

Conversations with Freda

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an interview with Freda Guttman

by Stefan Christoff

Howl arts collective
March 2014, Montréal, Québec

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art work by Freda Guttman / **photo by** Thien V.

back cover an impression from “Angelus Novus” by Paul Klee

Walter Benjamin bought “Angelus Novus” in 1921, Benjamin writes “A Klee drawing named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe that keeps piling ruin upon ruin and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.”

— Walter Benjamin, Ninth Thesis on the Philosophy of History

Howl arts collective

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Introduction

This zine is an effort to document and share the reflections of Freda Guttman, a long time social justice activist and artist in Montreal. Over many decades Freda has been meaningfully engaged in struggles for justice both at home and globally. From artistic solidarity work with indigenous people (specifically Mayan communities in Guatemala) facing US backed dirty wars in Central America in the Cold War 1980s, to a sustained focus on feminism and gender justice, Freda has consistently worked to challenge the injustice of political power and mainstream thinking on the key issues of our time.

Also within this zine you will find Freda’s reflections about the Palestinian struggle for freedom and against Israeli apartheid as rooted in a deep understanding of Jewish history as teaching the lesson of “never again, for anyone, anywhere.”

Most important this long conversation, recorded over a couple sessions at the Centre for Gender Advocacy at Concordia University in downtown Montreal, highlights a fluid connection between the arts and social movements, an understanding of art as a central element to the struggle for transformative social change. These reflections also explore radically beautiful ideas of thinkers like Walter Benjamin who influenced and inspired Freda’s work.

As a fellow artistic revolutionary, someone who is also an artist and holds a commitment to acting against injustices in our world, I felt both inspired and honored to work on this zine project aiming to highlight Freda’s important work over many years, but also to celebrate Freda’s 80th birthday.

Thank you for reading and sharing these moments with us.
love and solidarity. — Stefan Christoff, March 2014.



Demonstration against The Formula One Event, 2012

Artistic interventions and solidarity movements

Stefan : *To start this conversation, I wanted to ask about your thoughts and reflections on why an active engagement by artists with political struggles for justice is important. Can you reflect on this question in relation to your artistic work, your many exhibitions?*

Freda : Art speaks to people deeply, one reason being that visual images can imprint powerfully onto our brains as a different language, just as music which goes directly into our bodies is another sort of language. You look, you hear and the impact is instantaneous. I've always believed that art can be an important tool for social change, so my decision to do art that was situated within activist movements, direct political work, was a natural choice.

Often the story of Picasso's *Guernica* at the UN comes to mind when

people question the political impact of art, the possibility for art to create change. A US government press conference with Colin Powell and John Negroponte was planned at the UN building in New York City, to announce the US war on Iraq in winter 2003, directly in front of a very large tapestry version of *Guernica*, just at the entrance to the Security Council room. Powell spoke speaking in front of *Guernica*, but it was covered up by a large blue curtain so that no one could see it, seemingly at the request of the Bush administration.

In this case, the anti-war message of *Guernica* is so clear, so striking, that authorities covered it out of fear that the piece would influence people's thinking at a highly contentious media event. *Guernica* is an icon of political art in many ways and the piece depicts a terrible moment in 20th century history, a protest piece reacting to the aerial bombardment of a civilian population by Franco's nationalist air forces.

I really never doubted the importance and capacity for art to reach people. In relation to my work about Guatemala, the exhibition *Guatemala: The Road of War* was a response to the genocide against indigenous Mayan communities taking place in Guatemala during the 1980s.

At the time there really wasn't much mainstream news about what was happening and the situation was invisible to many people. I decided to create works about Guatemala in response to the mainstream silence, it was a directly conscious choice, a decision attempting to highlight the Mayan people's struggles and suffering in Guatemala.

Beyond the Guatemala exhibition, my work as an artist from that point onward was always focused on directly political issues. My next big project was a large installation about the global system of food production and distribution, called *The Global Menu*. In both these works, it was really important to collaborate with groups and organizations that were working directly on issues highlighted by the art. I didn't want to do art that was seen in a gallery but I wanted to broaden the context and create a space that would bring many people to see the work.

As an artist I really felt it was important to employ my skills, my artistic talents, to carry a message, utilizing mediums that could speak to people, while in parallel also illuminating the activist work going on related to the issues at hand. So mainly my work during this period were installations, multimedia installations, addressing a series of particular issues and struggles.

