

J E S S I E J A N E L E W I S

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I am not an Artist.

These days I'm a professional disabled person. There are so many larger issues to be dealt with: the health care crisis, ADA and access to buildings, being a mom and a step-mom, holding on to my job, just getting through the day. The luxury of making art is not possible any more. I'm becoming an activist. I spend my "free" time writing letters, going to Harrisburg, protesting, testifying, doing what I can. It isn't much and it certainly isn't nearly enough.

Fran Orlando asked me to make an "Artist's" statement about what inspires me. For many of us, it is impossible to separate the work from the life. My disease process makes it especially poignant for me. My life is the art now. I have a disability, an illness. It has a name. Multiple Sclerosis. It's a role I didn't audition for.

Everyone always wants to know exactly what it is, why my legs don't work and what is wrong with me. I always tell them, "MS", but even before I had MS my father used to ask "What is wrong with you, Jane?" It was especially a problem when I was in art school and went to alot of demonstrations. One time my dad actually got so frustrated that he grabbed a book to hit me with. The book happened to be the Social Register. You see, it was that kind of upbringing but I was a teeneger. I laughed in his face. That made him hit me all the harder. My mother got him off me, but I had won. He had lost his temper and he was ashamed of himself. What was wrong with me was that I had a conscience. He did pay for my education though and he never tried to stop me again. Then the real learning began.

Evidently I have chosen to use this space on the wall as an Activist's statement, not an Artist's statement, but if you change the letters around a bit, pretty soon the word "Artist" begins to look like "Activist". Which brings me to , where are all the young artists? We need you because at heart you are really activists by daring to begin to make art in this difficult world. It was easier for me coming up. Those of us who are older couldn't help ourselves. We didn't know any better. It's much harder now.

Oh all right, so you are sitting there looking at the tapes and you want an explanation and all I do is rant and rave. Maybe it will enhance your understanding of the tapes. Maybe not. By now maybe your mind is starting to wander so you'll want something to read. Here it is.

The work Stings was started in 1991. I had my own hive and in two years received over 4000 bee stings as treatment for my disease which was getting worse. This tape documents that period: the friends and neighbors, the bouts of urinary incontinence and of course, the stings themselves. It was an attempt to understand my disease process and I gained alot of respect for bees.

BodyWorks was made with other people some able-bodied, some not. It was co-directed with Suzanne Church Wheeling, and alot of Nexus members got involved. It was important to me to do something for the community, to tell people about the body making art and that the voice has to find a way to get out no matter what the circumstances of the body.

A Change in the Perception of Red was a blend of performance and video. It was part of the John Cage events at PMA 1995. Mostly I found out that some tech people get really nervous when things are not predictable but that kids love it. Also and most importantly, everybody wants to help.