

**W.H.A.M! (Women's Health Action and Mobilization)
& Matuschka, launching the Breast Cancer Movement in 1991**

W.H.A.M! was an American activist organization based in New York City, established in 1989 in response to the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Webster vs. Reproductive Health Services* that individual states may bar the use of public money and public facilities for abortions.

Based in New York City, **W.H.A.M!** worked closely with **ACT UP** and used direct action tactics, disrupted the confirmation hearings of Supreme Court Justice David Souter and distributed and plastered “pro-choice” posters and literature on surfaces though out New York area.

In 1989 members of **W.H.A.M!** and **ACT UP** took part in a controversial action at Saint Patrick's Cathedral to protest the church's position on homosexuality, safe-sex education and the use of condoms. **W.H.A.M!** formed two additional activist groups, the *New York Clinic Defense Task Force* and the *Church Ladies for Choice*.



By 1991 the organization became famous for draping the **Statue of Liberty** with a “pro-choice banner” (with the help of a loaned helicopter) the same year Matuschka--- a New York artist and former model--- recently diagnosed with breast cancer, joined the group.

In 1991, while undergoing chemotherapy Matuschka worked closely with Dr. Susan Shaw, a prominent member of **W.H.A.M!** to form *The Breast Cancer Action*

Movement (B.A.M!) in an effort to bring greater awareness to the ‘breast cancer epidemic’. Together they designed a series of *Breast Cancer Awareness* posters that **WHAMMERS!** would plaster on buildings, trucks and barricades in the New York area. Soon numerous ‘alternative’ publications published these images and other essays Matuschka wrote concerning a disease which claimed 400,000 women a year while receiving little press. **W.H.A.M!** effectively

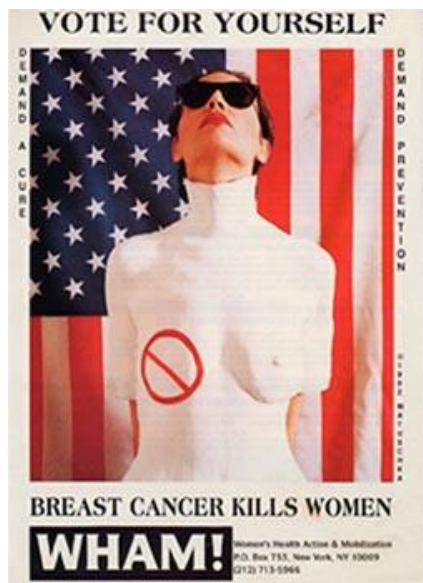


followed Act Up's "act" in achieving support from sponsors, rallying people and patients diagnosed with breast cancer into action and focusing on breast cancer prevention.

In 1992 *Fox Five News* began following the group and was the first mainstream media to air **W.H.A.M!**'S breast cancer campaign using these posters in demonstrations and actions for the next two years.

1993 And the Turning Point at the Snapple Stand

In 1992, (which many consider an important election year), **W.H.A.M!** sponsored Matuschka's poster "*Vote for Yourself*" as a glossy eye-catching poster to be distributed nationally. **WHAMMERS** plastered this political poster at dozens of breast cancer rallies and demonstrations



throughout the greater New York area while the image was published world-wide.

In May of 1993, **W.H.A.M!** sent Matuschka to *The National Breast Cancer Convention* held in Washington D.C. with a suitcase of these posters to represent the group and network with activists, scientists, advocates, and breast cancer survivors. Six hundred attendees denoting dozens of grass roots organizations and larger conglomerates (such as N.O.W. and NABCO) would convene at the Rotunda for the largest, most organized and publicized breast cancer event yet organized. Dr. Susan Love, a prominent advocate of breast cancer research, and regarded as one of the most

respected [women's health](#) specialists in the country, was the key note speaker. Six hundred national activists signed up to network and table at this three-day convention. Many would sell breast cancer memorabilia and hand out pamphlets. Matuschka would set up her poster booth to display, distribute and sell **W.H.A.M!**'s posters and literature. Her bold 'set up' was both welcomed and condemned as she was the only one offering graphic images that depicted symbolic imagery of women with breast cancer. Unbeknownst to her, a conspiracy against her work and **W.H.A.M!** had developed.

On the first morning of the convention, Matuschka took a ‘bathroom break’ and asked someone to watch over her table. When she returned, that person was gone along with her posters. The display had been dismantled, and the posters were now hidden under a table--- covered with a black table cloth. The organizers were determined to thwart **W.H.A.M.’s!** efforts and contribution to the cause. Matuschka packed up and left the building.

