

PRINCIPLE

BALANCE ART AND MESSAGE

Art seeks to explore deep questions. Politics demands a clear direction and message. The right balance can move both hearts and minds.

CONTRIBUTED BY

Andrew Boyd

Andrew Boyd is an author, humorist and long-time veteran of creative campaigns for social change. He is Wrangler-in-Chief Emeritus at Beautiful Trouble.

Kevin Buckland

Kevin Buckland is an artist, activist organizer and the "Arts Ambassador" for the grassroots global network 350.org. Responding to the call to "make this movement as beautiful as the planet we are fighting to save," he employs comedy, tragedy, farce, satire, and a great deal of cardboard in his attempts to end empire and globalize justice.

Nadine Bloch

Nadine Bloch is currently Training Director for Beautiful Trouble, as well as an artist, political organizer, direct action trainer, and puppetista.

"ART INVITES US TO THINK RATHER THAN TELLING US WHAT TO THINK."

"Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it."

—Bertolt Brecht

"Political art." Easy to say, harder to do. Art seeks to explore the deep questions. Politics demands a clear direction and message. That's a tough tension to manage. Sometimes quick gimmicks are called for; sometimes it pays to dig deeper — in our craft and in ourselves — to mobilize the unique powers of art.

"If I could tell you what it meant," Martha Graham once said, "there would be no point in dancing it." Unlike politics, which tends toward plain prose in endless repetition, art goes beyond explicit meanings to connect with that more elusive, soulful dimension of being human — a realm which must be engaged if we are to truly change the world (see: THEORY: Ethical spectacle).

Song has its own special powers. Singing together builds emotional ties and harmonies — literally and figuratively. Song makes us feel powerful and united in a way nothing else can. During the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1989, the Estonian liberation movement used the country's traditional songs in resistance work. At one juncture, a

POTENTIAL RISKS

Creative communication can get lots of attention — so make sure to connect that attention to your desired action. Give people the tools to act on your issue, even if it's just a URL, a #hashtag, or a phone number.

RELATED TOOLS

Stories

- 99% Bat Signal
- Battle in Seattle
- Bicycle rally for peace
- Billionaires for Bush
- Conflict Kitchen
- Every Heartbeat Counts
- Ghana ThinkTank
- Lysistrata Project

full quarter of the country's population sang together in the streets, facing down Soviet tanks.

Consider the power of Picasso's Guernica. A striking and visceral canvas painted in protest of the first aerial bombing of civilians, its aura as a global symbol of the senseless devastation of war was still strong enough seventy years later that the Bush Administration felt compelled to throw a cloth over a tapestry copy of it when Colin Powell spoke at the UN pushing for war with Iraq. Images from Guernica continue to resurface in anti-war marches the world over.

Advertising is the dominant art form of capitalism, as well as a science of messaging. In the late 1980's Gran Fury, an AIDS activist art collective, used the artistic and messaging power of graphics to bring the AIDS epidemic front and center and move a critical social conversation in a direction it had never gone before. Their "Kissing Doesn't Kill: Greed and Indifference Do" bus ads featuring same- and mixed-sex couples kissing were not only explicit in their visual content, but beautiful, hip, emotive, and evocative.

Art invites us to think rather than telling us what to think. This is one of its great powers, and if you make your art accessible and beautiful enough, people will want to follow where it goes. And because they themselves are deciding where to go with it, they'll more easily connect it to their own experience.

The right balance of art and message can move both hearts and minds. Striking this balance, however, can be difficult. Think about your audience and your goals. What do you want your art to achieve? Do you want to evoke sympathy? Provoke deep soul-searching? Get people to call their Senator? Art can help you do all of these things, but only when art and message are in balance. You know you've struck gold when you're able to say something so clearly that it hardly needs to be said at all, but is instead embodied in how you've said it.

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LEARN MORE

AIDS: Making Art and Raising Hell

Queer Arts

<http://www.queer-arts.org/archive/show4/forum/atkins/atkins.html>

AIDS Demo Graphics

Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston, 1990

https://books.google.com/books/about/AIDS_Demo_Graphics.html?id=L0xRAAAAMAAJ

The Singing Revolution

<https://singingrevolution.com>

- Manich Msamah
- PARK(ing) Day
- Pedestrian death puppets
- Pimp My . . . Carroça!
- Public Art Nanny Hotline
- Public Option Annie
- Pyramid of Shoes
- Standing Man
- "You'll never have a home in your f***ing life!"

Tactics

- Advanced leafleting
- Artistic vigil
- Clandestine leafleting
- Culture jamming
- Currency hacking
- Electoral guerrilla theatre
- Flash mob
- Guerrilla projection
- Human banner
- Image theatre
- Music video
- Reverse graffiti

Principles

- Brand or be branded
- Bring the issue home
- Consider your audience
- Don't dress like a protester
- Make the invisible visible
- Show, don't tell
- Stay on message
- This ain't the Sistine chapel
- Use the power of ritual

Theories

- Alienation effect
- Artivism
- Critical multiculturalism
- Cultural hegemony
- Ethical spectacle
- Expressive and instrumental actions
- Floating signifier
- Prefigurative politics
- Temporary autonomous zone
- Theatre of the Oppressed

Methodologies

- Artstorm

TAGS

Art, Communications, Language