

David Solnit and The Arts of Change
Interview by Jen Angel

David Solnit is that kind of behind-the-scenes person who's been involved with most mass mobilizations in the United States in the last 25 years. Though you might not know his name, you've probably seen his work. To many, he is an unassuming guy known for making large puppets. While there have been many other radical artists over the years, Solnit has been instrumental in popularizing the use of giant puppets in mass demonstrations since the 1990s. Naomi Klein calls him "the man." *Mother Jones Magazine* profiled him in 2005

(<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2005/03/people-power-interview-david-solnit>).

From his experience organizing in social change movements since the '80s, Solnit, now 45, brings to bear a wealth of knowledge and skills. His work focuses primarily on anti-war and anti-globalization organizing. He regularly gives workshops on strategic organizing and direct action (and of course, making puppets and other art). He incorporates elements of art and theater into everything he does, working with diverse groups and movements like the Coalition of Immokolee Workers, School of the Americas Watch, and the anti-nuclear movement.

I first met Solnit in 1996. We were in Chicago for the Active Resistance Conference held in conjunction with the Democratic National Convention. Over the years, I've come to respect him as someone who has thought long and hard about how to make change in the United States.

Solnit was a main organizer in the WTO protests in Seattle in 1999 and in the shutdown of San Francisco the day after Iraq was invaded in 2003. Currently he is supporting GI resisters through an organization called Courage to Resist (www.couragetoresist.org),

The youngest of four children, Solnit comes from an activist family – his two brothers are active in anti-GMO organizing, smart growth, and unions. His sister, Rebecca Solnit, has published more than 10 books, including the upcoming *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* on Viking.

Though he claims he is no writer himself, David Solnit has worked on several books. He recently co-authored a book with Gulf War I conscientious objector Aimee Allison. *Army of None: Strategies to Counter Military Recruitment, End War, and Build a Better World*, now available from Seven Stories Press. His previous book, *Globalize Liberation: How to Uproot the System and Build a Better World* is available from City Lights. He is currently working on a pamphlet about the Seattle WTO protests to be published by AK Press.

I spoke with him in November 2008 in San Francisco, where he is based.

Army on None

<http://www.sevenstories.com/book/?GCOI=58322100436890>

Globalize Liberation

<http://www.citylights.com/book/?GCOI=87286100654030>

Introduction to Protest.

Jen Angel: I know that you started doing activism pretty early. You told me you first started with anti-draft registration work in the '70s, and then anti-nuke work in the '80s. Why do you think you first got involved in activism?

David Solnit: In '79 Carter ordered that all 18-year-old men had to register for a military draft. The kids in my high school and I thought that we were going to be drafted into a war for oil in the Middle East. There was the gas crisis: long lines, Middle East saber-rattling and Carter had provoked the Soviets into invading Afghanistan and then the CIA orchestrated the Osama Bin Laden and others into Mujahadeen guerrilla war against the Soviets. We started organizing Oregon High School Students Against the Draft in Portland. There was an amazing homeless organizer named Michael Stoops, and he was the mentor for our group and would sort of meet with us and help us when we needed things, but he let us make the decisions and figure out what we wanted to do. We organized punk shows, "Hell No We Won't Go, We Won't Die for Texaco" pickets, educated other kids about refusing to register, and got the school board to pass a resolution in support. I became an activist.

JA: Sometimes it feels like protests in the U.S. have become repetitive and flat. Protesters seem to continually re-enact the same roles – the march, the sit down, the clash with police. What do you think is going on and what's wrong here?

DS: Two things.

First, there's been a 30-year campaign to marginalize protest and activism, which is the most key democratic mechanism in any society that we have to control our lives and communities when the established channels fail, and they always do around any deep issue. So people have been led to believe protest is a fringe, wacky activity leftover from the distorted myth of the "'60s" that normal people have nothing to do with, never mind our own history of struggles for freedom and increased democracy. That's what people around the world do when there's injustice or when things are wrong: they protest, take direct action, they resist in different ways and make change.

