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“CREATING SPACES AND DIALOGUES FOR PEACE: THE PUFFIN FORUM ALTERNATIVES TO AN ENVIRONMENT OF VIOLENCE AND WAR IN THE UNITED STATES”

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Throughout U.S. history, individuals and networks have developed to create cultures of peace in resistance to the prevailing environment of recurrent war and other forms of violence. The creativity of these undertakings provides alternatives to create a better world through working toward realization of human rights locally, nationally and globally.¹ Oftentimes, such projects and processes are ignored even by the local media and largely written out of history. But, their impact is significant in providing members alternative communal networks and support in working toward ending violence and promoting cooperation and peace while reducing individual isolation and alienation. From the *Curriculum of Hope for a Peaceful World*² to *Pax Educare*³,

1 Peace educator Betty Reardon in an essay on “Learning Our Way to a Human Future” in *Learning Peace*, eds. Betty Reardon and Eva Nordland (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994) captures this ideology of positive peace when discussing her involvement with project PEACE(Project on Ecological and Cooperative Education). “The project tried to focus on positive alternatives: not just on what it means to be against war, injustice, human rights violations and environmental deterioration, but what it is to be for peace, justice, the realization of human rights, and ecological balance. The task it assumes is to give concrete form to a peaceful, just society that respects human rights and protects the environment, and to educate people to achieve and maintain a global social order of such form.” (p. 24).

2 “The Curriculum of Hope for a Peaceful World” is a quarterly newsletter distributed to over 800 educators worldwide. See <http://www.deltakappagamma.org/CT/chope.html>. The Newsletter was founded by former elementary school teacher Jeanne Morascini in 1986 and is a standing committee of Alpha Kappa Gamma State Chapter of Kappa Gamma Delta, an international organization of educators.

3 See www.paxeducare.org. Peace educator Mary Lee Morrison founded paxeducare which provides a range of activities from educational materials to workshops to foster peace education.

networks of small, political, cultural, social, religious and economic groupings primarily on the grass roots level continue to work toward a more just, peaceful society and world.

This paper will explore the work of The Puffin Foundation Ltd. with its two interactive cultural exhibition spaces, The Puffin Room in New York City and The Puffin Cultural Forum in Teaneck, New Jersey. Puffin seeks to provide an alternative forum for citizens and in particular artists and others whose work and voices are not heard or seen in the mainstream press and museums. At a time of war and other violence in the United States and world-wide, the Puffin Foundation provides an environment to promote peace and social justice and to educate against war and other forms of violence.

Historical Context Today

Black Panther Party member Stokely Carmichael noted “Violence is as American as cherry pie.” This comment outraged many U.S. citizens when it was stated in the 1960s and undoubtedly would still anger and be refuted by many citizens today. Denial both of the degree of violence within U.S. society and its links with the current U.S. wars on terrorism continues. The symbiotic relationship between escalating violence in U.S. culture and waging war abroad is largely ignored. The degree of domestic violence from high school shootings⁴ to youth suicide to large numbers of minorities and other individuals incarcerated in U.S. prisons continues to escalate. The bombings of 9/11 have been used as an excuse to curb civil liberties in the United States and world-wide. U.S. citizens’ sense of vulnerability contributed to the 2004 re-election of President Bush and support for an all out war against terror. President George W. Bush continues a rhetoric and foreign policy of American exceptionalism and justifies waging war on Iraq as bringing the blanket of freedom and democracy to the oppressed. The politics of U.S. education historically largely ignores or denies space for teaching about human rights and social justice issues in the classroom⁵ and rarely fosters creative spaces for differences of opinion and dissent. In the present environment of good and evil empires and just/unjust war theory rationales, a series of networks and groups working toward cultures of peace in the United States continue to develop. This paper will look at one such movement, the Puffin Foundation Ltd., and discuss how it has provided important resources and space for individuals to express an alternative message of creativity and education including resistance to war and other forms of violence and promotion of social justice issues.

History and Goals of the Puffin Foundation

The Puffin Foundation Ltd. was founded in 1983 by the Rosenstein Family who wanted to provide grants for artists and various art groups “who are often excluded from mainstream opportunities due to their race, gender, or social philosophy.”⁶ In the last decades, the

4 See Linda Rennie Forcey and Ian Murray Harris, *Peacebuilding for Adolescents: Strategies for Educators and Community Leaders* (New York: Peter Lang Pubs., 1999) for essays that analyze ways to address violent events in schools from killings to fighting, harassment, weapons carrying and bullying and how to develop strategies for non-violent resolution and reduction of violence.

