DYNAMIC COLLECTIVITY

PRACTICING ARTISTIC DIRECT ACTION AND ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY WITH THE PUNCHCLOCK PRINTING COLLECTIVE

BY RYAN HAYES

"Artists' collectives do not so much make the flowers as the soil." -Alan Moore[1]

I'm sitting with Rocky Dobey in his basement studio. The long-time street artist—who's been active in Toronto since the late 1970s—lists collective after collective he's worked with over the years: No Right Turn, Anti-Racist Action, Purple Institute, Symptom Hall, Blackbird, countless anarchist gatherings and bookfairs, and most recently, Punchclock. Speaking from decades of experience, Rocky observes, "The interesting thing about collectives is they don't last forever."

Nor are they static. The Punchclock Printing Collective is a perfect illustration of the dynamic nature of collectivity. I encountered Punchclock's screenprinted posters as a young activist in the mid-2000s, along with their parties that combined art and music to raise money for indigenous sovereignty movements. A few years later, when I built up enough confidence to see myself as an artist, Punchclock had faded from sight.

By connecting with former members of the group, I learned that Punchclock still exists—as a collective space with shared rent—but that its core membership transitioned from self-taught activist artists to recent art school graduates. The current Punchclock members don't have relationships with social movements, but maintain close ties with spheres of cultural production including visual artists, small press fairs, and indie musicians.

This article explores how Punchclock formed and evolved over time from the perspective of four key members: Shannon Muegge, Stefan Pilipa, Rocky Dobey, and Simone Schmidt. When this group of outsider artists came together, new collective relationships allowed them to transcend their singular capacities and make important contributions to social struggles.

OCAP medallion, Stefan Pilipa, 2010

Fight to Win, Stefan Pilipa, 2000

13½, Rocky Dobey, n.d.

Raise the Rates, Stefan Pilipa, 2005

Punchclock's eventual depoliticization is a good example of the challenges with sustaining prefigurative collectives. Punchclock had to contend with a hostile political climate, an atmosphere of aggressive gentrification, and an economic reality where ethical sourcing is incredibly difficult with limited funds. Along with these external pressures, Punchclock experienced a wave of personal transitions and health issues, which were intensified by the lack of a proactive process to renew and diversify Punchclock's membership, loose operating rules, and devaluing of cultural work by their social movement allies.

Because these challenges still exist, and because Punchclock and its membership were continually transformed by their engagement with these realities,

their example is worth examining in greater detail.

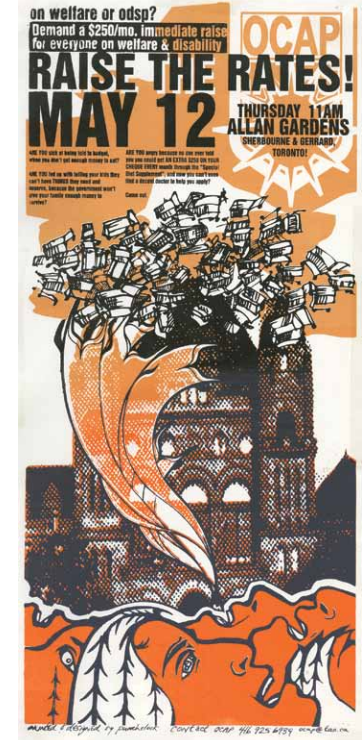## GNARL AND BUCKLE: CONFRONTING NEOLIBERALISM

Shannon Muegge and Stefan Pilipa started Punchclock in 2003 as a space to screenprint for activist groups and non-profits. Shannon and Stefan were friends who met through the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP), best known for organizing militant demonstrations and its model of direct action casework.

On June 15, 2000 OCAP organized a march to the provincial parliament that became known as the "Queen's Park Riot." In response to vicious neoliberal attacks on poor and working people, OCAP called for a shift from the passive "mass therapy" style of routinized protest towards "organizing with the intention to actually win."[2]

Despite mass arrests, orga-

nizers saw June 15 as a watershed moment. They asserted that "The call to 'fight to win' was taken up by others, [which contributed to] building real resistance in this province and beyond." As OCAP member A.J. Withers reflected, "While there is no doubt that repression has increased exponentially since June 15, OCAP has met it with

ingenuity, creativity, and resilience."

