

LigoranoReese

6 creative ways to make your point at the conventions

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100 naked women participate in the "Everything She Says Means Everything" art installation in Cleveland. (spencertunickcleveland.com)

Here we go again. The Republican Convention officially opened this week in Cleveland, Ohio, with the Democratic Convention nipping at its heels next week. Every four years the United States is thrown into this national frenzy that is part infomercial, part political theater and somehow part electoral reality (we do end up with a presidential candidate). Since the current representative electoral system leaves many progressive activists feeling shut out of the two-party system, we are faced with what often feels like a huge distraction from our "real" activist or community-based work.

Amidst the grim backdrop of the killing of black men and police officers in the United States, and the recent mass murders across the globe, the stage is nevertheless set for the 2016 presidential conventions. It is hard to tell whether there will be more or less protests at either convention in this atmosphere; we do know that there will be an extraordinary level of security rules and protocols put in place, further limiting free speech and free association in the vicinity of the events themselves.

Still, many are compelled to use the opportunity of this national media circus to highlight critical issues on the big stage, and to build networks to fight for progressive change long after the conventions are over. To capitalize on this moment and minimize risks to individuals, many groups are harnessing creative and dispersed tactics. In 2016, actions run the gamut from encircling the city with love by holding hands, to nude photo shoots, to building a wall, along with the expected protest marches at the RNC and the DNC.

The naked truth

Early on Sunday morning at a secluded location nearby the Cleveland Convention Center, 100 women stripped down “to expose the naked truth about the Republicans” at an art installation named “Everything She Says Means Everything.” They held mirrors to reflect their anger at the Republican rhetoric against women and minorities. Taking it all off to get on the news can be a powerful tactic that juxtaposes the vulnerability of nakedness with the power of exposure.

The organizers of this event report that despite the current restrictions and the risks associated with getting naked in public, 1,800 women signed up to participate, and “would have shown up naked in front on the steps of the convention to make art with what may be the most controversial subject in this presidential race, a woman’s body.”

Spencer Tunick, the New York artist behind this event, further noted: “The philosophy of the artwork relates to the idea of the sacred feminine. By holding mirrors, we hope to suggest that women are a reflection and embodiment of nature, the sun, the sky and the land. We want to express the belief that we will rely upon the strength, intuition and wisdom of progressive and enlightened women to find our place in nature and to regain the balance within it. The mirrors communicate that we are a reflection of ourselves, each other and of the world that surrounds us.”

Melting away



An ice sculpture by Ligorano/Reese. (Twitter/@melted_away)

The idea that the “American Dream” is disappearing right in front of us won’t be just a feeling anymore. At both the Republican and Democratic conventions, designers Nora Ligorano and Marshall Reese will install a 30-foot-long ice sculpture of the words “The American Dream.” It will melt away, dripping with meaning, “highlighting the erosion of opportunity and social equality” embodied in the vision of America as a land of promise. This is part of their grand series of work entitled “Melted Away,” which has utilized words to illustrate seemingly solid concepts and beliefs to communicate their tenuous nature as they melt. The melting sculpture also embodies the tension of the unknown challenges ahead, as the letters transform and disappear at unpredictable rates. The artists have seen the physical weeping of the statues themselves matched by an emotional and guttural response of the witnessing public, moving folks to at least reflect on our situation, if not move to action. In support of this, teach-ins and readings will be featured in both locations. The oldest free speech organization, the City Club of Cleveland, will anchor the Cleveland event.

Because of the extreme transitory nature of the sculptures, the entire project will be live-streamed, and posted on social media, extending the reach of installation well beyond the 24 hours it is anticipated to physically exist. It will also live on through the meltwater that will be collected and bottled, available as the “Tears of the American Dream.”

After almost 10 years of producing temporary monuments, the logistical challenges of producing a transient artwork of this scale have only increased. This work is crafted from ice — a completely familiar and transparent material — and is very accessible, allowing viewers to touch the melting letters and become

part of the work. Still, as security concerns are heightened and corporations buy up more venues, fewer permits are available to groups for free speech activities in convention cities. Determined to produce sculptures, Ligorano/Reese partnered with ArtsEverywhere, a project of the Musagetes Foundation, to use a local arts venue in neighboring Ohio City.

As Ligorano/Reese have said, “The role of the artist is to express ideas beyond established discourse — to inspire, uplift and motivate. To paraphrase poet Denise Levertov, insofar as art has a social function, it is to awaken sleepers by other means than shock.”