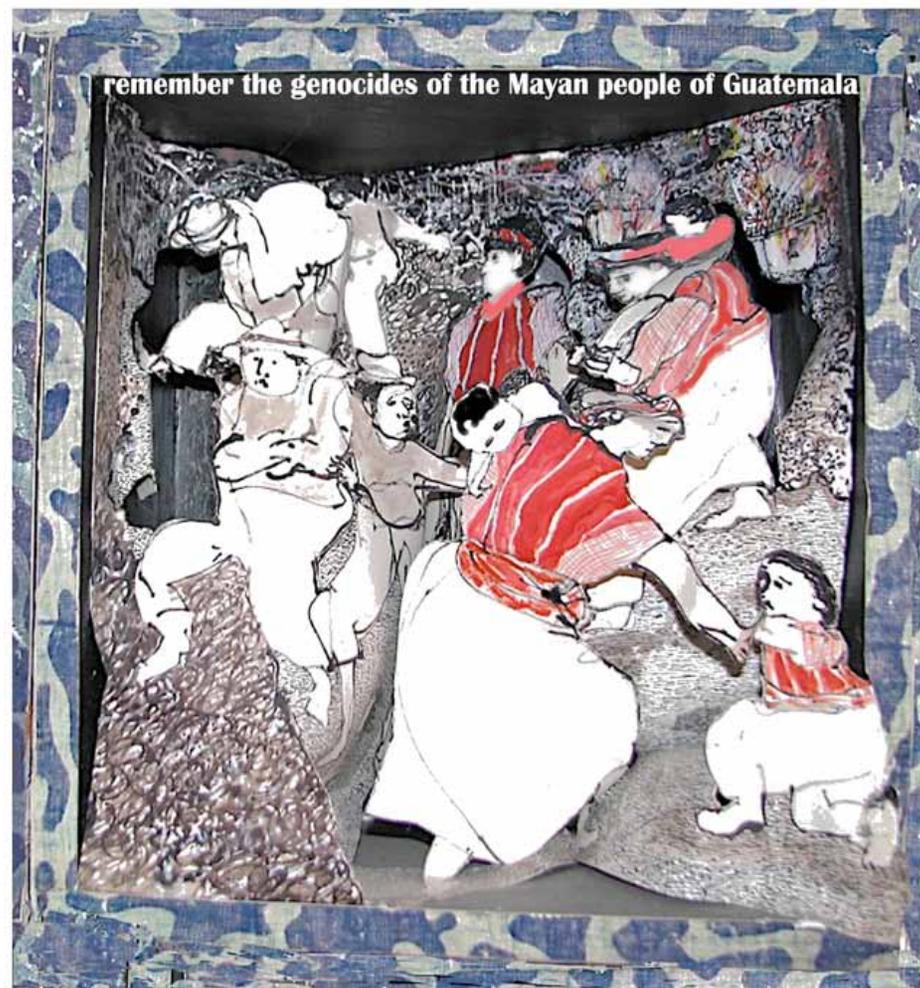
Stefan : *Concerning Guatemala, can you tell us generally what was happening in Guatemala at the time, in the context of the Cold War and heightening US militarization in Central America.*

Freda : Compared to the 1973 US-backed coup d'état in Chile against Allende, which was really in the international media, there was much less information about the incredible human rights violations and violence against the people in Guatemala that began in 1954 and ultimately lasted for 40 years but to some degree still exists.

Stefan : *During that period I have heard about an important struggle to pressure the Canadian government to welcome Chilean refugees in Canada, was there something similar happening around Guatemala, or more general solidarity work and protests?*

Freda : Yes there was an important struggle around Chilean refugees, which was successful in pushing the Canadian government to welcome more Chilean refugees, which was also in ways an acknowledgement of the human rights abuses happening under Pinochet.

However concerning Guatemala, there was relatively little awareness about the situation, certainly some activists were informed and were taking action, but for many in Canada, Guatemala was really far away. Also there was a tighter control over information coming out of Guatemala about the war crimes taking place, a militarily imposed silence that would be much more difficult to enforce today due to social media and new media. I found out about this history through organizations like Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA) and other Latin America solidarity group in the US and Canada that I connected with as the exhibition project on Guatemala was developing.



Detail from "Guatemala! The Road of War" 1986

During that period for most people there wasn't that same sense of being globally tuned in that is possible today, with minute-by-minute updates easily accessible online and almost immediate communications between activists around the world. The US military intervention in Guatemala was secretive and events were depicted through the lens of Cold War propaganda. The genocides in Mayan communities were hidden in that way. The majority of people in Guatemala are native, indigenous, a different dynamic than in many other countries in Latin America. What happened in Guatemala, was truly a genocide, crimes against humanity. I felt at the time an urgency to talk about what was happening in Guatemala, to try to inform people, these were the feelings that inspired *Guatemala: The Road of War*.

Stefan : *What was the link to Canada at the time, to what's happening in Ottawa, was there a complicity on the part of Canada?*

Freda : Yes certainly Canada was complicit in the genocide in Guatemala and never forcefully spoke out. There was no serious diplomatic action and many Canadian companies provided during the Cold War (a pattern continuing until today) important machinery for the US military industrial complex. Canada was and is part of the US alliance.

US intervention in Guatemala extends far back. It was the United Fruit Company that was directly implicated in the 1954 coup d'état in Guatemala that brought down a democratically elected government, an event that created the context for the violence in the 1970s and 1980s.

Stefan : *Did you coordinate the Guatemala: The Road of War exhibition as a political and social intervention about the crisis in Guatemala within Quebec and Canada, as a response to the information that you were hearing about the underreported human rights disaster in Guatemala?*

Freda : Yes the project was done with that goal. I organized for the exhibition to go across Canada, and also to New York City, it showed

in 14 different artist run centres, which were all very supportive. Also the exhibition was actively supported by church groups, activist friends, Guatemala solidarity committees and some NGOs.

