

# Thinking about looking fierce...

a little handout/zine for Picture the Homeless  
thrown together by daniel lang/levitsky, may 2009/5769  
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*the role of the revolutionary artist is to make revolution irresistible*  
- *toni cade bambara*

These are a few ideas and questions for thinking about **how to use spectacle in and as action**. They're intended as a way of starting conversations and schemes by talking about the (huge) range of possibility that little phrase covers. These are my versions of ideas that come from many different places; this handout/zine is a way of throwing them back into the mix and seeing how they get transformed as they pass through other hands and minds.

The first question is always about **the goal** of the action or event:

To attract and hold the attention of folks passing by?

To convey a message to media that have already been recruited to be there?

To deliver a message to a specific target?

To occupy as much public space as possible?

To take control of private (or privatized, or public-but-restricted) space?

To be a visible and identifiable contingent in a larger event?

The next is about **the role of the spectacle elements** within the action. These are some of the usual ones; they're often and easily mixed, and certainly aren't the only ones:

**Demo-dressing:** Visually unifying a group of people and making them more eye-catching.

**Amplification:** Increasing the impact of a small group of people on a space.

**Attraction:** Drawing passers-by towards an action or event.

**Messaging:** Conveying information or emotional impact.

**Performance:** When the spectacle IS the event or action – messaging in its largest form.

**Frontline:** Playing a core role in a direct action – disguising gear, being gear, &c.

Thinking through the action's goals and seeing what roles spectacle could play in accomplishing them is the best place to start making a plan. Then you can start to play around with **ideas for forms and visual approaches** (see below), and thinking about which could work best with the themes and messages of the event. These are some questions to think about as you do that brainstorming and scheming. Some are more obviously related than others, with effects on the number of visual elements that make sense, on how heavy or large they can be, &c; others are a bit less so, with effects mainly on more elaborate kinds of spectacle.

How many folks are participating in the action?

How many are needed for roles that will need both of their hands and/or most of their attention?

How many can take part in a building/painting party a day or more beforehand?

How many can take part in a planning or rehearsal gathering before the action?

Is it a one-off action or part of a series of similar ones?

Is the action rigorously planned, or will it develop as it goes on in response to the situation?

Is the action stationary or moving?

How far is it from a place where props & visuals can be stored before and after?

What are the transportation possibilities for props & visuals?

Are there participants with limited mobility (or in scooters/wheelchairs)?

What is the expected response from passers-by (supportive; hostile; joining in; &c)?

What level of police harassment is expected?

What permits (if any) are there for the event?

Here are some notes on **overall visual approaches**, and models to think about as you devise a plan. Simple, iconic images are easiest to read at a distance. Clear shapes and strong outlines help a lot. In many ways, using stylized images draws folks in, especially when you're representing people. A naturalistic, detailed face is always someone else's, the face of someone we're looking at from outside; a simple, stylized face allows us to project ourselves into it so that it becomes our own.

**Multiples.** A set of identical images magnifies their impact and makes a strongly unified impression on viewers. Multiples can separate and come together, but don't lend themselves well to conveying a narrative.

**Theme & Variations.** A set of images with a common theme (different kinds of building; tools; wild animals) can be great to get across the connections among a set of related things.

**Central Image & Supporting Images.** One version of a 'theme & variations' approach is to have a (often larger) central image and a set of related images to support it (the mayor, supported by a realtor, a cop, a chainstore, and a yuppie...).

**Polarizing.** Having two groups of multiples, or two 'theme & variations' sets, creates an instant narrative tension. Good and evil is always a good story to tell.

Finally, here is a **laundry-list of forms**, with some notes about each of them. They're all geared towards cheap or easily-scrunged materials; some take more time to construct than others. There are many, many more possibilities than these; this list is the ones that come quickest to my mind. At the end of this mini-zine are some places to find other ideas, and more detailed instructions for building and designing a wide range of spectacle elements.

### Materials:

**Cardboard Flats** – Simple and easy. Cut into shapes and paint. The corrugated (two layers with a foldy one in between) kind is the best. If the edges are taped with masking tape, and the sides are fully painted, they can survive rain. With cardboard handles duct-taped on, or twine loops tied through them, one person can manage a 3' x 4' flat pretty easily, and a 5' x 5' one with some difficulty (depending on the wind). Cardboard tubes from fabric stores or garment factories can raise a flat 3-4'; bamboo poles are great for a taller lift, though cops don't always love them.

**3D Cardboard** – Shaped by cutting, folding, and stapling with a staple-plier (a.k.a. florist stapler) or regular stapler. Can make pretty complex shapes with some fooling around. Go over seams with masking tape before painting, for a better seal and surface. Look at "68 Ways" from the Resources section for more details and ideas, for faces in particular.

**Cloth** – Can be used in all kind of ways – streamers, flags, headbands, painted robes, shaped banners (stapled over frames made from cardboard tubes and/or hula hoops), giant puppet gowns, 'dragon' puppet bodies, &c.

