



WHOSE BODIES

Cultural Struggles Around Abortion¹

B. Lee, photographs by Left Eye

Starting Points: Images and Actions

What images have defined the abortion struggle in the popular culture and media? Is it the right to life "sidewalk counsellor" proffering his plastic foetus to women going to clinics in an attempt to show them the error of their ways?

Or is it the thousands of women and men who have taken to the streets in support of women's right to make the decision for themselves? What images symbolise the breadth of this determination and resistance?

What myriad medical, legal, moral, official and feminist discourses have defined and constructed the issues of abortion and reproductive health care? Where do women speak in these discourses? What is missing from the following?

How do we put women back in the picture — literally and politically? How do we keep the focus on women's condition, experiences and needs?

The long struggle for abortion rights has never solely been about winning free and equal access to abortion and all other needed reproductive health care for women. Like so many other key political conflicts, it is also a struggle around representation. This essay explores how the reproductive rights movement has been trying to challenge and transform the framing of the "abortion question" within the media and dominant culture. It explores the institutions and narratives we have confronted in the symbolic battle over the meaning of abortion, and how we have tried to build a positive and popular discourse of reproductive freedom and women's empowerment.

The Politics of Abortion

Abortion has been one of the most heated points of conflict between the contemporary women's movement and the state and conservative right. It has also been an area of significant feminist advance: the pro-choice movement has been able to overturn (at least for the moment) the oppressive and inequitable federal law on abortion; free-standing clinics have been estab-

lished in a number of cities and more are on the way; the notion of choice is firmly embedded in the public consciousness; inequitable and inadequate access to abortion has come to be seen as a major problem for women's health and well-being; and about three-quarters of the population support the idea that women should be able to decide for themselves whether or not to have an abortion. The long struggle to win full and equal access to abortion and all the other reproductive care women need is far from over, but significant gains have been made.²

However, the struggle for reproductive rights has taken place on very hostile ideological terrain. Pervasive conservative ideologies of gender and sexuality, motherhood and familism, remain the vital context for the meaning of abortion. Few of the thousands upon thousands of women who have had abortions feel comfortable to publicly acknowledge it. (If they had, would this not have immeasurably strengthened the pro-choice movement?) Many people who support access to abortion do not see it as an unqualified right, essential to women being able to control their lives, but rather as an unfortunate

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necessity legitimate only in certain circumstances. Others disapprove of abortion as "a means of birth control" or for reasons of "convenience." And the powerful symbol of the foetus overshadows the entire debate.

Why have the discourses around abortion remained so harsh and unforgiving? How can we escape the ideological strait-jacket of motherhood and selfless femininity to define the debate around abortion in feminist terms? How can we forge a new feminist cultural politics that celebrates reproductive freedom? These are the questions addressed here. First of all, I want to survey the competing discourses and key points of ideological conflict around abortion.

Competing Discourses: Whose Bodies/ Whose Rights/Whose Lives

A feminist discourse of reproductive freedom starts from the basic premise that being able to control their reproductive and sexual lives is a precondition of

women's liberation and autonomy. The fundamental goals of the reproductive rights movement have been to win the conditions needed to ensure this reproductive freedom for all women and in so doing to transform and revolutionise the very way in which reproduction is socially organised. The goal is nothing less than women's empowerment.

To be able to control their lives women have to be able to decide when and whether they will bear children. Because available contraception is often ineffective or unsafe, abortion is indispensable to this goal; it is a vital component of health care for the full spectrum of women's reproductive lives. At the same time, access to contraception and abortion underlies heterosexual women's sexual autonomy.³

For these reasons, free and equal access to abortion is essential to women's well-being. This is much more than an abstract legal right. Women need access to abortion because of the basic way sexuality and reproduction are organised in contemporary society. It is an indispensable precondition

of women being able to control their bodies and their lives. Bodily integrity in this most fundamental sense is in turn the precondition of women's moral integrity and individual self-determination. It is "a positive and necessary enabling condition for full participation in social and communal life."⁴

Such themes present a striking contrast to the dominant discourses of state, medicine, religion and the moralist right. Medical discourses define abortion as a technical and professional problem, with physicians as the gatekeepers and adjudicators who decide whose abortions are "medically necessary." Official judicial and legislative discourses see abortion as a delicate moral problem upon which there is no social consensus; the role of the state is therefore to fashion a compromise, to regulate abortion in the interests of "society."

Within anti-abortion discourse women having abortions are often seen as victims: whether of their biology, of unscrupulous doctors, or of a rapacious male sexuality that leaves women with the consequences

WHOSE LIVES?



of sexual freedom. There actually are front groups calling themselves victims of abortion. Nowhere is the right's inability to conceive of women acting independently for their own reasons clearer.⁵

When women are not portrayed as victims they are presented as selfish and uncaring. Beneath this is the traditional assumption that women are by nature selfless nurturers. One of the primary reasons for the fervour of right-wing opposition to abortion is that it lays bare the emptiness of this traditional familism. A woman choosing abortion is making, consciously or not, a direct and irrefutable challenge to this ideology; she is declaring that she refuses to bear a child at that point in time and that she defines her life as more than motherhood.

