

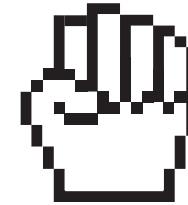


**The Evolving
design of
Protest**

Interview with Pinky & Bunny

**Personal experiences
and advocating social change
in the digital realm**

E-mail response received 7:40 am April 13th 2010
by Urgyen Badheysang

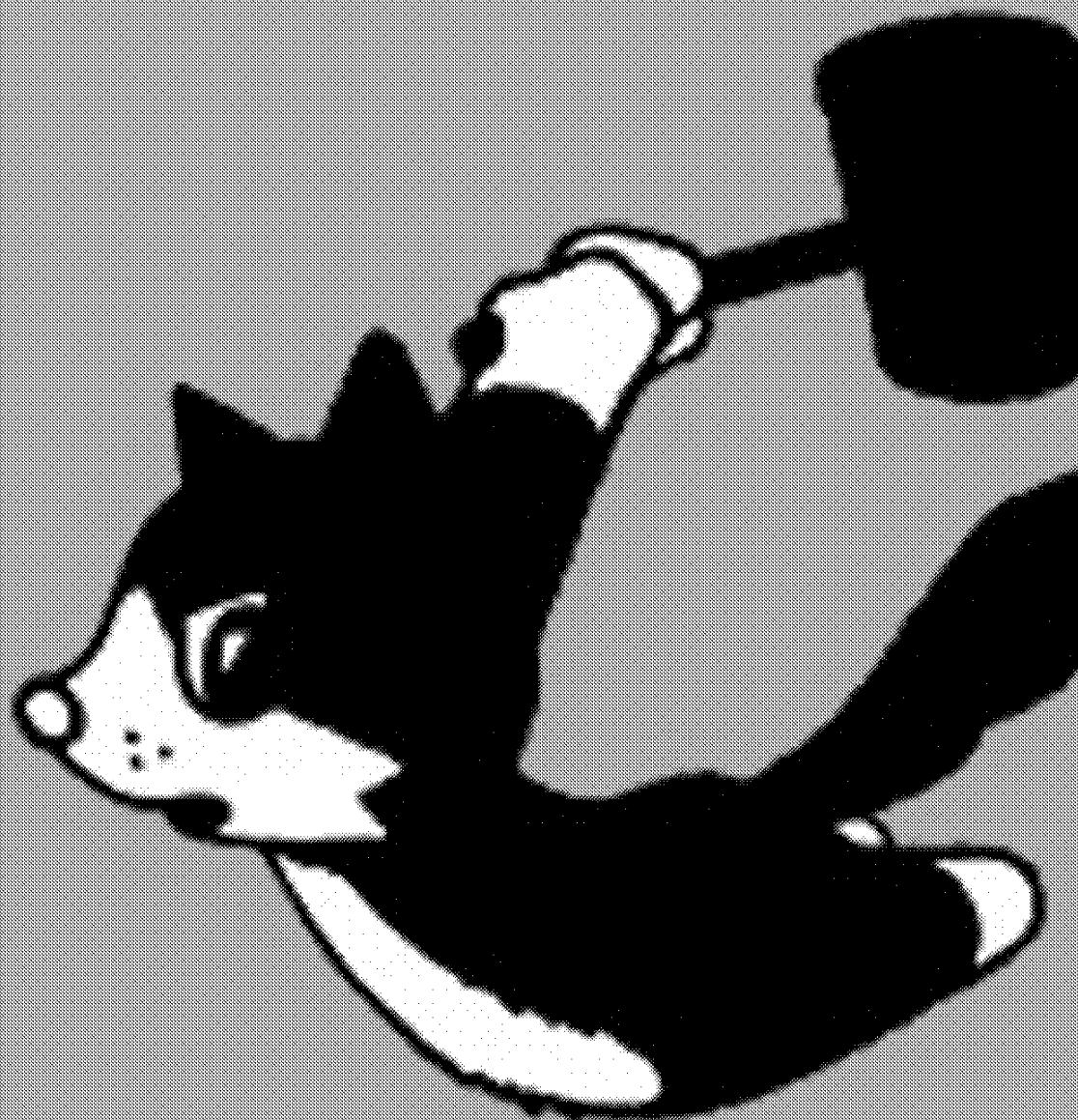


The Evolving Design of Protest
interview series

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PINKY & BUNNY

Pinky (the black kitty) and Bunny (the grey rabbit) host a show called 'The Pinky Show' which has garnered a huge following as a show that calls itself a part of 'Radical Education'. In this show, they outline problematic issues that are overlooked in education, media and general views and take the viewer along with them on a sort of personal journey into better understanding the world around them.

