

TEMPORARY SERVICES

P.O. Box 121012, Chicago, IL, 60612, USA
www.temporarieservices.org

WHAT A MESS!

There is a growing global awareness that we must get rid of plastic bags altogether. Giant plastic patches larger than the continental U.S. float autonomously trapped in gyres in the Pacific Ocean. Plastic bags are so widely used because they are cheap to produce: about 1¢ each (a biodegradable bag is 8¢). China is leading the world with its plastic ban, implemented in 2008, to rid itself of what it calls "white pollution," the many plastic bags caught in trees, and plastic containers dotting the landscape.

San Francisco is the largest American city to ban the use of non-biodegradable plastic bags. In 2008, New York stores over 5000 ft² were forced to set up plastic bag recycling. Los Angeles County supervisors caved to lobbyists and private industry; they failed to implement a complete ban of plastic bags and adopted a voluntary program instead. Things aren't much better in the Chicago area.

Because the bags can so easily blow out of recycling bins, they are barred from curbside pickup programs in most suburbs. Chicago does not list plastic bags as acceptable items for the city's recycling program. U.S. shoppers go through about 100 billion plastic grocery bags every year, including upwards of 400 million in Lake County, according to the Food Marketing Institute (FMI). Using industry figures, Cook County's 5.3 million residents go through 3 - 6 billion bags a year. In 1982 plastic bags held just 8% of the retail sack market (FMI). Now, almost all grocers and retailers use them, and some use only plastic. Studies show that only about 0.6 percent, or 600 million, of the plastic grocery bags distributed annually in the U.S. end up in recycling centers.

In South Africa plastic bags had become such a problem they were derisively nicknamed "the national flower." As a result, the government required manufacturers to make the bags more durable and expensive, discouraging their disposal. Ireland instituted a 15¢/bag "PlasTax" at stores four years ago, resulting in a 90% reduction in use. Australia and Britain also are reportedly considering similar levies.

Sources:

- "Modern dilemma, contain sad sacks," By David Wischnowsky, *Chicago Tribune*, September 13, 2006
- "Taking Aim at All Those Plastic Bags," By Chris Conway, *The New York Times*, April 1, 2007
- "Plastic-bag ban unravels," By Jean-Paul Renaud, *Los Angeles Times*, January 23, 2008
- "New York Mayor Signs Plastic Bag Recycling Bill," *Reuters New Service*, January 25, 2008
- "China's biggest plastic bag maker closes after ban," By Jonathan Watts, *The Guardian*, February 27, 2008



PERSONAL PLASTIC

We're surrounded by plastic shopping bags. They perch in the branches of our trees like vultures on the make. They clog our sewer grates and stick to the bottoms of our shoes and tires.

The global deluge of waste created by the advent of the personal plastic shopping bag is not just a simple annoyance. Plastics manufacturing is big business worldwide. The plastic shopping bag can be seen as a calling card of sorts - an indicator that The Market (with all of its buddies, like The Military-Industrial Complex, the Prison-Industrial Complex, and Big Oil and the Bad Wars) is coming to your city and will be playing at your favorite concert hall whether you like it or not.

Plastic shopping bags are created from a polyethylene resin - a flexible plastic polymer that can be blown into a film, which is then molded into a variety of shapes, including the bag. The plastic is made from a process involving petroleum - not just a non-renewable natural resource, but also the basis of much contention in worldwide economic battles over money and control of the property. Plastic production is hazardous and contributes harmful pollution to our water supply and air. In order to continue to produce plastics, our countries must have access to petroleum, a situation that has resulted in things like the Gulf War, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and countless backroom deals and decisions based on profit and gain rather than human need. Carrying around our wares in personal plastic shopping bags makes us living, breathing advertisements not only for consumerism, but also for the evil and deadly decisions that those in control of industry often make on our behalf.