Foetus Fetish

Floating over all these debates about women and reproduction is the ever-present symbol of the foetus. Lawyers argue about its constitutional status and legal personhood. Doctors define the foetus as a patient — separate and distinct from the mother — and appoint themselves as its guardians in any conflicts with the "foetal environment." And, of course, the fiercest clash in the cultural conflict over abortion is with the rabidly anti-abortion "pro-life" groups (here, as elsewhere, the very terms are highly charged and contentious).

The image of the innocent and defenceless foetus has become the centrepiece of anti-choice political strategy. In its symbolic deployment by anti-choice and moral minority ideologues, the foetus has come to encode a host of powerful messages. Its destruction condenses a whole series of anxieties for the faithful: the loss of sexual

innocence, fear for the embattled family, and yearning for that mythic secure and stable past so beloved of the conservative right. The symbol of the foetus serves both as political sign and moral injunction: sign of moral decay and disorder and injunction to turn back the godless feminists and humanists — to resurrect those traditional values of motherhood, femininity and family that demanding the right to abortion so directly challenges. In these ways, the spectre of abortion and the symbol of the foetus have become powerful mobilising forces for those who fear social change and hate the feminist and other progressive movements working to bring it about.⁶

In the cultural struggle around abortion the anti-choice has had considerable success in appropriating the foetus, and the attendant symbolism of the meaning of life, as the major issue in the abortion debate. Ignoring the complexity of women's reproductive lives and experiences, this boils the abortion issue down to the simple but extremely powerful image of the foetus, a stark and dramatic image that works effectively in a visually oriented culture.⁷

Shifting the Focus: Women's Lives/ Women's Values

The problem is that abortion is not a simple question, either for society as a whole or for individual women. It does raise complex questions concerning the relationship between a woman and the potential life developing within her; the social division of labour with its rigid gender differentiation and expectations around family, childbearing, and motherhood; the many constraints and pressures that limit women's ability to bear and raise children in adequate circumstances; and the relations of power surrounding the human body in the social organisation of sexuality and reproduction. How can such complexity be captured by simple slogans or images? This section analyzes the diverse cultural and ideological issues the choice movement has tried to integrate into our politics.

We can respond, just as starkly, to the foetus fetish of the anti-choice with the symbol of the coat hanger — a powerful and unpleasant image that effectively highlights the implications of the ban on abortion the "pro-life" so fervently desires.

There are also the shocking pictures of women dead on cheap motel room floors as a result of botched illegal abortions. The slogan "Keep It Legal/ Keep It Safe" speaks to the bedrock concern of choice activists. We know that women have always resorted to abortion, often for reasons beyond their control and out of desperation rather than free choice, and they have done so under appalling conditions. We also know that illegal abortion is the leading cause of maternal death in the third world and that some 100,000 to 250,000 women world-wide die each year. To seek to ban abortions while knowing this and knowing that women will die as a result reveals the depth of "pro-life" hypocrisy and misogyny.

But we can't just respond at this level; it

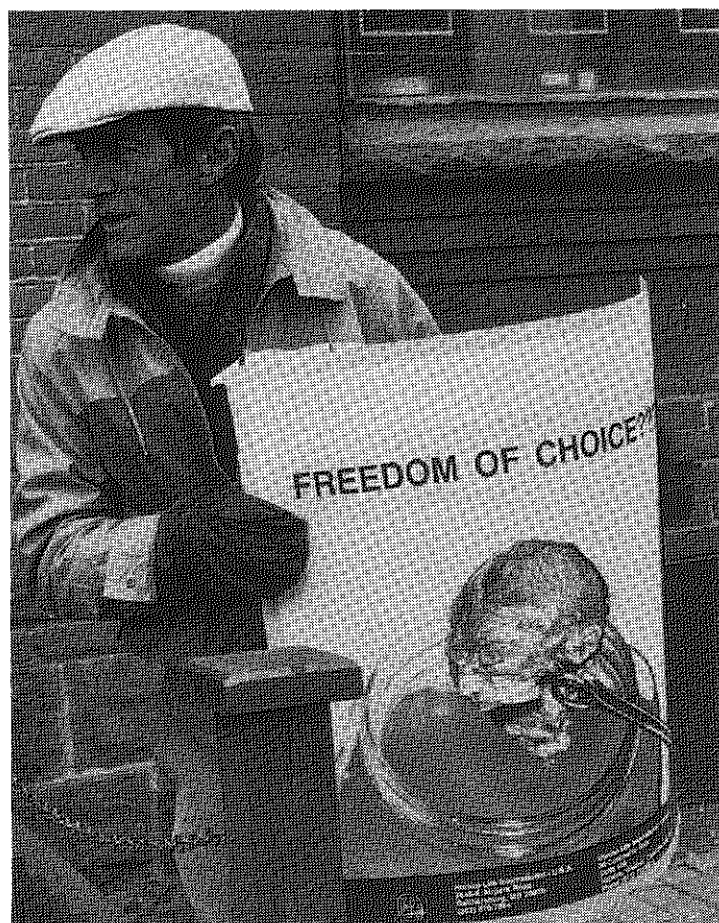
is not enough to show the ever-present danger of anti-choice goals. Their pervasive reification of the foetus is not just a matter of threatening women's lives and health if abortion were ever to be banned. Nor is the underlying ideological conflict really about the moral status and value of the foetus. In fact, there may very well be a point of consensus, shared by pro-choice and anti-choice alike, within the conflicting range of belief on abortion. It is likely that most people do feel that the potential life of the foetus should be taken seriously. But the great majority then go on to balance this potential against the immediate situation and needs of the woman facing an unwanted pregnancy. And this means that the real point at issue, and the real conflict, is over nothing less than the value of women; the value we place on women's status, needs, aspirations and autonomy.⁸