URGYEN BADHEYTSANG: Hi Pinky and Bunny. Thanks so much for taking your time to help with this interview.

PINKY: Hi Urgyen. Thank you for inviting us.

BUNNY: Hi.

UB: I hope things are well on your end, with the production of your programs, travels and everything. I would like to ask, what were your initial reasons behind starting this show?

PINKY: We started working on The Pinky Show to try to understand what's going on in the world and how it got this way. Since there isn't an obvious, uncomplicated answer to this, we thought we should create some kind of long-term project that we could use to study things all day, every day, for the rest of our lives. Creating a life-project

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If you have a regular job, at a very fundamental level you're probably being positioned – economically, institutionally – in ways that's not in your so-called best interests to think too deeply about how you're complicit in maintaining unfair or even violent social structures. Which is why so much of society is organized around the concept of full-time paid work. It's like that on purpose.

– Bunny

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like The Pinky Show was the only arrangement we could think of that would allow us the time and space to pursue our learning full-time.

BUNNY: And we didn't want to do the industrialized learning package.

PINKY: Yeah, schools are good for some things, but not for what we're trying to do. We thought about it for a long time and tried different things, but in the end we just decided to create our own learning project so that we could try to eliminate the artificial division between that inquiry and the other parts of 'everyday life'. Trying to understand how social structures and ideology works is not really a part-time activity. There's just too much to look into. Like, if you have a 'regular job' - whatever that means - you probably won't have the time or energy to map things out once you get home all worn out at the end of the day. You're too tired at that point; critical thinking is hard work too. Maybe that's why a lot of people just flop down and watch TV or something at the end of the day. We wanted a situation where we'd wear ourselves out every day doing what we really want to do, which is learning stuff.

BUNNY: Not only that, but if you have a regular job, at a very fundamental level you're probably being positioned - economically, institutionally - in ways that's not in your so-called best interests to think too deeply about how you're complicit in maintaining unfair or even violent social structures. Which is why so much of society is organized around the concept of full-time paid work. It's like that on purpose.

PINKY: Yeah. Doing the research, writing, and all the various production tasks that goes into creating The Pinky Show, these things bring focus and concrete objectives to our studies. It guess you could also say it's kinda like a public diary of some of the things we've learned so far.

BUNNY: I want to add that it's not just the learning that's important to us, it's also important that after we learn something, we try to figure out how to put that



into a form that can go out into the world and help others think things through. The world is being filled with violence, apathy, and misinformation. If you think something is hurtful or evil probably you should work against it in some way, because just thinking about it's not going to change anything.

UB: Surely there are so many cats and bunnies out there that just like to have fun and play all the time, why are you doing this instead? Was it your social group that influenced you?

BUNNY: I like fun and play too but neither one does anything to turn back violence and stupidity.

UB: I remember visiting your show at the Toronto Free Gallery (Jan-Feb 2010). Your human representative talked at length about your show and the concept behind it. He mentioned at one point that "important foundational discussion becomes bypassed in protests and marches". Can you tell me more about what he meant by that?

Above: From left to right, hosts Pinky and Bunny, and other members behind production and crew, Mimi and Kim.



Instead of just making an episode talking about whether or not a certain soldier or platoon or general is guilty of a war crime, maybe a better first step would be to learn about the moral, political, and legal frameworks that's already being used by the international community to talk about war-related violence.

— Pinky



BUNNY: That's HR03 (Human Representative 03). I'm assuming he was talking about how as a society, we often fixate on the particulars of a certain subject or issue, and in doing this it's easy to lose sight of the moral conflict that lies at the foundation of the issue. Let's take the Vietnam War as an example, since that was the topic of one of our first videos. Recently, Pinky and I were watching a Tariq Ali interview, the historian. He was talking about how the word "liberation" became used in the U.S. by various movements - the Women's Liberation movement, the Black Liberation movement, the Gay Liberation movement, and so on. It was a way for people engaged in their own political struggle here in the U.S. to acknowledge their solidarity with the NLF - the National Liberation Front - a.k.a., the Viet Cong.

