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Blueprints for survival: Artists construct The Civil Defense Information Centre

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Blueprints for Survival

Artists construct The Civil Defense Information Centre

Vancouver's status as a major target area has led to an increasing need for information facilities to provide the public with blueprints for survival from nuclear attack. Current data forecast two to three megaton warheads targeted at the Vancouver-Victoria area. (Civil Defense Information Centre, Press Release, Jan. 1982).

When the *Vancouver Sun* printed this statement verbatim they believed that they were excerpting from a press release by the federal government. In fact, they were providing an advertising channel for a multi-media anti-nuke exhibition created by three Vancouver artists, Laura Hackett, Dean Mitchell and Daniel Werger.

The three recent graduates of Emily Carr College of Art, working in collaboration, sought to create a show which would grasp at the growing public fear of nuclear annihilation. Their two week presentation (Feb. 1-14, 1982, Unit Pitt Gallery, Vancouver) combined performance, video, sculpture, architectural media, slides and blueprints within the gallery space and a media and leafletting assault without. They were unusually successful in their ability to educate a mass audience, rupture traditional gallery space and in their generation of mass media coverage. In this interview, FUSE talks to Laura Hackett and Dean Mitchell.

Sara: How did "Blueprints for Survival" come about?

Laura: The show came together with three working artists who have all been concerned over the years about the nuclear issue. We wanted to deal with it through the medium of art, with whatever focus we wanted to take individually and collaboratively under one space. The big concern was: what aspect of the nuclear issue did we want to focus on? We came to the realization that you have to deal with all aspects of the issue because they are all linked. You can't separate disarmament from uranium mining, or nuclear power. We read a lot of information that isn't accessible to everybody, so we tried to simplify it and make it as elementary and communicable as possible. By creating enormous four by five blueprints we could do visual imagery and written information in large scale. It made it much easier to absorb than if you were to read books and books of the same information. We regionalized the information. We had a lot of references to articles from the local newspapers, as well as magazines, editorials, cartoons. Humour was an important part of the show because we realized that the issue

is so serious that another method of allowing or helping people to absorb the information was to put in a humorous element.

Dean: Humour was a way to release all this pent-up anxiety about the issue.

Sara: It's certainly struck me that people can easily become cynical or hopeless about nuclear war. Did you try to offer solutions to people through the show?

Laura: During the evenings we had different groups come in: those who had been directly politically active with the issue, people like the **Canadian Coalition for Nuclear Responsibility**, and **Women Against Nuclear Technology** to speak from a feminist perspective, individuals who had a lot of information about B.C. Hydro, people who could talk about a more global, international context. One fellow talked about multi-nationals and the **Trilateral Commission**. The feminist perspective was really important to me, as was the indigenous perspective: so many Native Indians are being abused by uranium mining. It was an educational experience as well as an event which people could come and experience visually. We had a hand-out which

described what you can do. It was put at the entrance of the show and it talked about individual approaches to taking action and about joining groups. There was a concern about not maintaining that overwhelming feeling that so many people have about the nuclear issue which is, 'What the hell can I do about it. It's so devastating, so enormous, I can't do anything.' Which is a myth because internationally, everybody collectively working together has had impact. The fact that the Geneva peace talks have evolved, that's enough to see that something has been brought about by the general public.

Sara: How did the nuclear issue emerge as an important arena for you to intervene in, as artists?

