U.S. street artists protest against art censorship of artist Blu, 2010-2011

December 9, 2010 to April 16, 2011

Country: United States
Location City/State/Province: Los Angeles
Location Description: Museum of Contemporary Art

Goals:
To make a statement, support Blu, and to keep the conversation going; stand up for freedom of expression, and to voice opposition against militarism and war

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 056. Selective social boycott

Methods in 2nd segment:
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 021. Delivering symbolic objects
- 024. Symbolic lights
- 026. Paint as protest
- 044. Mock funerals
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 178. Guerrilla theatre

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:

Methods in 5th segment:

Methods in 6th segment:
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 026. Paint as protest
- 044. Mock funerals
• 178. Guerrilla theatre

Classifications

Classification:
Defense
Cluster:
Human Rights
Group characterization:

• Artists and Veterans

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
LA RAW, Leo Limon, Joey Krebs, Carol Wells, Todd Moyer, John Carr, and others
Partners:
LA Anonymous
External allies:
News-reporters, Sonali Kolhatkar from Uprising Radio
Involvement of social elites:
Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

• Blu
• LA Anonymous

Groups in 2nd Segment:

• Blu (exit)
• Carol Wells
• Joey Krebs
• John Carr
• LA Anonymous (exit)
• LA Raw
• Leo Limon
• News-reporters
• Sonali Kolhatkar from Uprising Radio
• Todd Moyer
• artists
• veterans

Groups in 3rd Segment:
Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Jeffrey Deitch (director of MOCA)

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not known

Campaigner violence:
None known

Repressive Violence:
None known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
3 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:
The protesters achieved their goals by supporting Blu, keeping the conversation going, standing up for freedom of expression and voicing their opposition against militarism and war of making a statement. However, the protesters and LA RAW did not get MOCA or Deitch to change museum policies about censorship.

Jeffrey Deitch, the director of Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) commissioned Blu, an Italian street artist, to paint a mural on the Geffen Contemporary building as part of the “Art in the Streets” exhibit about graffiti, which was planned to open April 17, 2011. While Blu painted the mural on December 8, 2010, Deitch decided to remove the mural within mere hours after he started painting it, and the mural was completely whitewashed by the next day, Thursday December 9.

Blu created a scene of coffins draped in one-dollar bills to express his antiwar sentiments. Deitch considered this mural inappropriate because the wall faces an L.A. Veterans’ Affairs Hospital and the Go For Broke monument, which honors Japanese-American soldiers who fought in the Pacific during World War II.

When news reporters contacted the veterans’ affairs center management, the management claimed that they had not complained to MOCA. Representatives from the National Go For Broke Education Center claimed that some members found the mural distasteful, but the organization had not voiced any objections to the museum.

After news reporters publicized the censorship of Blu’s work, MOCA invited Blu to come back and paint another mural. He refused to paint another mural over his erased mural in protest of their censorship.
On December 16, the art activist group LA Anonymous created a paste-up poster that they displayed a few blocks from MOCA. The image of the artwork spread virally on the Internet when the LA Times published it the following day.

On January 3, 2011 a crew of about twenty street and graffiti artists and war veterans gathered in the empty parking lot of MOCA's Geffen Contemporary building to stage a guerrilla protest performance against Deitch. Protesters included respected Chicano artist and Vietnam War veteran Leo Limon, Joey Krebs (The Phantom Street Artist), and Carol Wells (founder and executive director of the Center for the Study of Political Graphics).

The protesters projected laser graffiti out of the back seat of a car with a laptop perched on the roof of the car. The artists took turns tagging the whitewashed museum wall using a handmade laser graffiti gun created specially for the event by artist/computer programmer, Todd Moyer. His specially designed computer program animated the light-graffiti so that it looked like dripping paint as it hit the wall. The laser light show climaxed when the protesters projected a photo of Blu's mural back onto its wall of origin. They then superimposed the word "censorship" in red across the projected image. In addition to projecting images on the wall, protesters gave out handmade models of Blu’s coffin with a dollar bill draped over it.

The artists’ and veterans’ laser show protest gained a lot of press and brought up the issues freedom of speech and censorship. A participant and artist, John Carr later commented that their protest was about making a statement, supporting Blu and freedom of speech, and to keep the conversation going, which they achieved by their guerilla protest.

On January 10 many of the artists who participate in the laser show protest formed the group LA RAW. These LA based artists & activists aimed to focus their efforts on two key principles: 1) standing up for freedom of expression and 2) voicing opposition against militarism and war. That same day, Sonali Kolhatkar from Uprising Radio on KPFK in Los Angeles hosted a discussion with Carol Wells (LA RAW representative) and artists Man One and Vyal One about MOCA's censorship of Blu.

To further their publicity, LA RAW distributed “Deitch condoms” that had the phrase "Don't Be Blu, Practice Safe Art”—a reference to the health campaign slogan “practice safe sex”. They meant the condoms to symbolize censorship of art.

LA RAW continued to speak out against censorship and held a protest on January 20 against Wayne Clough, Secretary of the Smithsonian Museum, who recently removed David Wojnarowicz’s 1987 video, “A Fire in My Belly” (see “U.S. Artist's Campaign Against Art Censorship at the Smithsonian, Wojnarowicz’s “A Fire in My Belly”, 2010-2011”). LA RAW held a mock funeral procession for the freedom of expression.

On April 6 LA RAW created a paste-up poster nearby MOCA which read: “Broadum and Deitchy: Safest Show on Earth”. The poster featured Deitch as a circus performer with a huge smile on his face. They also painted Blu’s mural on the side of a van that they drove around.

The exhibition “Art in the Streets” opened on April 16 and LA RAW protested with guerilla theater. The campaigners dressed up and whitewashed each other with paint. They also unrolled a scrolling banner in front of the new mural that read “One Nation Under Deitch” and held a mock funeral in remembrance of Blu’s mural. LA RAW plans to continue protesting art censorship not only at MOCA, but also about national art censorship.

**Research Notes**

**Influences:**

This campaign influenced and was influenced by the U.S. Artist's Campaign Against Art Censorship at the Smithsonian, Wojnarowicz’s “A Fire in My Belly”, 2010-2011 (direct link located in narrative of this case). (1,2)

**Sources:**


**Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:**
Nicole Vanchieri, 10/04/2011

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Links: