has with the audience is diffuse and discursive

rather than authoritative (as in the style of propaganda). Therefore, Toby's impact on people is difficult to gauge. This is the nature of all art, where meaning is bound not in the text but in the particular engagement of the reader. As his success is by no means assured (being largely determined by the audience), Toby is vulnerable to disappointment and discontent.

Toby's satisfaction comes from engaging the public in his art. His performances demand public interaction. Therefore, the success of his work, both in real income and personal satisfaction, depends his rapport with the audience.

I- I really love it when you make someone's day and you can see that you've changed their day, you know? And that for me makes it worth it. Like for instance, about a year and a half ago I was performing up in Fremantle - it was Coexistence Day in Fremantle, and then, this whole mob of black fellas come up, and they're really dark, obviously from up in the Northern Territory - Arnhem Land or somewhere - and these kids- there's about twenty of them or so, they're all crowding round me, they're all just-and speaking their own tongue and then looking at me and pointing and laughing their heads off. They give us two bucks. I bend down, shake her hand and kiss her hand, yeah? She's laughing her head-off and their all laughing and all standing there smiling at me. Their there for about five-minutes, just smiling at me; and it was great. It was like wow! that's what its about. They left, I packed up and went home and made about five bucks in the day, but I felt fuckin' wicked! (Toby: satisfaction)

Toby has found a place and continues to develop and play with his role in it.

Part III

translating to the screen

Chapter 6

engaging documentary praxis

In this chapter, I will discuss the use of the documentary medium in delivering the Shooting Activist! Project. Some of the reasons for using this cinematic form will be outlined below before exploring its potential in effecting change. There are however a number of challenges posed by using the visual medium that need to be acknowledged. Three contrasting documentary forms will be examined and considered in respect to these issues.

the allure of the screen

The 'Shooting Activist Project', or SAP!, was designed to inspire people to pursue what matters to them most. The visual medium offers an engaging mode of communication that transcends the level of information towards an emotional response. The documentary form enables stories to be told in an evocative and heart-felt form that reflects a reality that the audience can relate to. Video is an economic and efficient way of expressing ideas and experiences to a wide audience.

Noble Bohemia is an attempt to pursue a form of cinema that is discursive rather than monocratic. Following Walter Benjamin's faith in the revolutionary potential of cinema, it is hoped that this documentary will make people think about these issues. Screen texts are like all other mediums in that they present their own unique set of enabling and disabling elements. The ambitions of *Noble Bohemia* are not an instant transformation of the world but more simply an offering that speaks to this possibility.

The methodology of the project was deeply embedded in the social practices of generosity. That is, it was formed out of and developed within a

collaborative framework that was life-affirming. This is keeping with Benjamin's notion of a "practical, ethically engaged form of cultural critique" (DeChaine, 2000, 295). Similarly, *Noble Bohemia* endeavours to open up a dialogue whereby we question our current situation and try to "imagine a less oppressive, more humane world".⁵³ This is the terrain in which *Noble Bohemia* is enmeshed.

Like Theodore Adorno, Benjamin saw the potential of film to be used for maintaining a strict social order on society. However, he also saw its potential as an immensely liberating tool, or as Robert DeChaine puts it, "an engaged form of cultural critical practice, a view portending an entirely post-modern project." (2000, 285-86) In respect to Benjamin's conception of Marx's historical materialism, his "attempted articulation of philosophy, art, writing and politics signifies a potentially revolutionary form of *praxis*, one which enjoins the author, as intellectual and cultural producer, with other social actors in a mediating activity of working toward social change." (DeChaine, 2000, 287)

An author who teaches writers nothing, teaches no one. (Benjamin quoted in DeChaine, 2000, 292).⁵⁴

The original Shooting Activist! concept was to invite filmmakers around the world to make similarly socially engaged forms of productions. The advent of the 'digital age' has liberated many screen consumers to become screen producers.⁵⁵ Benjamin referred to the Russian journalist, Tretiakov, as his

⁵³ DeChaine (2000) is here referring to Benjamin's ambition for film (302). "The criteria for Benjamin's methodology are clear: the critique must be politically engaged, organised, pedagogic in its intentions, take advantage of new technical innovations, and foremost, be concerned with the well-being of the social collective." (DeChaine, 2000, 295)

⁵⁴ This pedagogical imperative outlined here should not be read as arrogant or patronising. This is because Benjamin is arguing for film to not only present empowering realities but to also offer new methods of presenting them. That is, to open up new possibilities of expression that may lead to a better or more empowering understanding of the world.

⁵⁵ Benjamin argued that "new technology compels us to view reception in a new light, and to recognise in it the possibilities for artistic intervention and revolutionary social change." (DeChaine, 2000, 293.)

“operating’ writer’, his Xenophon of the filmmaking world. Benjamin observed that Tretiakov did not try to present events as a neutral bystander, but tried to “intervene actively” (quoted in DeChaine, 2000, 292). Here, Benjamin invokes Brecht's ambition to turn "spectators into collaborators" (DeChaine, 2000, 292-93). With the capacity to produce screen mediums comes the capacity to voice our interests, passions and concerns. One way for marginalised groups to voice their concerns is for them to get behind as well as in front of the camera. For Benjamin, this is a potentially revolutionary practice.

harsh glare

Having discussed the merits of using the visual medium, it is worthwhile examining some of its associated problems. The key problem that I will discuss here is that of presenting a real subject (that is, a person) through the visual medium to an unknown audience. Benjamin identified this problem in his notion of maintaining a subject's ‘aura’. The aura is the authentic original that is deeply embedded and situated within a unique time and place. Translating a person onto the screen inevitably involves a reification process. The subject is always abstracted in a contrived formulation of fragments seen through the distortions of the lens. This equates to a loss of integrity, where the subject is dismembered into selective parts (that is, objectified).

Reproduction necessitates the displacement of the original time and space of the object it portrays, alienating the viewer from the authenticity of the original cultural and historical context. In the case of the visual medium, the event of screenings (that is, a reproduction that is divorced from the original context), “reactivates the object reproduced” (Benjamin, 1976, 221). While the act of reproducing work (screening a film) may sacrifice “a unique experience”,

However, it must be noted that despite screen technology becoming cheaper, it remains beyond the grasp of most.

it allows the “plurality of copies” to gain a plurality of meanings by being situated within the context of the audience (such as their particular time, space and ideology).

Indeed, Benjamin saw that film’s “destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage” was the very source of its power (1976, 221). He goes further to say that when art is emancipated from its “parasitical dependence on ritual” it takes on a pointedly political nature (Benjamin, 1976, 224). For *Noble Bohemia*, its strength or meaning lies in the space between the activism constructed on screen and the particular situation of the viewer. The documentary is an attempt to subvert generic notions of activism as something foreign and alien, to something that is deeply personal and particular. The work (*Noble Bohemia*) is dead without audience engagement, without them identifying themselves with ‘activism’.

Benjamin’s discussion of the film actor is useful in understanding the inherent problem of representing the subject on screen. Luigi Pirandello most lucidly expressed this eternal predicament when he wrote,

The film actor feels as if in exile-edited not only from the stage but also from himself. With a vague sense of discomfort he feels inexplicable emptiness: his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice, and the noises caused by his moving about, in order to be changed into a mute image, flickering an instant on the screen, then vanishing into silence... The projector will play with his shadow before the public, and he himself must be content to play before the camera. (Luigi Pirandello quoted in Benjamin, 1976, 229)

To maintain some voice and presence of the authentic subject the documentary form does provide some tools. In *Noble Bohemia*, subjects are *shot* completely mute, that is, we never see them speak. The visual scenes are taken from a combination of ‘natural’ and ‘artificial’ events. As the above quote testifies, it is impossible to translate an authentic subject to the screen, and so even the most

natural and everyday chores are coloured by the process of shooting them.⁵⁶ There are always going to be compromises. The question is, where are the lines to be drawn?

A number of production processes that would more accurately reflect the subjects were considered before concluding that they would demand an unreasonable amount of time from the subjects.⁵⁷ If the totality of their character could not be adequately compressed onto the screen, then it was vital that I at least had an appreciation of who they are as people. This meant that their activism was considered within the context of their life as a whole. It is impossible to portray the whole of a person within a screen structure (that which always isolates pictures and words). The task is must always be (in cinematic terms) to appreciate the person as a multiplicity of ideas, images and conceptions, and present that person with sensitivity.

The camera becomes not just a recorder, but an assistant in the construction of reality (Aufderheide, 1997, 17).

Expression through the screen is not merely to reflect a given reality but to actually create a reality. This is not to say the reality created is false but that it is contrived and mediated to pose a particular meaning. The intended meaning is however by no means fixed but is fluid, depending largely on the reading of the audience (see John Fiske, 1989, 27). The reality is indeed more transparent than most we construct and so invites critical engagement.

engage and subvert: the power of the personal

⁵⁶ The clearest example of this can be witnessed in the many 'reality TV' programs ('Survivor', 'The Missing Link', 'Pop Stars', 'Big Brother, et cetera) that proclaim authentic characters but only present 'real' people posing for the camera. This is also evident in game shows, where contestants are made to perform for the camera (that is, the artificiality of the situation necessarily imposes particular television conventions).

⁵⁷ The alternatives considered included writing the script with the subjects, and giving the subjects an extended period of time to answer the questions. For more detail, see 'Method of Inquiry' in the appendix.

To suggest that a political message is carried in *Noble Bohemia*, is merely to state the obvious. All texts have political implications. Here I would like to discuss three documentary movements⁵⁸ that explicitly address political subject matter: cinematic propaganda, televisual news and personal narrative forms. These diverse media forms will be examined with respect to an ambition of social change. It will be argued that while propaganda can inspire and news can inform, the best means of engaging the audience in the debate is through the personal narrative. While the personal approach is biased, if made transparent, has the potential to be in some respects, more honest and more powerful than other cinematic forms.