At the time I sometimes felt in my heart that I wanted to just go around broadcasting the terrible news that we weren't getting about the situation in Guatemala, to wake people up, but I couldn't do that, so I created the exhibition.

Another important part of the project was to work with activist organizations to also create contexts for learning about Guatemala outside of the galleries, so we also held speaker events, concerts and film screenings. Everywhere I went with the exhibition I worked with and coordinated with local solidarity projects. This was the only way to work on a project like this as an artist that made sense in relation to context then, which required urgent activism about the situation in Guatemala.

Stefan : *I noticed in posters and material about the exhibition that you shared, that you were actively illustrating the links between what was happening in Guatemala and the conditions of First Nations communities in Canada.*

Freda : Yes for sure, this wasn't done explicitly in the actual exhibition, but within various parallel events around the project. At the art run centres and other spaces, we had speakers, movies and concerts that addressed First Nations issues here, for example Alanis Obomsawin joined events around the exhibition and actually sang at one event. At the time Alanis was singing as well as making films.

There are clear links between the devastation that indigenous people in Guatemala, the Mayan communities, and the sustained oppression that First Nations have experienced since Canada began.

Stefan : *At the time there were many ways that one could have intervened here in Canada about the massacres, the war against indigenous people that was happening in Guatemala, you could have met with MPs, organized protests, or pickets outside the US consulate. There were so many different ways one could have taken*

action, why choose an exhibition, an installation at art run centres?

Freda : For one thing, at that time, there was very little organizing in that way - public protests, demonstrations, pickets, etc. Those are things we commonly do today but weren't done then. Today there are so many organizations that we can involve ourselves in addressing local and global issues but there weren't at that time. We are empowered by all the ways we can protest. At that time, I only had my art as way of protesting.

The exhibition created a context for people to come, to contemplate things, to also learn about the beauty of the indigenous culture that US-backed forces were actively trying to destroy. The beautiful weaving patterns indigenous to different villages in Guatemala were also part of the exhibition.

Stefan : *You talk about the power of art, you described that in relation to the Guatemala exhibition, but also would like to hear what you think more generally. Sometimes people are cynical toward the impacts of art within the context of political struggles and activism.*

Freda : Art reaches people in deep ways, in different ways, it has a power beyond words. As an artist I have tried to use that power to reach people emotionally about different issues that I felt were urgent and important. I actually see activist work and artistic work as interconnected, I don't separate them in my mind.

Stefan : *A lot of people do separate art and activism.*

Freda : Yes a lot do.

Stefan : *So why do you always make that connection between your practice as an artist and the difficult political issues that you address as an activist?*

Freda : Its obvious, its important to be politically active, to demonstrate, to speak with people, to challenge power, to always try to address injustices, art is an essential part of this process, a key

element.

Stefan : *Can you describe the Guatemala: The Road of War exhibition?*

Freda : *The Road of War* exhibition had many different parts. I created large sculptural pieces to represent the situation in various Guatemalan villages. They were mountain-like shapes, made from hand made paper, and each one spoke about a village that was attacked in the US-backed covert war, about its culture, and specifics of what happened to the people who lived there.

I created the paper 'mountains' and then xeroxed patterns and information about what had happened in the different villages, the massacres, the names of people killed or disappeared, and glued them onto the large shapes, each representing a different village. The beauty of Guatemalan embroidery became a large part of the exhibit, the beautiful particular designs. Every village had its own distinctive patterns, worn not as costumes but as a part of their identity. Over the entire exhibition there was a canopy of camouflage material, there were also drawings. There were also little hand made diorama boxes, that depicted different scenes of resistance and repression. I am now doing a portfolio of lino prints based on these dioramas.

Stefan : *When you talk about people in Guatemala resisting, what were they resisting against?*

Freda : In 1954, a democratically elected government was destroyed by a CIA backed coup. The government of that time had tried certain policies aimed to make the society more equitable. At the time The united Fruit Company owned most of the land in Guatemala and other resources and they didn't take kindly to the governments attempts at land reform. And so the coup, to "save Guatemala from Communism", so we were told. There was resistance in the beginning by guerilla groups against the violent onslaught by US backed military forces, brutal repression, mass killings, the total upheaval of communities. Many guerrilla movements, unarmed progressive social activists, priests inspired by liberation theology, were wiped out. The Americans, the Israelis were involved in the methods and

the trainings, that often took place at the School of the Americas (SOA) in Fort Benning, Georgia [now known as Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC)].

Efraín Ríos Montt, the former former president of Guatemala, a dictator, is a graduate of the School of the Americas. During the time that Montt, who was a Christian fundamentalist was president, in the 1980's, a series of horrible massacres were carried out.

Recently Montt went on trial for genocide in Guatemala, was found guilty and was sentenced to 80 years, in prison, but the conviction was annulled 10 days later by the Constitutional Court, Guatemala's highest court, on a technicality. The verdict was revoked, many believe, because the current president of Guatemala, Otto Pérez Molina, is also deeply implicated in this history of killings and genocide. There are pictures of him present at massacre scenes from that era.