There's a popular bumper sticker that says, "If You Enjoy Your Freedom, Thank a Vet." While we do need to honor our vets, politicians always misused them for agendas other than defending our homes and freedom-- sometimes using them against our own freedom struggles. So to be honest we should be saying, "If you love your freedom, thank a protester." Millions struggled and many died or were imprisoned--and continue to be-- for democratic and human basic rights in the US. Activists have created what political

breathing space there is.

Second, movements and activists often step into this marginalizing "protester" box that has been created to inoculate society against democratic initiatives from below. We need to constantly re-think how to avoid the predictable boxes, how best to reach people, and how to assert our power. This means taking care to identify ourselves in ways that people can identify with us and understand us- as parents, or students or workers, or community members, or whatever. One of my inspirations over the last decade is the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, who always talk about their experiences as farm workers and communicate shared values so people, the public, will get it. It also doesn't work to automatically do the same picket, March, rally, and direct action from the past; we have to come up with new forms of protest, resistance and communication.

JA: Do you think this effort to marginalize protests is conscious and orchestrated or not?

DS: I don't think there's a group of creepy guys sitting in a room with a master plan, but I do think there is a sophisticated effort to marginalize anything that begins to empower people and effect change. Any social change conflict is a battle of stories. When we organize a Montgomery Bus boycott, serve free "Food Not Bombs" to low income folks, or when military families speak out against war we tell a compelling story. Power holders and their media respond by finding or creating narratives to marginalize or dismiss our stories or try to actually disrupt or subvert our organizations or movements, as happened with COINTELPRO in the '60s and '70s and continues today with anarchist and other movements.

JA: We talked about activism being repetitive and we're doing a lot of the same activities over and over. Do we just need to accept that those activities are boring but we still need to do them? Earlier you talked about innovation, and we talked about movements from the '60s being marginalized, do we need new tactics?

DS: I think making change is like being a boxer and keeping on your toes. If you throw a left hook and knock out your opponent once, if you use the same left hook over and over, you become predictable and won't win. Movements constantly have to be on their toes and check the situation and come up with new and unpredictable ways of communicating and resisting that jump outside the box. So, yes we need to innovate and be creative, but we also have to carry out some nuts and bolts of organizing for change, build our organizational base, create alliances, build public support and education, have a strategy and organize multi-tactic campaigns, not just a series of one-off actions or activities.

Making social change usually requires long-term struggles and hardship and sometimes our ADD society wants only fun, entertaining instant-results actions.

JA: Sometimes when people participate in public protests, they don't see results. I think of the protests before the Iraq invasion, February 15, 2003 – when millions of people protested the war, but then the war continued. Many people were disillusioned. What do

you think about that?

DS: Yes, it was one of a series of disempowering and despair-creating incidents, after the repressive war-making response to 9/11 and followed by the re-election of Bush. But, change, especially radical change, is not often instant and direct like legislation, but it depends on shifting consciousness and relationships-- the foundations of power. And I mean radical, like radish, which comes from the Latin *rad* and means "to get to the root of."

Those 20 million or more on every continent who participated in the February 15 2003 demonstrations were biggest global protest in history. They did help to shift consciousness and de-legitimize the US empire. Over time we may look back on those protests as a watershed moment in end of US empire and global corporate capitalism.

The protests were organized through the networks created by the global justice movement, which in turn were inspired in part by rebellions by the Zapatistas and in the streets of Seattle. Those networks are continuing, the empire is actually losing power, they're massively de-legitimized and social movements are winning in lots of parts of the world.

JA: Over the years you've worked with a broad number of issues. You've worked with counter-recruitment, anti-war groups, anti-nuclear stuff, you've worked with farm workers - Do you feel like you lack a focus or what is it that ties all these issues together?

DS: When we do well, like when we shut down the WTO in Seattle, is when we're able to get different sectors and movements to coordinate. So building relationships between a lot of different movements is incredibly essential. Look at the corporations-- they don't have a separate committee to screw over their workers, to contaminate the community, to exploit resources and labor in foreign countries. They work together, across the board to change the ground rules. We also have to be able to combine and take on their basic power in society.

Art and Revolution, Ant-Globalization and Movements.

JA: I want to change the subject a little and talk a little more about the past. Can you tell me about Art and Revolution?

