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Fifty billboards: an art project hopes to provoke debate across America

Art

By Nadja Sayej

After raising \$172,000 on Kickstarter, artists Hank Willis Thomas and Eric Gottesman will launch The 50 State Initiative, sharing artwork on billboards in every US state



Make America Great Again with Spider Martin, Pearl, MS, 2016. Photograph: WyattGallery / ForFreedom

In 1943 Norman Rockwell created a series of four oil paintings based on Franklin D Roosevelt's "four freedoms", which he declared as "the simple, the basic things that must never be lost sight of in the turmoil and unbelievable complexity of our modern world".

They included Freedom of Speech, which Rockwell painted as a man standing up in a public meeting, Freedom of Worship, with praying people, Freedom from Want, with a family eating a meal and Freedom from Fear, with parents tucking children into bed at night.

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Four Freedoms at 75: Norman Rockwell's paintings come to life again

Now these historic paintings are the inspiration for a new public art project launching this fall called the The 50 State Initiative , where artists will be taking over advertising billboard space across the US. Co-founded by New York artists Hank Willis Thomas and Eric Gottesman, the goal is to put artists in the public eye – around the same time politicians will be using public advertising space for the midterm elections.

“Artists and creative people are often seen as voices off to the side, not necessarily driving the main thrust of public discourse,” said Gottesman. “We want to put artists and creativity really right at the center of public discourse and recognize creative people don’t just make paintings, music or movies, but they shape the systems of the society we live in.”

Their artist-run political non-profit For Freedoms raised over \$172,000 from more than 2,100 people on Kickstarter for the billboard project. It was a close call in the critical final hours

“It was a real nailbiter,” said Thomas.

Late night on Tuesday, the duo held a phone call marathon at their new headquarters in Fort Gansevoort, a cultural building in the Meatpacking District of Manhattan, which will become a hub for political art exhibitions, book launches and election-related activities.

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Installation view of Paula Crown's I am FOR. Photograph: PAHC/studio

Rather than running one campaign, they ran smaller ones with a goal of roughly \$3,000 per state. "We monitored them all independently," said Gottesman. "It felt like election night."

The states of Delaware, Alaska, Maine and Vermont were the toughest to raise funds for, but donors pulled through at the last minute.

"Most people funded their own states but there were others who funded other states to help those who need," said Gottesman. "It's a nice model of how we could work, helping out your neighbors."

It began in 2016 when Thomas and Gottesman founded For Freedoms to bring political art projects to the forefront of contemporary art, and have previously hosted political art exhibitions at the Houston Center of Photography, the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York and the Cressman Center for Visual Arts in Louisville.

Over the past three years, the duo have also mounted billboard art projects across the country, many of which are poetic musings on freedom. One popped up in Denver, where the Berlin-based artist Trevor Paglen emblazoned a billboard with the phrase "Protest us from our metadata," while another in Ohio by the Syracuse artist Carrie Mae Weems read "With democracy in the balance, there is only one choice."

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Us Is Them with Wyatt Gallery, New Orleans, LA, 2016. Photograph: Wyatt Gallery / For Freedoms

They are not taking sides politically. “There are many ideas of what these mean to many people, but it opens us up to the possibility that ambiguity are part of these public messages,” said Thomas. “It could change the perceptions of what people have.”

Getting people thinking about grey areas between polarized politics is part of the project’s goal. “We all disagree on things,” said Gottesman. “Reconciling that is at the base of the experiment of democracy in this country.”

The duo are not worried that the public might misunderstand the billboards when they drive past them, in fact, it’s quite the opposite. “We’re worried they might be too didactic, too reductive,” said Thomas. “A lot of political speech winds up being binary, simplistic or dumbing things down.

“In a time when most headlines are about clickbait, this idea of making space for a deeper look into questioning is what our country really needs,” he adds.

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With Democracy In The Balance There Is Only One Choice by the artist Carrie Mae Weems in Columbus, Ohio, 2016. Photograph: Wyatt Gallery/Courtesy of Wyatt Gallery / For Freedoms

While the duo have previously worked with billboard companies such as Lamar Advertising and Outfront Media, they have not disclosed the discounted deals and donated billboard space they are working on to show the art.

Though vanity billboard projects were big in the 1980s with Hollywood stars like Angelyne , are billboards becoming a vintage relic? According to a report on Statistica , there are 341,909 billboards in the US, down from 368,239 in 2016.

“There’s a lot of pushback against billboards, but that’s indicative of the way we’ve been looking at this project,” said Gottesman. “Reclaiming these spaces from what would otherwise be on them – in terms of political messages – is something I feel confident about. The level of discourse in politics has been so poor, we’re trying to elevate that physically and figuratively.”

Though Thomas and Gottesman count themselves fans of Rockwell’s “four freedoms”, they may have found a fifth.

“Another core value is optimism,” said Thomas. “We are trying to create a creative space that is not just about protest, but in spirit of things we believe. We are ‘For Freedoms’ because in democracy, you have to support things you don’t personally agree with or support. What we do this fall is not just an art project, but it hopefully contributes to the general progression and growth of democracy.”