5 See Joyce Apsel, “The Challenges of Human Rights Education and the Impact on Children’s Rights,” in *Children’s Human Rights: Progress and Challenges for Children Worldwide*, eds., Mark Ensaraco and Linda C. Majka, (Oxford: Roman & Littlefield, 2005): 229-247.

6 <http://www.puffinfoundation.org/grants/mission.html>

foundation's small grants have fostered the work of "emerging artists in art, music theater, dance, photography, and literature whose works due to their genre and/or social philosophy might have difficulty being aired."⁷ The purpose of "continuing the dialogue between art and the lives of ordinary people" is central to Puffin's establishment and goals:

"The Puffin, a species whose nesting sites were endangered by encroaching civilization, were encouraged to return to their native habitats through the constructive efforts of a concerned citizenry. We have adopted the name Puffin for our Foundation as a metaphor for how we perceive our mission, which is to ensure that the arts continue to grow and enrich our lives. In doing so we have joined with other concerned groups and individuals toward achieving that goal."⁸

Education and Serving as a Resource for Public Schools

The Puffin Cultural Forum located in the Foundation's administrative offices in Teaneck, New Jersey, serves as a local resource for both the adult community of Northern Bergen County but also for the public schools offering a series of programs such as art exhibits and workshops, group tours and theater presentations "concerning important issues of our time." "Our work takes place at the intersection of the arts and the struggle for human rights" through emphasizing the crucial role that "the arts play in shaping our consciousness, and the role of artists as agents of social change."⁹ The Puffin Cultural Forum brings "thoughtful, socially-relevant, and provocative art programming from art exhibitions to theater, author interviews, workshops, lectures and dialogue."¹⁰ Hence, the Puffin Forum attempts to provide educational outreach to classrooms and schools in Northern New Jersey, especially Teaneck, New Jersey, as well as provide a community space for dialogue, debate, dissent as well as education.

Cooperation with other Networks, Foundations, and Organizations

An important development of the Puffin Foundation that has emerged increasingly in the last decade is creating links and cooperation with a number of other organizations including museums, magazines, and other partners. For example, The Puffin Foundation is working with ALBA, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives. ALBA contains documents from the approximate 3000 U.S. volunteers who went to Spain to fight against fascism from 1936-1939. The Puffin Foundation is fostering projects that will bring "the archival material about the Lincoln Brigade into public view through art and cultural and educational programs."¹¹ Another project is co-sponsored

⁷ <http://www.puffinfoundation.org/grants/prospectiveapplicant.html> The average grants are between \$1,000-\$2,500. Several years ago, the author, in her capacity as Director of RightsWorks International received a small grant to help distribute books and other educational materials on human rights to elementary and secondary school students.

⁸ The Foundation generally does not fund large documentary works, travel grants, continuing education or book writing. Ibid. <http://www.puffinfoundation.org/special/living.html>

⁹ <http://www.puffinfoundation.org/grants/mission.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.puffinfoundation.org/forum/forumindex.html>

¹¹ Ibid.

with the Museum of the City of New York on the New York City Coops (cooperative housing) Exhibit and Documentary. "The documentary will highlight the struggle of primarily immigrant working men and women, who in solidarity were able to build the first decent housing cooperatives for working men and women in the 1920's and 1930's."¹² These two projects represent initiatives by Puffin to raise awareness of the role of progressive activists and working class solidarity as part of U.S. history; two historic developments largely ignored and written out of history in the classroom and in public education.

In 2001, Puffin funded the Puffin/Nation Creative Citizen Award which is awarded to U.S. citizens annually who challenge the status quo "through distinctive, courageous, imaginative, socially responsible work of significance."¹³ The Prize is administered by the Nation Institute, an affiliate of the progressive magazine, The Nation, and the \$100,000 Prize is funded by the Puffin Foundation. To date, The Creative Citizen Award has been given to Dolores Huerta, a political activist and union organizer of farm workers and to Robert Moses, an educator and founder of the Algebra Project which encourages ways to learn mathematics so that African American students can escape the "tracking system" in the United States. The 2003 recipient was David Protess who founded the Innocence Project which has been responsible for overturning the conviction of eight Illinois prisoners, four on death row. Protess is now working to set up a program to help "exonerated prisoners adjust to civilian life."¹⁴

Exhibits and Forums against the U.S. War in Iraq

In November, 2004, The Puffin Room in New York City featured an exhibit called The Kingdom of Fear: Art and Propaganda of the American Empire. This artistic representation followed the revelations of torture and other abuses of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. military at the Abu Gharab prison. The art works of artists opposed to the war included depiction of a shrouded dark silhouette figure with hands spread out and white wire attached. The words 10,000 volts in your pocket, guilty or innocent were written under the drawing.