Anyway, I hadn't really thought about that historical connection until we heard Tariq Ali talk about that in the interview. Okay. But what that led us to think about, to talk about, Pinky and me, was this question: if all those marginalized groups in the U.S. were taking up the word "liberation" as a sign of solidarity with the Viet Cong, why weren't there any mass protests in the U.S. opposing the brutal, crippling embargo the U.S. government slapped on Vietnam after its military withdrawal in 1975? Those sanctions devastated Vietnam for 20 more years after the war ended. The U.S. government did everything it could to collectively punish the Vietnamese, and U.S. progressives after '75 did almost nothing about it. Why didn't all those people in the U.S. who were so inspired by the Vietnamese people's struggle for freedom stop their government from doing that? Instead, it was like "okay, the war is over" and then the anti-war actions stopped. As long as U.S. American lives weren't being destroyed, the violence could be tolerated. This is an example of a foundation-manifestation disconnect.

PINKY: Actually I think [HR03] was referring to how important it is to always foreground basic, fundamental concepts even when speaking about specific topical issues, or specific events. I always use this example - it's com-

mon to pick up a newspaper or watch something on t.v. and they'll be talking about, say, something horrible just happened in Iraq. And then a debate begins in which we'll hear all kinds of terms start getting thrown around - war crime, crime against humanity, sometimes even genocide. But these terms are not interchangeable, they have different meanings and different implications. But do we know what they mean? Probably not. That's why we make episodes like What is a Crime Against Humanity?

Instead of just making an episode talking about whether or not a certain soldier or platoon or general is guilty of a war crime, maybe a better first step would be to learn about the moral, political, and legal frameworks that's already being used by the international community to talk about war-related violence. This is the kind of stuff that usually gets left out of public debate, which is why they usually sound like wild, morally ungrounded shouting matches.

BUNNY: Okay, I'm good with that answer too.

UB: Do you believe in physical involvement (rallies, direct action, verbal protests) as crucial in maintaining a movement and a dedicated group of activists? From my research I previously concluded that 'The street is no longer visible' in reaction to the constantly changing social sphere and people's increasing reliance on less physical modes of communication. How effective do you think a march/rally still is as we dive into digitally reliant forms of awareness campaigns and action?

BUNNY: Wow, there's a lot wrapped up in that question. I don't really understand what you mean when you say that "The street is no longer visible." We're not experts on activism or anything like that, so I'll just respond to your question in terms of communication and learning.

First of all, I think 'physical involvement', as you put it, will always be extremely important. At the level of



Ordinary people congregating in the street in opposition to 'something' instantly connects those people to a history of resistance. The ruling class takes this very seriously. Publicly, maybe they mock it, but that's besides the point. They take it seriously because of its political utility; they take it seriously because they know that 'The People' have successfully toppled all kinds of hegemonic structures before.

- Bunny





Taking action to the streets will always be important because it allows all kinds of real-life social relations to be formed and then played out. Activists get to talk to each other and make relationships, political and otherwise. People get to test their theories, test their decision-making, test the reaction from the media, the public, and so on.

– Bunny



representation it remains an incredibly powerful image. Ordinary people congregating in the street in opposition to ‘something’ instantly connects those people to a history of resistance.

The ruling class takes this very seriously. Publicly, maybe they mock it, but that’s besides the point. They take it seriously because of its political utility; they take it seriously because they know that ‘The People’ have successfully toppled all kinds of hegemonic structures before. Their goodies are on the line! Of course there will also be lots of ordinary people who say “Oh look at those idiots...” That happens too; but I’m less interested in the reaction from those people - unless they organize themselves into an even more spectacular rally in support of the status quo. Then, “Uh oh.” If that happens a mistake’s been made!

PINKY: To continue on a bit with what Bunny’s saying, I think it’s super important to study the reaction to dissent from the leadership class of our most ‘respected’ social and cultural institutions - not only because it’s something to contend with in and of itself, but also because millions of ordinary people take their cues from them. The leaders always have an eye on the streets, and we need to watch them carefully too. Are they keeping things quiet and smoothed over until unrest hopefully dissipates? Are they actively working to delegitimize the movement? Criminalizing its activities? Or simply crushing it? The kind of response reveals a lot about what kind of strategies make sense moving forward.

BUNNY: Yeah. And on a more practical level, taking action to the streets will always be important because it allows all kinds of real-life social relations to be formed and then played out. Activists get to talk to each other and make relationships, political and otherwise. Not just the public demonstration part but also in the organizing part. People get to test their theories, test their decision-making, test the reaction from the media, the public, and so on. It’s an incredibly efficient way of gathering

information. I was going to make a second point but I now I forget.

