

how to...

Spark creative action ideas

Activism guide • September 2016

Whether you're planning an action, trying to engage people, or designing an inspiring event; creativity is an important part of campaigning. Combining the unexpected with the visually eye-catching; incorporating art, music and theatre, and using humour and imagery can create powerful actions and events. It can change and shape a narrative; engage people more effectively; attract media attention, and be tactically useful.

But as well as being fun, effective and strategic; being creative can be empowering and bring people together in a way that strengthens relationships and builds community. Creating something together can help us believe that we can build a better world. Reclaiming and transforming spaces, and disrupting and subverting the status quo help move us towards long-lasting social change and the world we want to live in.

Why be creative?

Inspire and empower people

Actions that embody the change you want to see or that dispel dominant narratives in a creative way are empowering and can inspire others to take action. The act of putting together a creative action can also build community and trust.

Get your message across

A creative action can get your message across more effectively and engage passers-by and the media. An image or striking photo can get a message across instantly and provoke an emotional response in people.

Go viral

A simple image, meme or replicable creative action can capture people's imagination and get others copying and sharing your action.

Be inspired by others

You don't always have to come up with something new. There is a long history of creative activism, which you can adapt, replicate or build on.

Beautiful Trouble is a great place to start if you want to get a feel for past creative actions and tactics. The website and book was put together by a network of artist/activist trainers to help movements be more effective. beautifultrouble.org



The Rebel Clown Army uses carnivalesque tactics to ridicule and confuse the authorities. The idea is that mockery and fun can be more effective than direct confrontation. As well as diffusing tension, it provides a playful way for people to be involved in direct action.

Surprise your target

Creativity often involves the unexpected, and can surprise your campaign target (and the police or security) and make it difficult for them to know how to react.

De-escalate a situation:

Activists can find themselves in confrontational or hostile situations during an action. A creative intervention can set the tone or shift the mood if things get tense.

We are clowns because nothing undermines authority like holding it up to ridicule. Because since the beginning of time tricksters have embraced life's contradictions, creating coherence through confusion...

Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army manifesto



Photo: Peter Marshall / Campaign Against Arms Trade

Palestine solidarity activists dance the Palestinian dance Dabke while blockading military vehicles from entering the site of a major arms fair. The dance is itself a form of cultural resistance against the Israeli state. In this instance, as well as performing the practical function of occupying the road, it did it in a way that was fun and empowering.

Sparkling creative ideas

Everyone can be creative. You just need to find a way of facilitating creative thinking

Set up a creative space

The first place to start is to set up a space that facilitates creative thinking. There are no set rules for this, but here are some things that might help:

- Try meeting somewhere different. Go outdoors, share a meal, sit in a park or meet in a cafe. A stuffy room with no windows is definitely not conducive towards creative thinking! If you're meeting in an office, try getting rid of the tables.
- Visit your campaign target to get a feel for the space. How would you transform it?
- Listen to music during your planning meeting.
- Bring props to your planning session: costumes, plasticine, and sweets are always great.
- Have food and drink available: hungry people don't think creatively!
- Use flipchart paper, coloured paper and pens. Get people to start drawing their ideas.
- Get an external facilitator: It can help to have someone outside of your group if you're feeling stuck.
- Be open to new ideas: Even if something seems ridiculous or totally unfeasible, be prepared to go along with it. You never know where it might lead.

Useful resources

- Beautiful Trouble: A book, online toolbox and international network of artist-activist trainers beautifultrouble.org
- Actipedia: A database of creative actions from around the world actipedia.org
- Artivism by 350.org: Artivism guides and examples of past creative actions art.350.org
The trainings section of the website includes lots of useful tools, activities and games for planning creative actions trainings.350.org
- The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination: "An affinity of friends who recognise the beauty of collective creative disobedience". Lots of examples of creative interventions labofii.wordpress.com
- Destructables: a DIY creative protest website destructables.org
- Creative Resistance: Collection of activist art creativeresistance.org
- Kevin Zeese and Margaret Flowers: *Creative Resistance: Why We Need to Incorporate Art Into Our Activism* alternet.org/activism/we-need-art-our-activism

Art is good for our communities, and artistic collaboration is a bonding experience. We make art together, not just because of the changes it can bring to the world around us, but because of the way it changes us internally.

Tatiana Makovkin, an organiser with Creative Resistance

Use people's experience

Get everyone to write their favourite action on a post-it. Put these up on the wall. Take turns to pick one and get people to talk about why they chose the action and what they liked about it. Make notes of what people say on flipchart paper and then think about whether you could adapt or use any of the ideas.