And it is this basic question that can be lost in contemporary debates. We must not allow ourselves and the broader debate to be diverted onto the question of the foetus. Above all else, we have to say clearly and strongly that women's needs and aspirations have a higher ethical and political priority than the potential life of the foetus the woman is carrying. This means directly taking on many of the key ideological notions that constrain and construct the social relations of reproduction. Most fundamentally, we must demand *abortion without apology*.⁹

Too many pro-choice supporters and feminists have come to speak of abortion as inevitably a tragedy; as at best an unfortunate necessity. This apologetic tone runs the very real risk of conceding the ideological terms of reference to the anti-choice: it implies that there is something intrinsically morally wrong about abortion. I would argue that we have to challenge this view directly.

Of course we prefer less invasive means of preventing and terminating unwanted pregnancies than surgical abortion. That is why we always couple our demands for improved access to abortion with the need for safe and effective forms of contraception. That is why we want to explore the potential of new developments such as RU486, a pill which seems to safely and effectively terminate pregnancies early on. But for now, and for the foreseeable future, abortion is an indispensable means of women controlling their fertility. We must not shy away from this central importance.

We would never want to ignore the ambivalence and occasional remorse that some women feel around their abortions. But we must understand these feelings in the proper context of a culture that places tremendous pressure on women to conform to maternalist and familial ideological expectations and a health care system that makes access to abortion burdensome for all women and horrendously difficult for far too many. We can admit the emotional complexity of abortion while at the same time clarifying the conditions in which it would not occupy a problematic position in women's lives: free and equal access to all reproductive health care, women-centred centres and services in



which abortion is integrated with counselling and services on all other facets of reproduction, and a transformed culture of reproduction in which abortion is no longer viewed so negatively but is seen as one part of the overall continuum of women's reproductive choices.

We often speak of women making their decisions out of desperation, from strikingly unequal material positions and from a realm of sexual relations that is starkly oppressive. All of this is true, but is there also a danger of overemphasising the degradation and inequality women face? For some, making the decision to have an abortion and overcoming all the obstacles women routinely face can be a positive act of individual will and courage against powerful institutional and cultural obstacles. For some women it may be a key experience in taking control of their lives.

We should also remember the huge number of women who have abortions for their own reasons and the even larger number who support the right of women to make their own decisions. While less visible than activists would hope for, this collective action and belief amounts to a significant transgression of the deep-seated norms of femininity and maternalism that envelop abortion and reproduction.¹⁰

A feminist discourse of abortion without apology can also be part of the challenge to a broad complex of narratives centred on women's bodies: discourses around biology, femininity, motherhood, nurturance, family and privacy. Perhaps most fundamentally for contemporary political conflicts, political and ideological conflict around abortion and sexuality are inextricably linked and abortion has come to play a key role in the moral regulation of sexuality.¹¹ Abortion is certainly central to the wider political agenda of the "pro-family" conservative right. The spectre that drives them to distraction is that of women seeking pleasure in autonomous and self-defined sexual lives. At its crudest the right wants women who are sexually active to pay for their sins; this is at the root of the incredibly punitive attitude to women seeking abortion that pervades anti-choice philosophy. They hope that the threat of unwanted pregnancy will constrain women's sexuality and that making abortion inaccessible will drive women into the traditional sanctities of marriage and family. The coercive nature of "pro-family" politics is nowhere clearer.

The enemies of choice know full well that their struggle to limit abortion is really about the control of women's sexuality and we must not flinch from making this connection. We have to challenge the repressive sexual moralism the anti-choice seeks to impose. We have to say without hesitation that if abortion, as the occasional but vital back-up for contraceptive failure, is the price to pay for heterosexual women's sexual freedom — then so be it.¹²

All of this is crucial because popular struggle is never solely about demonstrations, building alliances and defying oppressive laws. Just as in women's overall fight for social equality and sexual freedom, the struggle for lesbian and gay lib-

eration and the current politics of AIDS, conflict over cultural representation is a crucial facet of the politics of abortion.¹³ A vital analytical task is to unravel and unpack the diverse discourses and assumptions that surround abortion and identify how political and ideological conflict around abortion is so central to issues ranging from family, children, and sexuality to the whole construction of gender relations. But we have to do more than simply understand the cultural context for abortion politics; we have to find ways of challenging and transforming the very terms of reference for the abortion debate. How effectively and imaginatively we are able to do this will very much shape the ultimate political success of the pro-choice movement.