Dean: It seems to be a really immediate concern. Things are continuing to escalate. The stalemate that in the 1950s they wanted to achieve kept on escalating into the 60s and on into the 70s. Now we're having a whole new round of the military arms race. The economics of it are just one aspect. It overtakes human needs. The money that goes to build a bomb is not going to education or food stamps for the poor. It superimposes itself onto



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Civil Defence Information Centre

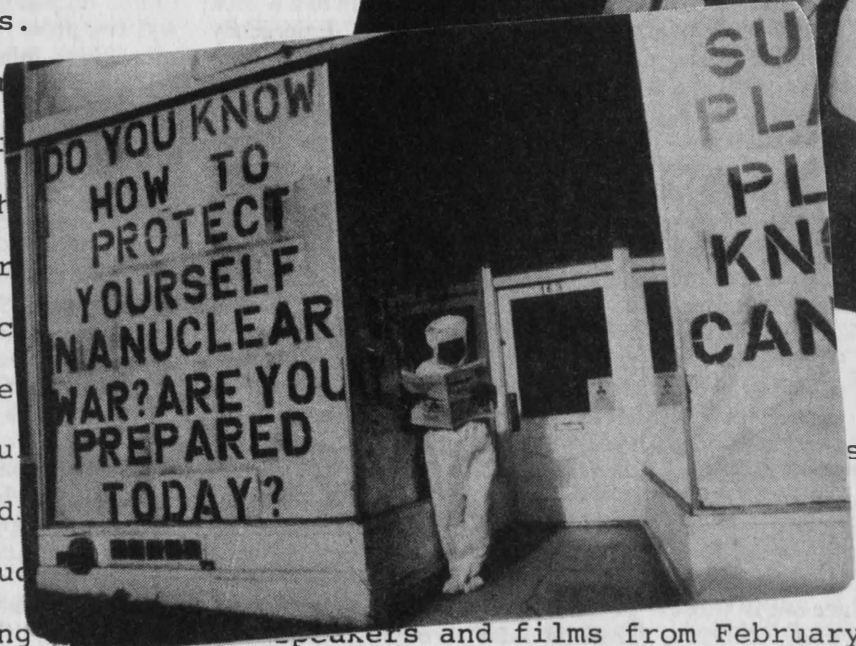
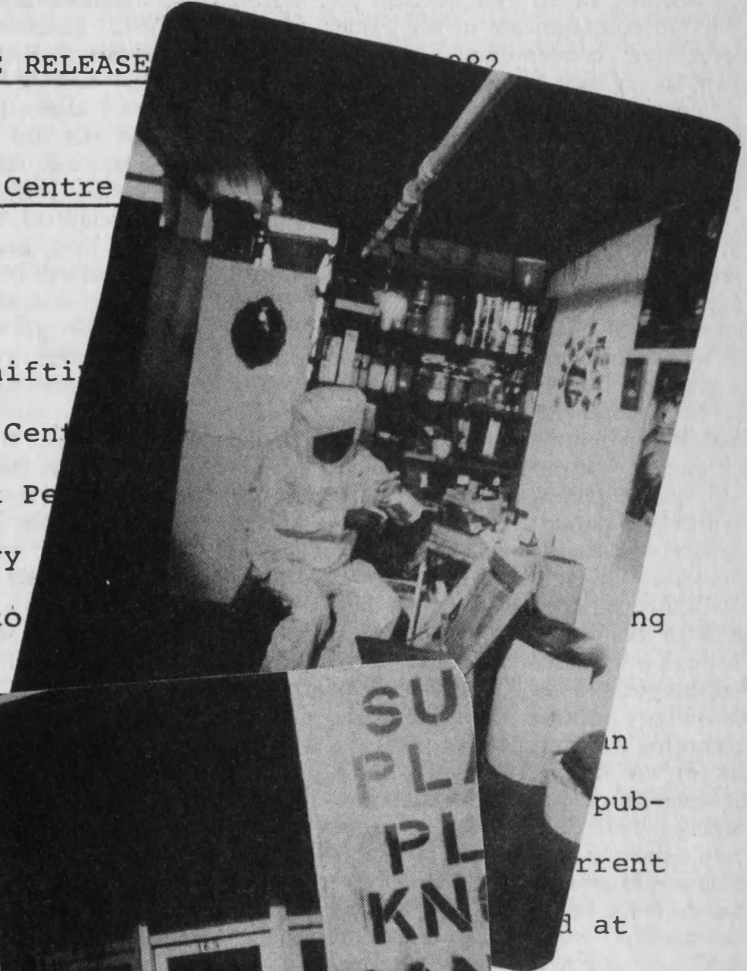
Tuesday, February 2nd

