The Art of Activism

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There is a problem.

You know the problem is a BIG problem. It's very serious and very urgent.

(It doesn't matter what this problem is. God knows there are a lot of problems in the world. Whatever problem popped into your mind you can use for the purposes of this example. Let's continue.)

Now that you are aware of such a big, serious, and urgent problem what is the next step? Of course, you want to_ do something about it!_

Perfect. Let's look at what just happened in our example. We can use this equation:

YOU + AWARENESS = CHANGE

You were just reading, then you thought about a problem, and now you are motivated to take action.

So, following logic, the inverse of the equation must be true:

CHANGE = PEOPLE + AWARENESS

If we want to create change, and there is no change happening, what do we do? First we create awareness. We study the problem, and devise ways to effectively communicate this information as far and wide as possible. When we spread this information, people become aware and become motivated. They gather together and create a movement, and that movement creates change. That change results in more motivation, which results in more change. Eventually we create a near perpetual motion machine that cycles back and forth between motivation and change, all fueled with information.

And this is how change happens.

At least, this is one fairly common approach among activists. And it makes sense when you understand cultural change as being rooted in enlightenment and rationality: people, armed with facts, reasoning out their ideas through informed discussion all in the service of a larger truth.

Although it makes some sense, unfortunately, we don't believe change works this way. Raising awareness is a far step from creating change. If only it were so simple.

For another approach we look to the arts.

Creativity can be described as making combinations. Because there are no truly new ideas, only new combinations of ideas that came before, creative people are always examining the world and making connections. Out of those connections and combinations of ideas, perspectives, and artistic materials a creative project can be born.

How might an artist handle our sample problem?

They could take a technique they're familiar with, let's say experimental video, and combine it with a problem, say shrinking glaciers, and create a project. An experimental video climate crisis project. Sounds like an interesting political artwork, right?

Let's try it again. An artist could take a technique like, say just for example, charcoal drawing. Then combine that with a topic like the 2004 Abu Ghraib torture scandal. Boom! You've got a political artwork: the Abu Ghraib Prison Torture drawing. Or combine data visualization and economic inequality and - presto - you have a creative economic inequality data visualization project.

As you can see, this method is a highly useful technique in generating project ideas for interesting art works about political events. Unfortunately we don't believe this changes much of anything either. Making artwork *about* politics is not the same as making art that *works politically*. The former aims to, again, raise awareness, while the latter is directed toward changing the world.

Both of our examples illustrate a common approach to social change politics because raising awareness makes intuitive sense to someone trained in political science, policy work, performance, or plastic arts. However, this is the same intuition that tells you, when you notice your arm has caught fire, to wave it around and run. In your past experience, waving your arm causes whatever is on it to fly off. If that doesn't work, running away is an excellent second option. But when your arm is on fire these techniques, as much as they make intuitive sense, don't put out the fire. This is why we learn to "Stop, Drop and Roll", because the most effective reaction is not always the most intuitive. We need to re-think what makes sense.

Let's go back to the 15 February, 2003. In New York City more than a million people are overflowing the streets to protest the impending United States invasion of Iraq. They are joined by an unprecedented ten million protestors around the world in the largest, collective anti-war statement of all time: "The World Says No To War." Thousands of activists have organized for months in order to bring this message to the awareness of the people and leaders of the world. The result? The protest is covered for a day or two in the

mass media, President George W. Bush's responds: "Democracy's a beautiful thing…people are allowed to express their opinion, and I welcome people's right to say what they believe," and a little over a month later, the US invades Iraq, beginning what will be an eight year occupation.

