



## Pressing the issue

Artist, provocateur Art Hazelwood talks imagery and action on the homeless front

BY EMILY GREEN  
STAFF WRITER

Above, Art Hazelwood's print "In the Balance" depicts global injustice. A scale holds the world — the 99 percent — on one side and those in power on the other. A female figure representing justice and democracy attempts to balance the off-balance system.

For decades, Art Hazelwood has used his sinister style of art as a means of educating society about complex social issues by way of posters and books. His often dark and nefarious-looking images frequently attack powerful figures that he believes are directly contributing to poverty.

The 52-year-old San Franciscan creates the majority of his screen prints for Street Sheet, a publication of the Coalition on Homelessness, and for the Western Regional Advocacy Project. WRAP has brought West Coast organizations fighting homelessness, including Street Roots, together since 2005, and is currently promoting the Homeless Bill of Rights in California and Oregon.

A recently released book written by WRAP director Paul Boden, "House Keys Not Handcuffs: Homeless Organizing, Art and Politics in San Francisco and Beyond," features a selection of posters Hazelwood created for the organization over a 15-year period, along with an essay from the artist about the growing influence of art in homeless community organizing.

**Emily Green:** At what point in your life did you decide to marry your art with political activism, and what inspired you to focus on issues around homelessness?

**Art Hazelwood:** I moved [to San Francisco] in 1993. I'd been doing art that people told me was political, but it was really just social commentary, street life,

that kind of thing. I encountered [Street Roots sister paper] Street Sheet, the street publication of the Coalition of Homelessness, and thought I could contribute to it. I sent them some work, and it wasn't necessarily political but it was life-on-the-street imagery, and I started producing work directly for them. The editor would give me a topic: "We're doing an issue on addiction." I would create something for it. For me, at first it was: "Oh, I'm getting my work out there. I'm connecting to something." But later making art for Street Sheet politicized my work and it taught me more about the issues. My immediate connection to homelessness was a real desire to connect to people who are underserved in our community. I was connected to disability rights as well when I first moved to San Francisco for similar reasons.

**E.G.:** The new book, "House Keys Not Handcuffs," examines 30 years of activism in an effort to examine what worked and what didn't. After reflecting on your own activism efforts as an artist, is there a time when you feel your art was particularly effective and what was the end result?

**A.H.:** The arc of time, the 30-year period really starts out with very little art — handwritten signs — and then the Street Sheet came into existence almost 10 years into it. At that point the artwork that was supporting the coalition and its activism, my work included, was mostly created for Street Sheet, as opposed to street art. And I felt

like that was an effective information tool — as a way to reach people without heavy text. It really started to broaden in the early 90s when we basically started using artwork in more ways. We started using it as street posters and working with other groups, like advertising agencies to do bus ads, for example. For me, the real useful part of my artwork came when WRAP was born in 2006, and I started working with [WRAP Executive Director] Paul Boden to organize artists to answer the question: Why are there homeless in such and such numbers in relation to federal government spending numbers? We were basically taking data and making art to tell the story of that data, and I think those are very effective posters.

**E.G.:** You mentioned that posters can be more effective than plain text. Can you elaborate on that a little?

**A.H.:** People take in information in different ways. For some people, reading an essay about something gives them

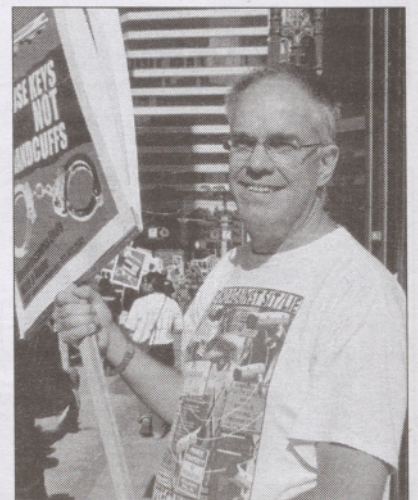


PHOTO BY FRANCISCO DOMINGUEZ  
Art Hazelwood at a protest in San Francisco.

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