



Ethical Spectacle

IN SUM

To be politically effective, activists need to engage in spectacle. By keeping to certain principles, our spectacles can be ethical, emancipatory and faithful to reality.

ORIGINS

Andrew Boyd (p.433)

Stephen Duncombe (p.428)

PRACTITIONERS

Situationists (p.433)

Abbie Hoffman / Yippies (p.428)

Zapatistas (p.428)

Reclaim the Streets (p.428)

Critical Mass (p.428)

Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (p.428)

Yes Men (p.428)

Greenpeace (p.428)

Billionaires for Bush (p.428)

CONTRIBUTED BY

Stephen Duncombe

The concept of ethical spectacle offers a way of thinking about the tactical and strategic use of signs, symbols, myths and fantasies to advance progressive, democratic goals. First introduced in a 2004 article by Andrew Boyd and Stephen Duncombe and later expanded in Duncombe's 2007 book *Dream*, the theory's premises are:

1. that politics is as much an affair of desire and fantasy as it is reason and rationality
2. that we live in an intensely mediated age (what Situationist Guy Debord called the "Society of the Spectacle")
3. that in order to be politically effective, activists need to enter the realm of spectacle
4. that spectacular interventions have the potential to be both ethical and emancipatory.

An ethical spectacle is a symbolic action that seeks to shift the political culture towards more progressive values. An ethical spectacle should strive to be:

Participatory: Seeking to empower participants and spectators alike, with organizers acting as facilitators.

Open: Responsive and adaptive to shifting contexts and the



Flower Power, 1967, The Washington Evening Star photo by Bernie Boston.

ideas of participants.

Transparent: Engaging the imagination of spectators without seeking to trick or deceive.

Realistic: Using fantasy to illuminate and dramatize real-world power dynamics and social relations that otherwise tend to remain hidden in plain sight.

Utopian: Celebrating the impossible -- and therefore helping to make the impossible possible.



The theatrical campaigns of the Zapatistas sparked a national and global solidarity movement.

Progressives tend to distrust anything that smacks of propagand-

da or marketing: it's what the other side does. We tend to believe that proclaiming the naked Truth is enough: "ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." But waiting for the truth to set us free is lazy politics. The truth does not reveal itself by virtue of being the truth: it must be told, and told well. It must have stories woven around it, works of art made about it; it must be communicated in new and compelling ways that can be passed from person to person, even if this requires flights of fancy and new mythologies. The argument here is not for a progressive movement that deceives or cheapens its message, but rather for a propaganda of the truth. This is the work of ethical spectacle.

FURTHER READING

Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy, 2007, New Press

<http://www.stephenduncombe.com/dreampolitik/>

The Manufacture of Dissent: What the Left Can Learn from Las Vegas, by Andrew Boyd and Stephen Duncombe, Journal of Aesthetics and Protest - Volume 1, Issue 3.

<http://andrewboyd.com/the-manufacture-of-dissent-what-the-left-can-learn-from-las-vegas/>

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THEORIES

Society of the Spectacle (p.341)

TACTICS

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PRINCIPLES

Be the Ethical Prankster (p.134)

Make the Invisible Visible (p.139)

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All Power to the Imagination (p.148)

Vacillate Between Real & Symbolic (and be OK with it) (p.139)

Sell a Dream/Ideal (p.145)

Don't Turn the Spectator into the Enemy (p.148)

Be Expressive & Instrumental, But

Don't Confuse the Two (p.145)



TACTIC:

Flash Mob

COMMON USES

To create a shared moment of random kindness and senseless beauty, to organize a show of dissent on short notice, to quickly replicate a successful tactic in a dispersed yet coordinated way.

PRACTITIONERS

Improv Everywhere (p.433)

Critical Mass (p.428)

The April 6th Movement (p.428)

Newmindspace (p.428)

Adbusters (p.428)

FURTHER READING

<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/flash-mob>

CONTRIBUTED BY

Dave Mitchell (p.433)

Andrew Boyd (p.428)

At a pre-arranged hour, in response to a widely circulated twitter message, hundreds of grinning strangers show up on Wall Street, armed with pillows, to demand their bail-out. Feathered chaos ensues.

