

## **ON PADD AND UPFRONT**

### **Memories and Reflections**

**PADD** was appealing to many of the other artists and myself for a number of reasons. It was a collective organization genuinely committed to purpose. It identified itself as an artist collective and honored the creative spirit of individuals. It strived to make wider connections, to affect change. The group was oriented around ideas that stem from critical and social theory and the application of them. And there was a lot of various ingredients to it to make it very lively, creative and contemporary. Padd positioned itself as a critic of ideology, promoter of collective action and it practiced reflection.

PADD offered me a way to develop my artwork through collective action. I learned so much in the discussions and especially through the work of the magazine Upfront which made me feel useful. It was with it that I was able to contribute the most, learn the most and practice what I was absorbing. However I was involved in all aspects of the group including the archive, the exhibitions, actions, marches, performance events and discussions. The work of the magazine reflected, reported on and extended all of the activities. It was an empowering, it made me feel a part of something meaningful much bigger than myself. I felt a real sense of ownership with the magazine, I felt encouraged to be creative. It was important to me and the others to make work that had meaning and had a political point. I wanted to keep it artful always but balanced aesthetics with the content. Truth was more emphasized than beauty.

On the critical side I do remember struggling with the political language and discourse. It was alien to me-hard to grasp- often over intellectualized. I identified myself as a visual artist and although I read a lot I wasn't a confident writer or speaker and felt those limitations. And yes I felt silenced often by the more articulate and accomplished in the group. I did try and go with it while keeping my insecurity in check. I tried to learn and apply what I was involved with to my own understanding. It was more than a little confusing to juggle all of the various perspectives presented in the magazine. I did see it as a challenge and felt it was important to document a full range of activities. I tried to keep it within the spirit of a collective by giving fair weight to diverse views. Of course a lot of the content was determined by the collective editors, with most direction coming from Lucy and for a while from Stuart Garber who was a remarkable although short lived presence.

### **Afterthoughts**

I liked working with Lucy Lippard. I enjoyed the teamwork and comradeship plus she was a lot of fun to be with. She wrote and edited manuscripts. I arranged and brought it together. She was funny and ironic and was free with her opinions. I saw she respected my work and was encouraging for me and many others. She was fair even though complicated. She loved purple and advocated for it sometimes unreasonably but in her lovable way. She would work ceaselessly hard for weeks, then stop everything and take an afternoon off to go to the movies. She loved to dance and made a party happen.

Greg Sholette and Janet Koenig were very heartening to me. I felt like they represented the best of the group with their tireless, uber principled work to further the collective. They were apostles of theory and I learned a lot from them about the deconstructivists. They were very creative individually and yet demonstrated such a remarkable commitment to cause, process and theory/ practice. They really were amazing models of artist activists by combining all of these capabilities of organizing, conceptual development as well as warm and loyal comradeship.

Jerry Kearns was another strong influence mainly because of his balance of artistic career and political activism. He was clear about how he valued integrating his vision with the larger political movement- I think he carried it off and showed an incredible sense of integrity as well as creative risk.

Some of the favorite and outstanding issues of the magazine included the Fall 1985 issue that surveyed the very ambitious exhibition series on State of Mind/ State of the Union. I loved the cover using Jerry Kearns's work with the figure with a hole in it that coincided so well with the Upfront nameplate. Another important issue was the 1987 issue that included the print work PADD exhibited in Concrete Crisis at the Exit Art Gallery. Favorite covers for the magazine included the two by Anton Van Dalen and one by Peter Gourfain. It was great to design articles about Sue Coe, Merle Ukeles Laderman, Art from the PADD archives, the Not For Sale Exhibition against gentrification, Rudolf Baranik, Cuban Photography, Art Against Apartheid, Artists Working With Labor and works of Group Material.

There were many who we came in contact with and the circle of acquaintances expanded widely for me. Some of the people I worked with included Joel Cohen, Rae Langsten, Charles Frederick, Mimi Smith, Barbara Moore, Herb Perr, Jerry Kearns, Irving Wexler, Stuart Garber, Susan Crowe, Greg Sholette and Janet Koenig et al. Others were not core members but were in our circle that included Ira Shor, Peter Gourfain, Edgar Heap of Birds, Tim Rollins, Anton Van Dalen, Alan Moore, Myrna Zimmerman, Eva Cockcroft, Alfredo Jarr, Dennis Adams, Christy Rupp, Doug Ashford and many others. Hans Haacke, Nancy Spero, Leon Golub were at some of the gatherings.

I believe I played a modest role in PADD. I wasn't a leading presence in the group although my paintings, prints, banners, street stencils and design were fairly evident in the scope of activities. I contributed to the continuity, substance and production of the group mainly through Upfront. I believed in the mission of PADD and believed in the others and their commitment to political engagement in order to transform the world. It was edgy for the participants, it wasn't a career move like other groups such as Colab where the group focused on writing grants and promoting themselves. I liked nearly everyone in PADD although in retrospect I realize I felt like I was silenced sometimes because of the strong voices and that alienated me. I felt conflicted because I believed in my role as a cultural worker and the value of that but I did see others as more equal than I and so I knew I had to find my own direction. I left PADD before it faded because I wanted to pursue my own work more related to public projects. I became active with the muralist group Artmakers and worked closely with the founder Eva Cockcroft for the next years. I see that has led me to my work as a public artist today. I do credit my work with Upfront as the first steps I took as a designer and I continue to do that as well as teach it.

The group remains an important model and can still resonate in these times of continued cultural and political struggle.

Padd is over and gone, but long may it live.

Keith Christensen

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