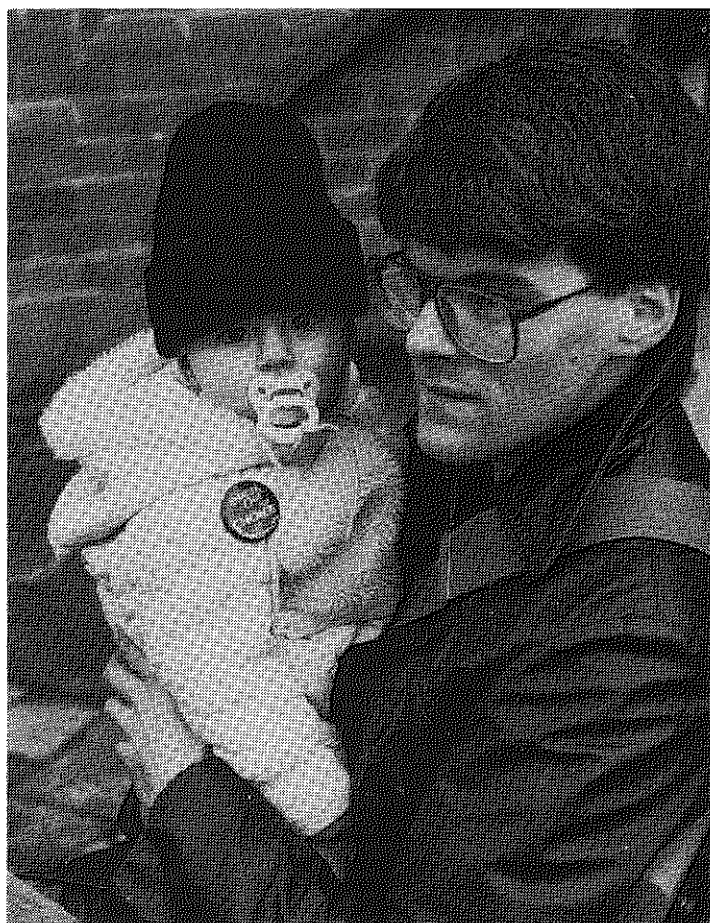
Cultural Struggle/Political Struggle: Creating a Feminist Discourse of Abortion and Reproductive Freedom

A key task is to define, popularise and communicate our vision of reproductive freedom; our positive alternative to anti-choice moralism and official state and medical discourses. I want to now explore some examples of what reproductive rights activists and others have done or could do to contest and transform the context and framework of reproductive politics.¹⁴

First of all, we have to reframe the basic abortion "question."¹⁵ We need to argue that the basic question is not under what circumstances abortion should be allowed but rather: Can we accept the higher mortality and morbidity that would result from banning abortion? Can we accept the anxiety, increased risk and inequality that result from arbitrary administrative restrictions on availability? Given that abortion is essential to women's health and well-being, how can governments fail to ensure equal and adequate access? Framed in these ways we put the pressure back on the state and anti-choice: how can they justify imposing such risks and inequities on women?

Secondly, we have to portray women choosing abortion in the full context of their life circumstances and social relationships. One of the important dangers of the anti-choice reification of the foetus is the disappearance of women from the abortion debate. The anti-choice video *The Silent Scream* has been criticised by pro-choice groups, particularly through a counter video by U.S. Planned Parenthood, as a distortion of medical facts. It is certainly that, but confining our attack to these terms ignores the video's symbolic meaning and power. We must also challenge its focus on the foetus as the primary issue in the abortion controversy. What would our counter video look like?

- In place of the image of free-floating foetuses on video screens,¹⁶ we would put women back in the story. Picture a woman quietly chatting with her counsellor about her joyfully anticipated birth and beginning to experience some connection to "her baby" as she views the image on the ultrasound screen and



feels the foetus move within her. Picture another also looking at the ultrasound as she discusses with the counsellor her appointment for an abortion. Both women are perfectly comfortable with the decision they made. The women's health centre they are meeting in is an environment that respects and facilitates both choices.

These possibilities lead to a key question: what images of wanted and unwanted pregnancies together — of women choosing abortion or birth — can we create to show the full spectrum of reproductive choices?

- A very powerful statement of the breadth of reproductive choice is made when groups of midwives and their entourage of pregnant women and babies have demonstrated outside the Morgentaler clinic to protect women's right to choose.¹⁷

Defining our Terms

We have followed the feminist tradition of "breaking the silence" on key issues affecting women. The women's movement "named" rape, wife assault and sexual harassment as symptoms of the oppressive power relations of a male dominated society rather than as the personal problems of individual "victims." We have also been relatively successful at defining access to abortion and the quality of reproductive health care as key public issues.

- Choice groups across the country organised tribunals in 1985. Women provided powerful and moving testimonies of



their own abortion stories — of the horrors of abortion in the illegal era and the continuing degradation faced in contemporary hospitals. Such “speak-outs” are another way of putting the emphasis back on women’s lives and needs.

We can draw lessons from the experience of other struggles within the reproductive rights movement. Midwives and their advocates have known full well that “reclaiming birth” has been a cultural project as well as a political challenge to medicalisation. In their struggle with obstetrical practice and, just as importantly, with medical definitions of pregnancy and birth, these movements developed alternative frameworks to understand and interpret these processes and create a counter vision of birth. They developed a whole series of metaphors for birth as a normal process which will happen in its own time, as a flow or river of life energy which women ride as a wave, as a journey or ripening, and as a harmonisation or integration of body and mind. These concepts were created to tap and represent women’s activity and challenge medical definitions of birth as crisis and pain and women as merely the environment for the baby-to-be.¹⁸

What would be our corresponding language and concepts to highlight the importance of abortion in women’s reproductive lives?¹⁹ To summarise earlier points: our themes would be women’s empowerment and self-determination. We would want to displace medical definitions and terminologies by redefining abortion in feminist terms: as an indispensable means of women being able to control their fertility, as an essential precondition of

women’s bodily integrity and as a positive enabling condition of women’s individual autonomy. We would want to displace the hysterical foetus fetish of the anti-choice by always emphasising that women choosing abortion are active moral agents making a difficult decision for themselves and taking responsibility for their lives. Above all else, we would never apologise for women’s need for abortion.

