

How ACT UP Effectively Used Art To Generate Political Change

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September 1, 2024

Introduction

In order to understand how art can be used to generate political change, it is important to first understand that political change can only occur through continuous collective actions. The principles of movement organizer and political theorist Saul Alinsky can provide insight into the methods that can create political change. Rarely does monumental change happen through the work of a singular person or small group of people (Alinsky, 2010). Individual actions, while sometimes effective in generating momentary outrage in the general public, or causing inconveniences to institutions of power, fail to generate mass change. A singular protest will soon be forgotten by both the media and those in power, as more pertinent things come to the forefront. The actions of a singular person, no matter how extreme, can and are dismissed as the actions of a zealot, whose views stray from that of the people. It is only through collective actions that true change can occur.

Major societal change has been generated through the work of movements and coalitions made up of the people. While a demand from a singular person can be easily dismissed, the demands of thousands have the potential to harm the institutions in a way that can not be ignored. Monumental change has occurred through prolonged effort by organized groups of people.

Thus, to understand the true potential of art activism, I analyzed the works of art within a political movement rather than art in art institutions. Political art within the art world has a limited impact as a tool of direct action because it is situated in institutions which “have the power to censor”, and is constricted to “limited sphere of the art world” (Serafini, 2018, p. 142). The audience of art in art institutions primarily consist of people within the realm of the arts,

which means that it fails to reach a broad public audience, even when it doesn't fall prey to institutional censorship. Instead, to become a catalyst for change, artists must instead become citizen activists separated from the institution and remove the boundaries between themselves and the public (Berman, 2012). Even within this, the power of the art often fails to cause an impact on a societal level, and instead stays at an individual level (Scher, 2007). Thus, I decided to study this question from the side of the political movement, which has been able to create change on the societal level, looking at artwork that was generated specifically within political movements for the expressed purpose of advancing the movement. After a review of art within political movements of the 1970s-90s, the ACT UP movement stood out as a group that was particularly effective at using art to generate political and social change.

ACT UP was a political organization founded in 1987 to address the lack of action towards the AIDS epidemic (Gould, 2009). The group engaged in political protests, lobbying, propaganda, and lawsuits to sway public perception of the AIDS epidemic and combat homophobia, while pressuring the government to act. From the beginning, ACT UP had various art based working groups, such as the Silence = Death Collective and the New Museum which worked on individual projects (Lowery, 2022). Eventually, members from these projects, recognizing the need for an official art-based group, formed Gran Fury. Gran Fury was responsible for most of the visuals that accompanied the political actions of ACT UP, as well as the propaganda and information disseminated by the movement. Gran Fury's most impactful and well known pieces were done in coordination with the rest of ACT UP, and incorporated the political strategy and information that was associated with the rest of the movement (Schulman, 2021).

In this paper, I analyze some of ACT UP's most successful art performances against Alinsky's theories, and compare them to similar less successful artworks, in order to figure out what made certain artworks so successful. I explore how art assisted ACT UP in both building the movement, attacking power structures, and changing public perception, noting qualities that made works more or less successful. By using ACT UP's art pieces as case studies, we can understand different ways to how art can effectively contribute to political movements.

Building a Movement

Any effective political movement is a power base of the people. Alinsky notes that to effectively build a power base of the people, an organizer should fan resentments and agitate the people (Alinsky, 2010). The people must first be aware of the way the current system is harming them. Identifying and amplifying resentments alone is not enough, the people need to know where to direct their resentments in order to create tangible change. They must believe that they have the power to change their situation, by simply directing their anger and pain into the right direction. It is not until they both know what needs to be changed and believe that they have the power to enact such change that people will start to think about how to make such changes. Throughout ACT UP, activists attempted "to amplify the problem" so that audiences were "persuaded that any response other than collective action is unreasonable" (Gould, 2009, p. 170)

Gran Fury's Concentration Camp Float specifically serves as a key example of the way that ACT UP utilized art to amplify and highlight the issue to build a movement. In the mid 1980s, proposals had been made by various political and public figures to permanently lock up people with HIV, in an attempt to prevent them from spreading the virus (Gould, 2009). These

proposals, if successful, would have meant that being diagnosed with HIV would be enough to condemn a person to spend the rest of their life in prison. In response, the artists of ACT UP designed a mock concentration camp float for the 1987 New York City Pride March. The float was made to resemble a prison, with barbed wire atop black prison bars enclosing the members on the float, who wore pink triangles. A guard tower, with Ronald Reagan's face overlooked the "prisoners", and a man wearing a Reagan mask sat atop the truck's cab pointing and laughing at the prisoners. The side of the float had a sign with the words "Test drugs, not people", and members wearing masks and gloves surrounded the float handing out flyers for ACT UP's meetings. At noon, they staged a "die in" and had a moment of silence as bodies lined the street.

