

environmental youth forum

# DIRECT ACTION TOOLKIT: CREATE A PUBLIC ARTWORK



## What is direct action?

**Direct action** refers to the political tactics and methods used to raise awareness or force discussion on an issue. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., nonviolent direct action “seeks to dramatize the issue [so] that it can no longer be ignored.” Like voting, direct actions, which include protests and sit-ins, are an essential part of a democracy. Unlike voting, however, direct actions can happen at any time, and anybody in a society can initiate a direct action—not just those of voting age.

## Public Art

There is a long history of using art as a form of public demonstration. In the early 20th Century, painters like Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros turned public murals into a full-fledged art movement, painting images designed to draw attention to social issues. In the second half of the 20th Century, graffiti gave rise to the international street art movement, with artists like Banksy creating public art to address topics like war, oppression, and inequality. Whether or not you create art in public or create it in private and share it via the internet, a powerful image is an excellent way to communicate a message directly to the heart of your audience.

# INSTRUCTIONS

## Step 1: Research the issue

Effective direct actions always start with a solid understanding of the issue you are trying to address and the community you are trying to reach with your message. First, understand both sides of the issue. Then, figure out what you are trying to say and, just as importantly, who you are trying to say it to. Are you addressing people who feel differently from you to raise their awareness of your perspective? Or are you addressing people who agree with you to create a feeling of solidarity?

## Step 2: Pick your surface

You don't need a big wall to make impactful art. Work with what you have. If you're lucky, you might get permission from your school or another organization to paint a public mural. Otherwise, you can create activist art on smaller surfaces, like paper and canvas, and then share it digitally. Another option is to get a piece of plywood to paint on, which you can then install in a public location. If you do plan to paint or install your work outdoors, make sure you have permission from the property owners.

## Step 3: Sketch your design

Start out by creating a pencil sketch of your piece on your surface. Consider what imagery you want to include. Use images, symbols, and icons that capture the most important parts of the issue you are raising awareness about. Be thoughtful in your composition: Make the most important elements of your work large. Try including some text, like a powerful quotation or phrase that supports your opinion.

## Step 4: Paint the final version

After sketching, fill in with colors using something permanent. If your work will actually be outside, you need to use something strong and weather-resistant. Wall murals use a layer of white gesso (a primer which helps the paint stick to the wall) with colored acrylic paint on top. Spray paints are also extremely durable, but you'll need to wear a mask and get help from an adult to use spray paint safely. If your artwork is smaller, you have more options, such as markers, colored pencils, watercolors, and pastels.

## Step 5: Share it!

If you are able to paint your piece in an actual public space, then you're all set! Otherwise, use digital tools to spread your work, such as social media or an online classroom. Also, look for local art contests. If you can make photocopies of your artwork, you can try posting copies on community bulletin boards in your neighborhood; you can sometimes find these at small businesses like coffee shops.



**"The role of the artist is that of a soldier of the revolution."**

Diego Rivera  
20th Century Mexican Muralist