

## Activists, Bodies, and Political Arguments

Jason Del Gandio

The following essay is adapted from a keynote address presented at the 2014 Patti Pace Performance Festival. The live address included a PowerPoint presentation involving a series of images and videos.<sup>1</sup> One of the great strengths of the Patti Pace Festival is the wide range of attendees, which include high school students, undergraduate and graduate students, and professors. This address aims for a middle ground by targeting the undergraduate audience. In brief, the address discussed the manner by which activists use their bodies to make political arguments.

### Setting the Stage: An Introduction

People often think of argumentation in terms of verbal communication—for example, someone advances a claim, supports it with evidence, and provides an overall rationale. But we can also use nonverbal communication to make arguments. This is particularly true with activists.

Think of anti-war protesters conducting a classic “die-in.” The activists choose a rhetorically significant location—perhaps a military recruiting center or the office of a pro-war representative. The activists gather at the location and at a pre-designated time one of them blows a whistle. Everyone suddenly drops to the ground. Another activist stands among the “lifeless bodies” and recites an anti-war statement. And still another activist is using a handheld projector to cast images onto the side of the building: bombs, fire fights, injured bodies,

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<sup>1</sup> Editor’s note: Please see the online version of this essay for the many links to images <http://liminalities.net/11-4/keynote.html>

apache helicopters, draped coffins, looks of despair, and the faces of politicians who have sent us to war. This scene dramatizes the human cost of war and invites passersby to reflect upon realities that are often ignored or forgotten. In brief, it is an argument against the war.<sup>2</sup>

Such embodied argumentation does at least four things: it allows activists to critique social norms and practices; it allows activists to promote alternative norms and practices; it alters activists' own perceptions and understandings<sup>3</sup>; and it implicates wider audiences.

For instance, a same-sex couple performs a mock marriage ceremony in front of a courthouse that just outlawed same-sex marriage. This protest critiques the newly passed law and promotes an alternative value of equality—not equality for some people, but equality for *all* people. The participants of this protest undergo a certain kind of experience that alters their own perceptions and understandings. If nothing else, it acts as an empowering experience of political speech—to act on one's own behalf and to speak back to the very power structures that are excluding them from full equality. If this protest leads to arrest, then the participants will attain intimate knowledge about interaction with police, about being physically detained, and about the jail system, the court system, and the justice system. This protest also implicates wider audiences, and not just the judges or lawyers, but also those who support same-sex marriage, those who oppose same-sex marriage, and even those who are undecided on the issue.

This last point about implication is politically important and theoretically rich: All public discourse implicates wider audiences, but there is something unique about embodied rhetoric and street action. Putting your body on the line calls out to others; it calls people to conscience in a way that verbal discourse does not. Onlookers and witness suddenly think, why am *I* not doing that? Why am *I* complacent? Why am *I* not committed to social justice?

This might help explain the common negative reaction to activists. People feel implicated in the actions and, as a subconscious self-defense mechanism, they lash out at the activists. Rather than embracing that implication and seriously grappling with the activists' views, they feel threatened and find ways to psychologically distance themselves from the activists. If activists are "crazy," then there is no need to consider their arguments.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The following sources are helpful for understanding the relationship between activism and embodied argumentation: Boal; Boyd; Bruner; Chvasta; Del Gandio ("Chapter Four"); DeLuca; Frey and Carragee; Madison; May; Perucci; Shepard; and Shepard, Bogad, and Duncombe.

<sup>3</sup> For further elaboration on these first three points, see DeLuca "Unruly Arguments."

<sup>4</sup> This line of thought emerges from notions of interpellation and ideological hailing (Althusser, 127-186; Butler, 106-131).

### On Becoming an Activist: From Reason to Eroticism

There are numerous reasons as to why people become activists. Two of the more basic reasons include (1) people's lives depend on it, and (2) people have altruistic intentions and sincerely want to improve the world.<sup>5</sup> The first is a self-oriented approach in which people must fight for their own well-being. This might include same-sex marriage, the African-American civil rights movement, labor unionizing, campaigns to raise the minimum wage, immigration rights, women fighting for pay equality, etc. The second is an other-oriented approach in which participants fight for the rights and liberties of others. This might include animal rights, environmentalism, lawyers fighting against the death penalty, and the pro-life movement fighting for the rights of an unborn fetus. These two approaches are obviously fluid. Straight allies can fight for same-sex equality, and anti-climate change activists address an issue that affects the entire planet, including each and every human being.

