EMERGENCE
Metta Center for Nonviolence

In Focus
Art of Nonviolence

DISAPPEARED
AND
DISAPPEARING
EMERGENCE magazine is a monthly e-magazine by the Metta Center dedicated to sharing stories about nonviolence movements worldwide.

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OUR MISSION

Our mission is to promote the transition to a nonviolent future by making the logic, history, and yet-unexplored potential of nonviolence more accessible to activists and agents of cultural change (which ultimately includes all of us). We focus on root causes (sometimes called “upstream” causes) to help people in any walk of life discover their innate capacity for nonviolence and use it more strategically for long-term transformation of themselves and the world. We work to challenge and replace the prevailing worldview with a much higher image of humanity informed by nonviolence and its implications for the meaning of life and value of the person.

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Dear Beloved Community,

In this issue of Emergence Magazine we turn our attention from movements worldwide in order to explore the power of art within those movements. But is not art itself a kind of movement? In a culture that looks to commodities over creations, to meaninglessness instead of purpose, art is a midwife to the spirit itself! The exploration of beauty, power, personal creation; the engagement of art with society--to tell a story, serve a purpose, even create purpose and meaning in some instances, not to mention the immense healing, cathartic salves--art is a revolutionary tool embodying the revolution itself as it proceeds.

Art at its best is the expression of the creative energy at the heart of the universe--a voice breaking the silence of uniformity, a cool breeze, a chord, an inspiring verse that can lead one to realize that we are not separate from one another.

Nonviolence is perhaps one of the greatest arts we have been endowed with as human beings. It is an art to learn how to use, gracefully, nonviolent skill-sets to be courageous under immense pressure from within telling us to flee from or lash out, instead of address our most urgent conflicts. Nonviolence is an art because it requires the same dedication of a great artist, dancer or musician--an effort to harmonize body, mind and speech toward serving a higher purpose than the facile pursuit of self-interest (often against our best interests!).

image@  
Stephanie Van Hook
And most importantly, nonviolence is an art because just like any artistic endeavor, it is the expression of the creative forces of life that underlie our existence and evolution as human beings. Like any energy, it can be diverted and frustrated, leading to expressions that can either alienate us from one another or facilitate our growing closer and more tightly bonded as a species and with the rest of life.

Turning hatred into love, transforming fear into fearlessness; there is perhaps nothing more beautiful than this gentle artistry of the heart. By our very being human, this art is ours for perfecting.

What an opportunity we have before us.

In heart unity,

Stephanie

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Art and Nonviolence

Some fifteen years ago Bob Dylan was invited to give a concert at — of all places — West Point. The troops-to-be loved the show. Naturally, some reporters asked a commanding officer, didn’t they sense a certain cognitive dissonance (Dylan had not tried to hide his strong anti-war stand). The officer said, “Oh, we were just listening to some nice music.”

I was reminded how the future Augustine, not yet a saint, went to hear his mentor-to-be Ambrose in Rome “to pick up some tips on public speaking,” only to find himself overwhelmed by Ambrose’s passionate exposition of the Christian faith. Hopefully Dylan had some such effect on those music-loving soldiers, for a rhythmic message can be more powerful than simple argument.

A striking example of something else that art can do unfolded in a violence-plagued school recently in New England. The place had driven many a principal to despair when one younger person tried a different and counter-intuitive approach (if you think our present conditioning is really intuitive): the first thing he did on stepping into the desperate job was to fire the entire security staff, and with the money he saved set up an art program. It was the end of the violence in that school. By having the courage to give up on the “security” of arms and turn it in for some art he ended up with both.

Art has played an important, but sometimes ambiguous role throughout the history of social change. Art can, when it works, touch deep chords. It can awaken passions more dynamically than the levels of communication that appeal to reason only. Songs have brought down dictators and roused populations (usually in reverse order). But art has also been misused to make fun of persons rather than actions, and that’s a setback for the deeper capacities of nonviolence.