Stefan : *Can you talk more about the massacres that took place in Guatemala, they were highlighted in your exhibition through the focus on different villages. Can you talk about some of what you learned, as an artist and activist, about this period of US-backed violence in Guatemala?*

Freda : There were mass killings based on military models developed by the US in Vietnam. The military went into villages and killed people en masse, women, children and the elderly, the theory was that the guerrillas were supported by the people. In this context entire villages in Guatemala were wiped out, with the goal of spreading fear and panic throughout the indigenous villages and territories, to try to make people afraid of supporting revolutionary ideas and actions.

Also one thing that happened a little later on, is that the military and government would forcefully displace people into model villages, controlled by the army, mixing up people from different villages, disrupting local culture and social organization, disorienting communities. Mayan villages in Guatemala have a specific identities, specific linguistic dialects, special weaving patterns on the clothing, so moving people by force, after the wave of mass killings, was an attempt to break that sense of community continuity, to destroy the

Mayan identity.

Also indigenous men in villages were often forced into the military, so they were forced into the army without choice and then ordered to control their own communities by force. They would compel young men, often adolescents (child soldiers), into this situation, forcing them to keep tabs on what was happening at the local level and report to the state, to monitor people and also carrying out killings in their own communities.

There was a regime of terror in Guatemala during that period, backed by the US, with Canada standing completely on the side of empire. Another very important thing I learned from my research was that Israel was heavily involved in supplying weapons to the Guatemalans, taught them methods of torture, of security, etc. That deepened my understanding of the kind of state that Israel is.

Stefan : *In many ways there hasn't been much accountability for this period of brutal violence in Guatemala, can you reflect on that?*

Freda : In very recent years some democratic space opened up, the trial of Montt is an example, but even that is in jeopardy. Really very, very few people involved in these policies, in these killings have gone to trial, have faced justice.

Stefan : *Why is ensuring justice, in cases like the one you are describing in Guatemala, important?*

Freda : Accountability is so important because it helps give some small sense of justice, it can allow some space for healing and moving on, this is so important for survivors.

Also justice raises the possibility, the chance, that the likelihood of such things happening again somewhere in the world is less possible, because people involved could face real justice.

This whole process of justice has been very, very slow in Guatemala.

Today in Guatemala there are major Canadian mining interests,

corporations who want the lands and resources of Guatemala, so there are people resisting and fighting these mines who are now facing violence once more, even killings. As everywhere, it is Indigenous people who are in the vanguard of the defence of land and the environment. Just a couple years back Adolfo Ich Chaman, a community leader in Guatemala, was killed in a death linked to Canadian mining company HudBay Minerals Inc.

Stefan : *I can imagine that there were many long hours that went into this exhibition on Guatemala, working a lot on preparing the different aspects of the exhibition, the installation. When you were spending hours doing this, what was going through your mind, what were you thinking?*

Freda : I was thinking that this situation in Guatemala is so terrible, so horrible, it needs to be told, people need to be aware of the situation. It can't be invisible here any longer and it was invisible to most in Canada, so I felt an anger and an imperative to put together the exhibition.

Stefan : *Do you remember any difficult moments, major challenges that came up while putting this exhibition together? How was the role of the larger activist / artist community important to the event and project?*

Freda : I worked with different groups toward the exhibition, so there was a community aspect that was important, the stories and recounting of events highlighted in exhibition was done with groups local like Comité d'appui au Guatemala and Projet Accompagnement Québec-Guatemala.

I also did an enormous amount of research for the project, there were organizations putting out reports, magazines, reading one text would lead you to another. This is an interesting question because it makes me think about doing something like this without the Internet, which now would seem impossible, but the exhibition was done most certainly without the Internet.

There was enough that was coming out about Guatemala to get

information if you looked, mainly written material from progressive organizations or alternative media, but these sources were largely ignored by the mainstream.

Stefan : *How was the response to the exhibition in Quebec society?*

Freda : It was good, here in Quebec and everywhere the exhibition went, the response was very engaged.

Stefan : *Were you nervous back then about presenting the exhibition?*

Freda : No I wasn't that nervous, I was very organized, very on top of things and details for the project. I was also very driven by this imperative that doing the exhibition was important politically, given what was happening in Guatemala. Actually I have been nervous when I have had shows that were more personal in nature, or metaphorical.

Stefan : *Do you feel that there could be more of an artistic aspect to social movements, to activism today?*

Freda : Yes I do feel this is important and I feel that there is less engaged art in Montreal as compared to other places in the world, more artists should out. Things like guerilla art and graffiti are on the rise, which is good, but there could always be more.

On Art + Activism

Stefan : *The exhibition on Guatemala was presented in the 1980s, you mentioned the various solidarity efforts that were taking place back then. Given your grassroots political engagement over different generations I am wondering if you have any reflections about where things are at today in Montreal in relation to similar types of activism? Are there any big points of contrast between then and now in relation to links between art and activism?*

Freda : Society today is much more repressive. So many good projects have lost public funding, there is more of a conscious effort by the Canadian government to quell voices of dissent, to silence our voices. However, although I have lived in Montreal my whole life, I have never witnessed such a wave of involvement of young people mainly, in social movements, and this is very, very powerful. The Quebec student strike in 2012 represented a whole society in opposition, people up in arms, in the streets together, questioning everything about the system. In this sense, in regards to activism, I feel that things are better, more intense. Today the inequities are so obvious, in the 80s there were more jobs, wages for working class people were better, working in a factory and owning a car and a house was a possibility, not a capitalist fantasy. The economic reality was very different. More importantly, people's understanding of what is wrong with the world today is unclouded by the rhetoric of liberalism.