DS: Art and Revolution was both a concept and a network of street theater and organizing collectives. Our goal was to infuse art, theater, and culture into popular movements to create new language and new forms of resistance-- and to have fun and inspire along the way. It came out of an anarchist conference called Active Resistance in Chicago in 1996 which brought together puppeteers from Wise Fool Puppet Intervention, with other artists and theater folks and many radical activists who-- inspired by the Zapatistas-- were searching for new forms of communication and resistance. As part of the conference, we organized a five-day session of art and theater-making and teaching and took on organizing participatory theatrical resistance to the Democratic National

Convention in Chicago in '96.

JA: Because it was going on during the Democratic National Convention?

DS: Yep. Mayor Daly Jr. was mayor. It wasn't what you usually see, where the culture is sprinkled onto the typical form of protest. The logic of the protest was fundamentally different. It was a participatory theatre spectacle and the quality of people's responses on the street was really positive and engaged. Traditional protest tends to go into little boxes in people's heads that say, "Oh, this is an angry or whatever protest." People were unfamiliar with what it was and partly it was visually stimulating and it was inviting, though it also drew and weathered a very violent Chicago police response.

After that I and a Seattle artist/organizer, Dana Schuerholtz, and others organized the first Art and Revolution Convergence in Seattle the next year, in spring 1997. We brought together 200 people, half of them were artists and performers who we taught how to shut things down and run meetings and do media. And half of them were activists and organizers who learned how to make art and theater and use it in the streets. On the last day we brought it all into the streets of Seattle. It really foreshadowed the shutdown of the WTO a couple years later. That was our, the core concept of Art and Revolution, to use art as a vehicle; art, theatre, culture as a vehicle for social change and to try and bring together cultural and direct action skills. Bay Area dancer and arts organizer Alli Starr and I then formed a collective in the San Francisco Bay Area and did trainings across the country, so within two years there were six Art and Revolution collectives around the US. This complemented the emergent intelligence that was looking for new forms in the US and also with creative culture-mixed-with-action groups like Reclaim the Streets in the UK.

JA: Did you feel like that was a new concept for a lot of people?

DS: There was really a hunger for new ways to resist and make change and communicate. The established thinking about social change in the United States was stuck in single-issue movements, where you can only talk about your issue or maybe make a few links to others. If you talked about the whole system or capitalism you were seen as a weird sectarian communist group or something. By using art and culture we were able to break out of that. Also a big influence was the Zapatista uprising, which had broken from traditional forms of rebellion, both in the, in how they organized, in what they wanted, that they didn't want to take power. Guillermo Gomez Pena called Subcommandante Marcos the Subcommandante of performance art, because he and the Zapatistas have such an amazing sense of spectacle, theater, and poetry.

JA: And that was 1994?

The prototype of the free trade, NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement, went into effect on January first 1994 and the Zapatistas responded with a popular armed uprising and took over 14 cities in Chiapas. That is one of the creation stories of the global justice movement, though of course there has always been-- especially global South-- resistance. The way they rebelled and the stories they told were a fundamental departure from past left rebellions that sought to take, or appeal to, state power. They

simultaneously used traditional indigenous forms of organization mixed with, creative cutting edge use of the internet, media and culture to build international solidarity that created political pressure that made the Mexican military back off on repressing them. It was also a real articulation of, of new forms of organizing after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the last nail in the coffin of the old authoritarian left. Margaret Thatcher had announced that there was "no alternative" to the status quo of global corporate capitalism. We were searching for new forms, and the Zapatistas were a clear articulation of new ways to make change, so people around the world were inspired by them. They are a fundamental departure from the communist international model, where one group holds the correct political line and applies it all over the planet like a cookie cutter. The Zapatistas were saying, 'No we want a world where many worlds fit' because different communities have different histories, needs, desires, and forms, and instead we want to weave this together through horizontal networks. More like an ecosystem than a top-down corporate or party model.

JA: You talked about the beginning of the anti-globalization movement here in the U.S. For a lot of people, the 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle really cemented both the use of art with protest, and this cross-movement ideology. I have a couple of questions related to Seattle, but first I want to talk about how, for many people, this was their introduction to using art on a large scale, in particular, giant puppets. First, can you talk about how you first began using puppets in protest?

