How to Make XXL Street Stencils & Get Away WIth It

by **slambert** on July 6, 2007

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This instructable will show you how to cover 640 Square feet of advertising with giant block letters in less than 3 hours in high traffic areas - all during the day. By using clear plastic stencils and painting the whole wall black, this technique minimizes the amount of time one would look suspicious, allowing the writer to work during the day on a large scale.

Why Make an Instructable?
In 2000 I did a project to both cover these ads and, with luck, get the neighborhood to think about why ads filled our public spaces as opposed to *anything* else more productive. I know I haven't exhausted the potential of this technique, and so I pass it on to you to put to use and improve on.

Background:
What's wild posting? If you live in an urban area you've probably seen poster sized advertisements on the streets. These wheatpasted "wild postings" * are often illegally placed on construction site barricades, building facades, in alleyways, and on assorted buildings in order for big business to reach urban demographics (like you!). Companies win by putting their products in the face of hip, urban consumers at the expense of alternative uses for public space - such as murals, street art, community boards, or just plain old architecture. (see Banksy's The Joy Of Not Being Sold Anything)

These top-down autocratic messages designed to persuade the public just become a default part of city life. The idea of something more democratic or of community interest in it's place becomes hard to even imagine.

step 1: **Gather Materials**

Neccessary Materials:
1. Large Ruler (36+ inches) or straight stick
2. Measuring tape at least 8 feet long.
3. Level
4. Permanent Marker - Sharpie, Marks-A-Lot, etc.
5. Construction/Agricultural Grade Plastic Sheeting. Clear. 3 or 4mil thickness should work. Usually sold in 10x100 ft rolls at hardware stores. (You can use the left overs from 2003's [biological attack warning.)
6. Manual Staple Gun
7. Roll of twine or string.
8. Black latex housepaint - a few gallons depending on how big your wall is. Buy extra, this stuff is handy.
9. Canvas drop cloth - makes you look more legit.
10. Paint Rollers, and stick
11. Foam Brushes
12. Light colored latex paint (for outlining letters)

Helpful Materials
1. Computer and printer
2. transparency sheets that work in said printer
3. overhead projector (lcd projector would work too)
4. Right angle
5. Painter's costume (overalls, painter's cap, and other paint splattered clothing)
6. Orange cones

Image Notes
1. this stuff will unrolls and folds open to dims like 10x100ft. 3-4 mill should work.

step 2: Scope out some sites

1. Find some sites with wheatpasted ads.
2. Measure out the dimensions and make a note.
- many construction barriers are 8ft high, because they are built with sheets of 4x8 plywood. If you don't have a meauring tape you can count the sheets of plywood and determine the length.
- Poster advertising is usually a uniform size. If you know the width and height of one poster, you can often deduce the width and height of the whole wall by counting out the posters.
3. Take a digital photo if you can.
4. Watch the wall for at least 2 weeks. The posters will be replaced on a semi-regular basis. If you can determine when they cycle through, you can make sure your piece stays up as long as possible. *note: I learned this the hard way when one of my larger works was covered with ads after just 7 hours.*

You'll want to find more than one location. These locations are often temporary, construction barriers especially. I've planned on doing a wall, only to have it disappear days before I was ready.

Image Notes
1. this unfortunate fellow gets paid to drive around in a truck and put up ads all day. We talked to a worker once and they can be arrested if caught, and are responsible for the legal consequences, though their companies will post bail.
2. if you know the width of this poster, you can determine the length of the wall.
3. this is likely 8 ft high.
4. tools of the trade: bucket of weatpaste, brush (sometimes a paint roller), and a belt satchel to hold posters.

step 3: Plan your piece

Now that you know the dimensions of your wall, you can plan your piece.

The Message
This part is up to you and involves many factors. I offer some of these questions as starting points:
- What do you want to say that thousands of people will read each day?
- How can you involve your audience in the making of the message?
- What message will do the most good in that area?
- Will the message get attention or be ignored?
- Is the message in terms people will understand?
- What are your intended consequences and how can you maximize them?
- What are possible unintended consequences and how can you minimize them?
- Remember that the "fill" of your letters will be the ads, so incorporate that into your concept.