Along with 250 others, Shannon and Stefan faced politically-motivated charges for participating in the Queen's Park Riot. The noxious experiences of being arrested, facing criminal charges, and living with restrictive bail conditions were, in some ways, a perfect cauldron for the development of Punchclock. It is an example of the ingenuity, creativity, and resilience that came out of these struggles.

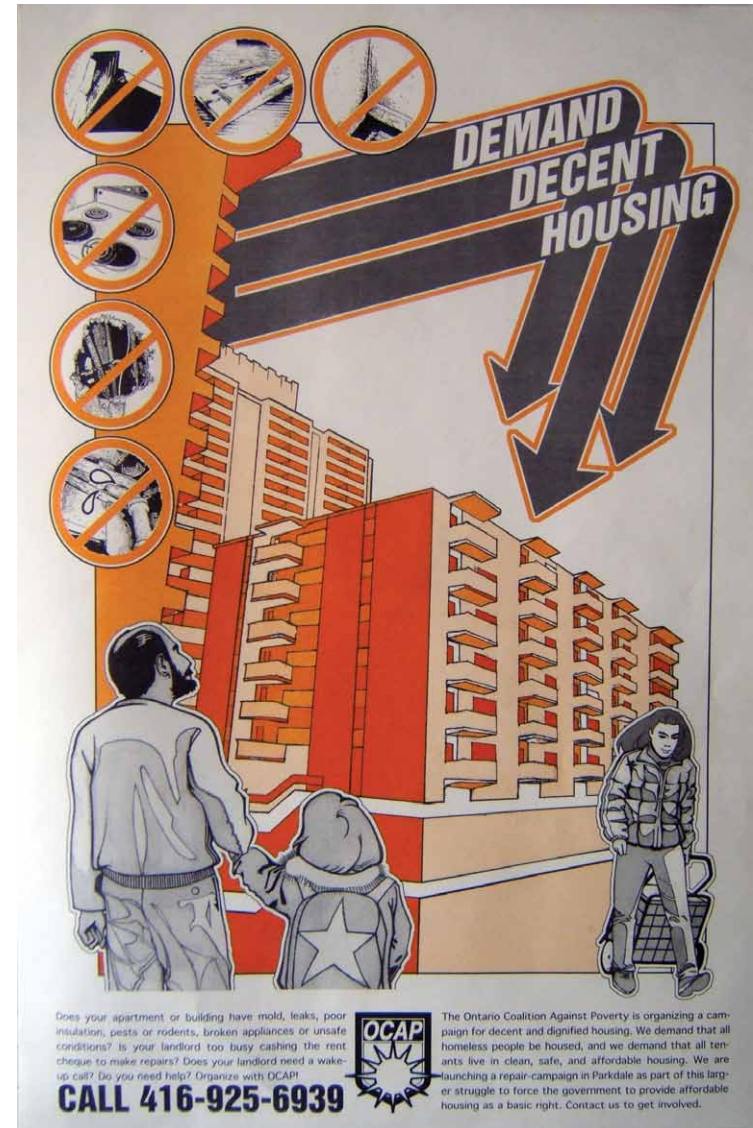## BALANCING ACTS: ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY AND ARTISTIC DIRECT ACTION

Attempting to address a mixture of competing needs and desires with a new kind of organization, Punchclock declared a mandate of economic sustainability and artistic direct action. The plan was to pay rent and wages by offering original designs and printing to organizations with funding, and in turn, for this income to underwrite work for grassroots groups they wanted to support.

Shannon describes the beginnings of Punchclock as a natural fit between the activist art she and Stefan were making with OCAP and her paid work printing T-shirts in a basement. Stefan also had experience with screenprinting as an extension of designing political posters. He adds, "The politics of collectivism just came with us. It was a project for us to try to live, to do something cool and meaningful and long-lasting."

In the spring of 2003, Shannon and Stefan rented a studio in a downtown Toronto warehouse. The unit was 400 square feet, with no windows, ventilation, or a proper drain. "Looking back on it, it's cringeworthy, some of the stuff we were doing, but I think it's part of the process. You have to make those mistakes. We'd flood the auto detailer that was below us. It was total anarchy, the bad kind of anarchy!", recalls Stefan.