It is through frameworks like this that we can effectively contrast our positive and emancipatory goal of reproductive freedom — of women being able to control their bodies and their lives — with the authoritarian and anti-democratic injunctions of the anti-choice. In the most telling metaphor of all, the availability and meaning of abortion have come to symbolise — for both feminists and anti-feminists alike — the conditions, rights and status of women. Nothing less is at stake in the conflict over abortion than the social value placed on women.

Watch Your Language

What have been our own “keywords” in defining the heart of our struggle? The pre-eminent, of course, has been the slogan of choice. This concept has tremendous polemical value and real resonance in a democratic political culture. It allows us to define ourselves as supporting the right of women to make a complex decision for themselves, and to define the opposition as anti-democratic, attempting to impose the views of a small minority on all. It also allows those who would feel difficulty themselves having an abortion to support the right of others to make their own decisions.

But at the same time we have been aware of the limits of the notion of choice. Even full and free access to abortion, as significant a change as that would be, would not guarantee that all women would have real “choices” over their lives or over having and raising children. We try to show these limits concretely by stressing that the choice to have a child can never be free in a society in which women earn so much less than men and in which quality daycare and affordable housing are not available for so many.

This is why we have never seen the demand for abortion in isolation, but rather as one of a number of interdependent struggles — from autonomous midwifery to universal daycare, from employment equity to the right to define and live independent sexualities — which must be fought and won for women to control their bodies and their lives. This wider reproductive rights perspective is crucial strategically; as the basis for alliances among different struggles. But it also makes an equally crucial ideological statement: this vision of reproductive and sexual freedom in its widest sense is our ultimate goal.

Popular Culture

What other forms of communication, activities and images could fashion our counterculture of reproductive freedom?

One important dimension could be the types of photographic and video images discussed and included in this essay.

- Such images are crucial in agit-prop. In the Ontario Coalition for Abortion Clinics we always try to use photos of spirited demonstrations or protests, with appropriate slogans on placards and colourful banners, to dramatise our posters and flyers. The picture we want to create is one of determination and resistance; of strong women fighting for their demands.

How can graphic art be put to better use in our agitation? Would not a really striking and attractive poster reach a tremendous number of people?

- One such poster was produced and plastered all over Toronto by feminists associated with the Women’s Cultural Building project to build a pro-choice rally in 1983. It highlighted the consistent support of some three-quarters of Canadians for freedom of choice.

O.C.A.C and supportive cultural workers have also produced “wearable art” — pro-choice t-shirts and a range of buttons. These are not simply for fund-raising purposes, but to make the pro-choice majority visible, to get our slogans on the street. This visibility is an important part of our movement building and agitation. For example, in the spring and summer of 1989 we had a great “marketing” success with black t-shirts with “CHOICE” emblazoned across their front in bright pink or blue.²⁰ Media shots of us defending the Toronto clinics from “Operation Rescue” vigilantes always included a half-dozen people wearing “CHOICE” shirts. Along with our equally striking banners, these images make it very clear what is at issue.

How can popular culture coalesce with the struggle for reproductive rights? There have been many benefits, often organised by clubs and artists themselves who wanted to demonstrate their support and raise money for the choice movement. In bringing together dancers, actors, musicians and other performers these benefits dramatise the breadth of support for women’s freedom of choice and take that message to broader audiences than political groups can reach.

Cultural workers in different areas have taken up the issue of reproductive rights.

- Gay Bell’s play *Danger/Anger* dramatised the place of abortion and the choice struggle in women’s sexual and social lives.
- Women’s rock band the Heretics have a song, “Bus to Buffalo,” which speaks of the desperation of women forced to leave their community to get an abortion.
- The feminist theatre groups Ladies Against Women and Hysterical Women satirise the cult-like fascination of the

radical right for the foetus and their passionate defense of the "pre-born" — at least until birth.

- How many supporters were cheered by the anonymous graffiti artist who spray-painted "No New Abortion Law" along College Street in the summer of 1988?

Theatre into the Movement

We have taken theatrical principles into our political events.

- The O.C.A.C. Players, activists without experience or training in theatre, have tried to enliven our demonstrations with skits lampooning judges, politicians, priests and other enemies of choice.

How to create energy, style and image and how to find ways of presenting complex political strategies and ideas in an interesting and enlivening way have become an important part of our tactical planning for any action. This is never easy — especially through a bullhorn on a cold February night — but I think theatricality and fun can be every bit as important a part of mass action as speech-making and leafletting.

