

# GrEeN GrRRRI PoWEr

by Kimberley Fry and Cheryl Lousley

*Cet article examine le développement du mouvement eco-grrrls qui a adopté l'environnementalisme comme raison sociale des politiques environnementales et féministes.*

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It is late in the afternoon of the massive mobilization against the World Bank and IMF in Washington, D.C. Protestors are tired and overheated. Our intersection is unprepared for the unusually warm April weather and after a long morning of facing police batons, pepper spray, and buses full of delegates, we are losing our ability to focus. In a moment of desperation and hope I run over to a lamp post and tie up a piece of blue-green yarn that has been sitting in my pocket and try to string it across the street where the cars have been trying to break through "our" intersection. The yarn is from a ritual I attended the night before where over 300 protestors, mostly women, formed a massive spiral and finished the night off with a magical yarn web of protection. I come up short. Before I know it, I am joined by a group of young women who had been taking a knitting break in a nearby park. These young, politically savvy knitters from North Carolina help to construct a massive, multicoloured web across one part of the intersection. We dance around our construction and the group becomes re-energized as protestors rejoin the lines, singing, chanting, and laughing.

—Kim Fry, April 16th, 2000.

Behind the "riot scenes" the media portrayed from Seattle, Washington D.C., Windsor, Prague, and Quebec City, the anti-global corporatization movement includes a significant number of young women like Kim who draw on the language and images of "girl power" in shaping their environmental politics. Women dressed as fairies, complete with wings and feather duster "magic wands," greet the rows of helmeted riot police. Radical cheerleaders, dressed

in the anarchist colours of red and black, chant anti-capitalist slogans. Yarn stops traffic. What impact do women—by far in the majority among youth environmentalists—have on the direction of environmental and feminist politics? Where is this playful, performative, sassy political aesthetic coming from? Is girl power really a potent source of environmental activism and cultural change?

## Pop Culture Environmentalism

Transforming western culture has been a goal of the environmental movement from its birth in the 1960s counterculture. Flower power, organic farming communes, Woodstock, securing environmental protection legislation, and developing environmentally-favourable policies were reformist contributions to a much larger politico-cultural movement. Times have changed. Environmentalism now permeates popular culture. The current generation of kids—the Pepsi Generation—has grown up on a diet of rainforest crunch cereal, eco-cartoons, blue box discipline, and fleece jackets made from recycled pop bottles. Recycling is introduced in elementary school. Green products line the shelves of Loblaws grocery stores. Earth Day is a corporate event. In an era when culture is almost indistinguishable from consumerism, environmentalism becomes just another brand, like Disney or Martha Stewart, that sells products by evoking a particular lifestyle, set of values, and identity.

Among the many implications this cultural phenomenon has for environmental education and activism, we want to highlight how youth now come to environmentalism *through* popular culture and often make their environmentalism a *cultural* politics. There are no better examples of this than "eco-grrrls"—a subculture of young women who shape their political commitments, gender performances, and style around an environmental ethic. This is a caricature of an eco-grrrl (and there are days when this describes the authors of this article): she wears Mountain Equipment Co-op clothes with a backpack and hiking boots, complemented by unshaven legs, no makeup, and a bandanna covering her hair. She dutifully attended Lilith Fair, rejects the cult of romance, and believes in no-trace, low-impact camping and vegetarianism. Other riffs on this theme include "ethnic" clothing such as long patterned skirts and "gypsy" blouses, and thrift-wear

corsets and bell-bottoms. Like most subcultures, eco-grrrls are a product of the popular culture, developing a common style and philosophy through teen magazines and peer example, and also a form of resistance to mainstream cultures, including the mainstream versions of feminism and environmentalism. As eco-grrrls individually and collectively work through the contradictions of this position, they are redefining feminism, environmentalism, and political action.

