



by Debora Kodish

ERIC JOSELYN: “What you got to say?”

Politically active his whole life, Eric Joselyn is known among an extended community of activists as an invaluable resource. Rarely credited publicly, he is a prolific working artist who has been turning peoples' demands and dreams into eye-catching (and conscience-catching) physical and visual expressions for decades. Without recognizing it, you may well have seen his work displayed street-side: at local demonstrations for immigrants' rights, at antiwar protests, at street theater against racism. Thousands of Chinatown residents and allies fighting to stop the city from putting a stadium in Chinatown wore t-shirts Eric designed. He crafted many of the cardboard bulldozers, puppets, costumes, and signs that local people carried to City Council chambers to protest against the city's use of eminent domain to displace poor and working families from their homes. Aiming to even the odds for social justice movements, his deceptively simple arts and crafts are good tools for popular struggles.

Eric Joselyn photo, and photos of his work, courtesy of the artist

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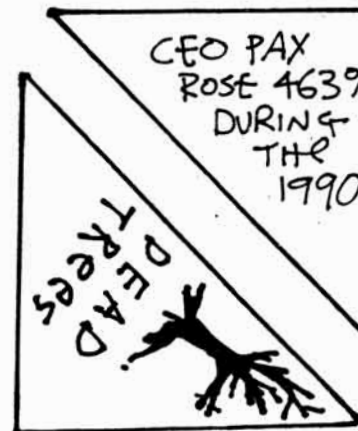
clip, fold & use your own ERIC JOSELYN FORTUNE-TELLER PAPER TOY

Part of the material culture of childhood, these folded paper toys have been used as fortune-telling devices and for other playful purposes for at least 50 years. They are widely reported, and have been described in many variations and by many names, including “fortune-tellers,” “salt cellars,” “film star oracles,” “wiggle-waggles” and “cootie catchers.”* Contemporary artists have made use of the form; mathematicians use them to teach basic principles. Eric Joselyn made this one for a “free-trade parade” that was part of the Philadelphia Fringe Festival in September 2006. Suited “capitalists” passed out the fortune-tellers to spectators: a bit of fun to open crowds to the critique.

how to make it:

- ✎ Cut the folded paper off at the -----.
- ✎ Fold the “Dupont” corner over to meet the “Gulf War Oil” corner, and uncrease.
- ✎ Fold “Enron” corner to meet “Dupont” and uncrease.
- ✎ Flip the toy over.
- ✎ Fold all four corners over so that they meet in the middle. (Four full squares and eight triangles will be showing).
- ✎ Turn it over. You should be looking at 16 triangles with “fortunes.”
- ✎ Fold each of the corners in to the middle. You should see 8 triangles: “Dead trees,” “Toxins,” “My S.U.V.,” etc.
- ✎ Crease the square in quarters, through the middle of each flap. (If you flip it over, you will see the 4 squares.)
- ✎ Back on the side with the 8 triangles, bring the outside points together in the middle.
- ✎ Pull out the square flaps: “Dupont,” “Gulf War,” etc.
- ✎ Place thumb and index finger in each flap to manipulate.

* For examples, see Iona and Peter Opie, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (1959), Mary and Herbert Knapp, *One Potato, Two Potato* (1976), and Simon Bronner, *American Children's Folklore* (1988)





CAPITAL FLIGHT
IN 2005, FORTY OF TOP 20 SONGS INCLUDED AT LEAST ONE BRAND NAME.

\$5.15 per HR.
THE TOP 1% HOODS ALMOST HALF OF ALL FINANCIAL WEALTH IN THE UNITED STATES.



CYANIDE IN A HICKON
DOLLARS SPENT BY U.S. BUSINESS ON ADVERTISING: \$150 BILLION IN 2006

STOCK MARKET CRASHES:
BUILD A LOCAL BAITER (5% - 10%)
COFFEE GET BUCKS & GET MORE SLEEP.

POWER GRID FAILS:
START HANGING YOUR SHIRTS ON THE LINE TO DRY.
GENERALLY ENGINEERED CROPS GO MUTANT: SAVE YOUR SEEDS!

EVERY DAY WE ARE HIT BY OVER 1,000 ADVERTISING MESSAGES.

1/2 MILLION MEXICAN FARMERS WERE DISPLACED FROM THEIR LAND IN THE 1ST TEN YEARS OF NAFTA.

GLOBAL WARMING ADVANCES:
MOVE UP NORTH.
COMMUNICATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE FULLY PRIVATIZED: GET TO KNOW YOUR NEIGH-BORS.

Economy COLLAPSES:
PLANT A COMMUNAL GARDEN.
ISYAH WALKS LONG TAKE ALL OIL RUNS OUT:

U.S. HOUSEHOLD CREDIT CARD DEBT HAS INCREASED 185% IN THE PAST FIVE YRS.

ONE TO ONE.