Traditionally, cinema that was pointedly political was propaganda¹. Cinematic propaganda has the primary goal of persuading its audience to adhere to its agenda or ideology (often by means of vilifying the enemy). It was Joseph Stalin who said that the “cinema is the greatest means of mass propaganda” (*Brewer’s Cinema*, 1995, 448). Perhaps the earliest examples of propagandist cinema appeared with the advent of the First World War (*England Expects* (1914) and *The Fatherland Calls* (1914)), but was most evident in the years surrounding the first and second World Wars⁵⁹. According to Joseph Goebles, propaganda must “invisibly... penetrate the whole of life without the public having any knowledge at all of the... initiative” (quoted in *Brewer’s Cinema*, 1995, 448). In other words, to be effective it must be insidious.

⁵⁸ This is not to privilege non-fiction forms. (In fact, many of the most powerful political explorations have come from fiction (*Apocalypse Now* (197?) and *A Clockwork Orange* (197?) to name but two.) As *Noble Bohemia* followed the documentary format, I will confine this discussion to that genre.

⁵⁹ *The Little American* (1917), *Mothers of France* (1917), *The Kaiser, the Beast of Berlin* (1918), *Yankee Doodle in Berlin* (1918); *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (1924), *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), *Earth* (1930), and *Alexander Nevsky* (1938); Depression-era Americans saw *Our Daily Bread* (1934), *People of the Cumberland* (1938), and *Reefer Madness* (1936), a warning against marijuana use; and inter-war Europeans saw *Kameradschaft* (1931), *J'accuse* (1938), and *La Marseillaise* (1938), and Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940). (Robert Cole, 2001, 137)

Cinematic propaganda is also evident in many environment and social justice films that focus on the issues at large. Films like Godfrey Reggio's *Koyanasqatsi* (1982), Luc Besson's *Atlantis* (1991) and Ron Fricke's *Baraka* (1992) are epic pieces that may not appear to be explicitly propagandist but certainly employ many of its rhetorical methods (grand visuals (*mise-en-scene*), majestic cinematography, strong juxtaposition, and emotive music). These are indeed effective and powerful films that highlight the wondrous beauty and horrendous pain inflicted on the earth. However, what they lack is the human dimension that allows the audience active engagement with subject matter. The scale is simply too large for the individual to grasp and envision their role in such a world.

It could not be disputed that such films play an important part in informing people of significant issues. In some respects, "propaganda is more honest than news - it makes none of the truth claims of news" (Hartley, J., 1992, 53). *Koyanasqatsi* is a powerful film that illustrates the global scale of many important issues that we face. It operates on a visceral level that tries to prove its point emotionally. However, rather than opening a dialogue in a frank and critical way, propaganda stifles debate with a heavy hand. Propaganda can be a useful tool for both hegemonic and anti-hegemonic groups to illustrate its concerns, but is limited in its long-term capacity to effect change.

There is a fine line between 'social commentary' and 'propaganda'. In Propaganda could be said to have been appropriated by news-journalism. In some respects, news reports and documentaries are more insidious, because they avoid "the alienating effect of propaganda posing as entertainment" (*Brewer's Cinema*, 1995, 448). It is not that all journalism is perverse but that all stories are bound within the confines of dramatic entertainment. There is

absolutely nothing wrong with 'infotainment' as long as it is read as such. Unfortunately, news presents a pretence of truth. It is this deceit that should not be tolerated.

[I]f the story happens to be told from a white, professional, male, conservative, first-world point of view, which does sometimes happen, then those whose point of view is organised around different subjectivities are automatically exiled from the community whose news story this is. For such instant outsiders, the news is not true but racist, sexist, biased and propagandist. (Hartley, 1992, 16)

John Pilger, for instance, personifies a style of filmmaking that is socially engaged and openly biased. As a news journalist, Pilger tries to provide a broad perspective of the issue, with little attention paid to the individual. His message is information and the brutality of facts. If propaganda's operating agenda is to persuade us of what is right, then for news, it is that of truth.⁶⁰

The social commentary genre sits somewhere between propaganda and newsjournalism. The genre is personified by Michael Moore's highly effective satirical films.⁶¹ Moore uses comedy, sarcasm, euphemism and juxtaposition to make serious criticisms about governments, big business and the mass media.

I want [my films] to have a political point of view, but I don't want to give a sermon. (Moore quoted in David Sterritt, 1995)

In Moore's first feature documentary, *Roger and Me* (1989), he explores the life of his home-town of Flint, Michigan, after General Motors closed nearly a dozen of its factories (and opened up new ones in Mexico). Moore does not merely try to cover the facts of what happens to his town.⁶² Moreover, *Roger & Me* tells the story of a concerned citizen of Flint, himself. *Roger & Me* like, Moore's other films, does not conform to either traditional propaganda or

⁶⁰ As Benjamin demonstrates, any notion of authenticity must be considered very circumspect. (Also see Hartley, 1992.)

⁶¹ Not the president of the WTO, the other one with the American accent.

⁶² Massive job cuts in the automotive industry leads to an exodus, desperate poverty (including many home evictions) and Flint becoming the crime capital of the US. After tourism fails, Flint's economic salvation rests on the growth of prisons (which picks up some of GM's sacked employees).

newsjournalism. His use of personal point of view takes his style into the realm of the personal documentary form. In this way the operating agenda is not so much to find what is 'right', or tell the 'truth', but to understand what it *means* to those most affected.

Taking newsjournalism further are issues-based films that document environmental threats and degradation. While there is a diversity of forms and styles employed, they are united by their principle focus on the issues themselves, rather than particular individuals. One such filmmaker who uses this approach is Pip Starr. Her documentaries, *Fight for Country* (2000) looks at the fight to stop the uranium mine at Jabiluka in the Northern Territory; and *The Return of the Kingfisher Festival CERES 1999 & 2000* (2001), promotes a community garden in Melbourne. Both of Starr's documentaries tell the story through the people involved and prioritise content over production values. The strength of Starr's films is that they are actively engaged in the subject matter.⁶³ Unlike propagandist films that have clearly defined arguments, her documentaries are more concerned with providing a window into these issues. However, both films fail to make a strong impact because of her loose and organic chronological narrative that is neither critical or discursive.

Jen Scradie and Matt Devries' film, *The Golf War* (2000) takes an alternative approach that follows Michael Moore's tradition of social commentary and satire. This documentary looks at a small farming village in the Philippines that is threatened by developers who propose to build a golf course complex. Despite being American, Scradie and Devries are able to present the views of the village with emotion and power. They are able to bring a sensitivity and humour to an issue that is indeed serious, with protests

⁶³ As an activist herself, Starr uses participant observation, following the action from the inside.

bringing lives at risk. The interviews with locals are frank and genuine. But it is the hilarious cameos by Tiger Woods and his father (“[golf] gets people off the streets”) who provide the documentary with international resonance. *The Golf War* is a fresh and tangible insight into the old conservation versus development debate. Through the personal accounts of the threatened farmers and the humour of ‘the Tiger Woods show’, this documentary successfully argues its pro-conservationist view. However, as an issues-based film *The Golf War* does not (and indeed has no need to) offer its audience the possibility of partaking or participating in that way of life. This is something that the issues-based film has no concern with.

This is where the personal documentary form is most suited, enabling closer connections between those on screen and those in the audience. This connection can be considered in terms of an emotional proximity between the audience and subject matter. Posing this question in Benjamin’s terms, how is the aura to be conveyed through film? In other words, how can reproductions resonate outside the immediate, original context of their construction? One answer to this is to locate politics within personal and particular stories. In contrast to the head-on approach of propaganda and journalism, personal cinema tackles political issues from an oblique angle. Personal cinema uses documentary methods like first-person narratives, subjective point-of-view, diaries, confessions and cinema verite (fly-on-the-wall) to open up wider political issues.⁶⁴

... today's personal documentaries ... [form] the flip side of widespread public cynicism about journalists, TV news and reality shows as biased, sensationalistic, or exploitative. (Aufderheide, 1997, 23)

⁶⁴ Examples include Macky Alston’s *Family Name* (1997), Gary Caganoff’s *The Second Step* (2001), Peter Kinoy’s *Teen Dreams* (1995), Ellen Spiro’s *Greetings from Out Here* (1993), Maysles brothers’ *Hoop Dreams* (1994), respectively.

In her introduction to Benjamin's *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt argues that "[f]or him the size of an object was in an inverse ratio to its significance... The smaller the object, the more likely it seemed that it could contain in the most concentrated form of everything else..." (1976, 11 and 12). This perspective reflects the way in which we as an audience identify with the small and personal aspects of film. It is here that a story has its most powerful resonance.

By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film,... extends our comprehension of the necessities that rule our lives (Benjamin, 1976, 236)

One of the advantages of the understated approach of the personal documentary is that it allows space for the audience to consider what the story means to them, and society generally. Rather than bearing the burden of proof, or of having to present an objective reality, personal documentaries only need to present the truth of the subject (that is, a subjective but not necessary relative truth). Not only does this method validate the opinion of the subject, but it also gives the documentary credibility. By claiming only to present a limited point of view, the documentary does not drift as far from the authenticity of the people depicted (thus remaining closer to the aura).

Avoiding the omnipresent-observer-from-above view, personal documentaries are there on the ground, engaged and involved in the story that they tell. It is fundamentally a collaborative approach between author and subject that gives the genre its integrity and potency. It is through this method that "otherwise disenfranchised voices" are given an all-important platform to raise their concerns (Aufderheide, 1997, 16).

"... all [personal documentary filmmakers] undertook their projects as efforts to make public an experience that they felt had been rendered invisible by the profit imperatives of mass media, by social discrimination, or both." (Aufderheide, 1997, 20)

Despite being politically engaged, the personal documentary can potentially avoid a polarisation of the debate. This is because it is not directed at the level of universal truth but that of personal experience. The personal documentary makes "an implicit request for the viewer to recognise the reality of the speaker, and to incorporate that reality into his or her view of the world." (Aufderheide, 1997, 16) It is because of this open approach that it can be so powerful in reaching a wide audience, going beyond just 'preaching to the converted'.