MIGRATION



IS NOT A CRIME

This stencil uses the famous children's story of Paddington Bear to counter the negative narrative about migrants being promoted by the UK government and the media. It has appeared at protests and been 'graffitied' in several places.

Tactic: Subvert branding

Subvertising is the act of making parodies (or spoofs) of corporate and political adverts, logos and slogans. It is a tactic used to counter corporate marketing and to expose the reality of what businesses and governments do.

Logos, slogans and images can be subverted easily and used as images shared through social media; on banners or placards; or printed and placed in strategic places.

Think about your campaign target's logo and slogans and how you could subvert their messaging.

Think of iconic images

Think about famous images or memes that people immediately relate to and think about how you could use them to communicate your campaign message

Use photos and videos

Put photos of creative actions around the room. Get people to look round them and stand next to one they are drawn to or especially like. Take it in turns to share what you like about the action and what makes it creative. As above, capture what people say and see if you can adapt or use any of the ideas. You could do something similar using short videos of creative actions.

Use stories

Take your campaign target and use a well-known story to communicate it. Think about a famous genre (e.g. fairy tales) and characters that conjure feelings and associations for people. E.g. who is the villain in your campaign? Who are the heroes and what obstacle are they trying to surpass? E.g. David and Goliath: canoe vs warship

Loosen up inhibitions

Start an action-planning session with an energiser or a game like *The Magic Blob*:

Get everyone standing in a circle. Introduce the imaginary 'blob' you are holding and shape it into something. For example 'This is now a big fish'. When you have shaped it, throw the 'fish' to someone in the circle. They then shape it into something else (e.g. it becomes a basketball) and throw it to someone else. The key is to be expressive with your creations!

Use metaphors

For example if your campaign target were an animal, what would it be?

Listen to music

Listen to short clips of different types of music and see what feelings and images they conjure. If you're feeling adventurous you could all stand and dance/ move around with your eyes closed while someone plays the music for 30 seconds at a time. When the music stops, shout out what comes to mind and have someone write everything down on a piece of flipchart paper. This list can then be a good starting point for thinking about actions or messaging.



All over Spain anti-capitalist group Flo6x8 has organised surprise and seemingly spontaneous flamenco performances in banks and the Andalusian parliament protesting the banking crisis and austerity measures. The performances were filmed and have gone viral online. Through the actions the group has been repoliticising flamenco and taking back private spaces.

Sisters Uncut: Reclaiming space and direct action

Sisters Uncut, a feminist direct action group fighting cuts to domestic violence services, has been reclaiming empty buildings and transforming them into community spaces.

In Hackney, East End Sisters took over an empty council flat scheduled for demolition and after nine weeks of direct action and community organising they secured several promises from Hackney Council. The space acted as a hub for the estate, where children could go for breakfast, and parents and adults could receive information around domestic violence and housing.

In Peckham, South East London Sisters took over an empty commercial property and ran a community centre for women, non-binary people, and children. They had daily meals, information sessions and practical workshops such as feminist self-defence and yoga.

With their actions Sisters Uncut made the links between cuts to council housing, evictions and regeneration, and the impact on survivors of domestic violence. In both Hackney and Southwark they succeeded in making change at a council level.

Sisters Uncut started in London and has spread to Portsmouth, Doncaster, Newcastle, Bristol, and Glasgow. They have achieved significant news coverage and have over 20 000 'likes' on Facebook and 14 000 followers on Twitter.

Childhood games

Think about your favourite games and other well-known games and play around with how you could adapt them for your action or campaign.

For example, the outdoor game 'Capture the Flag' has often been used to reclaim public space, takeover roads in a fun and dynamic way and as a way of people familiarising themselves with a space where they are planning a protest.

Remember

- When you're thinking up ideas, no idea is a bad idea
- Have fun! If you're tired or bored you're unlikely to come up with creative ideas.
- Think big! Even if you don't think something is feasible, it could be adapted or it might spark another idea
- Don't underestimate what you can get away with. Creative actions are often unexpected and can take your target by surprise.



Photo: Global Justice Now

Activists across the UK re-branded Monsanto's flagship weed killer 'Roundup' by placing spoof labels on bottles at garden centres and DIY shops. The labels warned people about the product's toxic dangers and that Monsanto's corporate control of agriculture degrades farmers' power.