More starting points from the Anti-Advertising Agency website.

how could you turn this space into something interesting and meaningful?

step 4: Blueprint your design

The Blueprint
I've found that clean, sharp font-like letters get people to pay attention. If the letters don't "look like graffiti" then in the popular mind, perhaps they are supposed to be there? You can at least get people to slow down and read until they figure out what's happening.

So, if you're going to reproduce a font for an 8 foot tall wall, how is that done? How tall and wide should you make each letter? How much space in between each letter?

You have 2 options
1. Create your own font
2. Use a font from your computer

(I'm only going to deal with option 2 in this instructable. Maybe I'll do option 1 in the future.)

Mocking up your design
I'm going to demonstrate this in an open-source alternative to Illustrator called Inkscape. You can use whatever graphics editor you prefer.

1. Launch Inkscape.
2. Open the Document Properties (Shift+Ctrl+D) and change the rulers from pixels to centimeters (see image)
3. Type your text in whatever font you like. Blocky fonts are easier to recreate large scale and read easier.
3. Change the object property measurement to centimeters (see image).
4. Resize your letters to fit the wall.
- I used a 1 foot : 1 Centimeter ratio, so a 7 foot tall letter (6 inch margin top and bottom on an 8 foot wall) would be 7 centimeters.
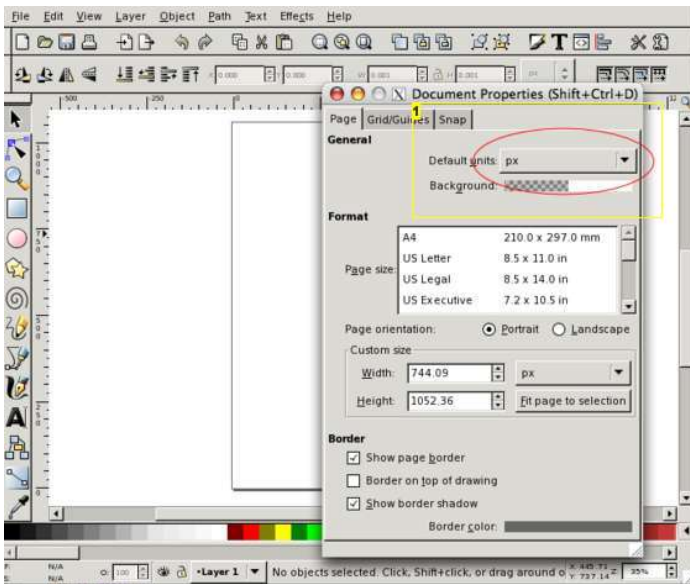
Image Notes
1. change this to centimeters

Image Notes
1. this is how you change the object property measurement.
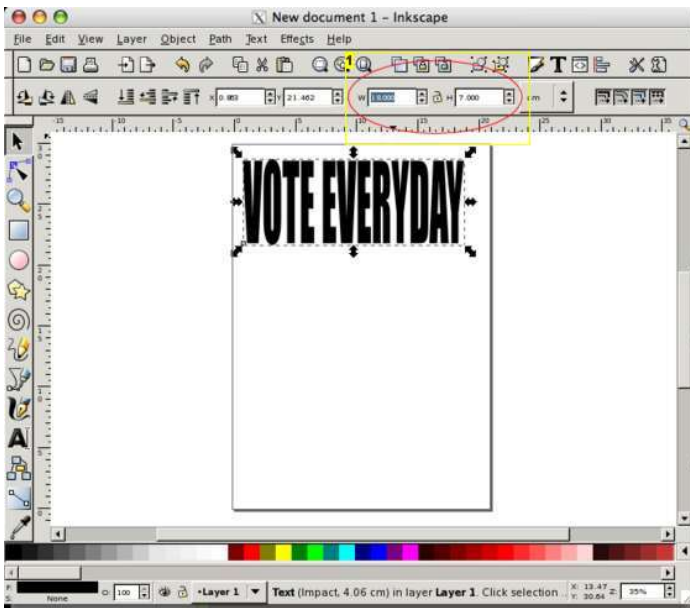
Image Notes
1. when the letters are selected, you can resize the height and width using these boxes.

step 5: Scale up your letters

I have scaled up my letters using 2 methods. Using an overhead projector, and using math and a level.

