

THE RIGHT TO (NOT) REMAIN SILENT

BY JAMES H. EWERT JR.

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>> Being a cultural activist these days is kind of like being human in an increasingly post-human world, your flesh and bones are no match to the power of fuel-injected engines, precise sequencing of computers and cold steel. But thanks to humanitarian agitator Kalle Lasn, founder of the Vancouver-based cultural activist magazine *Adbusters*, human beings may have just scored a figurative nut-shot on their post-human counterparts.

In what has been a two-decade long legal battle, Lasn and his *Adbusters* Media Foundation, the non-profit organization which produces *Adbusters Magazine*, have finally won the right to argue in the Supreme Court of British Columbia that one of the most widely accepted universal rights granted to people, the freedom of speech, has become insufficient in a rapidly advancing information age. On April 3, the British Columbia Court of Appeal unanimously overturned a previous BC Supreme Court ruling against *Adbusters*, thus paving the way for Lasn's case to finally be heard in the highest provincial court.

In short, Lasn is arguing that the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (equivalent to the U.S. Public Broadcasting System) and other major Canadian television conglomerates are obligated under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms to sell *Adbusters* airtime just as it is sold to major advertisers and sponsors.

The fight to access public airwaves is particularly important to Lasn, an Estonian immigrant who grew up in a Soviet-Union-controlled country that went so far as to change high school history text books and lock up governmental dissidents in mental asylums because it is so starkly similar to the oppressive battles he faced as a rebellious youth.

"There was no way for the people to counteract all these lies they were being told," Lasn said by phone speaking from his home in Vancouver, British Columbia. "Then, many years later I found myself here in North America, the cradle of freedom and democracy and suddenly I found out that in Estonia you weren't allowed to speak

back against the government, while here you weren't allowed to speak back against an [advertising] sponsor. Right then I could really tell that there was this really deep down sense of rottenness here. Something rotten is going on when the people can't speak back and have a voice, this is what has kept me going all these years."

Now, as the figurehead of an international movement to "jam" westernized-culture's grip on the minds and bodies of humans everywhere Lasn's primary goal is to be the wrench in the cogs of an emotionless industrialized society—and in an age that is increasingly reliant on information and its dissemination, Lasn believes he's picked his battle wisely.

His case goes all the way back to 1989 when Lasn began approaching television stations in the Pacific Northwest seeking to buy airtime for his 30-second segments that criticized the forest industry, a major television advertiser that was spending millions of dollars publicizing how its work had little effect on the area's ecosystem. Conversely, Lasn wanted to draw attention to the dangers and harm the forest industry was inflicting on the environment. Unsurprisingly, however, Lasn faced stiff opposition in his effort to air his broadcast-quality segments, or 'subvertisements' as they are called. Whenever Lasn would find a network willing to run his spots advertisers would threaten to withhold their dollars from the station. Lasn's experience attempting to buy advertising time is eventually what led to him founding *Adbusters*.

"Well fuck those corporations," Lasn said. "If the forest industry is saying we'll have forests forever, we want to

come on and say we won't have forests forever then why the hell aren't we, the public, allowed to access our own public airwaves?"

It wasn't until 1995 that Lasn brought the matter before Canadian courts, but his suit was quickly dismissed. For the next several years Lasn and his organization toiled in legal maneuvering and on occasion were successful in finding stations to sell him time, but only under certain restrictions that weren't applied to other major television sponsors. Then in 2004, after Adbusters Media Foundation and expanded considerably from its 1990's infancy, Lasn mounted another lawsuit, this one going straight for some of the largest television conglomerates in Canada and the publicly-owned CBC, who's airwaves were supposedly owned by the people of Canada. The CBC was able to delay Adbusters' precedent-setting case until early 2008 when the BC Supreme Court dismissed it. According BC Supreme Court Justice William Ehrcke's ruling, Adbusters' case was "bound to fail." Fortunately for Adbusters, the BC Court of Appeal disagreed, thereby resuscitating the hope that one-day humans will know and be endowed with another right, the right to seek, impart, and receive information.

Now if you're thinking it's a bit hypocritical for a magazine predicated on the eradication of advertising and consumerism to be airing commercials, you're right. But, while Adbusters business model is counterproductive to say the least it has managed to help expand the organization into a viable advocate for a simpler and more thoughtful living experience on planet earth. Through different campaigns like 'Mental Detox Week,' and 'Buy Nothing Day,' Adbusters has quietly grown to a contingent that boasts a following of nearly 100,000 strong. During the course of Adbusters development over the past 10 years, it certainly has taken its hits from the cynical and self-loathing for everything from hypocrisy to pretension, but the magazine has continued to march to its own drum like a stoic adolescent. Many of the magazine's detractors continue to think of the Adbusters Media Foundation as the periodical equivalent to nihilistic dog porn, but a more apt description for Adbusters may be likening it to an alienated high school student with a penchant for pills and J.D. Salinger novels.

