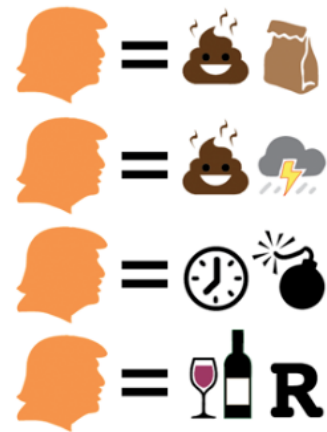
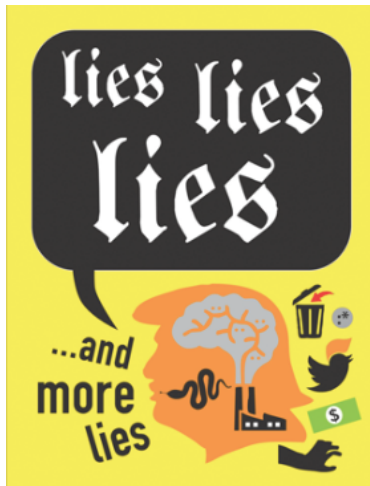


MAKING FABRIC PROTEST BANNERS: Tips + Tricks

By Stephanie Syjuco, updated 12/23/16



"Lies, Lies, Lies,"
cotton and felt
fabric panel, 44"
wide.



INTRODUCTION

I put together this overview to share some examples of fabric protest banners that I designed and made since the results of the 2016 Presidential Election. I realized that I wanted to create lasting images and signage that took advantage of a skillset that I've honed over the years -- sewing and making. By no means is this a definitive way of making fabric banners but since I've been posting images of my results on social media, I've been getting a lot of questions about how I've made them. I wanted to show how easy it can be, and I've even put together downloadable, printable templates that can assist if you want to make them yourself.

I could have technically designed and printed these banners digitally, but I decided to take the time to cut and sew them instead. Why? Because there's something about wanting to dig into the materiality of *stuff* and have a direct hand in a work's creation that is hard to argue against. Don't get me wrong, I'm not privileging the handmade over the digital – in fact, much of my own artwork deals with digital technologies and incorporates 3D scanning -- but I do think that in this case, the slowed-down timeframe of having to actually *make and sew something* forced me to spend more time thinking about what it was that I was arguing for in the imagery and message of the work. I spent more time playing with the symbols, the colors, and the juxtapositions. The side effect was that I felt closer to the final result and more invested in it. I'll value these sewn banners more than a digital print, and I'm sure others who view them will, too. They're not meant to be discarded, they're meant to be kept and viewed.

A note on use and reuse of my banner designs: Feel free to use, remix, cut and paste, modify, and outright copy my designs for your own work, whether it be in analog, digital, or what-have-you form. They consist mainly of clip art that I reformatted and put together into new narratives, and I consider these files templates that others can reconfigure in any way they want. You do not have to ask my permission to use them, but if you want to share any images of what you've made with them, I'd be delighted to see!



Thousands protest out-of-control London housing market in [#MarchForHomes protest](#)

WHY MAKE FABRIC BANNERS?

They're practical and reusable. They last longer than cardboard signs, look great, and can double as snazzy wall hangings after the protest! Besides, who doesn't want to see a great craftastic handmade fabric banner unfurled in public? As artists and makers we have a treasure trove of skills that can be put to great use in this format.

They fold down into small packages. Roll them, fold them, and stash them easily in a bag, under your arm, or wear as a shawl. Try that with a cardboard sign and it doesn't work so well. Lugging a giant sign on public transportation can be tricky and impractical. And if you have to disperse quickly, folding up your banner is a faster way to disappear than looking like a giant moving cardboard target running down the street.



Suffragette banners came in all sizes, designs, and shapes. View more at the [Women's Library: Suffrage Banners Collection](#)

They reference a long history of textiles in tradition and protest. From the DIY painted fabric banner made for expediency, to the U.S. and British [Suffragette banners](#) of the early 20th Century, handmade fabric banners have been held aloft and made by men and women for a wide range of causes. Consider them future heirloom objects that you can pass down for generations!

