



'Prisoners' Inventions': An Interview with Temporary Services

by **Craig Buckley**



The interview deals mainly with *Prisoners' Inventions*, a book and an exhibition that came out of a collaboration between Angelo, a man who is currently incarcerated in California, and Temporary Services, a group based in Chicago. The interview was developed via email in the summer and fall of 2003.

CB. Temporary Services had been in contact with Angelo for some time prior to the *Prisoners' Inventions* project. Can you describe how you initially met Angelo and how you arrived at the collaboration that became the *Prisoners' Inventions* project?

TS. Angelo first contacted Marc Fischer from Temporary Services back in 1991 (Temporary Services began in 1998). At the time, Fischer was publishing a fanzine about underground music, politics, and art. The 'zine was free to prisoners and Angelo's cellmate requested a copy which he shared with Angelo. Angelo contacted Fischer and sent him one of his drawings; this marked the beginning of their friendship and correspondence.

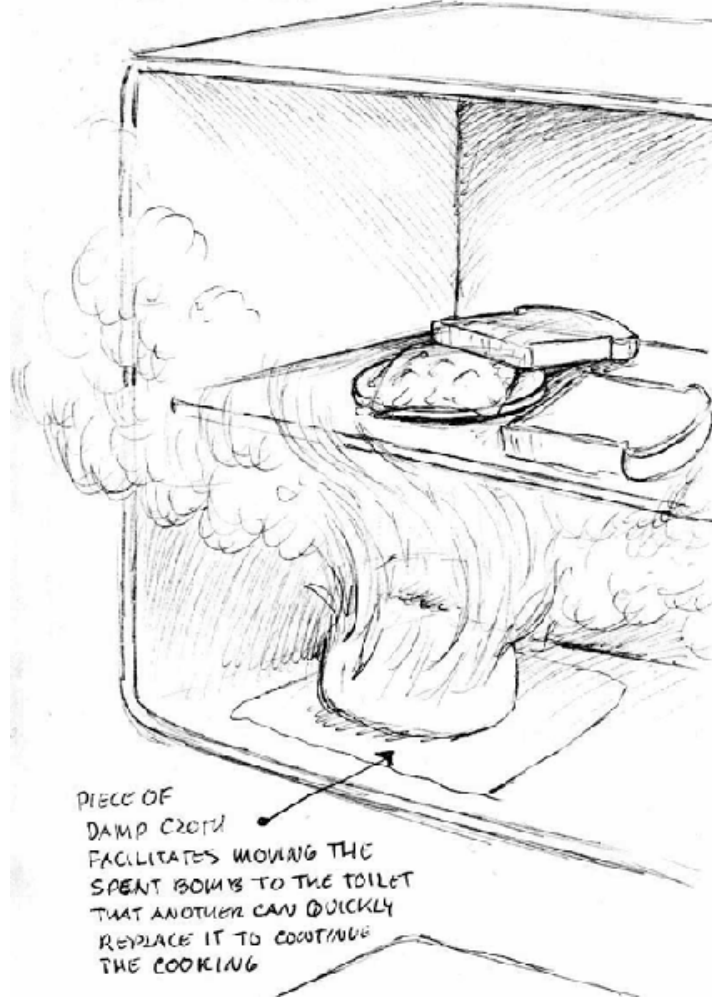
In 2000, Temporary Services mounted an exhibition of Angelo's narrative drawings from a more personal and continuous body of work that he has been producing for many years. The organization of this exhibition became the group's larger introduction to Angelo's work and ideas. Since the beginning of Temporary Services, we have been self-publishing booklets for our projects and we regularly send these to Angelo. He enjoys receiving them and was greatly excited by the booklet that we produced in conjunction with his exhibit.

We arrived at the idea for the *Prisoners' Inventions* project through a series of casual discussions about inventions that Angelo sometimes mentioned in his letters. We also talked about inventions that group members had read about in varied sources or heard about in dialogues with other inmates. The idea of prisoners inventing wildly creative things to maintain greater personal autonomy and to bypass the restrictions that are imposed on them was immensely appealing to us.

We casually asked Angelo if he'd like to write and illustrate a small booklet on the subject of prisoners' inventions. We had been invited to participate in a one-day event titled "Autonomous Territories of Chicago" organized by an initiative called the Department of Space and Land Reclamation. We felt that a free booklet on this subject by Angelo would be a nice contribution to this event. Angelo took a while to think about the invitation. At first, he couldn't think of many inventions of great interest. Fortunately, Angelo has an astounding memory for visual details. In time, he began to remember, draw and write about lots of things he had seen.