DS: My friend K. Ruby, a Bay Area activist/artist did an internship with Heart of the Beast Mask and Puppet Theater in Minneapolis, an amazing community-based arts organization. They do a big May Day celebration every year with huge involvement from the low-income neighborhood of Phillips and Powderhorn where they're based. They are in the tradition of Bread and Puppet and Peter Schumann's work. She came back to the San Francisco and I asked her to organize puppet theater for an anti-nuclear testing demonstration and direct action at Livermore Nuclear Weapons Labs. So she taught me how to make puppets, and out of that group of arts organizers formed Wise Fool Puppet Intervention, which is one of the groups that innovated popularized puppetry and pageantry as part of demonstrations. After many years I got tired of organizing the same types of mass direct actions at places like the Nevada Test Site. I thought, "I want to be one of the folks who makes the art and the puppets." I worked with the anti-nuclear testing movement for many years; our global movement had successfully forced Clinton into stopping nuclear testing, which he didn't want to do. I was looking for new forms and using art and theatre and puppets made sense and was fun and a great organizing tool. Those of us in Art and Revolution were able to work with a lot of different movements: anti-sweatshop stuff, EarthFirst! and forest activism, housing, labor, all kinds of homeless issues, and so on.

A lot of us were searching for a way out of the trap of single issue organizing, where everyone has his or her own little umbrella. Meanwhile the corporations work in concert to make systemic changes that concentrate their power and wealth keep us down. In a way the World Trade Organization was this amazing gift when they said "we're creating this one deeply anti-democratic organization that shuts out any kind of public

participation and we're going to run the global economy and have corporations and the governments they control be the sole actors, and override local laws and traditions." That was a gauntlet thrown at us that allowed us to link and build unity among movements and organizations that were all hurt by the same institution.

JA: I look at the choice to focus on the WTO as being a very strategic decision, of having to look far into the future for a point, a possibly strategic moment, and picking it, and deciding to organize around it. Can you talk about the decision to focus on the WTO?

DS: We were following the lead, particularly of the global south and also of Europe, where social movement people understood corporate globalization and why it was a threat. Many of us in the US were both searching for a way to bring together different social movements, and beginning to move from talking about single issues to talking about the underlying system. The WTO Ministerial allowed us to do that. When Art and Revolution started organizing, the city had not been chosen for the WTO Ministerial, and San Diego was looking likely. Art and Revolution wrote up a letter we circulated to groups in Seattle and up and down the West Coast, saying that we saw a huge potential for the WTO mobilization to be a strategic catalyst. The non-profits, like Public Citizen and unions had also started mobilizing. It's important to note that a lot of movements had been organizing against corporate globalization in the US before Seattle.

JA: Seattle was such a flashpoint for a lot of people, but it didn't happen over night. Can you talk about the process of leading up to the '99 WTO protests and battling the myths that have come up about that organizing?

DS: Seattle brought together many of the movements that had been simmering; forest activism, sweat shop organizing, housing and homeless, environmental, workers, solidarity--all different kinds of movements-- and it created a systemic framework in which people could converge and act in concert. There is a widespread activist myth that it was a spontaneous rebellion, which has led to a lot of badly organized mass mobilizations where people think that the Seattle recipe is you put out a call to action, set up a website, rent a convergence center, you know and people will miraculously come. Instead it was six months of creating organizational structures and building and strengthening networks, doing mobilizing which means face to face meetings and events, getting lists of people who are going, helping them get on busses and carpools, training people and preparing them for direct action and massive infrastructure, mass trainings and building alliances between movements. The mobilizations this year around the Democratic and Republican Conventions, while amazingly audacious and courageous, they lacked broad-based organizing and basic what and why strategy and the hardcore of activists who did step up got pretty beaten up.

JA: One of the success stories from last summer's DNC, maybe, is Iraq Veterans Against the War.