I have long been pessimistic about the use of symbols in nonviolent action. I think we overuse them, inadvertently sending a message that we can’t do anything concrete. I noticed years back — and checked my hunch with Arun Gandhi, the Mahatma’s grandson — that Gandhi virtually never did anything that was just symbolic. He marched, not to demonstrate his commitment (or even just to rouse followers) but to pick up real, i.e. concrete, physical salt as an act of civil disobedience, which worked. His people spun khaddar (homespun cotton) that was not just, as Nehru said, “the livery of our freedom;” it put food and clothing on starving millions and reminded them that they had power to take back their culture and their economy from the colonial regime.
Art can provide, as it did at West Point, a safe space for the kind of criticism that would lead to outrage and repression if it were aired in other forms. The griots of various West African societies, for example, who function as advisors to kings and chiefs, sometimes enjoy extraordinary license to criticize their rulers in ways that would otherwise get them killed. I suppose that with the weakening of our commitment to truth and muddling of genres today — ‘infotainment,’ ‘infomercial,’ etc. — we have something a bit similar: one could watch Oliver Stone’s JFK and tell oneself that it’s “fiction,” which one could not do with, for example, James Douglass’s superbly researched JFK and the Unthinkable. But it’s not clear that the film, impressive as it was, led to much change in attitude among the unconvinced.

The Filipino singer and activist Renato M. Reyes, Jr. recently said, “Music is …an outlet where we can express ourselves and help amplify the message to a broader audience.” We can. But we can also feel that once we’ve ‘expressed ourselves’ we’ve done our job, the nonviolent battle’s won. This can be dangerous.

I believe we should think of art in nonviolence as we do symbolism in general. Art is strong when it reflects reality, not when it replaces reality. It can work powerfully to galvanize and inspire people to action, not so well when they think that expressing themselves is the action. Within those guidelines art has been and will hopefully continue to have a crucial role in nonviolent action. 

image@Stephanie Van Hook
If as an average American we begin to free associate, putting together the words ‘nonviolence’ and ‘music’ we might think of someone like Pete Seeger — someone who had the power to get audiences of all ages singing along to songs of uplift and inclusion like, “We Shall Overcome,” but who could also pen a biting antiwar song, “Waist Deep In The Big Muddy,” censored by CBS in 1967. We might think of Marvin Gaye, whose mainstream appeal allowed him to ask “What’s Going On?” and have almost everyone say collectively, “Right on!” We might think of Joan Baez and Bob Dylan, of Mahalia Jackson and Odetta — anyone, really, who became associated with the US Civil Rights movement. But according to these traditional definitions, in the United States we tend to think a protest singer has to either carry an acoustic guitar and a harmonica holder, or themselves represent a group marginalized by society.

My personal introduction to the intersection of music and nonviolence, however, goes back to the hardcore punk subculture of the 1980s. Though by no means the only songs of that genre dealing with social and political issues, a few that reached my tape player were compositions like “Bottled Violence” by Minor Threat, and “Holiday In Cambodia” by Dead Kennedys. A bit later on I was exposed to tunes written in reaction to the first Gulf War, such as “Face The Flag” by 411, and “Facet Squared” by Fugazi, both touching upon the absurdities and dangers of patriotism and blind adherence to ideology. Though the lyrical content was perhaps familiar to fans of earlier protest songs and opponents of earlier wars, traditional folk music this was not.

So I’ve always been quick to admit that loud, guitar-based music typically accompanied by slam-dancing and stage-diving is not the first thing people think of when they contemplate the ways in which nonviolence and music can be combined. Yet therein lies the beauty of the art form. Virtually any style of music can be used to convey social and political messages, just the way virtually any visual medium can be used — theater, film, poetry, graffiti, even dance. One need look no further than Benjamin Britten’s “War Requiem” or the Philip Glass opera “Satyagraha” to see how traditional European music can be molded in this direction, or if you prefer jazz, Max Roach’s “Freedom Now Suite” and Les McCann’s “Compared To What” are both equally powerful.
lokashakti
THREE STORIES
लोकशाक्ति
When well done, music can affect us in a great many ways: gutturally, emotionally, cerebrally. It can even encourage very real lifestyle changes. My own experience as a teenager is instructive: within the tradition of hardcore music there are a handful of songs that discuss issues surrounding vegetarianism and animal rights. Two early compositions that affected me deeply were “Cats And Dogs” by Gorilla Biscuits and “No More” by Youth Of Today, both New York-based bands from the late 1980s. I made the decision at age 15 to become a vegetarian, and those two songs helped keep the ideas in my head as I was making up my mind. This was a concrete lifestyle change, and it happened to me personally, so that’s how I’ve always measured what kind of an impact a musician is capable of creating.