As the personal becomes a metonym for wider political concerns, it has been widely used by a number of marginalised movements. Robert DeChaine (2000) has looked at the activist group, 'Queer Nation', who employ a diversity of tactics to subvert conventional heterosexual conceptions of gender and sexuality. They employ the shock tactics of "photomontage and juxtaposition" to challenge traditional heterosexual cultural mores (2000, 295). Often the most "innocuous photographs" DeChaine argues, are given "politically charged captions which are meant to wrench traditional interpretations away from them" (*ibid.*).

Perhaps the area where the personal documentary is most suited is that of dealing with issues of identity. For both cultural and gender identity, the telling of personal stories is particularly effective. Patricia Aufderheide describes the filmmaking style of Marlon Riggs (1989) and Ross McElwee (1993) to be "both tentative and assertive" (1997, 17). The explosion in gay and lesbian filmmaking is just one movement that has employed the personal documentary

to great effect, and cultural identity is another.⁶⁵ As the genre continues to grow, so too does its potential to change perceptions.

Noble Bohemia is the second documentary instalment produced under the guise of the 'Shooting Activist!' banner. The first was *Ngully Yaddaguai (Us Dreaming)* (1999) a issues-based documentary that featured the central protagonists of a land-care project but also alluded to the cultural identity of the Wadjarri people living in this isolated reserve. Keeping to traditional documentary form, both productions were about real people in real places. Both focused on individuals engaged in noble practices. In *Noble Bohemia*, the personal approach was pushed further in an attempt to delve into the character of activism rather than merely describe the activity process.

In a search for a medium to deliver social change, the documentary form provides great potential. Screen texts have the advantage of reaching a diverse audience. This wide appeal and its capacity to effect the opinions and attitudes of its audience make the documentary a very apt medium. The documentary text remains contested but supplies material for consideration and debate (including opinions, information, attitudes, and ideologies). Despite these advantages, there are of course many factors that need to be negotiated for the documentary to be effective. Most notably, there is the issue of authenticity. The documentary genre needs to reflect a reality that we can relate to our own experience so that we can identify with the story and views being presented. One form that has seen a strong rise in popularity has been that of the personal documentary. As the nature of this genre is pitched at the level of the personal,

⁶⁵ Gay and lesbian films: Su Friedrich's *Hide and Seek* (1996), Ruth Ozeki Lounsberry's *Halving the Bones* (1996), Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied* (1989), Ross McElwee's *Time Indefinite* (1993), Jennie Livingstone's *Paris is Burning* (1985), and also see Michelle Citron, Maxi Cohen, Spiro, Vanalyne Green, Amalie Rothschild and Claudia Weill; cultural identity filmmakers include, David Achkar's *Allah*

it attempts to open a direct dialogue with the viewer. That is, the personal documentary communicates at a personal and immediate level to the viewer, thus engaging and inviting them to empathise with its subjects and draw their own personal conclusions. This is what makes the personal documentary so effective.

Tantou (1991), Raoul Peck's *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet* (1992), Ngozi Onwurah's *Body Beautiful* (1991), and Isaac Julien, Ian Munro's *Prejudice* (1989) (Aufderheide, 1997, 19).

Chapter 7

conclusions

This project has sought to describe a possible interpretation of the activist through the visual documentary medium. More specifically, I wanted to sketch an ontology of the activist. This study has been explored through a case study of three activists. Cassie, John and Toby are presented here as examples of activism, each illustrates a different approach to life that I believe is 'noble'. All embody aspects of the activist character outlined in Part I. This paper was never intended as a 'how-to' guide 'to being an activist'. Rather, it has been an exploration of the character of activism.

The approach that I have taken is based on a practical understanding of the world and our role within it. I wanted to look beyond general activist stereotypes. The activist is often depicted as a hypocritical protester who prevents the very development that supports their life-style. Or, alternatively a hero who sacrifices their interests for others out of lofty principles. Instead, I see the activist as living according to values founded through their experience of the world. Activists are by no means 'selfless', but they do see their interests as intertwined with wider natural and social systems. It is a love and care for the world and recognition of their place within it that motivates their action. It is precisely through this consciousness that contributing to a better world is rewarding in and for itself.

Each subject highlights a particular aspect of the activist character. This character was described in terms of involving action, taking a stand, an ethic of care, a concern for justice and taking responsibility for the world around us. Cassie transforms her environmental conscience into an ethos that permeates

through her entire life. The way in which she lives out her ideals is something that I truly admire. John's work with the AIDS Council personifies an ethic of care that commands respect. His generosity of spirit transcends ideas of time and sacrifice. Toby's street performances demonstrate the diversity of forms activism can take. His critical mind and creativity make Toby a unique individual who continues to defy categorisation.

The visual medium was employed because of its inspirational potential. *Noble Bohemia* is an attempt to inspire people to engage actively with the world. The three subjects illustrate the potential power of all of us to contribute to the people and world around us. The personal approach taken compliments the symbolic nature of the medium. All three subjects show a humility that builds a rapport with the audience. Using their personal stories to drive the narrative, *Noble Bohemia* is able to connect with the audience at an intimate level. Limiting the documentary to fifteen-minutes maintains an energy of enthusiasm that aims to whet the audience's appetite for activism (rather than giving a turkey sandwich to a vegetarian!).

We are all searching for a place or role that is mutually nourishing--that is at once for the world and for ourselves. Activism is only a more pointed or explicit expression of this search. The documentary was part of my own personal contribution to the people and world that I care for. The activist character described in Part I is not a saint or green angel, but a person acting responsibly out of a sense of care. *Noble Bohemia* is thus a documentary made by activists, about activists and for activists. Activism is not motivated out of religious tenants, but is situated in our practical experience. Neither is it about ideology, abstract principles or morality but of conceptualising a world where we all take an active part. SAP! is an attempt to embrace activism as a

worthwhile practice that provides life-affirming sustenance. Alternatively, as Noam Chomsky has said, its “a matter of weather you can look at yourself in the mirror,” (*Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media*, video, 1992)

looking forward

Using the relational ontology argued for in this paper, we must acknowledge that a healthy self depends largely upon a healthy social and natural environment. We are enriched by the world around us beyond our imagination. To see healthy communities and healthy habitats in the wild enlightens my soul. I take solace from knowing that the life around me is well. My life is embedded in the world. My well-being is connected with the well-being of the world I care for.

The antithesis of activism is to be passive and apathetic. The affects of such attitudes permeate social and economic institutions, threatening to diminish vitality and trust within our communities. Activism is to actively deal with these concerns. To embrace activist practices is itself to contribute to the development of social capital, that which sustains the vitality of communities. The possibilities emerging from activist practices can be truly revolutionary. And that is the objective that this project hopes to contribute to. From the outset I have stressed that I am not presenting activism as a magic wand to cure all ills. Activism is rather a 'place to come from', a set of practices that produce meaning. It is from this position that our activities are motivated towards contributing to the world around us.

I began this paper with the words of Margit Spira, and so I will end it with the words of her son:

I guess basically one wants to feel that one's life has amounted to more than just consuming products and generating garbage. I think that one likes to look back and say that one's done the best one can to make this a better place for others. You can look at it from this point of view: what greater

motivation can there be than doing whatever one possibly can to reduce pain and suffering? (Spira in Singer, 1998, 197-98).

appendix (a)

production notes

pre-production:

concept...

The reason for wanting to make *Noble Bohemia* was to inspire an audience into taking action. I perceived a vacuum between what people thought should be done and what most of us were actually doing. Presuming that the audience was at least sympathetic to social justice and environmental issues, I wanted to encourage action. I took the assumption that if people believed they could make an effective difference, they would. Therefore, I saw the film as a catalyst or inspiration for change. With this in mind, I set about finding the ingredients for such a goal.

I wanted to appeal to the audience by using the human face of environmental and social issues. I wanted to show the faces of those who I saw were making a difference to the environmental justice and human welfare. Particularly with the history of environmental filmmaking, the tendency has been to focus on the facts and issues. This educational approach has been essential in previous decades in making the environment a mainstream concern. However, the level of information is not the most pressing problem preventing change. One issue that has been neglected in mainstream media is that of participation. The typical image of participation has been the waving of placards and yelling at protest rallies. This negative depiction of activists (as the term 'protesters' implies) is one stereotype I wanted to dispel.

The direction taken with *Noble Bohemia* was designed to reach a wide audience. This translated into the personal approach taken that aims to reach the audience at an intimate level. The philosophy behind the documentary is not made explicit. This was for the simple reason that the screen is not the most

suitable medium for expressing these ideas. The screen is a medium of images, both visual and symbolic.

To exploit this strength I employed emotive rather than a descriptive, informative or theoretical style. This emphasis on the symbolic power of the visual medium informed the content, style and length of the production. As a symbolic medium, the screen has a wonderful economic quality. The old adage, 'less is more' has great resonance in this medium. This is because the audience is forced to make sense of the images presented. There is no jargon or even direct references to 'activism' as such. There are only the three people and their stories. This understated approach leaves far more space for the audience to consider their own connections to the stories told.

script...

The process of writing the script was a matter of creating a structure from the concept and questions and developing the visual story to compliment their responses. Several drafts were re-written at each stage of the project (pre-production, production and post-production). There were many reasons for this. Initially, I needed something to work with from the outset. A script is like a road map, I needed to know where I was going and how I was going to get there (even if the eventual destination was somewhere else). The documentary relied heavily on the responses given by the subjects. Therefore, as the focus, people and locations changed, the script had to change. Also, there was the question of how I was going to put it together. At one stage, I had planned to use three-frames simultaneously. This was to add depth and context to the subjects, illustrating the wide diversity of activities that they are involved in. Therefore, the production process was open and fluid throughout.

subjects...

I needed to find positive activist role models that did not necessarily fit the mainstream image. The criteria was open but there were characteristics that I was looking for. The first was that the audience had to relate to these characters. In other words, they had to be ordinary people. Secondly, they had to be doing something that was 'extraordinary' - something that was a little different or unfamiliar that people could admire. Thirdly, they had to be 'photogenic', in that who they were and what they did translated to the medium in a way that engaged the audience. Thus, they needed to be ordinary enough for people to understand them and extraordinary enough for people to take notice. I was not looking for experts and professionals but interesting people with a passion.