Today under the Conservatives, even before Harper, society has been getting more and more repressive. There are more social problems as public institutions get underfunded, or defunded, like programs for mental health and the homeless, or soon public health care. Free trade agreements like NAFTA are undercutting working people, its real. But in response to this reality there is more resistance, over the last 15 years resistance has been on the rise, despite the repression.

Walter Benjamin talks about these important moments where people collectively wake up, this brings to mind the student strike, moments of awakening, moments that are a preparation toward revolution. Although revolution maybe doesn't happen at those moments, these experiences stay in your mind and within society collectively, they

change peoples ideas in relation to the possibilities of activism. These moments can be built on and this is the process of change.

Stefan : *Can you reflect on the ways that your background and experiences, your family life for example, informed your political perspectives and social engagement?*

Freda : I think its always important to talk about both personal and collective history at once.

I was very young when I realized that my life wasn't separate from what was going on in the world. The contingencies of my birth, the things that formed me, including when I was born, where I was born, the fact that I am Jewish - I always saw these aspects of my identity as in a sense a part of a larger history.

What Walter Benjamin said about history, in relation to collective history is that the real history we should study, the real history that is meaningful, is the history of the oppressed. When we do that, study this history, the notion that society has progressed from one stage to another, becomes meaningless. Throughout history across the ages, in different parts of the world, there were popular struggles against oppression that shaped the real history of things. After the terrible 20th century, filled with violent wars, and now that we are into the equally violent 21st century, I think that it is obvious, that things don't naturally progress or get better.

Benjamin was writing about these ideas in the 1930's and 1940's after the various Utopian Communist, Anarchist and socialist movements in Europe collapsed and the rise of Fascism

What remains important in what Benjamin said is that in order to understand real history we must look at the history of the oppressed, that progress is not a given and that Fascism is always lurking.

Stefan : *How did these ideas inform your work?*

Freda : These are ideas that I have wanted to convey in my work for a long time. Also I spoke earlier about my personal history. I did

a work in the 80s called *Cassandra: An Opera in Four Acts*, and the theme was the silencing of women's voice.

I grew up in a very patriarchal family and felt silenced as a woman in my family, my mother was silenced also, at the same time I loved my father. I was trying to explore the fact that within our family cultures there are echos of fascism. This was interesting to me because Germany demonstrated possibility that a whole society could be so enthralled, by a fascist ideology, by ideas that were so evil that could do evil things and yet these were not evil people.

Stefan : *Do you see extensions of this history of fascism in Europe and our situation today?*

Freda : The types of controls that we live under today are different that the fascism of Europe in the 20th century. Obviously we don't live in an out and out fascist state, with laws that say we hate minorities, Jews, Gypsies and fascists, they are disposable people, mass scapegoats that will be killed en masse.

Today in our society there is the influence of fascism, although it seems so distant. There is a manufactured consent, around the idea that we really live a true democracy, however we don't. There is more and more repression of radical ideas, of activists, as ordinary people that try to resist the systemic ecological destruction of their communities, their land by major corporations, are criminalized. For example people who resist fracking, or the tar sands, are criminalized. Or we in Quebec who want to march and demonstrate our dissent who are subjected to unjust bylaws, arrests and brutality. People who stood up during the student uprising, against the loi spéciale, were attacked, arrested. These were clear attempts to undercut our collective rights, won through struggle over generations. Also today basic social rights, like the right to education and health care, are all being cut down by neoliberal and austerity policies. This is the reality today in our society where there are increasing injustices, increasing poverty. When people are attacked in so many ways for demanding their rights, how can we say that this is contemporary Fascism.

Across the global south there is growing exploitation of people

working for corporations, in sweatshops, in maquiladoras, often without many rights at all. The situation is a disaster, just look at the factory fires recently in Bangladesh.

There are so many inequities and injustices that actually are getting worse.

Also there are the perpetual wars, the massive production of arms, there is no way that we can pretend we live under true democracies, because it's not a democracy for the majority of people in real terms, in economic terms.

Actually I feel that these attacks are going to get worse, the heightening of repression, as resources become more scarce is going to become more and more violence over the next generation.

Stefan : *When we look back at the history of fascism in Europe, when we are confronted with the images of World War II, these images are often presented as the exact contrast, the opposite of our society. Wondering if you have any reflections on this?*

Freda : Today fascist ideas are less obvious but they are still present. Today there is a constant wearing away of our collective rights, month by month. The fact that capitalism is becoming more and more extreme, that austerity is presented as inevitable. People's rights and collective well being is under attack by austerity, by capitalism.

It's getting harder and harder in Canada for people to get access to universities, to access education, sustaining public health care in the future is a big question. People are being weighed down by personal debt, forcing them into a form of working slavery. People's dreams and rights are being thrown away.

These patterns are not new, they extend throughout history. It's important to sound the alarm on our situation because we are under a real attack today. Nothing is inevitable, so things that were won through struggle like access to public education and health care are being taken away, piece by piece.



