

The Housework Poster Rip-Off

Shirley Boccacio

The story of the Great Poster Rip-off began during the Fall of 1970 when the underground women's movement was at its height. It ended on Friday, Sept. 14, 1973, when Judge Maxwell Ponte of the Federal court in Los Angeles pronounced the words, "Motion to set aside dismissal denied!" But perhaps it really isn't over yet; perhaps because I am writing this, the case of the Poster Rip-off will not end and peer judgment will ultimately vindicate me.

As I sat on the hard bench in the brutally functional Federal court chambers of Judge Ponte on that fateful September 14, I heard the words of Flo Kennedy echoing somewhere in my brain as he pronounced the verdict against me. "Honey," she had said several months ago, her laughter mocking me, "the trouble is, the Law is not meant to protect people like you, and you all get so hot and bothered because you believe it should. You were taught that we all have equal protection under the Law; well Honey, that's just so much bullshit!" Flo KNEW, and here it was all happening.

The poster that is central to this story is familiar within and without the Women's Movement . . . it is the Fuck Housework poster, a drawing of a young woman breaking a broom in two, with a smile of commitment and unshakable determination on her face. That poster was born out of the anger and frustration of Women; I was the artistic medium. I conceived it, designed and drew it and then had it printed as a poster. I dutifully copyrighted it with the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. That was in 1971. The poster was an instant success.

I am a single Mother of three small children; at the time I designed the poster, we were living on a bare minimum income of something like \$320.00 a month for the four of us. I managed to keep a roof over our heads and food on the table but very little else. Shoes and clothes were hand-me-downs from sympathetic friends . . . entertainment was a walk in the park or a street car ride to the beach. We were poor. Income from that poster was a

release from the prison of poverty. Suddenly we could afford new shoes, jeans, bicycles at Christmas and a babysitter once in a while. We got a rug for the bare wooden floor. The money meant that I could do more posters and eventually create a line of feminist children's books which could break through the inherent sexism of children's literature. I had found a way to earn money that challenged my creativity, work that was a joy and a privilege and that allowed me to raise my children myself. I was free, and it all came from the Women's Movement. SHE was providing!

Another woman and I were distributing the poster ourselves to poster shops in the Los Angeles area. That summer of 1971 we were doing a thriving business; it was mind blowing. I had the feeling it was all too good to be true, that somehow our success was violating some unknown law. Unfortunately, as we shall see, my intuition was correct.

Toward the end of that summer of '71, Pat, the woman who was distributing the poster, informed me that a shop on Brand Avenue called Picture Hut, had stopped buying from her, and further, that she had gone by there and seen a slightly enlarged copy of our poster in the window!

She looked at me knowingly for a moment, shook her head and said, "I was afraid of this; your poster is too successful, you've finally been ripped-off, it happens all the time in the poster game."

I was furious at their audacity. I strongly felt that the poster belonged in the Women's Movement. Many of them had been donated to feminist causes such as fund raising for N.O.W. and to the women organizing for the child-care initiative. There were so many long ignored needs of Women that needed to be fulfilled.

As soon as I could find a break in my schedule, I got the children together and we went across town to purchase a copy of my pirated poster. Sure enough, there it was in the window looking out on the passersby. It was exactly as I had drawn it, even to the copyright notice I had placed in the lower right hand corner with my pseudonym, Virtue Hathaway. They had photographed one of the posters, made a plate from it, and begun printing it, a relatively simple procedure.

On the way home in the bus as I looked out on the rainy winter streets of Los Angeles, my thoughts and feelings were in a turmoil . . . my anger had to be directed properly. These people must be stopped somehow . . . they were stealing from us just as they always had been, except now it was in the context of Women's Liberation. But it was the

The names and places in this article have been changed. Not because the story didn't happen just as Shirley says but because the necessary documentation to avoid the possibility of legal action could not be gathered together by press time.

same as doing the same work for less pay, doing housework for free, raising children for cannon fodder, being charged \$500.00 for abortions, the needless hysterectomies, the list of rip-offs was endless . . . and now our creativity. It must end.

The first step seemed to be to find an attorney. I spoke to Maida Zylekirt an outstanding feminist lawyer in Los Angeles. She listened to my story over the phone and then responded negatively. She was already overworked, and I had no money to advance for attorneys' fees because the poster income had dropped off since the rip-off. The attorney who took the case would have to be financially well off enough to work on a contingency basis. That means she would have to pay filing fees, salaries, rent, etc. and wait until the courts reached a monetary judgement in order to be reimbursed and have her fees paid. That was also taking a chance that the judgement would be a sufficient amount to cover the expenses. It always is a gamble. Few professional women who are also feminists are rich; most are struggling to survive in a hostile community. The lawyer who took my case would have to be a man who was sympathetic. More informal consultations with friends, more phone calls, and thus I began a long harrowing fight for my copyright.