Regardless of the motivation, activists often develop a sense of social justice and self-empowerment. This raises a set of politico-existential questions. For example, what kind of world do we want to live in? How long will we ignore our own oppression and/or the oppression of others? Why is it that so many people are well-adjusted to social *injustice*? What are the ethical implications of turning a blind eye to the ills of the world? Addressing such questions often compels one to act, either on one's own behalf or on the behalf of others. At that point, one becomes self-empowered. Rather than simply casting a vote every two to four years and allowing an impersonal bureaucratic system to make all the decisions, one becomes an active political participant. One becomes an active creator rather than a passive receiver of the world. One becomes an *activist*.

Such a mindset makes it more likely to use embodied argumentation as a form of social change. Submitting yourself to possible harm, arrest, and public ridicule may seem strange, but not for the average activist. Embodied argumentation—understood as *civil disobedience* and *direct action*—has a long history. There is debate as to whether or not these two phrases—civil disobedience and direct action—are synonymous. But for the present moment, we can understand embodied argumentation as a conscious disruption of social operations for the intended purpose of political change. The purpose is to disobey the laws and/or customs of civil society in order to highlight and challenge social injustices. Numerous examples exist: labor strikes, hunger strikes, boycotts, buy-cotts, sit-ins, die-ins, kiss-ins, lock-ins, lock-outs, road blockades, school walk-outs, building occupations, encampments, property destruction, street theater, political clowning, etc.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For more on these two reasons, see Stewart, Smith, and Denton (58-61).

<sup>6</sup> For definitions, examples, and debates, see Graeber, Gordon, Sharp, and Zinn.

Commentators and onlookers commonly criticize such tactics. Someone might say, for instance, that such activists are “wannabe hippies” or “crazy anarchists.” But these are obviously inaccurate over-statements. Some of our most beloved moral leaders—like Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.—used embodied argumentation to win political battles and alter the conscience of their societies. When they were alive, they too were mocked, ridiculed, arrested, and even beaten and murdered. But years later, their “radical” arguments have become social norms and their disruptive actions are deemed heroic and revolutionary.

But many people still wonder why more traditional political activities cannot achieve the same results. This is usually an issue of access. Most activists don’t have millions of dollars to run high-tech campaigns. Most activists don’t have the ability to access mass media. Most activists don’t have the ability to hire expensive lobbyists. And, in general, most Americans are systematically excluded from directly influencing the political process. But rather than giving up, people find alternative ways to engage the public mind and to participate in the public discussion. That is the purpose and function of civil disobedience and direct action.

Embodied argumentation and street action also involve a sense of eroticism. Here, the erotic is not referring to sexuality, but rather, to sensuality. As the famous feminist and anarchist Emma Goldman once said, “If I can’t dance to it, it’s not my revolution.” In other words, rebellion and resistance are embodied, sensory, and even joyful experiences. There is something unique about the co-presence of bodies acting together in public space. Collective public defiance heightens the senses and stimulates the body; one becomes more aware, alert, and enlivened; one’s politics become enfleshed. This kind of affective experience allures people to the action, builds a sense of collective identity, and further motivates people to act, resist, and disrupt. Such an experience can be very liberating. One feels a righteous indignation and is willing and wanting to act out in the name of justice. In this moment, social change becomes an existential calling rather than a rational decision.<sup>7</sup>

### **Doing Embodied Argumentation: Some Steps and Considerations**

There are two basic steps for doing street-level embodied argumentation: (1) general rhetorical considerations, and (2) basic elements.

*General Rhetorical Considerations:* What do you want to argue? What message do you want to communicate? What do you want people to think about? Who is your target audience? How might they respond and how might you circumvent

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<sup>7</sup> For further discussion on this point, see Katsiaficas and Del Gandio (“Extending the Eros Effect”).

any negative reactions? Do you want them to actually do something, like boycott a company, go vegan, or join your movement? Or do you want them to become more aware of issues like genetically modified food and sweatshop labor? These are general rhetorical concerns that any good activist must address. But with street actions, you must also think about your body. How can you use your body to make your argument? This leads to the next point.

*Basic Elements:* There are at least five basic elements: the location of the action; the use of props and costumes; the use of exaggerated actions and behaviors; the use of signifiers; and the guideline, “be reflective, don’t reify.”<sup>8</sup>

**Location:** The location itself can and should be used for rhetorical effect. What does the location say about your action? Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his “I have a dream” speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. That location was a rhetorical choice: Abraham Lincoln supposedly freed the slaves by signing the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. But yet, in 1963, African-Americans were still not free. King’s speech is understood as a form of verbal discourse, but he was also acutely aware of the embodied significance of the location. As King states in the speech, “Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation.” This statement draws attention to the rhetoricity of location.