Still from video “Film Muet/Silent Movie”, 1995

So we think of Nazi Germany as the ultimate evil and of course they industrialized murder to get rid of the people that they didn't want. Everything was organized, planned, the camps, the ways of gathering people together to bring to the camps, everything was planned, so that the fascist ideas could be implemented smoothly.

There are systems of control and institutional violence today that are different but also very repressive and its important to see parallels in order to feel the urgency of the struggles that we still face.

Stefan : *You mentioned the dynamics within your family and how that inspired your piece Cassandra: An Opera in Four Acts, often today one idea that keeps coming up in mainstream, reactionary forums, is that we live in a society that is beyond gender oppression, that feminism is no longer needed because this society has reached*

gender equality. Wondering your views, as an artist, as an activist, about the importance of feminism today.

Freda : This brings up another point of Benjamin, that there is always oppression, and those that have power will always take advantage of people. For every generation the feminist cause needs to be refought, there is always a different context but the feminist struggle still remains extremely essential, important.

Again lets discard this notion of progress, yes there are some victories, awareness is built, but today women still get paid less than men, sexism in our society is rampant. Look at the situation of the missing and murdered indigenous women. Even within progressive movements feminism struggle remains very important, remember the reports about women being sexually assaulted within the student movement for example.

Sexism is so imbedded in men's heads and within the structures of our society, this social fabric that illustrates women as creatures, as prey, this is a reality. To go back to Cassandra: An Opera in Four Acts the piece was inspired by the myth of Cassandra, who was the priestess of Troy in ancient Greece and she had the gift of seeing the future. The story goes that because Cassandra refused to sleep with Apollo, Cassandra was punished by Apollo who said that although Cassandra can see the future, no one will believe anymore.

So you know the wooden horse that came into Troy, there was a warning by Cassandra about the wooden horse. Cassandra knew that there were Greek soldiers inside and that Troy would be destroyed, but no one was listening, no one believed.

The reasons I wanted to do that piece inspired by Cassandra, is because it seemed to me that I was always bearer of bad news. From the time I was young I always felt my identity and presence as connected to the world, I always wanted to really know what was going on, to learn about our world today and throughout history.

I always felt that people just never wanted to hear what I had to say, to hear about the bad news, it made them uncomfortable, it's

upsetting. For example I could never really talk to most of my family about Israel, it makes them crazy, they just didn't want to hear about the injustices being committed against the Palestinians.

Stefan : *Why do you feel that people don't want to hear, to listen?*

Freda : Look at what's happening to the environment, why aren't people on the streets screaming their hearts out every day? Every week we learn about another ecological disaster, another train carrying oil blowing up, another oil spill, or pipeline explosion.

I really don't know why people don't want to truly address these issues, the root cause, which is our economic system, capitalism. I don't understand why we can't turn around and realize what is happening collectively and make it stop.

Well one reason is poverty, when people are poor and are working long, long hours at soul sucking jobs that they hate, this steals their energy, their spirit. While they are focused on surviving and on



Demonstration at Laval Prevention Center, 2013

feeding their families, this pressure steals their energy, their time.

Stefan : *Before you were talking about seeing today's systems as rooted in facism, is this related to what you're saying now?*

Freda : Yes. I think that people are lulled by our stories, by the mythologies that our society is based on, that politicians and the mainstream media repeat at dizzying speeds. The myth that our "rights" really protect us, that injustice is not systemic in Canada, that the laws protects us, more often these systems are used to oppress us. These "rights" that Canada so famously talks about are less and less real.

Stefan : *Do you think that new technology can enable people's capacity to struggle for their rights, to fight for a more just society?*

Freda: Yes new technologies can be important, but they can also be used against use, its complex. One thing that Benjamin talked about was how new technologies change us and our society in various ways, in deep ways that we often don't realize until afterward.

For example the first radios were really large, built like furniture, and in Nazi Germany one of the things that Hitler's gang realized early on was the power and potential of radio, of broadcasting Hitler's speeches. So actually Nazi Germany manufactured cheap radios, to try to ensure that there was a radio in every house and that people could access the speeches.

I have memories of hearing those speeches, I can still hear Hitler's voice in my head, we would listen as a family to the speeches and my father would get enraged because Hitler was talking about us, about Jews being evil.

Stefan : *Your work often revolves around history and the importance of learning lessons from history, why is this important?*

Freda : Studying history from the len of the oppressed is important. Look back to the privatization of common land, that was a shift toward injustice so essential for capitalism. Look at the Diggers

movement who tried to resist the privatization of land. Because land before wasn't owned by anyone, it belonged to everyone and then suddenly with the introduction of private property the land was owned by these feudal lords.

Stefan : *Before you have mentioned to me the Angel of History, a piece of art that Benjamin always talked about, could you talk about that?*

Freda : Yes, well the piece Angelus Novus was by Paul Klee, a Swiss artist, an early modernist painter. It's a work that Walter Benjamin owned for many years. He saw in it the parable of the angel of history, facing the past which we call history, but all that the Angel sees is an ever-growing pile up of ruins. The angle wants to try to do something, to change things, to awaken the dead, but he is being blown by a terrific wind into the future and that wind is what people call progress.