Flash mobs began in 2003 as a form of participatory performance art, with groups of people using email, blogs, text messages and twitter to arrange to meet and perform some kind of playful activity in a public location. More recently, activists have begun to harness the potential of flash mobs for organizing spontaneous mass actions on short notice.

The understanding of “flash mobs” that has filtered into popular culture is generally limited to surprise choreographed dance routines performed in public. But for organizing purposes, these carefully choreo-



Pillow fight on Wall Street, 2009. Organized by Newmindspace. Message for event read: 'Bring a pillow to Wall St & Broad St at 3:00pm. Dress in business suits, demand your bailout.'

graphed stunts are better described as “guerrilla” than “flash.” The unrehearsed, spontaneous, contagious and dispersed mass action that constitutes a flash mob has its own unique advantages, and requires a different set of organizing principles.

Flash mobs have become a powerful vehicle for political protest, particularly under repressive condi-

tions. In the midst of a harsh crackdown on protests in Belarus in 2011, for instance, dissidents calling themselves “Revolution through the Social Network” began organizing impromptu demonstrations where protesters would simply gather in public spaces and clap their hands in unison. The result was the bewildering sight of secret police brutally arresting people for the simple act of clapping their hands -- a powerful challenge to an increasingly irrational regime.¹

The overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt also involved flash mob-like tactics, with protesters gathering in alleys and other protected spaces for safety before moving into the streets in larger and larger numbers. Blogger Patrick Meier explains the innovative thinking behind this approach:

“Starting small and away from the main protests is a safe way to pool protesters together. It’s also about creating an itera-

tive approach to a ‘strength in numbers’ dynamic. As more people crowd the smaller streets, this gives a sense of momentum and confidence. Starting in alleyways localizes the initiative. People are likely neighbors and join because they see their friend or sister out in the street.”²

Another example of effective use of the flash mob tactic is the “UK Uncut” (and later the “US Uncut”) phenomenon. In October 2010, one week after



From the “How to Protest Intelligently” pamphlet circulated in Egypt in January 2011.

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TACTICS

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Orange Alternative (p.341)

UK & US Uncut (p.341)

the British government announced massive cuts to public services, 70 people occupied a Vodaphone store in London to draw attention to the company's record of unpaid taxes, publicizing the event on Twitter with the hash tag #ukuncut. The idea quickly went viral: within three days, over 30 Vodaphone stores had been shut down around the country by flash mobs.

Flashmobbers have only begun to tap the potential for dispersed, coordinated action in this age of

social networking. As Micah White writes in *Adbusters*:

“Fun, easy to organize, and resistant to both infiltration and preemption because of their friend-to-friend network topology, flash mobs are positioned to be the next popular tactic with revolutionary potential. . . . With flash mobs, activists have the potential to swarm capitalism globally.”³

PRINCIPLES

at work

Simple Rules Can Have Grand Results (p.134)

OTHER PRINCIPLES AT WORK:

Make It Fun (p.134)

Expand the Drum Circle (p.139)

Enable, Don't Command (p.139)

Make Everyday Acts Subversive (p.139)

If Protest is Illegal, Make Daily

Life Protest (p.139)

Be Expressive & Instrumental, But

Don't Confuse the Two (p.139)

SIMPLE RULES CAN HAVE GRAND RESULTS: Whether it's a mass pillow-fight (bring a pillow, hit anyone else carrying a pillow), or a bank shut-down (get in line, ask the teller you'd like to withdraw your entire account balance in pennies, be disarmingly polite), the invitation to participate in a flash mob is easy to share, but when multiplied by tens or hundreds of people, leads to a grand outcome.

¹“Dozens arrested in Belarus ‘clapping’ protest,” *Al Jazeera English*. July 3, 2011.

²“Civil Resistance Tactics Used in Egypt's Revolution,” <http://irevolution.net/2011/02/27/tactics-egypt-revolution-jan25/>

³ Micah White, “To the barricades,” *Adbusters* 94, March/April 2011.