In terms of building the movement, this action was a great success. The float inspired so many onlookers to join the march, that the float contingent, which started with 50 members, stretched four blocks by the time they made it to Fifth Avenue (Kaufman, 2020). Even more significantly, the float brought a large influx of new members to ACT UP meetings. Finkelstein, a member of Gran Fury, observed that after the float, the attendance of ACT UP meetings grew from 80 people to 500 (Lowery, 2022).

Alinsky's principles can provide insight into why this float in particular was so effective at recruiting people into ACT UP. First, the float fanned resentments and agitated the people, by forcing the people attending pride to think about AIDS and the political figures that were using AIDS as an excuse to introduce discriminatory policies. During this time many of queer people and even people with AIDS were avoiding the problem out of fear (Schulman, 2021). The New York Pride Parade was typically a largely apolitical celebration for the queer community, with political floats typically at the end of the parade (Lowery, 2022). ACT UP's float was in the middle of the parade, bringing the topic to the forefront of the event, forcing the queer audience

to acknowledge AIDS. The imagery of the concentration camp was so stark, that it forced many to acknowledge and recognize the problem and their anger and grief.

Second, the action offered people a direction to channel their energy in order to create change. Within the march, ACT UP was in the center and very visible (Lowery, 2022). The demonstration looked cohesive with members inside all wearing pink triangles, and outside all wearing masks and gloves. The float itself was imposing, frightening, and animated. The overall look of both the float and the members appeared intentional and powerful, conveying the idea that ACT UP as an organization was powerful and organized. The float gave people a reason to believe that ACT UP had the power to enact real change, and joining ACT UP efforts was a way that they could help save themselves and their loved ones. When members handed out flyers for the next ACT UP meeting, people recognized that the meeting was the best place to direct their efforts in an organized way.

While this action was not solely done by the artists of ACT UP , the artwork played an invaluable role in making this action successful in both fanning resentments and agitation, and portraying ACT UP as a powerful leader. The emotional effect of the float was potent because of the stark visual imagery that was created by the artist. ACT UP appeared cohesive and organized because the artist thought up the costumes worn by the members and made the float appear imposing and powerful. Certainly without the other members of ACT UP marching alongside the float and handing out flyers it would not have had the same effect. But, at its core, the elements of performance art at the core of this action are what made it so impactful.

This action demonstrates how artwork can assist a movement in building a powerbase of people. Shocking visual elements can be used to draw attention to an issue, fan resentments and agitate people into action. Coordinating the visual elements and creating similar costumes for

members can make the movement appear more cohesive and organized than it actually is, which can send the message that the movement or organization is truly powerful enough to generate change. With both, the artists must act with the rest of the movement in order for the work to truly be effective, but if done well, artists can completely alter the perception of both the issue and the movement, allowing the movement to recruit more people and build a larger power base.

Attacking Power Structures

Once a movement has been built the movement can engage in actions to actively generate political change. Any actions should have specific precise goals that they are aiming to accomplish (Alinsky, 2010). The ends that they target should be achievable and the actions taken should have at least a reasonable chance at achieving those ends. Actions typically have a specific target, out of which they are trying to get an outcome, and the action must specifically impact that target. The target can be an institution, corporation, government, person, or any entity that the movement chooses to deem responsible for the system. In order to coerce a reaction out of the target that is favorable to the movement, the target must feel threatened. Good tactics go outside the experience of the enemy but remain within the experience of the people, and are ideally, enjoyable by the people. They can not drag on long enough that the people within the movement get bored and tired, and yet, they must pose a prolonged threat to the enemy such that the enemy can not simply wait them out.

Gran Fury's Wall Street Money can specifically demonstrate not only how artwork can engage in such attacks, but also how the application or ignorance of the principles can be responsible for the failure of the attack when it comes to generating change.