- A hundred women wearing coat-hanger t-shirts greeted an anti-choice march at the Morgentaler clinic several years ago. Not only did this infuriate and frustrate the anti-choice marchers, but it captured media attention (here using the media's imperative of getting "both sides" of the issue for our own ends). Again, we sought through this image to subvert the media's framing of abortion politics — so that this event would be "read" not merely as the clash of opposing opinions on a divisive issue, but as dramatising the impact on women of any ban on abortion.
- The anti-choice have traditionally held a vigil and march in Toronto on Mothers' Day. In 1984 we subverted one of their most cherished symbols by countering with a "Motherhood by Choice" picnic, with all of the diverse reproductive rights groups taking part.
- The 1989 International Women's Day march in Toronto delivered 1,000 coat hangers and a mock coffin to Campaign Life's headquarters. This was successful at two levels. It was a highly charged event for the thousands of feminists on the march and brought home to them the urgent threat of the anti-choice to all women. Secondly, the "message" we wanted to portray was consistently picked up in the media: women defining the anti-choice as a danger to their health and freedom and declaring their resistance.

These events highlight the important politics of imagery, of being very clear what "message" we want to "send" through the media.

- One of our most effective "props" has been a giant 15-foot coat hanger which we take on all our marches and demonstrations. This symbol shows clearly to passersby the threat to women's autonomy and lives represented by the anti-choice. This image is also perfect for the media: television reports of these demos open with a shot of women in "CHOICE" t-shirts carrying the hanger and this tends to be the photograph picked up in the newspapers. Our image of women's resistance to the danger of the anti-choice comes through clearly.

Changing the Frame: Media and Movement Politics

In these ways we have tried to use the media's conventions, but at the same time subvert the dominant framing of the "abortion question" with our imagery and actions. Of course, it is not easy to challenge and change prevailing media assumptions. It took us years to get the media to use pro-choice rather than pro-abortion, and many of the more conservative papers still use the latter. Another premise that frames abortion in the media is the view that there are two intransigent or extremist minorities with the majority somewhere in the middle. We constantly point to public opinion polls showing that we represent the great majority who support freedom of choice and that the opposition are the real minority who seek to impose their views on all.

We have also struggled against the individualist focus of the media and the difficulty of shifting their attention to broadly based movements.

- One thing O.C.A.C. has done is to have several spokespersons. Some argued that this would be ineffective, that the media like to come to only one figure for comment. We have not found this to be a problem and think it gives a better picture of our collective strength.
- The media tends to latch on to Henry Morgentaler as the public face of the movement. We recognise the tremendous public recognition of Henry and the widespread respect for his accomplishments and commitment, and we have at times built on this by organising rallies where Dr. Morgentaler spoke. But we have also tried to show that it is mass movements that have kept the clinics open and overturned the old law. We have worked hard to build our own presence and contacts within the media.

Our counterpart movements in other countries have also used the media's fascination with celebrities to their own ends.

- Large numbers of prominent women publicly declaring that they had illegal abortions and demanding legalisation and equal access had a strong impact in the struggle for abortion rights in a number of European countries. Simi-

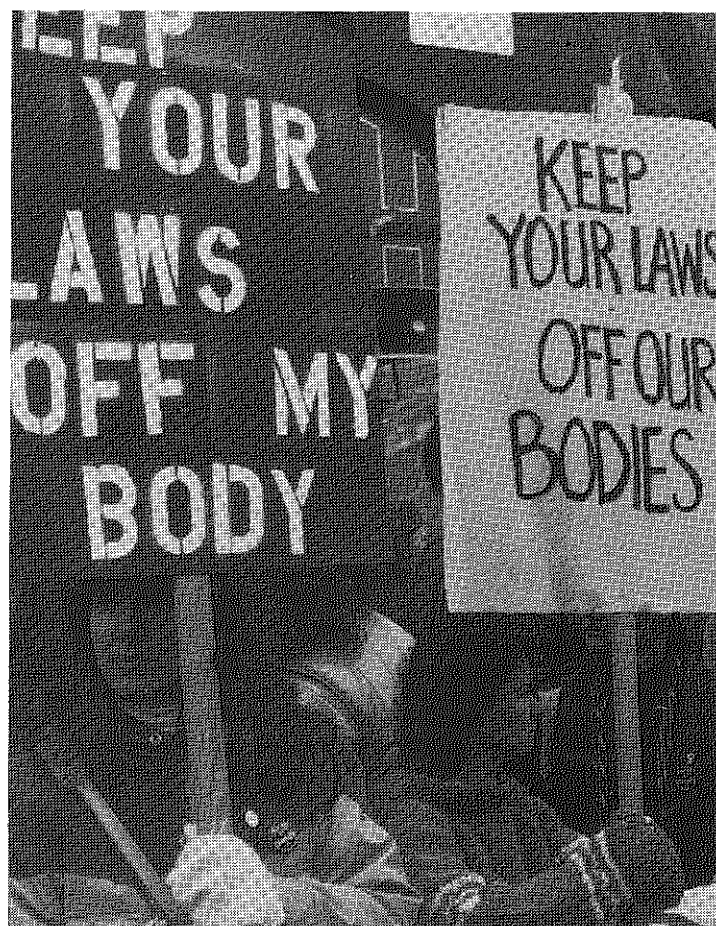
larly, recent enormous pro-choice marches on Washington have featured large numbers of movie stars, writers, athletes and other famous women.

In all these ways we have had to think carefully about how to work within the mainstream media without being co-opted by its frame of reference. We have had to learn the technique of the 30-second clip and the concise quotation. More generally, abortion has become a particularly "hot" topic in recent years and we see it as our responsibility to the broader women's movement to use our greater media presence to promote feminist ideas and style. Forging such a communications strategy is never easy, especially given our lack of material resources to produce sophisticated pamphlets, videos and other forms of communications. Nevertheless, it is vital that our demands and struggles are presented in the media, both to build popular support for our movement and to put pressure on the state.

