51 Radical Walls
Classrooms that Celebrate Activism and Social Justice
An Interview with Josh MacPhee

Nicolas Lampert and Josh MacPhee

Josh MacPhee is a street artist, designer, curator, author, and activist. His first book was Stencil Pirates: A Global Survey of the Street Stencil (2004). A street stenciler and poster maker for over a decade, MacPhee also helps run JUSTSEEDS, a radical art distribution project as a way to develop and distribute t-shirts, posters, and stickers with political content. Since 2000 he has curated the Celebrate People’s History poster series, a collection of inexpensive educational posters focused on suppressed and little known histories of social justice movements.

Lampert: What inspired you to start the Celebrate People’s History series?
MacPhee: I first started producing the posters in 1998, soon after I had moved to Chicago. I noticed that there was a lot to look at on the street, but that 99% of it was advertisements of one form or another, either for corporate movies or records, or for independent music shows, or even for protests or meetings. It’s not that all of this was necessarily so bad, but it was striking how everything was a directive, it all expected the audience to buy something or go somewhere. I wanted to put something on the street that was a little more generous than that. In conversations with my roommate, who was a teacher, I decided to produce a poster for Malcolm X’s birthday and to cover the streets with it. This was the first People’s History poster, and the beginning of the idea of producing posters around people, groups and events in history that were extremely important for social justice movements but have been erased or hidden by mainstream history.

Lampert: Now that the poster series is well established and has been wheatpasted in the streets, are you aware of any teachers hanging the Celebrate People’s History posters in classrooms?
MacPhee: Yes, a lot of teachers hang them in their classes. Teachers from around the country have e-mailed me and told me they use them; many have even sent me photos of them on their classroom walls.

Lampert: What age group was it for?
MacPhee: In most cases it appears that they are for middle school to high school age kids, but I know of some elementary school teachers that use the posters, as well as college professors.

Lampert: What has been the reaction from teachers to your poster series?
MacPhee: For the most part teachers seem really excited that the posters are available and financially accessible. There seem to be very few high quality visual resources for teachers about alternative or “people’s” history. There are a number of books that have been cropping up, but very little in terms of graphic materials.
Nicolas Lampert and Josh MacPhee

to hang in the classroom or to use with students that respond better to visuals than straight text.

Lampert: Have any of the posters in the series to date focused on people’s movements within creating schools and alternative forms of education?

MacPhee: Although used by teachers, the posters themselves have not been overly focused on education. Some of the people celebrated by the posters were scholars and educators, for instance Elisé Reclus, the 19th century geographer and anarchist, and more recently I printed a poster about the Highlander Folk School. Highlander originally opened its doors in the 1930s as a place for Southern poor and working class people to educate themselves in order to radically change society. In the 1950s Highlander became a prime training ground for the early Civil Rights Movement, hosting workshops and providing space for groups to meet and organize.

Lampert: Have any teachers assigned their students to work on their own posters that celebrate people’s history?

Figure 51.1 The Occupation of Alcatraz by Josh MacPhee.
MacPhee: I have had a number of teachers tell me that they were integrating people’s history poster making into their curriculums. The one example I am most familiar with is in Pittsburgh, where Tresa Varner, a printmaking teacher at CAPA, the Pittsburgh arts high school. Tresa did a People’s History unit in which each of her students produced a two-color linoleum block people’s history print. A selection of these student prints were then hung at an exhibition called Small Acts at the Space Gallery in downtown Pittsburgh alongside a selection of the Celebrate People’s History posters I organized and created.

Lampert: From your own past experience as a student (K–12) do you recall any similar types of posters within the classroom that inspired you?

MacPhee: I have no memory at all of any liberatory visual materials in school. I know from research that there were some materials that came out in the 1970s, but they weren’t in use in the schools I went to. Most of my friends that are teachers didn’t experience any either, which is in large part why I think educators appreciate the posters so much.

Lampert: Much of the curriculum in K–12 in history is looking at a very standard, top-down, European-American version of American history. Rarely do students learn about people’s struggles or in many cases, their own ethnic history. How
do you see the CPH posters challenging this? Are the posters a window for people to learn more about various individuals and events? Are they meant to inspire?

**MacPhee:** First of all, the posters are not intended to be full history lessons in and of themselves. They are created with the hope to educate and inspire people enough to learn more about certain subjects on their own. In addition, when I began the series almost 10 years ago, most of the posters being produced were about specific individuals, a set of alternative heroes so to speak. At some point in the process I decided that even though the posters were important, this approach of celebrating people’s heroes was doing a disservice to our understanding of history. If the posters are truly to be an alternative to mainstream history, they need to be more than just our version of great men and great battles, but need to help illustrate how history really happens, through the hard work of groups of people, and lots of them. So I’ve refocused the project away from individuals and onto groups and collectives as well as specific events and activities. I feel this is a more honest look into our history and also values the collective aspects that are most important for moving forward and...
creating a future we want to live in. I also have moved more and more toward producing posters that focus on events and groups outside of the United States. Our culture is already so myopic, with everything “American” always held up as the most important, and I think the posters can start opening windows into history outside the United States.

Lampert: The theme of many of your recent presentations and talks has been on “Taking Control of Your Visual Landscape,” a critique of just how corporate the public landscape has become and the impact this has had on culture and people’s attitudes toward what is possible and what is not. In regard to students, the K–12 age group, why is it essential that a critique of the visual landscape begin at this age?

MacPhee: The earlier students learn to understand that their visual landscape is not a natural product, but specifically created with specific intentions in mind, the earlier they will be able to understand what those motivations are, and if they agree with them or not, and therefore intellectually interact with the landscape by choice, rather than default. It is really about choice and autonomy, without an understanding of how people are trying to influence you, it is
nearly impossible to make educated choices about whether you want to be influenced, and influenced by whom for what purposes.

_Lampert:_ Images have a very profound impact on society, yet visual literacy (and the arts for that matter) is downplayed in most educational curriculums. In your opinion, why is it essential that students learn about and engage in the arts?

_MacPhee:_ Every day our world becomes a more and more complex web of images and signs, many of which are not neutral or benign, but specifically intended to make us speak, move, act in certain specific ways. Increasingly it is not simply written language, but text in concert with images that information is transferred, whether this is on television, the Internet, magazines, billboards, or just about any other information transfer point in our society. Unless we are taught the skills necessary to decipher this complex web, then we are at the mercy of the image-makers. The more students engage in arts education, the deeper their understanding of visual language, and the higher their level of what I like to call “meta-literacy,” and understanding of the language that is laid on top of standard written language.
Acknowledgment

Josh MacPhee was interviewed by Nicolas Lampert in February 2006. For more on Josh MacPhee’s work please visit: http://www.justseeds.org.

For more on Nicolas Lampert’s work (including a previous interview with Josh MacPhee) please visit: http://www.machineanimalcollages.com.

Reference