PINKY: Those are all good points. One thing I’d throw in there is that there’s a big difference between doing things that involve your body, and things that don’t. We learn differently through our bodies, we remember differently, and of course what we take away from experiences rich with sensory information and feelings ends up affecting us in a way that is profoundly different from just sitting in front of a computer. Not to say that there aren’t any feelings involved in sitting in front of a computer. But it’s different. Also I think it’s important to differentiate between ‘movements’ and ‘campaigns’.

BUNNY: Okay I remember now. I was going to say that one way to stay visible, even when the evening news people don’t send even one camera crew to cover street-level resistance, is to just document everything yourself. It doesn’t play out the same way as having network t.v. coverage but at least it becomes part of a historical record that, in the future, nobody will be able to say “Oh look, all this shit was happening and the people took it all lying down.”

We know a guy named Pono, I guess you can call him a Hawaiian nationalist. And every day, he is somewhere with his cheap camcorder videotaping attacks against Hawaiians in all of its forms, and even more importantly the grassroots resistance, the struggle against those attacks. He is 100% dedicated to creating a historical record. And because he’s doing this no one can say “nothing’s going on”, or “Hawaiians are happy the U.S. seized their lands and hijacked their nation”. In the future no one will be able to say “nobody fought”. He’s made thousands of videos and put hundreds of them up in publicly accessible places like YouTube. That’s just the work of one person. Nobody knows who he is but he’s my hero. I’m 100% sure he’s changing history.



We learn differently through our bodies, we remember differently, and of course what we take away from experiences rich with sensory information and feelings ends up affecting us in a way that is profoundly different from just sitting in front of a computer.

– Pinky





Above: An episode of *The Pinky Show* that talks about the idea of illegal immigration and American media's general alarming response to it.

Marginalized perspectives and subject matter is easier to distribute widely via the internet than it is via traditional media, which tends to be propelled forward by capital and popular acceptance. Without using digital media we would have never been able to reach millions of viewers in such a short span of time.

– Pinky

PINKY: Yeah, digital-reliant forms of communication hasn't made street-actions obsolete. It has added new dimensions to old struggles.

UB: Some studies have shown that people, especially heavy internet users, might possibly be less emotionally responsive in the digital age due to the heavy flow of information online, which gets processed faster than the mind has time to respond to. What are your thoughts on such studies, and have any of your experiences reflected any of those statements in your personal experiences? If you consider the digital age much more of a boon, please briefly state why.

BUNNY: I have no ideas about that. We should ask Daisy what the world felt like before the internet.

PINKY: To me, there is a stunning level of apathy amongst most U.S. Americans; I agree with that. But there are so many forces in operation that may be contributing to the construction of that apathy - not just technological but also sweeping and rapid social and cultural transformations - that I think it'd be really, really

difficult to say what part or how much of it is coming from "heavy internet use" or anything else. I want to see those studies.

UB: Please state briefly how you feel about the age of digitalized dissent, and your personal perspectives on social issues and people's responsiveness to them.

PINKY: Digital media is a good fit for our project, because of what we are most interested in talking about and also who we are primarily speaking to. In terms of content, we're all about U.S. imperialism, settler colonialism, doing structural analyses, talking about ideology, et cetera. We're not covering any new territory here, but we try to talk about these things in a way that people can easily understand, and these are things that are not widely understood within mainstream public conversation here in the U.S. And making these perspectives more widely understood is one of the primary objectives we are trying to work towards in our own little way.

Marginalized perspectives and subject matter is easier to distribute widely via the internet than it is via traditional media, which tends to be propelled forward by capital and popular acceptance. Well, we don't have money. We have no access to establishment distribution channels. So without using digital media we would have never been able to reach millions of viewers in such a short span of time. All of these are factors.

Now the question of how people respond to our work is a lot more difficult to talk about or consider. For the vast majority of people, I simply don't think consuming digital media is an effective way to challenge or change consciousness. We've received a lot of e-mail from people who tell us they've been deeply affected by simply watching or reading or listening to our material, but proportionately speaking, I have to think this is actually very, very rare.

Bringing about some kind of emotional or moral or intellectual dissonance is what we're after. Once you have that, then when you're trying to put everything back together again you have the possibility of creating new ways of understanding the world.