Overhead Projector method
1. Print your letters out on transparency sheets.*
2. Project the letters against a wall with an overhead projector.
3. Hang the plastic sheeting against the wall where the projection lands.
4. Trace your letters with a permanent marker.
*Depending on the projector, you might need to print your original larger on the transparency in order for the letters to project 7 feet tall.

Math and Level method
1. Since you printed your letters to scale (1cm=1ft) you can draw a 1x1cm grid over the letters and use that as a guide for hand drawing your letters onto the plastic.
2. Plot key intersection points onto the plastic.
3. Use the level as a straight edge and to ensure you are drawing at right angles.
4. Note that "round" letters like S, O, C, Q, etc extend slightly above and below the "square" letters.
5. Don't worry if you are off by an inch or two, but try to be as exact as you reasonably can.

http://www.instructables.com/id/How-to-Make-XXL-Street-Stencils-%26-Get-Away-WIth-It/

Cut out the letters.

On each plastic letter, note in permanent marker what letter it is and how far to space the next letter. Write the same note in several places on the plastic. When you're on the street, it's easier to find your notes than to roll out each 7 ft letter and see what it is.
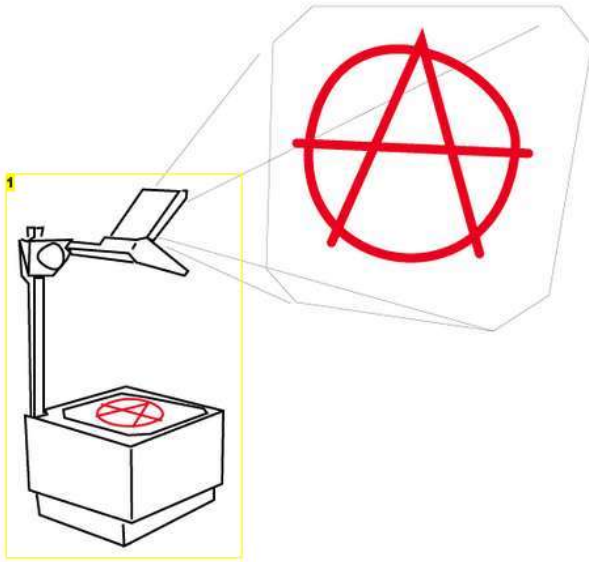
Image Notes
1. Each square is 1cmx1cm. When scaled up, the letters will be 7ft H by 18ft W.

Image Notes
1. if you don't have an overhead projector, schools seems to be getting rid of them lately. I have found several for as low as $15

step 6: Overview of Painting Process

Gather up your materials and be sure to your drawings and a printout to refer to on site.

See the pictures for an overview of how it all works.
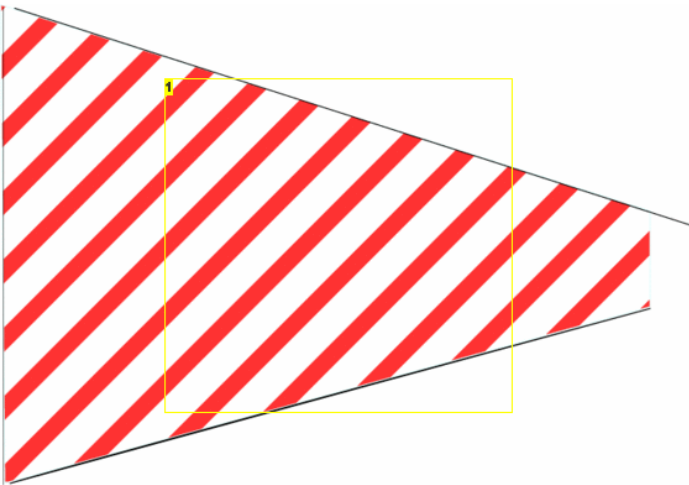
Image Notes
1. ok, so this striped thing is your wall.