COOKING WITH BOMBS (TOILET PAPER)

USING THE CELL PROPERTY LOCKER AS A GRILL



He missed the deadline for the event but as his work on this project became more ambitious, it immediately became clear to us that *Prisoners' Inventions* should be something more than a photocopied booklet. The amount of writing and drawing that Angelo was doing necessitated a real book and an exhibition. After we began to receive the finished drawings and writings from Angelo in several separate mailings, we discussed amongst ourselves, and with Angelo, how this project might be expanded.

CB. In any collaboration one of the hardest and most important parts is the process of decision making. It sounds like your work with Angelo has largely been through correspondence, either through letters or perhaps email. Given the fact of this distanced relationship how does the decision making process take place? For instance, when you were putting together the book, was there a selection process? When you present the project as an installation (such as the installation for *Fantastic* at Mass MoCA, or recently for *Get rid of Yourself* at Halle 14 in Leipzig) does Angelo work with you on the installation? In this process, what part of the work would you call "yours" and what part would you call "his"?

TS. All of our work with Angelo has been through written postal correspondence. He does not have access to email and has never seen the Internet. The communication process can be extremely slow because it takes 2-3 weeks before Angelo receives a letter. Everything must be inspected for contraband by the mail room so even if we respond to a letter immediately and he responds immediately, it can still take nearly a month for all of us to get 'on the same page'.

We spent a very long time communicating with Angelo and each other before the exhibition at MASS MoCA and the book were realized. Questions from Nato Thompson (the curator at MASS MoCA)--and from Anthony Elms--(the managing editor of the book's publisher) were all forwarded to Angelo through Temporary Services to protect his privacy and to limit the circulation of his address. We continually generated questions for Angelo about how to proceed with various

aspects of the project and we filled him in regularly on how our own thinking was progressing.

When we decided to realize a book and an exhibit around *Prisoners' Inventions* we immediately sought Angelo's input and shared our ideas. We felt that the drawings alone would not be visually tactile enough as an exhibit so we suggested making precise copies of some of the objects. Angelo then suggested that we build a copy of his cell or find people who could build it for us. He even recommended friends of ours--Zena Sakowski and Rob Kelly--who he thought might be good cell builders. This suggestion came from his having seen a booklet we published on their work and photos from one of their exhibitions.

Angelo understands that we have to work under pressures and time and budget constraints that are not always knowable to him given his situation. He gives us his input on anything he thinks is important and then he trusts us to do what we think is best and take or leave his advice. In the case of the book, we used every drawing and piece of writing that Angelo sent. Nothing was omitted. In the case of the first exhibit, we could not construct the cell exactly as Angelo had hoped, though he was extremely pleased with the result (we sent him many photos). The cell was built entirely from Angelo's drawings by the fabricators at MASS MoCA and there wasn't time or money for us to help or intervene in their process. There were some deviations from what Angelo wanted in the area of realism and these are things we might be able to correct in future showings of the project. Though we sent him sketches of some installation ideas early on, ultimately it was impossible to really confer with Angelo on the precise installation at MASS MoCA and Halle 14. We did not fully understand how we would install the work until we arrived at the spaces.



After seeing photos of the cell and of the inventions, Angelo offered corrections where needed. In some cases he felt that things had been built incorrectly. In other cases he noticed that he could have been clearer about scale and proportions in some drawings and this accounted for errors that we can fix next time around. We have worked with Angelo long enough that he trusts us to make decisions.

He will always correct us if we make mistakes. We make it clear, in this collaboration, that the drawings are Angelo's as was the idea to make a replica of his cell (for MASS MoCA). The book is clearly credited as Angelo's work with just some basic editorial notes about our involvement in the project. Beyond that we don't make a lot of distinctions; we just present it as a collaborative project. We also had many other people helping us out on *Prisoners' Inventions*. We calculated upwards of 20 people collaborating in various capacities to make the entire thing happen. We do not provide authorship for who made any of the inventions but we do publicly acknowledge everyone that helped either in publications or on wall labels.

CB: That kind of distance reminds me of a striking story in the book, an invention that is actually about this kind of distanced communication. In an entry titled "A Fishing Tale" Angelo writes about a story he heard from another inmate about the Hall of Justice Jail in Los Angeles. That particular prison had a number of floors and somehow someone discovered the toilets shared the same pipe, and that fishing wire flushed down the pipes could be caught by a lower floor and used as a system to pass messages, love letters, objects, pictures. Both the book and the installations are not unlike letters, in that the experience they represent are always distanced. Video and photography, such as the documentation of exonerated men featured in Taryn Simon's *The Innocents* project, (a project that links itself very explicitly to inmate advocacy) work to give you an impression of an individual presence. *Prisoners' Inventions*, even though it is recounted in the first person, remains anecdotal, fragmentary, written by an author who we cannot see, and about whom the reader knows little or nothing. While this distance may have been imposed by the system, it also seems to me to be a decision, a strategy of presentation. Could you describe how you approached the strategies of presentation and how you see the link between the specificities of making your work and the issues of inmate advocacy?

TS: The distance you describe is partly a reality of geographic and institutional constraints, partly a natural outgrowth of how Angelo wanted to be included in this project, but it was also a deliberate choice on all of our parts.

In the past, as when Temporary Services presented drawings of his in our old office space,

Angelo has been forthcoming about many aspects of his life (but he does not discuss his conviction). He has shared a lot of biographical information with us. *Prisoners' Inventions* is somewhat different as Angelo is not telling his own story; he is acting as a vehicle through which the inventions of prisoners are explained. It is appropriate that the specifics of his own life or the lives of other inmates would not be in the foreground of this project.

Angelo insists that he's just trying to stay sane during the course of his sentence and he does not want the attention that he might receive if knowledge of his full name, his conviction, or his exact location were made public. He does not want the hassle of becoming a celebrity prisoner. So some distance was created in order to protect Angelo's privacy. This strategy has helped keep viewers more focused on the major themes of this work: the inventions and the social context that forced their creation. The distancing prevents viewers from judging prisoners for their crimes and allows the viewers to think about aspects of their everyday lives that are given short shrift.

The themes of this project transcend the biographies of the people that made them. One can easily imagine that similar inventions exist in any prison anywhere in the world where inmates are restricted from having things that they feel are fundamental to their everyday comfort and existence. On a recent trip to Buchenwald Concentration Camp we saw homemade chess and checkers sets from the 1930's that look identical to the things Angelo describes.

Angelo has been quite clear in his letters that he is not trying to lead some kind of revolution on behalf of other inmates, or trying to take that advocating type of position. This project is not a focused type of advocacy that campaigns for one person's case or individual rights. The project does however speak to the kind of extreme repression that is imposed on prisoners and it shows how many of them are dealing with it. Parts of the project could probably be used by inmate advocacy groups to demonstrate prisoners' responses to their conditions. News about this project is being circulated among people who work in the field of Criminal Justice.

As a group we are definitely interested in strategies that get unheard or under-represented voices like Angelo's out into the public. We are very interested in working with people who are rarely included in art exhibitions or other media. We are happy to be a liaison between the press and institutions for people like Angelo who have something to say but need to maintain a certain amount of distance in order to say it.

Prisoners' Inventions is, in essence, about how inmates make things they are not allowed to have so it would be hard to believe that any prison's administration would let us visit and work with the inmates on this project. This rules out the possibility of taking photos, doing video, or getting the actual objects directly from prisoners. Angelo could not even receive a newspaper article on this project because it included one of his own drawings showing how to make an electrical cigarette lighter! Likewise, neither Angelo nor his cellmate Paul have been able to receive copies of the *Prisoners' Inventions* book. Angelo has, quite literally, written a book that he is not allowed to have. It is our understanding that prisoners cannot correspond with inmates in other institutions so Angelo is also distanced from some of the former cellmates whose inventions he describes. Jerry, who is frequently mentioned in the book, was transferred to another prison. He has no awareness of the book because Angelo can't write to him (We will try to send him a copy).

CB: I hadn't realized that Angelo is prohibited from possessing his own work. As the author of the text and drawings, the book is Angelo's intellectual property, but because of his status as a prisoner, it cannot actually be his physical property. At the bottom of the copyright page, there is also a disclaimer telling the reader that "no prisoners received financial reward or profit from the publication of this book." This means he is excluded at another level from the author's traditional rights to their intellectual property, which is perhaps a stipulation about publications from prison. In being convicted of a crime, whether justly or unjustly, (as you said, you know nothing of Angelo's conviction) the convict is subjected to the force of the exception. This suspension of the law by the law, is the very condition of the state's sovereign power and authority. One of the things that we are witnessing today is that the state, in the name of security, is claiming ever-greater authority to name subjects that are subject to such exceptions (special registrants, detainees, non-enemy combatants are a few examples). Has this dynamic been a part of your conversations with Angelo? Have these concerns been brought up subsequently in the reception of the work?