And in a nutshell, this is how I came to protest music, and protest art in general. Over the years I’ve realized that the style of music is actually not important; that there exists a socially conscious strain within virtually every musical genre, in many places even more so than in the US. From Nigerian afrobeats, to Jamaican reggae music; from Brazilian tropicalia, Irish rebel songs, and Tunisian hip hop, to calypso, nueva canción, and in some instances even flamenco, oftentimes political content is even the norm. In fact, as I’ve gotten older I’ve grown to really appreciate and seek out this diversity in politically and socially conscious songs, which is largely the idea behind the blog ‘Protest Music.’

The second thing I realized was that the fact of me personally not belonging to any marginalized group didn’t necessarily have to be seen as stifling. Like anyone, I should be writing songs about what’s real to me. Without appropriating anyone else’s culture or struggle, or in any way insinuating that a group is incapable of advocating for themselves, I realized that as a citizen of the United States and a citizen of the world I was entitled – some might even go so far as to say, required – to question the way my own government’s policies and actions impact the lives of billions of people every day. What could be more real to me than writing songs against the American empire, or against the economic and political systems in place around the world, set up often at the behest of a so-called democratically elected US government, that make the implementation of empire so ruthlessly effective? The potential subject matter to choose from within this domain is wide and painfully diverse.
So I began to turn my longstanding fascination with music that carries a message towards my own social and political ends in the form of the band Lokashakti. The songs are anti-imperialist to the core, and exhibit conscious influences from a diverse array of genres. Upon recording and planning to release our first EP, “Three Stories,” it seemed to make sense to create a record label at the same time. The band was already part of a nonprofit organization, also called Lokashakti, and having a record label would give us the option of promoting other people’s socially conscious music as well. Since there didn’t appear to be much out there expressly aiming to put out this kind of music, creating a record label was an easy decision to make.

Lokashakti Records grew out of a desire to create music with a revolutionary message that could also have a chance at finding a large audience. There have been innumerable politically trenchant critiques set to music in recent years, and yet most protest songs are never able to reach the mainstream. It takes a great amount of skill as a lyricist to insert political messages that are neither so obvious that people feel like they’re being beaten over the head, nor so vague that no one’s really sure what the song’s about. The trick while composing protest music is to find that middle ground, and our record label is designed very specifically to promote artists who are able to achieve that goal, all while crafting the highest quality music.

We’ve only just started our journey at Lokashakti Records, but we have high hopes for the future. Although the record industry today is a vastly different place than it was even just 20 years ago, we’re confident that we can make a positive impact promoting talented, socially aware musicians from around the world. And even though as an organization we have nowhere near the support necessary to be able to promote anyone yet the way we’d like to, we’ve become part of a truly amazing community of activists and musicians engaged in some of the most promising efforts you could imagine at that intersection of music and nonviolence. Please stay in touch with us as we grow throughout the years.

Will Travers is the executive director of Lokashakti.org
How can art be effectively used as a form of political statement to promote nonviolence? Give some examples from your personal work or others work where we see art playing an important role in shaping contemporary events.

I think there is a narrative in the heart of every piece of art. I think like that because I am a storyteller but storytelling is very crucial in a politically charged situation where human rights are denied and violated with impunity. Art, because of its public nature, brings the perpetrators of human rights violations to a public trial by exposing the reality to the public. On the other hand, when art travels, it invites sympathy. In fact, stories are the only way one can raise awareness about the graveness of a situation – reporting, photography, fiction, poetry, are all ways of telling stories about people. All kinds of human rights intervention take place after stories are circulated, that helps in forming public opinion. Of course, who is telling and what kind of stories is being circulated is important. We need a balance of stories, and we need storytellers from the grassroots. But this is how art can be used to form a consensus, awareness.