Thoughtful and caring analysis of the world's current predicament invariably leads to paranoia, conspiracy theories, and obsessive tendency to complicate common sense goals with esoteric rambling, a path this writer knows all too well. But that is why Adbusters has been

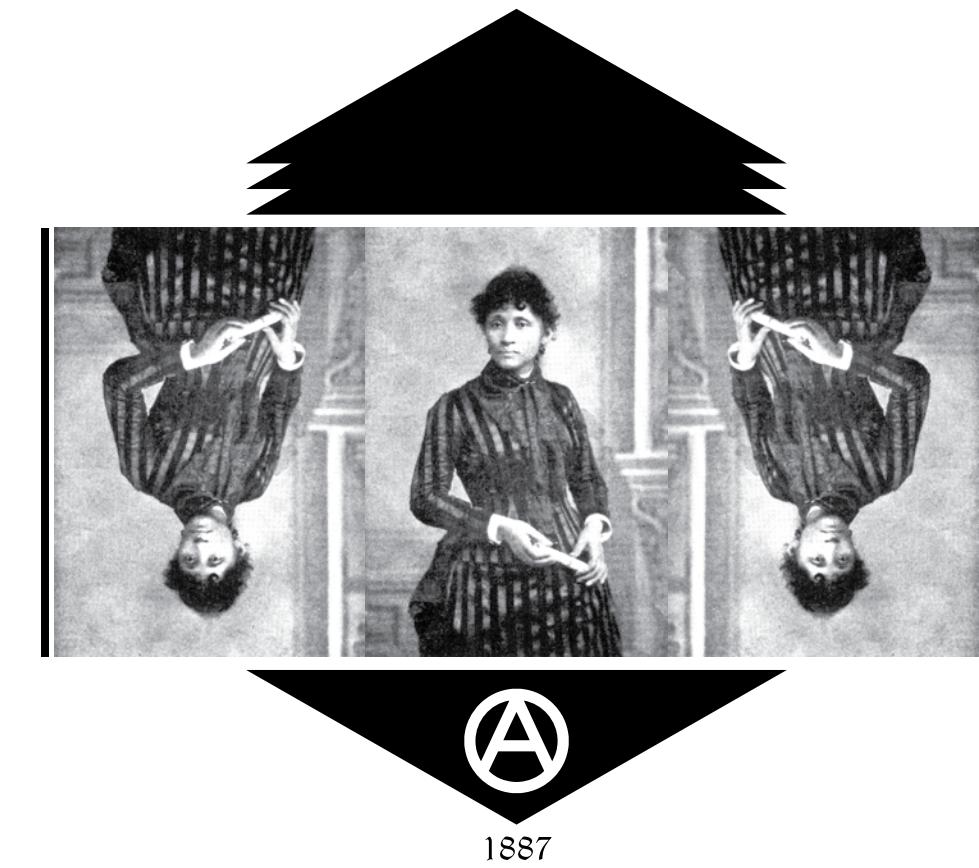
specifically remarkable in its ability to articulate more clearly its opposition to that overwhelming feeling of hopelessness and utter lack of motivation that seems to have pervaded every facet of our mechanized society.

Perhaps it's a bit melodramatic, but Lasn and the other hundreds of thousands of 'culture jammers,' as they are called by the magazine, may finally be on the verge of deciphering and making comprehensible that intangible, yet palpable and unmistakable figurative sense of a cultural earthquake swelling the ground beneath us and the economic tsunami contracting the oceans before us—but enough with the Adbuster-dick-sucking and on with the point.

To encapsulate Adbusters' moral and human argument for the right to communicate the group has issued a 'Media Carta,' an equivocal and bounding screed that, like its 13th Century predecessor, demands the acceptance and adherence to a new set of universal human rights. Except these new liberties don't pertain to a medieval world, but rather the 'Media Carta' addresses a world and culture slow and inefficient in keeping step with its own technological advancements in media and information dissemination. The manifesto confronts a civilized culture adulterated by media and extends the freedom of expression to the freedom of communication. It's not the words or concept specifically, but rather the consequential ramifications of such a declaration that make the campaign so bold.

It's hard to say what exactly it was 32,000 years ago that compelled the first homo-sapiens to carefully smear colored pigment on the walls of their caves in the shapes of horses and thin figures in their likeness. But research tells us that those first crudely executed cave drawings exhibited a particularly-human compulsion to communicatively express the intangible miasma of thoughts circulating in the brain's frontal lobe. In the few years that have elapsed since then, early homo-sapiens once uncanny compulsion to primitively replicate what they were observing every day has evolved into something more than a necessity to modern day humans and post-humans, communicating has become a basic component to sustaining life. With the help of a world unheedingly dependent on information and subordinate to its dissemination, scribbling on a cave wall no longer satiates our highly-advanced desire for complex expression. No matter how loud we shout and express ourselves on a street corner no one will hear us if they are inside watching TV.

WICKER PARK



A Ghost Named Lucy Still Haunts Us Here. by Lemi Goh

Cool kids still come to Wicker Park to get drunk, buy shoes and be artists. There is still the hint of an aura and a pull here. I write this from a tiny closet at the tip of North and Damen, while listening to the drunken roar of dancers--timed out for a smoke--at 2 am on a Saturday night. Drunken idiots everywhere down there. I spent the day talking to a photographer named Roberto Lopez about the neighborhood. His neighborhood--Wicker Park. Roberto moved here in 1971 from Mexico. His studio in the Flat Iron Building has hundreds of photos that he has taken of the neighborhood over the years. I like his photos because they prove what I know and what he knows about the neighborhood--that something was going on here before the 1990's. Before the influx of pre-packaged "alternative" types, people who mistakenly think that Wicker Park began in 1990. (Or, maybe 1993 according to some smug, Neo-Bohemia writer-dude.) People who mistakenly think that they started it all--never stopping to think that what they stumbled upon was ripe, fertile ground, that was, in fact, already bordering on Disneyland Punk and Art by 1990. And no, you didn't "start it" you don't deserve "credit" for it and if you made a killing on real estate you probably will never really "get it."

continued on next page

ILLUSTRATION BY EMILY CLAYTON