– Pinky

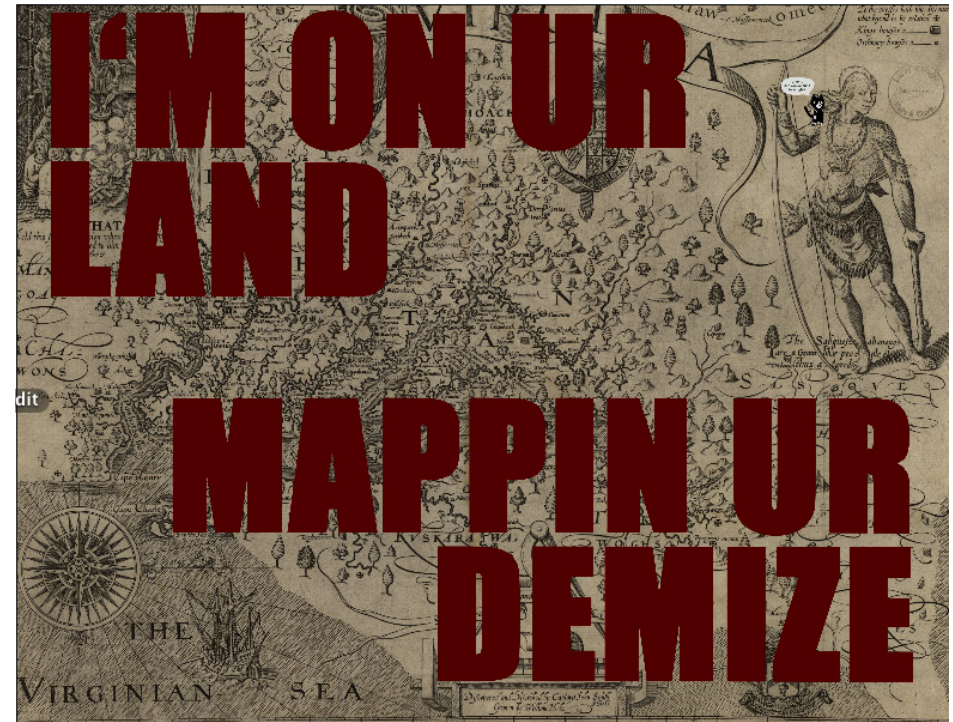
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We're focused on addressing U.S. Americans because they're the ones who have the most leverage to influence the actions of their own government. We're happy to receive communications from people in Guatemala, Chile, Vietnam, but usually those folks already know all about imperialism.

— Bunny

Bunny and I create materials - we call everything we make 'texts' - in the hopes that there are creative people 'out there' that will somehow find ways to put these texts to use — maybe activists, maybe teachers working with students, but maybe also people teaching themselves — using our texts to build new conversations, practices, and relationships. Especially long-term relationships. We get a lot of feedback from people who use our texts in their offline education work - study groups, teach-ins, all kinds of non-formal education.

This is an important part of our project that visitors to our website or YouTube channel don't see. But it's important precisely because consuming 'content' doesn't radicalize people. And that's true even for the most radical or revolutionary texts. It's people's life experiences that matters. So we try to create texts that can easily become part of people's lives. Hopefully our texts can help people critically reflect upon their everyday experience of the world. Bringing about some kind of emotional or moral or intellectual dissonance is what we're after. Once you have that, then when you're trying to put everything back together again you have the possibility of creating new ways of understanding the world. I hope that makes sense.

UB: Whether it is about the American government spending on billion dollar jets, the problems with animal cruelty or the issues behind institutionalized education, a huge amount of people have positively responded to your approach in making these very simple yet captivating presentations and shows (As I could see online from fan mail). But these are still people with an internet connection and computer access, a small percentage of privileged people in the world. Do you think your approach limits itself to only a few privileged people, or is that even an issue, and are there plans in the future to make your show more accessible?



BUNNY: If we are trying to have more U.S. people do their own analysis of U.S. imperialism, settler colonialism, etc. - all those subjects Pinky mentioned earlier - this means that our primary audience is U.S. Americans. Yes, they are extremely privileged in comparison to most others. Well, we think it's important for U.S. Americans to think real hard about their own privileged status in this world, because right now they're walking around acting as if they're the victims. That's ridiculous. We're focused on addressing U.S. Americans because they're the ones who have the most leverage to influence the actions of their own government. We're happy to receive communications from people in Guatemala, Chile, Vietnam, but usually those folks already know all about imperialism. They've been at the receiving end for a long time and they don't really need us talking to them about it. It's U.S. Americans that aren't doing enough to stop or repair the damage. We're more interested in speaking to the person of conscience from Bakersfield who never heard of the Pentagon Papers. The crazy cat lady who also has the ear of her four nieces and nephews who love her very much.