TS: The issues surrounding the personal and intellectual property of prisoners are complicated and there is surely plenty we don't know about or understand in this area. The reasons for Angelo not being able to have the book were most certainly due to the contents of the book and not his own authorship of it.

In most cases mail is looked at more closely when it comes into the prison than when it goes out. The reason for this is that prisons are concerned about contraband being sent in (drugs,

paper money, and materials considered dangerous or pornographic for example). Because of the discrepancy that mail is looked at a little less closely on the way out, it is possible for prisoners to generate written or drawn material that they would not be able to receive if it were sent back to them. It appears that this is what has happened with Angelo's drawings of the inventions; another prisoner might make the inventions and get hurt. The absurdity of this, which Angelo noted in a recent letter, is that most inmates know how to make this stuff anyway! Rules about property are also enforced very unevenly. Some prisoners are singled out for special attention. Whether an inmate gets something or doesn't may depend on who is working in the mailroom.

In our relationship with Angelo, our greater preoccupation is with personal property rather than intellectual property. Prisoners are greatly limited as to how much physical property they can have. In Angelo's situation, we believe he gets about six cubic feet and if everything doesn't fit in his storage cubbies then whatever is left over could be confiscated in a cell search. In general, prisoners' personal property is not safe. Things get stolen by guards and sometimes by cellmates or other inmates. Angelo has had literally thousands of drawings stolen. He sends Marc from Temporary Services all of his work for safekeeping when he is finished with it. This is probably 4-5,000 pages of writing and drawings. This arrangement has saved a lot of material from theft but things are still sometimes stolen or confiscated before they can be sent out.

The question of how prisoners' art, writings, and creative work can be safeguarded for them by friends and family on the outside or handled for them during the course of their sentences is huge. Many people in prison do not have family they can turn to for the safeguarding of their work. Prisoners serving long sentences can outlive their family or they are essentially disowned, neglected, or forgotten. It is no easy task to figure out how best to handle and archive someone else's lifework. In the case of a person as productive as Angelo, maintaining one person's lifework could easily become the lifework of the person that is maintaining it.

So far the *Prisoners' Inventions* book has not turned a profit. It will probably need to sell out to make a profit and if it sells out the profits would probably first be used to reprint the book. White Walls, the book's publisher, has not-for-profit status. Temporary Services works non-commercially but does not have or want the bureaucratic designation of "non-profit". Temporary Services exceeded our budget for the project at MASS MoCA and spent some of our own money to realize that presentation.

There is a possibility that this project could generate profit and our response to that is something we would have to discuss. Marc supports Angelo to a degree and this support may remain a private arrangement in order to retain a distinct separation between state-funded institutions that host *Prisoners' Inventions* and the publisher White Walls which is also partly state funded. Angelo does share a copyright on the book (along with us and White Walls). We wanted to make sure that if he gets out, he would have a stake in the success of this book. This project is ongoing and so far we have not had a lot of conversations with Angelo about money because we did not expect to generate any income from this project. Our primary drive has been to figure out how to realize *Prisoners' Inventions*, not how to make money from it. Just doing the project seemed daunting enough! If we do start seeing money from the various components of *Prisoners' Inventions* then this is something we will have to start dealing with. So far it hasn't really been an issue or a large part of the public discourse around the project because the project hasn't turned a profit.

We have talked a little about ways of making a profit and safeguarding it legally for Angelo if or when he gets out of prison. It is incredible to us to what an extent American prison systems and civil society will go to put up barriers to a person's reintegration into the world--the stripping of funding for education and rehabilitation is the first destructive step. The privatization of the prison industry has not helped and will be a perpetual barrier to prison reform. We didn't set out with this project to address these issues, but have been forced to encounter them along the way.