CASE STUDY:

Florida Modern Slavery Museum

WHEN

2010 – present

WHERE

Exhibit has toured from Florida
Florida to Massachusetts

PRACTITIONERS

Coalition of Immokalee Workers (p.433)

Student/Farmworker Alliance (p.428)

Interfaith Action of Southwest Florida (p.432)

Just Harvest USA (p.428)

FURTHER READING

<http://ciw-online.org/museum/index.html>

CONTRIBUTED BY

Coalition of Immokalee Workers

In December 2008, farm labor contractors Cesar and Geovanni Navarrete were each sentenced to 12 years in prison for their part in what U.S. Attorney Doug Molloy called “slavery, plain and simple.” According to the Justice Department, the employers “pleaded guilty to beating, threatening, restraining, and locking workers in trucks to force them to work as agricultural laborers... [They] were accused of paying the workers minimal wages and driving the workers into debt, while simultaneously threatening physical harm if the workers left their employment before their debts had been repaid to the Navarrete family.”

Although shocking in its details, the Navarrete case was simply the latest link in a long, unbroken chain of exploitation – including forced

labor – in Florida’s fields. It was the seventh farm labor operation to be prosecuted for servitude in the state in the past decade, cases involving well over 1,000 workers and more than a dozen employers in total. The federal government has since initiated two additional prosecutions, bringing the total to nine as of 2011.

Even setting aside forced labor,



A man tours the inside of the box truck that houses the Florida Modern Slavery Museum. Photo courtesy of Fritz Myer.

farm work in the U.S. still offers the worst combination of sub-poverty wages, dangerous, back-breaking working conditions, and lack of fundamental labor protections. In this context of structural poverty and powerlessness, extreme forms of abuse such as forced labor are able to take root and flourish. However these cases are reflective of the impunity and exploitation that is rampant throughout the agricultural sector. In other words, modern-day slavery does not take place in a vacuum, nor is it an inevitable feature of our food system.

To highlight these abuses and to identify their causes and solution, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers – a community-based farmworker organization – decided in 2010 to create the Florida Modern-Day Slavery Museum. The mobile museum consists of a cargo truck carefully outfitted as a replica of the trucks involved in the Navarrete case and a collection of displays



The Florida Modern Slavery Museum is exhibited on the National Mall, Washington, D.C., June 2010. Photo courtesy of Fritz Myer.

on the history and evolution of slavery in Florida over the past four hundred years. The multimedia exhibits were developed in consultation with workers who have escaped from forced labor operations, as well as leading academic authorities on slavery and labor history in Florida.

With a team of farmworker and ally docents, the museum toured Florida intensively – visiting churches, schools, universities and community centers – for six weeks in the lead-up to the Coalition of Immokalee Workers’ three-day Farm-

worker Freedom March in 2010.

Peoples' reactions to the museum were so overwhelmingly positive and such a buzz was generated that the CIW later decided to tour outside of Florida to cities throughout the Southeast and Northeast,

including a stop on the National Mall in Washington, DC. In March 2011, former President Jimmy Carter himself visited the museum in Atlanta, Georgia. Approximately 10,000 people have toured the museum since its creation.

WHY IT WORKED

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers closely links education and action in its work. The last panel of the museum highlighted the ongoing Campaign for Fair Food as a systemic solution to the problem of farmworker exploitation. And since the Florida tour occurred during the lead-up to a major mobilization, docents were able to extend countless personal invitations for museum-goers (i.e., grocery shoppers) to join the three-day march to the corporate headquarters of Publix Super Markets, one of the CIW's main campaign targets. The museum was not only an educational tool but an organizing tool, reminding attendees of their own capacity for social change and the indispensable role they could play alongside farmworkers in transforming the food system.

TACTIC used

Public Art (p.341)

PUBLIC ART: The museum was not a “work of art” in the conventional sense of the term, but it did transform both the public spaces it inhabited and the people who viewed it. Through a host of different media and creative displays -- the highlight of which was the careful re-creation of the Naverrete operation inside the truck itself -- the museum was able to reach viewers at a visceral level.

SHOW DON'T TELL: It is often very difficult for people to accept that modern-day slavery is a systemic problem facing U.S. agriculture. The thought that the tomato topping your hamburger or tossed in your salad may have been picked by a slave – and was certainly picked by someone receiving very low wages for very difficult work – can trigger a denial impulse that is difficult to break through. But the museum, by using actual historical artifacts, presented a tight and irrefutable indictment of the status quo that was able to pierce this veil and open peoples' minds to dialogue and possibly collective action.