### Eco-Grrrl vs. Barbie

Eco-grrrls have adopted environmentalism as a social identity—and *style*—which distinguishes them from their peers. This is especially the case for adolescents. The hallways at their high schools are full of teenaged girls wearing platform shoes, tight pants, and makeup; the boys are in Nike or Adidas running shoes and Tommy Hilfiger clothes. Taking up an “eco-grrrl” identity is a way for young women to reject and subvert the overwhelming beauty pressures and male gaze targeting them daily. One eco-grrrl we spoke with described how not shaving her legs was “the ultimate political act” in contesting being a “girly girl” in her high school. Others find empowerment in the collective spaces and physical labour offered by environment clubs (predominantly female) and summer camps, such as the Ontario Rangers program for 17-year-olds. A number of women emerge from these experiences as “eco-grrrls” which, to them, includes being more confident, more comfortable with their bodies, and more concerned about personal integrity and ethical actions than appearances. The outward manifestation of this growing self, social, and ecological awareness is a deliberate switch from what they describe as their “girly girl” style to some variation of the “eco-grrrl” dress and behaviour. “I like playing in dirt,” laughs one eco-grrrl in an all-female environment club initiating a compost program in their Toronto high school, declaring a lifestyle and set of values radically different from—and unacceptable to—many of her female peers outside of the club. Participation in a subculture—where others visibly share and affirm a counter-stance—offers important validation of these environmental values and gender politics.

This proto-feminism is part of what has been called “third wave feminism” or, more popularly (and by the young women themselves), “girl power.” “Girl power”

predates the Spice Girls, the British music group widely popular with pre-teen girls. In the early 1990s, Seattle’s alternative music scene spawned a movement of young women who challenged the dominant commodified culture

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by actively producing their own cultural images and meanings through songwriting, zine publication, and disruptive fashion codes. They called themselves riot grrrls, the name evoking a growl that disrupts the nice and passive femininity of “girl,” a label women bear well past childhood and adolescence. Riot grrrls parodied the Barbie “girly girl” image of women by juxtaposing baby doll dresses with army boots, and plastic hair barrettes with ripped stockings and jeans. Recognizing how women’s bodies are the target and tool of male fantasy, marketing, and consumerism, riot grrrls displayed their bodies as sites of political contestation. They turned their daily lives into a performance of resistance through a style which continuously recalled and rejected the standardized and commodified feminine norm.

There are similarities between riot grrrl and eco-grrrl identities and cultural practices. Both contest the Barbie version of femininity and both reject the asexual, serious tone of power-suit, equality-frame feminism. In re-appropriating “girl,” riot grrrls highlighted their youth and reclaimed, rather than denied, their bodies and their sexuality. Similarly, some eco-grrrls bring playfulness into their environmental politics with actions like building a barricade of brightly-coloured yarn or teasing sombre riot police with pink feather dusters—as the actions in Seattle, Washington DC, and Quebec City attest. In the same way that riot grrrls re-shaped feminism, eco-grrrls challenge the tragic apocalyptic tone and policy-oriented approach of mainstream environmentalism. Puppets, costumes, and street theatre are used to draw attention to social justice and environmental issues such as sweatshop working conditions, domestic violence, and endangered species. In this way, eco-grrrls, and other politically-active youth,

bring humour, fun—*style*—into environmental politics.

### Consumerism, Play, or Politics?

While eco-grrrls stand out among their peers, they may fail to step outside of the fashion game and consumerist lifestyle, elevating Mountain Equipment Co-op or vintage clothing into veritable “eco-brands.” And many turn to an eco-grrrl style to appease their desire for adventure or for a back-to-the-land spiritual retreat. Even self-proclaimed “urban princess” Leah McLaren, a 20-something columnist for the *Globe and Mail* newspaper, acknowledges a “granola” side, representing the worst form of superficial environmentalism. She writes:

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Beneath my urban-princess demeanor lurks a crunchy-oatbran crust. Before going to work each morning I eat sugar-free mueslix in my Saskatchewan-made moccasins.... I have a well-used membership at Mountain Equipment Co-op and occasionally enjoy the feeling of my own unshaven legs. I recycle fanatically, and give money to anyone who comes carrying a clipboard and wearing Birkenstocks. (R3)

Here the eco-grrrl identity becomes nothing but a consumer identity, individualized into guilt-appeasing actions that do little to address the unsustainable economy of production and consumption which structures late-industrial societies. And the shift in focus from public policy to household management represented by recycling and green consumerism suggests an offloading of environmental problems onto women and voluntarism.

