



I've been involved in creative direct action in different forms for many years, in terms of taking an activist position or as a performative, feminist artist through my art practice. I think the positions and terms artist and activist are intertwined, or they are one thing. I'm a multidisciplinary artist. I enjoy mixing things up with materials and collaborating with people. I'm a graphic designer too. Text, typography, and signage really interests me. The images on this montage slide are from various activist action preparations, performances and demos.

I'm going to show a series of slides with images from my artistic and activist practices. From these, you'll get a pretty good idea of:

- how I/we collaborate
- how I/we engage with the public and create spectacles
- and within that, forms of banner making

I will also show some images of UK AIDS quilts from a recent exhibition.

Top row, left to right: LGBTQIA+ RIP Pride direct action (2015): The musicians leading our group are visible;  
 Shut Down Yarl's Wood Detention Center (2017): Banner I made with a colleague that reads "#WomensLivesMatter - Freedom for all";  
 Peckham Community Pride (2016): A close-up image of a papier-mâché aircraft (carried on a pole) bearing the text "NO MORE DEPORTATION CHARTER FLIGHTS!";  
 No Pride In War: A coalition of activists from different backgrounds and groups protesting against the

military presence at Pride in London (2016).

Act Up Blind Date (2015): Act Up London activist/actors on stage performing a parody version of Cilla Black's Blind Date (where contestants with HIV discuss/educate audiences on HIV issues including relationships and healthcare access);

Middle row, left to right: Act Up London HCV action (Dec 2015): Activists demonstrated at the entrance to the European Conference on HIV and Hepatitis Coinfection. Act Up London were challenging overpriced hepatitis C drugs.

Peckham Community Pride: Activists prepare banners and signage in a back yard.

Peckham Community Pride: Activists papier-mâché an immigration enforcement van piñata to be smashed later at a demo.

Catwalk4Power (2018): An image of the Catwalk4Power market stall at Greenwich Market where women sold products they created, to fundraise for their performance/action in Amsterdam. They also handed out treatment and prevention leaflets and discussed issues about how HIV affects women.

Catwalk4Power (2018): Close-up shot of a podium monitor in the foreground and participants/performers standing before it at the AIDS 2018 International Conference, in Amsterdam.

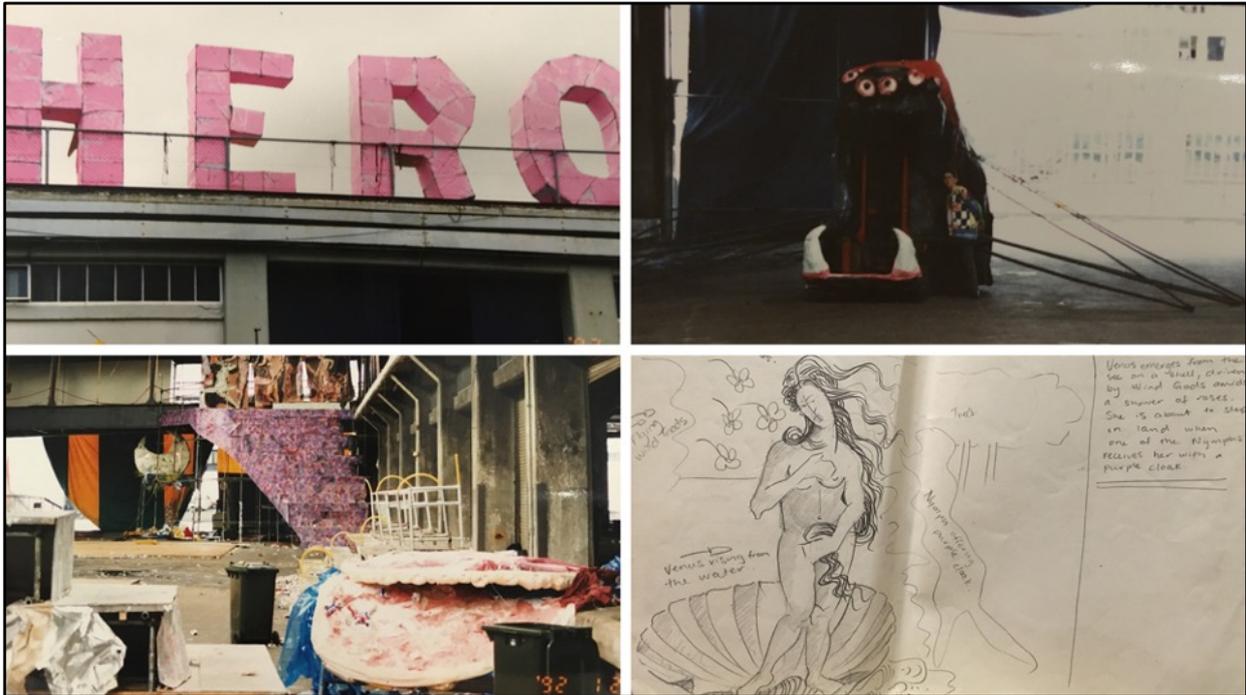
Middle row, left to right: LGS Migrants banner, 2015: Painted banner carried by half-a-dozen people at the Dover seafront, in protest of the UK's hostile treatment of migrants/refugees/asylum seekers and to also demand greater support for displaced people and an end to war.

