

THEORY

PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS

By creating in the now — via visionary direct action and living our values — the future world we wish to see, we can experience for ourselves how a better world is not only necessary but possible.

CONTRIBUTED BY

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“WE CAN’T CREATE A WORLD WE HAVEN’T YET IMAGINED. BETTER IF WE’VE ALREADY TASTED IT.”

You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.”

—Buckminster Fuller

Many of us spend so much time trying to stop bad things from happening that we rarely take the time to sketch out how things could be better, let alone actually go out and create a little slice of the future we want to live in. Prefigurative interventions seek to address that imbalance.

The lunch counter sit-ins of the US civil rights movement are frequently referenced as defiant, courageous, and ultimately successful acts of resistance against America’s Jim Crow-era apartheid. They were certainly that, but they were also profoundly prefigurative. The students’ actions — mixed-race groups of people violating the law by sitting at lunch counters and demanding to be served — foreshadowed victory and prefigured the world they wanted to live in: They were enacting the integration they wanted.

Pranks, art interventions, tactical media, alternative festivals, and temporary communities, even electoral guerrilla theatre, can also be effective ways to prefigure the world we want to live in.

Prefigurative interventions are direct actions sited at the point of assumption — where beliefs are made and unmade, and the limits of the possible can be stretched (see: METHODOLOGY: Points of intervention). The goal of a prefigurative intervention is twofold: to offer a compelling glimpse of a possible and better future, and also — slyly or baldly — to point up the poverty of imagination of the world we actually do live in.

POTENTIAL RISKS

When playing with utopian visions, it’s easy to get carried away. The idea is not to paint a pretty picture full of rainbows and unicorns, but to put forward a fragment of something visionary that lies just beyond the realm of the possible — and in such a way that your action calls out the vested interests making it impossible. In sum, it has got to make sense. Don’t go proposing replacing a cash-and-credit economy with a hug-and-kiss economy and think that’ll demonstrate how the CEOs are keeping us all from being happy.

RELATED TOOLS

Stories

- 99% Bat Signal
- Barbie Liberation Organization
- Battle in Seattle
- Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army
- Conflict Kitchen
- Daycare Centre Sit-In
- Dow Chemical Apologizes for

Like the occupation of Tahrir Square in Egypt and the encampments in public squares across Spain by the Indignados movement, the Occupy (see: STORY: Occupy Wall Street) encampments across the world are crucibles of prefigurative intervention, providing a space for people to create in microcosm the communitarian and democratic world they want to bring into being. Likewise, the Burning Man art festival works as a temporary autonomous zone where people can live out values, test out ideas and experiment with the future in real time.

Monthly Critical Mass bike rides prefigure future cities in which bicycles actually hold their own as traffic. Or PARK(ing) Day, in which people in cities across the country put a day's worth of coins into a parking meter and transform their parking space into a mini-park or jazz lounge or tiny public swimming pool, prefigure a greening of urban space and a reclaimed commons.

The Oil Enforcement Agency was a 2006 theatrical action campaign in which environmental activists — complete with SWAT-team-like caps and badges, posed as agents of a government agency — one that didn't exist, but should have. Agents ticketed SUVs, impounded fuel-inefficient vehicles at auto shows, and generally modelled a future in which government took climate change seriously.

If hope truly is a muscle that we build by exercising, then interventions that prefigure the world we want to live in — whether by prophetic acts of civil disobedience, the formation of alternative communities or the staging of prankish provocations — are one of the best ways to work that muscle.

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LEARN MORE

Don't Wait for the Revolution, Live It

Andrew Boyd, Yes Magazine, 2013

<http://www.yesmagazine.org/issues/love-and-the-apocalypse/don-t-wait-for-the-revolution-live-it-andrew-boyd>

Should We Fight the System or Be the Change?

Mark Engler and Paul Engler, Waging Nonviolence, 2014

<http://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/fight-system-change/>

Beautiful Solutions: A Toolbox for the Future

<http://beautifulsolutions.info>

Can Prefigurative Politics Replace Political Strategy?

Berkeley Journal of Sociology, 2014

<http://berkeleyjournal.org/2014/10/can-prefigurative-politics-replace-political-strategy/>

Bhopal

- Every Heartbeat Counts
- Harry Potter Alliance
- Miniskirt March
- Occupy Wall Street
- PARK(ing) Day
- Pimp My . . . Carroça!
- Reclaim the Streets
- Replacing Cops with Mimes
- Santa Claus Army
- Schools of Struggle
- Streets Into Gardens
- The Salt March

Tactics

- Citizen's arrest
- Civil disobedience
- Critical mass
- Cultural disobedience
- Distributed action
- Electoral guerrilla theatre
- Encryption
- Eviction blockade
- General strike
- Identity correction
- Nonviolent search and seizure
- Public art intervention
- Storytelling
- Subversive travel

Principles

- Balance art and message
- Be the change you want to see in the world
- Brand or be branded
- Breakfast is persuasive
- Change is the only constant
- Consensus is a means, not an end
- Foster safer spaces
- Hope is a muscle
- Joy is a revolutionary force
- Kill them with kindness
- Lead with sympathetic characters
- Make the invisible visible
- Reframe the issue
- Seek common ground
- Shame the authorities by doing their job
- Show, don't tell

- The price of a successful attack is a constructive alternative
- Think narratively
- Turn the tables
- Use organizing strategies that scale
- Use your cultural assets
- Use your radical fringe to shift the Overton window
- Would you like some structure with your momentum?

Theories

- Action logic
- Capitalism
- Commodity fetishism
- Comunalidad (communality)
- Cultural hegemony
- Debt revolt
- Direct action
- Expressive and instrumental actions
- Floating signifier
- Framing
- Glitch feminism
- Hamoq and hamas
- Memes
- New Pan-Afrikanism
- Participatory democracy
- Pedagogy of the Oppressed
- People's "Shock Doctrine"
- Revolutionary reform
- Strategic nonviolence
- Temporary autonomous zone
- The commons

Methodologies

- Action star
- Baraza
- Points of intervention
- SMART objectives
- Theory of change

TAGS

Action design, Campaign strategy, Community building, Direct action