Image Notes
1. your giant stencils get laid over the top. Becuase they are clear, it's harder for passers by to tell what you're doing.

Image Notes
1. Then you pull down the stencils and BAM! you got a giant message with the old content in the fill of the letters. Now it's time to work fast.
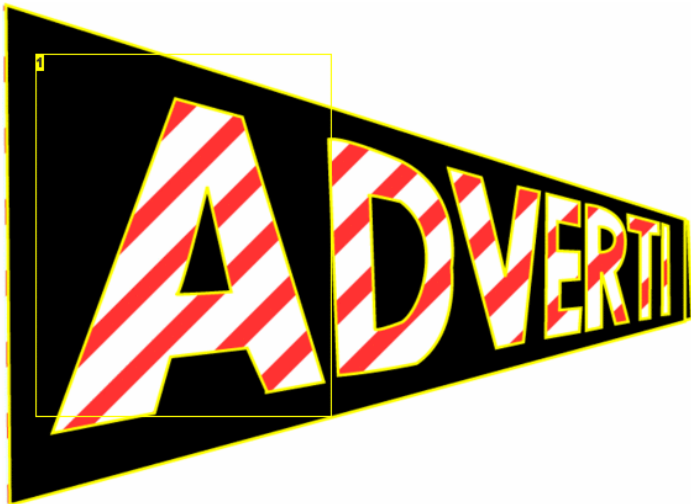
Image Notes
1. Last step is adding a bright outline. It makes a big difference in visibility. Work as quickly as possible here.

step 7: Hanging your stencils

Run a line of twine along the top or bottom margin of your letters. This twine will serve as a guide to where to hang your stencils. In the case of this example, 6 from the bottom edge.

Check the notes you wrote on your stencils and hang the first letter using your staple gun. Remember your left and right margins. The level can come in handy as a guide, if your ground and walls are also level...

Image Notes
1. a ladder just makes your look more legit. Drop cloths and cones help too.
2. this is where I tucked away my stencils, other materials, and house paint.
3. it's difficult to see here, but there is a clear plastic letter A that I am stapling up on the wall.
4. this is my twine guide.

Image Notes
1. staple gun
2. hung stencils, barely visible.
3. more letters

Image Notes
1. don't forget your costume. Some paint splattered white overalls and a painters cap go a long way.

step 8: Paint the whole wall black & pull your stencils.

1. Get your black paint, your rollers, and your drop cloth, and systematically paint the whole wall black. Cover your clear stencils too so the whole wall is black.

If anyone asks who you are or what your doing, say something like "just cleaning up" or "giving this wall a fresh coat".

2. Hang out and let the paint dry. Maybe grab some coffee or a snack. Get your hi-light color and foam brushes ready.

3. When the paint is dry, pull the stencils down and pack them up. Immediately start work on your outlines. If you have 2 people it goes pretty fast. If you hold the brush correctly, you can get a fairly uniform line weight.

That's it. Take pictures and send them here:
the Anti-Advertising Agency

Thanks...

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beauwalker23 says:
Apr 23, 2009. 12:07 PM   **REPLY**

great instructible. but lets say i want to something a little more "banksy '

life silhouettes of people. or faces.

how would i do that? any ideas? you do anything else big?

---

godfreyandthandi says:
Jan 29, 2009. 12:20 AM   **REPLY**

great bro, thx

---

temp says:
Oct 15, 2008. 12:48 PM   **REPLY**

Ha ha by the time you took the second picture in the last step, someone put something over the "r" lol

---

slambert says:
Oct 15, 2008. 1:47 PM   **REPLY**

no actually, I left the sign for the construction company out of politeness because it had their license number on it.

