

Change the World

Have Fun, be Creative

Norman Nawrocki

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Imagine if more people believed in the power and the magic of collective creativity, what a crazy wonderful new anarchist world we could build. Under capitalism, any form of creativity is usually seen as an individual pursuit, the domain of the rich, the elite and artistes. It's something to be commodified, re-packaged, and sold back to others as pop culture to be consumed. People accept that they must subscribe to watch movies or hear music to get their cultural fix. For the average person, the high costs of attending live theatre or dance performances are usually prohibitive.

Who would ever think that ordinary people, with little experience, can tap into and harness their own creativity and imaginations and use their own powers of expression with others to create non-commercial art with a political purpose? A piece of work that can also be used as an organizing tool? And, do this in a collective, supportive, non-judgmental atmosphere with others who share the same ache for radical social change? When people are given the opportunity and the goal to dance, draw, paint, sing, shout, act and strategize their way into the minds and hearts of an unexpected public, it can happen. And, be enjoyable.

Using my decades of experience as a multi-disciplinary anarchist artist, I teach Creative Resistance (CR): how to use the arts, music, dance, theatre, poetry, visual art, digital art, etc., to address critical issues and work towards creating a saner world. And, how to use this approach for more effective community organizing and radical social change. The setting can be universities and colleges, but also in the community with housing rights or climate crisis activists, labor organizers, LGBTQ2S groups, and anarchists. The participants are mostly people with no arts practice background, no performing experience, who never imagined how the arts could be useful in their work.

At one dedicated CR housing rights workshop hosted by a group of anarchists and sympathizers in Kelowna recently a small town in British Columbia where tourism is a major economic activity, participants were asked to name and summarize the local problems and possible solutions in short answers. The list blossomed into material for slogans, posters and sketches. Their examples:



Zombie Pipeline street theatre walk in Vancouver BC in 2023 to protest Enbridge's Westcoast Connector Gas Transmission project.

“Lack of tenant rights: need to advocate!” “Real estate as a capital investment: Housing as a Human Right!” “Empty vacation homes: Fill them with squatters!” “Short term rentals to tourists: Ban Air B’n’Bs!” “Stigma harms unhoused and housing insecure people: Education!”

Each work group then chose one theme, brainstormed a creative physical, theatrical depiction of it, and dramatized both problem and solution. The result: punchy, easy to understand, improvised anarchist guerrilla theatre sketches that could be performed anywhere in public. They also added improvised live musical accompaniment, sung chants, and drew simple, but powerful artwork to hold up behind and alongside the performers. During a two hour workshop, they accomplished all this in less than thirty minutes with a ten minute rehearsal. The rest of the time was dedicated to learning the principles and theory of CR and best practices elsewhere.

Their next step was to return to their community groups to share the new skills, including working with the local unhoused population, some of who had expressed interest in using theatre to advance their demands for affordable housing.

In St. John’s, Newfoundland a few years ago, a group of students wanted to mount a campaign to address the problem of date rape drugs in bars. As a result of a CR workshop, they devised a series of improv sketches about actual bar experiences which they would later refine, film, and, with the cooperation of local taverns, screen on the bar’s TVs as public service announcements. One workshop participant wrote, “I came away full of ideas, firing on all cylinders! So much of what you had to say was very practical and extremely helpful. Some of your words replay in my brain every day: e.g. “you can’t do this kind of creative work alone, sitting in front of a computer screen.”

In Regina, Saskatchewan, young trade unionists, a few years ago, planned a public support campaign for baristas trying to organize outlets of a local coffee shop chain. The CR crew brainstormed and enacted not only short, agitprop theatre sketches to be performed on the street outside and inside the shops, but also, printed coffee cup holders with printed messages on them to support the workers. They even re-wrote the lyrics to hit pop songs to encourage the public to pressure management to recognize the union and the rights of their employees to better working conditions. According to one of the activists, “Your workshop made me realize that although our passion for social justice is a serious struggle that we fight for every day, our vision seems more attainable when we focus on building a culture of resistance through creativity, collective action and fun!”

Earlier this year, I worked online with members of a wanting to remain anonymous environmental group fighting the Royal Bank of Canada financing oil pipelines. The participants devised a whole strategy of CR actions again using hit and run improv theatre to be performed in bank lobbies, during bank shareholder’s meetings, and on the street outside these meetings. The actions included everything from spilling black paint to represent oil on bank property to dressing up as shareholders, crashing meetings, and taking over the microphones demanding accountability, or dressing up as ATMs inviting the public to put money in, then someone spills oil/black paint. A participant wrote afterwards “Your workshop got us all fired up raring to plan a new campaign based on Creative Resistance actions.”

As a card-carrying, black flag waving anarchist, all participants in my CR workshops are encouraged to follow anarchist principles—no leaders, no stars. Everyone has an equal role to play. Consensus is key. Contesting authority, dominant narratives and beliefs on the agenda. We work collectively, adopt affinity group approaches and hone how to practice self-reliance and group self-management. We never forget the importance of play, of having the freedom to explore one’s own playful nature, to let loose and experience the joy of self-expression. Because struggle does not always have to be boring.

After a high-energy CR workshop or class, participants feel empowered. Aware that they now have access to a new organizing and activist tool. One to help think, imagine, strategize and mount more effective visible campaigns and actions.

They discover maybe never acknowledged creative skills that reveal the hidden clown, singer, or actor in themselves and hear the power of their own voices in a dynamic and different kind of group formation singing acting or chanting together. They experience the thrill of collectively creating something possibly wild and artistic to address social issues and imagine potential solutions.

And, realize that they accomplished this within a dedicated short time frame. It’s a new alternative to the usually staid activism that neglects creative practices. Another approach to help re-boot imaginations and inspire, inform and empower oneself and others also. A means to engage people in new fun ways. Provoke questions. Reach a

broader public that tunes out traditional protests. Communicate ideas more effectively. And attract more media attention. Participants always affirm that they leave the workshops energized ready to hit the streets.

This freedom to create and express oneself within a political framework is something anarchists have long identified with. From critiques of the State and the bourgeois social order to visions of a new world, anarchist artists and sympathizers have always used puppetry, poetry, song and theatre to spread the Idea.

Lively anarchist cabarets thrived across Europe in the late 19th century. Dozens of anarchist theatre groups existed worldwide in the early 20th century. Carnival-like anarchist protests from the 1970s onward always had an artistic component. The annual Montreal International Anarchist Theatre Festival, where the public can view the best of contemporary anarchist theatre, continues the tradition as do the cabarets of the Anarchist Writers Bloc, also in Montreal.

Anarchist artists are especially aware of the links between creative self-expression, the power of the arts to stir people's minds and working towards Social Revolution.

All power to the imagination.

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