Act Up Blind Date: Another stage shot of Act Up London performers at The Glory, Hackney.

Catwalk4Power (2018): C4P women rehearse dance moves at the performance venue in Brixton.

#FreeTheVaccine Carnival March (July, 2020): Close up of UAEM students stencilling banners against the quad pavement of Kings Hospital, pre-demonstration.

#PharmaGreedKills action targeting Roche Pharmaceuticals (2017): An activist in a multi-breasted surreal pink costume holds up a sign that says "Shame on you Roche! Justice for all people with breast cancer!".



My earliest memories of seeing activism in Aotearoa/New Zealand, as a child, are to do with environmental conservation and peoples' right to land:

- Aotearoa/NZ's anti-nuclear stance
- Maori land claims and demands to honour \*Te Tiriti O Waitangi.

In 2021, people of \*\*Aotearoa and \*\*\*Pacifika are actively demonstrating and lobbying on these issues.

My earliest involvement in activism organising and participation (with the exception of No Nukes stuff at school), would be in the area of HIV/AIDS activism. Early activism included building props for a major dance party and theatrical spectacle 'HERO' (1991-92, Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland, Aotearoa/NZ) to raise funding and awareness of the AIDS crisis. The 'HERO' performance concept, conveyed a story of overcoming adversities and to celebrate life. I learnt a lot here about grass-roots organising, volunteering and collaborating to create from whatever was to hand. I started to learn about building creative spectacles. I first learnt about AIDS quilt sewing here, but I didn't participate in these sewing projects, although friends did. I also made great friends. 'HERO' was where I first met people with HIV. Many of those early acquaintances have since passed away from HIV-related illnesses. Other forms of HIV/AIDS activism included tree planting commemorations and vigils, public interventions led by costumed actors. Garnering support for people with HIV, educating the public, fighting HIV stigma and homophobia were primary concerns.

\* The Treaty of Waitangi

\*\* Aotearoa = Maori name for New Zealand. Widely used by those living there.

\*\*\* Pacifika = Broadly, the South Pacific region. Pacifika peoples = those whose ancestry is rooted in

South Pacific countries; a diverse range of people, including those who migrated to Aotearoa.

Top left: A giant pink 'HERO' sign on the roof of Prince's Wharf, where 'HERO 2' was staged.

Top right: A giant spider I built with friends over a forklift. It would serve as one of the many challenges for our 'Hero' (actor/dancer) performing at intervals throughout the party. Trapeze wires for dance performances were also strung throughout.

Bottom left: The aftermath of mess, post-party, the following day. In the foreground there's a squashed giant clam shell that the lead actor/dancer would appear from. Way in back are stairs connecting two more performance areas and a dishevelled Grecian-style mural.

Bottom right: Part of one of the concept sketches I made to plan the clam shell tableau.



I have always had a multidisciplinary art practice. But I really started to engage with audiences in more varied, public ways, while living in south London and in response to gentrification. This public intervention work (from 2014) is from the project 'Head Out Of Space'. I was interested in exploring the value of artists' contributions to society and how we find space to create. I created this action twice. First in Brixton, in the grounds of the windmill (now restored and milling flour). Next, in nearby Bermondsey, in a building of artist studios that were set to be demolished. Both sites were fully open to the public.

The large bunting (pictured) is also meant to mimic fabric windmill sails. They lined the way to a gazebo of artwork (before the windmill), which was also a primary participation site. (The windmill itself is a local project and success story because of its community-led renovation and associated creative education spaces.)