**Props and Costumes:** The Black Panther Party, and the Black Power Movement in general, strategically used props and costumes to reconstruct the image of black people. This actually highlights a general misconception about the Black Panthers. The Black Panthers were *not* anti-white, but rather, pro-black. Although they agreed with the legal issues being addressed by the Civil Rights Movement, they were also concerned with extra-legal issues like black identity, black culture, black history, etc. In brief, the Black Panthers were concerned with liberating themselves from the white power structure. To do that, they had to reconstruct black consciousness, which involved symbolism and the power of the visual image. Their black berets, black leather jackets, and naturally grown afros signified “all black, all the time,” “be black, be proud,” and “black is beautiful.” The Black Panthers also carried guns. Those were *not* theater props; the guns were real and, at times, used. But those guns were also rhetorical and performative. If blacks are to be equal to whites, then blacks should be able to enact their Second Amendment right to bear arms. Doing so alters the image of blacks—they are not weak and subordinate but empowered and ready for action. The overall collage of props and costumes evokes a posi-

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<sup>8</sup> Due to time constraints of a public talk, I limited the elements to five. But I believe that “timing” is also essential. A street action that is too soon or too late minimizes its rhetorical impact. It is thus imperative to follow public discussions and organize actions around issues that are currently being debated or, conversely, need more public attention.

tive, self-affirming and self-valorizing black identity. It signifies black defiance and black insurrection.

The 1960s hippies also used props and costumes. The self-proclaimed countercultural revolutionary Abbie Hoffman was a master of street theater. He orchestrated numerous high-profile street actions that garnered media attention and propelled both the countercultural and anti-Vietnam war movements. He and his fellow YIPPIES (Youth International Party) combined youth culture with revolutionary politics. Abbie's American flag dress-shirt was an example of his rhetorical-and-performative intelligence. His dress-shirt signified that he and his fellow hippies were part of rather than antithetical to America. It further implicated police officers who would tear off that shirt during protests and street actions. Such behavior could be perceived as defacing the American flag, which then begs the question: Who is more patriotic, the person who adorns the American flag or the person who destroys the American flag?

Another famous "prop" was used at a 1967 anti-war demonstration in front of the Pentagon where fifty-thousand demonstrators stood face-to-face with the National Guard. People were yelling and screaming, soldiers had drawn their rifles, and neither side was backing down. A young hippie kid then walks up and places a flower into the barrel of a rifle. Someone takes a picture and it becomes an iconic image: Violence is confronted with peace and "flower power" comes to symbolize an entire generation.

**Embodied Exaggeration:** Theater and performance always involve exaggerated body movements. This helps to mark the message and bring to life the reality of the story. But this is even more important during street actions. First, there is no captive audience. Consequently, passersby may not recognize what you are doing. Exaggeration helps to mark the moment and draw attention. Second, there is no theater seating and "sightlines" may be obstructed. Exaggerating your movements helps onlookers see what you are doing. This problem can also be overcome by finding a good location—physically elevate your body by using stairs or steps, a hill, a cement wall or divider, or even a street curb. And third, it is often hard to hear outside. There are no walls for your voice to bounce off of. Actions and movements thus become more significant than one's voice and spoken lines.

The activist-theater troupe Bread and Puppet Theater is a good example of exaggerated embodiment. The troupe has been around since the 1960s and is still visible at many of the major national protests. Political satire and larger-than-life puppets are signatures of Bread and Puppet Theater.

For example, a performer wears a red, white, and blue full-body sports spandex, signifying the classic strongman. The colors allow audiences to read it as "America, the world's super power." The strongman then attempts to lift an oversized barbell, but is crushed under its weight. Words are placed on either end of the barbell—the left side (from the audience's view) reads "corporate welfare" and the right side reads "military spending." The basic message is that

America, the supposed super power, cannot bear the burden of its own efforts. Providing tax breaks to the world's richest corporations while simultaneously accounting for nearly forty-percent of the *world's* military spending is not sustainable. The system is on the brink of collapse.

Another example involves a ten-foot high skeleton puppet covered in a black cloak. The puppet resembles something like the grim reaper. In the middle of the puppet's body reads a sign: "FREE to exploit people & nature TRADE." The message is that economic free trade, as promulgated by the likes of N.A.F.T.A, is a death sentence for workers and the environment. The puppeteer further exaggerates the performativity of message by moving the puppet's larger than life arms and hands while walking through the crowd of protesters. The puppet, and thus the message, is surreal and eerie: free trade will steal your soul and leave you for dead; death is looming.

**Signifiers and Marking the Message:** Well-designed signifiers direct the audience's attention and interpretation and thus enhance the effect and readability of embodied argumentation. Simple examples might include protest signs like "SWEATSHOPS = ABUSE," "PROFIT over PEOPLE," and "1% vs. 99%." In many ways, the entire street action is a cluster of signifiers. But a good action fills the visual frame like a painting: there is no empty space; the entire landscape is filled in by signs, actions, props, colors, costumes, puppets, movements, etc.

Beginning in the mid-to-late 1980s, the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power, better known as ACT UP, devised actions to garner media attention and to pressure the government to dedicate more resources for AIDS research, treatment, and medication. ACT UP knew how to fill the frame. During a die-in, for instance, protesters lay lifeless on the ground. Their bodies are flanked with cardboard cutouts of pills, pharmaceutical drug names, and exclamatory words like "NOW!" and "Time Kills!" Other protesters in the background hold a large sign. It reads at the top, "One AIDS death every half hour." At the bottom it reads, "FDA: Stop Blocking AIDS Treatment." The number "42,476" is placed in the center of the sign; the last two digits are interchangeable. At the center of the action is a poster of President Ronald Reagan; the phrase "AIDSGATE" is written across the bottom of his face (the placement allows for a clear recognition of his face). In brief, the entire visual frame is filled with signifiers marking the message: The federal government is responsible for the death of tens of thousands of people; the government must act now or more people will die; this is a political scandal deserving attention and amelioration.

**Be Reflective, Don't Reify:** Street actions commonly rely on popular cultural and broad cultural assumptions. This is simultaneously smart and dangerous. It's smart because the message becomes more readily identifiable by average passersby. But it's also dangerous because it can reinforce and perpetuate particular power structures and hegemonic ideologies.

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) has fallen victim to this danger. Most of their actions bring much needed attention to the maltreatment of animals. But some of their actions have used the standard advertising technique of “sex sells.” In American society, this translates into objectification of the female body, perpetuation of the male gaze, and the dehumanization of women.

One of PETA’s actions involves five women wearing animal prints. Their bodies are literally painted in the prints of wild animals—cheetahs, leopards, tigers, etc. The women also hold signs reading “Animal Prints, Not Animal Skins” and “No Fur.” This is a visually provocative anti-fur demonstration with an easily understandable message: human animals and nonhuman animals should be treated with equal respect, and that wearing fur is cruel, unjust, and unnecessary. At first glance this seems to be a noncontroversial action. But the more one thinks about it the more one starts to wonder if the action unintentionally reduces women to nonhuman animals. It’s five women wearing close to nothing and dressed as animals. This is not far from the objectification found in magazines, commercials, billboards, dance clubs, etc. This critique is questionable, but definitely worth discussing.

But the controversy is much more pronounced in another action where a lone woman stands completely naked except for a handheld sign covering her crotch. Her body is marked with tattoos, and a single sign reads “Ink, Not Mink.” This, too, is an anti-fur demonstration. But unlike the previous example, this undoubtedly reinforces the objectification of the female body. The first example draws one’s immediate attention to “humans dressed like animals”; the second draws one’s immediate attention “a naked female body.” This is perplexing given PETA’s progressive values. One can safely assume that PETA does not support sexism. But this action fails to challenge sexist assumptions. Activists must be reflective and consciously work against such reification.<sup>9</sup>

### **UC, Davis: From Pepper Spray to Walk of Shame**

On November 18th, 2011, during the height of the Occupy Wall Street movement, students were protesting at the University of California, Davis. Riot police were called in and gave the students orders to disperse. The students refused and conducted a spontaneous sit-in. After several warnings and a long

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<sup>9</sup> To be fair, PETA is neither the first nor last to use naked bodies for protest purposes. But PETA—and other activists—must critically reflect and consciously use multiple kinds of bodies—male bodies, female bodies, queer bodies, older bodies, culturally-diverse bodies, etc. Again, to be fair, PETA has done this on occasion; but even when doing so, the images/actions tend toward objectification.



standoff, the police pepper sprayed and physically removed the students. The incident was caught on video and immediately went viral.<sup>10</sup>