Fast forward to 6 August 2005. Cindy Sheehan, an American mother who has lost her son in the Iraq war, sets up a small, makeshift camp just outside the ranch in Crawford, Texas (population 711) where President Bush is vacationing. Surrounded by white, wooden crosses representing the soldiers killed in Iraq, and under a banner which reads "Bush, Talk to Cindy," she announces her intention to stay at the side of the road until the President meets with her to explain why her son, Army Specialist Casey Sheehan, was sent to war. Cindy Sheehan's vigil strikes a resonant chord with a war-weary public and the media cover the unfolding drama for weeks. Over the next few months, public opinion swings from a majority supporting the war to a majority against the war. Camp Casey was a sincere vigil of a grieving mother, but it was also an effective performance well tuned to symbols of private grief and official indifference, cultural narratives about the human costs of war, and the mass media's voracious appetite for the dramatic and the spectacular.

It is artistic activism. And it worked.

Why did it work?

Humor us and try a little exercise. Take a short break from reading and recall

the moment you decided to become engaged. Remember the first time you realized the world needed changing, and you felt the stirrings within you to be part of that change.

Now return to that time and place in your mind.

Where were you and who was around you? What do you see? hear? smell?

What were you feeling at that time?

Take a little more time to feel it. Close your eyes and experience it again.

Was your transformative experience the time when you:

1. Read a flyer?
2. Studied a policy report?
3. Attended an academic lecture?
4. Signed a petition?

Likely, it was none of these things. Yet this is how activists often approach others when trying to convince people to step off the curb

of indifference and join them in the streets. We approach strangers at their doorstep with a clipboard, stuff a fact-filled flyer in their hand (composed in tiny type to jam in as many facts as possible), or we invite them to public forums where they can hear The Truth from experts. We dump overwhelming amounts of often depressing information about the world on them, and then expect them to be energized and excited to join us.

This is routine activist practice.

It is also not very effective.

We work with lots of seasoned activists and when we ask them to recall what triggered their sense of injustice and prompted them to want to change the world, they invariably describe powerful, personal, and emotional experiences. You probably felt this too. They are moments you can usually still feel and see as if it happened yesterday. Politicization is an *affective* experience. Activism that aims to build a movement purely through rational argument and factual discourse is ineffectual because it runs counter to our own experiences of engagement. It is playing to the wrong key.

Activists are trained to think critically about the world and make a cogent case for how it could be different. We provide people with evidence - facts, figures and other information - that will lead them to interpret reality as it really is and, hopefully, see the world as we do. This is good; a reflective and reasoning public supplied with factual information is the basis for a thoughtful democracy. It is also naïve. A nation of considered thinkers or a republic of rationality may be our ideal of politics, but the practice of effective politics resembles little of this. From our own histories we know politics is not a purely cognitive affair, yet we consistently approach others whom we want to join us with black and white arguments and documented facts. Somewhere, right now, there is a canvasser on the street mechanically repeating a reasoned argument why the person in front of them should sign their petition. And they are being ignored.

We are moved to become involved with politics for what are often non-rational, emotional, and personal reasons. We make sense of our world through things like images, sounds and narrative as much, if not more, than we do through facts and figures. None of this is to say that people's rationality should be ignored, that facts don't matter, or that the truth is relative. It's just that we are never going to get people to read our facts or understand the truth, unless they desire to read the facts and are attracted to the truth in the first place.

This is where the art of activism comes in.

There is an art to every practice, activism included. It's what distinguishes the innovative from the routine, the elegant from the mundane. One thing that can help the "art of activism" is applying an artistic aesthetic tactically, strategically, and organizationally. Throughout history, the most effective political actors have married the arts with campaigns for social change. While Martin Luther King Jr. is now largely remembered for his example of moral courage, social movement historian Doug McAdam's estimation of King's "genius for strategic dramaturgy," or what we call tactical performance, likely better explains the success of his campaigns. From Jesus' parables to the public stage of Occupy Wall Street, working artfully makes activism effective.

Good activism is instrumental. It is activity targeted toward a discernible end. Art, on the other hand, tends not to have such a clear target. It's hard to say what art is for or against; its value often lays in showing us new perspectives and new ways to see our world. Its

effect is often subtle and hard to measure; even confusing or contradictory messages can be layered into the work. Good art, in our opinion, always contains a surplus of effect: something we can't quite describe or put our finger on, but leaves an impression upon us nonetheless.