They look f*cking GREAT. Part of the challenge of creating a compelling message is to create a compelling visual delivery for it. Fabric banners can deploy a range of designs, patterns, styles, and craft techniques to add an extra level of "wow!" to a protest. Despite the beauty and immediacy of the handmade cardboard sign, the commitment to making a fabric banner can speak volumes about your conviction to a message. This types of visual resistance can lift spirits, be eye-catching, and remind people that protests and aesthetics are intertwined. Think of the beautiful posters produced in the 1960s by [Atelier Populaire](#) (pictured below), the contemporary works by print collective [Justseeds](#), and the activist 80s

campaigns of [ACT UP](#) (also below, featuring artist Keith Haring's design) to see how visuals can aid the movement. There are many more examples of course -- it's just the tip of the iceberg!





EASY PRODUCTION TECHNIQUE: Paint, Fabric, and Glue

It doesn't have to be complicated. With simple graphics and effective design, you can easily produce painted banners or glue fabric letters onto a larger fabric panel to get your message across.

Paint on fabric

Super easy: use old bed sheets or scrap fabric and acrylic paint. Sketch out your design in pencil, or if you're feeling super confident, just start lettering directly onto the fabric. This technique has a great "immediate," action-oriented look. You can also use small paint rollers to paint on large segments of lettering (faster than using a brush).

- Acrylic paint is cheapest, although you can buy special fabric paint if you have the funds.

-
- Avoid using tempera paint, which will wash out in the rain or washing machine. Also not recommended: oil paint.
 - If you use acrylic paint or latex house paint, consider watering it down slightly so that it can flow more easily.

Fabric cut-outs and glue

Another quick and dirty technique: cut out blocky letters or images out of contrasting fabrics and use fabric glue or white glue, hot glue, or other adhesive to literally just stick it on. While it may not be the most secure or permanent, it's a fast way to get a message across and can look amazing.

- Hot glue can get stiff and sometimes doesn't adhere after a while, so experiment with how well it works.
- Cheap acrylic craft felt works great for this, since the cut edges won't fray. You can buy pre-cut 9" x 12" acrylic craft panels in tons of colors for just 49 cents each, or by the yard for about \$4-\$6.
- Use patterned fabric for an interesting look and unusual design combinations.



Mike Kelley, "Friend of the Animals and Animal Self" 1987, glued felt 2 parts, 241 x 172 cm and 244 x 183 cm, The Schyl Collection, Malmö Kontshall | Photo: Helene Toresdotter, Courtesy Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts.

Artist Mike Kelley used this simple technique to great effect in his [fabric banner series](#).



MORE INVOLVED PRODUCTION TECHNIQUE: Iron-on fusible interfacing and sewing

This method takes more time, but makes for great impact! This is my favorite technique, and uses iron-on fusible interfacing to get fabric cut-outs to stick to a large fabric backing

panel. I use [Pellon 805 Wonder-Under](#) which comes in 17" wide rolls that you can buy from \$2.99 - \$4.50 by the yard. From there, I use a sewing machine to stitch on top of the edges of the appliques to secure them down. Reminiscent of applique techniques in quilting or patchwork, the finished work is good enough to hang on your wall after the protest!

Basic steps

1. Decide on the final size of your banner.

If you're using scrap cloth or just a small piece of fabric, make sure your text and design will be legible. Conversely, if you are making a super large sign, make sure that you have enough material for the size.

- I've been making banners that have been wide enough for my outstretched arms to hold, and so that I don't have to rely on a second person to help me carry it. Most of them have been from 36" - 44" wide, and about 40" to 50" tall, which is a perfect size for buying cotton quilting fabric by the yard since the standard bolt width is 46". Generally, for my backing panel I buy 1 ½ yards.

2. Design your panel.

I use Adobe Illustrator because I used to be a graphic designer and I use clip art and special fonts to get the look I want. The designs are vector files and scalable, which means I can enlarge or shrink the images as needed. I make the final design the exact size that the banner will be so when I print the paper templates I can just cut them out exactly at the size I need.

OR

Go analog! Obviously, you can be a lot faster if you sketch out your design free-hand with pencil and paper. For larger designs, consider drawing on cut-up paper grocery bags, newspapers, or butcher paper, which can then serve as the paper templates you need.