I spent about three months on pinning down my three subjects. I decided on three rather than a single subject for a number of reasons. The first was I wanted to increase the chances of finding commonalities with the audience. I wanted a wide cross-section of the audience to relate to the stories and socio-economic situation of the subjects. While this is not explicitly revealed in the film, it can be inferred from the characters. Being a subjective documentary based on the strength of the characters (rather than the objective heroics) I needed engaging personalities with a story to tell.

One of my initial sticking points was finding 'the right activist' that fit the bill. This was a considerable problem, as without subjects the film could not move forward. The selection criteria was initially too optimistic and naive, my 'perfect subject' sounded more like an 'angelic martyr' than an activist. Not only was I looking for committed activists but also individuals who were articulate, approachable and visually arresting.

Raising the project among activist networks proved to be more difficult than first anticipated. While it was important that they were actively involved in the community, it was more important that they operated within an embodied philosophy of activism. What distinguishes these subjects from the common image of activists, is that they recognise the personal rewards that they receive from their activism. Therefore, they are not selfless saints but people of the community who make a difference to gain personal satisfaction.

There was also the question of balance. One of the aspects of John that was so appealing for this project was the fact that he does not conform to traditional notions of the 'activist'. Likewise I thought Toby did not fit protester stereotypes that could be judged from his appearance. The idea that all three subjects would be male was most uncomfortable. A number of male activists were put aside to lock down a woman. Although through word-of-mouth I had a few leads, I was reluctant to approach them with the project without at least having good second-hand impression of them as people.

Once identifying three suitable subject, the next challenge was to gaining their commitment. I have found the activist community to be one of the most modest. Those I did approach would convince me that they were not the one I was looking for, but that I should talk to their friend or neighbour. Another problem was that those who were suitable were usually too busy being 'activists' to take the time needed for the project.

In the end, Cassie, John and Toby, all proved to be most worthy candidates. In their unique way, each embodied an activist philosophy that I related to. They were chosen on the basis of their lives as a whole, their self-reflection, their ability to communicate and their visual prowess. This last aspect was evident in their physical talents: Toby's street performance and art,

John's work, Tae-Bo and Tai Chi, and Cassie's acrobatics (which did not make it into the final cut). It is these attributes that I wanted to use to project a sense of awe for the audience, as a symbol of their active endeavour.¹

production

content...

The content of this documentary was governed largely by the subjects themselves. I wanted to show who these people are, the places where they live and work, and what they do there. As the questions do not explicitly ask 'what they do', the visual story must compensate and fill in some of these important gaps. Other key considerations were that the story must keep to the personal framework and focus largely on the positive and constructive lives that they lead. Background scenes were thus chosen to compliment the story that they were telling. Except for the one shoot in the television studio, all locations used with the subjects were natural (in that they were shot where they were going to be. As well as capturing some of the detail that highlighted who these people were, it was also important to show the communities in which these people belong. These backdrops included, the port (John), the bush (Cassie), and the city of Fremantle (Toby). Therefore, the characters are fleshed-out and supported through visuals and text information. Hence, only through the integration of the oral stories, text, visuals and music is the meaning made clear.

structure...

¹ They also serve as signs of their individual strength that counter-balance the moments when they are at their most vulnerable (ie. during 'their lowest point').

As the video would be made within the documentary form and is very much character driven, the leading questions are absolutely crucial in providing a strong narrative structure. The role of the questions are numerous and onerous. They had to satisfy the objectives of the documentary as well as provide the essential conflict of the narrative.

To fulfil the objectives of the project, the questions needed to draw out the ordinary and extraordinary qualities of these people. Rather than the questions being used to explain precisely what it is that they do, I was more interested in gaining an understanding of their relationship with what they do. Framing the interviews as reflections on these issues, the questions were made very personal. Because of the internal nature of the subject matter, only they themselves could convey their thoughts. The questions had to express both their sense of passion and commitment for their work and the freedom and power they possessed to make a difference.

In terms of providing a dramatic element, the challenges that they had undertaken were highlighted. By examining their personal turning and low points in their work, the audience could gain an appreciation of what they faced. The latter question, 'what was your lowest point in your activism', served the dual purposes of characterisation and developing conflict. These two questions compose the main body of the documentary, conveying the core antagonism of the drama (namely, the 'human verses the world'; but also 'human verses themselves'). As the subjects reflect on their lives, we see their awareness of how as free-agents, they themselves are largely responsible for their impact and effectiveness. The narrative conflict is thus derived from their endeavour to rise to that challenge.

Maintaining a loose three-act structure, the first question provides the exposition, the second and third: the central conflict, and the fourth: the conclusion. The first question ('morning ritual') introduces the characters and opens up the question of what motivates them in their lives generally. The second ('turning point'), explores their motivations to work in the areas that they do. This question encourages them to convey their passion and commitment to making a difference to that which they care for. The third ('lowest point'), provides an insight into the work that they do and how they deal with the harsh realities they face. Just as importantly, this question helps to build a rapport with the audience, demonstrating their humility as ordinary people. The final question ('satisfaction') sees the return of the light and positive atmosphere upon which the documentary began. While it ends the story, it is by no means a conclusive resolution. The question draws out the personal rewards gained by their activism.²

Governed by these four questions, the remaining aspects of the documentary needed to strengthen and compliment their responses. After undergoing numerous drafts, the way in which I wanted to tell this story was through a multi-layered approach. This meant that the narrative, themes and meanings were to be conveyed through visuals, text and a soundscape of stories, music and sound effects (mainly recorded separately to vision). Just as it was essential that there be some diversity in the kinds of activism represented, it was important that those that were shown were seen to be real people, where their activism constituted merely one (if crucial) aspect of their identity.

² The response given by Cassie is an exception. As all interviews were about an hour in length, in this final question, I decided to use one of Cassie's statements that spoke directly to the themes of the documentary, thus making an apt point to end on.

There were a number of possibilities open to me. One means by which to do this was to show three separate frames simultaneously.³ This would allow me to use one to focus on the subject and two to show the context of their story, with additional footage or text. Unfortunately, this concept was not viable due to technical and time restraints. Subsequently, subjects and contextual information vied for the same screen. This proved not to be such a problem as most of the footage taken with the subjects was within a particular context that could relate to their story. Additional footage⁴ was used to compliment their story by providing added information as to other areas of their lives or placing their story within the wider context (but were not permitted a clear narrative in their own right). Text was used to convey important information, such as short descriptions of what they do, as well as special quotes. Using all these elements of the screen through the theme of reflection, I was able to convey a broader sense of their character.

style...

The oral story was only able to tell one aspect of their life at a time. Therefore it was crucial that appropriate contexts were used to give a fuller sense of meaning to that story. These three characters were represented through photography, sound and editing. All these devices were used to complete a picture of these people as activists. Like a jig-saw, each piece is crucial and adds its own dimension to the image that I wanted to portray.

Remembering that my aim was to inspire the audience into action, my approach had to be seductive, with the intention of drawing them into the story. As the story is driven by the characters, the audience has to identify with

³ There have been numerous examples of which. One film of 2000, was Darren Aronofsky's, *Requiem for a Dream*. (However, it was used in that film to show a number of events simultaneously.)

⁴ that is, footage taken from a different scene than that shown.

their story. Therefore, the way in which the story was told needed to support the audience in understanding and appreciating the characters.

After my experience with the previous documentary, *Ngully Yaddaguai* (*Us Dreaming*, 1999), I wanted to do something different with the interview technique. One motivation was to delve deeper into the character, the personal drives and *modus operandi* of the individual. Another was to maximise content and substance within the limited time-frame. This was attempted through the interplay between the images and oral narratives.

This divergence in approach is illustrated by the way in which interviews produced. *Ngully Yaddaguai* employed the conventional 'talking-heads' approach to interviews. This technique suited the charismatic and articulate characters discussing issues they were very familiar with.⁵ In this situation, we allowed the tapes to roll and left the documentary's content until the editing stage. *Ngully Yaddaguai* sustained the 'talkie' style with cut-aways to what they were actually doing up there (to hide edits).

The most distinctive feature of this documentary is how the interviews were used. Traditionally, documentaries are told through voice-over and interviews. While both of these were used, they were used in an unconventional manner. Whilst voice-over narration is usually unseen, in *Noble Bohemia* they are almost always seen. And whilst interviews are usually shown visually (as well as orally), the subjects never actually talk 'on-camera'. There were a number of reasons for this. One was that the subject matter I was dealing with was very personal, so minimizing production paraphernalia of the interview was crucial. Interviews which are shot usually require a crew with a

⁵ The documentary was dealing with the level of community, where individuals worked towards a common goal (thus the title, 'us dreaming').

camera on a tripod, a microphone and a fair degree of artifice, (that may include lights and props). Such situations often make the subjects more self-conscious, less comfortable and therefore, less articulate. In order to gain as much rich material as possible, I needed to remove everything but the essentials: the subject, the questions and a microphone.

My initial idea was to give the subjects as much time as they needed. I wanted to provide them with the list of questions and a portable mini-disk recorder over a period of a few days. This would enable them to ponder the questions and record answers when ideas came to them. However, this proved to be impractical as they believed it to demand more time on them than a conventional interview. In the end, interviews were conducted in single sessions with just a microphone--except with Toby, in which instance I had a sound recordist along for the event.

One of the problems with this technique was that it forewent the emotional connection that camera-interviews possess. It was then the responsibility of the visual footage taken with the subjects to carry that sense of connection and emotional weight. One way of dealing with this was to use close-ups to gain intimacy. I also brought them into the television studio to represent the reflexivity of the documentary and also to gain greater control over their composure.⁶ This scene was most certainly the most contrived in the production, with each subject feeling most uncomfortable.⁷ But under these conditions, I wanted to capture the subjects at their most relaxed. I was looking for a relaxed and neutral composure. However, I had explained that I was

⁶ Although all three studio shoots were going to be included, reducing the screen back to a single frame forced changes.