The banners each proclaim a different demand for artists or a point of discussion that arose from a series of Head Out Of Space interviews, conducted in the weeks preceding the action.

Top image: In Brixton, South London, sail bunting lines the park walk up to a gazebo of images and texts. People practice football behind them.  
 Bottom image: In Bermondsey, South London, sail bunting hangs inside a building dedicated to workspaces for artists (later demolished).

Some of the visible banners proclaim: "The term artist covers a multitude of skill sets"; "Artists need space"; "The job of the artist is to make good artwork. To make that artwork accessible to people is a

shared responsibility”; “(Art) career defined: ‘An occupation undertaken for a significant period of a person’s life and with opportunities for progress’ (Oxford Dictionary)”; “Artists can think outside the box, design-wise. They can bring a lot of strategy on how to change spaces”; “We’ve got a big job persuading people that artistic consumption can only happen if you’ve got artistic production”; “Home is where the art is”...etc.



The work involved inviting passers-by to visit the exhibition site and swap a digitally printed fragment of a participating artist's work for the visitor's advice on how to make artists' lives better. Advice and comments collected were then published online for contributing artists and the public to see, along with interviews with various people about creative workspaces.

Although members of the public did offer up a range of suggestions for artists that included calls for more funding support and promotional tools for artists, most focussed on engagement; particularly advising on ways that artists could provide services to others. Participants confirmed that artists' contributions were wanted. Additionally (problematically), how to fund artists' toil and artworks was less of a consideration.

Speaking out against gentrification and anti-austerity became a hot action topic. A lot of creative and LGBTQIA+ spaces were disappearing, as were community and youth group rooms, with cuts to local funding.

I began to collaborate more with other activist groups on these issues which then intersected with a whole range of human rights issues. We engaged in radical direct actions in public spaces. And we did so with a sense of theatre and performance, high colour, high visibility, large banners and clear text with demands and hashtags.



These are photos from the RIP Pride action (2015). Many of us in this coalition were artists or creatives of some kind or other. And those who weren't, came to see themselves as creative types. It is so often the process, that through creative involvement in such activism, people become aware of other ways to use their voice.

We didn't like one bit, that Barclays Bank was positioned to lead the Pride parade through London, that UKIP representatives were also given a spot on the parade, and that there was again a fee to march. So, our diverse group of LGBTQIA+ individuals organised a 'Funeral for Pride' to mark the demise of our political Pride and to demand that our human rights issues be foregrounded. We spent a few frantic weeks building props and making large banners and flags with short message demands like "Pride is a protest". Most of the banners were made with cut out fabric letters and glue, or they were painted.

Mock funerals are nothing new as symbolic actions. In fact, I was involved in another funeral action with Global Justice Now, this October, on C19 vaccine access and patent waiver demands.

Top left: Post-action photo of most of our group.

Top left: People constructing the coffin structure out the back of someone's flat.

Bottom left: People cutting out fabric letters for flags in a basement sitting room.

Bottom center: One of our group sewing massive rainbow flags in their front room.

Bottom right: Our group getting ready in the nearby quad of University College London. Here, we also met with journalists prior to the action.



We broke into the front of the Pride in London parade, before any of the floats. Organisers, police, and stewards did not want the many thousands of public spectators, press and TV to see any of us frogmarched away - bad PR. They decided to let us do our thing. We weren't dangerous or menacing; we were just radical queers acting for social justice.

Once we had broken through the barriers at Oxford Circus, we reformed our procession troupe and marched down to the Mall. We passed out loads of flyers about our action. We also handed out bags of glitter that we labelled as Pride's ashes. (\*Since this time, we've stopped using glitter and we produce a lot less paper to distribute.) We spoke with people who supported us and with those who disagreed with what we were doing. Some of us posted on social media along the way. When we're doing public direct actions, our aim is to grab as much press and social media attention as possible.

One of our group read out Pride's eulogy which explained the process of loss of a political Pride as well as urgent issues we still must fight for, such as: the oppression of LGBTQIA+ globally, lack of support and safety for LGBTQIA+ migrants, homelessness rising for young LGBTQIA+ and non-binary people, poverty, and loss of services. Just because we now had the option of same-sex marriage, and there was a popular street parade that could draw hundreds of thousands of people and tremendous business revenue, it didn't mean we all had rights.

