

REBELLIOUS SOUNDS

Dreadnought South West: Rebellious Sounds Interview with Nicci Wonnacott

My work has been stemmed in activism for about 20 years as an artist-activist, and it is primarily a feminist activity. I'm really interested in art-action and performance and the manifesto, and how all those things have influenced my practice and brought it to where it is today. My practice title is Life-Art and Politics, because I can't really separate any of those things and it encompasses all of what I want to portray.

I suppose it started with becoming a manifesto maker while I was at art college. I collected a series of directives from all the women that I knew, asking them to give me a directive for positive social change, which is again very important to my art practice. Those directives have gone on to inform performances or art actions. They still do. They form a series of words, sentences, collectives that I've brought together and which then go on to inspire how I make art to help create positive social change, in a particularly feminist practice.

The directives themselves were very simple, from 'take care of yourself' to 'protect me from what I want', which was itself inspired by Jenny Holzer's piece of work. As in a manifesto, it looks to past declarations collectively, drawing influence from other manifesto makers, as well as the people who were involved personally in building my practice, then I use those as future proclamations. So, 'crack on or crack up' is one I carry with me on daily basis. They're just simple, short collections of words that people feel are important to them. Like manifestations, I carry those words with me on a daily basis; they might be drawn on to keep you going through the day. With some of them I make sculptural props out of them, which then go on to promote and back up my performances in public space. I use my body in public space to create a message.

For example, I did a piece of work on purifying America – which is a big job! – for which I made some ancient karigurashi wands, which notoriously or historically always have text to make a spell in the world. I put the directives I'd collected onto some lovely wands and then I went to a park in America and did a dance with these words that were full of these magical sentences to help manifest change.

The reactions were quite positive. It was a risk, because we weren't supposed to make any political statement in that park – Union Square Park, in New York, which is notoriously an activist site – and it did feel risky; in the film you can see me looking around for the cops all the time. We had a strategy for what to do if I got arrested, but it didn't happen.

Everything that I do is peaceful action, and I can get away with quite a lot by promoting myself as a peacemaker in the first instance. For example, when we held the protest on Cathedral Green against the closure of the women's refuge in Exeter, I set it out as a peaceful protest, a peaceful mothers' day picnic, so there wouldn't be any concern from the police or from the cathedral. It was set out to be non-confrontational, and I feel that people can't really argue with that. That particular protest was really peaceful; people came and shared food, and conversation. Because it was outside, it opened up a mechanism for conversation – there were no records [of what people said] because they were a bit scared to speak – there was the possibility of losing their jobs, the threat of redundancy – and so it became a place that was safe in order to have the conversations that had been lacking prior to that. Peace is important to me as a woman, as an artist, and as an activist, although I do see some other

sides of activism that might call for something a little more mainstream, or little bit more... I'm thinking about the suffragettes now and that debate about radical and moderate.

Which camp might I have been in, then? That's a tricky question, and one I had to ask myself only two weeks ago when I watched the read through of *The Orchard*. It raised a lot of questions for me, because the language was modern-day, and people talk about radicalisation today; it really made me think about how I consider myself in relation to that term, and it's a threatening term these days. I'm still chewing that over.

Sometimes direct action is needed but I would only ever take direct action if it wasn't harmful to anybody else. I think that's where my line is. I've also been studying anarchism for many years and, going back to language, I really don't like the way that the word 'anarchism' has been subverted. Again, in my manifesto, I challenge that quite a lot, because my understanding of anarchism is that it is about peace and love, and I've done a lot of work around prolific anarchist women throughout history to try and resurrect the idea that it's not about chaos and disorder. Being an old punk, I got switched on to anarchism in the 1970s and it really opened my mind as to what political alternatives were available to the very male-dominated patriarchal system, and that's what I connect back to.

I actually came to feminism late in life. I married young and got swayed in the direction of my ex-husband's businesses, and became a nightclub owner at 18, and went on through that until I was 30. At that point I decided that I had to leave my husband, and then got caught up in another relationship, but very quickly realised that the relationship wasn't as I hoped it would have been, although I went on to have my darling twin daughters with that person. When they were two that relationship went very badly wrong, and I was encouraged by my GP's surgery at that point to speak to a trainee social worker, which was really all the help they could offer me.

When she came along to see me, I was in my home in the middle of nowhere with these two two-year-old girls, it was as a volunteer really – it was part of her skills-building – but she came for about an hour a week for six to eight weeks. We talked, and feminism came up, and although she didn't necessarily preach to me about feminist values, she empowered me. She said, 'I am a feminist', and I thought, 'God, how wonderful to be able to say that,' because I felt disempowered. I hadn't really had time to think about those things before, because I'd got into a relationship quite young, then another, and they spiralled. So when she talked to me about feminism, I realised that I had a voice, and since then I've been trying to use it, and to work with other women to help them find their voice. I feel that I'm happy and lucky to be part of that feminist legacy, even though I got there late in life. Hopefully, for my daughters, having been brought up by a feminist mother means that their legacy will have started earlier than mine. So I feel really happy about that.