Finally, I ended up with a man in the Law Offices of Francis Sarri, named Will Mueller. Sarri's firm had a reputation for defending indigent minority people. Mueller seemed adequate enough, the case was sound, there was no question that the poster had been stolen. He agreed to take it and would take as his fee 1/3 of whatever he could recover at the time of judgement.

In the meantime, I had discovered that the poster was being produced by a large Chicago based poster company called Caricature Posters. The Picture Hut here was one of their own retail outlets, although they were distributing it to other shops. Mueller drew up the proper papers, and the company was ordered to appear in court to answer on charges of copyright violation and to reimburse me for the posters they had already sold. The hearing took place on Friday morning, January 28, 1972. I had planned to attend, but one of the children was sick, childcare was very expensive and virtually unavailable, so I was unable to go. That afternoon, in the midst of the many diverse chores necessary to keep us all going, I received a phone call from a Los Angeles Times reporter requesting permission to come out and take a picture of me for a story they were doing on the hearing that morning. My sensibilities, dulled by the monotony of laundry, cooking and dishes, suddenly sprang to life. "What happened?" I asked eagerly.

"It was a routine morning in court," the reporter responded, "and we reporters were just sort of hanging around when your poster case came up before Ponte. He hadn't looked at it before the morning session, so he opened up the file and started shuffling through. Then he opened up the poster, took one long, hard look at it and fairly screamed! Then he threw it into the air like it was on fire and he didn't want to burn his hands. Now Ponte's court is usually one of the dullest, the guy is just devoid of any sense of humor, but suddenly everything perked up. Everyone wanted to see what the poster was and what had

happened in that Judge's head. When he finally got control of himself and got over his initial shock he began to condemn the poster as being 'patently obscene'."

"But what about my copyright?" I persisted.

"I think he refused to rule on that," the reporter continued, "he said something about the posters should be thrown out to the Farrolone Islands and that they shouldn't be disseminated where women and children would see them."

"They are supposed to be disseminated where women and children can see them!" I grumbled, half to myself.

The reporter wanted to get his business done with. "Look, can I come out and photograph you and the poster?"

"Sure," I said, "but are you planning to cast me as the plaintiff in this case, or the defendant?"

He laughed at that, but I was chilled by my own irony.

The reporter arrived soon after the phone call, and we both set about trying to figure out how to photograph the poster without having it censored. I suggested having my little boy, Charlie, place his chubby little hand over the offending four letters and let it go at that. The reporter chuckled merrily and set us all up accordingly. Charlie flashed an innocent, cherubic smile, the camera clicked, and there we were in the next day's paper. A woman and a small child . . . radical revolutionaries of a new order, having set the old one to shivering and shaking in its cold and sterile halls of justice.

I then phoned Mueller to find out where we stood legally at this point.

"The judge refused to rule on the case," said Mueller. "He wouldn't issue a restraining order or anything of the kind. He charged that the poster was against public policy and does nothing but demean our society."

"Oh really," I answered with a note of sarcasm in my voice, "I wonder if Judge Ponte would find it demeaning to be a young Mother who does nothing but clean, cook and care for children 14 hours a day, 7 days a week, year after year. I wonder if the good judge would find it demeaning to have served as a dutiful and faithful housewife for all of one's life and then find oneself living in abject poverty as an old woman, the labor of a lifetime, extolled by society, counting for almost nothing in one's old age. I wonder if our stern Judge would find the mental, emotional and physical fatigue of unrelenting, unpaid housework demeaning if he found himself as a woman in that occupation. You know, Will," I continued, "it was not the word fuck that Judge Ponte objected to; rather, it was obscene to him that women are revolting against their assigned place in the kitchen. And, of course, he is right, the poster IS an expression of outrage against public policy, the public policy of exploiting women!"

"Now, now, calm down," he said. "Let's stick to the practicalities of this case. I spoke to the lawyer from Caricature Posters and he assured us that his client has stopped selling your posters. In the meantime we will work on arranging a meeting with Larry Seizel, president of Caricature Posters, in order to come to an agreement on compensation and licensing."

The meeting with Larry Seizel, president of Caricature,

was finally scheduled for Saturday, April 1, 1972 at 10:00 AM in the offices of his lawyer, Robert Younger. The office was located in the financial district of Los Angeles. At 10:00 sharp I met Mueller in front of the building; the door was locked, so we leaned up against the building chatting to kill time. We went over our demands and wondered out loud what the other side was going to do or say. In a little while Younger showed up and opened the door to the building. He greeted us amiably and apologized for being late.