My novel is set against a series of extra-judicial killings allegedly committed by the Indian government during the late 90s in the state of Assam to curb an armed dissent. This episode is known as the secret killings of Assam. Numerous investigations have been conducted to nab the culprits, but the relatives of the victims who were killed are yet to receive justice. There are many versions and theories about the series of murders. I tried to represent this situation of chaos in my novel by telling the story in a non-linear way because I wanted to create a textual equivalent of the atmosphere of fear and suppression that prevailed during that period and I thought the non-linear way would be the most suitable. This atmosphere, this chaos, is represented in the broken sequence of the novel. That’s why the central story of the novel is buried within many other stories because the novel emerges from a political context where stories are suppressed, where people know what is the truth and yet don’t know if it is really the truth at all.
As an artist how do you respond to violence around you? You have written about a violent and bloody chapter of Assam, tell us more about the experience of dealing with such difficult topics.

Like everybody else, my response is shock when I encounter violence but when it comes to representing it through art, certain questions emerge: how much violence should I represent in my work? When I was writing my novel, I was filled with a lot of anger when I read about the widespread human rights violations in Assam by Indian security forces as well as armed militants but it was the perennial resistance of the common people in this part of India that appealed to me the most and I thought, I should honor their struggle, their prolonged resistance, their struggle to survive amid unchecked atrocities. It is because of this, I kept the violent acts in the storyline on the backstage and focused on the aftermath – its psychological impact, how people negotiated it, how they tried to deny it or face it. In this way, I was able to put the story of survival of the common people in Assam on the center-stage and relegate the violence to the peripheries.

Do you think artists often use books to speak out against violence? Can you give examples of some authors you admire and why they impress you?

I don’t think artists “often” use books to make a political statement but the act of writing books can be a political statement in certain situations. I think, writing realist fiction, that tells the truth about a people in a situation—where the official version dominates and tries to whitewash the truth about that people—that work by the writer becomes a political act. I am interested in the different ways in which human rights and storytelling work together and that was one of the things I kept in mind while writing my novel. I guess, that makes my work political?

The list is long but I admire the work of Nadine Gordimer, Toni Morrison, William Faulkner, Ashapurna Debi and Indira Goswami. All these authors not only taught me the various ways in which a story can be told, but also how to use art to create dialogue, resist and subvert official narratives and explore the eternal conflicts of the human heart – the mainstay of good fiction.

What role can authors play in dealing with violent history vs. violence in contemporary politics?

I don’t think there is any prescribed role for authors. I don’t think authors should play this or that role. As long as we are telling honest, unflinching stories about human beings, we are doing the job. I use the word “unflinching” very carefully because many authors wouldn’t want to write about violence because it probably disturbs them, because it might turn out to be polemical. I think authors should go to these uncomfortable places. It is important. How can you write about flowers and grasses and blue skies, when your country is bleeding, when people are getting arrested for non-violent protests against government atrocities?

Sometimes writings, sometimes art can ignite violence…what are your thoughts on this?

If it is written with the aim to ignite violence, it is not art. Also, the world is full of many foolish people who read something and get offended without probing deep into the matter – we should put them in jail and make them read books. In India, nowadays, fundamentalists get offended even without reading books and resort to violent acts and censorship. The author can’t be held responsible for a wrong interpretation of his work.

Do you think it is a moral responsibility of artists to react to violence and injustice that they witness in their communities?

I don’t believe in terms like moral. What is immoral for one person, is moral for another. I think it is impossible not to respond to violence around you because it confuses you, scares you. I think it is natural for writers and artists to respond to violence. There is no question of a moral requirement here.
The market was teeming with people. Among the well-dressed crowd, Mridul looked odd in his dhoti and shawl. He wasn’t wearing a shirt. He was barefoot. Among the people buying vegetables, oil, and meat from the shops, he looked out of place. With his tonsured head, he looked like a statue, a symbol of sacrifice, a Buddhist monk who had relinquished the pleasures of earthly life.

We had reached a large laburnum tree that stood beside the village road and just on the edge of the road there was an electric pole. I noticed that Mridul stepped out of the road like a meandering stream of water when he reached near the electric pole, to avoid treading on the portion just below and around it. I was behind him and he asked me not to step on the portion of the road that was just under the electric pole. I followed his instructions, wondering why.