Most people wind up with more of these bags than they can ever re-use. We were curious about how others have been coping with their excess baggage so we asked friends and our email list to share photos of their own "bag collections". This has grown into a public archive that you can view on our blog: <http://pics.livejournal.com/temperv/gallery/0003rt4f>. We also collected many unwanted bags from people on our list to use in our creative experiments.

Temporary Services has been considering the personal plastic shopping bag as both a symbol and a new tool for us to work with. We have been re-using and re-configuring plastic shopping bags in a variety of ways. Fortunately, they are a pretty interesting raw material. We've been quite amazed at the array of crazy and quite elegant banners, clothes, wallets, re-usable "packing sausages" that cushion items being mailed, and other miscellany that these bags can transform into with help from tools like heat sealers, irons, and glue guns. We have been attempting to incorporate this material into our daily creative lives as freely as these bags have forced their way into our homes.

It's intense to think that a seemingly innocuous thing like a bag could be linked to all of the very scary things that are actually changing the core structure of both our shared environment and our nature as humans. This is more than just a litter thing - it's a pretty awe-inspiring example of the power of capitalism to quite literally rape the earth and change (on a sometimes unconscious but always intrinsic level) the habits of its inhabitants. Bags are a physical threat, yes, but they are also an insidious way for corporations to make us personal advertising shells and for us to be willed into consuming more. It's so convenient! We carry a bag and grab more and more, gallons of oil rushing through our blood as we comply with the many decisions that have been made on our behalf. And we are left with the detritus of our own longing: bags choking our outsides and insides, mocking our inability to create a life that is not based upon the seeds of its own destruction.



IT USED TO BE A BAG

These are some of the things Temporary Services has made from reused plastic shopping bags since our experimentation began.

BOOKLET HOLDERS

Temporary Services makes a lot of booklets so we are often thinking about ways to display them. Simple holders can be created from bags and then used to hang publications in exhibitions, outdoors, or in a variety of spaces, with or without permission.



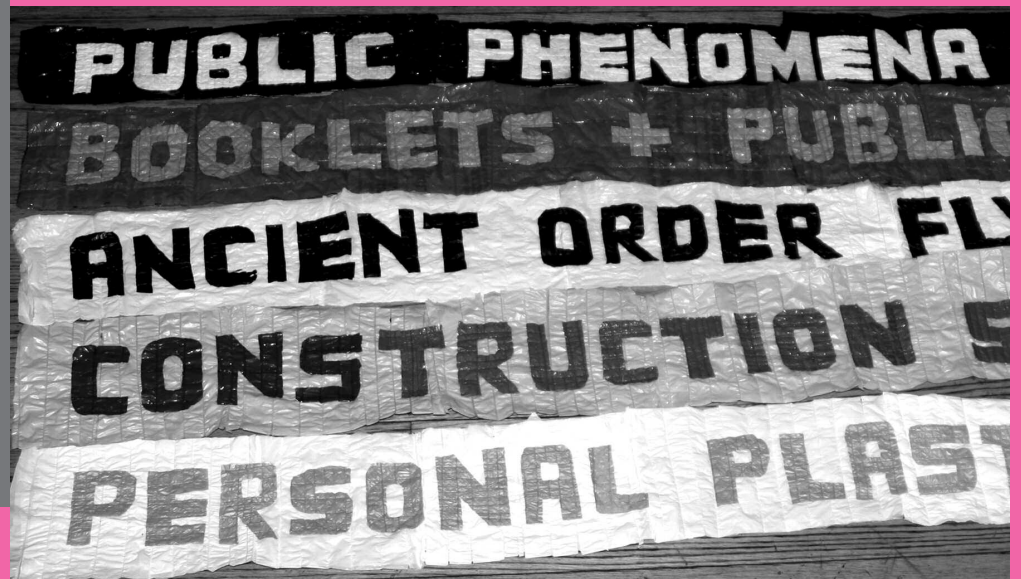
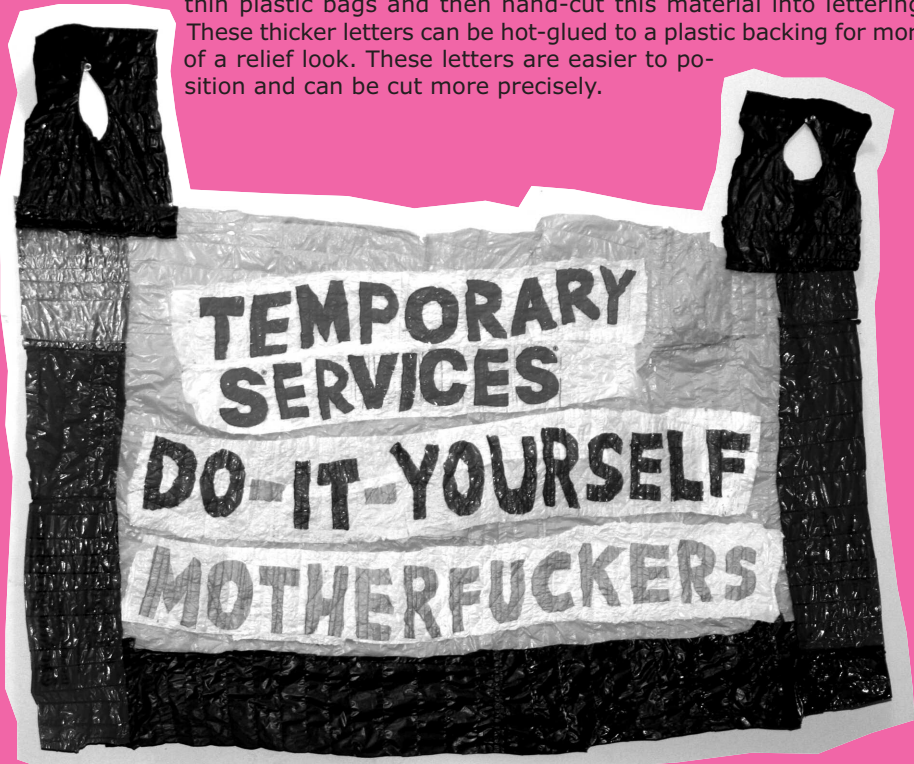
PACKING SAUSAGES