Stefan : *A lot of people talk today about an obsession with the future, there not being enough focus on the present, or learning from the past. This framework of thinking could be tied into conservative religious concepts, or even economic concepts of growth, this "progress" that you talk about. Can you reflect on this?*

Freda : Yes, when I think about the future I feel really gloomy, unfortunately, because we seem to be repeating the same things over and over. Even Pete Seeger felt gloomy about the direction we are taking, a person who was so positive. I will never stop trying to change things in my small way but the future does look really gloomy. We are facing such great danger.

So I do feel gloomy about the future and our current situation, yes.

Stefan : *Despite that feeling I have always known you as being a very active person, always on the streets, always involved, over many years. How do you battle that feeling of gloominess and continue to be involved in revolutionary idealistic movements?*

Freda : I think that we should fight in whatever way we can even if

we do feel despair and fighting for what is right is a way of warding off despair. We should never give up and we should find joy in our communities and in our common struggles. There is still joy and beauty in the world,

Maybe we have limited power, maybe we can only change some things, but whatever, I think that it's better to go down fighting.

Being involved is also very personal because being involved battles against despair, that feelings of doom, that injustice is not inevitable. That feeling that you are trying to do something, that you are trying to do something with other people, that is so important because that involves community, friendship and creates solidarity.

Fighting together is so important, so that we see our common interests, so that we are surrounded by like minded people, that we are trying to face these injustices rather than letting them destroy us and our world.

Stefan : *That's very interesting because a lot of the time people view art as an individual practice and understand artists as being able to exist as autonomous beings, removed from the people. As an artist you have always been more interested in a collective approach.*

When we were talking about your exhibition project about Guatemala you talked about the different organizations involved, the community events that happened in parallel to the exhibition. I am wondering if you could talk more about that notion of collectivity and the importance of community in relation to being an artist?

Freda : As an artist I always thought about my work as a way to participate in various struggles, that perspective means that you work with other people in the movement, that you work with organizations addressing the issues. This approach has always been important to me, to find ways to put my art to use within the movement.

Stefan : *Still there is this celebration of the artist as this autonomous being, with great politics and a great deal of talent, as floating above the activist movements that are directly addressing the*

issues at hand. You see this image being created around artists, especially musicians, that present themselves as radicals here in Montreal, this idea of the artist as untouchable, like a mini god. Outside of a formalized context, over coffee, or dinner, we talk about a songwriter, or a great filmmaker as often removed from the movements that created the context for their work, the social process that creates the framework for their work.

Freda : I have always want to be directly involved in social struggles and as an artist I never really pushed myself much in terms of a career or within the art world, I don't think that was ever my goal.

This is not necessarily noble, its been a great struggle, but in a way my involvement and participation has been a way to make my life more meaningful, it has enriched me as a person. I want to feel like I am a person who does things to support movements, that my life is meaningful but also is lived with the notion of solidarity.

I have had many struggles, I dealt with serious depression, years of doubting myself as a person, feeling shitty about myself. Today these feelings are much, much less there, but I had to go through really thinking about myself as an artist, as an activist and find out ways that I could really try to contribute and also feel good inside myself about what I was doing. The key was to do something that was beyond me, to join collective struggles that are larger than one person but that allow for individual identities to thrive and flourish.

You know what I mean?

Stefan : *Yes totally I know what you mean. I actually was wondering if you ever get angry about people who make opposite choices from the ones that you describe. People who make choices that are about comfort, about removing themselves from the ground. Does seeing people who make these choices, while still speaking about being radically politically, piss you off?*

Freda : I don't really hang out with many people like that. Perhaps the people that I get the most angry about are the Zionists in my family, actually !

Perhaps my feelings of anger are more toward the terrible choices that our society makes collectively, not toward individuals anymore. I sometimes get angry, but its unfocused anger, its about the state of the world.

Stefan : *What do you do with that anger ?*

Freda : I protest, to feel that sense of collectivity, of togetherness, to feel linked with other people.

Stefan : *There are a lot of activists I know who sing, play an instrument and or make visual art, but they feel this sense of intimidation toward the idea that they could be an artist, this feeling is often gendered also. There is this perception that artists are hold this unique power that comes from somewhere else, almost beyond human power. I wanted to ask you about that process you went through to becoming an artist in the public, to use your art very publicly as a way to talk about the issues in the world that you feel are important.*

Freda : I love to express myself that way and its a way to make my life meaningful. I have taught art and I think that everyone is an artist, everyone could do beautiful work and express themselves that way, but they often don't get the opportunity. They are stuck with this idea that only special people can do art.

There is sometimes this idea that art needs to be representationally real, this is a skill that some people have, but its not essential to making art. When I was teaching art, I would give students work to do that would avoid the idea that art was about representation, I would supply colors, materials to make patterns, different approaches. Things that would expand the idea of art, things to build up their confidence without having to feel that an artist is only someone who draws representationally well.

Actually I think that the fact that many people lack the time and space to do art is tragic, we should all get a living wage and get the time and space to create art.