As we went up in the elevator Younger filled us in on Larry Seizel. "Mr. Seizel is in town with his wife . . . she is also his business partner in the poster company. You might even say he has liberated her." We all smiled politely at his wit.

The three of us walked into the offices, like so many others in the city . . . secretaries' desks with covered typewriters, corridors with several doors to the smaller rooms that housed the men in the firm.

"We'll hold the conference over here in the library," said Younger as he opened the door for us to pass. "Coffee anyone?"

Yes, we would have coffee.

The clock stood at 10:30 and the Seizels still had not arrived.

We spoke of trivia, being careful not to venture into the territory we were there to cover . . . finally at 10:45 the Seizels arrived. The door swung open and he nearly filled the frame. He was dressed in a silk shantung suit, a diamond stick pin adhered to his wide tie; there were rings on his fingers, thick black hair combed to perfection and a smile uncurling over his large, white teeth. He exuded money and power.

We were all introduced. "Sorry I'm late," he said, as he moved to the chair at the head of the conference table. His wife followed him in, a strong, handsome woman. "It's my fault," she said, "I mistook the shower faucet for the bath faucet and sprayed water all over my hair . . . I just had to dry it before we left."

No one could argue with that. She sat down at the table opposite me.

Seizel took over immediately. "I've been far too busy to look at what you are proposing," he said, looking over at me, "but we have only printed 200 of the Fuck Housework posters . . . now we propose to pay you \$200.00 for those we have already sold and 5¢ royalty on all the posters we sell in the future."

There were a few minutes of awkward silence. Was I supposed to answer? I looked over at Mueller who cleared his throat and finally began to speak. "My client does not believe that you sold only 200 posters. From her experience with the sales of them here in Los Angeles, it would seem that you have sold many times that number. My client therefore wants to be reimbursed \$15,000 for those posters you have already sold around the country, and further, to be paid 25¢ royalty on every poster you sell in the future."

Seizel seemed to rise inches in his chair . . . he leaned over and glared at Mueller. "We have only sold 200 posters and we will pay no more than \$200.00 to your client here

and the royalty will be no more than 5¢ and I suggest you accept that," he growled. "I retain a battery of attorneys who do nothing else except fend off artists such as your client who bother me with their stupid copyright claims. They are very good and very well PAID." At this he laughed and Mueller seemed to shrink inches in his chair. "You are just wasting your time if you try to bargain with me!"

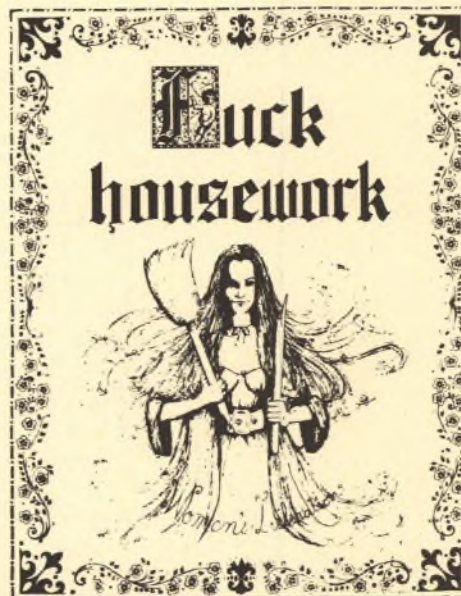
Again there was silence in the room. Then Seizel leaned back with a satisfied smile on his face and began a virtual soliloquy. "This reminds me of the time I had with the Mothers for Peace . . . they had a poster with this big flower drawn on it and then the words 'War is not healthy for children and other living things', and it looked like a kid had done it. Well, anyway, we heard it was going pretty good so we picked up on it and started selling the thing. Now, the way I look at it, we were actually doing the Mothers a favor by getting their message around more and better. We have a first rate distribution system, and, well, those movement outfits are just amateurs. They came to us so mad about their damned copyright. They didn't want to deal with us or anything, so finally we quit selling it. You know what I call those Mothers now?" His eyes narrowed and the corners of his mouth dropped . . . "Mothers for cash!"

Quite satisfied with himself, he proceeded to bore us for another hour and a half telling us how rich and successful he was and what a damned nuisance he found Artists who troubled him with their silly copyrights, and how happy those Artists would be if they would just fall into line and do what Larry-babe said.

