



HOW ACT UP EFFECTIVELY USED ART TO GENERATE POLITICAL CHANGE

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Introduction

Guiding Questions: How can art be used to generate political and social change? What makes art effective at generating political change? What qualities made ACT UP's artwork so impactful?

I am interested in how art can create change on a societal level. Political theorist and activist Saul Alinsky in his book "Rules for Radicals" finds that widespread political and societal change is generated through a political movement, and explains how actors can build an effective movement (Alinsky, 2010). Because political movements appear to be an effective way to generate political change, I decided to analyze artwork within a political movement. Specifically, I decided to analyze the art of ACT UP to understand how art can effectively contribute to political movements, and the qualities that make the artwork successful.

Goals

- to learn how art can be used more effectively in current political movements.
- to understand how the visual qualities of the art impact its effectiveness
- to understand how the presentation of art and the way it interacts with the rest of the movement contributed to its success or failure

Methods

According to Alinsky, organizers need to build a power base of the people, attack power structures, and maintain popular support in order to generate political change. For each of these steps, I identified an art piece created by ACT UP which was deemed successful in achieving its objective. I used firsthand accounts from the artists involved, as well as books and articles about ACT UP to learn about the art itself. I then analyzed the art through the lens of Alinsky's theories, looking at the content of the artwork, the context in which it was presented, the way it interacted with the rest of the movement, and the specific purpose of the work. I identified the way those qualities impacted the effectiveness of the work and saw if Alinsky's theories held up, or were challenged.

Conclusion

Art was able to influence the perception of both the issue of AIDS and the ACT UP movement, which made the movement more effective. The stark imagery and simple, direct presentation allowed the organization to spread its ideas in a clear and easily digestible manner. Artworks that created a spectacle brought attention to the cause or action, and the repetition of the same imagery made the messaging unavoidable to the general public. Art created the image of the ACT UP movement while amplifying its impact.

In the future, I would like to study how more modern movements have used social media to communicate their messages. In modern times, the site of many activist movements has moved from the streets to the internet. 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.



Act Up's Concentration Camp Float



Action at New York Stock Exchange



Silence = Death poster

Results

Art can successfully contribute to building a movement when it:

- Has stark imagery that fans resentments and agitates people
- Is presented in a location that reaches currently uninvolved people
- Looks cohesive and powerful, making the movement look organized and power

Art attacks are successful when they:

- target and reach the right audience
- Create a spectacle that forces people to pay attention

Propaganda is successful when it:

- is simple and easy to read from a distance
- is engaging with clear message
- has familiar or shocking imagery with high visual contrast

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