The tactic of breaking into the front and marching ahead of the Pride parade was taken up in subsequent years too, with much larger queer blocs forming.

The aim is not to stop the parade from moving, but to make certain that LGBTQIA+ folk from many backgrounds and margins, lead the parade ahead of the banks and other \*'pinkwashing'

corporations.

Top left: Image shows a skirmish as activists breach barriers at Oxford Circus.

Rest of top row and bottom row: Led by drumming musicians, activists reassemble and proceed to march with banners, flags and a coffin, in a funeral procession to the Mall.

\* Hand sewing banners can be time consuming but has less environmental impact than using paint and ink. Liquitex produce a range of 'eco-friendly' acrylic paints and sprays. But no paint is truly 'green'. Wool, cotton, silk, viscose, and hemp are more environmentally friendly than other fabrics, depending on your animal welfare stance. Recycling fabrics is also healthy tactic.

\*\* Pinkwashing = Using LGBTQIA+ issues to positively build the profile of a country/company/organisation while distracting from the negative activities of that country/company/organisation. To make money, market products, and appear 'progressive' by appearing to be an LGBTQIA+ ally.



No Pride In War organising still happens. But these photos here are from two demos relating to Pride season, 2016. People sewed pride flags and stitched and glued giant PRIDE rosette signage to accompany a coffin. There was also a mysterious run of bus stop advertising hacks, where posters were hung through central London.

This was done to protest against the militarisation of our queer spaces and blatant military recruitment strategies. Groups such as BAE Systems had organised to march at Pride in London. A Red Arrow military grade aircraft flyover of Pride had also been organised. We were a very broad-ranging coalition, comprised of groups such as Veterans for Peace, Act Up London, CAAT, Peace Pledge Union, Queer Strike, LGSMigrants, and many other groups.

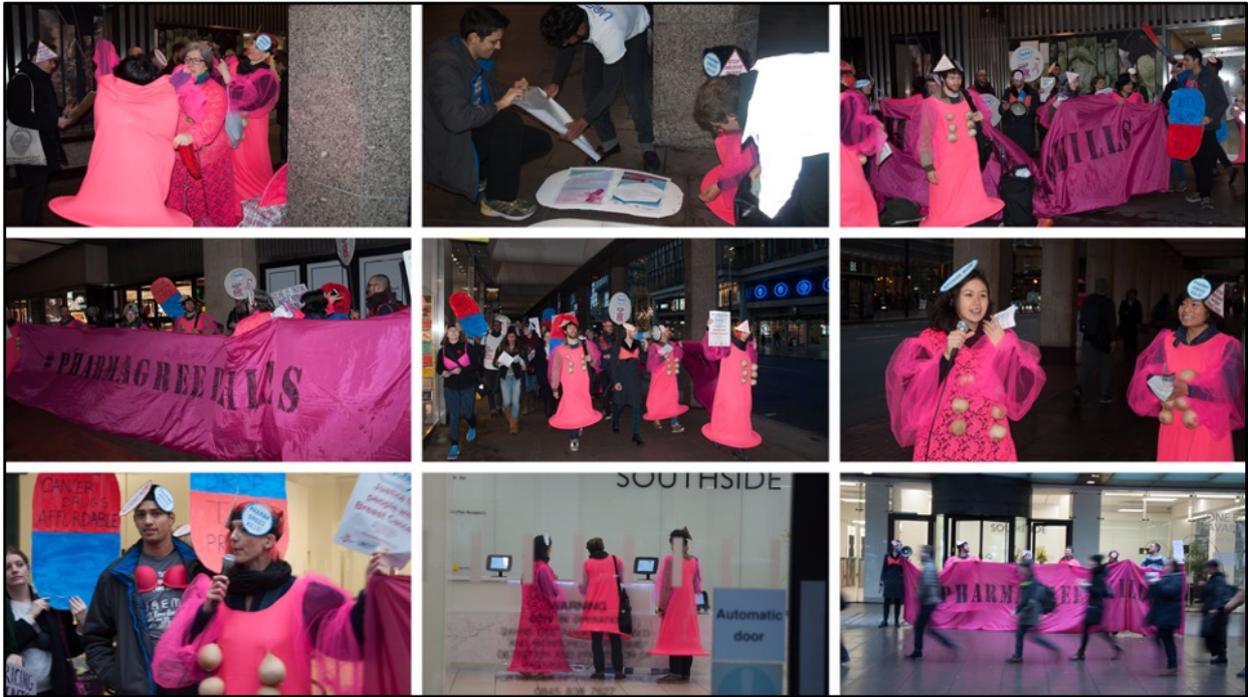
Top left: Outside the London Mayor’s office, activists stand behind a rosette sign that reads ‘No Pride In War’.