Visions of the Future

Part of fashioning a feminist discourse of reproduction is to develop a clear vision of our alternatives to the existing system and our long-term goals. This means developing a clear programme of all the changes, from universal daycare to lesbian rights, needed to win the conditions for reproductive freedom.

We also need a clear vision of what the future organisation of reproductive health care could be. Such visions are not really for the future at all; we have found that a clear and attractive sense of what we are struggling for is an indispensable part of our current politics. A vision of health care





that empowers women can seize people's imagination by showing that there are realistic alternatives to the existing system. It can inspire activists to keep fighting and draw new people into the movement. Clearly defined long-term goals can also help us to negotiate the inevitable tactical compromises, strategic adjustments, and ebbs and flows of long campaigns. In these ways — as inspiration and touchstone — a vision of what future reproductive health care could be can contribute directly to our current struggles.

- To this end, activists from the Midwives Collective of Toronto and O.C.A.C. have tried to identify the fundamental principles of women-controlled health care. We have envisioned a model of community women's reproductive health centres that could put these principles into practice: that provide the full spectrum of care in whatever languages women need; ensure equality of access; operate within philosophies of informed consent and respect for women's decisions and feelings; facilitate individual participation in planning their health care; and integrate counseling and services. We have presented our model in magazine interviews, speeches, essays and even traditional policy papers.²¹



Final Word

This account may seem to be full of dilemmas and problems. That is not my intention. Let's remember the very real accomplishments of the choice movement that I began this essay with. But we also know that the campaign for reproductive freedom is going to be a long struggle — that ultimately it is not solely about removing particularly oppressive legislation or winning adequate service levels, or even restructuring the social organisation of reproduction. It is also about transforming consciousness and culture. And to this end we have to integrate cultural analysis and activism into all of our political work.

This essay outlines some initial reflections on how we have tried to do this and how we might develop and improve our campaign in the future. The many questions posed throughout are not merely rhetorical. I really am asking writers how we can develop and popularise a language of reproductive freedom; how we can convey and clarify the subtlety and complexity of our concepts? We need to hear from media workers how we can influence the media to take up our frame of reference and how we can stay on the media's agenda, even when our issue is not "hot." I think cultural workers exploring how theatre, poetry, fiction, painting and other media could portray women's strength and independence as they fight to control their reproduction can make a significant political contribution to the choice movement.

I hope that these questions and reflections can stimulate further discussion and debate. We know we could benefit greatly from an interchange of experience and insights with activists and cultural workers in different spheres. Perhaps we all need to create forums and mechanisms to facilitate such exchange — to cross-fertilise our different areas of struggle.²²

B. Lee has been active in the Ontario Coalition of Abortion Clinics for six years and is also a member of AIDS Action Now!.

NOTES

1. The pro-choice movement is composed of many organisations and constituencies with different political strategies and levels of analytical sophistication. The "we" I refer to here is the Ontario Coalition for Abortion Clinics within which I have worked since 1983. I have also worked in the campaign for community midwifery and AIDS Action Now! When I mean "I" I will always try to say so. I would like to thank Cynthia Wright, Mariana Valverde, Miriam Jones, Joe Galbo and Satu Repo, who commented on an earlier draft.

2. For histories of this struggle see Ontario Coalition for Abortion Clinics, "State Power and the Struggle for Reproductive Freedom: The Campaign for Free-Standing Abortion Clinics in Ontario," *Resources for Feminist Research*, 17:3 (September 1988): special issue entitled *Feminist Perspectives on the Canadian State*, eds. Sue Findlay and Melanie

Randall: 109-14 and Patricia Antonyshyn, B. Lee and Alex Merrill, "Marching for Women's Lives: The Campaign for Free-Standing Abortion Clinics in Ontario," in Frank Cunningham, Sue Findlay, Marlene Kadar, Alan Lennon and Ed Silva, *Social Movements/ Social Change: The Politics and Practice of Organizing* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1988).

3. Rosalind Pollack Petchesky has made the most significant contribution to outlining a feminist ethic of abortion. See her *Abortion and Women's Choice: The State, Sexuality, and Reproductive Freedom* (New York: Longman, 1984).

4. Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, "Abortion in the 1980s: Feminist Morality and Women's Health," in Ellen Lewin and Virginia Olesen, eds., *Women, Health and Healing* (London: Tavistock, 1985), p. 167.

5. This view of women as victims is shared by some cultural feminists — with all the implications of passivity and fatalism that go along with this language. See Catherine McKinnon, "The Male Ideology of Privacy: A Feminist Perspective on the Right to Abortion," *Radical America* 17:4 (July-August 1983): 23-35. Critics have seen this to be a worrying meeting point of cultural feminism and the moral right, with similar dangerous implications to their intersecting agendas on pornography: Rosalind Petchesky, "Abortion as 'Violence Against Women': A Feminist Critique," *Radical America* (1983): 64-68.

6. Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, "Foetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction," in Michelle Stanworth, ed., *Reproductive Technologies: Gender, Motherhood and Medicine* (London: Polity Press, 1987). See also Zillah Eisenstein, *Feminism and Sexual Equality* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984).