Due to the rapidly shifting
Civil Defence Information Centre
information display at 163 West Pe
2nd, continuing to February
from 12:00 - 5:30 Monday to
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speakers and films from February 2nd to
February 13th. For more information about the program of eve-
ning events, call the Civil Defence Information Centre.



everything. It's not just like you're anti-war, or a pacifist, or you don't like nuclear power. It's partially all those things, but it affects people who have nothing to do with it whatsoever.

Sara: You can see the mobilizing power it has in Vancouver; the fact that 35,000 people would come into the streets when there hasn't been a demonstration of that size for years.

Laura: We're just part of many people. But working in art you develop an ability to communicate in ways that maybe aren't conventional.

Dean: Or saying it in another way that isn't just another fact or figure. Like you said earlier, there's a numbness that sets in. People saying, "I can't deal with the bomb myself." The show was done as a conscious collaboration. This is also referring to the art world itself.

Laura: We had access to a lot of material. One of the pieces that stood out was a government document that is accessible to the public. It's called, **Eleven Steps to Survival**. It gives you information on how to protect yourself in a nuclear war, how to deal with the onslaught of a blast, what kind of procedures you should take, what kind of supplies you need to stash away into a cubbyhole in your basement to potentially survive for fourteen days or more. It's a lot of myths and lies. Through other research we discovered that this pamphlet was an extension of the military mentality because it was promoting the concept of survival in a nuclear war. It was telling you about the cause of war but it wasn't acknowledging the effects of war. We decided to do a parody on the book, which we knew would generate antagonism. The approach we took was to first of all simulate our own design of one of the bomb shelters which they suggest. They really emphasize the nuclear family syndrome, the single family, a suburban dwelling that has a spare pingpong room or corner in the basement and you can redesign it to have it ready and waiting. As we know, a lot of people simply don't live like that. People live communally, in large apartment buildings, in congested situations. Most people economically cannot afford to produce one of those hideaway halls.

Dean: It's generating the idea that the bomb shelter will save you when they're not talking about all the other stuff. There's no way of venting all those poisonous gases that are going to build up, all the wastes. What are you going to do for water after the fourteen day rations that they suggest you have are used up?

Laura: It's an ironic book because they talk about the kind of diet you should have. It's a 1950's diet, that has not been updated. Throughout the book they keep reinforcing the necessity to have a battery the rest of the city because he or she is located in a central location. They don't tell you that in a blast all radiowaves are completely disrupted and that there are no frequencies whatsoever. There's all sorts of implications of disease, and the rest of the city because he or she is located in a central location. They don't tell you that in a blast all radiowaves are completely disrupted and that there are no frequencies whatsoever. There's all sorts of implications of disease, and they ignore people who are claustrophobic.

Sara: There's a basic assumption in all this that system will remain intact.

Laura: There are two underground fallout shelters for politicians, one located in Nanaimo; it's for B.C. politicians, for example Premier Bennett, different ministers, and departments. It's like the one in Ottawa — called the Diefenbunker, because that's who created it. The concept is that people who are in power will be able to resume power when they come out of the shelter. There is no money, no energy, no thought being put into the survival of the Canadian public. There's a \$2.8 million budget for the Emergency Planning Department. \$1.8 million goes into employees' salaries and another one million goes into producing information for the general public. Xeroxing. And who do you know who has access to that information? We had to look for days to find it. It isn't in your corner store.

Sara: By focusing on the shelter were you trying to reach people around their own personal survival in order to get them into looking at the broader issues, the context?