‘I don’t think you should know the reason. You won’t be able to digest it.’

I was irritated. ‘Is this some kind of a joke? I have digested Oholya-jethai’s words; I would be able to digest anything now. Tell me,’ I said.

Mridul looked at me, as if he was preparing to tell me something serious and didn’t approve of my flippant manner. Without saying anything, he started to walk away; I followed him, asking more questions. He went to a shop where some of his friends were hanging out, chewing betel nuts. He introduced me to them. One of them was called Brikodar, whom he was particularly close to.
‘Pabloo wants to know the story of the electric pole,’ Mridul told him, with a touch of mockery in his voice. Brikodar laughed. He was taller than Mridul and plump. He looked like someone who wouldn’t weave mysteries the way Mridul loved to. By telling me half stories, by asking me not to walk on a certain portion of the road without explaining why. Mridul laughed, too, at my confused state. I didn’t like it. I didn’t like it when his friends told me that I would have nightmares if I heard the story and laughed. I didn’t like it when they asked me if I would be able to digest it. I felt annoyed because I couldn’t tell them I would jolly well be able to, if I could digest whatever Oholya-jethai had been saying all day. I was humiliated because their laughter reminded me that I was younger than them and they had access to worlds I didn’t. Worlds that Mridul wouldn’t usually think twice before introducing me to.

But now those worlds were suddenly hidden away from me. I was suddenly reminded that I was four years younger than Mridul. I told Mridul politely that I wanted to go home. He was surprised, but didn’t protest. He walked with me, said this and that, but I didn’t respond. When we reached the electric pole, I saw him avoiding the portion under the pole. I wanted to defy him and walk on it but I felt, whatever the reason was, it wasn’t funny; it was serious and he was scared of something, which is why he had walked like a meandering stream that had found an obstacle on its way and changed course. I realized that obstacle was invisible—the obstacle that made him avoid the portion of the ground just under the electric pole that stood just near the road, next to the laburnum tree that hadn’t yet bloomed into flakes of gold.

The sun had set by the time we reached home and I thought about how long it took for the sun to set. On our way, I wanted to ask him again what the fuss about the electric pole was all about, but I was too proud. I was offended that he had reminded me of the difference in our age by telling me I would be scared if I knew the real reason behind his peculiar behavior. I could smell ghee. I could smell chopped coriander and chopped green chillies. I could smell boiled potatoes and grilled brinjals. Smell of slivers of lime that must be stacked on banana leaves beside a mound of stork-white salt. I knew that smell all too well.

The smell of a mourning-house dinner, which we used to have when grandma had passed away in 1993. When I had met Mridul for the first time. When I wasn’t old enough to roam around the village alone, wasn’t old enough to go to Mayong alone, but Mridul, who, at that point, had disrupted my ideas about the animal kingdom was old enough to represent his family at a funeral. Dressed in a blue shirt and black trousers, he had looked so handsome that I had felt jealous, just as the way I was jealous of his dimples.

‘Mridul!’ Oholya-jethai’s booming voice invaded the room. I was sitting quietly on the bed, too proud to tell Mridul that I was offended. He must have been wondering what was wrong with me. So he didn’t know what to say or whether he should leave the room. He had started arranging his books on his study table.

Mridul turned towards her.

‘I need to tell you something. You will not mind, I hope. You will not pull a long face, I hope.’

He turned his back to her and started rearranging the already-arranged books. He didn’t look at her.

‘I don’t like this habit of yours.’

No one spoke. I looked at Mridul. Oholya-jethai folded her hands and stood there, staring at Mridul. I don’t know if he knew that she was staring at him. But her look was piercing and he must have felt it on his back, on his spine, on his neck, on his scalp, and so he had replied after a few uncomfortable moments of silence,

‘Which habit?’

‘You don’t need to roam around like this in the market. There is no need to hang out with those losers like Brikodar and I have always maintained you should stay away from their family. They might feed you some potion and you may end up falling in love with Brikodar’s sister. They have been eyeing the men of our family for years now. And what is this carrom fascination? Have you forgotten? Last year, you failed your exams because you spent hours playing carrom and strumming the guitar with them. It’s just four days since your father passed away and you are already doing things that would have made him unhappy. You don’t deserve to mourn him. Take off your mourning attire and change into jeans and T-shirt!’
She left in a huff.