Rossiroller says:
Jul 2, 2008. 12:00 PM   **REPLY**

Its scary how many privileges you can get just by wearing a uniform or acting like you belong there. I think there was a streaker a little while back at a football game who got all the way down to the field without being questioned just because he wore a referee's uniform.

KINGDEADBEAT says:
Nov 20, 2007. 8:03 PM   **REPLY**

If you wanted to be a little ninja about it, you could even wear a dust mask(hide identity), and maybe some pepper spray in your pocket if things get ugly, lol

---

jason-2590 says:
May 7, 2008. 11:37 AM   **REPLY**

and maybe some pepper spray in your pocket if things get ugly, lol

ye cuz the spray paint in your hand wont workl ike pepper spray, they wouldn't see sh!t if you sprayed

---

josh says: Mar 22, 2008. 12:14 PM **REPLY**

there is a self adhesive clear plastic that many automotive and house painters use. It comes on a roll and can be bought at most paint supply stores. it is not very tacky, and it used mostly for masking windows. I have used it numerous times and it sticks quite well to most surfaces. if one was able to cut out the letters in advance they would go up in a flash. They also would keep paint from running behind the stencil. this works great for making designs on walls in bedrooms.

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clamoring says: Feb 13, 2008. 9:46 AM **REPLY**

What an eloquent way to express what seems to be an opinion most of us hold but don't know how to implement. +1.

---

unspecified says: Jan 18, 2008. 9:26 PM **REPLY**

This is out of control! Looks great too.

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killerjackalope says: Jan 6, 2008. 2:50 PM **REPLY**

I really enjoy this idea, it's the kind of thing I will do when I find my overalls and go to the printers next (had an idea similar to this involving a clear picture stencil at 8'x4' with whatever colour of paint you like, put it up at the end of the wall and start painting the wall take a 'tea break' pull it down and be amused...

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soustar says: Nov 13, 2007. 8:16 PM **REPLY**

such a great idea!!

I really want to do that... another good costume idea that I got from this site www.woosterscollective.com is to grab a clip board and a hard hat, and any old name tag, and you can pretty much go anywhere in the world without any one questioning you...

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soapy says: Oct 25, 2007. 4:02 AM **REPLY**

Great idea!

The use of the clear lettering is the touch of genius here, as otherwise you'd be effectively painting a target on your own back!

Now, where's MexicoMan to compare this to genocide?

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mattface says: Oct 22, 2007. 1:46 PM **REPLY**

That is fantastic. I'm going to be on the look out for poster-ed walls now!

---

sex says: Oct 18, 2007. 2:11 PM **REPLY**

-_- interesting , nice result -_-

i prefere to adbust illegal ads with the paintbrush and the cutter .
Around 600 000 A1 (90 x 60cm) posters in 12 years
[http://streetart.info/adbusting#â"€â"€â"€â"€â"€â"€â–ˆâ–ˆâ–ˆâ–ˆâ–ˆâ–ˆâ–ˆâ–ˆâ–ˆâ–ˆâ•â?â•â?â•â?â•â?â–ˆ streetart.info/adbusting]

ArtisticBabe says: Oct 5, 2007. 10:35 AM **REPLY**

Do you think that if you told a police officer that you were "Just cleaning up" he'd believe it? :)

---

slambert says: Oct 5, 2007. 10:55 AM **REPLY**

probably not, but the point is to set up a scenario where there is no reason for the officer to stop - to minimize any suspicion.

ArtisticBabe says: Oct 5, 2007. 11:36 AM **REPLY**

Right, well heres a pat on the back for doing something worthwhile. :) Very cool

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skip2mylou says: Sep 7, 2007. 7:38 PM **REPLY**

definitely a ROCKIN idea!!! much respect to the author. just a question about removing the painted over stencils... when u take em off the wall, do u just rip em off from top to bottom? do they come off pretty much intact? would u suggest minimal staple-age so as to minimize the possibility of the stencils getting caught in the staples while u try to rip it off that wall, or is that not really a concern?

---

slambert says: Sep 7, 2007. 8:08 PM **REPLY**

I just gave a tug and they come off. I was more concerned with getting out of there quickly. If you want to recycle 'em, you can put packing tape over the tears in the plastic when you get home. The thicker construction grade plastic is durable enough.