Punchclock operated out of this space for only a few months until moving into a 1,000 square feet unit downstairs in the same building. Most of the equipment was bought second-hand: "One shop would be going out of business and you'd be able to buy up all of their ink" says Shannon.

Demand Decent Housing, Stefan Pilipa, c. 2005

Stefan was able to piece together a functioning exposure unit for burning screens from used and broken equipment.

The following year Punchclock started bringing new people on board to share the equipment and help pay the rent. "That's kind of when the idea of it being a collective came about" says Shannon,
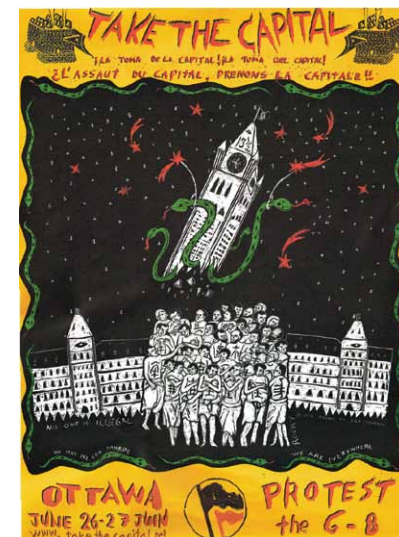
At one point we had way too many people. Two bands were using it as practice space, but it was not big enough to be that multi-purpose. At that point we decided to boil it down to five or six printers, and that was the steady balance we struck: Will Munro, who has passed away now, Michael Comeau, an amazing artist, John Caffery, from the band Kids on TV, Simone Schmidt, Stefan and I.

Shannon describes Punchclock as a 'mythological beast' that changed form many times. This resonates with collective member Rocky Dobey's account of Punchclock as a space with multiple nodes of activity:

It was a great collective, you could tell right away. There was something happening there every weekend. There were a lot of parties. I remember one time it was -30°C and they met at a party to go out and do street art by the railroad tracks. Shannon did a lot of these railroad track treks. There was always people working, printing, bands practicing, it was just a great place to go. Every time I went in, there was always new projects. People used it as collective space.

Punchclock meant different things to people based on their particular interests and points of contact. Simone Schmidt, an activist and artist who met Shannon and Stefan through

Clockwise from top: *Theft* installation, Shannon Muegge, 2007; OCAP flag, designed by Stefan Pilipa, photographer?, c. 2006; *Take the Capital*, Rocky Dobey, 2002; *Fuck Off Fantino*, Shannon Muegge, 2005

OCAP, says Punchclock's party atmosphere was partly a response to the chronic stress of political organizing. "Half of the people were in OCAP and doing really serious anti-poverty organizing, so they were like, 'You know what? We're here, we're queer, let's party.'"

Stefan describes more lofty goals, like creating a space to develop skills for working together cooperatively, as a way to fight the alienation of a deeply competitive society. When I ask Stefan about how Punchclock defined artistic direct action, he says:
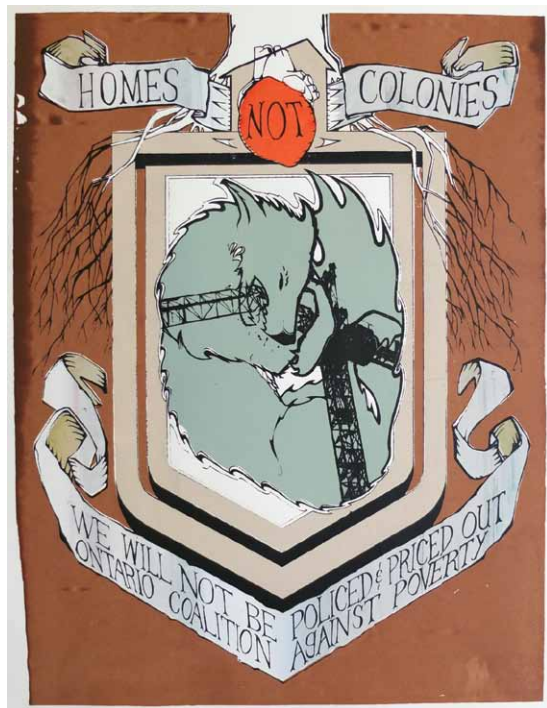
Artistic direct action was a combination of OCAP sloganeering and our artistic sensibilities. Some of the actions that Shannon did were literally artistic direct actions. What Rocky does on the streets with his metal plaques, it's pretty action packed. He's a machine and a monster when he works. And also just thinking of all the examples of OCAP paraphernalia that came out of the studio, things like pennants, flags, and placards. I wanted the bodies and thoughts of the people at the demonstrations to be magnified by the materials we made. I wanted the protest presence to be overwhelming for the state.

