

TACTIC INFLATABLES

An inflatable prop (pneumatic object made of plastic foil, filled with air or helium) with the right symbol can be a great way to frame your action and communicate your message.

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Artúr van Balen

Artúr van Balen co-founded the artist group Eclectic Electric Collective (2009-2012) and founded the art-activist platform Tools for Action (2012-present), in which he gives participatory skillshare workshops on how to make inflatables for community building and as a tool for intervention. He is in love with everything that inflates and currently researching the technological evolution of inflatables.

“THERE IS NOTHING AS SAD AND DEMORALIZING AS A LIMP INFLATABLE.”

“My creativity, no matter how poor, is for me a far better guide than all the knowledge with which my head has been crammed. In the night of power, its glimmer keeps the enemy forces at bay.”

—Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*

Inflatable props, or inflatables, can transform a boring protest march into a playful, memorable, and interactive event. Inflatables are pneumatic objects made of thin plastic foil and filled with air or helium. Folded into small bundles, they can be transported in a backpack or suitcase. Once inflated, they mesmerize with their enormous size, softness, and gravity-defying weightlessness.

Inflatables bring a tactical frivolity to protest settings. They can be put to many uses, from engaging the crowd, to ridiculing the police, to providing an iconic meme for the media (see: PRINCIPLE: Do the media’s work for them), to forcing authorities into a decision dilemma (see: PRINCIPLE: Put your target in a decision dilemma). In the same way that protest theatre uses comedy and absurdism as a tactic to get beyond police lines (see: STORY: Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army), the grotesque, goofy nature of inflatables can be used to similarly disarm or ridicule the authorities.

The building of large-scale inflatables is difficult to do alone, so making it a social activity of equal importance to the action that follows is not only crucial, but powerful. There is something poetic and utopian in collaboratively bringing to life lightweight, oversized

POTENTIAL RISKS

Creating inflatables can be technically demanding and, once deployed, they can be easily damaged. There is nothing as sad and demoralizing as a limp inflatable. There are, however, some ways to compensate for these weaknesses: Avoid making holes by working in a clean environment free of sharp objects. For objects that are bigger than 5 metres, you can use a fan that continuously inflates the object. This allows the inflatable to have a few small tears without it looking limp. Bring tape with you to the action to repair the biggest holes.

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Stories

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structures. The work is ideally suited for engaging people from diverse backgrounds: creatives, bringing artistic skill, as well as activists, bringing energy and strategy. As the big inflatable takes shape, excitement grows over the collectively built sculpture that soon will be shining in public. The inflatable production process is, therefore, the ideal creative space that can foster trust and friendships that go beyond a political mobilization.

One example of a successful inflatable is the 12-metre, silver, inflatable hammer that was built in Berlin and sent in a suitcase to the United Nations Climate Conference in Cancún, Mexico, in 2010. The global march for climate justice stalled at the fences assembled 100 metres in front of the conference complex. A sense of frustration was in the air. Suddenly a group of protesters ran in with a gigantic hammer above their heads and banged the inflatable against the police barriers. In full view of the press, the Mexican police ripped the inflatable to pieces. Within hours, the global media corporations declared the inflatable hammer the symbol of the protests for that day.

Another example is the inflatable cobblestones used in 2012 in Berlin during the May Day protests and in Barcelona against the austerity cuts. These simple cubes, made of silver reflective foil and tape, were easy to build in larger quantities. At the Berlin May Day protests, the inflatables proved very effective in disarming aggressive police and buoying spirits after the crowd got kettled in. Bouncing the inflatables against a phalanx of heavily armed riot cops was a humorous activity, as the police could not help but to bounce them back and were thus unwillingly participating in a game of catch. Videos show the cops struggling with the slippery surface of the material, trying to restore order but in fact engaging in slapstick comedy. The action caused loud laughter and effectively flipped the standard media portrayal of the protest from “stone-throwing troublemakers” to “mean old riot cops destroying a balloon.”

As we can see from both of these examples, inflatables are most powerful when they are not only used as a visual element in a march, but when they are placed into a tactical, performative situation, which might involve blockades (see: PRINCIPLE: The real action is your target's reaction). Striking a balance between utter seriousness and a sense of absurdity or humour is key for a compelling story. And of course it is important to have a team of photographers ready to document the situation.

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Tools for Action

<http://www.toolsforaction.net/>

Inflatables for Protest: An Interview With Artúr van Balen/Tools for

Clown Army

- Reclaim the Streets

Tactics

- Carnival protest
- Mass street action
- Visibility action

Principles

- Do the media's work for them
- Put your target in a decision dilemma
- Say it with props
- The real action is your target's reaction
- Think narratively

Theories

- Action logic
- Activism
- Memes

Methodologies

- Points of intervention

TAGS

Action design, Art, Humour, Pranks

Action

Steffi Duarte, Victoria and Albert Museum, 2014

<https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/disobedient-objects/tools-for-action-interview-with-artur-van-balen>