⁷ . These were perhaps the most difficult scenes to shoot. All three (they were shot separately) were not used to the studio, indeed finding the whole idea of being shot in such a way completely hilarious. Most of the shoot was spent trying to relax the subjects in to sitting still.

intending to use the footage in the studio for the 'lowest point' section. Therefore, they were aware of the sombre context in which the shoot related to.

The photography oscillates between the intimate and the distant. It was essential that these people were always seen in the context in which they lived. I wanted to reflect that these people were far from 'above' the community, but in fact deeply immersed within it. These were community-minded people. I saw their connection to the community being precisely what gave them the impetus for what they did. While they recognised problems in their community, it was because they were able to sympathise with it that they wanted to support it. Therefore, it was essential that the subjects' involvement in their communities was conveyed.

This was achieved through the environmental backdrops that were shown with the subjects - either directly (the actual places where the subjects were seen) or indirectly (through cut-aways). John was depicted primarily in his work setting. There was a number of reasons for this. First the P&O cold stores and the industrial port is setting that is integral to his day-to-day life, as he spends about fifty-hours there each week. As I was unable to gain access to his volunteer work with the AIDS Council, the industrial (and industrious!) backdrop of his work provided an oblique symbol of the 'raw reality' of his work in needle-exchange and palliative care. While John's work in the cold stores is physically exhausting, his work with the Council is emotionally exhausting. This theme was carried through to the intimate moments. When John tells his story of his school experience, tight close-ups in the cold stores are followed by wide scenes of the port that reflects the alienation he felt. I sought to exploit this comparison wherever possible.

With Toby, his community was the urban-bohemian life of Fremantle. Therefore, Fremantle, with its cafes, art galleries and street-life, was his backdrop. While John and Cassie were shown in homes, Whittington was not. In true bohemian style, he has no fixed address. His most permanent home is his studio in the Australian Artists Council (as shown when Toby applies his make-up for the 'Happy Harry' character). The first we see of Toby is the scene in the Fremantle Markets. The Markets offers an appropriate symbol for his life of experiences and diversity, with its great colours and textures. Toby spends a great deal of his time in and around the markets (even performing close-by). Another important locale was that of his primary school. Indeed the independent alternative primary school of Lance Holt was the place where we met and has made a lasting impression on the way we both see the world. The philosophy of Lance Holt Primary was very liberal and encouraged a great deal of engagement with the community. All these backdrops provided a context for understanding his way of life.

Cassie is a very down to earth person who spends much of her time in natural environments. I wanted to represent her connection with the earth. This did not prove to be too much of a problem. The garden scene was something that I had in mind but in fact happened quite spontaneously. The footage of Cassie using a stick as a digging tool was very not contrived but reflected her organic sensibility.

There has been some debate as to the consistency of Cassie's character. Because of some confusion over the representation of Cassie, I believe it is important to explain my intentions. The plan was to explain her activism through the way in which she lived her life. Therefore, I saw no inconsistency between the scenes with Cassie in the garden and the scene on the yacht. In

hindsight, I recognise the ambiguity of this juxtaposition. The problem lies in the representation of class. This is an issue that I paid little attention to in the production. While for John and Toby, it was never made problematic,⁸

Cassie was depicted in many scenes which gave an impression of little wealth, but then in a final scene the context was one suggesting 'money'.⁹ I understood that her involvement with the yacht club was not as a member, but was being taught by a friend. She explained her interest in yachting by saying that she enjoyed it and, as yachts are wind-powered, they pose little threat to the environment. The scene on the yacht also provided an appropriate reflection of her thoughts on her role in trying to change society. The image of the 'little-guy' in a boat dwarfed by the backdrop of the city skyline seemed very fitting. As this juxtaposition challenges the notion of what an activist *should* be, I believe it serves the objectives of *Noble Bohemia* very well. However, these ideas were not made explicit to the audience.

The photography could be described as either shoots with and shoots without the subjects present. More than twenty hours of footage was taken for this production. This was due largely to the changing drafts and concepts. Also, a large portion of the photography was taken prior to the interviews. Such an extravagant amount was only possible because of the low-cost of the digital tape technology. I was allowed an unusually large degree of freedom in the production because of the minimalist approach of the shoots. A day of production would usually consist of just my camera operator and myself.¹⁰ As my camera operator had commitments with a number of other projects, I

⁸ That is, their level of wealth was never contradicted.

⁹ It is worth noting that Cassie comes from the middle-class suburb of Mount Lawley. She now shares a rented house in another middle-class suburb, Subiaco. However, she receives a student allowance from the government, and plans to remain on welfare until she can support herself through her vocation as a masuer.

¹⁰ Roughly 90% was taken without the subjects being present.

would often take out a camera on my own. This allowed me to travel easily to locations when the weather suited.

sound...

The soundscape of the documentary consisted of the oral stories, ambient noise and music. Creating the narrative through the notion of reflection, the interviews were edited and laid down as a voice-over. This gave the impression that as a viewer, we are eavesdropping on their most inner-thoughts. After recording the interviews, the next stage of the production was to edit them down to the required time of roughly four-and-a-half-minutes per subject. Utilising the editing facility of mini-disk technology, I was permitted a considerable degree of freedom.¹¹ With the questions providing the structure, I drew out the most relevant and interesting parts the interview and reworked them into the desired time frames. Responses were thus edited constructs rather than pure and complete answers. I was given the trust of the subjects (as friends) to remain true to their words, even if they were reworked. The entire documentary rested upon their words. Thus, the editing of the interviews was given considerable thought and attention. Once edited and assembled in order, I had the backbone of the documentary in which to flesh out.

Ambient sounds were used to provide a fuller sense of place and add atmosphere. They were taken from a combination of diegetic¹² and non-diegetic sounds that were recorded separately with just a microphone (recorded on a portable mini-disk recorder). To maintain a high level of quality, diegetic sound

¹¹ Mini-disks allow edits to made up to eighty-fifth of a second. This enabled me to quite literally to construct every last sentence.

¹² that is, the natural sounds that are recorded with the visuals shown.

was used rarely used.¹³ Because of the reflective form of storytelling, I was allowed significant flexibility in my use of sounds.

As I am not a musician, I have relied on friends to supply this most vital component of the production. With no budget, I was completely reliant on the generosity of Daniel Lambert. Daniel knew Toby from our primary school and was very sympathetic to the project. We discussed the mood that I had in mind and played around with some ideas in his makeshift studio. Given the audio track of the questions and only a few minutes of unedited vision, Daniel composed the musical score. The low-key yet off-beat sounds compliment the character of *Noble Bohemia* very well.

¹³ Even the twenty-eight parrot was 'dubbed' with a sound-effects CD.

interviews

John: On the day of the interview, John came over to my home for lunch. It was a relaxed affair, as we caught up on our news. I propped up my microphone on the dining table so that I wouldn't have to hold it up to his face. He stayed for three and a half hours, but little over an hour was actually recorded.

Toby: He was given the questions some weeks before the interview but was quite adamant that he wanted to cover them "fresh", unrehearsed and spontaneous. Toby was interviewed in less than an hour, with fifteen minutes of shooting following the interview.

Cassie: I met with Cassie on a beautiful Summer's day at King's Park. The first half-hour was spent explaining the objectives of the film, and an hour was spent going over the four questions.

post-production

democracy and ownership...

It was always important that this project was a group effort and not simply 'my project' which people helped me out on. This went for my small crew, but especially for the three subjects involved who lent not merely their time but their character and identity. This was needed for two reasons. One was that this was a 'no-budget' production that meant that we all worked on a voluntary basis. The second followed on from this. This was that if the subjects felt as much apart of the documentary as I did, they would give more of themselves.

This was realised through a number of methods. As the final product was so dependent on the subjects, their involvement was considered from the outset. Throughout the production there was a balancing act between giving the subjects control over the process and development, and minimising their time demands. In post-production this was reduced to approval over the editing of their stories. Once the stories were edited down to the time limit, each subject gave their approval. This was crucial as the editing of their stories required significant changes to the way in which the questions were answered. I believe this restructuring and tightening was justified as I maintained the spirit of their story. After hearing the edited version, they made no objection and so was incorporated directly onto the documentary.

This soundtrack of their story composed the backbone of the documentary. Therefore, all that was added (images, additional sound and transitions) had to speak to those oral stories. Far from limiting the images to the subject matter discussed, their story allowed me the freedom to raise other matters. Some images (such as Cassie's anecdote about the trucks carrying the jarrah logs) were directly related to what was spoken. Others were abstracted excursions - like the people going into the 'Fremantle Workers' Social Club' when Toby talks about the need for happiness to effect change.¹⁴ It is through such juxtapositions that their thoughts resonate in the world.

¹⁴ This metaphor of people going into this social club carries a number of possible interpretations. The people that I witnessed entering the Club appeared to lack any spark of happiness. Some irony can be seen in the fact that it is a 'social club' - a community institution, the very space that I wish to promote. The symbol of the reflective sliding doors, with people coming in and out was considered like the idea of 'revolving doors' that is often associated with the prison system. Like many of our revolving door institutions, I see few who walk out in a better state than they walked in.

self-assessment

Noble Bohemia was told through stories of self-reflection to explore the embodied philosophy of these three activists. It is thus only fitting that I here reflect on how effective this technique was in fulfilling my objectives.

restatement of aims

I embarked on making this documentary for the purpose of making a particular impact on the audience. This impact was designed to inspire the audience to make a greater commitment to issues that they care about. The personal form of the documentary was chosen because of its ability to engage the audience with their story. As explained earlier, I limited the length of the documentary to fifteen-minutes to make a sharp impact within the confines of my time and resources, and reduce the demands on the subjects. This allowed just five-minutes for each subject. The documentary had to be stripped to its bare essentials. I wanted their stories to impact emotionally and intellectually. The stories needed to say enough to convince the audience without being too self-important or outstay their welcome.

Where I think the documentary was successful was the inclusion of John Tawhai, the interview process, the photography and the light-touch in which the subject matter was dealt with.