So I wanted to depict an aura of organization and a unified message. I would print hundreds of oversized flags in bright colours so that there was a sense of unity. Because in North America, we are a heterogeneous culture and when we go to demonstrations we are not skilled at acting as a unified body.

Stefan eventually moved on because there was not enough paid work at Punchclock to support both him and Shannon full-time. His role as a de facto studio technician was a significant part of his evolution towards metalworking and the creation of a new collective, Punchclock Metal, in 2006. In 2007, Shannon also decided that she needed to change careers; she and Stefan gave the business and managing position of the studio to Simone Schmidt.

Homes Not Colonies, Stefan Pilipa, 2007

Economic Disruption for Land & Survival, Stefan Pilipa, 2008

HOMES NOT COLONIES: CREATIVE RESISTANCE TO GENTRIFICATION AND COLONIALISM

Simone dropped out of university at 19 to do housing organizing with OCAP. Because Simone designed flyers for OCAP, Stefan and Shannon invited her to work out of Punchclock. While organizing, Sim-one became very familiar with the struggle for housing in the Parkdale neighborhood where Punchclock was located. She says, "The change that needed to happen in the neighbourhood wasn't the change that came."

A dotcom entrepreneur opened the swank, newly renovated Drake Hotel in 2004 with a manifesto that it would become a community centre for artists, while in reality it quickly became a beacon for gentrification. In retaliation, Punchclock organized a street party called Noise Attack on the night of a major opening. Their stunt attracted attention from local residents, wealthy patrons of the Drake, and an array of police paddy wagons:

Chris Eby, who would DJ at our parties, had this big rig of powerful speakers on a bike trailer. We had all different people doing stuff. There was confetti that on one side said 'crack' and the other side said 'illegal' and then another one that said 'cocaine' and 'legal'. We started from Punchclock and made the short walk to the Drake. The police had already arrived once we got there. And we actually had only planned

Vazaleen Memorial, Michael Comeau, 2010

to have a street party. So we were doing a great party and then the speakers got confiscated. But it was enough to bring three paddy wagons to the vicinity.

The warehouse in which Punchclock was located was effectively evicted in 2008 due to a rise in rents. In an act of supreme

irony—or conquest—the condos built on the site of their demolished building were marketed as Art Condos. Simone oversaw Punchclock's move to a new space, where Punchclock Metal was already based.

Along with sparking creative resistance to gentrification, Simone organized events to draw attention to indigenous sovereignty movements. As a gesture of support for a Mohawk activist facing charges, Punchclock issued a call for art and planned two events under the banner of Shawn Brant Is No Criminal:

With parties, I think much like the idea of taking money from projects that were lucrative and funding print work for activist organizations, we decided to take money from indie rockers that we knew were going to spend $5 on a Friday night. We knew Shawn Brant because of OCAP. Members of the Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory were involved in a struggle against mining on their land, and at the time there was not that much talk about it. Same with the Boycott Divestment Sanctions movement against Israel. At the

Tyendinaga logo, Shannon Muegge and Stefan Pilipa, c. 2003

Shawn Brandt Is No Criminal, Simone Schmidt, 2008

very least we decided to try to get money out of indie rockers. At the very most, involve them in some consciousness-raising.

Support for Shawn Brant and Tyendinaga was part of a symbiotic relationship for Punchclock. From 2003-2005 Punchclock produced labels and packaging for Tyendinaga tobacco, building upon friendships and political bonds that were forged through OCAP. Fundraising events also included an element

of reciprocity. Simone would barter free printing in exchange for performances, knowing that musicians struggled to make a living in the economy.

Likewise, economic challenges were an ongoing concern for Punchclock. When Simone shifted to printing full-time, she felt pressure to generate business, while trying to source fair trade shirts and absorb the cost of moving from toxic plastisol to healthier water-based inks.