Top Right: After the Pride parade, Activists assemble for a group photo by the barriers at a corner near Trafalgar Square.

Bottom Left: A bus stop in Soho shows a backlit poster of military aircraft overlaid with the text “NO PRIDE IN WAR – RED ARROWS NOT WELCOME AT PRIDE”.

Bottom right: Ironically, the parade paused at a moment when BAE systems were directly in front of the NPIW protest spot.

Activists climbed the barriers and stood in front of the BAE group with signs stating “No Pride in War”, “Queer lives matter more than war pigs’ toys”, “No pride in bombing Yemen!”, etc...



With all of this story telling and spectacle, humour is so important for bridging social divides. It's pretty much in every action I/we plan. It doesn't mean we're not serious about the issues or that we're downgrading the issues. When we include satire or some type of 'quirk factor', the general public will engage. They get very curious and perhaps, to them, we are approachable.

There was a \*global day of action in 2017 to target Roche pharmaceuticals for their extortionate pricing of a breast cancer drug, we know in the UK as Herceptin. In the UK, it was costing tens-of-thousands of pounds per patient annually. Yet a year-long course of this drug could be produced profitably for £190.00. So, in London, Act Up London, UAEM, Just Treatment and StopAIDS planned a walk with our massive pink banners, pink bras and pink surreal costumes to the British Pharmaceutical Industry HQ, near Victoria station. There, we delivered a letter of our demands. We spoke to commuters about the action and patent monopolising. We played music. We drew messages over the pavement in chalk.

We fired images and messages over social media. The key hashtag and catch cry: #PharmaGreedKills.

After the action, two of us took the train out to Roche's HQ at Welwyn Garden City, to deliver six more letters to various Roche execs.

A few weeks later, we were invited to meet with Roche. We took up that offer. After a year of sustained, global action, Roche greatly reduced the price of this treatment in the UK and South Africa.

The grid of slide images show activists dressing and preparing signage pre-dawn, ahead of marching to the protest site where day breaks and commuters appear.

\*This global day of action was led by women living with cancer in South Africa. One of their leading activist campaigners, Tobeka Daki, had passed away the previous year while still campaigning for access to this medicine (meds known as Trastuzumab in SA).



This is another #PharmaGreedKills action (April Fools Day, 2016) at Gilad headquarters in Holborn, London. Naked activists stand in the window. Text across banners and their naked backs reads #PharmaGreedKills. Our intent was "...to stand here naked, completely vulnerable, a state in which the current system leaves millions around the world...". Gilad had priced Truvada or PrEP so high that the NHS could afford it. The protest was coordinated by a coalition of over 25 health advocacy groups from 6 continents. Demonstrations occurred outside the offices of Pfizer, Gilad, Roche, Tufts Center for the Study of Drug Development, and PhRMA.



In July of 2020, FreeTheVaccine activists and UAEM (Universities Allied for Essential Medicines) joined together to organise a carnival march through London. We stopped at Universities that had been working on C19 vaccine and medical technology developments. Millions of pounds of public funding had already funded this work. We wanted to have a say in how vaccine knowledge and the vaccine itself could be shared globally. We urged organisations and individuals to sign up to the Open Covid Pledge, thereby pledging to make C19 intellectual property openly, freely available. We were able to recycle some of the banners and costumes from former actions (a big help, given that we were locked down prior to the action and online action organising was challenging).

People dressed as covid viruses, surreal, colourful, carnival beings, and lab coat wearing doctors and nurses with giant prop syringes. A lot of the creative direct action organising I've been involved in has been strongly influenced by Act Up tactics (AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power). Storytelling and offering up alternative realities is super important. When planning and executing the action, everyone is given a role.

Hashtags used for this campaign: #FreeTheVaccine4C19 #OpenCovidPledge #PharmaGreedKills #FreeThePeoplesVaccine #MedicinesForPeopleNotProfit

Slide image: #FreeTheVaccine and UAEM carnival marchers pose for a photograph outside the final stop, University College London.



