
Collective Murals

by chris cavanagh, Catlayst Centre, 2008

Objective

- To engage in dialogue and critical thinking through the use of visual art
- To produce murals that can be used in public actions

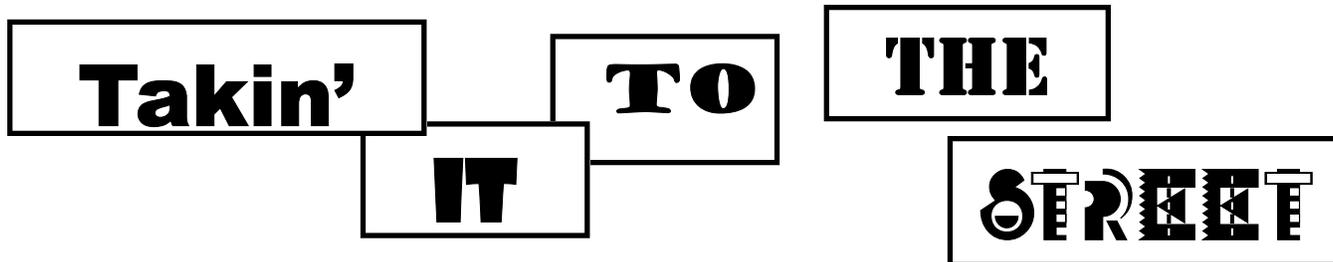
Time 30 minutes to a full day

What you need

While you can make murals with as little as a big piece of paper, paint and a paint brush, the following is a list of basic materials that are good to have on hand:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Wax Crayons | <input type="checkbox"/> Erasers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Markers (odourless) | <input type="checkbox"/> Grommeting Tool |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pencils | <input type="checkbox"/> Grommets |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pens | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Chalk | <input type="checkbox"/> Magazines |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Water colour paints (tempera) | <input type="checkbox"/> Photography books (for reference) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Acrylic Paints (primaries + black and white) | <input type="checkbox"/> Construction paper |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gesso | <input type="checkbox"/> Cardboard |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Latex house paint | |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Viewfinder |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Paint brushes | <input type="checkbox"/> Drop cloths |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Stir sticks | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Masking tape | <input type="checkbox"/> Letter sized paper 8½” x 11” |
| <input type="checkbox"/> White Glue | <input type="checkbox"/> Legal sized paper 8½” x 14” |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Glue sticks | <input type="checkbox"/> Ledger sized paper 11” x 17” |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Scissors | <input type="checkbox"/> Flip chart paper |
| <input type="checkbox"/> X-acto knives | <input type="checkbox"/> Butcher paper |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Staple gun | <input type="checkbox"/> Billboard paper ~ 4’ x 5’ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Rulers – metal straight edges | <input type="checkbox"/> Post-it Notes |





Murals have the great advantage for doing group work of being LARGE – lots of space to cover and, therefore, much labour that can be shared. There are many types of mural work that can be used for popular education, protest, street theatre and more. And, as with all artwork in popular education processes, murals can be used simply within the context of a workshop for the purposes of democratic dialogue (as with timelines, community mapping, body outlines), or they can be produced to share with larger audiences (as with banners, moveable murals, bankelsang). The aesthetics may need to be attended to differently in each case. Collective murals are also good opportunities to practice both individual and collective work.

1. Contour Guided Murals

1. Divide into groups of three or four.
2. Remind participants of the rules for brainstorming.
3. In small group, brainstorm (regarding the theme of the workshop or task) issues, keywords, critical questions, etc. (things that people connect with, that they think are important).
4. Ask the groups to think of visual metaphors that connect to the themes, issues, keywords, concepts.
5. Use a photograph as a layout guide.
 - a. Search through a bunch of photos looking for one that has some interesting contours (e.g. landscapes are very good for this, but many other types of images are suitable as well). The contours that you're interested in should not be too complex. You are looking for a few lines that you will transfer to your mural.
 - b. Identify the contour lines you wish to use. If you are using a magazine photograph or an image that is otherwise disposable you can highlight the contours you wish to use on the image itself. Or you could use tracing paper. Or simply eyeball it.
 - c. On the mural paper you plan to use, reproduce the contour lines with a good black marker line.
 - d. Cut the mural paper into pieces — one for each individual in the small group.