3. Print/produce your paper templates.

- If using the digital design method you can print out the letters and images onto regular 8 ½" x 11" paper. For larger sizes, you can "tile" the prints and tape them together. Here's a great tutorial on how to do it in Illustrator: <http://fashionclassroom.com/blog/illustrator-tutorial-how-to-set-up-page-tiling-for-large-artwork>

-
- If you're super lazy and want to just print the templates out on large sheets of cheap paper, Fedex Kinkos can print black and white large format digital copies on bond paper for approximately 75 cents a square foot, up to 36" wide by any length (it's on roll paper). You upload a PDF file for them to print and can usually pick it up the next day. If you're in the Berkeley, California area, I recommend using [The Ink Stone](#), a locally-owned art and architecture supply that has the same rates and super fast turnaround time.
 - If drawing by hand, go ahead and cut out your paper designs to the size you need.

4. **Transfer your design to fusible (iron-on) interfacing**

In order to get those crisp fabric cutouts, I use double-sided iron-on fusible. Before even ironing it onto your fabric, you can trace your template onto the paper backing of the fusible.

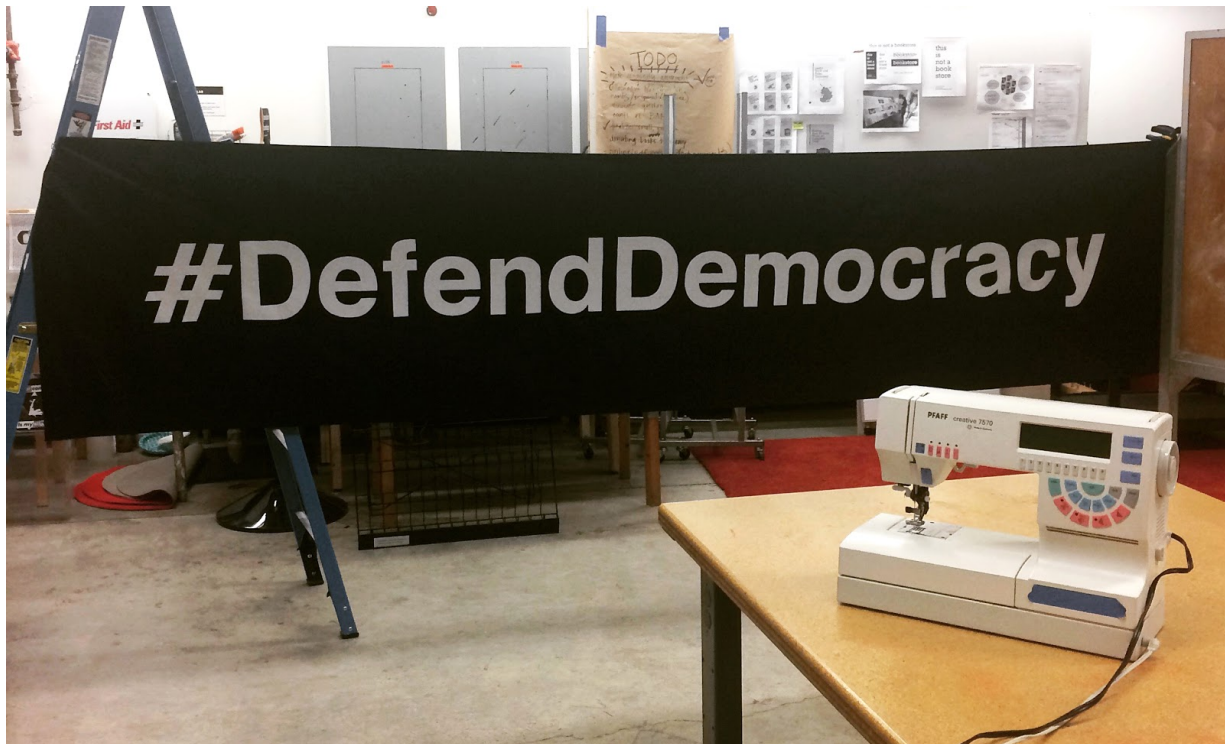
- This tutorial shows one way to do it using a window or lightbox:
<http://www.sewmamasew.com/2014/06/how-to-use-fusible-web-for-applique>
- You can also just cut out the printed paper templates and trace them directly onto the paper side of the fusible. A bit of an extra step but very direct.

5. **Iron on, cut out, and sew!**

Technically the iron on fusible will adhere your fabric cutouts to the main panel, but I've found that extra topstitching is a decorative and useful addition. The fusible has a tendency to pull off after enough folding and handling of the panel, so if you want your banner to last longer and have that extra detail, sew down the cutouts.

- You can use a straight stitch just inside the applique, or use a zigzag around the edges. The sewmamasew video tutorial linked above shows how to do this as well.
- I've found that you don't necessarily have to be neat and even a rough stitching of some kind works. Depending on the effect you want, sometimes rough stitching actually looks great!

-
- The more layers of fabric in your project, the thicker it will be. Consider this if you need to fold it up easily.



Banner Example #1: **#Defend Democracy**

Materials: 4 yds black fabric, 1 yd white fabric, iron-on fusible.

Download templates [here](#).

Time: 5-7 hours

This banner was made to be 12 feet across and to be displayed on the steps of the California State Capitol in Sacramento for an event sponsored by [#DefendDemocracy](#) and led by the wonderful activist/writer Rebecca Solnit and Taj James. It's SIMPLE yet effective and gets the message across. I wanted something that was easily read from afar and visually bold. Two people can hold it up, one on each end.

I designed it in Adobe Illustrator and printed out the letters as templates. The white letters each fit onto a single letter-sized piece of printer paper (except for the "D's" which took two sheets taped together, and are cut out of white fabric. I used black poly/cotton with a nice weight that is used to make raincoats. I wanted it to be pretty substantial so it stood up to

different types of scenarios and could be used again and again. I used fusible iron-on interfacing and then roughly zig-zag stitched the edges of the letters with white thread. It's hemmed all around for a finished look.



12' wide

#DefendDemocracy

Tips:

- The message can be applied to different contexts and isn't overly specific. I've found that if you make it too specific, sometimes it can't be reused for other events.
- Next time I'd consider sewing in grommets to the top edges or pole pockets on the sides or tops.



The cut-out letters with iron-on fusible already adhered to the back of fabric.



Laying most of it out on a long table and ironing on the letters before topstitching.



At 12' wide it's a bit awkward to sew on the machine but with some patience it works!



In the end it folds down to such a small size! Amazing!



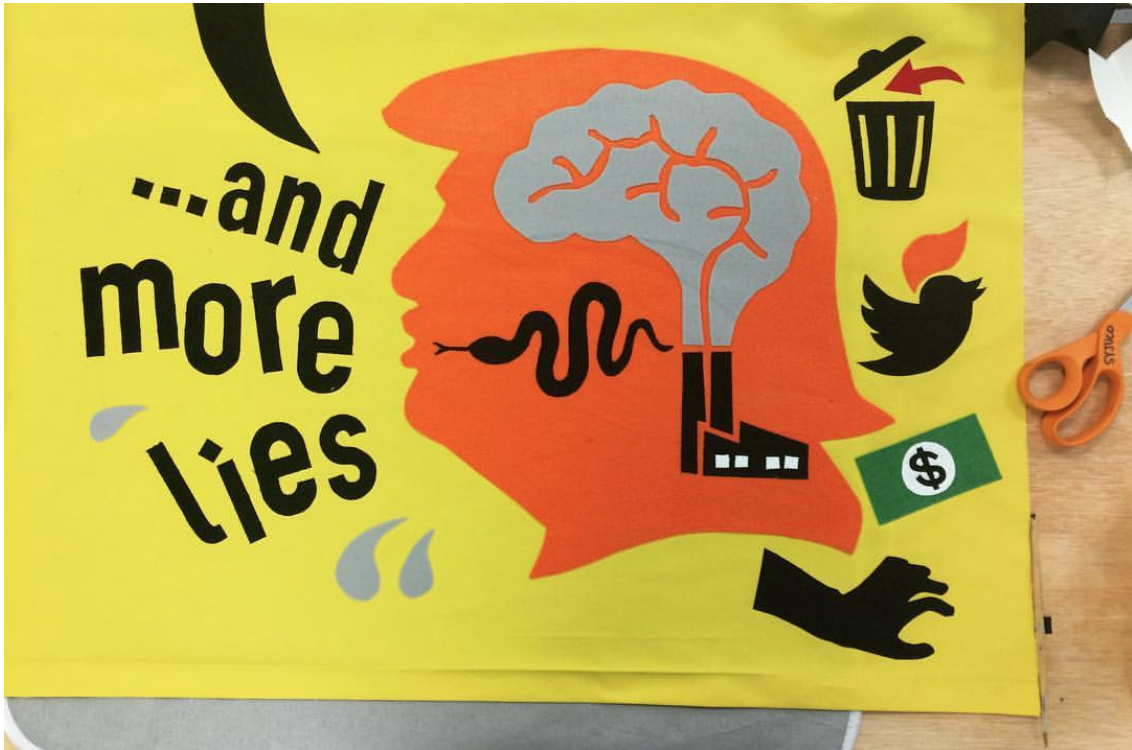
Banner Example #2: Lies, Lies, Lies

Materials: cotton fabric, acrylic felt, iron-on fusible, printed paper templates

Download templates [here](#).

Time: one day

I used clip art that I found online (and modified) in order to make this design. It's 40" across, hemmed with brown fabric, and the cutouts are a mix of cotton and felt, all with iron-on fusible and topstitching.



Detail: felt and cotton components.



Printed templates cut and taped together from letter-sized paper. These were then traced onto the paper backing of the iron-on fusible before cutting out the fabric.



Banner Example #3: **Total Twit Meets the Future**

Materials: cotton fabric, acrylic felt, iron-on fusible, printed paper templates

Download templates [here](#).

Time: one day

I used clip art that I found online (and modified) in order to make this design. It's about 40" across, hemmed with red fabric, and the cutouts are a mix of cotton and felt, all with iron-on fusible and topstitching, except for the tiny text, which seemed like overkill.



Detail: felt "tweet bubbles" with cotton fabric appliques



Detail: felt "tweet bubbles" with cotton fabric appliques



Detail: felt "tweet bubbles" with cotton fabric appliques



Banner Example #4: Resist! (Fist)

Materials: cotton fabric, acrylic felt, iron-on fusible, printed paper templates

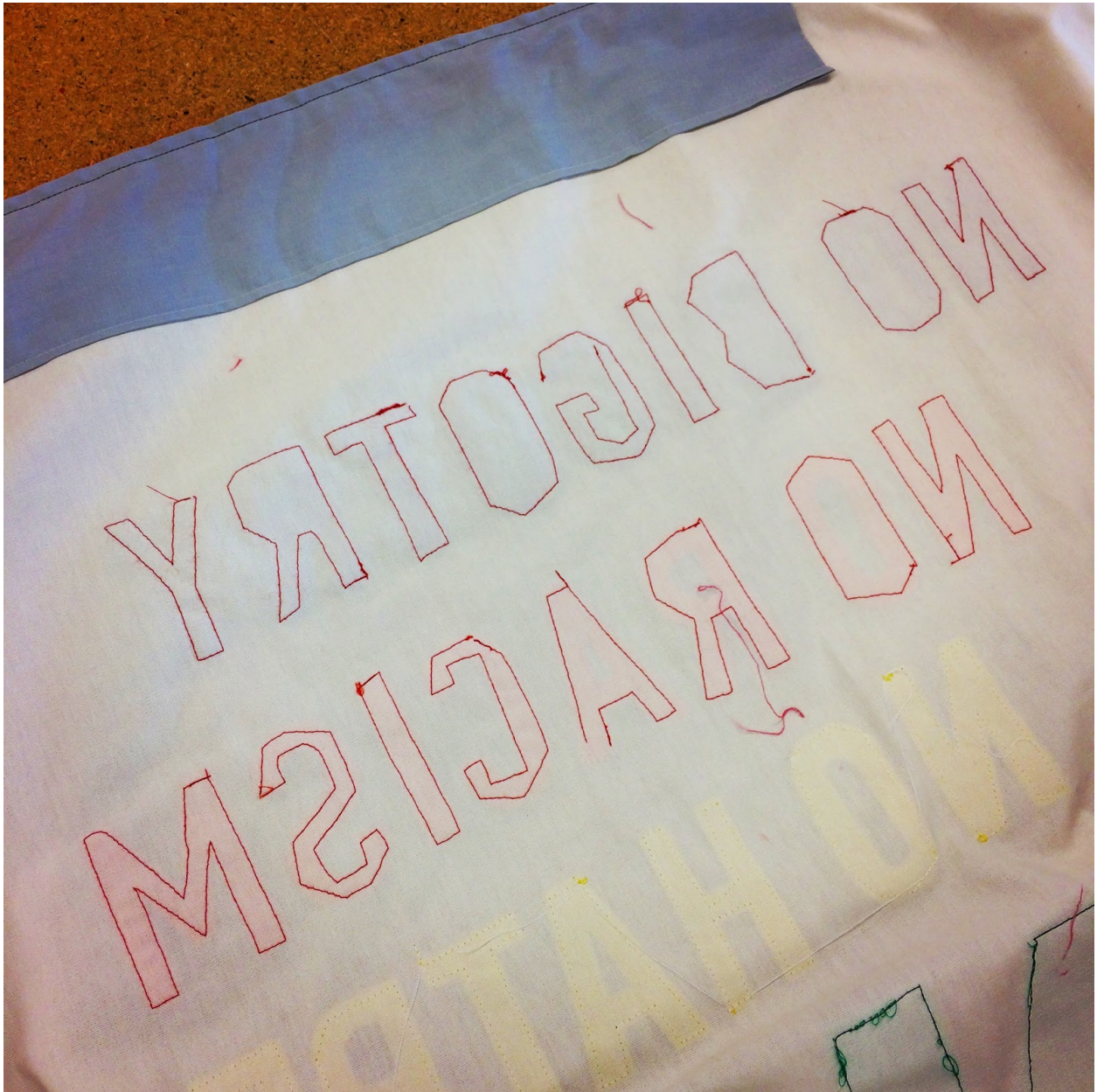
Download templates [here](#).

Time: one day

I used clip art that I found online (and modified) in order to make this design. It's about 44" across, hemmed with red fabric, and the cutouts are a mix of cotton and felt, all with iron-on fusible and topstitching.



The letters are made of acrylic felt and they are roughly topstitched with matching-colored thread. Because of the iron-on fusible, the topstitching is just meant to reinforce it. Also, the felt doesn't fray so the edges don't have to be treated as detailed as regular fabric cutouts.



Reverse side of fabric showing how rough the topstitching is. If you use matching thread it's not noticeable from a distance and doesn't have to be fancy. Plus it can add to the aesthetic of immediacy!



I sewed a 3" tall "pole pocket" at the top (onto the back of the fabric panel) so that I could insert some lightweight PVC tubing into it. The PVC is too flimsy and not super sturdy so I'll design a better way to hold it aloft. But the pole pocket keeps it versatile in the meantime.



I also sewed in some straps onto the top back corners so it can be easily held instead of gripped at the sides. The gray panel is the pole pocket.



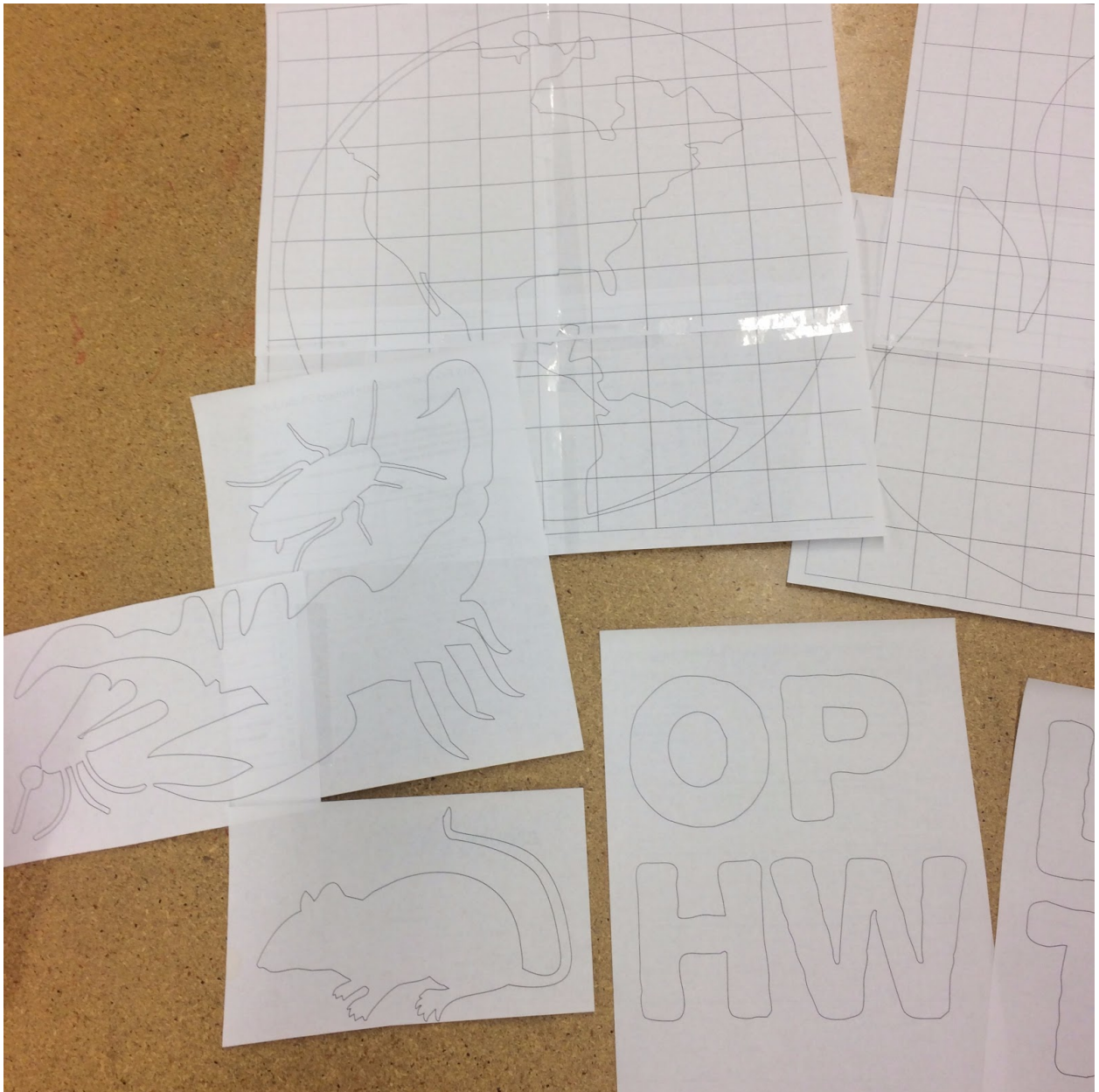
Banner Example #5: Earth on Fire (Let's Stop this Sh*t Show)

Materials: cotton fabric, acrylic felt, iron-on fusible, printed paper templates

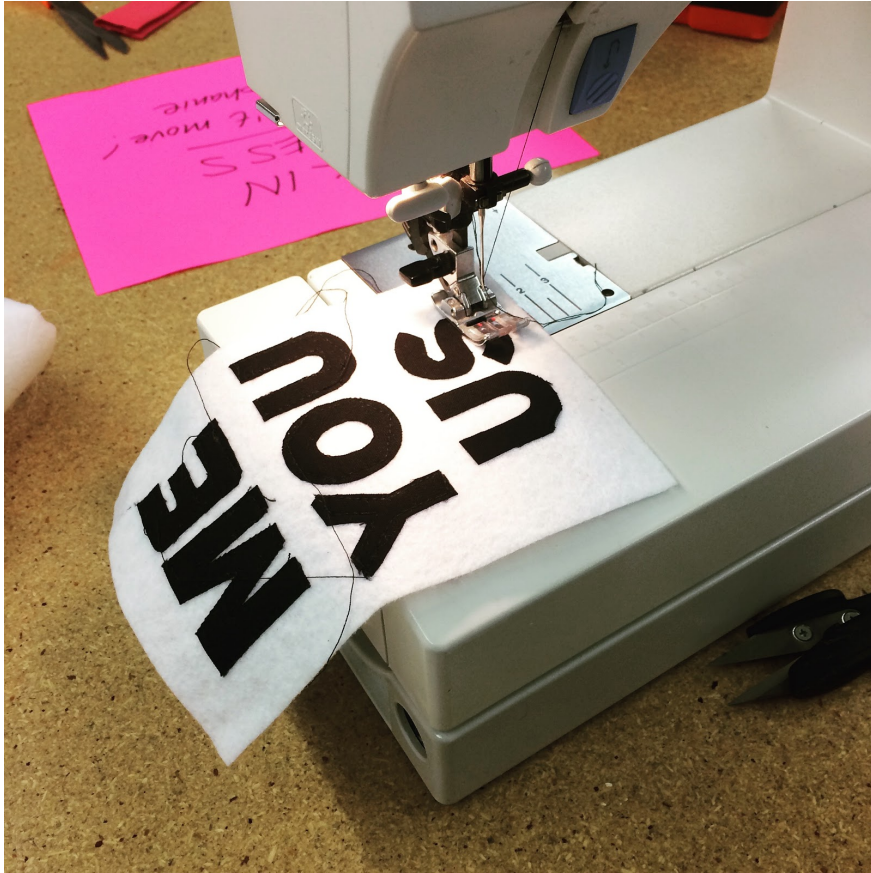
Download templates [here](#).

Time: one day

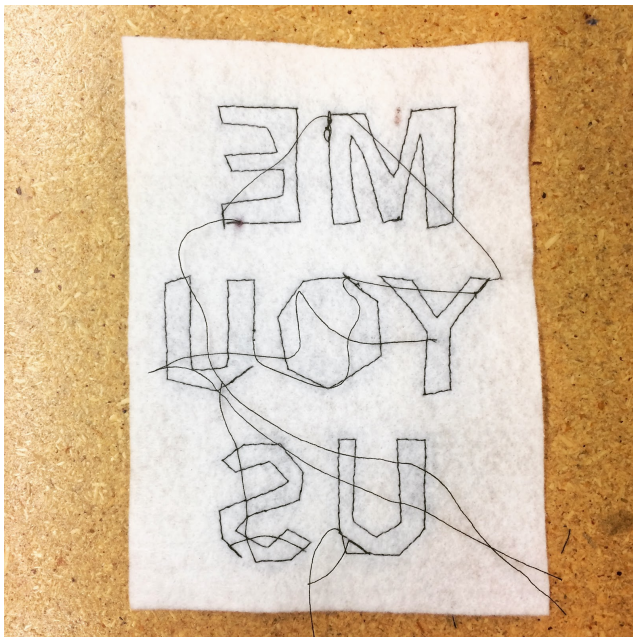
I used clip art that I found online (and modified) in order to make this design. It's about 38" across, and the cutouts are a mix of cotton and felt, all with iron-on fusible and topstitching.



The printed paper templates, taped together when it couldn't fit onto pieces of letter-sized paper.



Topstitching black cotton fabric onto white felt. I made portions of this in panels so that it was easier to sew as small pieces rather than onto one larger banner.



Reverse side of panel showing how rough the stitching could be if the thread is matched.



Banner Example #6: Snake Oil (Zero Proof)

Materials: cotton fabric, acrylic felt, iron-on fusible, printed paper templates

Download templates [here](#).

Time: one day

I used clip art that I found online (and modified) in order to make this design. It's about 44" across, and the cutouts are a mix of cotton and felt, all with iron-on fusible and topstitching. Will be hemmed when complete!



Pinning down the fabric appliques onto the main backing panel. The iron-on fusible was adhered to the black fabric before cutting out the shapes.



Laying out the pieces on a large table and pinning together. An ironing pad is underneath and the components are first ironed down and then topstitched.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Manuals

- [The Ruckus Society](#), a seasoned arts and activist organization based in Oakland has put together an AMAZING resource for protest banner-making: [Creative Direct Action Visuals, A Ruckus Society Manual](#). I wish I had seen this first, it has so many great ideas and tips!

Materials:

- **Pellon Wonder-Under fusible interfacing:** Linked [here](#) to Joann Fabrics for those that can't get it easily, but please consider buying from a local source instead!

Materially Responsible ideas:

- **Shop local!** Although you can buy things online, consider what it means to give your money to small businesses and fabric stores instead of the chain stores.
- **Use second-hand clothing, fabric, textiles.** A lot cheaper than buying new fabrics and can also create a great visual statement if you integrate this concept to your message.



A banner reading 'Capitalism isn't working' at the Occupy London Stock Exchange protest. (Photograph: Oli Scarff/Getty Images)



Stephanie Syjuco is an artist and educator who has a tendency to create tutorials and run public workshops in relation to her projects. Earlier this year she created the instructional document [“How to Start a Bare Bones Bookbinding and Publication Studio for Under \\$1000.”](#) Other resources include [Public Pedagogy](#), a database of syllabi meant as a public resource for those that develop and teach coursework in fine arts at the college level, and [Speculative Propositions](#), an archive of grant applications and project proposals with notations on what may or may not have been successful. She is an Assistant Professor in Sculpture at UC Berkeley and is based in Oakland, CA.

You can view more of her work at www.stephaniesyjuco.com.