The first subject that I chose, John, was the one that I felt most confident about. I knew he had a story to tell, that he knew how to tell it and that he could appeal to a wide audience. John has had an amazing upbringing and lived quite an extraordinary life. His size and presence aptly epitomises his life, making him easy to translate on screen. He has a gregarious personality and is a beautiful story-teller, speaking openly from the heart.

The process of recording the interviews was conducted in a relaxed way, largely on the subjects' terms. By limiting the interviews to only four questions, the subjects were given a great deal of time and space to follow their train-of-thought.

As most of the photography was shot without the subjects (see above), I was allowed a great deal of time to capture what I wanted. In the end, we were able to capture some very nice footage gave a context to their stories.

My intention was to demonstrate a particular way of being that was essentially seductive. I certainly did not want to clobber my audience with 'the *one* True way'. Wanting to avoid the righteous dichotomy of 'good-guys' and 'bad-guys', I wanted to keep the stories personal and draw in the audience wherever possible. Therefore, anything that may have been construed as directives for the audience (orally or visually) were cut. Music and subtle editing were used to keep the atmosphere light and maintain a positive energy.

Much of the feedback that I have had has focused on Cassie. She was the last subject I selected and the most stereotypical 'green activist' amongst the three (if such a thing ever existed). She could be classified as a 'feral' or 'hippie', having a deep ecological philosophy, similar to that of 'deep-ecology'. Every film is inherently political, but here I did not address the issue of 'class'.

John for instance, is a supervisor in a blue-collar industry with a Protestant work ethic. He came from a working-class family, lives in a modest suburban house and helps to support his extended family. Despite his income, I consider him working class. This is reflected in the use of the port as a backdrop for his story.

As a street-performer, Toby best personifies the bohemian class among the three. He relies entirely on his craft to support himself. While he now lives

simply, he comes from a very middle-class family. His income is not large but has been successful - as demonstrated by people flying him overseas to perform. Therefore, he lives in that ambiguous class of artists whose income belies their success and respect.

Cassie comes from a middle-class home but while studying, relies on student-assistance to support her. Her activism has been done largely through grass-roots community organisations, and so much of the documentary depicts Cassie in these very earthy situations (such as her habit of not wearing shoes, digging in the garden with a stick and making baskets).¹⁵ These scenes portrayed a particular image of Cassie, one not too dissimilar to the stereotype of the 'hippie' living 'close to nature'. However, this image was not questioned until the very final scene. This is the scene that has sparked the most controversy. While I would encourage some level of ambiguity and contention, in hindsight, I see that leaving the scene in the yacht until the end does challenge that the audience's perception of her class. It is most important that the audience maintain a level of rapport with the subjects. Thus this confusion of Cassie's class has had the unfortunate effect of undermining this rapport. However, I stand by this scene for its challenge to the image of the 'poor activist'.

There are other issues concerning the making of the documentary. First, there was the restricted access to sites of action. The original plan was to capture these people in action. For John, I had hoped to include a scene involving the AIDS Council's (WA) needle-exchange van. These hopes were dashed when the Council raised concerns over the possibility of compromising their clients' access to the van (by threatening their privacy and anonymity).

¹⁵ All but the shot of Cassie walking over dry leaves were spontaneous in that I played no part in controlling her actions.

There was also the problem of John having such little time for the documentary. Cassie was another whom I found difficult to capture in action. Her social activism is sporadic. While there is no questioning her commitment to living by her words, direct action effecting the community was not always obvious.

This brings me to another issue, that of conveying the message through the visual medium. When I was forced to drop the idea of using three-frames simultaneously, the words and text of the documentary were burdened with an even greater responsibility to convey meaning. As the message raised ontological questions, I relied greatly on the spoken and written word. Toby's activism is to be found between his critical understanding of the world and the expression of this in his performance art. His scathing views on society extends to the protest movement itself. Toby challenges us to search for alternative means of change. Like with all the subjects, I was forced to delete many of the more interesting issues because the length of the video simply could not give them justice. Unfortunately, there must be limits to complexity on screen.

The sheer time taken to complete the production was long and at times quite inefficient. The script underwent many drafts and changes, leading much time and energy being poorly used. Delays were made for numerous reasons. One being the long process of securing all three subjects for the production, and another being issues of scheduling (standard juggling act between subjects, crew and equipment availability). However, these early shoots were valuable in exploring the subject terrain without the subjects and consolidating a suitable style for the documentary.

One of the weakness of *Noble Bohemia* was that it failed to substantiate the extent to which their actions impacted on the wider community. There is somewhat of a schism between what the documentary proclaims and what it

actually demonstrates. The opening quote from Margit Spira espouses my philosophical perspective, the point I was trying to make. Each subject describes their engagement with society and how this has brought them a unique sense of satisfaction. However, all are wary of exaggerating their impact on the wider community. Their conclusions are thus drawn back to the personal, believing that all they knew for sure was that they could affect their own lives. Thus their impact on the wider world is not direct, explicit or obvious. But other means and processes of effecting change are similarly oblique and diffuse. Also, the way in which we embody the changes that we seek in the world.

This threatens to reduce *Noble Bohemia* to the stories of three quiet individuals who share noble dreams for a better society. I believe much has to do with their humble nature. It is precisely this humility that allows the audience to be drawn into their story. Another reason is that they are still exploring and considering their life path. I would be lying if I said that they were completely happy people. However, they all seek a satisfaction and fulfilment that is in tune with their deepest passionate beliefs in community. Toby indeed speaks openly about depression. However, he shows the therapeutic affect his work has on him. Toby's art and performance as vehicle to express his beliefs plays an important role in supporting his well-being.

However, many readings are made possible. I hope that *Noble Bohemia* opens up debate on activism, both as an approach to life and as an approach to real social change.

appendix (b)

'Noble Bohemia' script

Black screen.

JOHN TAWHAI
P&O SUPERVISOR,
AIDS COUNCIL VOLUNTEER:
PALLIATIVE CARE & NEEDLE-EXCHANGE

Black screen.

SFX: An air conditioning system is faintly heard in the background.

The Fremantle port at dawn.

SFX: espresso coming to the boil. John, breathing hard.

JOHN
I take forever to get out of bed sometimes.

John practicing Tae-Bo. Medium close-up of John performing aerobic moves.

JOHN
It might take me five- to ten-minutes to throw my legs over the
bed and think,"

Feet jogging on the spot doing Tae-Bo (tight shot)

JOHN
'do I want to do this?', then I think 'no,' but I've got to get up,

Time-lapse of Port.

SFX: coffee comes to the boil.

JOHN
I've got to work. So, I go and do my Tae-Bo -

Close-up of John doing punching exercises for Tae-Bo.
Sun rises through clouds.

JOHN
I love doing Tae-Bo 'cos that just energises me in the morning;
and the thoughts - those negative thoughts of the day before,
all that crap that you sometimes think about -"

A grin of pleasure washes over John's face as he finishes his Tae-Bo. Container
ship in post-dawn sunlight.

JOHN
they just *pfss* just go away and I think, 'OK, its time to face another day.'

Black screen.

CASSIE NEWNES
ENVIRONMENTAL VOLUNTEER,

ACROBAT, MASSEUR

Black screen.

Tilt down from BOUGAINVILLEA to Cassie and friends having breakfast.
SFX: birds fade in and are heard intermittently throughout scene., chickens in background.

CASSIE

Sometimes I so much wish that I could say, 'I give up, I'm out of here,'

Medium close-up of Cassie laughing.

CASSIE

I'm going to go and get a nine-to-five job and have a house and all that kind of stuff,'"

Brendan juggles fruit (unsuccessfully).

CASSIE

Sometimes I really wish I could. But this is life.. this is living, might as well make the most of it."

(Close on Cassie)

I really try to bring myself back into to doing things that are nourishing for my soul and make the most of this opportunity to be alive.

Black screen

TOBY WHITTINGTON
- STREET PERFORMER -

Toby walks up to the juice shop.

SFX: The low hum of the crowd can be heard in the background.

TOBY

If I've got stuff on during the day that I've got to get straight into then I'll eat and run and do coffee and stuff on the go."

Pan ACROSS fruit and vegetable section of the Markets to Toby buying a juice.

TOBY

If I don't have that much on,

Follow Toby through the Markets, past the rainbow gumboots, candles and the fruit and vegetable section.

TOBY

I might spend a couple hours sitting in a cafe reading or writing or whatever.

Opening titles
Black screen

“IT IS NOT THE THEORETIC QUESTION
IF LIFE HAS ANY PURPOSE.
IT IS THE PRACTICAL QUESTION
WHICH PURPOSE DO WE PUT INTO LIFE.”

MARGIT SPIRA, 1954, IN A LETTER TO HER SON, HENRY

[Fade in]

A SHOOTING ACTIVISTS'! PRODUCTION

[Fade out]

[Fade in]

NOBLE BOHEMIA

[Fade out]

Pan of Fremantle Port. (from Port Authority building.)

SFX: the low hum of machinery (air conditioning, washing machine, etc.) can be heard in the background.

JOHN

When I was in third-form in high-school, one of the subjects we were studying in social studies was the history of the Maori people;

John at P&O Coldstores. Dolly along aisle

JOHN

and in a textbook there was this section in the textbook that was written in.. in Maori.”

Plastic wrapping machine (wide shot).

JOHN

The teacher asked me if I would-

Plastic wrapping machine (close-up).

JOHN

‘get up and read this to the class.’

Track a crate being taken down by a fork-lift .

JOHN

Of course I couldn't because no one had ever taught me to read Maori."

John comes into view on fork-lift.

JOHN

I felt this shame about not being able to.. - to read what I knew was my own language.

Dolly along aisle continues.

JOHN

And I said, 'No Miss,'. And she kept on at me and I exploded, I literally exploded,

John takes inventory.

JOHN

I got up and said, 'I can't read this fucking thing because I don't know how to read this fucking thing!', and I stormed out.

John stands by the roller door as a truck pulls in.

JOHN

That shocked me, tears were coming down my face. And it was at that point when I knew I had to do something. My teacher came out and I knew then that I had to go out and find out who I was.

John loads boxes onto a truck.