This incident is merely a prelude to a more interesting and politically astute action conducted the following day. The students responded to the pepper spray incident by organizing a silent, nonviolent sit-in targeting the university's chancellor. The students gathered outside an entrance way of the chancellor's administrative office. They formed two rows along the walkway. As the chancellor exits the building she must walk past the silent students sitting on either side. There are probably one to two hundred student participants. The scene is eerily silent; the only sounds are the clicking of cameras and the chancellor's shoes hitting the cement step-by-step. The action is occurring at night time, so the scene is dark. The students sit peacefully in the wings as the chancellor walks along the stage. She is spotlighted by sparse street lights and the flashes and glow of smartphones and other recording devices. By sitting, the students highlight the chancellor's power: She has, and can have, the power. But in relinquishing their power the students actually constitute another form of power—a collective, shared, and quietly defiant power. It's people power. This power dynamic also subverts social roles and titles. The chancellor is shown to be what we all are: human. In doing so, onlookers (or, in this case, YouTube viewers) are invited to actually empathize with the chancellor. This is further underscored at the end of the video when the chancellor is asked, first, if she still feels threatened by the students, and second, if she felt trapped inside. The chancellor, in a quiet, almost forlorn manner, responds that she never felt threatened. This then begs the question, why did the police pepper spray and physically remove the students?<sup>11</sup>

I believe that this action is brilliant for at least two reasons. First, everyone is assuming that the students are going to escalate the situation with some kind of loud, angry, and over the top action. Instead, they were silent, respectful, and subservient. Doing so made the action more powerful and effective. And second, the action constituted a "walk of shame" in which the chancellor, and those associated with the pepper spray incidence, were all called to conscience. The orchestration of the action exerted an ideological hailing that reconstituted the power relations among the students-and-university.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For a critical overview of the incident, see Augusto and Setele.

<sup>11</sup> There is debate about this action. A longer video of the original incident shows that the students were antagonistic and actually surrounded the riot police. It was only after repeated warnings and a long standoff that pepper spray was used. However, I would argue that the whole incident demonstrates the logic of State-sanctioned violence: challenges to State-authority will be tolerated, but only to a degree and only for so long; at some point violence will be used to "restore order," even if the challenge is waged non-violently. For further discussion of this issue, see Del Gandio ("Arrests").

<sup>12</sup> See the references to Althusser and Butler in an earlier footnote.

**Target Ain't People: A Musical Flash Mob**

In July, 2010 the big box store Target donated \$150,000 to Minnesota Forward, a political action committee that supports Republican candidates.<sup>15</sup> Minnesota Forward went on to endorse Tom Emmer, an anti-gay marriage and anti-labor union politician running for the governorship. Millions of Americans pledged to boycott Target over its politically irresponsible funding of an anti-democratic candidate. A group of activists went a step further by organizing a musical flash mob inside a Target store.

The activists nonchalantly enter the store. After milling about for a brief time, they inconspicuously gather at a large, open location near the front of the store. This increases visibility and makes for an easy exit upon completion of the action. A protester uses a sounding devise (a whistle or harmonica) to mark the start of the action. The lead performer announces "Wait a minute, I can't shop here. Target is playing games with our political system." The performer then opens a large rainbow colored umbrella and begins singing a spoof-song. The main lyrics state, "Target ain't people so why should it be allowed to play around with our democracy." After singing the line twice, a marching band suddenly kicks in and a fully-choreographed dance routine unfolds. The group is loud, exaggerated, and unavoidably noticeable. Everyone in the store is forced to stop, watch, and listen. The group begins to make an exit after about two minutes of song and dance, marching toward and through the exit doors and out into the parking lot. The action is shocking while simultaneously fun, festive, and inviting. Below is a breakdown of how the group used the five basic elements outlined above.

*Breaking Down the Target Action.*

**Location:** A Minnesota-based Target store.

**Props and Costumes:** A rainbow-colored umbrella representing LGBTQ pride; Business suits personifying C.E.O.'s and board members; A marching band that grabs attention, excites the senses, connotes a movement, and invites onlookers to participate.

**Exaggerated Actions:** A fully-choreographed dance routine; Loud music and voices; Multiple levels and heights that broaden and extend sightlines.

**Signifiers:** A brief opening statement that sets the stage and cues "the audience" for the start of the action; Song lyrics that satirically critique Target;

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<sup>15</sup> See Landman for a brief explanation of the issue.

the lyrics are adapted from Depeche Mode's 1984 catchy pop-song "People are People"

**Be Reflective, Don't Reify:** It can be assumed that the activists did not purchase Target products while in the store; The overall action is fun and festive, which challenges the stereotype of angry and threatening activists

### Concluding Remarks

Embodied argumentation is an alternative political praxis that aesthetically engages the collective imagination and inspires people to develop a dual sense of social justice and self-empowerment. Embodied argumentation is not the end all, be all of social change. But it does provide an important challenge to traditional political structures that often exclude millions, if not hundreds of millions, of people. Embodied argumentation is thus a tactic for creating a more open, active, and participatory society.



"Keep your coins. I want change" by street artist Banksy.

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