



BY SEAN DEVLIN

## Creative Spirits in Revolt

### Towards a culture of creative resistance

**O**n September 26, 1979 a film producer with a lot of money paid a stuntman to drive a rocket-powered Lincoln Continental off a 1,400 ft ramp in an attempt to jump the St. Lawrence River. The car needed to fly more than one mile in the air in order to land safely. Even Evel Knievel said it wasn't possible. He was right. The car only made it 506 ft into the air before breaking apart and falling into the water. The driver broke eight vertebrae, three ribs and his wrist. The producer who financed the stunt suffered no injuries.

At present, those responsible for devastating oil spills and collapsing economies have also escaped unharmed. Systemic unaccountability has turned our leaders into a reckless class of gamblers. They take unimaginable risks with our collective future, because they believe if things crumble, they'll be standing on the sidelines watching from a safe distance.

Prior to the 2009 UN Climate Negotiations in Copenhagen I spent a year working for a variety of environmental organizations helping give voice to the concerns of the majority of Canadians. We signed petitions and marched in the thousands. One day we occupied the office of a Conservative MP. By evening the police had arrived and made it clear that if we did

## OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

not leave, we would be arrested. At that moment a 16-year-old boy walked into the office and sat down with us. He had come straight from school to be arrested. Similar arrests occurred across the country. But in spite of these actions on the part of the public, our leaders went to the UN conference and acted in the interest of the oil industry, not the majority of Canadians they claimed to represent.

As world leaders failed to meaningfully address our increasingly unstable climate, I couldn't help but realize that most of these leaders and the fossil fuel executives they were serving would not be alive in 50 years. There is perhaps no safer distance than 'beyond the grave'.

These events left me dejected — in part because, while I had succeeded in engaging thousands of Canadians, I had failed to engage any of my closest friends. These friends were part of the creative community; they were young, talented and intelligent, but also — for lack of a better word — apathetic. Realizing that the movement wasn't powerful enough to make a difference and that I couldn't even get my friends involved left me so depressed I found myself having to do something I had never done before — I sought medical help from my doctor. Fortunately, I have one of those doctors who enjoys listening to his patients. He listened to me and his prescription was simple: "Stop reading the newspaper." He could see how overwhelmed I had become and felt that the best solution was to disengage for a while.

I tried that for a week and in that time I came to see the apathy of my peers differently. It wasn't that they didn't care; it was that to be acutely aware of the troubled state of things was overwhelming. Apathy was a form of self-defence.

The problem for me was that I found little comfort in disengagement. It was easy to avoid the news, but not the sleepless nights. And in this I know I'm not the only one. Many of us have a real fear for our future, simmering, untended in the back of our minds.

I couldn't live with that — not happily at least.

So I turned to my friends. I had been making videos and performing as a stand-up comedian since I was a teenager, but had abandoned that all when the world of activism called. As I reconnected with these creative communities I found that my new perception of "apathy" proved true. My friends did care, they just didn't know how to get involved, how to contribute by

utilizing their unique talents and abilities. That's when I came across the words of a playwright named Christopher Fry "Comedy is an escape, not from truth but from despair; a narrow escape into faith."

Consider this: Canadians spend more time on the internet than any other people in the world and the most popular media they consume are 'comedy videos'. So, naturally, we thought if we made some funny videos about some serious problems maybe we could get the attention of some of our peers.

Since then our unique brand of comedic activism has allowed us to meaningfully contribute to a number of struggles and to the winning side of two elections. However, we're aware that mouse-clicking and "facebook-liking" isn't enough and for that reason we're always striving to more deeply engage the online audiences we draw.

We've helped mobilize Canadians across the country to deliver asbestos to MP offices. We helped with online outreach for the largest act of civil disobedience in the history of the Canadian climate movement (part of a bigger movement that led to Obama's rejection of the Keystone XL Tar Sands pipeline that would run from Alberta to Texas). Most recently we were on the ground in New York making facilitating creative actions in collaboration with the Yes Men and Occupy Wall Street activists.

In the process I've come to learn that there is a vibrant history of creative activism, often led by youth. Creativity has played a vital role in successful revolutionary movements from Serbia to the Philippines.

When the interests of the masses are not being served, the biggest step an individual can take is to truly enter into service. My own experience tells me that if you have a creative talent or ability, that gift should not be taken lightly. The challenge is figuring out how to use it to serve something greater. Those currently running the show wield destructive force fueled by greed. Our calling is to summon a greater creative force, devoted to need.

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*Sean Devlin is an activist, comedian and filmmaker. He was the co-creator of [ShitHarperDid.com](http://ShitHarperDid.com) and founder of TruthFool Communications, a creative/strategic agency that employs some of the world's finest creative talent at the service of social change organizations.*