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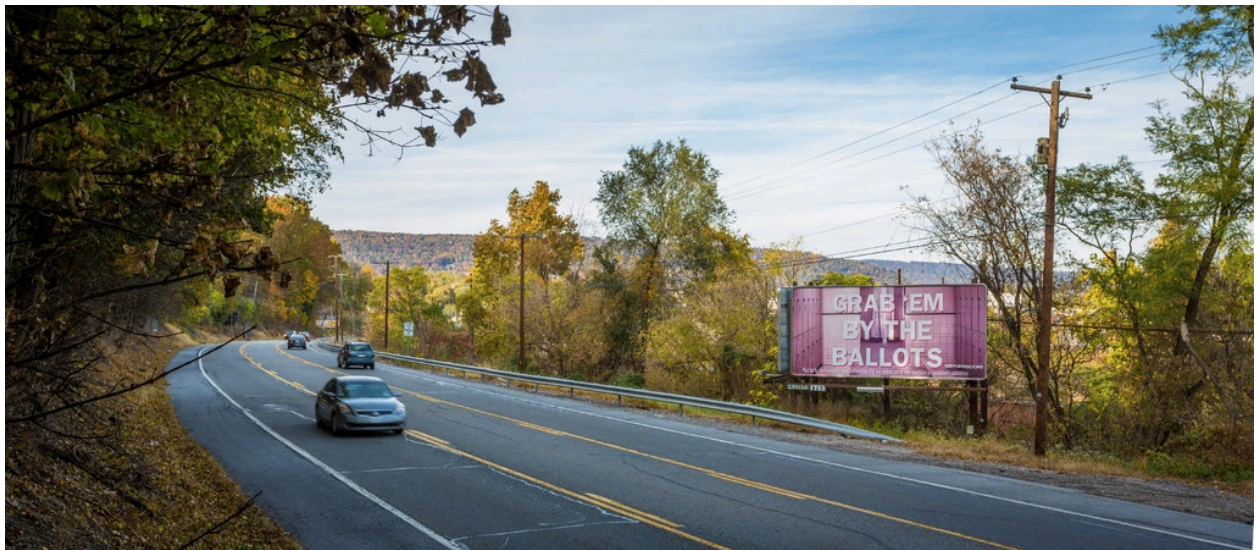
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A Public Art Campaign Will Commission Political Billboards Across the Country

By Andrew R. Chow

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“Grab ‘Em by the Ballots,” a billboard created by Zoë Buckman and For Freedoms in Harrisburg, Pa., in 2016. Credit: For Freedoms

This fall, thousands of billboard and lawn signs will be erected all over the country in advance of the midterms, bearing names of politicians up for election. But a new campaign by the organization For Freedoms aims to use those tools not to promote specific candidates but to galvanize debate and political participation through art. The organization has enlisted artists like Sam Durant, Theaster Gates and Marilyn Minter to create public artwork and lead town halls as part of a \$1.5 million-dollar campaign.

“We are hoping to bring art to the center of public life in the lead-up to the midterms, which is where we think art should belong,” Eric Gottesman, one of the organization’s founders, said in a phone interview.

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A central aspect of the effort, called the 50 State Initiative, will be a fund-raising campaign to put up billboards across the country starting in September. Fifty-two Kickstarter campaigns will seek to raise \$3,000 per state plus Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico. Dozens of artists, including the three mentioned above as well as Tania Bruguera, Trevor Paglen and Carrie Mae Weems, will contribute billboards. Mr. Paglen's work, for example, will focus on the ethics of data collection; Ms. Bruguera will work with the Rhode Island School of Design to create a billboard there.

For Freedoms has also enlisted over 200 local partners — from museums to universities to galleries — to collaborate on free public programming. The Fralin Museum of Art, for example, will use public dialogues and art-making sessions to educate Charlottesville, Va., residents about the history of slavery and discrimination in that city. And the Telfair Museums in Georgia will host a community day, with the exhibiting artists Erin Johnson and Ken Ueno leading tours of their work. More than 175 artists, including Nina Chanel Abney and Emma Sulkowicz, will participate in various ways across the country.

For Freedoms was founded as a super PAC by Mr. Gottesman and Hank Willis Thomas in 2016 and was inspired by Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" wartime address in 1941. Over the last two years, the organization has raised money for town halls and original public artworks with diverse views on political issues. The 50 State Initiative, though, is funded separately from the super PAC.

Mr. Thomas said that the organization decided not to change its goals or methods despite the rapid changes in U.S. politics over the last two years. "The election has caused us to double down and dared us to test our principles of not being partisan and not being interested in the binaries of left and right politics," he said.

More information is available at creators.kickstarter.com/forfreedoms.