DS: Iraq Vets Against the War are the best-organized, most hopeful part of the anti-war

movement at this point, together with GI resistance support organizations like Courage to Resist. The anti-war movement is where many in the global justice or anti-capitalist movement went, because war and military empire are another manifestation of corporate globalization. IVAW folks organized a mass concert with Rage Against the Machine, The Coup, and the Denver band (whose singer was in Seattle for the WTO) the Flobots. IVAW got them to play a free concert, almost ten thousand people went, then they invited them after the concert to march on the DNC and deliver a letter to Obama calling him out to get his policies to match his anti-war rhetoric. Because his policies were not anti-war but he had painted himself as an anti-war candidate and that's a big piece of how he got elected. The Obama campaign hadn't responded at all to the Iraq Vets letter expressing these concerns so IVAW marched in full military uniform in military formation with five thousand Rage Against the Machine fans and community support. I went out to support them and we had done multiple days of training so all the, most of the vets and hundreds of the Rage Against the Machine fans were ready to go to jail to make sure they got heard. We did not have a permit and Denver was a police state, but we were hella organized. So they marched right up to the riot police line, canister rifles at the ready to fire tear gas or rubber bullets. There's was an amazing moment where one of the cops on the cherry picker lift to get a clearer shot at the demonstrators. He actually walked off his job, and four other cops asked to be relieved because they cause they did not want to have to attack a bunch of recent veterans in military uniform marching in military formation. A different group would've never made it that far. Obama's people sent their Veterans Issues guy come out, talk with a representative and accept the letter for fear of having a bunch of vets in uniform go to jail in front of their convention.

The Art of Protest- Participation and Messaging

JA: Along with IVAW, there are several groups you've worked with for a long time, one of them you mentioned earlier which is the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, and also the School of the Americas Watch. You have explicitly worked with them around using visuals and art. Can you talk about these groups and how using visuals has contributed to their successes?

DS: School of the Americas Watch, which is one of the most sustained and vibrant parts of the global justice and anti-war movements in the US, has been going on a steady campaign to shut down the School of the Americas, which is a key piece of US foreign policy, for about 18 years.

One thing that I've realized as a, both a demonstration/direct action organizer and an arts organizer, is that there's no difference between a demonstration and a theater performance or even a ceremony-- they communicate with our bodies and our voices. Often demonstrations are just bad theater. After the Seattle WTO protests, a lot of us mobilized to the School of the Americas. One of the ways we were able to bridge the more rebellious direct action folks with the more Gandhian faith-based SOA folks was using art and theatre. It makes people smile, so a bunch of anarchists and anti-capitalists and militants join the demonstrations with art and theatre and puppets that added, instead of divided, participants. The whole demonstration, particularly the Sunday demonstration, is

a giant ritual--for four hours they sang hundreds of names of people who were murdered by soldiers and cops trained at School of the Americas and then 10,000 people would sing back "presente." That's a very powerful ritual. We brought in a second part of the ritual or the demonstration which was to celebrate resistance and positive alternatives. And so each year we would take a different story. For example, right after the Argentine economy collapsed and there was a popular uprising that overthrew several consecutive governments, so we, working with Graciela Montague, an Argentine puppeteer who worked with Bread and Puppet, we told the story of Argentine rebellion and the new forms of resistance in Argentina. We would involve hundreds of people and we'd do a mass rehearsal an hour before, and then transform the whole demonstration into a massive participatory spectacle. It was a pageant, which is part theatre performance and part festival. We called ourselves the Puppetistas, a term coined by puppeteers who worked in the global justice mass actions.

JA: The element of participation is something that I think is reflected both how the work is created, by people working together to make something happen. But as you were saying, your work often also engages the public in a different way. So why is the element of being participatory so important?

DS: Using art and culture can reach people's heart and guts, if it's used in a way that's not subcultural and strives to actually reach people. It's also an amazing organizing and education tool. It has the ability to involve hundreds of people in communicating their ideas. Art and Revolution would work with groups and communities and brainstorm ideas and images and involve people in both coming up with the story, what they wanted to communicate, and making the actual art and performing.

JA: You're kind of acting as a facilitator, to help people tell their own stories, instead of coming to them with a story you've already decided on.

DS: Yes. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers, influenced by Haitian and Central American organizing, they call those people animators. They draw on the thinking and ideas of the group and help to animate and facilitate their thinking and consciousness. We do the similar with art.

JA: When you're working with groups who are preparing for actions, what points do you try to get across about visuals? What do you tell people about why they're important?

DS: Two things: one is participation. A demonstration is partly a ceremony, and just a ceremony it should make space for peoples' hopes and desires and fears and anger. Two is to communicate: it should express clearly and in many ways-- visually, audio and with stories the messages of the group.

JA: Do people often want to express anger?

DS: It's healthy to be pissed off at what is happening to our communities and the world. You know with the classic peace vigil-- mournful or silent-- sometimes can be powerful,

and sometimes bore people out of their skull and deny that we are and should be angry.

JA: What are some of the recommendations around visuals that you have for groups?

DS: Three things. First, be Clear. If the newspaper or someone takes a photo of your visual at your action and there is no caption, can people tell what you want to communicate in images and words?

Second, keep it simple. Can you boil down your ideas or message to its core? Can people tell at a glance from half a block what your image is? Can people get your theater in right away without knowing any background?

And third, make it personal: telling stories and especially your own or your community's own is key. Our stories and experiences are the most powerful thing we have.

JA: When you talk about boiling things down to a core image, in the past you've said that you often try to make the dominant visual a positive one. Can you talk about that and give a couple examples?

DS: When you do a theatre performance or a demonstration you're articulating your vision of the future. If you tell a story of the system being powerful and winning, then, you know, it can disempower us. If we choose to show the system as vulnerable as it is, and unjust, and show our own movements as powerful it shifts how we think and what we see as possible, it makes radical change much more possible.

JA: There are some times, though, when you choose to make the dominant image a negative one, like when you were in Japan this summer for the G8 protests. Can you talk about that choice?

DS: Japanese anti-capitalist organizers invited me to work with them to make art and theater for their demonstrations, and for the anarchist and anti-capitalist movements in Japan. There are certain predictable images that corporate media will cover; Oxfam every year pays somebody to make eight giant bobble heads of the G8, and they always dominate news coverage. So we made eight skeletons with the G8 heads on them and wrote: G8 equals precarity, poverty, global warming, etc. It actually overshadowed the Oxfam images and placed a radical rather than a more timid message. On the last day when we marched as close as we could get to the resort where the G8 was meeting we symbolically smashed the G8 skeletons in front of sea of corporate media cameras, and so the images of us also destroying the G8 made the news.

JA: So art and theater are ways to engage with the public. It also serves roles for the activists. You talked about how it feels good.

DS: It gives people a way to participate that's more interesting and engaging. We also use a lot of art for popular education; with the Immokalee Workers I use a form called a *cantastoria*, which in Italian means singing story, where you paint images on pieces of fabric and then flip them over while singing or telling your story--their story was as

migrant workers being displaced by corporate globalization and then getting oppressive low wage jobs here and then organizing resistance to it and winning.

JA: Can protests that are focused on art and theatre be more than just symbolic protests?

DS: Yes. Art and culture was core to the organizing of the Direct Action Network in shutting down the WTO in Seattle; doing art making workshops with locked out steel workers in their union halls, and traveling up and down the West Coast with Art and Revolution explaining the WTO using music and dance and puppetry and traveling with a locked out steel worker David Reid and former sweatshop worker Chi Abad. In the streets, the widespread use of arts and culture actually gave us power in the situation because the police were on unfamiliar terrain. People were doing lock downs with people dancing next to them and giant puppets mixed with blockades, so it became that clear that we were about life and celebration. The police had their own theatre of dressing like Darth Vaders with projectile weapons, clubs and tear gas canisters and pepper spray.

JA: So how do you respond to critics who say that elements of art or theatre or dance just distract from the real message?

DS: Corporate advertising, which we don't want to emulate but we need to combat and learn some things from, you know, is all images and stories. We have to be able to combat their stories and images, not through manipulative ad executive style propaganda, but through the truth of our own experiences and stories and using art and theatre and culture to amplify them and create compelling counter messages. They use basic principles of propaganda to manipulate our emotions, hopes, and desires into doing what they want. We can respond with what Stephen Duncombe calls ethical spectacles from real lived experiences.

