

# Beautiful Trouble or how to move between art and revolt

Julia Ramírez

**Beautiful Trouble. A Toolbox for Revolution.** Andrew Boyd and Dave Oswald Mitchell (eds.). OR Books, New York and London 2012, 450 pages

*Beautiful Trouble* puts forward, one after another, different principles and ways of carrying out creative activism, listing them with clarity and with practical instructions on how to use them. It is no coincidence that one of the editors, Andrew Boyd, is a leading figure within this field, having led satirical campaigns such as *Billionaires for Bush*, one of the book's case studies [1]. Together with Dave Oswald Mitchell, Boyd coordinates an multiple authorship that involves ten groups and "dozens of artists and activists from all over the world" that seek to convey a knowledge which is intimately tied to praxis.



Fig. 1

*Beautiful Trouble* divide sus entradillas a doble página en "tácticas", "principios", "teorías" y "casos de estudio". En cada una de ellas se discuten las ventajas e inconvenientes, mencionando ejemplos reales y haciendo un listado de secciones relacionadas dentro del propio libro [2]. Resulta interesante que movimientos sociales que han sido etiquetados como parte de una cultura del hazlo tú mismo por basarse en la acción directa y tratar de no delegar la responsabilidad en otros, adopten un formato que emula el hazlo tú mismo del bricolaje. Se trata de montar una revuelta como quien monta una estantería sueca: el libro se autoproclama una caja de herramientas para la revolución, una especie de kit insurgente, listo para ser puesto en práctica.



Greenpeace Nuclear Free Seas campaign: British aircraft carrier HMS Royal in Hamburg harbor. © Greenpeace/Vermont, Déter

projected in real time. With a laser pointer, people on the street can write messages to others inside a building, whether they're friends and family in jail or a CEO in his corner office.

Projections help us up-end the power dynamic. The buildings of the powerful can feel so big and our voices and protest signs so small. But when a huge "99%" bat signal lights up the night sky, or you see your own handwriting scrawled across a corporate HQ in real time, it begins to level the playing field. Small voices are writ large.

**Related:**

**TACTICS**

- Human banner p. 56
- Banner hang p. 12
- Détournement/Culture jamming p. 28
- Media-jacking p. 72
- Mass street action p. 68

**THEORIES**

- Action logic p. 208
- Points of intervention p. 250
- Ethical spectacle p. 230

**CASE STUDIES**

- 99% bat signal p. 278
- Koch guerrilla drive-in web

**POTENTIAL PITFALLS:** The technology is very powerful, "spectacular" in nature, and often under the control of one person or a small group who could potentially manipulate a large and impressionable crowd. This power needs to be kept accountable to the broader group, and should be wielded with great care.

**BALANCE ART AND MESSAGE:** When designing your action, let your imagination range far and wide. Consider, in particular, its site-specific nature, and look for ways the medium itself can highlight your message. Consider all the artful elements at work in the 2008 *Free Tibet projection* on the Chinese consulate in New York: the persecuted Tibetan activist was at that moment literally in hiding a world away, yet was able to speak directly to — and literally on — a massive institution that was complicit in his repression. His handwriting splaying across the marble facade in real time was at once defiant and intimate. His private act of dissent had become not just public but beautiful.

**KEY PRINCIPLE**  
at work

**OTHER PRINCIPLES AT WORK:**

- Make the invisible visible p. 152
- Make your actions both concrete and communicative p. 154
- Do the media's work for them p. 124
- Know your cultural terrain p. 142
- Stay on message p. 178
- Show, don't tell p. 174
- Consider your audience p. 118
- Think narratively p. 186
- Reframe p. 158

TACTIC: General strike

Fig. 2

For Boyd, the texts should be read "before going out into the street or after having gone out, when one sits down to reflect and plan the next action." Know-how accumulated over decades is presented in a simple and practical form, ensuring that *Beautiful Trouble* could serve as a bridge between generations or as a kind of genealogy of practice. The *creative commons* license means that these texts are accessible in a free form, without copyright restrictions.

Most of the actions and case studies have a creative manner of conduct that is centered on the production of symbolism and the generation of images. In the book's promotional video we are told that "today's social movements have a creative new edge that's blurring the boundaries between artist and activist, hacker and dreamer". On many occasions it deploys humor as a political weapon: *Beautiful Trouble* is an entertaining and audacious book which provokes smiles in the reader. Its theses are read between the lines, left implicit under an appearance that lacks pretentiousness [3].



Fig. 3

If we accept that creative activism constitutes a kind of current or hybrid branch situated between art and political action, this book could function as a sort of canon of its authors, ideas and practices. In this sense, *Beautiful Trouble* has its own preferences and oversights: Marxism seems to have been practically erased, ideology is not made explicit and a certain pop sensibility is emphasized, in which US campaigns very much play the leading role. The compilation is put together with an awareness of the implicit limitations of a format that owes so much to the dictionary: in a gesture that is more symbolic than practical, there are blank pages so that an active reader can fill them with reflections or accounts of street action.

Reading about proposals that range from guerilla theater to general strike, one is unable to avoid reflecting on the eternal question of the limitations of art or, in this case, the limitations of creative activism. In response to these questions, Andrew Boyd affirms that, in a strict sense, “creative intervention could call attention to an issue, but it is important to understand that many things need to happen in order to produce a change in society”. Nonetheless, the question is not so simple:

“In a wider sense, one could define creative intervention as a real movement. One could say that the Egyptian revolution was no more than a huge revolutionary creative action. In that sense there are no limits because your creative piece is your revolutionary piece”<sup>1</sup>

*Beautiful Trouble* is an invitation to think through praxis and thereby test the elasticity of those fine lines that separate art from life, the dreamed world from the present world. All of this with the playful attitude that characterizes the best of the classic artistic avant-gardes [4].



Fig. 4