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thatkidej says: Jul 22, 2007. 11:40 PM **REPLY**

I love this idea, it's pretty awesome what you're doing =]

Is there a way to make large adhesive letters, and roll them on like wallpaper?

Or cutting letters out of wallpaper, and rolling them on for the same effect?

Just a thought!

Subvert says: Sep 2, 2007. 9:17 AM **REPLY**

The wallpaper idea would leave you exposed for longer while obviously doing something "wrong". The part where you're just painting solid black while in disguise is a lot less noticeable than slowly spelling out a stirring message one letter at a time.

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thatkidej says: Sep 2, 2007. 11:04 PM **REPLY**

Both of them would take MUCH less time, I don't see how you could think differently.

Especially my second idea.

Subvert says: Sep 4, 2007. 6:57 AM **REPLY**

Well, take the example in the instructable. ADVERTISING

So above, you're spending a couple of hours looking like a painter "cleaning up", and then at the very end it's... rip,rip,rip,rip,...etc, and a minute after the suspicious activity, you've got your message delivered, time to take pictures and go home.

With adhesive letters, I see it as more like...
Get your setup ready, and then
"A"
get your second letter ready, maybe peel off an adhesive end, or have one person hold it while someone else pastes up the wallpaper. (Maybe staples + paste would be best here, then you've got only one person).
"AD"
get ready for third letter...
"ADV"
get ready for fourth letter while passersby wonder what's up...
"ADVE"

You see where I'm going with this. I'm just thinking about the duration of time when you're exposed and looking especially suspicious. With your version, your net time is **significantly** reduced, but your overall suspiciously exposed time is moderately to significantly increased.

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thatkidej says: Sep 4, 2007. 10:47 AM **REPLY**

I understand what you mean. The second idea is the most time efficient of all, however. You'd look suspicious, but it'd take a minute or so in total to roll on an entire banner.

The first idea is cutting actual letters out to roll them on, the second is rolling the outline of the letters on, so it'd have more of a masking effect like the instructable produces.

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thatkidej says: Sep 4, 2007. 10:48 AM **REPLY**

In other words, the first idea: faster, but more suspicious. Second idea: fastest, very suspicious, but you'd be gone before anyone could say anything.

Subvert says: Sep 4, 2007. 9:14 PM **REPLY**

Ah, so I wasn't following everything exactly. Really cool idea. It sounds like you'd need to work out how to keep all the outlines getting tangled up, is the only minor weakness I can spot.

Maxaxle says: Aug 4, 2007. 1:22 PM **REPLY**

hmmmmmm...that's a pretty good idea!

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slambert says: Jul 24, 2007. 11:49 PM **REPLY**

I like that idea. That is why I posted this here. Please, build on it, change it, use it however you'd like...

Trebor1503 says: Aug 28, 2007. 6:39 AM **REPLY**

I like the idea, even though I live in an area this is not an issue. One minor change to your idea... Paint the highlight color AROUND the stencil before you take it off... that way people will really not know what youare doing until you are almost done. Might buy you an extra 15-20 minutes of calm before the final rush to get out of dodge.

Dimitrios says: Aug 26, 2007. 11:20 AM **REPLY**

Very nice work man! I love it! You must be busy for a while.. No problems with wind blowing your stencil away while stapling them? What about spacing your letters and having them perfectly vertical?

slambert says: Aug 27, 2007. 10:48 PM **REPLY**

no problems with the wind, but maybe it wasn't that windy. Either way, you just push it down and staple it. Spacing the letters I talk about in one of the earlier steps. If you have everything measured out and keep your guide sheet nearby, it's easy to keep the letters vertical. You also have the horizontal guide line at the bottom that will keep the wider letters vertical as well. Hope this makes sense...

Jando says: Aug 27, 2007. 8:03 PM **REPLY**

I love this instructable and I think that the purpose behind it is great! It's good to know that some individuals are trying to get the masses to think. Great work!