In December 2004, the Puffin Cultural Forum exhibited the Eyes Wide Open: Beyond Fear-Towards Hope. An Exhibition of the Iraq War in their small gallery in suburban Teaneck, New Jersey. Created by the American Friends Service Committee, Eyes Wide Open provides a "multimedia journey through the words, images, and sounds of the Iraq war. Visitors move through a vivid memorial to the war's soldier and civilian victims, a searing expose of the statements told to the U.S. public to justify the war, a compelling outline of what the war is costing us at home, and finally to an interactive, easy way to contribute their voices to changing our country's course toward peace."¹⁵

Along with the exhibit, a series of speakers throughout December included Kenneth Cain and Heidi Postlewait co-authors of *Emergency Sex and other Desperate Measures: A True Story*

¹² <http://www.puffinfoundation.org/grants/special.html>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ <http://www.puffinfoundation.org/special/creativecitizen.html>

¹⁵ Ibid.

from *Hell on Earth* revealing the dark side of United Nations Peacekeeping. A panel discussion on the The Human Costs of the War in Iraq included Erik Gustafson, Gulf War veteran and Executive Director of Education for Peace in Iraq; Irene Schneiweis, Program Coordinator of MADRE, working in Iraq with Iraqi women's organizations; and Alex Ryabov, veteran Marine from March 2003 Iraq invasion and co-founder of Iraq Veterans Against the War. In another free, public event, composer and jazz musician David Amram and poet Frances Quinn lead a poetic, musical investigation of the war in Iraq by performing anti-war poetry of Robert Bly, author of the new book *The Insanity of Empire*.

The Puffin Cultural Forum concluded the series with two video presentations: *Voices of Iraq* (Magnolia Films, 2004). This documentary is based on the distribution of 150 video cameras to mothers, children, sheiks, even insurgent, across Iraq "to document their lives and hopes amidst the upheaval of a nation being born."¹⁶ *The Ground Truth: the Human Cost of War* is a documentary examining the long term and often invisible effects the war is having on thousands of "nameless, undecorated Americans."¹⁷

In March 2005, the Puffin Cultural Form organized a multi-media art exhibit called **PatriART: Artists Defend Civil Liberties**. Working with the American Civil Liberties Union-New Jersey the Puffin Forum issued a call to New Jersey Artists and filmmakers working in all media to submit work for the exhibit. **PatriART** has as its theme:

"At no time in our nation's history have our civil liberties been more imperiled. Particularly in times of political reaction, artists are the conscience of the nation. The works of **PatriART** will examine the post 9/11 assault on civil liberties by laws such as the PATRIOT Act and corollary immigration and Homeland Security legislation, and executive orders. We are calling upon New Jersey artists and filmmakers to answer the marketing of fear by the right-wing with their own visions of the human and civil rights that are at stake and what we are fighting to preserve for future generations."¹⁸

Creating Spaces and Dialogues for Peace and Civil Liberties in Times of War

Hundreds of thousands of Americans protested against the Iraqi War before President Bush's final declaration. For the most part, their protests were ignored by both their Congress, the President and the local and national media. At a time when the popular culture is inundated with propaganda of violence and war and civil liberties are being undermined, The Puffin Foundation through its grants, exhibits, and public forums has created an environment for individuals who want to find common ground with others who oppose war and want to create avenues for

16 <http://www.afsc.org/eyes/default.htm> The Eyes Wide Open link includes an Iraq Peace Petition that demands ending the war in Iraq as well as comments made by visitors to the exhibits and upcoming dates and locations the exhibit will travel to throughout the United States such as the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis Tennessee, the National Cathedral in Washington D.C. and the Clinton Presidential Library in Little Rock, Arkansas.

17 <http://www.puffin.foundation.org/forum/calendar/dec.html>

18 Ibid. The documentary is by Patricia Foulkrod and runs 30 minutes.

19 <http://www.puffinfoundation.org/patriart.html>

peaceful change and social justice. The role of the artist and art in helping to express these goals is central to Puffin's vision. From its recent support of a butterfly garden for a school in Hawthorne, New Jersey to anti-war exhibits and public forums, the Puffin Foundation is an example of how a small foundation sometimes on its own and at times working with other non-profit organizations and community groups fosters cultures and communities of peace and human rights in a society dominated by war and violence.