Dean: It's the only stage in the whole cycle from mining, to research and development, to bombs, to nuclear power, that people are allowed to actually participate in. Some sections of the public are still picking up food, buying bricks and sandbags. Most people aren't preparing for it, they know about it through the media, on T.V., various movies that are coming out now, and people don't want to deal with it. Thus, it's a weak link in the chain. We can expose that weak link so that people whom it's meant to help can see it isn't helping them and then they can take that reflective action back and use it.

Laura: What they are trying to do is

put our priorities into petty domestic concerns. So everybody's preoccupied with themselves, with their own survival, in an alienated way, because those who *can* afford a bomb shelter will have one and those who *can't* won't: "tough luck Charlie"-type mentality. Those who continue to build bombs and proliferate nuclear technology, in whatever manifestations, can continue to do so while the general public is completely naive and unable to do anything.

Dean: So there's an information gap that we are trying to address.

Sara: How did you convey this information? How did you construct your relationship to the public at large as an audience?

Laura: First of all, our tactic was to formalize the show. So we called it **The Civil Defense Information Centre**. We made no bones about using the Canadian flag because we're all Canadian citizens. We wanted to put ourselves in the position of having a connection with others of the general public; we used the flag as our method of doing that. **Civil Defense Information Centre**, being the title, put us in a category that was legitimate, formal, organized, something that was related to a broad section of society. We did very extensive press mailings to all the major media sources, in radio, television and newspapers. It was the press release that formalized the show into not giving it any reference to artists. I set up a message recorder at my house because we had to have a contact number. This recorded message said, "You've contacted the Civil Defense Information Office. There's no one here at this time, but if you'd like to leave your name and number we'll get back to you as soon as possible." A flood of calls came in: CBC, the newspapers. They didn't wait for a return call. They were so ticked off because they wanted to move on it; they thought it was hot stuff. They went and called the **Emergency Planning Department** in Victoria and they said, "We're trying to get through to your Vancouver office, in reference to this show", because they made this automatic assumption that we were a government display. The use of the Canadian flag created a stir but at the same time brought in a large amount of our audience. The audience was diverse. It was school groups, university groups, senior citizens, businessmen, businesswomen, political allies, artists, basically everybody. There was no one category that was attracted to our show. People's response was remark-

able in its diversity. Some came in because they wanted to get plans for their own bomb shelter, some came in because they had seen the sign outside and were furious. People came in because they were totally enraged at the idea that the government set up a survival outlet. People also came in because they were intrigued about hearing about it through the media. Once the media got hold of it they broke the ice and they mentioned that it was an art show and these people had generated this innovative method of attracting the public. By the way, "civil defence" is an obsolete term. There is no such thing as civil defence as a Canadian department, so it wasn't a plagiarism. People were looking for a government department which doesn't exist.

Dean: It may be partially the way that we are conditioned to respond to the flag. Authoritarian conditioning.

Sara: That was my response. When I saw the poster I was just horrified. I thought, 'Nuclear war, El Salvador, intensified international conflict, internal unrest all escalating and there they (the government) are blatantly going out there and preparing the Canadian public to accept it and build their own bomb shelters.'

Laura: We had so many people with that same point of view come into the show ready to just lay into us. We defaced the whole gallery. We made no reference to it being a gallery. We wiped out any identification of the Unit Pitt (gallery) so that it looked like a rented space, a storefront. There was a Canadian flag on the outside of the building. The huge bay windows at the front of the gallery we covered with paper and on the paper were four major questions pointed at the public who would drive by, walk by. It was in enormous print. One said, 'Do you know how to protect yourself in a nuclear war?' and another said, 'Do you have a good survival plan for your children at school?' and another said, 'A good survival plan is one you know, one you can carry out.' Which is a direct government quote. And another said, 'Do you know what radiation sickness is?' When you enter the gallery you get a completely different impression than from the outside. It doesn't have the formalized office image that you might expect a government outlet to have. There's no person dressed in suit and tie or secretarial type to greet you at the door. It's an art show. There's a video installation, we set it on a Japanese podium with Japanese rice curtains to remind us of the evidence of nuclear

destruction, and a video show about the nuclear research facility at University of British Columbia called Triumpf. In one corner there was a simulated bomb shelter. It was filled with all kinds of personal items and stocked with all sorts of miscellaneous food and containers and things that you want to cherish. On all the walls we had these large blueprints, these were the parodies of the *Eleven Steps to Survival* handbook. There was a slide presentation: images of people and nuclear weapons and war weapons and images that reminded you of war, historically and in the present tense, as well as wonderful city shots of Vancouver.