Mridul leaned on the table. He didn’t look at me. How cruel her words were. Just to prove her point, she could say anything. Just to strip down her opponent of dignity, she said anything she could to hurt them. I was suddenly embarrassed for him because she had revealed secrets about him that I wasn’t supposed to know. He hadn’t told me he had flunked the previous year. Obviously he didn’t want me to know. Perhaps he wanted to hide it from me so that I continued to like him, respect him, and didn’t look down on him. And when he started crying not long after she had left the room, I didn’t quite notice it. I was still sitting on the bed and he had his back towards me. But his back was trembling and his head was bowed.

I went up to him, turned him around and looked at his face. He looked away, wiped his tears with the ends of his fingers. He didn’t want me to see that he was crying, that he had lost control. I wondered if he was crying because she had scolded him or whether he suddenly missed his father who wouldn’t have scolded him at all, who would have let him hang out with anyone he wanted to.

He wiped his tears and looked at my face. ‘You think I can’t answer back? You think I can’t say anything to her? I just want peace in this house. If you go out, it is the army’s fear. If you stay in, it is Oholya-jethai’s terror. For a while, the rebels have stopped coming to our house to demand food and shelter. And that was another kind of trauma. Where do I go? Where should I try to find some peace? If I play music, I have to consider what people will think because someone has just died in this house. If I play carrom, I am wasting time and not studying. How can I study? I still miss my father. It isn’t going to go away, Pabloo. It will never go away, just like the fear that makes me walk in a curve around the electric pole on that straight road, avoiding the portion of ground just under the electric pole. And not just me, many of my friends do that too because we had seen it first.’

He waited. His Adam’s apple moved up, down, up. He wiped the tears with the tips of his fingers. He said it was a nice day. Clear, blue skies. They could even hear the distant bleats of goats. They could see the kites flown by the young boys in the East Bengali village. It was a Sunday. So they had all woken up late but the younger ones had woken up first since they had planned to go fishing, get some crabs, get some pork from the Karbi village, prop up a hut in the middle of the empty fields and have dinner together that night. Eat forbidden food. The fields were bright yellow. The skies looked peaceful. Mridul had first gone to Brikodar’s house to tell him about the plan. From there, they had walked down to Binod’s house, and then to the market. No one was around.

The dogs were barking so loudly.

And since the dogs were barking in the village, dogs from the neighbouring villages had also gathered. But they were scared. They didn’t come into the marketplace, into the terrain of the Hatimura dogs. They were barking from a distance. And there were the crows. In a chorus, they had shattered the beautiful silence of that morning.

Mridul said that he had wondered, when he reached Brikodar’s house, why the crows and the dogs were making such a racket. Brikodar’s mother had said probably something was dead. A dog. A crow. A big, fat fox. Something. You know, if you kill a crow, the rest of the crows caw like that. For days, you wouldn’t be able to go anywhere near the dead bird because other crows would attack you with their sharp beaks and talons. When Mridul had gone to Binod’s house, Binod’s grandmother had said the same—why were the crows cawing like mad? Why were the dogs barking so much in the market? Probably something was dead. Something. A dog, a crow, a fox. A buffalo.

‘We didn’t care,’ Mridul continued. ‘It was far away—the shops, I mean, are far away from the houses. But we saw him first. I don’t remember who informed the police. But we saw the body first. Only in his red underwear. He didn’t have legs. They had been chopped off. He didn’t have fingers. They had been cut off too. His face was twisted—as if he was repulsed by a bad smell. It was such a horrific sight! Hanging from the electric pole like a dead, electrocuted bat. He was from a nearby village—the brother of an ULFA member.'
Why did they have to torture him like that? Moina-pehi, who had also seen the body, couldn’t eat for three days. She retched and retched. I couldn’t sleep for many days as well. Moina-pehi was among the women who cried the most, wondering aloud if the man had loved someone, wanted to marry someone, if he had a sister. His only crime was that he was the elder brother of an ULFA member and the ULFA member, his brother, had refused to surrender to the government and take the money that the government was dishing out so that he could return to society by setting up a business.