Little bits of plastic that remain after cutting up bags to make other things can be stuffed into heat-sealed tubes to make re-useable packing sausages. These light-weight and neatly contained cushions can be used when mailing or moving fragile items. They can be tied together at the bag handles to create clusters that will stay together. Packing sausages are easy to store and a lot less messy than Styrofoam packing peanuts.



BANNERS & SIGNAGE

With their vivid colors, plastic bags can be turned into highly readable, high impact, indoor and outdoor banners and signage. You can use pre-existing letters taken from logos, or hand-cut your own lettering. You can weld letters to backings with a heat sealer, which looks great but will cause the letters to shrink and distort when using thinner bags. We have also made dense multi-ply plastic fabrics from thin plastic bags and then hand-cut this material into lettering. These thicker letters can be hot-glued to a plastic backing for more of a relief look. These letters are easier to position and can be cut more precisely.



SHOW US YOUR BAGS!

It has become apparent that everywhere there are plastic bags – without any attempt to control their proliferation, there is an office or kitchen that is well-stocked with extras. We asked people on our email list to send photos of their collections. Here are a few of the submissions we received. You can send your own photo to: servers@temporarieservices.org



Above: What, How & for Whom, Zagreb, Croatia.

BAGS IN THE WILD



Above: Chicago, IL. Photo by Temporary Services.



Melinda McVay, Dallas, TX.

INFORMATION

Photos on reverse of poster:

Bag Collections of Temporary Services:

Top: Salem Collo-Julien, Chicago, IL.
Middle: Marc Fischer, Chicago, IL.
Bottom: Brett Bloom, Berlin, Germany.

Lower left: Bag in tree in Zagreb: photo by Temporary Services.
Lower right: Bag collection of Mike Wolf, Chicago IL.

This poster was printed in March, 2008. Text by Temporary Services.