TAKE THE SHOW ON THE ROAD: Instead of waiting for people to come to Immokalee to visit the museum, the CIW brought the museum to the people. With the museum as Exhibit A of an old-fashioned speaking tour, the museum crew toured across Florida and the Eastern US, often parking the exhibit right in the center of town. There's nothing like a museum on wheels to draw people's attention, not to mention a museum on wheels that addresses such a pressing and controversial topic as modern-day slavery. It was an effective conversation starter.

TEAM UP WITH EXPERT ADVISERS: A key factor that lent the museum credibility was the support garnered for the project from leading academic authorities on modern-day slavery and Florida's labor history. Several academics had the opportunity to offer crucial feedback on organizers' draft research brief. Others contributed “blurbs” similar to the advance praise you might read on the back of a book jacket, which were included in the museum booklet (which was itself a polished version of the research brief) so that attendees would know that the museum's content had been independently vetted.

PRINCIPLES

at work

Show Don't Tell (p.134)

Take the Show on the Road (p.139)

Team Up With Expert Advisers (p.145)

OTHER PRINCIPLES AT WORK:

Take Leadership from the Most Impacted (p.134)

Make the Invisible Visible (p.139)

Cater to Multiple Learning Models (p.139)

Deploy Sympathetic Characters (p.139)



PRINCIPLE:

No one wants to watch a drum circle

IN SUM

Participating in a drum circle is amazing, transformative and fun. Watching a drum circle, on the other hand, is torture. Don't ask people to watch you have fun; get them in the circle.

PRACTITIONERS

Steve Lambert (p.433)

Improv Everywhere (p.428)

FURTHER READING

<http://visitsteve.com/made/lawrence-livermore-conversion-plans/>

CONTRIBUTED BY

Steve Lambert

Drum circles are incredible! Hanging out in the park with a mix of friends and strangers, making rhythms together, communicating intuitively, adding your own beat, and making a big and beautiful sound that fills the park. It's an amazing thing if you're part of one.

If you're just watching one, however, they're at best tolerable, but more often they're torture. You're trying to hang out in the park with your friends when a bunch of self-indulgent dipshits start banging arrhythmically on their goat skins. The only witness expressing any amount of appreciation is some middle-aged woman in a tie-dyed sarong who will seize any opportunity to sway with her arms in the air.

Creative activism is often like

a drum circle – for better *and* for worse. Viewed from the outside, it can be painfully unimaginative, narcissistic and self-referential. For the people involved in the creation of an action, however, the experience can be rewarding and transformative (even if everyone else walks away confused or annoyed). If we want our actions to be effective, it's imperative to take into account the experience of both participants and observers.

One way to do so is to consider expanding the “drum circle” of your action: turn your audience into participants by opening up the creative part of the action to as many people as possible. Develop ways that the audience can involve themselves instead of being isolated witnesses to your self-referential creativity.

Think of creating rules to a game – one that is rewarding and fun to play. How can you create parameters within which participants can meaningfully act and create? A framework that allows participants the freedom to bring in their own ideas and solutions?

For example, instead of presenting only his own ideas of how to convert the Lawrence Livermore Nuclear Weapons Lab to civilian purposes, artist Steve Lambert xeroxed off many maps of the facility and invited all visitors to his exhibit to make their own conversation proposals using color-coded markers. The playful urban prankster group, Improv Everywhere, stages flash mobs and happenings like their annual “no pants day” that have simple rules – show up at such-and-such subway at noon with no pants on and act nonchalant – that can expand to involve thousands of people and still deliver a provocative experience to partici-

pant and observer alike.

Not all actions should turn into a drum circle, however. Far from it. If your action requires precision and discipline, like, say, a Greenpeace Banner Hang or a Guerrilla Musical, then you don't want it to turn into a drum circle. Instead, think: barbershop quartet or special ops platoon, just with better songs and haircuts.

Related:

TACTICS

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PRINCIPLES

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