The carnival march route connected the following locations, where a speech of demands and photo shoot took place at each stop: 1. King's Guy's Hospital campus; 2. King's Waterloo; 3. King's The Strand; 4. London School of Economics; 5. University College London.

A team of activists dedicated to social media posting operated remotely. Free The Vaccine and UAEM activists were joined by Act Up London and Catwalk4Power women. UAEM students from London, Cambridge, and Birmingham participated. The action was re-posted online by UAEM students from other universities and countries and Act Up London and C4P women.

Top left: Activists in front of an upturned globe sculpture at the London School of Economics campus.  
 Top right: Activists walk through Burrough from St Guy's Hospital campus.  
 Bottom left: A Thames walk view of the carnival procession through Southwark.  
 Bottom right: Close-up image of doctor taking aim at the C19 virus with a syringe, at LSE.



Catwalk4Power activism is very different from other organising models. Catwalk4Power is a project led by women with HIV, for women with HIV. My role in C4P is as a creative ally, supporting women with HIV through direct action processes or whatever they say they need. The project came about because women from Act Up London got together with women with HIV, from Positively UK, to create a project that would empower women with HIV. Together, we built friendships, strengthened community, and fought HIV stigma. Creative workshops over a series of weeks involved costume sewing, artefact and prop creation, catwalk/runway strutting, spoken word writing and performing, leadership training, and more. The primary aim is to build women’s confidence so that they can host and perform at their subversive catwalk event. The events are often – but not always – public. We also created market stalls to sell items women made and/or to relay information to the public, about women and HIV. It has been truly transformative experience for those involved. There is a power shift. This is possible through peer support as well as organising in women-only safe spaces.

With all the activism we do, there are so many urgent issues and one of the challenges of activism is how to move swiftly and to also show care for one another. I think C4P have a good understanding of this issue. Discussions around respect, consent, time and support are regularly voiced. With C4P, there’s a lot of emphasis on everyone having a role, all contributions being valuable, everyone has a voice, and specialist peer support is on hand for people who need extra support. Crucially, any barriers that might normally prevent a woman from participating, are removed. Childcare is covered, healthy meals are available, travel is covered.

This image is part of the Home page of the Catwalk4Power website that was launched in 2020: [c4ptoolkit.positivelyuk.org](http://c4ptoolkit.positivelyuk.org)

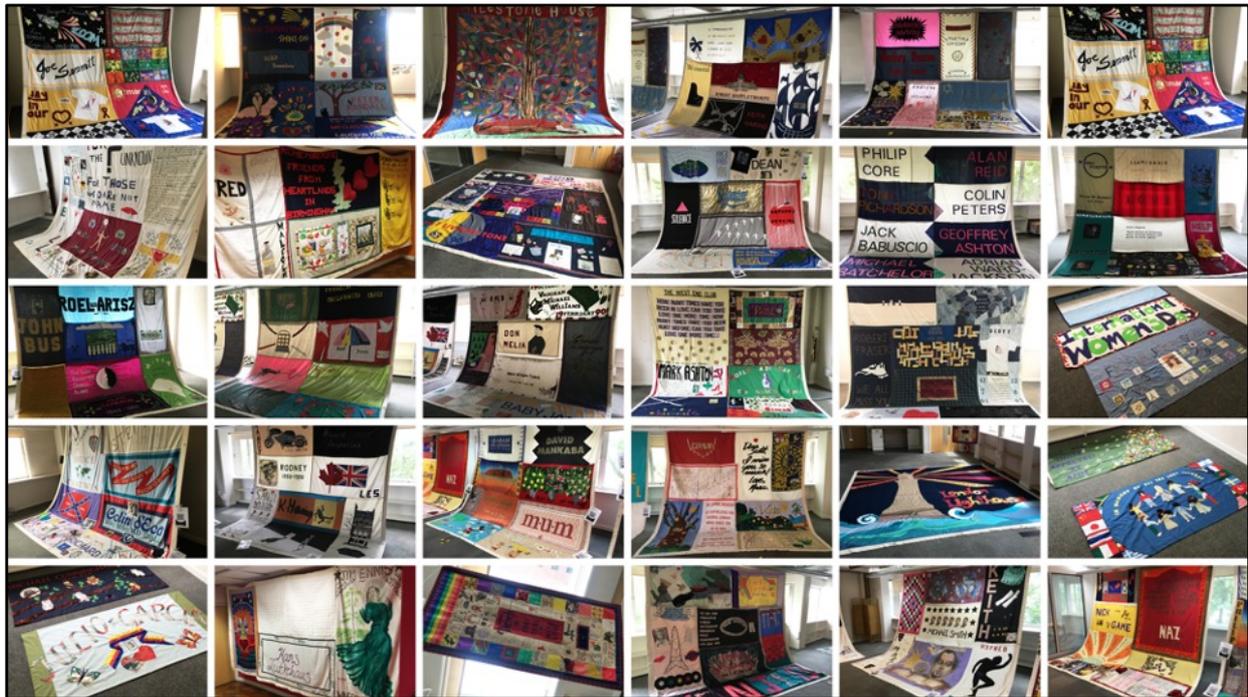
The site is a toolkit that guides visitors through a process of steps or 'struts' on how to plan and organise a C4P event. Case studies, poetry, videos, and other resources can also be found on this invaluable site.