I saw [the social worker] one day three years later on the bus. I looked at her and she looked back, and there was a vague recognition that our paths may have crossed at some point but we didn't speak. I've never stopped thinking about her. I can't remember her name but I can bring her back into the vision of my brain, and I guess she's out there somewhere helping more women switch on to feminism.

I left school in 1976, and interestingly enough, when I did my last big art action I met with my thesis tutor here at the Phoenix and she said, 'you've been doing art action for quite some time, 15 years...' It really took me back because in 1975 I did my first action and I brought the whole school out on strike, so I was political even as a young girl. The whole punk rock

thing really switched me on, but then very quickly that became suppressed due to being manipulated by men and then it raised its head again many years later, 30 years later, when I had a freedom to again explore those themes.

My art-actions take on quite a few forms. For example, I use my body in public space and sometimes those actions are as straightforward as making a call; I've done what people refer to as 'flash mobs'; I make a call to raise awareness to women, particularly recently in recent years about Pussy Riot's imprisonment. Another part of my practice comes from within, where I take on a variety of roles, and they are all roles where I perform in white, because I have this understanding of the 'woman in white', a figure who has been written about by Charles Dickens, and before that Wilkie Collins, but I think it goes beyond those two men. I do quite a lot of work about archetypes, and I felt compelled to become the woman in white, to raise some level of consciousness about that.

I have about four or five characters that I manifest, one of which is the 'ghost of capitalism', and I dress up in post-consumerist waste and haunt high streets. I've also worked with her in a theatre environment, in shows that are mainly feminist shows, or shows put on to attract women. Another one of those characters is the 'enchantress of peace and love', which I've used in the street, in public, and in theatre spaces, and I manifest her to represent the ghost of women who have been not so able to use their voices, as a mark of respect. Also I pay homage to people like Emma Goldman and Rosa Luxemburg, and I put myself on the street and put their words around their country of origin while dressed in white to represent their voices also.

I'm very much a Devon-based artist – although I have worked internationally – and I'm happy with that, so many of my performances are in Exeter, which really hasn't had an awful lot of performance artists working within the city, so when I rock up, particularly as the ghost of capitalism, I think men look at me like I'm a mad woman. That response comes back to the woman in white again. One Saturday morning, I was haunting Parliament Street, the narrowest street in the world, and families would walk by and the husband would say to the wife, 'what the hell is going on there?' and the wife would hurry the children along. But other women did approach me, and some men approached me, mainly men who were working in that area and they were very friendly, almost intrigued, and some women approached me on a deeper level and we had a deeper conversation. I suppose I just want to put that into the public psyche.

I was lucky enough to perform here once when the Reverend Billy & the Church of Stop Shopping, from New York, performed with his choir at the Phoenix. I was dressed as the ghost of capitalism and we had a good chat about my ideas and his ideas, and he went off and performed, went into Tesco and got thrown out of there. I haven't met or spoken to him since but I have seen that now his choir are much more glamorous, dressed as white figures, and I suppose that's what you hope to move forward, that some other people, other artists, will take on your ideas and there'll be some kind of global response. Likewise, I've been made aware of two New York artists who also perform as the woman in white since I've been working in that genre, so I think there is an understanding of that character and it still rings true to politics today.

I'm more aghast at politics for women today than I ever have been in my life. Things are getting worse and I look back at the time of the suffragettes and I feel that the women of the world are in worse trouble now than they were at that time. I know it's difficult to say because we weren't aware of the facts and the media has changed, but I think the struggle is

stronger. It's gone on politically from women not having equality and being suppressed to using women as political game, which is heart-breaking.

Networks and community are really important. I had to build new networks for myself when I was about 38, and almost begin my life again, and as a result of that I now have a really fantastic community of women, professionally and personally, that are my everything. I would say that there is a great deal of trust in those networks, and I like to offer that kind of networking support to women who are still struggling today, tomorrow. There's a massive power in community, particularly in community of women; if a woman is struggling to find herself I think that other women are a vital part of that reconnecting, offer support on many levels, whether it be someone to help with child care so you can work for an hour a week, or have an hour week off, someone who can speak to you on a compassionate level, on a political level, someone to find the right resources for you, someone to share creative practice, to help those people feel more empowered.

In terms of advice or encouragement I'd like to pass on to women who have yet to find their voices, the first step is to think and visualise what you really want for yourself, and dig deep and see how you want to manage and construct your life for the future. And then reach out to whoever will listen to you to help you make those changes. It's difficult because networks and resources are being cut left, right and centre for women who need to rise up, and I would say, don't give up hope; there'll always be someone there to listen, to point you in the right direction. The woman that helped me also helped me have an hour and a half off to myself a week. And she set up child minder to help fund that, because I didn't have any spare money at all. An hour and a half a week doesn't sound like a lot, but actually it gave me some time to sit and think, and that's what I did. Just to be able to clear my head from some of the hardship and think about what I wanted for myself and my kids. Whatever it is, there will be somebody that can offer you something.

My daughters are both very vocal, which I never really realised I could be, and one of them is already a feminist blogger, and the other one is a singer/songwriter. I think I'm lucky because they say to me, 'you've taught us so much, mum,' and I'm proud that they have a had better start in life than I had.