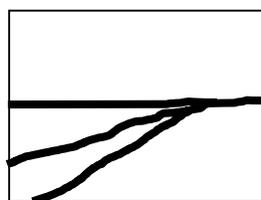
a:



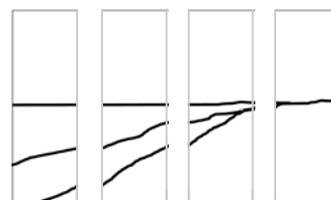
b:



c:



d:





6. The group could then simply do whatever they like for their section. Or the group could negotiate some simple agreements, e.g. only use certain colours for certain sections; only use words on top half of mural, etc.
7. Each individual works on their own for a while (a minimum of a half hour is good). (Tip: make sure everyone remembers which way is up for their section.)
8. Reassemble sections using contour lines to connect the pieces. (Masking tape on the back will hold it together nicely).
9. Mount murals, do gallery tour and debrief and discuss.

2. Grid Murals

1. Divide into small groups of three to five people each.
2. Remind participants of the rules for brainstorming: quantity, play-giarizing (i.e. stealing ideas from elsewhere or building on each others ideas), wild ideas welcome, no evaluation.
3. In small group brainstorm (regarding the theme of the workshop or task) issues, keywords, critical questions, etc. (things that people connect with, that they think are important).
4. Each small group should have one large piece of paper (poster or mural-sized) and a bunch of smaller pieces of equal size (enough for each small group member to have a few each). The smaller pieces. If you're using poster sized paper (e.g. 36" x 48") then the small pieces should be about four inches square; if mural sized (e.g. 4'x5') then small pieces can be eight inches square or letter-sized (8½" x 11").
5. Each individual uses small pieces to draw or collage images on the theme of the workshop (use brainstormed items for inspiration).
6. Compare images and discuss theme.
7. Collaborate on creating one collective image.
8. Assemble mural by making a selection of the small images individuals worked on and placing these in a square to frame the collective image in the centre.
9. Mount murals, do gallery tour and debrief and discuss.

3. Earthblankets

An earthblanket is a type of mural that dian marino conceptualized in her final years of teaching and art-work. It suggests the metaphor of a blanket, something that we associate with comfort and warmth, that can be spread (metaphorically) across our wounded and ailing earth. As a collective mural exercise, it provides an opportunity for doing environmental education. You can use either a contour or grid mural to do this. I have most often done earthblankets by having individual participants create individual images on small squares (4"x4" or 8"x8") and then affixing the small images to a larger piece of paper. You can also affix the smaller pieces to a piece of cloth. Or you can make the mural as a quilt – using fabric to fashion the individual squares.



4. Moveable Murals

A moveable mural is an adaptation of the Contour Guided and Grid Murals .

1. You will need poster-sized paper that you will eventually staple gun to pickets. Bristol board is good. You often need two sheets – one stapled on each side of the picket and then fixed to each other to sandwich the picket – this gives it enough stability to carry outdoors.
2. Decide how many panels your moveable mural is to be. A minimum of four is good and you can go up to 20 or 30 if you have the time and resources.
3. Line up your panels beside each other.
4. You can use a photograph as a layout guide to transfer interesting contours to your panels or, more simply, you could simply use a wavy line to divide your panels in two or three sections. (Note: If you are using two posters to sandwich your picket you may want to put information on one side. Simple phrases, for example. But stick to doing the moveable mural on only one side. This will help later when you are marching to be able to assemble the mural).
5. If you are doing a large multi-panelled mural discuss with the full group what colour scheme you'd like to stick to, what words or phrases you want to use and what images best communicate your ideas. (Note: It's not a bad idea to have a few comic books lying around – most comics are done as a sequence of panels and you can derive ideas and inspiration from some that might be favourites of yours).
6. You could also divide into groups of four or five and do a number of 4 and 5-panelled moveable murals.
7. Once completed, affix your panels to pickets and line up all the panels for a good gallery tour and discussion.
8. Discuss how you plan to use the moveable mural in your demonstration or march. Some typical problems to solve include:
 - a. Will you all stay together all the time? Or will you rendezvous at specific moments?
 - b. Are their presentations/speakers at the beginning or end of the march? In which case, can you assemble the moveable mural as a backdrop for the speakers?
 - c. Is there an easy way to line up all the panels in order quickly?
 - d. Do all the panels work independently or are some too cryptic on their own?
9. **Variation:** Do your moveable mural as sandwich boards that you can wear. This has the great advantage of freeing your hands – then you can carry lyric sheets, musical instruments, etc.
10. **Hint:** moveable murals can be irresistible to mass media – it's a great photo op.