Above: Pinky and Bunny also have political artworks on their website. This one is from a series titled *On Native Land*, where they talk about conquest and map-making that was a big part of settler colonization and invasion. According to them, they ask a simple question with this series: "Is it possible for the United States of America to move towards freedom, justice and democracy without first confronting its own shadow-history?"

Below: a magnified image of Pinky from the same piece



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I think people sincerely enjoy learning things. If you are able to take something that's complex or obscure and then make understandable, I think lots of people will think that's an enjoyable experience in and of itself.

– Pinky

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UB: Your reps mentioned at the talk at the Toronto Free Gallery that people inside the U.S. are less welcoming and responsive to your talks and exhibitions. Do you believe it has to do with how seriously a cartoon character can be taken or is it because the issues you talk about are too serious?

BUNNY: Many U.S. Americans are annoyed by our work because we are critical of many aspects of Americanism. Whether or not a viewer likes cats or cartoons is an issue that we're willing to consider separately.

PINKY: Actually I don't spend much time thinking about the people who don't like our work. I am focused on doing what I can for those who, for whatever reason, consider themselves our ideological friends, or at least friends. If people don't like where we're coming from they can dismiss our work for all sorts or reasons. If they can't think of something that makes sense they will just come up with something that doesn't make sense. They are not picky.

UB: Your presentation in Toronto was at the Toronto Free Gallery, and there was a lot of people from the art community (mostly middle-aged or a little younger) and that made me think about the role of art in activism, and the role of activism in producing art. Do you think it is important to differentiate between art as activism and activism as art?

PINKY: Bunny and I try our hardest to create useful texts. Although we've definitely been influenced by theories and practices drawn from disciplinary areas like art and education, much of how we work is grounded in our everyday experiences of trying to work with each other in a way that is respectful and honest. We're not art historians or art critics or educational academics, who I assume would probably be better suited to evaluate and categorize

our work according to their own standards and narratives. I don't want to come off as arrogant or make believe we're totally disconnected from those realms, but I just feel like my head is already full and the way Bunny and I are evaluating our work as we move forward is for the sake of moving forward. It's an insider perspective, which is different from what academics and related cultural workers are more interested in doing. We have our job, they have their job.

BUNNY: I actually enjoy reading about what other people - especially 'The Experts' - are saying about what we're doing.

PINKY: I haven't really been paying attention.

UB: You have been active for 5 years now, constantly producing work and helping people think differently. There is a tendency for people to see such shows and information as being too negative and pessimistic or hopeless (as you mentioned in your blog) . How do you feel about your approach to these issues, and how people may respond to them? How important do you think it is, with movements and shows like yours, that viewers an enjoyable experience whilst also being told about important issues? (btw I greatly enjoy your show)

BUNNY: I don't really sit around trying to figure out how to make something that'll be entertaining for somebody else. I don't know what human beings like. I'm not funny and neither are you.

PINKY: Nope.

BUNNY: We spend lots more time just trying to make information clear and tweaking the perspective, lining every single little detail up for the sake of creating understanding. But for 'enjoyable', I don't really know how to make something enjoyable...

PINKY: Well, for one thing, I think people sincerely enjoy learning things. If you are able to take something that's complex or obscure and then make understandable, I think lots of people will think that's an enjoyable experience in and of itself. I imagine that what people want more than anything else is to be able to look at the world and understand what's going on. Even the most horrifying situation can be made more tolerable when we are able to hold it in our minds, examine or understand it. When we're able to do this then even the most hopeless circumstances can eventually be turned. A lot of the things we talk about in The Pinky Show are pretty dark. I mean, we've done episodes where we speak about genocide war crimes, and so on. We take on these kinds of subjects because they're important, not for their enjoyability.

BUNNY: Right. If people don't agree I'm sure they can watch some other cat show. Or dogs.

UB: In conclusion, I would like to thank you very much for your assistance in helping answer questions from a unique perspective and voice. Is there anything you'd like to add that you believe is important to consider in this discussion about activism and the role of digital media?

BUNNY: [to Pinky] Do you see yourself as an activist?

PINKY: No. I associate activism with direct interventions of some kind, the intentional cultivation of transformational relationships.

BUNNY: Yeah. The bulk of our work with The Pinky Show is creating texts. Our work may be related or connected to work currently being done by activists, we may share some common political objectives and so forth, but basically it's a different kind of work.

PINKY: Agreed.

UB: Once again, thanks so much for the time and effort in this email interview. Take care.

This interview was
conducted via e-mail.
The activist interviewees
were reached using email,
facebook and phone.