Dean: It could have been any city. Those were in colour and other shots were black and white, sort of archival. We had a set of colour and black and white slides to set off what was going on as a background. There was a radio in the shelter with static on the radio. Then sandbags all over the place, to give an idea of the methods of protection.

Laura: There were so many sources that ended up phoning Emergency Planning. Well, Emergency Planning didn't have any idea about the show. They were completely flabbergasted, they didn't know what perspective we were coming from: were we endorsing their perspective, were we an extension of them, or were we antagonists? They had to bring over an investigator to check out the show and by doing so they were presented with something that was definitely alternate to their point of view, because we were definitely anti-government in our stand. So this fellow came in to look at the show, and shortly after, we received a cease and desist order from the Justice Department. It said that we were misusing the Canadian flag which was a copyright symbol and represents the Queen's services: we should remove our flag from all our literature. Our rebuttal was that we would felt-pen over all the Canadian flag symbols on our literature with a lovely clear red felt pen. We refused to take the Canadian flag off the front of the building. We also made mention that if they were so concerned with our use of the Canadian flag, they might consider investigating businesses like MacDonald's or Safeway which are as Canadian as apple pie. We didn't hear any more from them. There were a lot of spin-offs from the media because they all of a sudden began to enjoy the joke. They started to do their own investigating. The Vancouver Show has a controversial debate with a

physician, Tom Perry, who represents **Physicians for Social Responsibility**, and Fred Cooper, who is the federal **Emergency Planning** representative in the west. The first question the mediator asked Fred Cooper was, "What is the government doing to protect Canadian citizens in the event of nuclear war?", and he said, literally, "Nothing." Then he asked a question of Tom Perry, "What would happen if a one megaton bomb dropped on Vancouver?" The guy went on for a good five or ten minutes describing the devastation. It was hilarious, because the producer on the set was trying to tell him to shut up because he wouldn't stop talking. The impact of one government official who supposedly represented the public's safety and a doctor who we know has a legitimate, defensible position in society just had an amazing impact as a presentation.

Sara: What was the response of people from the art community to your work?

Laura: There was one group that came in from the art school and the question posed to all the students was, "Is it art?" They had to analyze it in terms of its qualifications, can it be categorized as art? That was the conflict with a number of artists: they called it political propaganda, regurgitation of information. A lot of artists that did come in were grateful to see a show like this because it broke some barriers that had been in existence in the art community and legitimized the overtly political in their work.

Sara: What about people who were looking for plans for a bomb shelter, people who might endorse Canadian foreign policy, the arms race?

Laura: We would end up talking about the facts about bomb shelters, there isn't much evidence that bomb shelters are a viable alternative for survival. Some people walked away, they didn't get the information they wanted. Other people were in a controversial state about it: they wanted to survive, they have the impulse to live.

Sara: What art forms did you use to enhance communication with an audience that was unfamiliar with a formal art tradition?

Dean: We tried to make it as tangible as possible. It was found-object stuff. We built the (shelter) really fast, in two days, and it looked like you could build it yourself pretty easily. We had an architectural cutaway, so you could see it whether you went in it or not. It was like you threw stuff in, you were in a real rush, you heard the siren and you had to get down to your shelter. "Oh My God, I forgot to put the clothes down there! Who's got the

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radiation suit? I thought you had the radiation suit!"

Laura: "Put the rice crispies in a jar!"
Dean: "That will keep them longer. I hate stale rice crispies!"

Laura: It was a whole menagerie of crap. But it was an installation, to me it was a sculpture. It evoked all sorts of thoughts and emotions. We had plastic flowers because real ones wouldn't grow or survive, we had container after container of dried, bland food. We had images, paraphernalia, memorabilia, things that are important in your life that you don't want to lose. It certainly didn't reflect a legitimate bomb shelter and it didn't give a sense of endorsing the bomb shelter concept. It seemed like a bomb shelter would be an absolutely useless alternative. And then the

blueprints — we had been cutting out articles in the paper, drawings, and getting information from all sorts of outlets and accumulating them in large formats, so that there was all sorts of tidbits on one sheet that you could absorb and see one facet of. It was to educate. It was dealing with plutonium and what plutonium is and what happens when a bomb drops on Vancouver. Then the element of the international conflict: the anti-Americanism, the anti-Russian mentality. One was called, "Who can afford Step Number Four, an easy bake oven?" with the bomb shelter.

Dean: Each of the drawings loosely represented a page out of the handbook. But only loosely — we moved in and out of the format. They weren't precious, they weren't precious

4000 REM: All people will die within hours.

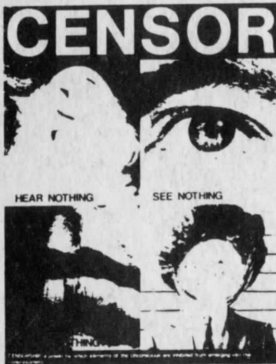
400 REM: 50% of people will die within a few weeks. The remainder will suffer from radiation illness; vomiting, loss of

hair, infection, etc. Survivors may suffer from leukemia and other cancers as well as genetic damage.

1000 REM: All people will die in one-two weeks.



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Film and Video Against Censorship (FAVAC) is a group of producers, exhibitors and distributors of independent non-commercial videotape and film, which is dedicated to changing the censorship laws in Ontario. The Ontario Film and Video Appreciation Society (OFVAS) is currently challenging the Ontario Censor Board under the new Canadian Constitution. Both FAVAC and OFVAS are supported by the Art Censorship Trust Fund. The Trustees of the Fund are June Callwood, Anna Gronau and David Poole.

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of the atom has nothing save our mode of thus we drift towards catastrophe...

- Albert Einstein

things on the wall, they were things that you could relate to on a day to day basis. A blueprint is a very inexpensive print-making process, they were large, four feet by five feet, and they just had slats of wood in very bright colours, surveyors' colours, on the bottom keeping them flat, and they weren't special, so that you had to get over the form to get at the content. There was certainly form in how we chose to put them on there, how we displayed them, how we lit them and where they were in the space. But there weren't any stumbling blocks to either reading, or looking, or laughing, or talking about them.

Laura: There wasn't a price tag.

Dean: There wasn't a big, long introspective title.

Laura: We had no acknowledgement of name. It wasn't done by so-and-so. There wasn't all the conventional processes that most art galleries and artists promote: that identification, commodity.

Dean: The main stumbling block was: how do we as artists turn this very charged information, technically and emotionally, into art and how do we get this out to the people who we would potentially want to talk to through this art?

Laura: We defaced the front of the building, so that we brought it out into the street. I know that many people who came by that building saw the questions. If you're asked a question and it's so enormous and confrontational and it's so contrasting to the rest of the urban visuals, it might have some impact. Bringing the art out into the street was important — that's why we had handouts. We did a lot of postering. We had all these groups come in and do talks, it was nice for them to have an atmosphere that was complementary to the discussion on opening night. We had Red Cedar Band singing and playing music, it was really powerful and just packed with people. People were becoming part of the space and they weren't treating it as a gallery in a conventional sense. They weren't stiffly walking around making sure that nothing fell off the wall. Everyone was sprawled all over the place and there was so much interaction going on.