AbiB says: Aug 14, 2007. 9:30 AM **REPLY**

www.Abi-Graffiti-UK.piczo.com
kwll idea!

yourmominavolvo says: Aug 9, 2007. 4:27 PM **REPLY**

I LIKE this! The idea, the execution, the philosophy behind it...Oh and BTW F Mohegan Sun. FUckin casinos...grrrrr...

altomic says: Aug 9, 2007. 7:29 AM **REPLY**

very cool idea.

pixelhustler says: Aug 6, 2007. 6:26 PM **REPLY**

Nice work, I love the final product...

I would have approached it differently though. It would have been nice to see a more elaborate stencil for all that effort. You could use chalk on a string to measure the width of your letters and such to make an outline that kept its symmetry and simply paint around the outline.

Still... the end result is beautiful.

slambert says: Aug 7, 2007. 1:42 AM **REPLY**

Thanks. Please replace that "would have" with a "am going to". I'd love to see this built upon by someone else.

I think a more elaborate stencil is a great direction to move in. The reason I didn't do the chalk and string thing, while it would work, is the "& Get Away With it" half of the title. Painting around letters would quickly give away what you were up to, while painting over nearly invisible stencils means that it just looks like you're painting the wall until the very end.

Maxaxle says: Aug 4, 2007. 1:22 PM **REPLY**

Gosh that's cool. Still...it's illegal. Oh, and a small idea for extra inconspicuousy: clear stencils that you can feel when you roll over them with a paint roller. They'll LOOK black when you paint over them, but then you can just take them off. Just make sure that the paint is dry first, or you'll get stained.

slambert says: Aug 4, 2007. 2:25 PM **REPLY**

@Mazaxle,

Read close, I do suggest using clear plastic stencils so they wont be visible until you are done. Also, the legality is definitely in a grey area since the poster advertisements are themselves are illegal and cities do little to enforce the laws.

Maxaxle says: Aug 6, 2007. 10:38 PM **REPLY**

The first thing: basically my idea!!!
Legality: DEFINATELY a problem around here (no posters in the first place, lol)
Poor enforcement: Not a problem around here :)

Morte_Moya says: Aug 5, 2007. 3:29 PM **REPLY**

That is great. I love the idea and the drive you have to do it.

Nice work.

catchinbugs79 says: Jul 16, 2007. 6:36 PM **REPLY**

This is TiZIGHT

JoshuaTerrell says:

I love this. Anything street art and open source is good in my book.

Jul 10, 2007. 7:02 PM **REPLY**

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lemonie says:

How long did this last before something new was pasted over the top?

L

Jul 9, 2007. 5:55 PM **REPLY**

---

slambert says:

I did this a couple times. For the shots that are in color, I started at 8am, it was totally finished by 11am (with a break for a snack and to let the paint dry). And was covered over by 7pm. It was disappointing, but hundreds of people saw it in the meantime. Way more than have ever come to a gallery show of mine.

But don't be dissuaded, the black and white shots on this page (which I totally forgot to upload to the instructable) from a separate time lasted about 2-3 months!

Other pieces I've done like this (I'm Afraid, Trash Will You Marry Me?, other simpler projects, etc.) stayed up for weeks if not months as well. So the 1 day thing is definitely the exception.

Jul 9, 2007. 6:25 PM **REPLY**

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lemonie says:

Thanks for the links.
Covered the same day?
Do you think this site was more, less, or equally attractive to new postings for having been painted?

L

Jul 9, 2007. 6:36 PM **REPLY**

---

slambert says:

I'd only be guessing, it could have been random. However, from the street is was fairly massive and I'm sure attracted all kinds of attention. I think 80 feet long and 8 feet tall. It was impossible to miss.

Jul 10, 2007. 2:46 PM **REPLY**

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stevolution says:

Keep up the good work man and keep it big.

Jul 10, 2007. 1:46 AM **REPLY**

PetervG says:

So you pretend your a painter cleaning it up. Nice idea.

Jul 9, 2007. 1:14 PM **REPLY**

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