JA: Right. In Stephen Duncombe's book, "Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy," his general thesis is that we live in an age of "manufactured consent" (a term first coined by Walter Lippmann), where spectacles that appeal to our needs and desires win our hearts and minds. His basic premise is that progressives and radicals need to package our ideas better so they can be more readily accepted by others – to "manufacture dissent" – in an ethical way. By adding an element of art to protest, that's what you're trying to do, right? To make the protest more compelling?

DS: We need to rethink the whole nature of the protest and make the whole thing, participatory, powerful-- a ceremony of sorts. Look at Obama's campaign: branding, simple messages and stories that have captured people hopes and desires, unrelated to his actual policies. Sadly he's can't deliver on them unless we build mass movements that give him no choice.

JA: So you think that it was his effective messaging that allowed him to mobilize so many people?

DS: I think for the first time that I can remember that the Democrats were actually able to

out-do the Republicans in terms of capturing peoples' desires and imagination, appealing to widely held values and talking in terms of stories and images. It's no small feat for the Democrats who are also one of the most destructive institutions in the history of the planet. Obama has stepped into a system that is hardwired and has much more momentum than he.

Now the battle becomes over what do these slogans that captured our desires mean, like ending the war and change we can believe in. Obama has done what I would call *hopewashing*.

JA: What do you think is going to change under Obama? Do you think his rhetoric will help people? Some radicals have said they feel that even just the language he uses around civic engagement is powerful and will have an impact.

DS: It's knowable. What has changes is that there has been a huge consciousness shift. Over the last seven years we got the message that you can't change things; from Rove, the evil magician propagandist. We were disempowered through not stopping the 2003 invasion and not unelecting Bush in 2004. People were in despair. I think it's an unknown whether Obama will subvert and manipulate movements to concentrate and consolidate his own power and his ability to keep the status quo or whether he's opened up a Pandora's Box of expectation, resistance and rebellion that will either overthrow the system that he's apart of or force him to do the right thing. Things are up for grabs but our movements have to be as smart and sophisticated as the Obama campaign.

JA: In terms of advancing a strategy, is that the people power strategy? Or do you think that framework has yet to be set?

DS: People power anti-war strategy. There has been an effort amongst a lot of us in the anti-war movement over the last several years to articulate a clear strategy that could stop the war ourselves without depending on politicians. We used longtime strategy tools to look at the pillars that hold up the war and occupation and then identified long-term campaigns that could weaken or remove those key pillars, such at troops, corporations or media.

JA: And that theory has been proven right by the new Congress being elected with an Anti-War Mandate in 2006 and they haven't done anything.

DS: Right, and Obama's elected as an anti-war president and unless we force him to he'll leave an occupation of contract mercenaries, US military bases and soldiers in Iraq while expand wars in Afghanistan and possibly Pakistan. So, we're still in the same situation with Obama except that we may lose lots of liberals and progressives for a couple years, folks who think that getting your guy into office is how you make change.

JA: There have been a lot of recent cultural developments in the U.S. that show people acting in different ways toward each other, like Critical Mass bike rides and flash mobs, where people do things that are not explicitly political. Or in San Francisco, every

Valentines Day there is a huge public pillow fight downtown, all examples of people stepping out of their normal roles and interacting with strangers in a different way. Do you think the popularity of these things show peoples' willingness to step out of those roles and what do you think about them not being political and can they be politicized?

DS: When people break from just being employees and consumers and self-organize anything it's quite political, whether it's cultural or recreational, whatever.

Inspiration

JA: Another barrier to protest in the last couple years has been police repression. I know, for example, that you've been arrested a lot. But now, it seems like the penalties for being arrested are increasingly more repressive. For example, the protests at the RNC last summer, several of the organizers in Minneapolis have been charged with conspiracy and terrorism charges. And those carry sentences, if they are convicted, of 7 or 8 years. And in terms of convictions we've seen recently, those are some of the lighter ones. Do you feel like that's changing the way that you organize?