Clearly, a key lesson in the commodification of environmentalism is that social and political critique is readily diffused through cultural appropriation. Nike, for example, has capitalized on the “girl power” movement with considerable success. Its advertising campaigns show athletic women experiencing the freedom of the open air and the empowerment of the sweaty victory. And the Nike brand resonates with youth beyond the sports field or fashion statement. Indeed, some eco-grrrls refer to the popular Nike slogan “Just Do It!” when they speak about activism and the need to motivate what they consider their apathetic peers. A careful reading of this slogan, however, belies its proto-feminist and environmentalist interpretations; “Just Do It!” suggests that if anything stands in the way of a woman’s dreams, it is her own hesitation and insecurity. Nike “girl power” is clearly about self-

confidence, not social change. “Just Do It!” is an invocation to buy, not an invitation to question the consumer society and the sweatshop labour it supports.

The Nike swoosh thus epitomizes the contradictory and ironic position many eco-grrrls—and other politically-active youth—find themselves in: their activism is quite often fired up and fueled by the same pop culture messages and icons they later come to problematize; or the social critique and cultures of resistance youth try to build become diffused and co-opted as their popularity proves profitable. Is an “eco-grrrl” Barbie doll unimaginable? Apparently not. According to *This Magazine*, the women’s magazine *Glamour* contacted Tao Communications in Toronto for an anarchist woman to profile the style emerging from the WTO protests in Seattle (Starr).

The response among many youth, including eco-grrrls, is to target the culture industry directly. They take on Nike and other corporations whose vulnerability lies in the integrity of their brands. They take on the media conglomerates and advertising culture which sustains the exploitative, consumer economy. But rather than aim for an anti-capitalist purity, the new generation of activists play with cultural images and challenge them through a production of their own independent, consumer-free spaces. A glimpse of a breast in the shadows of what, at first glance, appears to be a Calvin Klein ad for Obsession perfume brilliantly dramatizes the connections between the objectification of women’s bodies and the epidemic of bulimia. This poster of a thin, naked woman crouched over a toilet bowl is a campaign of the Vancouver-based media group Adbusters. On a smaller scale, eco-grrrls have produced zines like “Chicks United for Non-noxious Transportation” (C.U.N.T.), a radical Toronto-based women’s cycling paper photocopied by hand and distributed by word of mouth.<sup>1</sup> Zines, underground newspapers, independent music, websites, and newsgroups have revolutionized how youth are able to communicate with one another without relying on mainstream media outlets. Diverse pockets of cultural resistance can thus develop autonomously yet come together in a kind of “anarchist solidarity.”

### Transforming Culture, Transforming Politics

Few environmental advocates have questioned how their messages and strategies intertwine with popular culture. Often concerned with maintaining a line between education and politics, we have failed to notice how both have collapsed into marketing. But coming-of-age has never been so commercialized. What space remains for a democratic construction of self and society? What forms can environmental resistance take in an eco-branded world?

Eco-grrrls are not the answer. Eco-grrrls are one response to this era of globalized environmental degradation where utopian solutions no longer seem viable. Like many young

activists, eco-grrrls do not identify with a monolithic environmental—or feminist—movement. They do not share a single blueprint for a sustainable—or women-affirming or democratic—future. But nor do they wait for electoral gains or progressive international summits and agreements. Instead they strive to craft multiple spaces of democratic participation and cultural resistance in their daily lives. Ever conscious of the risk of co-optation, their politics have become more playful, more performative, and more directly aimed towards the culture industry than environmentalism has ever been. While this performative politics may be the result of the extraordinary influence popular culture has on adolescent identity formation, eco-grrrls demonstrate the need for a sophisticated understanding and deployment of cultural politics in environmentalism today.

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<sup>1</sup>The last issue of C.U.N.T. (#15) was published in Summer/Fall 2000. Back issues can be purchased by sending \$1 cash per copy to: P.O. Box 1042, Station F, Toronto, ON, M4Y 2T7.

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Selena Liss, "My Platform," 60" x 70", 2000.



Selena Liss, "Friday Night In," 60" x 70", 2000.



Selena Liss, "Hotseat," 60" x 72", 2000.