

# TACTIC

## ARTISTIC VIGIL

A vigil that draws upon artistic and ritual elements — thoughtful symbolism, the right tone, and a distinct look and feel — to deepen the experience for both participants and observers.

### CONTRIBUTED BY

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The word *vigil* comes from the Latin word for wakefulness, and refers to a practice of keeping watch through the night over the dead or dying. Compared to the blustery pronouncements of a rally, a candlelight vigil offers a more soulful and symbolically potent expression of dissent.

Unfortunately, routine and self-righteousness can strip vigils of their power. In the American peace movement of the 1970s, '80s and '90s, the “candlelight vigil” — all too often a handful of dour people silently holding candles — became a standard, and fatally predictable, form of protest.

An *artistic* vigil, on the other hand, brings a more artful touch. This doesn't necessarily mean costumes and face paint and puppets (though it could). It means thoughtful symbolism, the right tone, and a distinct look and feel that clearly convey the meaning of the vigil. An artistic vigil often draws upon ritual elements (see: PRINCIPLE: Use the power of ritual) to both deepen the experience of participants and demonstrate that experience to observers.

A good example is the series of “Our Grief Is Not a Cry for War” vigils organized by the Artists' Network of Refuse & Resist in New York City in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the twin towers. People were asked to wear a dust mask (common in NYC after 9/11), dress all in black (common in NYC all the time), show up at Times Square at exactly 5 pm, and remain absolutely silent. Each participant held a sign that read “Our Grief Is Not a Cry for War.” These vigils were silent and solemn, but there was a precision to the message that gave them a visceral potency in that emotionally raw time, for participants and observers alike.

### RELATED TOOLS

#### Stories

- 99% Bat Signal
- Bring Back Our Girls
- Kisangani Demands Electric Power
- Manich Msamah
- Pyramid of Shoes
- Round Dance Revolution
- Standing Man
- Who Would Accept?
- Zapatista Caravan

#### Tactics

- Advanced leafleting
- Blockade
- Creative petition delivery
- Distributed action
- Human banner
- Hunger strike
- Image theatre
- Lamentation
- Light Brigade
- Trek
- Visibility action

#### Principles

The most famous vigils of the late twentieth century were probably those organized by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, a group of Argentinian women whose children were disappeared by Argentina's 70s-era military dictatorship. By gathering every Thursday for more than a decade in the plaza in front of the Presidential Palace, they not only kept vigil for their lost loved ones, but also kept pressure on the government to answer for its crimes.

The "artistry" of a vigil can be exceedingly complex, or as simple as a few basic rituals. The simple fact of women wearing black and gathering in silence on Fridays gives shape and presence to the Women in Black worldwide network of vigils. Begun by Israeli women during the First Intifada to protest the occupation of Palestine, it has since expanded across the globe and embraced broader anti-war and pro-justice themes, but nonetheless maintains its distinctive character. At the other end of the spectrum, artist Suzanne Lacy has created complex works of art in which victims of sexual violence stand vigil amidst the art installations that tell their stories.

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## LEARN MORE

The Body Politics of Suzanne Lacy

Jeff Kelly in *\*But Is It Art?\**, Ed. Nina Felshin, 1994

<https://books.google.com/books?id=CSXrAAAAMAAJ&sitesec=reviews>

The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle

T.V. Reed, 2005

<https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/the-art-of-protest>

Our Grief Is Not a Cry for War

<http://www.dreadscott.net/works/our-grief-is-not-a-cry-for-war/>

Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo

<https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/the-mothers-of-the-disappeared-challenging-the-junta-in-argentina-1977-1983/>

Women in Black

<http://womeninblack.org/>

- Balance art and message
- Bring the issue home
- Build strength through repetition
- Consider your audience
- Focus on basic needs
- Give voice to those that can't speak
- Kill them with kindness
- Know your cultural terrain
- Lead with sympathetic characters
- No one wants to watch a drum circle
- Show, don't tell
- Simple rules can have grand results
- This ain't the Sistine chapel
- Use the power of ritual
- Use your cultural assets

## Theories

- Action logic
- Ethical spectacle
- Expressive and instrumental actions
- Hamoc and hamas

## Methodologies

- Battle of the story
- Story of self, us, and now

## TAGS

Action design, Art, Dictatorship