Rocks vs. Tanks; Birds vs. Airplanes, Shannon Muegge, c. 2006

Printing-for-pay intensified environmental concerns that were especially acute when making shirts for one-day-only events like charity runs and activist gatherings.

Amidst these economic and environmental tensions, Simone was getting physically sick from printing, her partner was fighting cancer, and Punchclock faced a stark turnover in membership: "Shannon was gone and hadn't wanted to print anymore because of personal factors in her life. Stefan was into the metalshop, Michael Comeau developed health problems and wasn't able to print, and Will Munro died."

Efforts to wrangle together a new generation of printers were impeded by a lack of interest in collective process and house-keeping. Simone describes having to put up signs about cleaning-up after yourself as frustrating and "kind of ridiculous."
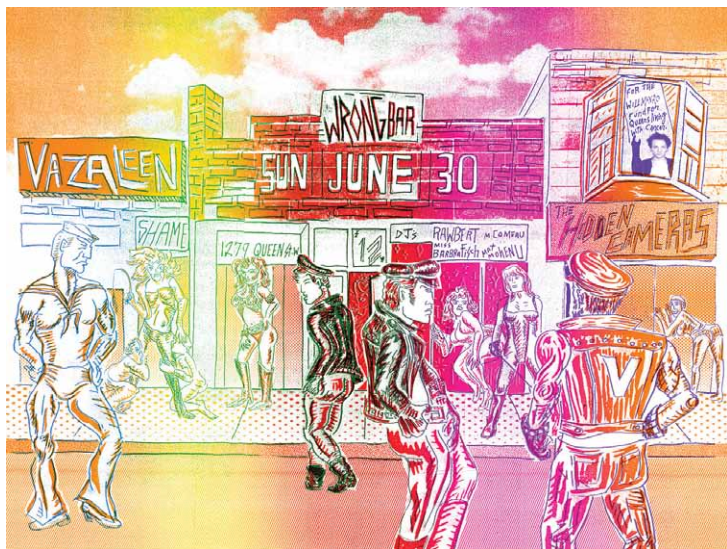
A lot of the new ethic in DIY culture seemed to only have to do with people resisting art school. I saw a lot of this attitude—people didn't want to be involved in any democratic process, had no interest in meeting, and no desire to try to form something new together. I remember we had a meeting at Punchclock, we brought everyone who was interested in renting in, and I was like, 'Okay, does anyone want to keep a speakers' list?' And I realized that was such a weird idea to some people because they had never operated in an environment where that had been used. Over the course of the meeting, the men talked. And the women were like … [silence]. And the conditioned order of mainstream culture prevailed. But I didn't know how, as one person, to break that down.

In late 2009, Simone shifted her focus to writing and

Vazalene Memorial, Michael Comeau, 2013

Rocky Dobey, 2013

performing music full-time. "I endured an amount of hardship in my personal life that required a more nuanced outlet." Working with movements was fraught with a red and black understanding of how things are, whereas she "found it easier in song and language and poetry to have a few different readings."

COLLECTIVE ANALYSIS: EXPERIMENTS WITH PREFIGURATIVE CULTURE

In 2013, after a chat outside of Punchclock Metal, Stefan brought me to meet Jacob Horwood, who took over the administrator role at Punchclock Printing after Simone left. When I met Jacob he was printing a poster designed by Michael Comeau for a party in honour of the Will Munro Fund for Queers Living with Cancer. Punchclock was preparing to move into a more spacious unit, which would allow it to share space with Jesjit Gill's risography-based Colour Code Printing, upgrade its equipment, and bring a few new renters on board.[3]

Although Punchclock fell off my radar with its disconnection from movement circles, it's easy to see how it may have never left for people rooted in different scenes. My research started from a desire to be a part of the Punchclock that I missed, and quite possibly, mis-imagined. By hearing people's first-hand 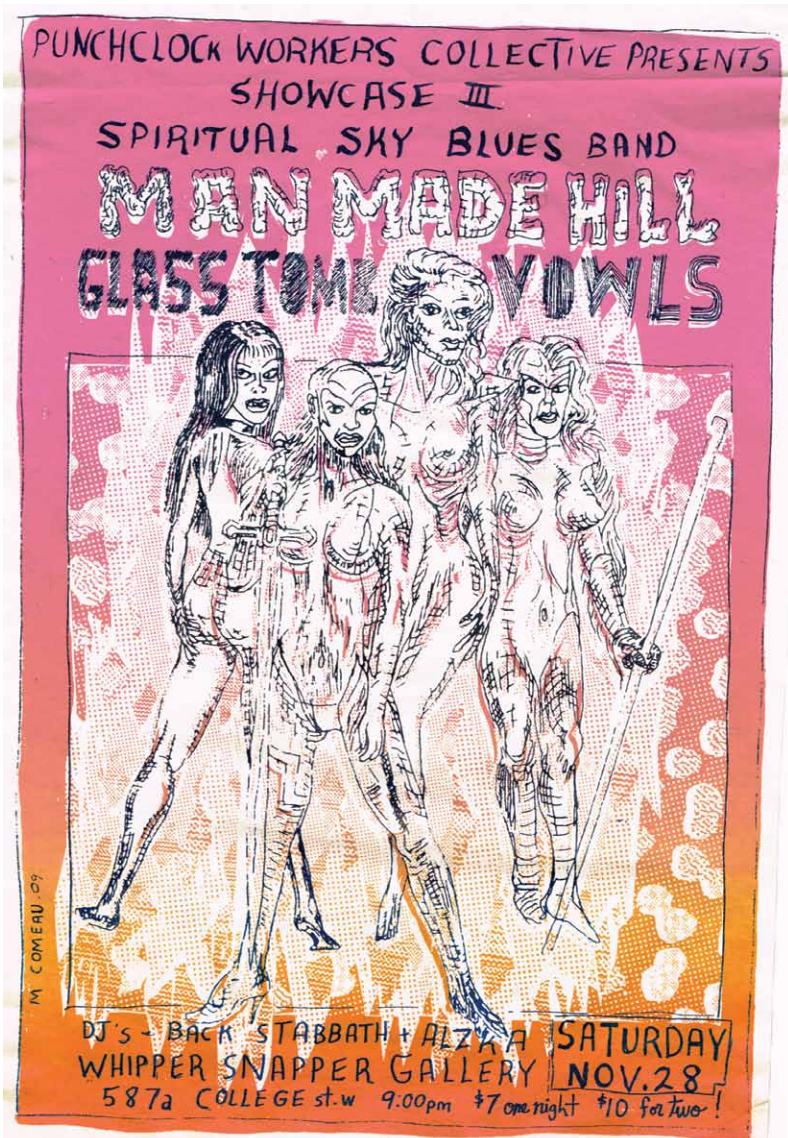experiences, I've realized that the complexities, tensions, limitations, and failures that Punchclock encountered are just as instructive as their successes. This is particularly true when considering Punchclock's engagements with accessibility, collective process, and points of contention with movements.

Punchclock supported crucial work that many people were not touching at the time: direct action anti-poverty organizing, Palestine solidarity activists in their efforts to launch the Boycott Divestment Sanctions movement, non-status migrant justice campaigns, and indigenous land defense struggles that were being criminalized by the state. Punchclock directly contributed to these movements working to dismantle destructive systems of capitalism and colonialism through their art-making and fundraising efforts.

That said, the absence of a more proactive policy to ensure access to the collective by people of colour and other equity-seeking groups hindered the transformative potential of their work and limited their sustainability as a political project. Without creating new opportunities for access and education, Punchclock primarily made art for struggles rather than with them—they weren't able to prioritize supporting others to find their artistic voices. As a result, when faced with a stark turnover in membership, Punchclock was limited to the existing pool of printmakers in Toronto, predominantly art school graduates—who in some ways are more diverse—but who did not necessarily share the same commitments to collective process and challenging power.

One way to view Punchclock's structure is as a missed opportunity, because the informal nature of the organization led to an inability to fully ingrain the political dimension of Punchclock's mandate. Rather than rigid politics, Punchclock organized around a series of tacit agreements rooted in flexibility and compromise. And yet, by adopting a pragmatic approach, the organization evolved and survived rather than collapsing from the weight of its political ambitions and social contradictions. Punchclock overcame early difficulties by embracing hybridity and clearly gained from the cross-pollination that came with the collective practices of resource sharing and collaboration. Although Punchclock's activist mandate has gone into hibernation, if there were enough interest in seeing this

Punchclock Showcase III Michael Comeau, 2009

activity emerge again, all the instruments are still in place.