JOHN

My auntie and my uncle showed me what being a Maori was all about and who I was. The teachings that my auntie and uncle gave me as I was growing up.. they became the bedrock to... for the person I am now.

Fremantle from above, ending on the Round House.

TOBY

I don't think I was making a difference.

Toby walking across High Street, with the Round House in background.
(text)

"...HUMAN BEINGS HAVE A LIKE, A LOVE FOR NATURE, YOU KNOW? YOU CAN'T REALLY ESCAPE IT."

TOBY

It was at the beginning of this year, and I'd marched from the Esplanade-

Italians converse in the High Street Mall.

TOBY
up to Parliament House in Perth, yeah? for the forest.

Toby walks past the front of the Fremantle Town Hall.

TOBY
And that's a march which I've done heaps, you know?

Toby looking at a photograph in the Moore's Building.

TOBY
So I'm sitting up there in this- this sort of place I call home
which is the front step of Parliament House-

Toby walks out of the Moore's Building (long shot, then wide shot).

TOBY
and I'm looking at it and its quite nice, its quite Roman in its
style with the big square pillars and high ceiling and stuff.

" WASN'T HAPPY TRYING TO SAVE THE FOREST
WHILE I WAS SMOKING SOMEONE ELSE'S,"

SFX: muffled crowd fades in.

TOBY
And I'm looking at the few- four-, five-hundred people that
have all marched up the hill"

"I JUST THINK THAT, UMM TO MAKE CHANGE
WE'VE GOTTA MAKE CHANGE IN US FIRST, YOU KNOW,
AND MAKE OUR LIVES HAPPY."

TOBY
and I'm thinking that really- if that sort of protest worked - if
sleeping at Parliament House worked,

Toby sitting in the threshold at Lance Holt Primary School.

TOBY
- if parading from the Esplanade to Parliament House with
banners and all that sorta stuff- if that really worked,

Lance Holt (wide shot) with Toby in the threshold.

TOBY
there was no reason that I should-a been sitting there, you
know?"

Cassie, Dave and Brendan gardening.

CASSIE

When I was umm eighteen, and I was really lost in the world -
I'd spent my teenage years drinking and smoking and-to
amazing excess,

Cassie digs soil with a stick (medium shot).

SFX: drummin and Didgereedoos fade in.

CASSIE

it was like, *phwah* !, it was stupid - *[laughs]* , crazy *[laughs]*. -
And just basically abusing myself,

Children play in the spring.

CASSIE

totally lost in this world because that was what society was
teaching me,

Musicians play by a spring.

CASSIE

that was how you deal with any sense of dislocation or
isolation or pain, you go and drink and smoke as a teenager.

Eucalypts sway in the wind.

CASSIE

And then I went to my first blockade-forest blockade, and oh
my god was I touched! *[laughs]*. Both by the beautiful people
who were there -

Musicians continue playing.

CASSIE

they were there because they loved the earth and they want to
protect the earth.

Cassie waving a basket.

CASSIE

And it was the first time I had been in a community--a
community where they were all coming from their hearts and
supporting each other and supporting the planet and living in
the best way that they know how."

Toby in his studio (preparing Happy Harry) (wide shot).

TOBY

The lowest I've really felt and the really most depressed I've
felt,

Tilt down posters on his studio wall.

TOBY
is when I was getting stoned all day, everyday.

" MOST PEOPLE ARE PRETTY AWARE OF WHAT'S GOING ON...
BUT THERE'S SO FUCKIN' HEAVY AND SO DAUNTING
AND NONE OF US CAN SEE HOW ANY OF US CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE
-
ITS MUCH EASIER TO GRAB A CAN OF COKE... GO TO MACDONALD'S,
THAN TO ACTUALLY CONFRONT YOURSELF ABOUT HOW YOU CAN
CHANGE."

TOBY
Like, you get a lot of great ideas, you know when you're
stoned, and its like, like you go 'yeah,

Toby applies make-up (close-up).

TOBY
'we've seen the answer to how we're going to save the world',
or whatever."

Blue sculpture.

TOBY
But that's all it is: a great idea and in reality, you, you never
actually create anything.

Pan around Toby's studio.

TOBY
One of the biggest things that probably does get me up in the
morning is the idea of creating during the day.

Happy Harry on the Cappuccino strip.

TOBY
When I haven't got things to create, I don't really wanna get out
of bed."

Cassie walking through bush (in Kings Park.)
SFX: birds.

CASSIE
And another time that was an incredibly low point

Cassie in the TV studio (wide shot).
SFX: A chainsaw can be heard in the distance.

CASSIE
for me was when I was down in the forest involved in activism

Clouds race over the top of eucalypts.

CASSIE
against the destruction of old growth forests and seeing these.. -
oh my god, it makes me cry just talking about it...

Cassie looks up through the trees.

CASSIE
... seeing these incredible ancient forests being totally-
mercilessly destroyed and

Close-up of Cassie swivelling slowly on the office chair of the studio.

CASSIE
trucks leaving this forest with trunks of trees so big that they
could only fit one on the back of these huge immense trucks

Cassie's bare feet walking towards the camera over dry leaves.

CASSIE
and then leaving behind everything else in the forest just
devastated.

In the TV studio, Cassie looking down (close-up).

CASSIE
And then just being a mess on the forest floor so that a few
people could have woodchips to make paper with...

Cassie blows out the wishing flower.

CASSIE
just seems crazy,

Long shot of a distant lighthouse.
SFX: air conditioning unit and very faint industrial atmosphere.

JOHN
There was one point where.. I was.. put on this palliative care
team, *ah* to look after this guy and...

Dark cloud loom over the sea.

JOHN
my friend couldn't talk much, he-he was not a very outspoken
person;

John in the TV studio (wide shot).
SFX: industrial sounds draw nearer.

JOHN

he-he hardly said anything to the volunteers that came and so after going there a couple of times I thought to myself, 'what use am I here?' - it doesn't seem to be.. - you know?

waves crashing on the rocks of the groin.

JOHN
All I'm doing is maybe doing a few dishes you know,
vacuuming up, you know?

medium close-up of John in studio.

JOHN
ah.. You-you need to be able to have that communication.. but
communication happens in more ways than words. And I
found out that he was a Trekker fan like me.

Waves crash on the rocks of the groin.

JOHN
And so I used to take up videos to his place and I'd go up there
and do a bit of cleaning up

Fremantle Port.

JOHN
and then we'd sit down and watch an old 'Star Trek' movie...

Clouds move across the moon.

JOHN
and I turned around to him and I said, (*cough*) 'You know,
when we die we go into the stars - you know that don't you?'

Industrial waterfront of Cockburn.

JOHN
and he looked at me and he smiled and he nodded his head.
Well it got to the point where he couldn't look after himself
very well...

Still frame looking at the hallway windows of a hospital of the 1950's.

JOHN
I got him into my car with all his clothing for the next few days,
and I said,

Very slow backward dolly of the hallway at the Artists' Foundation

JOHN
'I'll take you down to Respite House now this afternoon'. And
of course, the nurse said, "John, you've done really well -
you've done really well to get him to come down there!'

Extreme close-up of John in studio.

JOHN

And I took him down to Respite House and he died three days later in Respite House and not at home.

High angle view of the Side-Skirting of the respite hallway.

JOHN

And I knew.. I knew how much he wanted to be at home with his.. (excuse me)..”

Backwards dolly around a corner.

JOHN

And that really really.. really cut my heart, and I was the one who took him down to Respite House and he never got back home where he wanted to die.

John in the studio, spinning slowly in his chair.

JOHN

And I thought then that why.. why did I do that but that was a very, very low point *ah* , where I then questioned whether this is really what I wanted to do.

Ocean at sunset.

Fade to black

Tilt down from ‘Carillion Arcade’, to The Copper Man kissing a girl’s hand.

SFX: electro-beat music fades in.

TOBY

I- I really love it when you make someone's day and you can see that you've changed their day, you know?

Tilt up of the Copper Man.

TOBY

And that for me makes it worth it. Like for instance, about a year and a half ago I was performing up in Fremantle - it was Coexistence Day in Fremantle, and then, this whole mob of black fellas come up, and they're really dark,

“JOHN HOWARD,
HE PROBABLY WATCHES NATURE DOCOS -
HE PROBABLY ENJOYS THEM!...”

TOBY

obviously from up in the Northern Territory - Arnhem Land or somewhere - and these kids- there's about twenty of them or so, they're all crowding round me,”

Toby holding boy’s hand (increased speed).

TOBY
they're all just lookin' and speaking their own tongue and then looking at me and pointing and laughing their heads off. They give us two bucks."

Copper Man's audience.

TOBY
I bend down, shake her hand and kiss her hand, yeah? She's laughing her head-off and their all laughing and all standing there smiling at me."

Close-up of the Copper Man.

TOBY
Their there for about five-minutes, just smiling at me; and it was great.

Man in suit comes up to the Copper Man, young woman is lured in and promptly lent on.

TOBY
It was like wow! that's what its about. They left, I packed up and went home and made about five bucks in the day, but I felt fucking wicked!

John at a barbecue talking to friends and family.
SFX: air conditioning unit, ambient sounds from the barbecue.

JOHN
You mightn't see any hope for anybody for a long-long time, all they want to do is just get enough money to find their next fit.

John listening to a story at the barbecue.

JOHN
But you might get that one person who will come along and they'll come up and say,

John by the pool with family members.

JOHN
'I've been clean for so many months and I'm feeling really good', - and you think,

Parot flies off a powerline.

JOHN

Yes! Yes, it is worth it,
Family members talking, with young girl playing with her mother.

JOHN
just that one person' and it happens,

Close-up of Sandy laughing.

JOHN
and they'll still drop by the van and have a talk to you and let
you know how their life is getting on.

John telling story behind barbeque.

JOHN
You can see it, that programs like this do work, that there is
hope for people out there.

Long shot of the River with Perth skyline.
SFX : birds, music, gentle breeze, light tides lapping on the shore.

CASSIE
The only way I know how to make effective change is in my
own life.

Wide shot of the Perth skyline through the masts of the yacht club.

