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The Interventionist's Toolkit: Posters, Pamphlets and Guides

A squat retail building in New Orleans' Marigny neighborhood sits empty. Delta Countertops & Cabinets, its last tenants, are long gone, and the storefront is tagged with graffiti, including baby blue cursive spelling out "Sauce!" A glossy poster, roughly two-feet-high by four-feet-wide, hangs off center on the metal siding. The poster features a cheery illustration that might portend new development — housing, perhaps, or a revived commercial strip to replace the down-on-its-luck building? Closer inspection of the colorful rendering reveals a new future for the rundown structure. In the illustration the building is transformed into an ersatz mobile grocery. It’s raised high in the air and mounted on the back of a pickup; there’s a cascade of jumbo shrimp tumbling out of it. Airborne bananas and giant carrot-shaped street benches add to a festive composition. In the upper right hand corner is a logo and the enigmatic words: The Hypothetical Development Organization.

The poster is fiction.

But it is also a commentary on the need for grocery stores in underserved communities. Conceived by graphic designer/urban planner Candy Chang, and entitled Mobile Cornucopia, it is a piece in the new collective art project, The Hypothetical Development Organization (H.D.O.).

Began in December 2010, H.D.O. was founded by writer Rob Walker, photographer Ellen Susan and New Orleans’ publisher/gadfly G.K. Darby. The trio commissions, prints and posts fantasy signage not only as a means of provoking interest in abandoned sites around New Orleans, but also as a way to generate an alternative narrative for the city. They draw on the active imaginations of architects, designers and artists, giving them free reign to rework the existing buildings on paper. "As a public service, H.D.O. invents a
hypothetical future for each selected structure. Unlike a traditional, reality-based developer, however, our organization is not bound by rules relating to commercial potential, practical materials, or physics," reads the organization's website. Funded by a Kickstarter crowd-sourced grant, posters will pop up around the Big Easy this winter and spring. In April, an exhibition of all the "developments," at Du Mois Gallery, will cap the project.
H.D.O. co-founder Walker is a contributor to *The New York Times Magazine* (until recently he penned the "Consumed" column) and author of the book *Buying In: The Secret Dialogue Between What We Buy and Who We Are*. As the title suggests, his work routinely questions the connections between branding, advertising and personal consumption. Traditional commercial developer signage falls under his purview, as it presents economically driven urban visions which, in a place like New Orleans, never seem to come to fruition. Additionally, Walker is co-creator of *Significant Objects*, a web project that asks writers to craft stories around discarded crockery and disused bric-a-brac, thus giving newfound meaning to the stuff we throw away. H.D.O. operates in a similar manner. It returns significance to decrepit pieces of the built environment. "I categorize [Hypothetical Development] as a form of urban storytelling," says Walker. "Our tagline is: implausible uses for unpopular places. Unpopular — the stuff that doesn’t seem to have a lot of value in the eyes of the culture at large."

Posters — the tool of protesters, propagandists and advertisers — are an ephemeral medium, especially when wheat-pasted onto construction sheds, stapled to telephone poles, or tacked to the sides of buildings. Ink and paper (even when mounted on boards per the H.D.O. standard) cannot hold up to the elements. Rain and wind whip at the graphics, reducing their legibility (and novelty) in just weeks. Yet there is something charged in the temporal tension between the message's imperative and the medium's decay.

By relying on the poster to communicate, Hypothetical Development challenges how we represent urban change; and the medium itself — a rendering illegally hung on the wall of an old building — opens up the possibility of change to a broader audience, one that would not necessarily be reached were these speculations posted only online. The guerilla placement of posters on buildings counts as interventionist — the team doesn’t have permission for installation — yet the goal is not to dictate a future development but rather to tell a provocative story. "We don't want to promise someone that an urban market is going to happen," cautions Walker. The representations are understandably far-fetched. One, titled "The Museum of the Self," features a sculpture of Facebook's "Like" graphic — a giant thumbs up. Another, the "N(ew) O(leans) Loitering Center," transforms a building into a framework for a "No Loitering" marquee. Yet there is some seriousness and a real polemic underpinning these visual tall tales. The museum poster, by Dave Pinter, is about affirming community identity; the loitering center sanctions the non-programmed activation of public space. The projects seem to pose the question: If we can dream this big on paper, then what else could happen?
It's notable, even in our digital era, how much we rely on print to spread a message. And just as posters play a vital role in the Interventionist Toolkit, so too do pamphlets, broadsheets and sundry guides and how-to's. All of these formats take ideas and transform them into an accessible taxonomy of actions ready for the reader to follow. And increasingly, artists, activists and academics are pushing these traditional media into new territories. Take, for example, the publication, Studio-X's Guide for Liberating New Forms of Conversation. The book is ostensibly a catalogue of two years of activity at Columbia University's Studio-X in New York City — a downtown space conceived as one hub in a global network and meant to function as incubator, laboratory, and gallery of the built environment. But the guide is also structured as a kind of real-time instructional handbook, intended to spread its methodologies to outposts in Mumbai, Beijing, Rio and beyond. Perhaps as homage to political activist Abbie Hoffman's 1971 Steal This Book, the Studio-X Guide is organized into action-centric chapters. Where Hoffman orders readers to "SURVIVE! FIGHT! LIBERATE!," Studio-X editor Gavin Browning swaps exclamation points for periods, listing "Locate. Transform. Classify. Populate. Activate." In his introduction, "This Book Will Set You Free," Browning speaks to a kind of DIY practice in architecture, urbanism and cultural programming; as he writes, "[The Guide] looks very local, suggesting what to do with what you have."