Art is felt more than thought. This power of art to circumvent our rational minds and effect our emotions, our bodies, even our spirit, has been recognized for millennia. And has been feared for just as long. The Judeo-Christian *Bible* and the Muslim *Quran* are filled with strictures against visual depictions of all manner of things because it was believed that people would worship their own creations rather than God's; humans would be empowered at the cost of the divine. Witness the jealous God of *Exodus* when he commands Moses: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth."

Plato devoted a chapter in *The Republic* to the power of art. The philosopher's objections are many: art is merely a representation (of a representation) of reality, there is no way to judge its the utility, artists draw from imagination not experience, and so on, but Plato's criticisms culminate in his fear that art can effect its audience in a way that circumvents cognition. Watching a play or listening to a poem, the audience experiences the "pleasure and pain" of the characters in the drama. Rationally, we *know* these are merely made-up characters, fictive creations of the artist, but emotionally we *feel* as if the struggles and triumphs of these fictions are ours. Plato doesn't like this.

But we do. One of the most effective weapons in the arsenal of the powerful is knowledge. As Marx and Engels famously wrote: "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas." If we know that humans are distinguished by race, or gender, or intelligence, then we won't think of building an egalitarian society. If we know humans are innately individualistic we will not work to create a cooperative society. If we know that the world we presently love within is the only possible reality, we will not struggle to build another one. Knowledge is what determines the horizons of our imagination. This is why so much activist time and effort is expressed in critique and argument: the pamphlets, the studies, the lectures - we are trying to change what people know.

We advise another course: an end-run around what we *know* by connecting to what people see, hear, taste, touch and, most of all, feel and experience.

The power of art lies beyond simple thinking and knowing. In the past, philosophers and critics called this quality the "sublime." It's commonplace to judge a piece of art as beautiful or ugly, making these judgments based on cultural standards and personal preference. The sublime is something else: it can be beautiful but it can also be horrific; in either case it is beyond direct description, beyond measurement, beyond even comprehension — what Immanuel Kant called the "supersensible." As mystical as it, or perhaps because it is so mystical, the sublime is a powerful force because it has the ability to effect us in ways that our conscious minds can not always account for. This makes for potentially powerful politics too. The ancient Greek philosopher Longinus believed that the strength of the sublime lay not only in its capacity to provoke awe, but also in its ability to persuade. When we are effected, or rather: affected, by a piece of art we often say that it *moves* us. This motion is good for social change.

In an essay called "Poetry is Not a Luxury," the radical poet Audre Lourde writes, "I could name at least ten ideas I would have once found intolerable or incomprehensible and frightening, except as they came after dreams and poems." Art allows us to imagine things that are otherwise unimaginable. Art allows us to say things that can't be said, and give form to abstract feelings and ideas and present

them in such ways that they can be communicated with others. As Lourde continues: “Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought.” Art, if we let it, allows us to take the mundane, imperfect world we live in and combine it with radical, idealistic visions of the future. Through creative thinking we use these contrasting visions form tangible, complex plans that inspire and re-enliven our work and others to join us. It enables us to map out our goals against reality, envisioning pathways to a better world that was previously uncharted.

The problem with art, from an activist perspective, is that all this power of the sublime is wasted, sequestered safely away from politics. A painting hangs on the wall of a museum. It moves us. And then we move on, leaving that experience and its transformative power confined to its “proper” location, to be tapped only by cultural institutions seeking to increase their status or profits. In our world, the sublime is in the service of hierarchy and capitalism.

But what if we could harness the “supersensible” power of art and apply it to the world-changing potential of activism? This is what artistic activism does.

And this is what you will find in the pages of this handbook: tactics, strategies and case studies of the powerful union of arts and activism. This is not just art about politics: using social injustice and political struggle as mere subject matter, without serious thought about what the political effect might be. Nor is it only activism that uses art as window dressing: designing a better-looking poster or banner, with little concern for the affective power of art. Artistic activism is a hybrid practice combining the aesthetic, process-based approach of the arts with the instrumental, outcome focus of activism. It recognizes that in order to shift power you need to also shift perspectives, and in order to shift perspectives you need to also shift power. Artistic activism blends the affective and the effective.

A few words of warning before you leave us.

Just because the activism is artistic does not always mean that its politics are good. The Dark Side also understands, sometimes better than us, the power of artistic activism.

Turn on the television, flip through the pages of a magazine, or browse the web and you’ll see artistic activism in daily practice: images of people whose lives are transformed by the purchase of products. Advertisers are in the business of using signs, symbols and stories that tap into our dreams and nightmares in order to prompt a very particular and focused action: buying stuff. And they are very good at what they do.

When the US military bombed Baghdad at the start of the Iraq war in a demonstration of “Shock and Awe,” they were staging a deadly visual spectacle planned to have a devastating visceral impact. When George W. Bush landed on the aircraft carrier the USS Abraham Lincoln in a Navy fighter-bomber, and emerged in a flight suit to declare “Mission Accomplished” at the start of the Iraq War, it was a masterful - and deceitful - performance meant to replace his own less-than-heroic military service with the image of a warrior leader, and convince the public that his ill-conceived and executed invasion was a success. When the terrorists of Al Qaeda targeted the symbols of America’s commercial, military and political power by crashing their hijacked planes into the World Trade Center and Pentagon (only missing their third target: the White House), they were painting a picture in blood and fire meant to *move* their sympathizers and their enemies alike. And, arguably, the most successful artistic activists in history were the Nazis. Their

appropriation of powerful symbols like the swastika; their staging and documentation of pageants, marches and rallies; their use of art, sculpture and architecture; and their attention to sartorial style and acting techniques - all of these tactics were part of a larger aesthetic strategy meant to captivate, inspire and frighten the public in the service of their overall goal of racial genocide and world domination.

Artistic activism is powerful stuff. It can be used for good, and it can also be used for evil. But if we throw out any tool ever used unethically we'd have nothing left. This is why we must use artistic activism carefully and thoughtfully and continually ask ourselves if the creative process we use and the artistic actions we produce are in line with the politics we hold dear and the vision of the world we aspire to build. This isn't easy, as creativity in the service of action has been successfully employed for years to garner support for heinous political systems and the purchase of superfluous consumer goods. Many of the creative techniques that have been developed were done so specifically with these aims in mind, and contain within them the traces of these uses. We must be critical of creative activism of the past, further the practice, and employ the approach ethically today.

Artistic activism is also not meant as a replacement for other forms of activism: legal activism, political activism, or community activism. No matter how artistic our activities, there will always be a need for old-fashioned, boots-on-the-ground, knocking on doors, organizing community meetings, badgering politicians, and submitting legal challenges. A good activist, like a good carpenter, has a big toolbox and is able to select the right tool for the right job at the right time. One of these tools ought to be artistic activism. And, as with all tools, using this one will help you to see the job differently. Artistic activism is not merely a tactic that helps you be a better activist, but an entire approach - a perspective, a practice, a philosophy - that transforms activism.

The first rule of guerilla warfare is to know the terrain and use it to your advantage. The topography on which the activist fights may no longer be violent battles in the mountains of the Sierra Maestra or the jungles of Vietnam, but the lesson still applies. Today, the political landscape is one of signs and symbols, story and spectacle, where affect and emotion is as important as reason and rationality. To succeed on this battlefield we need the art of activism. And, like all art forms, artistic activism is a practice. One can't expect to paint masterfully the first time they pick up the brush and it is no different here. We encourage you to pursue the art, make room for mistakes, hone your skills, and use them to make a better world.