CASSIE
And I know I can adjust my own life to minimise the impact on
the earth.

Cassie fixing ropes on the yacht.

CASSIE
But I would love to be able to help-be a part of helping the
world to minimise the global impact on the earth.

The yacht out at on the river (long shot).

CASSIE
When you look at the whole scale of things, its so important to
just come back to community isn't it?

Cassie leans against the mast.

CASSIE
Like sometimes I get overwhelmed, I go, 'Oh my god!, there's
this going on here and this going on there and how can I
possibly be a part of the whole *shmangi?*'

Close-up of Cassie out on yacht.

CASSIE

but it all starts with community - and that's what I have to keep coming back to so I can hold on to my dreams.

Cassie blows on a wishing flower.

CASSIE

And there is a lot of people doing a lot of good things, a lot of fantastic things being done.

Closing credits.

morning ritual

i. *John Tawhai*

"I take forever to get out of bed sometimes. It might take me five- to ten-minutes to throw my legs over the bed and think, 'do I want to do this?', then I think 'no,' but I've got to get up, I've go to work. So, I go and do my Tae-Bo - I love doing Tae-Bo 'cos that just energises me in the morning; and the thoughts - those negative thoughts of the day before, all that crap that you sometimes think about: they just *pfss* just go away and I think, 'OK, its time to face another day'".

ii. *Cassie Newnes*

"Sometimes I so much wish that I could say, 'I give up, I'm out of here, I'm going to go and get a nine-to-five job and have a house and all that kind of stuff,'. Sometimes I really wish I could. But this is life.. this is living, might as well make the most of it. I really try to bring myself back into to doing things that are nourishing for my soul and make the most of this opportunity to be alive. There's just this inner drive to do so much, and I'm in this world that feels that it doesn't really want to do too much, it just wants to continue living in this consumer, easy - supposedly easy kind lifestyle. But its definitely this connection to the land that drives and sustains me."

iii. *Toby Whittington*

"If I've got stuff on during the day that I've got to get straight into then I'll eat and run and do coffee and stuff on the go. If I don't have that much on, I might spend a couple hours sitting in a cafe reading or writing or whatever."

turning point

i. *John Tawhai*

"When I was in third-form in high school, one of the subjects we were studying in social studies was the history of the Maori people; and in a textbook there was this section in the textbook that was written in.. in Maori. The teacher asked me if I would get up and read this to the class. Of course I couldn't because no one had ever taught me to read Maori. I felt this shame about not being able to.. to read what I knew was my own language. And I said, 'No Miss,'. And she kept on at me and I exploded, I literally exploded, I got up and said, 'I can't read this Fucking thing because I don't know how to read this fucking thing!', and I stormed out. That shocked me, tears were coming down my face. And it was at that point when I

knew I had to do something. My teacher came out and I knew then that I had to go out and find out who I was. My auntie and my uncle showed me what being a Maori was all about and who I was. The teachings that my auntie and uncle gave me as I was growing up.. they became the bedrock to... for the person I am now."

ii. *Cassie Newnes*

"When I was umm eighteen, and I was really lost in the world - I'd spent my teenage years drinking and smoking and-to amazing excess, it was like, *phwah* !, it was stupid - (laughs), crazy (laughs). - And just basically abusing myself, totally lost in this world because that was what society was teaching me, that was how you deal with any sense of dislocation or isolation or pain, you go and drink and smoke as a teenager. And then I went to my first blockade-forest blockade, and oh my god was I touched! (laughs). Both by the beautiful people who were there - they were there because they loved the earth and they want to protect the earth. And it was the first time I had been in a community - a community where they were all coming from their hearts and supporting each other and supporting the planet and living in the best way that they know how."

iii. *Toby Whittington*

"I don't think I was making a difference. It was at the beginning of this year, and I'd marched from the Esplanade up to Parliament House in Perth, yeah? for the forest. And that's a march which I've done heaps, you know? So I'm sitting up there in this- this sort of place I call home which is the front step of Parliament House and I'm looking at it and its quite nice, its quite Roman in its style with the big square pillars and high ceiling and stuff. And I'm looking at the few- four-, five-hundred people that have all marched up the hill and I'm thinking that really- if that sort of protest worked- if sleeping at Parliament House worked- if parading from the Esplanade to Parliament House with banners and all that sorta stuff- if that really worked, there was no reason that I shoulda been sitting there, you know?"

"I just think that, *umm* to make change we've gotta make change in us first, you know? and make our lives happy."

low point

I. *John Tawhai*

"There was one point where.. I was.. put on this palliative care team, ah to look after this guy and... My friend couldn't talk much, he-he was not a very outspoken person: he-he hardly said anything to the volunteers that came and so after going there a couple of times I thought to myself, 'what use am I here?' - it doesn't seem to be.. - you know? All I'm doing is maybe doing a few dishes you know, vacuuming up, you know? ah.. You-you need to be able to have that communication.. but communication happens in more ways than words. And I found out that he was a Trekker fan like me. And so I used to take up videos to his place and I'd go up there and do a bit of cleaning up and then we'd sit down and watch an old 'Star Trek' movie... and I turned around to him and I said, (*cough*) "You know, when we die we go into the stars - you know that don't you?" and he looked at me and he smiled and he nodded his head. Well it got to the point where he couldn't look after himself very well... I got him into my car with all his clothing for the next few days, and I said, 'I'll take you down to Respite House now this afternoon. And of course, the nurse said, 'John, you've done really well - you've done really well to get him to come down there!'. And I took him down to respite House and he died three days later in Respite House and not at home. And I knew.. I knew how much he wanted to be at home with his.. (excuse me).. And that really really.. really cut my heart, and I was the one who took him down to Respite House and he never got back home where he wanted to die. And I thought then that why.. why did I do that but that was a very very low point ah, where I then questioned whether this is really what I wanted to do."

ii. *Cassie Newnes*

"Another time that was an incredibly low point for me was when I was down in the forest involved in activism against the destruction of old growth forests and seeing these.. - oh my god, it makes me cry just talking about it - ... seeing these incredible ancient forests being totally-mercilessly destroyed and trucks leaving this forest with trunks of trees so big that they could only fit one on the back of these huge immense trucks and then leaving behind everything else in the forest just devastated. And then just being a mess on the forest floor so that a few people could have woodchips to make paper with."

iii. *Toby Whittington*

"The lowest I've really felt and the really most depressed I've felt, is when I was getting stoned all day, everyday. Like, you get a lot of great ideas, you know when you're stoned, and its like, like you go 'yeah, we've seen the answer to how we're

going to save the world', or whatever. But that's all it is: a great idea and in reality, you, you never actually create anything.

"One of the biggest things that probably does get me up in the morning is the idea of creating during the day. When I haven't got things to create, I don't really wanna get out of bed."

satisfaction

i. John Tawhai

"You mightn't see any hope for anybody for a long-long time, all they want to do is just get enough money to find their next fit. But you might get that one person who will come along and they'll come up and say, "I've been clean for so many months and I'm feeling really good", - and you think, "Yes, Yes it is worth it, just that one person and it happens, and they'll still drop by the van and have a talk to you and let you know how their life is getting on. You can see it, that programs like this do work, that there is hope for people out there.

ii. Toby Whittington

"I- I really love it when you make someone's day and you can see that you've changed their day, you know? And that for me makes it worth it. Like for instance, about a year and a half ago I was performing up in Fremantle - it was Coexistence Day in Fremantle, and then, this whole mob of black fellas come up, and they're really dark, obviously from up in the Northern Territory - Arnhem Land or somewhere - and these kids- there's about twenty of them or so, they're all crowding round me, they're all just lookin' and speaking their own tongue and then looking at me and pointing and laughing their heads off. They give us two bucks. I bend down, shake her hand and kiss her hand, yeah? She's laughing her head-off and their all laughing and all standing there smiling at me. Their there for about five-minutes, just smiling at me; and it was great. It was like wow! that's what its about. They left, I packed up and went home and made about five bucks in the day, but I felt fucking wicked!"

iii. Cassie Newnes

"The only way I know how to make effective change is in my own life. And I know I can adjust my own life to minimise the impact on the earth. But I would love to be able to help-be a part of helping the world to minimise the global impact on the earth. When you look at the whole scale of things, its so important to just come back to community isn't it? Like sometimes I get overwhelmed, I go, "Oh my god!, there's this going on here and this going on there and how can I possibly

be a part of the whole *shangani*, but it all starts with community - and that's what I have to keep coming back to so I can hold on to my dreams. And there is a lot of people doing a lot of good things, a lot of fantastic things being done."

appendix (d)

questions

primary questions

- Q1) What is your morning ritual? What gets you out of bed in the morning?/What usually drives your thoughts in the morning - your fears and loves?
- Q2) Has there been a significant place, event or turning point that has influenced your life as an activist?
(2.a) describe it and, if possible, give an anecdote that illustrates how you felt about it.
(2.b) how do you think it has impacted on your present life?
- Q3) Describe a time when you were at your lowest, most hopeless.
(3.a) What happened?
(3.b) How did you feel at that point?
- Q4) How did you get through it: what drives, motivates and sustains you in the face of adversity and disappointment?

secondary questions

These questions are to be conveyed visually. They will aid me in portraying a more accurate picture of who you are and put your responses to the above questions into context. However, you do not have to answer all of these, but please do if you have anything to say about them.

- 1). Describe your feelings and associations (particularly images or sounds) that you have with:
 - a) your community (however you define it);
 - b) your activism;
 - c) the people you work with (clients);
 - d) the people you work for (AIDS Council).
 - e) your paid-work;

- 2). What negative aspects of life inspire your reaction of activism? (eg. poverty, commercialisation, mass consumerism and excess, destruction of wilderness, loss of community, maltreatment of animals, et cetera et cetera.) What is your particular passion gets your blood boiling?

- 3). Describe some of the elements of places and communities that appeal to you. What would you like to see in a 'happy community'? (what could be observed from a good community?)

- 4). What does your 'activism' involve (what kind of action, activity or practice do you engage with in your activism)?

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