7. Petchesky, "Foetal Images." The way in which people "read" the imagery of the mangled foetus is by no means clear and we may not want to give too much credit to the anti-choice here. Some people may simply be repelled. Many of the pro-choice majority are certainly outraged by the pictures. On the other hand, this imagery has clearly contributed to making the foetus the centrepiece of so much media and political debate and to the uncertainty or hesitation of even some pro-choice supporters about the morality of abortion per se.

8. For a provocative and clear argument see Ellen Willis, "Aborting Freedom. Forget the Courts — We Need a Movement," *Village Voice* (11 July 1989): 18-19. See also her earlier "Abortion: Is a Woman a Person?," in Ann Snitow, et al, eds. *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983): 471-476.

9. Lynn Chancer, "Abortion Without Apology," *Village Voice* (11 April 1989): 37-39. This phrase — with dramatic graphics — was the cover title of this issue of the *Voice*, which also included other articles on the U.S. abortion rights movement.

10. In a very interesting essay on how insights from deconstructive theory could be applied to feminist politics, particularly around sexuality, Kate Ellis emphasises how "female transgressive behaviour" can break open the "male narratives" of inevitable superiority and power which pervade contemporary culture: "Stories Without Endings: Deconstructive Theory and Political Practice," *Socialist Review* 19:2 (April-June 1989): 37-52.

11. Mariana Valverde and Lorna Weir, "The Struggles of the Immoral: Preliminary Remarks on Moral Regulation," *Resources for Feminist Research* 17:3 (September 1988): special issue entitled *Feminist Perspectives on the Canadian State*, eds. Sue Findlay and Melanie Randall: 31-34.

12. For these reasons the essential context for our demands for choice on abortion is the wider concept of sexual freedom as a central and defining goal of the women's movement. The reproductive rights movement has gained important insights from the lesbian and gay liberation movements on how to carve out a positive sexual culture from a very hostile ideological environment. In the age of AIDS "talking sex" has become a vital and creative means of forging a feminist, sex-positive, grassroots discussion of sexual pleasure and autonomy in all their diverse forms. See Mary Louise Adams, "All That Rubber/All That Talk. Lesbians and Safer Sex," in Ines Rieder and Patricia Ruppelt, eds., *AIDS: The Women* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1988): 130-133.

13. For an excellent collection see Douglas Crimp, ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, (Boston: MIT Press, 1988). See also Erica Carter and Simon Watney, eds., *Taking Liberties: AIDS and Cultural Politics* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1989).

14. See Petchesky, "Foetal Images," who emphasises the need to be theoretically sophisticated here. Images and discourses take on meaning through context, the way in which they are framed and communicated, and how they are mediated,

received and interpreted. This underlines the importance of the interchange between reproductive rights activists and cultural workers and analysts.

15. Professor Bernard Dickens emphasised this in an address to the 1989 annual general meeting of the Canadian Abortion Rights Action League.

16. Rosalind Petchesky, "Foetal Images," cautions us that all we see is a grainy blob on the ultrasound machine; we only "know" this image of an image is a foetus when told so by the authoritative and professional voice of the male physician narrator.

17. Midwives and abortion rights activists have become important tactical allies in Toronto and both our struggles have been strengthened as a result. We also face common concerns; the degrading foetal imagery I have been discussing can also reinforce a view of women as merely the "foetal environment" and serve to justify increased obstetrical intervention and state regulation of pregnancy and birth. See Vicki Van Wagner and B. Lee, "Legal Assault: A Feminist Analysis of the Law Reform Commission's Report on Abortion Legislation," *Healthsharing* (Fall 1989): 24-27.

18. Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987): Chapter 9.

19. Feminist analysis of women's historical praxis of abortion has revealed some interesting cases of metaphors for abortion; for example, women in the

19th century European societies saw abortion as simply making themselves "regular" again, Petchesky, *Abortion and Woman's Choice*, Ch. 1.

In one sense this is far easier for birth than it is for abortion. In a pro-natalist society, giving birth, babies and mothering are all positively regarded. However, this very advantage carries with it a danger. An essentialist view of these issues as flowing from and defining women's "true" nature, perhaps most exemplified in "spiritual midwifery," can be as ideologically self-defeating as any other form of biological determinism. See Michelle Stanworth, "Reproductive Technologies and the Deconstruction of Motherhood," in Stanworth, ed., *Reproductive Technologies: Gender, Motherhood and Medicine* (London: Polity Press, 1987): 10-35.

20. We have also learned the importance of style. We and other movements know that while people may buy ugly shirts to support the political cause, they won't wear them. We need attractive design and good quality to get our images on the street.

21. See the interview with two activists from O.C.A.C. and the Midwives Collective of Toronto, "Visions for Reproductive Care," *Healthsharing* (Spring 1988): 30-32, and Vicki Van Wagner and B. Lee, "Principles into Practice: An Activist Vision of Feminist Reproductive Health Care," in Christine Overall, ed., *The Future of Reproduction* (Toronto: Women's Press, forthcoming 1989).

22. I can be contacted through the Ontario Coalition for Abortion Clinics, Box 753, Station P, Toronto, Ontario, M5S 2Z1, (416) 969-8463.

Photo by Elaine Ayeres