A lot of sewing takes place. Women sew body parts, shawls, banners dresses. You name it! Positive affirmations are a big part of messaging. These messages give strength to how a woman will feel she can step out onto a stage or runway and declare “I Am Here”. The project has enabled Catwalk4Power events to take place in London, Brighton, Manchester, and Amsterdam. C4P women have also voiced that they want to bring this project to Scotland, so that Scottish women can design their C4P event, strengthening more connections for women with HIV and their allies.

The most often used hashtags for this project are #IAmHere #WeAreHere #ThePowerIsOurs.

Slide images: Various sash, shawl, banner, and prop examples of how women with HIV declare themselves to their audiences.



This collection of UK AIDS quilts, exhibited together, is an incredibly powerful and moving monument to loss of loved ones to HIV/AIDS illnesses.

In July of 2021, the AIDS Quilts exhibition was hosted by 'Food Chain' (previously known as London Lighthouse) and filled five floors on Acorn House in Kings Cross, London. These are just some of those panels and quilts. They had not been shown together since 1994. I helped to install a room for Positively UK there as part of this exhibition and spent days walking past these magnificent, draping artefacts before returning with friends to properly read across all the panels.

These emotionally heavy works are mostly hand sewn. But not all. Some quilt panels are painted on or written over with markers. Some designs seem quite minimal, while others contain layers of fabrics packed with stitch detailing. There are collectively created panels by families, hospices, circles of friends, and work colleagues. Other times a simple panel succinctly states 'Mum' or a boyfriend's name.

Slide images: A grid of 30 quilt panels show how some are of simple design – a person's names in bold cut out letters. Others are incredibly complex and worked over. All manner of materials have been used to create scenery or compiled elements that describe or signify a person. Some have sculptural 3D elements. There's often a lot of sparkle. They are all amazing. If you get the opportunity to see them together again, please do visit.



Slide images: Details from four embroidered AIDS quilt panels that show: high colour, shiny fabrics, floral arrangements, rosettes, LPs, flags indicating travel, landscape, messages, a giant tree of life where each leaf bears a name.



## Utopia Dreaming

*This is an exercise to stimulate loads of different ideas .  
It's one that C4AA often tasks groups with...*

- On a sheet of paper, in one corner, draw 'you' and describe where you are right now.
- Think of a problem that really bugs you or an issue you're passionate about (stopping arms trade, food poverty, mass displacement of people, a new building HQ for your group....) [5 mins]
- Now think about the scenario or utopia you want. There are no barriers to achieving this (no bureaucracy, no funding shortages, no dictators...nothing to stop this place or project from being).
  - Draw this scenario or utopia in the diagonally opposite page corner.
  - Don't worry about perfect drafting. Use images and words.
  - Don't be modest about it. Let your imagination go. Draw what it would be like to win. [10 mins]
- Next, in the middle area of this page, imagine solutions and pathways connecting you to your utopia. How can this world be possible? [10 mins]
- What would you do next? Repeat the process.