Stefan : *You're highlighting the importance of art in society. I feel that a society that allows people to express themselves in beautiful ways, with their spirit, equals a healthy society. Its very interesting that now in Canada under the Conservatives the arts are being attacks, public funding for the arts is being cut. So for you how does the presence of art at a community level illustrate the health of a society?*

Freda : *I think that a society that encourages the arts is healthy. Art programs should be flourishing in the schools, this is less and less the case, art is presented as a frill which is ridiculous, while art is actually one of the most important things for a society. Art gives people room to really express themselves, so in that sense we don't have a very healthy society today.*

Stefan : *I always felt that concrete sciences are often executed as an expression of our proscribed reality, fitting within the imposed economic and material frameworks, that are very limited. However if you look at any picture of the stars this framework of science is ridiculous, or if you look at a branch of a tree, the beautiful detail, the idea that humans are at the height of possibility through industrial creation is crazy. Art in a sense I feel communicates the more spiritual and impossible nature of things, the commons here on earth but also the spirits beyond.*

Freda : *Yes art is beautiful self expression, you can see it with kids who draw, its their self expression, its coming from a sense of need to create that is repressed for the rest of their lives. Its a pity that it has to be more and more of a struggle today to create art in Canada and beyond; we have to envision a society where art is more accessible and an important part of society for everyone.*

In Montreal there are a lot of people making art which is great, and the connection between the arts and the activism that challenges the oppressive systems that prohibit real artistic expression from flourishing for most, is necessary.



where should the plants sleep after the last breath of air?

“Where Should The Birds Fly After The Last Sky?”, 2011

Standing with Palestine

Stefan : *So before we were talking about history, we talked about fascism in Europe, about Zionism in your family, about feminism and also your solidarity work with Latin America. I wanted to ask you now about how the Palestinian struggle became important to you, how you developed that strong sense of solidarity with the Palestinians?*

Freda : *It was gradual, I never had strongly nationalist feelings about Israel growing up, although I was surrounded by all the myths about*

Israel as being a land without people for a people without a land. But I never was a strongly nationalist person, I was always cold toward nationalist ideas, not particularly about Israel but more generally.

I think that nationalism is not a good thing, it whips people up and its dangerous, we should live in one common world, without borders. You can see an extreme version of nationalism with Nazi Germany, those ridiculous ideas about national superiority that were developed among the Germans by the Nazis.

Today in Canada you see these silly ideas, like about Canada being the best country in the world, what is this? Its ridiculous. In Israel there is this attempt to distinguish Israel as exceptional, as different, as the only democracy in the region, which is rooted in claims that aren't true, because Israel is based on dispossession and is not a true democracy for the people, the Palestinians, struggling under its military control.

I like a lot of other progressives, activists in North America, by the time the second Intifada started in 2000, started really waking up to what was happening in occupied Palestine. Many people started asking, why aren't we doing more about the situation in Palestine here? It was a period of awakening on the Palestinian struggle, I think that people knew before but it wasn't until this time, the early 2000s that there began to be a real movement about Palestine.

People started to get more organized, started groups, the weekly picket outside the Israeli Consulate in Montreal began, organized the Palestinian Jewish Unity (PAJU) and also student groups like Solidarity for Palestinian Human Rights (SPHR) started becoming very active.

For me being involved with the Palestinians struggle was also responding to a sense of complicity that I felt because of the Zionism in my family. I was taken to Canada Park in 2004, when I traveled to Palestine to join the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), and I found plaques in the Canada Park with the names of my family members, who had bought land for the park which was built on Palestinian villages destroyed in 1967.

I just felt the Palestinians have faced such terrible injustice and I do get angry at Zionism and Zionists. I just think that Zionists are so wrong and the suffering of Palestinians is something that I just can't be silent about. This whole situation is so ironic because coming from the Holocaust there is this phrase that we all learned, 'Never Again', in my mind this meant never again for anyone, anywhere and it seems that Zionists see Palestinians as non human.

I think that for the extreme Zionists that control Israel today, the echos of the Holocaust are clear, represented in this idea that you need to be militarily strong or else you are a wimp, that peace is for the weak. This is an incredible macho and deranged perspective. Many things that Zionists say are utterly fascist and racist, things that frame the Palestinians as second class humans.

Stefan : *Can you talk about the ways that your time in occupied Palestine impacted you, are your memories from there meaningful to you?*

Freda : Yes of course, those times in Palestine stay in my mind, I have many friends there that I stay in touch with online, all the time, those links are strong. Being in Palestine was a very awesome experience, being right there on the ground where people were facing the violence of the military machine. Where oppression means killings, imprisonment without trial and military violence, day after day.

People told me so many stories about their relatives being killed by the Israeli army. When I was in Bil'in village, both the popular resistance and repression was incredible. I met so many really brave and wonderful people there in Palestine, those were amazing experiences.

Stefan : *Comparing the situation between occupied Palestine and here, they are so different, what does that make you think about our world today?*

Freda : I think that in so many ways our lives are so privileged here despite the oppression that also exists here. That we fight oppression here but that Palestinians face that oppression in a more extreme way, they are killed, they are injured, their houses are blown up, this is part of reality, very different from here in so many ways.

Canada is a part of the problem in occupied Palestine, the Conservative government is one of Israel's biggest supporters, so we have a responsibility and need to take action.