It was an unusually blazing, sun-scorching day when Matuschka left the Rotunda and headed to one of the sprawling lawns outside the White House grounds with her suitcase of posters. There were no vending machines in sight to help relieve the many thirsty attendees. On the lawn, Matuschka noticed cartons of *Snapple* and *Dole* pineapple juice lying on the ground near three long tables. The table tops were perfect for displaying merchandise and posters, similar to the one she had just used inside. Matuschka quickly became aware that no one was setting up the *Snapple* Stand. As far as Matuschka figured, these thirst quenching drinks should be unpacked and distributed just like her posters. “This was an opportunity that could not be missed,” she wrote later in an essay. I’d be the volunteer to hand out the free bees donated by the beverage industry.”

Wheeling her poster packed suitcase over to the stacks of boxes *Dole* and *Snapple* had so generously supplied, Matuschka unpacked bottles of Ice Tea and Pineapple juice from their cardboard crates, arranged them neatly on the tables and placed several dozen of her posters alongside the free drinks. Other posters she pinned to the edge of the table. Soon a long line of thirsty advocates began to form.

“Can I give you something for this drink?” A woman asked.

“No thank you,” Matuschka responded politely, “The drinks are free, but would you like to buy a poster?”

“How much do I owe you for the ice tea?” a man asked.

“Nothing sir. Would you like to make a donation for one of these posters?”

Within a half-hour, Matuschka had quenched the thirst of 60 attendees, sold \$300 worth of merchandise and was ecstatic that her scheme had been so successful. That is, until the President of the Convention, who had kicked her out of the Rotunda an hour earlier, returned to evict her once again.

But Matuschka was on a roll, had gathered support and her success with poster sales (proving her form of activism had demand) ---, in addition to the comments individuals made about the work--- convinced her that other groups and individuals would be interested in what she and

W.H.A.M! had to offer. Told to scram, she packed up her wares once again and left the refreshment stand, undeterred.

The following morning 600 advocates and attendees took their seats in the Great Conference Hall to hear Dr. Susan Love speak. This was the last day of the convention--- the grand finale--- and the auditorium was packed. Tabling was still occurring in the crowded corridors where many continued selling and distributing various forms of breast cancer awareness materials and trinkets. Matuschka knew this was her last chance to be seen and chose not to take her appointed seat in the auditorium. Instead she made a sandwich board for her posters, mounted it to her torso, draped a satchel of rolled posters over her shoulder, and began her march. She strutted through the hallways and down the aisles of the theatre, much like a vendor selling popcorn in a circus for the next thirty minutes.

Matuschka felt if she couldn't sell or display her work (as others did on the provided tables) she would wear them. This time the president of the convention--- who had previously dismantled her display and evicted her from the *Snapple Stand*--- could do nothing about Matuschka's performance stunt, as she herself, was at the podium giving a speech.

Susan Ferraro, a writer, who was covering the convention for *The New York Times* spotted Matuschka wearing *Vote for Yourself* on the front and back of her torso. Ms. Ferraro came over to Matuschka, introduced herself, and then interviewed the artist for the article she would title *The Politics of Breast Cancer*.



*Activists like Matuschka -- a tall, striking artist in New York -- set out to shock. As a member of a small group called **W.H.A.M!** (Women's Health Action and Mobilization), Matuschka makes art of her mastectomy with poster-size, one-breasted self-portraits that force people to see what cancer does. Though some of her mainstream sisters are discomforted by the graphic images, they admire her determination. As she says, "You can't look away anymore."*

The New York Times decided to run Ms. Ferraro's article as a feature story for their Sunday August 15th edition and needed an image for their cover. They selected Matuschka's photo, *Beauty out of Damage* (showing the artist's mastectomy scar), a decision that turned out to be controversial and spark debate about the treatment, awareness and depiction of breast cancer throughout the world. This historical publishing decision not only made headline news but ended the era of silence, shame, and concealment for millions of women who could now express themselves in ways never seen or heard of before. Breast Cancer advocates and activists were here to stay and the breast cancer movement had been officially launched. Matuschka and **W.H.A.M!** had made history.

A few days before the New York Times hit the stand, Matuschka called her father who lived in New Jersey. His wife, being the artists' mother, had been mis-diagnosed and had succumbed to the disease in 1968 when she was 41, leaving him a widow with four young children. Breast Cancer was a delicate issue.

"Dad, do you get *The New York Times*?"

"Only on Sundays."

"Well are you going to get it this Sunday?"

"Is there something you want me to see?" he wondered.

"I'm going to be on the cover of the magazine section."

"Is it about your condition?"

"Well I'm not running for President."

"They're going to show you looking good and not sick. Right? It's like a make-over?"

"Dad, it's an honest picture."

Prior to *The New York Times* historical publishing decision Matuschka's portfolio of rejection slips had been substantial. After August 15th, 1993 Matuschka's breast cancer images were some



of the most published photos in the world. *Beauty out of Damage* yielded 13 awards and citations, was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and was included in LIFES TRIBUTE: *One Hundred Photographs that Changed the World* in 2003 and again in 2011. **W.H.A.M!** and Matuschka would be to breast cancer, as what **ACT UP** and Larry Kramer had done for AIDS.