

# (W)Hol(Dy Fucked!/: Strategizing Resistance to the Harper Arts Cuts

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**W**HEN STEPHEN HARPER'S CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT announced on Friday, 8 August 2008 that it would cut PromArt, a program budgeted at \$4.7 million which subsidizes international tours of Canadian artists, Anne Howland, a spokesperson for Foreign Affairs Minister David Emerson, denied that the cut had any ideological bias: it was simply sound budgetary trimming. But in the next breath, she contradicted her own talking point: "Certainly we felt some of the groups [subsidized] were not necessarily ones we thought Canadians would agree were the best choices to be representing them internationally." Pressed for an example, she shamefacedly dropped a self-censored F-bomb: "I don't even want to say [their name] on the phone. Holy F, that was one that was flagged." A Juno-nominated Toronto electronica band, Holy Fuck became a focus for the culture wars that would preoccupy many Canadians in the opening phases of the 2008 federal election, as Harper and the Tories followed up this announcement with further cuts to arts budgets totaling \$45 million. In identifying some effective and some counter-productive ways in which resistance to these cuts can be framed, I want to take this moment of taboo as paradigmatic of the way in which our government operates: claiming non-ideological

status for their free-market neoliberalism and a moral decadence on the part of those who question it.

The government defended its cuts by releasing misleading figures about their budgetary support for the arts, arguing that they spent more than the previous Liberal government. The *Globe and Mail* did some number crunching and found that this was a classic manipulation of statistics. For one thing, the arts are handled by the Department of Canadian Heritage (a worrisome situation in itself), which pursues two strategic objectives, known in acronymic bureaucratese as SO1 and SO2. The former covers support for Canadian artists' expression at home and abroad (literature, music, film, other media, support for festivals, etc.), whereas SO2 promotes "intercultural understanding," "citizen participation," and "sports." Since the Conservatives were elected in 2006, contributions to SO1, which is the core source of funding for the arts, have declined from \$817 million to \$759 million. Contributions to SO2, however, which has nothing to do with the arts, have increased from \$567.7 million to \$631.6 million, which accounts for the overall augmentation to the ministry budget. Evidence that funding to SO1 did increase in the first year of the Harper government before taking its dive is accounted for by the fact that because of the federal election, budgetary processes were disrupted and the Liberals' previously budgeted amounts for the arts for 2005–06 were included in the Conservatives' first-year figures. So thanks a lot ... Paul.

In fact, contrary to Howland's claim, the cuts were entirely ideological, forming part of the current government's propagandization of Canadian culture abroad. Of course, the promotion of Canadian culture internationally has always served ideological purposes; witness Foreign Affairs documents such as the following:

Filmmaker Atom Egoyan, multimedia director Robert Lepage, visual artist Jeff Wall, and author Margaret Atwood have made waves in Europe with individual, even quirky visions that are resolutely made in Canada. Such cultural figures are important elements of Canada's global brand, one that garners recognition all over the world but particularly in Europe. On a continent so deeply steeped in the arts, Canada's credibility in the cultural arena strengthens all aspects of our country's international relations.

Note the nervous balancing of the "individual, quirky visions" with the steamroller collectivism of "Canada's global brand." There's something about artistic production that is not as compliant as the architects of this

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document might wish, and something of their underlying anxiety seeps into their prose

In making these cuts, the Harper government acts in a similar vein, nervously circumscribing the overseas activities of Canadian artists. A government official who spoke to the CanWest news service on condition of anonymity said that programs like PromArt and Trade Routes were targeted because funding “went to groups that would raise the eyebrows of any typical Canadian,” including broadcaster Avi Lewis, described as “a general radical,” and journalist Gwynn Dyer, identified as “a left-wing columnist.” Noting the previous grants to Dyer and to representatives of the North-South Institute to speak in Cuba, the leaked Conservative memo asked, “Why are we paying for these people to attend anti-Western conferences in Cuba?”

