

TACTIC

ELECTORAL GUERRILLA THEATRE

By running for public office as a prank, you can sabotage a particularly ugly policy or candidate, popularize a radical idea, or challenge the limits of the electoral system itself.

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“GET PEOPLE’S ATTENTION WITH HUMOUR AND FOLLOW UP WITH A FEW SIMPLE YET RADICAL IDEAS — THE-WORLD-WE-WANT-TO-SEE TYPE OF IDEAS.”

“The joke is mightier than the sword.”

—Bassem Youssef

Reverend Billy, an anti-consumerist performance artist, running for mayor of New York City; a drag queen running for the Australian senate as the queer doppelgänger of far-right racist politician Pauline Hanson; and Cacareco the Rhinoceros running — and actually winning — São Paulo city council elections! These are all examples of electoral guerrilla theatre, in which activists creatively disrupt the business-as-usual public office elections to inspire critique of the electoral system or the choices on offer.

The term electoral guerrilla yokes two seemingly incompatible approaches. Electoral activists work within the state’s most conventional avenues in an attempt to reform the system peacefully. Guerrillas, in the military sense, exist on the extreme margins of the social system, launching surprise, swift attacks against the state before disappearing again. This contradiction is what makes electoral guerrilla theatre a wild card in the repertoire of resistance. It is an unstable and problematic combination that can take all players involved by surprise.

Winning is rarely the goal. However, by piggybacking on the massive media attention that elections gather (see: TACTIC: Media-jacking), a clever guerrilla campaign can attract much more public attention than might otherwise be possible. Craft a compelling and funny character that fits your critique, say, a pro-corruption pharaoh

POTENTIAL RISKS

If there is a candidate running that you actually do support, take care to craft your campaign in such a way that it amplifies theirs, or at least doesn’t interfere with it. Don’t let your satire upstage your ally to the point that it detracts from their campaign.

RELATED TOOLS

Stories

- Billionaires for Bush
- Panty power

Tactics

- Creative disruption
- Cultural disobedience
- Culture jamming
- Hoax
- Identity correction
- Legislative theatre

who wants to get in on the easy plunder that national establishments in Cairo have been witnessing, for example. Craft your persona, and start crashing mainstream political events — or make a scene when you are prevented from crashing (see: TACTIC: Creative disruption). Even better, earn more scandalous attention by bringing your absurdity through the front door of the power structure by getting a slot in an “equal time” debate, or getting on the ballot with your silly character name, or getting interviewed by the straight media in character.

When trying this approach, there are a couple of things to keep in mind. First, do what they do but with a critical difference (see: THEORY: Alienation effect). If you’re doing this right, by absurdly aping the clichés of the “proper” candidates you can call attention to the fact that they are just as socially constructed and fake as your pharaoh/witch/rhino/etc. Cut ribbons. Kiss babies. Bring out the empty symbolism of these rituals, and insert your own radical critique.

Second, combine serious and playful elements in your election platform. You should actually have a serious point you’re making, and in the middle of all the absurdity and pranks, while you’ve got people’s attention, make that point. Jello Biafra did a great job illustrating this principle during his run for mayor of San Francisco in 1979. Some of his “if I am elected” platform made folks laugh bitterly; some planks — like suggesting that beat cops be elected by the neighborhoods they patrol — made folks think “hmmm . . . actually that’s not a bad idea.” Get people’s attention with humour and follow up with a few simple yet radical ideas — The-World-We-Want-to-See type of ideas (see: THEORY: Prefigurative politics). This way you’re not just talking about what you’re against, but what you’re for.

When done right, electoral guerrilla theatre is serious play at its best.

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LEARN MORE

The Colbert Rapport

Larry Bogad, The Nation, 2007

<https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/colbert-rapport/>

Electoral Guerrilla Theatre: Radical Ridicule and Social Movements

Larry Bogad, 2016

<https://books.google.com/books?id=2ovDCwAAQBAJ&dq>

- Media-jacking

Principles

- Anyone can act
- Balance art and message
- Brand or be branded
- Bring the issue home
- Develop an inside-outside strategy
- Do the media’s work for them
- Know your cultural terrain
- Play to the audience that isn’t there
- Put your target in a decision dilemma
- Reframe the issue
- Stay on message
- Turn the tables
- Use humour to undermine authority
- Use others’ prejudices against them
- Use the law, don’t be afraid of it
- Use your radical fringe to shift the Overton window

Theories

- Alienation effect
- Ethical spectacle
- Floating signifier
- Prefigurative politics
- The propaganda model

Methodologies

- Battle of the story

TAGS

Campaign strategy, Elections, Humour, Media