‘When someone climbed up the pole with a bamboo ladder and cut off the rope that had tied the corpse to the pole by its fingerless wrists, the body had fallen exactly on the portion of the road we avoid stepping on now. It’s been almost three months since this happened. More killings are taking place every day. But this was the most horrific spectacle. The East Bengali villagers who use the Pokoria River most of the time say that they have started finding body parts of unknown human beings at regular intervals, almost every fortnight or so. They are so scared that they haven’t even informed the police.

‘But on that ground where that corpse fell—we still can’t walk. Because we saw him first. I will never be able to walk on it. I feel his ghost will enter my soul. It is also a way of respecting the man, you know? His mother had cried so much. We hoped that she would faint and fade away and not have to go through the trauma, but she didn’t. His wife did, though. The night before, four masked men had taken him away from his house. He was sleeping after a meal. There were guests. His wife howled, saying how much he loved the turtle curry. When the corpse fell, the blood had splattered around the pole, Pabloo. So much blood.’

Aruni Kashyap is currently an Assistant Professor of English at Ashoka University, Sonepat, India

Illustrations by Divya Adusumilli based on the novel The House with a Thousand Stories
Art, Truth and Violence

Mir Suhail is a political cartoonist living in India-administered Kashmir, which has been claimed by both India and Pakistan since 1947.

Why do you call yourself a “political” cartoonist?

I have drawn for as long as I can remember. As a child my school books were full of the cartoons I drew so much so that the teachers at our school would complain to my mother. But she came from a family of the artists, my grandfather was a well-known rabbabist of the valley, so she understood my instincts and supported my scribbles. Growing up during the militancy, I would unconsciously create images of what was going on around me with a pinch of my sense of satire. Slowly, I felt a sense of responsibility towards what I created and was keen to share it with an audience so I began working with the newspapers based in the valley at the age of 17. I am 24 now and it has been quite a journey!

How did growing up in a conflict zone influence your work?

I think it would be wrong to say that my work is influenced by violence. My work exists as result of it and as a response to it. In fact, the work itself is a violence. I am a Kashmiri political cartoonist and central to my work is understanding relationships between power and people, rulers and subjects, a relationship founded on violence. The same could be true for those who engage in art, anywhere. But Kashmir is different not only because of the vast scale of violence but also the cover of impunity it operates under.
What role are you playing as a cartoonist in Kashmir’s struggle? Do you think you can influence the political mood?

I think art is about the truth. For Kashmiris, conceptions of freedom, the value of a human life, rights and dignity, things which we are taught about in school, have been perverted to a degree where they lose all meaning they were invested with and become oxymorons. This is foundation of my satirical work. My cartoons are a work of satire and I think satire, in a situation like ours, a situation in which typed words fail us, brings my audience closer to the truth. I don’t think I can influence the political mood, it is the other way round.
Art is non-violent. But you say the issue in Kashmir is about violence. What you think is the role of art in a violent political situation?

Art is not violent in a conventional sense but that does not mean it is devoid of violence in the larger discourse that surrounds it. Of course, this depends on the context the work of the artist occupies. I am a Kashmiri, my right to life has been suspended since the day I was born, I grew up quite literally in the shadow of the gun, in the world’s most militarized region. How is it possible for even a single stroke of my brush to be non-violent in any sense when it occupies such a violent space?

Are there any particular images or memories that had a deep impact on your work?

Yes, there are some images that I think will live in my mind forever. I think every Kashmir has an image of violence that stays with them forever. I was so little, I couldn’t understand how it happened but I remember when an entire locality in downtown Srinagar was set on fire. Even today, when I pass that place, it is as if the houses are still on fire. I can’t even look at that place anymore. Of course these images show in my artwork, I make it a point to do so. I borrow from memory, not only my own but from the memories my friends and my family have shared with me. A purpose of my cartoons is to give shape to painful memories from our past. But even our present is so difficult. How do we remember the present? I always think about this.
Sometimes art can lead to violence. For example the Danish cartoons about Prophet Mohammad led to a lot of violence. How do you respond to it?

The role of an artist is not to offer blanket commentaries on people of a particular religion or race, it is to understand complexities surrounding different people and respond with your work. At the same time, I wish people did not respond with violence.