Between disinformation on one hand and McCarthyism on the other, what is to be done? Critics of the cuts have taken a number of approaches; among those that are counter-productive is meeting elitism with elitism. Some commentators sought to remind their readers that for every “Holy Fuck” there’s a Royal Winnipeg Ballet—cultural workers whose output is reassuringly mainstream. John Moore’s assurances in the *National Post* that “Rita MacNeil is just as much a Canadian artist as Karen Kain” are therefore not as helpful as they’re intended to be, for such defenses reinforce the mainstream/fringe discourse upon which the Harper cuts depend for popular support. Far more productive, in my view, are three strategies that were employed over the course of the federal election.

**1. Web-based activism.** In recent months, we’ve heard a great deal about taking advantage of internet communities, largely because of Barack Obama’s canny use of the web in the American presidential campaign. In Canada, a York University-based Facebook community produced a concrete rebuttal of Harper’s dismissal of artists as representing “niche” interests. In only fifty-four hours of operation, the group “Ordinary Canadians DO Support the Arts, Mr. Harper” signed up more members than the Facebook sites for all four major Canadian parties put together. In fifteen days, they had signed up sixty thousand people and garnered a significant amount of publicity. Like the much-publicized Avaaz.org site detailing, constituency by constituency, how Canadians might vote strategically to oust Harper, this online community is a straw in the wind for further strategic organization on the internet.

**2. Highlighting the community activism of government-funded arts programs.** Whereas the term “community activist” became a term of derision in the mouth of Rudy Giuliani at the American Republican National

Convention last summer, I persist in believing that such a slur has little meaning in the political lexicon of this country. And so, one tactic that was successful in last summer's protests against the arts cuts was the highlighting of programs like Sketch, a Toronto arts program for five hundred street youth housed in a King Street warehouse-turned-studio. As their artistic director Phyllis Novak noted, "Somehow [these young artists] are making culture despite the scarcity that they live with." We need to highlight these initiatives in order to reveal the implausibility of government equations of the arts with privilege.

**3. Vive le Québec artistique.** A final lesson that we can take from this federal election is that supporters of the arts should look to Quebec as a blueprint for conceptualizing the arts in society. It was, after all, upon the Quebec voting ground that Harper arguably lost his bid for a majority government, and the proposed cuts to the arts were a major factor in that failure. Late in the campaign, seeking to repair the damage, Harper stopped at a winery in Saint-Eustache and spoke about his childhood passion for the piano, neatly folding the imbibing of music and wine together in a mind-numbing act of political hypocrisy. On 29 September, in a further act of reparation, Harper offered an arts tax credit to Quebec voters which would allow them to recoup up to five hundred dollars of eligible expenses on their children's music, art, or drama programs. On 7 October, one week before the election, Harper made his final desperate bid for peace with Canadian artists and their public, vowing to get rid of the censorship clause his government had slipped into a piece of legislation that could cut tax benefits for films or television shows in Canada which contain sex or violence. But as we know, it was not sufficient to repair his fundamental misreading of feelings about the arts in Quebec. And although some commentators account for the visibility of the issue in Quebec due to its links to language law and "la survivance," this cannot, I think, account entirely for Quebecers' feelings about the integral role of culture in the state. So when Margaret Atwood angered some Anglo voters by declaring on 3 October that she would vote Bloc Québécois if she lived in Quebec because of Gilles Duceppe's strong support for the arts, she did something very canny: she directed the attention of voters outside of Quebec to the way in which that province integrates the arts with other facets of economic and political life. We should find other ways in which to build alliances between cultural policy in Quebec and the rest of the country.

Meanwhile, as of 6 November, Heritage Minister James Moore announced that the new minority Conservative government, in precari-

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ous prorogue at my time of writing, would stand by the \$45 million dollars in cuts in the New Year. Get busy, people. *Allons-y*--unless you want to see the arts in Canada “wholly” fucked.

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