DS: Seattle was every authority's worst nightmare. They have been hell-bent on preventing us from be effective, and that only increased after September 11. But what it means is that we have to do what I call political self-defense. This is another way of saying that we have to organize really smartly, by building public support and making repression so politically expensive that they're in a dilemma; if they repress us it will backfire and there will be mass public opposition because we framed the issues, built alliances with all the different sectors of the movement and community, built a track record and reached the public. The US is still much less repressive than most countries in the world or than the US has been at previous times in this country. The disruption, infiltration, and repression that we saw in Denver and St. Paul are not new, it's comparable other parts of the last century. And folks have figured out ways of organizing that are less vulnerable to this, but our lack of continuity and memory has made folks vulnerable, or maybe every generation has to figure it out themselves.

JA: So what do you find really inspiring?

DS: I continue to get inspiration from the Coalition of Immokalee Workers... one of our most successful organizing models. They are a group of low-wage migrant workers displaced by corporate globalization, forced to migrate, who have taken stock of their situation and, you know, organized themselves and fight and win through smart strategic organizing and networking against the biggest fast food corporations on the planet.

JA: Is there anything else you want to add?

DS: I love the idea of the "laboratory of resistance." The idea that our actions and our protests and our organizing rather than repeat things over and over; that we're social change agents or activists or essentially, we're scientists and we're experimenters. Every time we do something it's an experiment and the value in an experiment comes when we

step back and evaluate it, and learn from it and we need a constant process of innovation and experimentation and learning from it. When people have done audacious experiments that have put the authorities on unfamiliar terrain, if you do the same thing over and over again they know how to respond to it so you have to, you know, I think now more than ever constantly innovate and also, long term campaigns and have strategy. I like the Laboratory of Resistance and it's way of mixing up art principles and organizing principles.

JA: Can you give a few examples of actions that you've participated in that were particularly effective?

DS: During the first Critical Resistance conference at UC Berkeley, in 1997 I think it was, they asked us to organize a street theatre and march through Berkeley. So we built a giant mock prison and, used music and dance and puppetry to talk about who's being held in the prison industrial complex: political prisoners, poor people, people of color. The crowd that had gathered around and people literally ripped the walls down of a fourteen foot prison while singing 'Rise Up, Come Together, Tear the Walls Down' and then the giant puppets of political prisoners and birds of liberation flew out of the jail and led a march through the streets and marched on the new Berkeley police station with a jail and an indoor shooting range across the street from the High School. It was just under construction and people went directly from the theatre of tearing down the walls to physically ripping down the plywood wall surrounding the construction site with their bare hands while singing and carrying birds of liberation and puppets. You know, and so to me it was a beautiful example of theatrical rehearsal making it's actualization in our lives possible. And demonstrations can be a rehearsal for doing what we want in society.

JA: I think that you talked about other examples earlier, such as when we talked about the G8 in Japan and building skeletons that were destroyed at the end of the march. With the School of the Americas protests, you've talked about using puppets to tell stories there. Can you give an example of them?

DS: At the School of the Americas when we performed the theatrical pageant of the Argentine uprising we had a spoken word poet who rhymed the narrative while three hundred people taking the roles of rebellion and hope --each one had it's own color and an iconic puppet and also the whole crowd joining in.

JA: Can you give an example of using art in a way that doesn't involve 300 people that's been effective and powerful?

DS: I mean, my friend Ulla just did a project around climate change working with California environmental justice groups. She's a mom with kid and another one on the way and so she's been going to the parks that she plays with her kid at and talking people about climate change and having people make quilt patches and so she's put together a quilt which is now being used in demonstrations for climate justice and clean air. It was facilitated by one person, but it will be seen and communicate to many using a traditional, familiar language of quilting.

JA: It doesn't take 300 people to make an impact.

DS: Nope. Try this at home.

Jen Angel is the former publisher of Clamor Magazine and a founding board member of Allied Media Projects. She regularly consults with individuals and organizations on media and strategic planning and is a publicist with the cooperative agency Aid & Abet. She is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in Yes!, Bitch, Upping the Anti, In These Times, and Punk Planet. She blogs at <http://jenangel.wordpress.com>