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You don't usually find Eric's work in a gallery. The Folklore Project's exhibition this winter is a rare chance to see a sampling of more than 25 years of his efforts all in one place: high-spirited handmade props for demonstrations, stylish do-it-yourself banners, a forest of words on signs, and texts filled with painful reminders of the constant need to fight for justice.

The exhibition catalogues time-honored and newly-minted forms of political expression—banners, placards, t-shirts, buttons, badges, puppets, and toys—each representing some pressing concern of the last two decades. The exhibition is also a compelling inventory of some of the struggles of local communities.

Eric Joselyn's work challenges common notions of art-making in many ways. His work is not about individual creativity for its own sake, or about novelty or reputation. Creative, inventive, and fundamentally about what a principled individual can do, Eric has a clear commitment

to standing with others. The words on signs and banners don't just come from this artist alone or represent a singular vision: they come from groups of people mobilizing together. As an artist, Eric is about facilitating community expression on issues that matter. He says, "Putting visual tools into the hands of people working to turn this system over gives me a big dose of my kind of aesthetic pleasure. Traditional community skills and popular cultural traditions have taught me a lot about building a happy and democratic opposition to the greedy, hateful society foisted upon us. I'm offering ideas for tying our art to the ceaseless drive of regular people everywhere to build a better world. I am excited by seeing the things we make put to righteous use towards a righteous end."

Folk arts play an important role in his politics and style. Growing up in a politically progressive midwestern family, exposed to examples of busy people who made beautiful and useful things by hand. His grandmother encouraged his artistic inclinations, and provided many examples of how everyday

folk arts, lovingly made, could bring beauty into people's lives, while also sustaining a family. He remembers her quilting, sewing and canning: many-colored jars of fruits and vegetables preserved like exotic specimens in the basement. The Minnesota State Fair, with its annual gathering of the work of peoples' hands—prize vegetables, kids with animals they had raised—is another valued touchstone for him of how ordinary peoples' artistic productions can be publicly celebrated and appreciated. These grassroots contexts for art-making, rather than galleries and formal institutions, were important models for him, as he tried to define his own role as an artist.

It wasn't an obvious road for someone with a clear and developed politics. Eric's talents and inclinations set him on an artistic path, but the conventional role of a school-trained gallery-bound artist just didn't feel right. He studied art at the University of Minnesota, but resisted the push to disconnect from the world, retreat to a studio, or hone a personal vision and skills. He says, "That I almost need to make stuff is a fact. But I just couldn't spend my days in some one artist-one product-one consumer equation. I eschewed the label of 'artist.' I was something else." Eric says that it took time to find a way "to break through such a closed circuit."

He eventually came to see himself as part of a long line of cultural workers: "from naughty balladeers in pre-Revolutionary France, to woodblock cutters and jugglers spouting mass line in turbulent China, to the wives who sewed those gorgeous union local banners with all the gold tassels carried before the 8-hour day was won." And then there were broadside printers and artists, who turned out pointed political

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messages on hand-printed sheets. Like all these artists, Eric found a place, shoulder to shoulder with others, helping to shape and broadcast peoples' messages loud and clear. By now, he has serious street credibility as a community-based political artist. As the exhibition makes clear, he has contributed his artistry and political savvy to countless progressive efforts, creating "multiples" (flyers, t-shirts— work that can be handed up or posted in large numbers) and "highly visables" (banners, puppets, and the like). **He aims to change the world, to make popular movements "look better"** (adding aesthetics and style), and to encourage people to have fun in the process.

These values also infuse his teaching, another way that he "engages with big numbers of others." He has now spent decades working with young people, painting walls, making prints, and teaching in public schools. (He currently is the Art Teacher at the two-year-old Folk Arts Cultural Treasures Charter School, a project of Asian Americans United and the Philadelphia Folklore Project.) As a teacher in and outside of the classroom, he democratizes art-making, making it do-able, fun, and a way for young people and activists alike to exercise power. And of course, nothing is wasted. Eric uses (and re-uses) materials at hand— cardboard, wit and will. There are lessons, and politics to everything.

Twenty-some years after he left Minnesota, Eric has transferred many of the politics, values, and ethics of eclectic folk arts to Philadelphia's gritty streets, and to the communities among whom he has made a home. He continues to produce arts that are accessible, meant to be used, grounded in freely-shared knowledge, essential to sustaining meaningful relationships, aimed

at making a better world. In his hands, art continues to advance collective efforts and alternative perspectives. In a saner world, in another time or place, he would have been a village potter, or made things with cloth, he says. Given these times, his approach to art-making is to use native wit, a keen sense of politics, and a storehouse of traditional arts and expressions to amplify people's capacity to speak to one another and to be heard. His work remains human-scaled, democratic,

subversive, and quite literally community-based: **his head and hands and skills are invested in the capacity, and struggles, of communities to make pressing and necessary changes.**