Utopia Dreaming Exercise (a C4AA strategising tool):

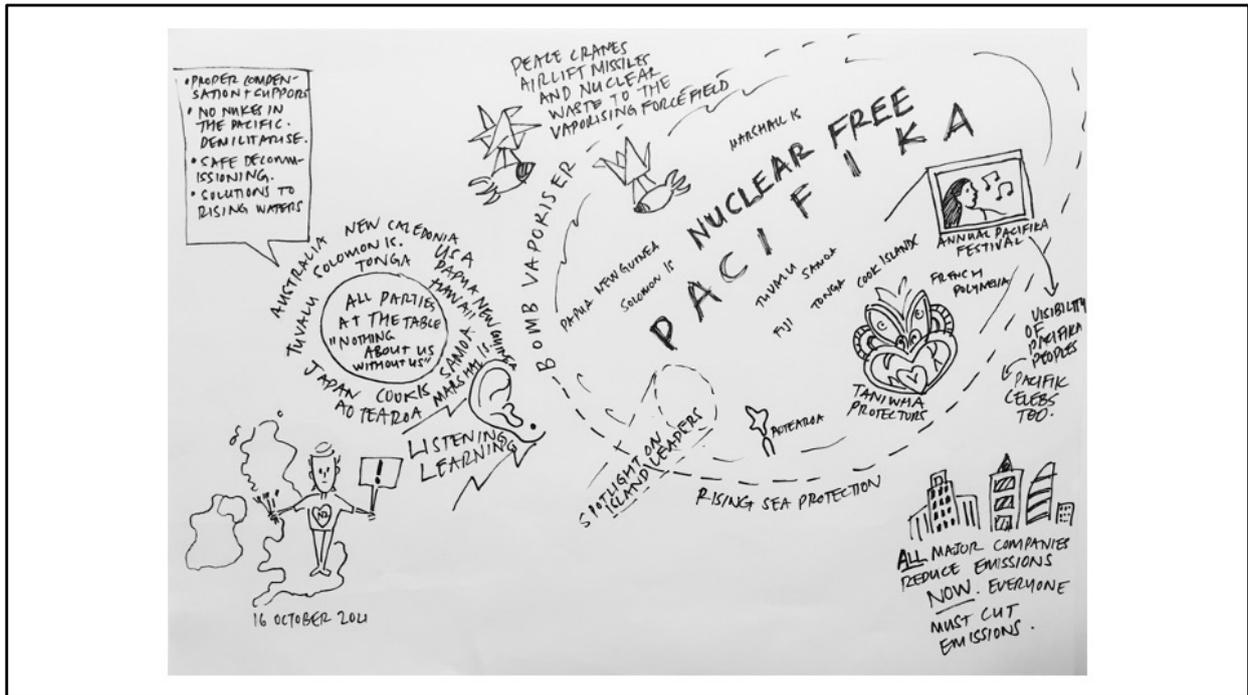
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What would you do next? Repeat the process.



Slide image: This is my rough drawing from a recent Utopia Dreaming exercise with Peace Crane/COP26 activists. My ideal scenario is for a Nuclear Free Pacifika. I've drawn a forcefield around Pacifika (South Pacific ocean). Peace cranes collect decomposing missiles, bombs and nuclear waste to then dump at the vaporising forcefield. Taniwha protectors ward off naval military machinery attempting to enter these waters. Taniwhas also protect Island countries and people from further radiation poisoning. The annual Pacifika festival expands its broadcast to go global, therefore placing Pacifika issues, culture, and talented leaders in full view. (Broadcasting is powered by a safe, green energy.) Major companies/institutions/organisations lead the way with emissions cuts. Then everyone cuts emissions, everywhere. At important, global roundtable discussions, all key parties are present. Pacifika leaders and communities are listened to and there is support for their proposals.

### Useful references and resources...

[https://c4ptoolkit\\_positivelyuk.org](https://c4ptoolkit_positivelyuk.org)

Catwalk4Power Toolkit (How to plan and organise toward a C4P event, plus resources)

<https://actuplondon.wordpress.com>

Act Up London archive of actions

Book recommendation: 'Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP, New York, 1987-1993'

Activist memoir by Sarah Schulman of Act Up NY.

C4AA (Center for Artistic Activism) and #FreeTheVaccine

<https://c4aa.org/2020/03/join-us-free-the-vaccine-for-covid-19>

Bishopsgate Institute (A major community archive and library that holds Act Up London, C4P and other activist documents and artefacts)

<https://www.bishopsgate.org.uk>

Beautiful Trouble activist toolbox

<https://www.beautifultrouble.org>

<https://sewing.com/hand-sewing-stitching-basics/>



Donna Riddington

<https://donnariddington.com>