Finally he rose; the conference was apparently terminated. "I'd like to speak to you in the other room, Younger." And they left, with the wife in tow.

Mueller looked rather stunned, "Well, uh," he said, "what do you want to do?"

"Look, Will," I said, "you know what I want to do. I



want my day in court. He is lying, anyone in the poster business knows that. No one prints just 200 posters, it isn't worth inking a press to do that. This is standard operating poster rip-off procedure for this character. They steal the poster. If the Artist squawks about it they offer a deal; if not, they have free ideas and art work. We have to make a stand against this. People like him should be stopped from exploiting the Artist. He is paying those high priced attorneys in Chicago with the proceeds from the stolen ideas of the very Artists who are protesting. An Artist lives by her creativity. When someone steals her ideas, it is like stealing bread off the dinner table."

"Now, now . . . let's be objective and not so emotional," he said, just as Seizel and his entourage reappeared.

"Decided to accept my offer?" Seizel threw out.

"I need some time to discuss this with my lawyer," I stated coldly, as we all prepared to leave.

While waiting for the elevator, Seizel gave Younger a little elbow in the ribs, eyeballing me from head to toe, and pronounced, "don't you think she'd be better off if she fucked for money instead of drawing women's lib posters?"

The humiliation of the past two hours reached its inevitable culmination. "I only fuck for fun," I retorted, and Mueller and I stepped onto the elevator and finally out into the fresh, clean air of an early spring afternoon.

Mueller was rather tentative, "Let's have lunch." he suggested. We went to Savid's Bar & Grill, a superb sea food restaurant in Los Angeles. We dined on sole, sour dough bread and chilled Chablis. It was very comforting. During our luncheon conversation I continued to emphasize that we must go back to court on the matter. Mueller, between sips of wine, kept nodding and smiling and looking away vaguely. We finally parted about 2:30 in the afternoon. Buying me lunch was the last significant thing Mueller did. Breaking bread and drinking wine was him performing the last sacrament in the Great Poster Rip-off.

Nine months passed and nothing happened. My phone calls to the Mueller office were not returned. New evidence I had received from women around the country who were buying the ripped-off poster was not being acknowledged. Finally I realized what had happened that day in conference. Mueller had effectively been castrated by Seizel, and I had better start looking for another lawyer. He had simply been no match for the big, blustery huckster from Chicago.

I was determined that Caricature Posters should go to court on this matter. Their insult had been too profound for me ever to consider doing business with them. The case had lagged badly now. The inaction of Mueller and my hostile judge in the case prevented its being brought up for review. A friend finally suggested an acquaintance of his. Bob Farin had a good reputation with the New Left. He specialized in conscientious objectors, evicted tenants and others (men) oppressed by our institutions. I spoke to Bob briefly on the phone. "Yes," he said he was interested, "I'll take the case."

The substitution of attorneys was filed and I had a new lawyer, a person who supposedly understood the prison of poverty. I rested in the thought that now my case was in capable, dedicated hands. I told Farin about the many posters around the country that women had purchased from Caricature outlets. I assured him we had all the

evidence we needed to prove they were continuing to sell the poster.

The subsequent phone calls from Bob Farin began to take on a distant tone. "Shirley," he said, "Caricature says they have only made 200 of the poster and that they are no longer selling the poster."

"Bob, of course that is what they are saying, but I have more than ample evidence that they are lying."

"Well, that's all well and good," he continued, "but I suggest we make some kind of a settlement with them."

"Bob," I persisted, "I don't want to settle with them, I want to go to court before a jury of my peers and present my evidence. I don't want to settle with liars and thieves!"

The next phone call from Farin came on a Sunday afternoon, April 7, 1973. "We have to go to court tomorrow and there is no way I can prepare for trial on such short notice. We will simply have to settle the case. There is no alternative."

I was appalled. How could this happen? Why didn't he prepare? I felt so helpless.

"The judge forced this on us," he continued. "I can get you around \$1,000 and an agreement to discontinue selling the posters."

Apparently I have no recourse, if it is in fact impossible to go to trial, but be certain to obtain an iron-clad agreement that they are to stop selling the poster. At least we can begin to get some of the income from them that we so desperately need."

"Yes," he assured me, "If they sell just one poster we can sue them."

Later in the week I phoned him to see what had happened. "Sorry," he said, "I could only get you \$750 as a settlement."

"But the agreement to stop selling the posters, did you get that?"

"Yes, yes, they cannot sell one more of your Fuck Housework posters."

Well, at least that, I sighed to myself.