CB: I'd like to change directions for a moment and ask what has informed your commitment to collaboration, both as a group and with others. I am also interested in how you relate to some of the writing about collaborative practices in the art world. Authors like Miwon Kwon and Hal Foster (among others) have used the phrase "ethnographic turn" to describe the research and collaborations artists conduct with individuals or institutions outside the traditional fields of art practice. One thing they stress is the need for a certain kind of reflexivity regarding the way that artists wittingly or unwittingly adopt positions of ethnographic authority, framing "otherness" for public or institutional consumption. Your work sits at an interesting angle to these conversations in that *Prisoners' Inventions* contains much that could be considered "ethnographic" yet it is not presented as the product of your own participant observation or ethnographic authority, it relates a very complicated process of self-presentation, perhaps even a kind of portraiture, authored by Angelo. You mentioned the term *liaison* earlier to describe your relationship with Angelo; how do you see this position relative to the one described in the debates about the "artist-as-ethnographer"?

TS: On a basic level, we collaborate with people that we consider friends and whose work and ideas we respect and admire. We work with people that we want to know better, learn from, and whose ideas we want to understand more deeply--all of those things become possible through collaboration. Those reasons for collaborating are part of why the three of us work together. Of course it is different collaborating with Angelo because we can't all be in the same room together. We can't go out drinking or eat meals or spend days making things together. We can't even email back and forth like the three of us are doing right now when we pass this text around to answer your questions. But that's okay. The mechanics of collaborating can be extremely varied.

The benefits of collaborating are many. To borrow a little from a text we have written about this:

Collaboration is an important activity to us, both within our group structure and as a pre-cursor to dealing with others outside the group. Group work already functions in almost all art projects --from those that are labelled collective or collaborative to those advertised as "solo shows". On a practical level, working together gives us both the ability to do multiple projects at once and the flexibility to use each other's experiences to our collective advantage. We also like collaboration because of the inherent challenges and incredible possibilities that come with working with each other and with persons outside of our group. We not only do more, but we are exposed to varied perspectives and opinions that we might never have to address on our own.

The writers you mention have no impact on our work or how we go about it. We haven't paid close enough attention to their ideas to specifically comment on the relationship of our work to their writing nor do we care to. We try to avoid speaking and debating from within this academic framework because it excludes too many people from the conversation. We often feel quite excluded from it ourselves. We look, rather, at how groups (and not just artists) talk about their practice and articulate it from their own perspectives.

It is possible to say a few things about ethnography in general but to just get stuck on making terms for art practice in this way really misses the point. Art is about life and is deeply embedded in it no matter what - not even if you try and claim some sort of aesthetic detachment. Angelo is definitely closer to the role of the ethnographer in *Prisoners' Inventions* than we are but Angelo has never used that term to describe his involvement in this project. We aren't about to tack it onto him. The categorization isn't necessary. We do feel that *Prisoners' Inventions* is a pretty serious piece of research on Angelo's part and he did employ a lot of direct observation. We fully trust his findings but ultimately we have no easy way of checking the precision and accuracy of his work. No one is professing to be an authority on the subject of *Prisoners' Inventions*. We can present Angelo's findings and make them more tactile for viewers and use his work as a springboard for all kinds of dialogues that we want to answer to and initiate, but we can't claim the observations that he is making for ourselves and won't give his work a label like ethnography.

We are interested in vernacular visual culture. It can teach us a lot about human behavior and how what people do leaves visual clues and traces to this behavior and its meanings. In other projects we have directly recorded public urban phenomena that interests us such as commercial sandwich board signs, makeshift roadside memorials to accident victims, block club signs that list the rules of behavior on various streets, unusual street flyers and public expressions, things people drag into the street to save their shovelled out parking spaces after heavy Chicago snow storms and things like that.

Prisoners' Inventions is definitely not portraiture. The idea of portraiture has been applied to so many kinds of contemporary art practice and has been stretched so thin that it has been stripped of any useful meaning. We don't ever talk about our work in this way. We spend an enormous amount of time trying to get away from these kinds of conventions and all the dead weight they pull along with them. This is one important way of breaking down concentrations of power that swirl around writers like the ones you mentioned and the way in which they get a disproportionate influence over art practitioners.

CB: If the work of people like Foster and Kwon isn't of interest to you, perhaps you could say a little more about the models or perspectives of other art or non-art groups that you are interested in?

