



The Naked War

by Stacey Kalish
 a writer based in New York
 Contact: staceykcalish@hotmail.com

Thirty jigging, goose-bumped, bare bottoms sprint over a canvas of snow. Flailing arms and erect nipples create a chaotic flurry of female flesh, coupled by excited shrieks. Suddenly, the bodies begin to drop onto the icy floor and lay prone to the soundtrack of murmurs, yelps and laughs. The figures link up vertically, horizontally, diagonally as bodies begin to resemble letters. A shivering, petite blonde screams over the bedlam with a frisson of panic "We need an O." The turmoil settles and a picture emerges on the frozen ground in Central Park, New York and the need for an 'O' is made perfectly apparent. Thirty quivering, bodies spell out the words, "NO BUSH" as a women's chorus ironically shout his father's infamous saying, "Read my lips."

The illegal protest occurred some six weeks before the current President Bush launched war in Iraq and readily found space in major newspapers across the United States and internationally. A group of everyday American women, varying in age, class and size had found a novel way to protest the war with an increasingly popular attention-grabbing tool – their naked bodies.

Since November 2002, when the [first publicized nude demonstrations against America's war](#) in Iraq occurred in West Marin, California, an estimated 50,000 people have participated in, at least, 91 naked protests around the world. But who are these brave, bare mavericks? Nudists, exhibitionists, zealous left-wing activists or 60's 'free love' hippie revivalists and why are they disrobing for dissent? And more to the point, why are they attracting so much attention from a society consistently inundated with sexual imagery?

[Wendy Tremayne](#), 35, from the East Village, New York works for a record label but prefers not to define herself by a job title. She was collecting dirty socks from friends and strangers in the street in an attempt to send them to President Bush accompanied by a note 'War Stinks,' – then she read about the West Marin demonstration. While she doesn't consider herself a "political person" or a "nudie" she organized the 'NO BUSH' protest driven by, what she described as a, "boiling over of self expression that was not popping out... it was bubbling over and I felt it deeply and I wanted to do something to release."

'Artists for Peace' www.artistsforpeace.ca is the organization that Conrad Schmidt, 34, founded in January this year, to protest consumerism and societal conformity by staging naked bicycle rides around his hometown of Vancouver. Unlike other naked protesters, Schmidt admits to a penchant for nudity but insists the protests have no sexual undertones. They are about the medium more than the message, he said. "It's more important for me to show people that they can break a social norm and

once they have done it, it's incredible self empowering to the individual." When not pedaling nude, Schmidt programs computers for a living.

And across the Atlantic in East Sussex, England, Mike Grenville, 53, a mobile messaging consultant and founder of a collaboration called "Bare Witness" thinks that naked protests are the best way to empower the powerless. "What do you do if you are disenfranchised by the system...What is the simplest way to send a message to the powers that be?" he asked rhetorically.

"It's about not being reasonable anymore" says, Suzanne Hart, 49, an author from West Marin County, California who is nearing completion on her book titled, 'Unreasonable Women Bearing Witness: Naked Vulnerability in The Face of Naked Aggression.' "Being reasonable is calling your congressman and standing on the street corner with a sign " but that doesn't get you on the front cover of a newspaper or a spot on the evening news. More than just delivering the message, the act of participating in a naked protest, "is about pushing past our limits and boundaries." A type of liberation that results from confronting the challenge of standing exposed, body and beliefs, for all the world to see. A freedom that ensues from the self-empowerment experienced in breaking away from conformity and as Conrad Schmidt says, the nudity is also a means of "reclaiming our bodies back from pornography". Well, things have come a long way since 1969 when seven female students at Grinnel College in conservative Iowa, took off their tops to protest the use of women's bodies as a commodity when a Playboy representative came to speak on his magazine's 'philosophy.'

Wendy Tremayne did not expect the overwhelming media reaction to '[NO BUSH](#)' as she amusingly recollects the in-pouring of calls from friends and family who had identified her out of the mass. She also did not expect the influx of support and hate emails that arrived from strangers. She rationalizes the impact of nude protestation as "you get a lot of bang for your buck being naked." The reasons appear a lot more complex than even the messages of protest themselves according to Howard J. Ruppel, Jr., Chancellor & Academic Dean at the Institute for Advanced Study of Human Sexuality www.iashs.edu in San Francisco, California. He explains how nudity is extremely contextual and attitudes towards the naked body reflect the degree of sexual repression as an individual and society.