A few weeks later I was talking to one of my feminist friends and she remarked that she had seen my poster for sale over in Pasadena. Knowing that I was not selling them over there I asked her to buy one for me. When it arrived, it was the Caricature copy. I was furious. It was then that I asked Flo Kennedy if she would pick one up for me when she was in Chicago. One of her friends bought the poster in the Caricature store in Chicago and Flo brought it back. It was in her apartment here in Los Angeles when I went to pick the poster up, that she laughed at me for the futility of my efforts.

By this time the case had been dismissed. I was sick about the whole thing but was still talking to feminists and lawyers. Finally through a woman I located a copyright attorney, Mick Carter, who became very interested in the case. We set an appointment and I related the whole mess. He shook his head in utter dismay, "I hate to hear things like this," he said. We went over all the facts carefully and he agreed to make an attempt to set aside the dismissal so we could have a trial in the case. However, we would still have to deal with the same judge, a Nixon administration appointee to the Federal Court bench. In the interim I received a letter from Farin deploring my efforts to set

aside the dismissal and stating he would not lend any support to my case. His hostility seemed unnecessary at this point, but I tossed it aside as being inconsequential. He had messed up the situation so badly we had to somehow restore some semblance of legal recourse.

Mick Carter presented our petition to Ponte's court. Ponte delayed his decision until we could get an affidavit from Bob Farin as to what he had represented the terms of settlement to be to me.

The details of his affidavit are unimportant except for the critical point, which was that Caricature Posters was to cease printing and selling the Fuck Housework poster. This was not covered in his version; he effectively lied.

And that brings us back to the final day in court.

My lawyer, Mick Carter, stood up and presented the facts that I had been unduly pressed into settlement and the stipulation to stop selling the posters had been ignored and excluded contrary to my directions. My affidavit and Bob Farin's were clearly in disagreement. Judge Ponte known in the business as a tough law and order man, decided to side with the "radical" lawyer. "Mr. Farin is an officer of the court," he stated "so therefore we will honor his statement that the settlement reached had been agreed to by the plaintiff. Motion to set aside dismissal, denied!"

That was it. I had lost at every turn. I had tried to work within the system. I had expected the copyright law to protect me, and found instead that I was on trial, not those who had stolen what belonged to me. As a woman, do I in fact own my creativity, do women who are artists suffer a double oppression? As an artist I must support myself and

my three children with my ideas. If they can be stolen so easily, how will we survive?

I decided to phone Bob Farin to ask him why he lied on his affidavit. He answered the phone. I told him who it was and then asked him if he had heard of the outcome of our petition. "No," he said coldly. Then I asked him why he had lied. "I stated my position and that is all I am going to say on the matter and I am going to terminate this conversation!" "Bob," I stated flatly, "I know you lied and you know you lied. We went over the terms repeatedly and one of the main points was that they were to stop selling the posters, you know that, Bob . . . but nowhere in the dismissal or anywhere else is that spelled out."

"You are being ungrateful!"

"Grateful for what? I have lost my copyright on my work because you lied on your affidavit." I was very, very angry.

"You ungrateful bitch!" And the representative of the "new left" slammed down the receiver.

So we are more or less where we started. Buying shoes for the children is still a problem. Peter's coat is badly torn and the school year is just starting. Other children have new coats. We still take the bus or walk, and our entertainment revolves around our beautiful park. I would estimate that Caricature Posters has sold between 100,000 to 200,000 Fuck Housework posters . . . maybe Larry Seizel has bought some diamond cufflinks to match his diamond stick pin which he wears with his silk shantung suit.

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Mother Love - Mother Work

R. L. Annchild

My mother was 29 when she packed our clothes and left my father. I was 6. It seemed we had just moved down to Texas to join my father in a too large house with palm trees on the front lawn, but now we were leaving, without Daddy, without any explanation. After three days in the same clothes our train pulled into Penn Station in Philadelphia and we went straight to my (maternal) Grandmothers. My mother stayed a week, unpacked our bags, separated my clothes from hers, and repacked hers while mine went into a big empty dresser. She was going to New

York, where I'd been born, and where we'd lived for four and a half years before my father got the idea to start his own business in Houston. My mother briefly explained that she was going to New York to get a job because there were more jobs in New York; and that I had to stay with my grandmother until she found one. And then she was gone. Within two weeks time I had no father, and no mother. I was confused and angry. I was afraid to hate my grandmother since she was all I had left; I was too much in love with my mother to hate her, and my father was too far away. I put into my bedtime prayers "God bless my mother and give her a job quick." Jobs for black women in 1956 were few, low paying and menial. My mother was smart and pretty, but she was still black and six months shy of a high school diploma. I don't know what she did during most of those years in New York, but I knew she