TS: On our website we have a section for readings that includes interviews and articles by people like: WochenKlausur, Greg Sholette, Julie Ault (formerly of Group Material), Nato Thompson, N55, Alan Moore, Guy Debord, and Lars Bang Larsen. A recent booklet we published compiled quotes about collaboration and included people and groups like: The Ex, Sonic Youth, Act Up, Paper Tiger Television, Parliament / Funkadelic, REPOhistory, Studs Terkel, Benjamin Nelson, and Frederick Wiseman. Our practice has been greatly affected by some of the people we

have collaborated with like Zena Sakowski and Rob Kelly, Brennan McGaffey, Dave Whitman, and Angelo. The contributions of past members of Temporary Services: Lora Lode, Kevin Kaempf, Nance Klehm and Lillian Yvonne have also helped to shape what Temporary Services is doing now.

CB: The antagonism you outlined is interesting and especially relevant given the theme of Us vs. Them. While I do share your desire for a language that is inclusive I am a little wary of how anti-academicism is used. For instance, populist "anti-academic" critics (such as Dave Hickey) have just as disproportionate an influence as "academic" ones, often linking populist language to quite conservative aesthetics. Forms of collaborative practice, while they do resist certain features of how power is organized in the art world (the focus on the individual, on object production, etc.) are not without their own specific power dynamics. One kind of power is the power of being able to invite the public to participate in a work: while this may be in a spirit of democracy, it may involve subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) forms of coercion. Often the forms of participation are established in advance and the public's role becomes that of fulfilling this function. I am especially interested in moments of awkwardness, or where a work is outright rejected, and the ability for conversation to come out of such antagonisms. You mentioned vernacular culture as one way of dealing directly with the dynamics of "everyday life." Can you say a little more specifically how you approach the use of vernacular culture, and what role, if any, social antagonisms play in these situations?

TS: We don't try to construct an "US vs. THEM" situation with our work at all. We work to get the ideas we value out into the world. We feel accountable for this work so we talk about it and explain what we do. Angelo may feel that it's the prisoners against the guards but that is something else entirely. We certainly didn't invite him to join hands with us to fight imaginary oppressors on the front lines of critical theory. We couldn't care less about their fucking squabbles.

We don't concern ourselves with the writings or ideas of the people you have mentioned. Asking us about these people really leaves us out in the cold. Deferring to these external authorities that have nothing to do with how we think or talk about our work puts us in an awkward position; all we can do is react and therefore look reactionary.

And it isn't about making simple choices between "academic" and "populist". We are neither of these; we work in many ways that try to articulate our ideas from our desires and not positions of power that are external to our concerns. Every situation ever involving humans has power issues that have to be negotiated. This is unavoidable. What we can do is try to avoid replicating this behavior. Complicated ideas can be communicated without needing to rely on specialized language and creating a position of power for yourself. One does not need to adopt an obscure language of theoretical gobbledy-gook and name-dropping to participate in the academic world, nor does one have to speak on a third grade level to make things comprehensible to a more general audience. Both the academic world and the popular press have been very supportive of this project. It is possible for artists to navigate all of these areas in a variety of ways without having to choose sides.

We also avoid terms like "everyday life" if we can. It is so loaded and over-used in contemporary practice. Generalizing about this, or about how collaborative art as a whole might coerce an audience feels unproductive and vague.

Looking at vernacular visual culture tells us a lot about how people use their houses, streets, cities, and all kinds of other things in a direct way that isn't about top-down planning or theorizing. In the past artists have presented vernacular culture in museums in an effort to antagonize audiences but this is not our intent at all. We were really happy that MASS MoCA did not feel the need to justify the Prisoners' Inventions as works of art or "readymades" or examples of "abject low culture" or some shit like that. One success of this project is that people seem willing to accept the inventions of prisoners as creative objects that merit our attention and thought without us having to force them into goofy critical constructs like "Outsider Art." We wouldn't do that. These objects don't need critical help to become interesting. New terminology does not need to be invented to create a niche market or new genre for a stick of melted together toothbrushes and bits of metal that can be used to make apple strudel in a prison cell!



Temporary Services

Temporary Services is a group of three persons: Brett Bloom, Marc Fischer, and Salem Collo-Julin. We draw on our varied backgrounds and interests to incorporate our aesthetic practice within our lived experiences. The need to create change within our daily lives translates directly to our public projects. The distinction between art practice and other creative human endeavors is irrelevant to us. We embed the creative work we present within thoughtful and imaginative social contexts and strive to create participatory situations. For more information:

www.temporaryservices.org

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