**Papermaché** – Lightweight, solid, and great for more complicated 3D visuals (masks, puppet faces & hands, &c). The simplest version is just flour (or non-chemical-impregnated wallpaper paste) and water, mixed to a pancake-batter thickness, with some white glue added for strength and water-resistance; then dip torn-up paper bags into it and smooth them onto a mold or form (shaped cardboard / clay covered with a plastic bag / &c), overlapping them  $\frac{1}{2}$ " or so.

### Things to Make:

**Masks** – Can be as simple as a cut and painted piece of lightweight cardboard with eye-holes, tied on with twine stapled to each side. Leave the bottom of the face uncovered if folks need to be able to chant, sing, or talk to press. Words on masks can be fun. Masks can add height or width to folks as well as indicate a character or idea.

**Headpieces** – Cardboard, cloth, paper, feathers, whatever you like. Use a headband circle of cardboard to make it wearable. If the wind isn't too strong (or if you add a chin-strap), a flat cardboard headpiece can be quite large.

**Rod/Pole Puppets** – The simplest kind that looks like a person is a flat cardboard face on a pole, with a crossbar for shoulders that has a long piece of cloth attached to it for a body. Arms can be flat cardboard hands attached with long strips of cloth to the shoulder crossbar (each hand will need its own pole, and probably another person to operate it). Or get elaborate, with papermaché faces and hands, fancier costumes, streamers trailing behind, &c. Look at "68 Ways" from the Resources section for more details and ideas.

**Backpack Puppets** – Basically just a Rod/Pole Puppet that can be tied to someone's back, allowing them to operate its arms. Look at "68 Ways" from the Resources section for more details about how to build them. Another option for structure is to take an aluminum or wood crutch, point it foot-upwards, and tie cloth strips on for a belt and shoulder-straps.

**Hoop/Dragon Puppets** – Any kind of long-bodied puppet operated by more than one person. The simplest form is the 'dragon dance' kind: a 3D face with a long piece of cloth attached, with one person holding the face and a few more under the cloth as the body. "68 Ways" has a lot of variations, some with hoops on rods, some with much more elaborate frames.

**Long Thin Things** – Anything from colored cords or paper/plastic chains to very long (25-50') banners that can be used to divide, surround, or snake through a space. The possibilities are endless.

**Bike-Based (or Cart-/Scooter-/Wheelchair-Based) Puppets** – Frames (covered in cloth, papermaché, or cardboard elements) can be built to turn anything with wheels into a spectacular object. NYC's More Gardens! has done a lot of this kind of thing, with bikes in particular.

**Built-In Sound** – Any of the above can be built to incorporate noisemakers of all kinds. Pots and pans or plastic buckets for drums; PVC piping for horns; tin-can rattles; bike-wheel percussion objects; &c. The "Drums and Demonstrations" page in the Resources has a ton of very useful information on the how-, why-, and when-to aspects of all this.

#### Performance Structures:

**Cantastorias** – A traditional form found everywhere from China to Italy (where this name for it, meaning "sung story", comes from), it's basically a picture, usually painted on cloth, that is presented to a crowd with narration and usually song. Some versions use a long scroll to tell an elaborate story, some use several 'pages' with one or two images on each; some include text (comic-book style), some use only very simple images. Often, there is one main narrator accompanied by a group who sing the chorus, give simple spoken responses, or do simple movement.

**Processions** – Can have built-in narrative, either by having a sequence of contingents with different visuals or by having different tableaux or scenes happen along the way (the Stations of the Cross model).

**Movement/Choreography** – Very simple movements can have a huge impact. Some possibilities: doing the same thing at the same time (raising a flat puppet; turning your back; taking a step forward); follow-the-leader; moving in a single-file line or in a one-person-deep row (encircling a space; dividing a space; sweeping across a space); two or more groups separating and coming together; &c. Generally will require a conductor/signaler if there's not a ton of rehearsal time.

### **Some resources:**

Folks to watch out for (online image searches will bring you some good and inspiring photos):

Bread & Puppet Theater, Great Small Works, Circus Amok, Heart of the Beast Puppet and Mask Theatre, Art & Revolution, Wise Fool Puppet Intervention, Puppeteers Co-op, Beehive Collective, More Gardens!, Shoddy Puppet Company, Insurrection Landscapers, Puppet Uprising...

The Puppeteers' Co-op's "68 Ways to Make Really Big Puppets" and other information  
[full text and images]

<http://puppetco-op.org/index.html>

The Bread & Puppet Theater

[photo galleries for inspiration]

<http://www.breadandpuppet.org/photogallery.html>

Wise Fool Basics (a.k.a the Wise Fool Handbook)

[sample pages on stilts; how to order]

<http://www.zeitgeist.net/wfca/handbook.html>

Drums & Demonstrations

[detailed how-to / why-to / when-to page with links as well]

<http://puppetista.org/drums/>

Puppet-building resources

[links]

<http://www.sagecraft.com/puppetry/building/index.html>