

Stephen Duncombe
New York University & Center for Artistic Activism, USA

Silas Harrebye
Roskilde University, Denmark

The Copenhagen Experiment:

Measuring the Relative Effectiveness of Creative vs. Conventional Forms of Activism

Executive Summary

Creative forms of activism, drawing inspiration from the arts and popular culture, and utilizing story, sign, and spectacle, have become increasingly popular, both as a practice and as an object of study. Leveraging the affective qualities of the arts and the effective capabilities of activism, the practice has been embraced by artists looking to have social impact, activists operating on an increasingly media-rich political landscape, cultural institutions seeking civic relevancy, and civic organizations looking for creative ways to engage the public and change perspective, discourse, behaviour, and/or policy. The effectiveness of creative activism, and particularly its effectiveness compared to more conventional forms of activism, however, has been more an article of faith than an assertion of fact.

While there has been a great deal of descriptive and theoretical work done on creative activism, what is missing is an evidence-based, empirical study of the variable impact of creative vs. conventional forms of activism on a public audience in terms of ideas, ideals, and actions. To address this knowledge gap the authors, both of whom are experienced creative activists as well as academic researchers, designed and staged The Copenhagen Experiment, the first ever public experiment on the comparative effect and affect of artistic activism vs. more conventional forms of activist interventions.

Over the course of three days in 2018, the authors and their research team mounted multiple activist interventions around a current environmental issue on a popular and well-traveled bridge in the middle of Copenhagen, Denmark. Each day a conventional activist intervention: public speaking, petitioning, or flyering, was paired with a “creative” way of accomplishing the same task in a classic A/B experimental model. Volunteer observers watched interactions and took notes, interviewers stopped passersby to ask their opinions and gather contact information, a camera person filmed the interactions to capture micro-dynamics and general movement patterns, and a survey was sent out two weeks later to inquire about recall and resulting action. The data for our analysis included 108 spot interviews, 30 observation sheets, petition and pamphlet tallies, hours of film footage of the events, and 25 follow-up survey responses.

Our design allowed us to analyse differences and similarities on several levels relating to attention, thought, feeling, action, and memory. We found that a creative approach was more effective than conventional means at delivering upon traditional advocacy objectives like awareness, engagement, and receptiveness. In addition, the affective responses of most of those we interviewed and observed were decidedly more positive towards the creative interventions than the conventional methods. Creative activism also proved to be more memorable, and result in more follow-up actions on the issues.

Specific findings include:

- Conventional activist methods of approaching individuals to talk to them about an issue, gather signatures, or receive a flyer are, in general, not positively perceived or received.
- Words and phrases used by respondents to describe the different forms of interventions are markedly different. “Annoying,” “lecturing,” “predictable,” and “unnoticeable” were frequently used to describe our conventional forms of activist intervention. Words like “funny,” “different,” “surprising,” and “captivating” were used to describe the creative interventions.
- The novelty, surprise, humor, and “productive confusion” of creative forms of activism disrupted people’s everyday automatic way of thinking about issues and activism, attracting attention, stimulating curiosity, and creating openings for new social interactions and political impressions.
- In nearly every quantitative measure we employed: observations of interest, number of signatures gained on a petition, the quantity and speed of flyers handed out, the creative approach proved more successful than the conventional one in attaining the desired objectives.
- Qualitative measures suggested a more positive immediate reception of creative forms of activism. Creative interventions also tended to be recalled more vividly, with better informational retention, and lead to more follow-up actions than conventional forms of engagement.

The Copenhagen Experiment has limitations due to the cultural specificity of its urban setting in an European social democracy. Furthermore, the experiment only tested the relative effectiveness of creative vs. conventional forms of activism in delivering very instrumental and immediate activist objectives, and not what creative forms of intervention may do best: shift perspectives and stimulate imaginations. A future study will include staging an experiment in different demographic, geographic and political contexts, and applying a wider definition of artistic activism and its impact.

Nonetheless, the empirical data generated by this experiment points decisively to the conclusion that creative forms of street activism are more effective, in part because they are more affective, than conventional tactics. This is an important conclusion for social actors seeking to maximize the impact of civic engagement in public spaces, as well as scholars looking to understand the dynamics of effective and affective activism.

With The Copenhagen Experiment we have also shown that the relative effect and affect of creative activism can be measured. We hope this challenges, and inspires, agents in the field to apply rigor in evaluating the effective and affective impact of even the most creative of activist interventions.

For Full Research Report, including pictures, methodological appendix and bibliography, please download pdf [here](#).