To resist the seductive grip of nostalgia, it is worth remembering that even though Punchclock oriented itself towards the activist community, there were recurrent tensions in this relationship. These points of friction reveal how cultural work and social movements often exist in uneasy relationships. When speaking about her artistic approach, Shannon highlights this:

In terms of my style, it being more personal, more narrative, influenced by an aesthetic interest in beauty that is suspended above activist branding—I found it really difficult to do graphic design for activists, which is sort of what we were pitching ourselves to be. I don't know if I really succeeded in that. In Punchclock there was always this bit of tension where I'd make things that were a little too weird, or not so simple, not like a red star on a black flag kind of thing. So yeah, I love illustration, and I love more complicated stories and aesthetics than activists usually go for.

Rocky mentions that when he produces posters, he also has to deal with narrow ideas about what activist art should look like:

Often people don't like it. They say "Can't you have a fist?" Nobody liked this poster when I handed that one in [gesturing to the 2001 FTAA poster].
And now it's considered a classic. What did they say?
Can you make the text bigger?
Can you put some flags in there?
Yeah, exactly. It's okay, they can say what they want. But this is what I do and I do it for free. So imagine if you're always doing it for money. You're going to be slowly compromised—you're going to move your work towards that.

Having an established personal practice creates space for setting boundaries when working with movements. You can say: "Look, if you're asking me, this is the kind of work that I do, so keep that in mind." However, the reality is that some people don't trust images—and maybe
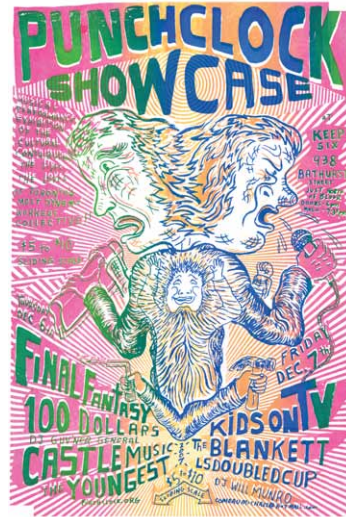

Carnival Against Capitalism, Rocky Dobey, 2001

No More Bantustans, Simone Schmidt, n.d.

Punchclock Showcase I, Micheal Comeau, 2007

Boycott Chapters/Indigo, Stefan Pilipa, 2007

Boycotting Israeli Apartheid, Simone Schmidt, 2006

for good reason. For people who want to micromanage everything down to a single correct reading, many images prove too unwieldy.

Rocky's work is a prime example of this. His intricate compositions, which begin as etchings on copper plates, have a very personal feel and yet leave plenty of room for interpretation. His style is transfixing partly because it is so different than everything else that you see. Like the 2001 FTAA poster, many of Rocky's images feature buildings that are in states of upheaval and destruction. They're apocalyptic visuals that invoke, sometimes explicitly, Marx's declaration
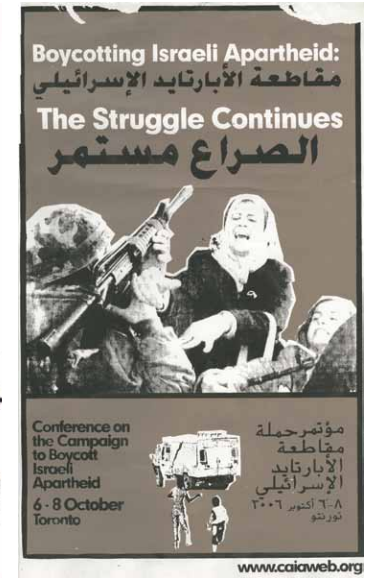
that "All that is solid melts into air."

When I ask him about the buildings' significance, he asks me what I think. Then, pointing to copper plates on his worktable, he says, "That's a log tower, to me that's colonial. Everything is a building, kind of, that I do. I don't know, other than: power, they look like prisons, they look like office towers." Rocky explains that he worked in highrises as a construction worker for many years. He used to dream of buildings. They are a potent symbol, able to express multiple

dimensions of his identity, experiences and anti-authoritarian politics.