Another New York City-based group, the Center For Urban Pedagogy, uses the broadsheet format to educate and advocate. Published since 2006, its Making Policy Public series features seven installments to date, each pairing a graphic designer with a policy. Using a double-sided single sheet to optimum advantage, every publication unfolds from an 8-by-11-inch pamphlet to a 32-by-22-inch poster. The policy issues range from municipal rules and regulations for street vendors, as illustrated in Candy Chang's Vendor Power!, created in collaboration with the non-profit Street Vendor Project (a part of the Urban Justice Center), to affordable housing, as framed in Predatory Equity: The Survival Guide, a collaboration between Tenants & Neighbors, the Urban Homesteading Assistance Board and graphic designer Glen Cummings of MTWTF. And in another issue in the series, Immigrants Beware!, the eye-catching design of Lana Cavar and Tamara Maletic illuminates Families for Freedom's strategies to fight deportation. "This publication is not legal advice, but it can help you understand the complex relationship between the criminal justice system and the immigration system," reads the front cover, part of the message of empowering readers.
Or consider *A User’s Guide to (Demanding) the Impossible*, published by the arts group [Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination](http://places.designobserver.com/entryprint.html?entry=25408) to correspond with the Long Weekend, an action organized by Arts Against Cuts and held at Goldsmiths college in London in early December 2010. The event was held to protest Prime Minister David Cameron’s reduction of government funding for British higher education, a spending cut of nearly 40 percent that targeted arts, humanities and social sciences while protecting the budgets of science, technology, engineering and mathematics programs. Held just days before a major MP vote, the 48-hour event offered a series of resistance workshops. The downloadable user’s guide presented a history of art activist strategies. Included were interventionist examples such as The Tactical Ice Cream Unit; created by [The Center for Tactical Magic](http://places.designobserver.com/entryprint.html?entry=25408), the TICU is an ice cream van that not only serves up scoops but also distributes radical literature to local communities and acts as a grassroots mobile communications hub. Another project profiled in the guide is the mid-1960s project, The Free Store; created in the mid-1960s by the Diggers (a group of San Francisco artists and actors, and later called the Free City Collective), the Free Store used tactics that we now see as familiar: it occupied an abandoned storefront, and inside, it distributed goods, food and health services for free or exchange. Recognizing the incendiary nature of the pamphlet, *User's Guide* authors Gavin Grindon and John Jordan write: "This guide is not a road map or instruction manual. It's a match struck in the dark, a homemade multi-tool to help you carve out your own path through the ruins of the present, warmed by the stories and strategies of those who took Bertolt Brecht’s words to heart: 'Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it.'"
These days, of course, print is not always the fastest or best means to exchange information. Wiki technology can be a powerful platform for collaborative how-to and DIY materials. A project such as Open Source Ecology, for instance, uses the wiki/hive mind to connect an extensive network of farmers and engineers. Founded in 2004 by Marcin Jakubowski (recently named a TED Fellow) in rural Missouri, the project sets out to create a "Global Village Construction Set" that is described as instructions for the DIY fabrication of industrial machines needed to support sustainable communities. In true wiki fashion, participants need just computer access and a web link to add to and modify the growing database.

And yet — perhaps precisely because the digital and the virtual are now so ubiquitous — there are times when the very tangibility of print makes it especially powerful; when the ability to pass a pamphlet from hand-to-hand and distribute information without an Internet connection is valuable, even irreplaceable.

This was made compellingly clear in late January when the activist website IndyMedia.com published nine pages from How to Protest Intelligently, a 26-page illustrated pamphlet published in Arabic and English that quickly was printed out and passed around among demonstrators in Egypt. When the Egyptian government cut off Internet service, the printed pamphlet was still accessible. Subtitled "Important Information and Tactics," the text clearly articulated the Egyptian people's demands, the strategic goals behind civil disobedience and the steps for effective resistance. The pamphlet's attention to detail and inventiveness is evident in the section "Necessary Clothing and Accessories":

- Sweatshirt or leather jacket with a hood. This helps shield your face from tear gas.
- The lid of a pot: you can use this shield when the State Security beats you or shoots rubber bullets.
- Protective glasses (Can be bought at any metalworking or paint shop).
- Spray paint so that if the authorities attack us, we can spray paint the visors of their helmets and the windshields of the armored trucks, blocking their vision and hindering their movement.

This kind of listing of mundane necessities and logistical ingenuity, which can be used collectively to overthrow...
a government that ruled for decades, offers perspective on DIY efforts. If a can of spray paint can be a tool in the struggle for democracy, then maybe it's not a fantasy to imagine that small-scale change can be achieved through urban interventions and arts activism.