The goal of the action was to get Burroughs Wellcome to lower the price of AZT, which at the time was the only drug on the market that could treat AIDS (Lowery, 2022). ACT UP 's lobbying efforts had failed to convince Burroughs Wellcome, the company that made AZT, to lower the drug's exorbitant price (Schulman, 2021). When it was clear that ethical and financial arguments would not succeed, ACT UP planned a Wall Street demonstration, along with a plan to infiltrate the New York Stock Exchange. On September 14, 1989, four members of ACT UP snuck into the New York Stock Exchange and chained themselves to a balcony (Lowery, 2022). At exactly 9:30am, they sounded air horns to drown out the opening bell, and unfurled a large black banner stating "SELL WELLCOME". They threw down fake hundred-dollar bills with the words "fuck your profiteering, people are dying while you play business" while ACT UP's photographers captured the chaos. The photographs and the action made international news. Less than a week later, Burroughs Wellcome lowered the price of AZT by 20%, making this one of the more successful ACT UP actions.

While art played a more subtle role in this action, the work of artists undoubtedly contributed to its success, by making the messaging of the attack clear and making the action more sensational. The large eight foot banner with the words "SELL WELLCOME" clearly identified the specific target of the attack, which was necessary given that the attack was at the New York Stock Exchange and not Burrough's Welcome. Gran Fury's money served to both convey ACT UP's issue - that Burroughs Wellcome was prioritizing profits over lives - and cause confusion and chaos. Both the banner and the money made the photographs of the action appear more sensational and enticing when used by the media.

Of course, the success of the action at the New York Stock Exchange can not solely be attributed to the artists. In order to fully understand why this action was so successful, it is important to observe earlier similar actions that failed to achieve the same results.

In both 1987, and 1988, ACT UP had staged protests at Wall Street targeting Burroughs Wellcome (Schulman, 2021). The 1988 action had over 1,000 people involved, and was the first time Gran Fury produced the fake money that would eventually be used again in the New York Stock Exchange action (Lowery, 2022). Protesters walked into the street to stop traffic, and then handed out the bills to passers by and placed them on the stopped calls. Over a hundred people were arrested, and the action got significant media attention, with newspapers echoing the language of ACT UP. Yet, the action failed to make an impact on the target Burroughs Wellcome in the way that the later action at the stock exchange did.

Alinsky's principles can provide insight into why both the success of the New York Stock Exchange action and the failure of the prior Wall Street Protests. First, while it was clear that both actions were targeting Burroughs Wellcome, the earlier action failed to specifically impact Burroughs Wellcome. The action took place on the street, so it largely impacted regular people trying to get somewhere rather than specifically targeting people who had influence over the company (Lowery, 2022). The cash with the words "fuck your profiteering, people are dying while you play business" didn't apply to regular people who had no connection to either the financial or pharmaceutical industries. While they could sympathize with the message, they for the most part had no control over the price of AZT which meant that the impact of that action was largely wasted. On the other hand, the action of the New York Stock Exchange directly impacted Stock Brokers who had a direct ability to comply with ACT UP's request to "SELL WELLCOME". While both actions got media attention, only the action that directly impacted

the people involved managed to generate results, highlighting the importance of making sure that actions specifically and directly impact the target audience.

Second, the dollar bills handed out during the Wall Street Protest failed to cause a spectacle that went outside the experience of the enemy in the way that the cash at the Stock Exchange did. Bills at the Wall Street Protest were handed out to passers by in the way that fliers would be, making them easily ignorable and easily discardable (Lowery, 2022). New Yorkers were used to being handed random fliers and even witnessing protests blocking the street, so it was easy to ignore. The bills themselves did not have the visual appeal of other artworks, and the words were too small to be well captured by photographs from the demonstration, so they failed to reach a broader audience. In contrast, when the bills were thrown down from the balcony of the New York Stock Exchange, they created a spectacle that was impossible to ignore. The combination of the bills fluttering down and the airhorns captivated the audience, and the spectacle gave the audience an incentive to read the words on the bills due to curiosity rather than simply discarding them. While a similar event had occurred during prior Vietnam War Protests, this event was still largely outside the experience of the stock brokers and people witnessing the action, which made it noticeable. Though the same bills were used in both actions, the difference in the way they were presented and the audience they impacted created a vast difference in impact they had. The disparity demonstrates the importance of creating a spectacle through the use of surprise that goes outside of the experience of the target.

Another reason that likely contributed to the success of the New York Stock Exchange action was that these types of actions were both enjoyable and familiar to the activists of ACT UP, who by this point were used to the process of causing a spectacle and then being arrested. Thus, when they were arrested and photographed, they appeared victorious and confident, adding

to the success. The action also had a contained time frame, as the main part ended when they were arrested, which was fairly quickly. Having a guaranteed and quick end point prevented the fatigue that is common with street rallies that fizzled out and when protestors were exhausted. By making the action exciting and short, ACT UP was able to maintain their energy throughout the action, and project an image of strength and organization.