As a Kashmiri, what do you think is the biggest challenge to peace in the region? How can the situation change?

Peace is loaded word. A noted Kashmiri poet once said that ‘they make a desolation and call it peace.’ We have seen in Afghanistan and Iraq that a manufactured peace does not last despite massive spending. Any conception of peace in Kashmir has to take into account the aspirations of the Kashmiri people themselves, something that has not happened until now. To me, doing this will be the biggest challenge.

As an artist, what impact do you hope your art can create? Is it to amuse people or make them politically aware?

The best response to my work would be that someone who sees it is provoked to think about what is happening in Kashmir, to take two minutes to learn about this place I call home. It’s not hard to do that, there is information everywhere but we need an emotional prick to provoke us. I hope my cartoon is that prick.
Mir Suhail, 24, works as a cartoonist for Kashmir Reader.
Resources for Exploration

This selection of resources can be used to further your own education in arts and activism, or can be used in the classroom with students.

Book: Beautiful Trouble: Toolbox for a Revolution
http://beautifultrouble.org/

Beautiful Trouble is “is a book, web toolbox and international network of artist-activist trainers whose mission is to make grassroots movements more creative and more effective.” The book and web site explore theories, principles, tactics, case studies and practitioners to educate and inspire creative, nonviolent action for social change. Tactics in the toolbox include creative action discussed including creative disruption, advanced leafleting, creative petition delivery and culture jamming.

Organization

Center for Artistic Activism http://artisticactivism.org/services/the-school-for-creative-activism/
The Center for Artistic Activism provides training and courses on using the arts for social change. They do not train people to be activists; rather, they work with professional activists to think about how they can bring creativity and beauty to their work and think of innovative ways to engage in their work.

Film:

Pete Seeger: The Power of Song http://video.pbs.org/video/2365166823/

“We’ve all got to be involved in putting this world together.” -Pete Seeger

Pete Seeger, one of America’s greatest folk musicians, passed away in January 2014 and this biographical film, which was first released in 2008, was recently rebroadcast on PBS in honor of his memory. The film chronicles his career and how Pete used music as a vehicle for social change, singing for human rights, peace and justice. The film portrays Seeger as a courageous man who stood up for his values and convictions, and did not give in to corporate or political demands, even while being blacklisted and censored. A lifelong activist, Pete’s mission to clean up the Hudson River was perhaps his ultimate svadeshi, using song and protest to educate and advocate for change in his local community. Ultimately, Pete’s music “surrounded hate and forced it to surrender,” as the sticker on his banjo said. He was a strong advocate of civic participation, and said, “Participation is going to save the human race.” This film provides an inspiring example of music as a form of activism, and how the dedication of one human being can make meaningful ripples of positive change across the world.
Theatre of the Oppressed, founded by activist and director Augusto Boal, is a movement inspired by Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed that uses interactive theatre as a tool for education, activism, and transformation. Boal believed that traditional theater was oppressive, as the spectators were passive participants, and that theatre used in a participatory way has the potential for liberation.

In Theatre of the Oppressed, spectators are turned into “spect-actors” and are invited and encouraged to actively participate in the theatrical event. The goal of Theatre of the Oppressed is the transformation of the actors, spect-actors, and ultimately, society, through dialogue and rediscovering our shared humanity.

Theatre of the Oppressed can take on many different forms. Forum Theatre is perhaps the most common method, in which performers act out a short scene of oppression in which the protagonist does not know how to act or respond. After the scene is acted out, the spect-actors are invited to take turns on the stage, assuming the role of one of the performers, exploring strategies and solutions to end the oppression. Theatre of the Oppressed can also be used to provide an opportunity and a “stage” for the spect-actors to act out the challenges and limitations that they encounter in their daily lives in their communities, and work towards finding solutions. For some examples on how forum theatre has been used by high school students to address issues like bullying, visit: http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-35-spring-2009/feature/flipping-script-bias-and-bullies

For a lesson plan on Theatre of the Oppressed, visit: http://www.tolerance.org/toolkit/circle-sculpture

Do you have additional favorite resources for activism and the arts? Please email them to education@mettacenter.org and we will add them to our list!

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