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## The Vomitorium: Gross Domestic Product as Agitprop

*We've come a long way since the Boston Tea Party. Two Artists' and lots of volunteers induce a brazen meditation on consumerism and empire.*

The Vomitorium was produced by Wendy Tremayne, Marina Potok and Dawn Ladd at St. Marks Church in NYC for a single performance on August 17th, 2004

**By Wendy  
Tremayne and  
Marina Potok**

Ever consider public vomiting to as a means of social protest? It might sound strange, but as artists and activists trying to make a pointed statement for an American public which has become inured to the shocking, we had to pull out all the creative stops in conveying the materialism and imperialism that we feel characterizes our status quo.

So setting up a public vomiting troth seemed like a good way to get people's attention. Plus, we had a historical reference point to give our project added legitimacy: the Roman Empire, where vomitoriums were commonplace in the homes of the rich who allegedly ate and drank until they were stuffed to the limit, then forced themselves to vomit so that they could eat again and again all the while being serviced on many levels by a variety of servants.

We decided to stage the Vomitorium just before the upcoming Republican National Convention in NYC where, not unlike a roman coronation, the few who benefit most from the corporate greed were about to gather for a week, tooting their own gilded horns over fine wine and five-star meals.

In early April, we sent out an email with the subject line "Artist Call Out: Participatory Art Project - Vomitorium" inviting perfect strangers to join the production and offering them a limited but juicy host of archetypes: Roman (must vomit), servant, nude statue, prostitute, entertainer.

We suspected we'd actually be able to find people willing to vomit in public for a political cause, because - and take this as a tip for recruiting when staging your own agitprop - you can always find at



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TECHNIQUE

JEM

PEVEN EVERETT

least 50 people to do any odd thing you name.

We recruited vigorously from the mainstream, encouraging participation from pedestrian ranks at large, and requiring no experience in theater, in keeping with our own level of theatrical expertise.

As responses to our email trickled in, we generated enough momentum to be invited to stage it for the HOWL! 2nd Annual Festival of East Village Arts. We put up a website, engaged a credible biochemist to write a paper on safe vomiting, "So You've Decided to Puke" and recruited a volunteer EMT.

Knowing that vomit would have to transcend its base repulsion factor, we dreamed of a high-end production in a grandiose venue, with beautiful lighting and a killer set that would depict Roman opulence. As near-starving artists, we put our DIY skill sets to good use (see bullet list) and we hoped that everything we needed would eventually find its way to the project - and it did.

Securing a venue for a public barf-a-thon was the hardest task - we'd considered a barge in the East River, public gardens and assorted rooftops before St. Mark's Church opened its doors to us. The Church facade with its massive columns were the perfect stage, and the public entrance was the ideal spot for an audience to gather.

We now had a solid venue and a definite one-night-only performance date.

Through a series of frenzied meetings an eclectic group of 62 volunteers, ages 20 to 63 (none of whom were turned away) collectivized ideas, endeavoring to incorporate every on-theme proposal into the production.

Allowing our volunteers this freedom of expression also proved effective in bringing forward an honest reaction to the notion of Empire. On-stage dialogue was only loosely scripted, about 20% of it was rehearsed, and the rest was ad-lib.

As the weeks passed, various forms of contributions were falling from the sky. Unbelievably, on the day of the show, a huge sign made of LEDs that flashed the word "Vomitorium"(!) arrived at our doorstep; a gift from a complete stranger in Boston. Local restaurants donated food (but when they found out what it was for, they asked us not to mention their names) and the lush set was furnished with donated goods from Materials for the Arts (<http://www.mfta.org>) a non-profit organization.

In the week leading up to the performance volunteers were coming from all over the place, anxious to join. Suddenly and without pre-meditation on our part, the Vomitorium was becoming a proper play.

On August 17, as the first and only performance of the Vomitorium unfolded, we witnessed our cast of non-actors write the play in front of an audience of hundreds. And as the audience cheered them on, the "Romans" unleashed the orgy with all forms of bad behavior, exuding the boredom and arrogance of a privileged and self-destructive people. The servers piled food on brass plates just as quickly as the romans could scarf it down; belly dancers, fire spinners and prostitutes entertained, nude human statues stood unaffected. Then the vomiting began, again and again, becoming a sort of status symbol.

In anticipation of an unsuspecting audience's vomitous reaction, we printed 500 vomit bags with our playbill hand-stamped on it.

As our cast acted out primal impulses, we wondered whether these

characters were lurking in the darkness of each person's psyche, now manifesting through the channels opened up by the production. If you watch the footage, you'll see that undeniably, our cast was not unfamiliar with the range of emotions they acted out on stage. Many in the audience raised their fists and responded with spontaneous chants of "Truth!" with each purge.

It was the culmination of more than 5 months of groundwork and a couple thousand years of western civilization. As we found ourselves cleaning out a vat of barf, the adrenaline still rushing, all we could say to each other was: "this is so punk rock!"

Here are some tips for those of you who'd like to stage your own agitprop:

- A good concept that's properly articulated will generate everything needed to produce it. Put your idea out far and wide and use what comes in to tell you about the way it's being perceived. View all your responses as information that can help you tweak your idea into its best form. We rewrote our text as much as 20 times in search of the right language to convey our project.
- Promote to and recruit from all demographics. There is nothing more validating (and interesting) than a production that speaks to everyone. Our volunteers ranged from 20 years to 63 years old and when viewed by an audience, people of all ages could find themselves in it.
- If you want to see the truth use volunteers. Actors act. Volunteers channel. The performance of *The Vomitorium* was visceral. It was the truth conveyed by those citizens needing to "do" something about how they felt.
- There is a right venue for every project. When you seek a venue be open to all and any possibilities. You may be surprised by who is willing to support you. Think big. Be ridiculous. Try everything.
- If your project is political and has an important message, make it free and offer it in a public space. Your message is your only currency and is best delivered when masses of a diverse population are exposed to it.
- Access all the free help that's available to you:

The Mass Defense League will run your project through the legal grinder and tell you where your at in terms of the law <http://nlg.org>

Materials for the Arts offers free props and materials for artists connected to a non-profit <http://www.mfta.org>

New York Foundation for the Arts has a grant library that is free to the public. They also offer free classes on how to use their databases <http://nyfa.org>

Every City has a Parks Department and many have online maps of useable spaces.

- Love your hate mail. Dialogs that begin with criticism are evidence that your idea is reaching people in a visceral way. People who care enough to write a criticism can turn into your best allies and supporters. You can learn from their different perspectives and ultimately, they represent some portion of the population that will eventually view your work. Respectfully respond and listen carefully.
- Keep your idea open. If you have too many preconceived ideas about how your production will look you will miss opportunities. We incorporated all on theme ideas and consequently wound up with new characters (like *The Vominatrix*), better props, donated art and a script that was better than anything we could have written ourselves.

- Volunteers are most self-empowered when they are asked to express how they feel and when they are invited to participate in the process. When a production becomes theirs, there is no end to the amount of cooperation and creativity that will be generated. Our cast gave us more than their time and creativity, they built props, donated food and wine, helped with all aspects of pre production, donated materials for the show and they made their own costumes.
- Work with what you have. Take what your given and don't sweat what you cant secure. Examine what you have each day and ask yourself how it fits together relative to your theme.