When it comes to art attacks, the way that the rest of the organization integrates the art plays a massive role in how successful it becomes. To be impactful, attacks should be targeted, shocking, and exciting. Art plays a large role in the messaging of actions and causing a spectacle. When art is used during an attack, of course the art itself should be striking and clear to be effective, to help emphasize the target. With the Wall Street Money, each bill had a single slogan that was both striking and easy to read. The SELL WELLCOME banner effectively conveyed the intention and target of the protest. Yet, the non-artistic elements of the work can determine how and by whom the messages are perceived, which can determine the overall success of the actions. The difference in the perception of the actions demonstrates that it is up to the actors to work in a way that ensures that the art reaches the target of the attack and is presented in a way that is impactful.

Propaganda

Propaganda is perhaps the kind of art that is most effective at changing the minds of the masses. By and large, propaganda aims to sway the minds of the general public (Lee, 1945). It typically utilizes vivid imagery and emotion-arousing symbolism to shift public perceptions on a mass scale. Typically, it involves the use of mass media to ideas that infiltrate the minds of the people, which is why propaganda is often used by organizations that have access to or control over means of mass communication (governments, large corporations, and other large

organizations. Given this, propaganda has typically been used to support institutions of power rather than challenge them. However, large activist coalitions and organizations can and have harnessed this method to create change in the minds of the public. ACT UP in particular, was especially skilled in spreading propaganda through the use of unconventional tactics and the hijacking of mass media, with Gran Fury often explicitly describing their art as propaganda (Lowery, 2022).

While the primary goal movements like ACT UP was to force the people in power to take action, a secondary goal was to shift public perception. Public support can put pressure on people in power, particularly elected officials who, to some extent, are accountable to the public (Lee, 1945). For identity based movements, public perception of people with that identity can change the social circumstances of the group.

To change public perception, goals and actions need to be presented in a way that is both easily understandable to the public and able to reach them (Alinsky, 2010). Organizers need to phrase goals in general simple terms and use language and images that are familiar and appeal to their audience (Burk, 2013). Utilizing strong, uncompromising rhetoric is required to polarize the issue to the extent that it will change public perception (Alinsky, 2010). Finally, propaganda must reach a large audience, as public opinion can only be swayed by a message if the message actually reaches the public.

One of the most famous and impactful pieces of propaganda from the movement was the Silence = Death posters. The posters, which were originally designed and wheatpasted around Manhattan by a small group of gay artists, soon became a symbol of ACT UP and the fight against AIDS (Lowery, 2022). The poster's main graphic is a pink triangle, against a black background, with the word "SILENCE = DEATH" written below the triangle in big white letters.

Written underneath, in smaller letters is “Why is Reagan silent about AIDS? What is really going on at the Centers for Disease Control, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Vatican? Gays and lesbians are not expendable...Use your power...Vote ... Boycott...Defend yourselves...Turn anger, fear, grief, into action” providing context to the poster.

The pink triangle was a reference to the Holocaust, where the Nazi’s put pink triangles on the uniforms of gay men in concentration camps (Schulman, 2021). By the 1970s, the symbol had been co-opted by the queer community as a reminder of ongoing oppression. The symbol was both recognizable and conveyed the horror of AIDS through the Holocaust analogy. By drawing a parallel to a tragedy of the magnitude of the holocaust, the poster was able to emphasize the threat of AIDS.

The poster was intentionally designed to have a lot of negative space, with most of the poster just being plain black (Lowery, 2022). The vast black space on the poster made it so that the viewer's attention was immediately drawn to the triangle and the big “SILENCE = DEATH” words (Finklestein, 2019). The pink used in the triangle on the poster was a more vivid hue than the original, making the tone of the poster appear more aggressive and vivid. The white words contrasted well against the black background, making them easily readable from a distance. At a distance, the poster, with its uncompromising, simple slogan, was intriguing. The questions and calls to action that explained what the poster was about were intentionally written in smaller letters, forcing people to approach the posters. In a way, the simplicity of the poster was a trojan horse, designed to draw people in, and then confront them with political questions that would force them to think critically about the government’s response to the epidemic.

The first posters were wheat pasted on fenced-off construction sites around Manhattan, saturating the scene with the images (Lowery, 2022). The posters were placed in locations where

they would reach the people who worked for the media. The posters saturated the scene, unavoidable and ubiquitous, forcing people to notice. The repetition of the same poster imprinted the visual, and by extension the message, onto the public consciousness. The consistency of the poster made it appear like there was a well-organized, competent, and professional movement behind it.

The effectiveness of this poster can be seen more clearly when compared to AIDS: 1 in 61, one of ACT UP's less successful propaganda attempts. Gran Fury intended to design a poster to convey a then recent statistic that one in every sixty-one babies born in New York had AIDS antibodies, which meant that they had HIV positive mothers (Lowery, 2022). The poster was designed for a protest at *Cosmopolitan's* headquarters, as they had recently released an article implying that heterosexual women were safe from AIDS. The statistic of newborns born with AIDS antibodies disproved the idea. The poster had the words "AIDS: 1 in 61" in big black letters as the title, with a stencil of a baby below. In smaller letters to the side, the text explained "One in every sixty-one babies in New York City is born with AIDS or born HIV antibody positive. So why is the media telling us that heterosexuals aren't at risk? Because these babies are black. These babies are Hispanic. Ignoring color ignores the facts of AIDS. STOP RACISM: FIGHT AIDS.". While the demonstration got attention, the poster failed to generate any noticeable impact. Unlike "SILENCE = DEATH" which infiltrated the national consciousness, this poster seemed to go largely unnoticed.

The difference in reception can be explained by a few qualities. First, the design "AIDS: 1 in 61" was too wordy and dense when it came to information. The title "AIDS: 1 in 61" meant nothing on its own, and the design of the poster did not arouse the same intrigue that the

contrast-heavy, bold “Silence = Death” posters did. The explainer text, that was required to understand the poster, was too small and not easily readable.

The poster also lacked a clear target or call to action, which made it less engaging and memorable to an audience. It attempted to address the AIDS crisis, the media's misinformation, ignorance of women's health and racial injustice in one graphic. The call to action to “STOP RACISM: FIGHT AIDS” is vague, without providing clear ways to do so. The poster calls out “the media” which is similarly too vague of a target to build any public animosity towards a specific institution. In contrast, “Silence = Death” listed both clear targets by name (President Reagan, Centers for Disease Control, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Vatican) and included clear calls to action (Vote ... Boycott...Defend yourselves...Turn anger, fear, grief, into action). “SILENCE = DEATH” was succinct, and specifically called out the lack of government action in response to the AIDS epidemic while encouraging the community to take action. It used a simple design and slogan, which could be easily understood and arouse the public. “AIDS: 1 in 61” attempted to address too many issues at once, and appeared more complicated. The lack of simplicity made it fail to infiltrate the public consciousness in the same way.

The difference in reception highlights the strength and limitation of Gran Fury and the art of Propaganda as a whole. When it came to ideas that could be translated into simple slogans or visually repeated, propaganda was more effective at infiltrating the minds of the public. However, when it came to more nuanced issues without a clear, one sentence answer, the posters failed to elicit the same response (Lowery, 2022). This is because it is the repetition of the image that makes it so effective. The visuals can only imprint onto the consciousness of the public if they are simple and repetitive, which can only happen if the message is simple and repetitive.

Conclusion

Within ACT UP, art influenced the perception and reach of movement. The visual cohesion of the Camp Float and the Silence =Death posters made the movement look more coordinated and organized as a whole. The spectacle was created by art like Wall Street Money and brought the movement media attention, which allowed it to reach a wider audience. The simple, clear, and direct presentation of the writing on posters and banners helped ACT UP spread their goals and messaging in a digestible and clear way. The art that was successful in creating significant change used identifiable and stark imagery that infiltrated the minds of the audience.

Part of the reason it was so successful was because it was used as a tool of the movement. The posters and banners would not have had the same impact had they been in a gallery or museum rather than in a protest. The reason these works were able to have an impact was because they were situated in the streets where the general public was likely to see them. The movement displayed the same symbols and imagery over and over again around New York until they were unavoidable and unignorable. The art conveyed the message and brought attention, while the movement presented the art in a way that it reached the target audiences. The art heightened the impact of existing efforts, making activist actions more impactful, rather than being the action itself.

In modern times, the site of many activist movements has moved from the streets to the internet, where they can reach people around the world. In the internet era, graphics on social media posts are used to communicate and convey messaging and information to the public. In the future, I would like to study how more modern movements have used social media to communicate their messages. I would like to study how the types of imagery that are successful

at grabbing the attention of the mainstream media and people in real life translates on the internet.

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