

Pop Politics

by David Balzer

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Les Paterson posts populist thought

Last summer Les Paterson got a lot of attention for his clever "The Marge Simpson Project," which recreated all the cartoon characters' paintings, including, of course, Mr. Burns in the nude (without mocking his genitalia, natch). This summer, Paterson's got another appealing trick up his sleeve: "The Pop Can Poll," an exhibit of a thousand discarded aluminum cans, crushed and turned into postcards — on which people have written messages to members of parliament or the prime minister. And, yes, after the exhibit is finished, Paterson plans to mail all the cans — 10 to a mailbox, he alleges — taking full advantage of Parliament Hill's postage-free policy.

"It's less about getting a reaction from the government and more about getting people, individuals, thinking and engaged a little in political discourse," says Paterson, who approached hundreds of strangers for the project despite a self-admitted shyness. "I'm trying to get those who haven't even considered political action to stop on the spot and consider about their relationship with the government — how can they address their concerns directly?"

Interestingly, sending crushed cans in the mail is nothing new for Paterson. An unapologetic eccentric, he's been doing it for years as a cute way of communicating with friends and relatives, and promises the cans won't be returned — that they "have always gone through [i.e., the mail], very consistently." The import of this small, goofy act hit him gradually last year: "One day I was walking home and a woman was canvassing the street for Falun Gong with those preprinted postcards," he says. "It dawned on me that mail is free to Parliament Hill, and on further research I found that the kinds of messages politicians are most interested in receiving aren't those cards but rather spontaneous letters. I thought, well, why not give them what they want, in grand size?"

More ideas began to emerge: Paterson notes that in Ancient Greece, citizens used to cast their votes on pottery shards, and he figures pop cans are the contemporary equivalent. Then there's the environmentalist bent: the mailbox functioning as a kind of ideological recycling box. Paterson claims this McLuhan-esque medium-as-message aspect came about pretty spontaneously; nonetheless, the majority of participants in the "Pop Can Poll" have written directly to Stephen Harper about the environment. Indeed, in many ways the project seems tailor-made for Harper, though Paterson denies this.

"My intention was to be as inclusive as possible, rather than just making the project some kind of shrill attack on the ruling party," he says. "I wanted to get a diverse range of people participating, and include people both for and against [the Conservatives]."

"Many people's first response is, 'I don't know what to say,' at which point I say, 'Something about the government must bother you.' Then they stop and think, and often what they come up with is as intelligent and well-written as someone who's passionately political. Even in the jokes there's something to be learned."