Ruppel devised an exercise for his students to provoke discussion around issues of social context of nudity. He draws a line on the board representing an imaginary continuum of emotions ranging from highly uncomfortable on one end to erotic on the other. The students are given a range of social situations involving nudity like a doctor's office, a strip club, posing in an artist's studio and then asked to position themselves on the continuum based on their emotional reaction to the particular context. Once the students have made their choices and witnessed the varying placements of their peers, Ruppel leads a discussion about the social dimensions that affect how one feels and what motivated the student's response to the exercise. "We find that the social context in which nudity occurs often affects the reaction of seeing nudity". This experiment exemplifies the varying behavioral reactions to the naked demonstrations as viewers are confronted by nudity within a foreign social context. The contextual element of the naked protests is inherent and specific to the public's responses ranging from emulation to castigation. Conflicting reactions are exacerbated by the contextual anomaly as Mike Grenville explains, "One is used to seeing nudity in a film but not used to seeing people wander around naked and in a non-sexual manner."

Reactions are an indicator of individual conditioning and sexual development. Ruppel explains how we learn our attitudes towards sex from our parents or caretakers at an early age. A child that grows up in an environment where sexual education is discussed openly by an 'askable' parent (a psychological term defining a parent who is approachable and receptive to questions) has less chance of developing sexually repressed attitudes later on in life. A term in sexology used to capture the concept of sexual repression, as determined by Donn Byrne and William Fischer, is known as 'erotophobia'. While there are multiple variables contributing to an individual's attitude towards sexuality, Ruppel says, "Some people who are repulsed by situations where people disrobe as a protestation in a setting, might be a case of erotophobia." While not wanting to brand every detractor of naked protests a frigid prude in need of sex therapy, Ruppel suggests there is a possible element of sexual repression for those disgusted by these demonstrations of nudity.

Suzanne Hart concurs with this presence of sexual repression. She sees evidence of such phobias in the threatening hate mail sent to nude protesters that she read while researching her book. She believes the naked protests have triggered a lot of repressed inhibitions that are still prevalent in the United States and stem from the Victorian influence of social propriety and the current, fundamentally Christian, right-wing Government. Quips Schmidt, "Clothed people have all these strange insecurities and fears [about their bodies] so why are we the freaky ones."

And speaking of body hang ups, it seems baffling that women were more prominent in stripping for protest than men. While the naked protests were largely gender mixed, there were many that were all-female events. Since November, more than 200 women in California have defied the law and used their naked bodies to spell out anti-war slogans on three sites: a Marin beach, a ball field and dung-laden pasture. This was followed, in January and February of this year, with naked protests by fifteen women in Urbana, Illinois, another 15 in Helena, Montana and a further 750 naked females formed a heart shape around the words 'NO WAR' in Byron Bay, Australia.

So, why the larger number of breasts versus pecks? Tremayne said she specifically organized the 'NO BUSH' protest as 'a girl thing' because she believes that when females remove all their clothes they eliminate a barrier of safety that leaves them far more susceptible than men - "a vulnerability there" she said, "that maybe connects to people's compassion."

Hart sees the preponderance of women's nude protests in far more symbolic terms. "A man with a gun standing there faced with a nude women, completely naked and defenseless, spelling out peace was so much more than about peace." The female body, signifying the life-carrier and giver of birth, creates a sub text of naked vulnerability in the face of naked aggression and it is this powerful conduit for expression that flew in the face of the war mongers, she said.

Naked female protestors may not have stopped the war but they did manage to get their message heard, and at the same time, called into question some longstanding behavioral reactions, societal conditioning and sexual attitudes. And, while the illegal naked dissonance caught the eye of the media it didn't manage to attract much attention from the authorities, as Tremayne shrugs and says, "We didn't hear a damn thing from the White House." She does add, however, that two weeks after the 'NO BUSH' protest the Handschu agreement, a 1985 court order that regulates the surveillance of constitutionally protected activity, was overturned in New York and no longer protects activists from being surveilled without their knowledge. But legalities aren't about to convince these protesters to cover up now.

The war may be technically over, but the 'nудie' activists are just getting started. 'Artists for Peace' have a naked protest against wearing fur on November 8th and Schmidt advises to check the website for upcoming naked bike rides. Tremayne says she has a list of 250 people who have contacted her and are "waiting for me to give them a reason to take off their clothes." She has her sights on the upcoming Republican convention as an appropriate venue for a collective strip tease. And if planning fails and President Bush should miss this bare breasted showing then he still has his scheduled tour of England in November where 'Bare Witness' founder, Mike Grenville, drops mention of a special British welcome from him and his white bottomed friends.

by Stacey Kalish

November 2003

http://www.barewitness.org/naked_war_article.html

© Copyright, Bare Witness.org, 2003