

Nikki Craft: Inspiring Protest

INTRODUCTION

Diana E. H. Russell

If I were to be on the selection committee for a Nobel Prize for feminist activism, I would have no hesitation in nominating Nikki Craft.

For almost 20 years I have followed her efforts to stop violence against women, and I have been in awe of her brilliance. Her extraordinary abilities emerge as she uses her art in pursuit of her political goals: her sharp wit, her inventive sense of humor, her instinct for good strategy, her understanding of what will interest the media, to say nothing of her courage, her ability to inspire and mobilize others, and her willingness to act alone and to swim against the tide if necessary. Craft uses all her talents and intelligence in the service of her profound determination to make the United States a less violent country for women to live in.

Craft has attacked many different forms of woman hating in our contemporary U.S. culture, including rape, pornography, sexist ads, products that promote bulimia and anorexia, beauty pageants, and anything that requires women to mutilate their bodies to meet prescriptive standards of female attractiveness. In addition, Craft has been one of the few feminists to consistently demonstrate against femicide (although she only recently started using this particular word). However, these protests do not stand out from her actions on other issues, partly, I believe, for lack of an accepted word—until now—to describe the misogynist killing of women.

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The following five readings provide typically daring examples of anti-femicide protests by Craft and her sister activists. In "The Incredible Case of the Stack o' Wheat Prints," Craft describes how, in 1980, she destroyed a collection of 10 prints housed in the Special Collections Library at the Santa Cruz campus of the University of California. These photographs eroticize the murder of women by glamorizing representations of their corpses. Craft was nearly expelled from the university for this action.

I remember Craft asking me to write to the chancellor of the university in support of her action—an easy task for me. In the end, not only was she not expelled, but she was nominated for a chancellor's ethics award by 400 students, her arresting officer, the provost of her college, and the socialist feminist mayor of Santa Cruz.

Next, D. A. Clarke analyzes Craft's one-woman Stack o' Wheat action, arguing that defense of the prints on the grounds that they constitute art "is specious at best." She points out that the established definition of what constitutes art is discriminatory, and she analyzes how male art is frequently used to silence women.

The following two selections describe the destruction of *Hustler* magazines by the Preying Mantis Women's Brigade, a fly-by-night underground feminist group in Santa Cruz, where Craft lived for many years. This group engaged in many illegal actions designed to attract media attention in order to confront issues of violence against women. These acts of rage were dedicated to one of the victims of murderer Kenneth Bianchi, the so-called Hillside Strangler of Los Angeles, who was sentenced to life imprisonment together with his accomplice, Angelo Buono, for the torture and murder of 10 women. The victim was 20-year-old Cindy Lee Hudspeth. Craft selected her from the others because a "joke" was published in *Hustler* referring to her murder as Bianchi's "latest accomplishment."

One of the many lessons that Craft's life can teach us is how powerful and effective one dedicated, courageous woman can be. I have often thought that if there were many more Nikki Crafts in our movement, women in the United States would be much closer to achieving basic feminist goals. Those who have worked closely with Craft, such as Ann Simonton and Melissa Farley, two other remarkably brave and committed feminist activists, exemplify Craft's ability to inspire.

I regret that I have never lived in the same community as Craft because I fancy that I might have become—like Simonton and Farley—less willing to allow my fear of arrest and imprisonment to stop me from doing what needs to be done. I believe I would be less intimidated by the police and courts and would get more enjoyment from my activist work. The injection of humor into demonstrations is not only effective, but fun. Anyone who hears Craft talk or attends her rousing and informative slide presentations about her work will learn that she doesn't merely rage and scream. She also laughs a lot.

In the final reading of this group, Melissa Farley describes what she and Craft called a "rampage" against the femicidal images published in a particular issue of *Penthouse*. Their many acts of civil disobedience during this 18-month rampage in 1985–86 resulted in 95 arrests of many different individuals. Craft was arrested 17 times and Farley 13 times, in different states.

The day after I viewed that group, I read on the front page of the San Francisco Chronicle of the murder of Barbara Schwartz, who was killed by