Laura: We did two versions of postering for the show. One was a really formal legitimate straight-laced poster with a Canadian flag on the top. We were able to penetrate all sorts of mainstream places where you ordinarily wouldn't be able to hang an art poster because it had no relevance. We did another poster which said,

"Future radiation area, no loitering", and there was a radiation symbol on it and it gave the same information as the other poster, but it would attract a different crowd.

Sara: Could you describe the process of constructing the show, it sounds like you did a tremendous amount of research and conceptual work to pull it together.

Laura: We were wanting to do a videotape on Triumph nuclear research facility. We went up there and the fellow that showed us around the plant, was an articulate physicist/computer scientist and had been working there for seven years. He talked about radiation always being a breaking-down process, never a building-up. He talked about the Atomic Energy Commission, they're the ones who gauge dosages of radiation in all nuclear facilities in Canada and yet they don't really have a safe dosage. They don't know what a safe dosage of radiation is, particularly when you have an ozone layer that doesn't protect us anymore and you have x-ray overdoses in hospitals and you've got other outlets that give you radiation. All the employees that work at Triumph are allowed so much radiation per year and the radiation impinges itself on badges and you can figure out how much radiation dosage the individual's received. They've (Triumph) been responsible for dumping radioactive waste in the harbour, carting radioactive materials through the residential sections of the city, storing radioactive wastes in the math building at UBC, so no one knows how many students or professors have been exposed. It made me angry. This fellow was a born-again Christian and he introduced us in the plant to about five other men who were Christians — that was what he acknowledged they had in common. He would negate responsibility for his actions because he was a Christian, because God took it in his hands, "When you're a Christian, death has no significance" and in a sense through the course of the tour he was talking about legitimate, respected, legalized suicide. He can acknowledge that they don't have a safe dosage, he's allowed so much radiation and if he works there it's cumulative, all radiation is cumulative. That experience was the start of the show. I wanted to do a videotape on Triumph because I had heard all these scummy things that they were involved in. Nobody ever talks about Triumph; same with Toronto, there's a Slowpoke reactor in the middle of the

city but no one talks about it.

Dean: So it was emotional triggers that started it.

Laura: And then it went into 'Let's investigate some more.'

Dean: A lot of it was also questioning, 'Can and do we want to make art out of this?' Then, we want to, so how do we? Obviously, we're not well-versed, we're not scientists, we're not technicians, we're artists, we're almost like funnels for the things that we've seen. We made these yellow posters based on the actual thing that they've got up at Triumph which says, "No loitering, radiation area", we just added the "future". Same symbol except it had the amount of radiation you could absorb in an hour there. They're only allowed fifteen hundred milyar a month. One scientist down from where we were shooting had forty milyar every hour. If you stayed there an hour you'd get almost a daily dose. And that's just an arbitrarily-set limit.

Laura: There are enough resources of professional people; their information is an alternative. Particularly Helen Caldicott, who talked about what you can do. She, as an individual, has done a remarkable amount of things: she stopped all nuclear power in Australia, there's no atomic weaponry stored there; she had an effect on French testing in the Pacific. All these sources generated the focus that we took. You go into a library and there are just stacks and stacks of books from both perspectives. We did find a lot of pronuclear, but it was always tainted because it was either somebody working within the military or a scientist funded by a research foundation which was run by the Ford Foundation. The majority of anti-nuclear information came from qualified origins and perspectives. The information and statistics are emerging everywhere.

Dean: Part of it was realizing that it was a personal issue, it was something that affected you while you were doing it. It's not like a still life that's on the table that's away from you. It's coming right from the inside, so you're angry and scared. There were three people who got together, Laura, Daniel and myself. That was the nucleus. There was a second layer of people who did a lot of the press contacts. They are more directly political and have those connections. We sent the press release out as a feeler, and it was taken seriously.

Laura: It was imperative to have a support group to give emotional support, critical analysis and endorsement. ●