If Rocky offers a sense of apocalyptic possibility, that amidst a suspension of social norms new realities can emerge, Stefan takes the same theme of large-scale disruptive action and grounds each image in specific struggles. Stefan is credited by his fellow artists for successfully balancing the need to produce images that communicate the urgency and militancy that

activists want, while still offering interesting and imaginative visuals. When Stefan talks about his affinity for the aesthetics of medieval heraldry and banners, which are strong features in the hand drawn Homes Not Colonies, Economic Disruption, and Boycott posters, he relates this to a goal of connecting with people on a visceral level.

Empathic connections are an important but often overlooked aspect of social justice organizing. Simone gravitated towards

music because there was a lack of engagement with these issues in movements. Reflecting on her art practice, and a departure from a red and black understanding of politics, she says:

I think my only really successful poster was a bouquet of all the provincial flowers, and it just said "These flowers were picked from stolen land." And then it said "Free Shawn Brant." It was a 6-colour Victorian print of flowers.
So, kind of disarming, because at first you only see the flowers and not the meaning behind it.
Right, it's something my mom has up at her cottage, which is obviously not effective because she has a cottage in Muskoka, but the reality is that every time she looks at it, she has to contend with the idea. I think sometimes art is just a reminder. It's not a movement.

Producing art that intervenes in the realm of ideas is part of the long-term organizing needed to create cultural shifts within mainstream conceptions of gender, race, sexuality, disability, migration, capitalism, and colonialism. If you start to imagine how people might connect with an image on a personal level, and how such an image can embody your liberatory ideals, you are in the idea space that Favianna Rodriguez talks about in her article "Change Culture, And the World"[4]. Rodriguez points out that too often this crucial work is neglected at the expense of supporting immediate actions. Shannon suggests that critical engagement with aesthetics could allow activists to connect with people outside the same typical echo chamber and beyond the limited framework of reactionary politics.

Culture is not just a tool for movements to wield, it is its own terrain for struggle. As Simone puts it, "Aesthetic choices are also material choices." They're deeply political. If we mimic the dominant aesthetics of corporate culture, we should consider why we're doing this. Is it because we're seeking legitimacy? To project the idea that we're not just some rag-tag group of activists? And if so, why do we associate legitimacy with this slick advertising aesthetic? What does it mean when DIY

Free Shawn Brandt, Simone Schmidt, 2008

or movement aesthetics get coopted by corporate culture? In our social justice campaigns, we should consider how the materials we produce relate to these struggles. What does it mean if we use sweatshop t-shirts, paper from clearcut forests on unceded native land, harmful chemicals in our studios, or produce things that are effectively disposable the day after our actions? Mitigating this reality is a necessary part of our political work as we continue organizing to change the underlying conditions that produce them.

The name "Punchclock" is a reference to the experience of industrial workers under capitalism: work as a prison house of measured time, increasingly standardized and controlled. The way that our bodies are disciplined as laborers—both paid and unpaid—is yet another step in the enclosure of social life. Today workers in "creative" industries are an archetype of the new norm: a lean, self-disciplining, freelance economy where we're always working, and expected to do more with less.

Collectives and cooperatives attempt to confront this individuation by reclaiming common spaces—prying our labor away from systems of domination and redirecting our resources towards more caring, fulfilling, and collective ends. Collectives can be self-serving and exist for the benefit of a select few, and yet they also have the potential to act in collaboration with struggles against injustices on a scale that transcends our individual capacities. As experiments in prefiguring new worlds—even if swift and changeable—they suggest possible ways forward for nonhierarchical organizing towards transformative social justice. Ⓢ

Printing at Punchclock, photo by, nd

1- Alan Moore "General Introduction to Collectivity in Modern Art" in The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest (2002): http://joaap.org/new3/moore.html

2- Stefan Pilipa "The 'Queen's Park Riot' and the Politics of Provocation: Another Look at June 15th" in *June 13½* (2002). *June 13 ½* is a small book produced by the "Queen's Park Riot" Defendants. The number 13 ½ refers to the prison justice slogan: one judge, twelve jurors, and half a fuckin' chance.

3- I eventually became one of the new renters at Punchclock and continue to print there today.

4- FaviannaRodriguez "Change Culture, And the World" (2013):http://culturestrike.net/change-the-culture-change-the-world

5- *20 Years of Organizing the Fight Back*, title page image (p. 142), designed by Stefan Pilipa, 2010