5. Banners

Banners are best made on cloth (muslin or coloured taffeta is best). You may have to size the cloth before using it (you can buy already-sized fabric). Remember that if it is large enough you may have to cut wind-holes. Consider how you plan to carry the banner: with poles on both sides? Or hung from a pole across the top? You might want to grommet the banner (superior to stapling and tying).

1. Decide on the size of your banner. How many people will be needed to carry it? Consider the strength to weight ratio (remember that paint adds weight).
2. Size the cloth if necessary. (“Size” is a technical term in painting and paper-making that refers to the glue that holds paper together or stiffens cloth so that it can be better used as a painting surface. “Size” is both the noun and the verb.) Ordinary house latex or acrylic gesso work well for sizing.
3. Discuss your message, what images, words and phrases you plan to use. You can begin this with brainstorming.
4. You can use a photograph as a layout guide to divide the space on your mural.
5. If you have access to an overhead projector you can work with transparent plastic (acetates) to trace images from books and then project them onto the banner (which needs to be mounted on a wall) and trace the image onto the banner. This is an effective way to do fine lettering and to get around limited artistic abilities. Originality can be over-rated.
6. Design and paint your banner. Any paint that is waterproof will do (acrylic, latex, dry tempera mixed half and half with polymer medium). You can do this in many ways – using any of the drawing techniques discussed in this ‘zine. Or you could have one person sketch in all the principle lines and drawings and have everyone else paint.
7. Once the banner is dry, affix it to the poles or tube or wood you plan to carry it with. If you plan to grommet your banner you will need the grommets and a grommeting tool (not very expensive). Cut wind-holes if necessary. Take a picture of your banner for your records (or to make post-cards – hint, hint). Carry it in your demo and be proud!



A banksang produced during a Planning Action conference using lyrics from the Peter Tosh song *Equal Rights*.



3. Bankelsang/Cantastoria

Bankelsang and Cantastoria are both medieval practices (in Germany and Italy, respectively) of popular street picture storytelling. According to one book I've come across, this method finds its origins in ancient China. Bankelsang literally means "singing banner" or "banner singing." I first saw bankelsang used by Bread and Puppet Theatre in Vermont. A story is illustrated using a number of panels of cloth (either one scene per panel or multiple frames per panel) which are then mounted together like pages on a flip chart. According to Eric Miller in his essay *Visual Accompanying Face-to-Face Storytelling* (http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/~emiller/MA_essay.html):

"A bankalsanger was a man who stood in a marketplace and chanted and sang, accompanying himself with picture sheets ("schilder"). "Schilder" were created using a variety of materials, including wood-block prints, copper engravings, and oil on canvas. The picture sheets were large enough to be seen by a small crowd standing around in a marketplace. They contained up to a dozen of the story/songs most dramatic scenes. A common size was 1 1/2 meters wide and 2 meters high."

Bankelsang can be performed by one storyteller narrating the tale or a chorus of many voices. You could organize two chorus lines, one to each side of the bankelsang, and write a script that includes call and response or singing to recount the tale. As the story is told or sung the bankelsang images are progressively revealed by flipping them over. Since a story requires many images this is a good opportunity for collective creation. Working with a group of fellow storytellers, I facilitated the creation of a bankelsang using a passage from Eduardo Galeano (*Walking Words*, Norton 1997, p. 151):

The Church says: the body is a sin.

Science says: the body is a machine.

Advertising says: the body is a business.

The Body says: *I am a fiesta.*

We decided to make one panel for each phrase (i.e. one for "The Church says" and one for "the body is a sin"). We translated the phrases into Spanish, French and Italian, and included the words (in all four languages) on each panel. The last panel, however, had no words and was one large image done by an artist friend. When we performed it, we would recite the words together and the audience would often join in since they could read the words. See the illustrations on the following page.

Bankelsang / Cantastoria have the great advantage of being extremely portable. You can roll them up, run to a location, unroll them, run the show (between five and fifteen minutes is good), and you're off to another location.

Tip: If your panel size is between 2'x2' and 5'x5' a lightweight muslin is good. Larger than 5'x5' and you should use medium weights. Remember to do the math on the final weight of all your panels together (all that paint adds up, too). Make sure you have an adequately strong dowling to mount the bankelsang.