Wall off hate



Activists with Mijente building the Wall Off Trump before the RNC. (Facebook/Mijente)

Donald Trump has called for a wall between the United States and Mexico, a physical and symbolic manifestation of his xenophobic platform intent on mass deportations and immigration restrictions. In response, activists are building a wall to instead wall off hate — to make Cleveland and the country safe from the hate of Trump and the Republican Party’s platform.

This Wall Off Trump project is being built by organizers, artists, veterans, young and old, who are partnered with Mijente, the Ruckus Society, Iraq Veterans Against the War, Working Families Party, the Other 98%, First Seven Design Labs, and others. They are promoting this as a line of defense for a progressive future for the country. Funding for this project was crowd-sourced and is ongoing.

Deployment of the wall is set for Wednesday morning in Cleveland. As Tania Unzueta, a Mijente organizer noted, “Conventions are splash points, a chance to tell our stories, make people aware of what we are trying to say, what we are working on ... to meet people who are allies, confront those who are promoting ugliness and hatred and build a network of progressive activists to move forward with.”

From her perspective as an undocumented, disenfranchised youth, taking risks with actions like Wall Off Trump serve to make the issues that impact her and the broader community visible. Although there will not

be a wall built at the convention in Philadelphia, Mijente and others will be organizing a march to highlight similar issues around immigration for the Democratic delegates.

Inspired beauty pageant



Code Pink activists dressed as Lady Liberty at the RNC in Cleveland. (Facebook/Code Pink)

Code Pink is mobilizing at both the DNC and RNC to lift up the issues of militarism and refugees by calling on values of justice, compassion, feminism and solidarity. Given Donald Trump's longstanding and problematic relationship with beauty pageants, Code Pink is going to hold an RNC-inspired pageant. Expect to see contestants with names including "I Miss Justice," "I Miss Compassion" and "I Miss Solidarity" just to start the list of what has been lost in the discourse this election cycle due to Trump's rhetoric. To highlight immigration issues, Lady Liberty costumes with messages that say "Immigrants Welcome" are being deployed. Alli McCracken, the director of Code Pink, has noted they are focusing on reaching the delegates at the conventions themselves, hoping to make the connections clear between the perpetual wars, particularly in the Middle East, and the cost of militarism to women and families globally.

Walk your talk



Posters for the "Longest Walk." (meglouise.info)

At the RNC in Cleveland, female-identifying individuals will gather to participate in a formalized, ritualized performance piece to weave together the stories of struggle of women everywhere. Dancer Meg Louise and print maker Angela Davis Fegan have crafted an interdisciplinary community event and public body installation; they are inviting people to join in the "Longest Walk" and represent the issues most relevant in their lives and communities by walking with posters that they have personalized to reflect those concerns. Based on research of nonviolent movements, it will involve a group of people in constant motion, offering a presence against, and a way to interact with, the dehumanizing policies of the 2016 Republican platform.

According to Louise, "In the end, every participant makes part of an emergent system in the same way that citizenry makes government." Recognizing that this is a symbolic performance piece, Louise has conceived of this as a "living monument to women from around the world and throughout history who have put their bodies on the line for their beliefs. It is a monument in time to the exhaustingly slow progression of lasting change. It is a monument to the contested space of the female body – being too often used for personal or political gain. Most importantly, it is a monument to the resiliency and power of embodied action."

Trump and Cruz kiss



A billboard created by Planting Peace in Cleveland. (Twitter/Democracy Now!)

Much of the work being done in Cleveland is about fighting back with intentional love. In Cleveland, a provocative image of Trump and former challenger Sen. Ted Cruz about to kiss each other along with a powerful progressive message that reads “Love Trumps Hate. End homophobia.” was posted on a billboard by Planting Peace. As an organization that works to support LGBT rights, they are calling for an immediate change in the Republican platform, “that brings full fundamental rights to the LGBT community, and a narrative that empowers LGBT people to live and love freely.”

The bottom line this convention season: There are plenty of creative and potentially powerful actions and events planned in both Cleveland and Philadelphia — and lots of opportunities for you to have your voice heard. To stay safe, use your street smarts and activist antennae, and don’t bring any fruit to the RNC. For starters, check out this list of stuff prohibited at the RNC for the full story. And while you are at it, check out Stephen Colbert’s unauthorized taking of the podium at the RNC to officially launch the “2016 Republican National Hungry For Power Games.” As he is pushed off the stage by security, he said, “Look, I know I’m not supposed to be up here, but to be honest neither is Donald Trump.”