

A Brief Introduction to Temporary Services

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A Brief Introduction to Temporary Services

For a decade, this Chicago-based group has been helping us to reimagine the spaces of possibility and escape directly in front of us

by **Nato Thompson**

When it snows in downtown Chicago, many residents set to work on their public art. They exit their homes and apartments, grab snow shovels, and dig their cars out, after which they gather materials from the surrounding area (a safety cone, a broom, a plastic deck chair, a two-by-four, an old mattress) and build a barricade to reserve their parking spot.

Innocuous on the surface, these place-holding structures become fascinating anthropological specimens when seen side by side in photographs. An art historian with an interest in the vernacular who is unaware that they weren't made by artists might be tempted to describe them as assisted ready-mades, found-object sculptures, or assemblages. The Chicago-based Temporary Services refers to them as "public phenomena," and in more ways than one these temporary sculptures are an appropriate metaphor for Temporary

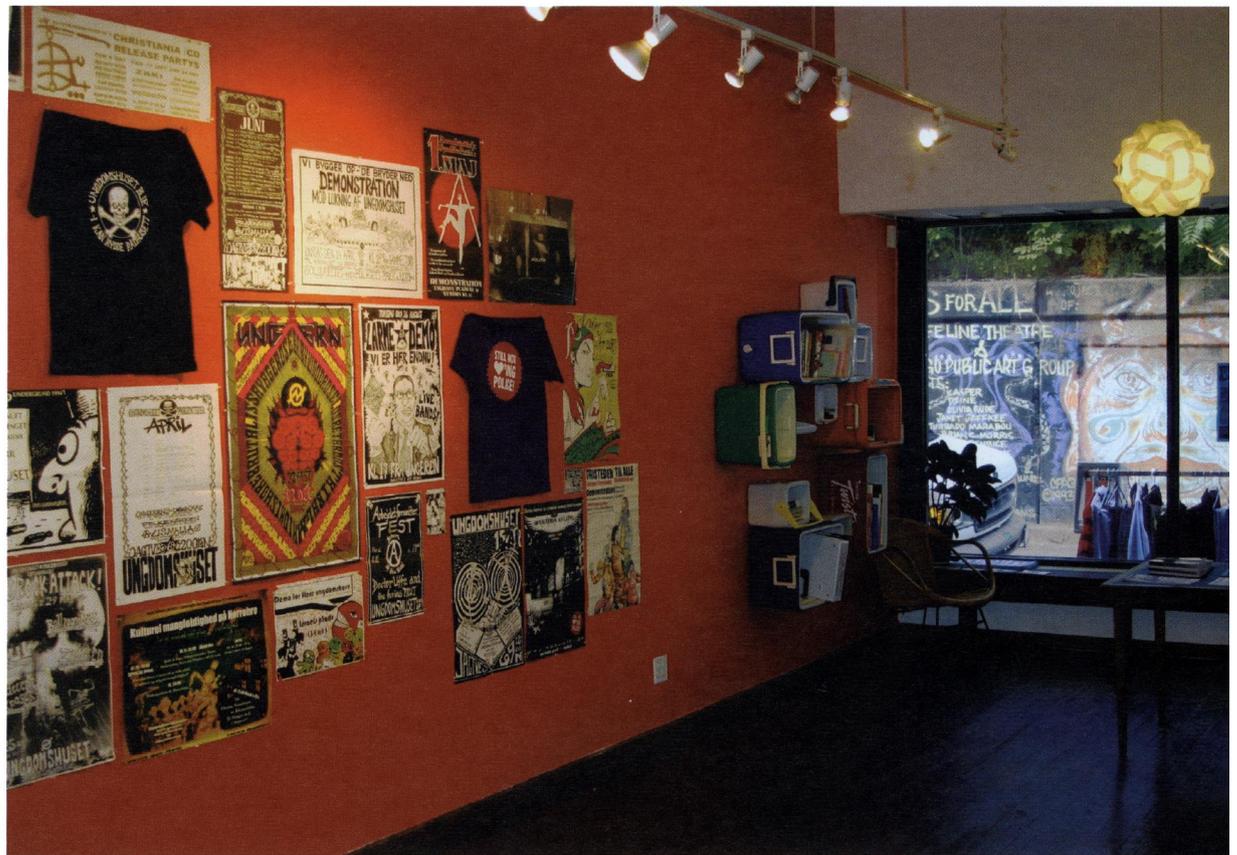
Services themselves, a group that I think has become the inspirational core for what might be the most important underground movement in American art in the last decade. Their exhibitions, public interventions, events, and publications—which reflect an overarching interest in people's efforts to transform their environments by manipulating the raw material of their existence—provide a cultural model that escapes the trappings of gallery-driven, taste-based aesthetics.

Temporary Services started in 1998 in a storefront space, opened by Brett Bloom and located at 2890 North Milwaukee in Chicago. I visited the storefront in the summer of 1999 during an exhibition of work by French artist Nicolas Floç'h. Bloom greeted me at the door and immediately demonstrated the use of one of Floç'h's collapsible multiuse chairs. In his eagerness, he nearly broke one in two, but I appreciated the enthusiasm. We then talked earnestly about



Opposite and previous spread: Public phenomena: parking space savers in Chicago. All images courtesy Temporary Services

Right: Mess Hall during the recent exhibition "Ungdomshuset"



Temporary Services' projects and I realized immediately that he was deeply invested in the social implications of the work on display. Shortly after my visit, Temporary Services shifted its emphasis from running a storefront to being a group that conceives or facilitates projects. Initially, the group consisted of Bloom, Marc Fischer, Kevin Kaempf, Lora Lode, and Lillian Yvonne Martinez, but it soon settled into its longtime arrangement of Bloom, Fischer, and Salem Collo-Julin. Though they still maintain a storefront-like space in Chicago—Mess Hall—that they co-run with eight others, Temporary Services' activities are now worldwide. Among other cities, they have done projects in Vilnius, Bangkok, and San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Temporary Services has a range of interests that makes encapsulating the entirety of their oeuvre a gargantuan endeavor. However, certain tendencies shine through: generosity, a concern with ethics, an interest in collaboration, a commitment to community building, an ongoing investigation into different means of distribution, a use of makeshift materials, and a fascination with outsider ethnography. A sensitivity to new forms of social activism emerged as a key component of the group's practice early on, influenced by several factors. Bloom and Fischer received MFAs from the

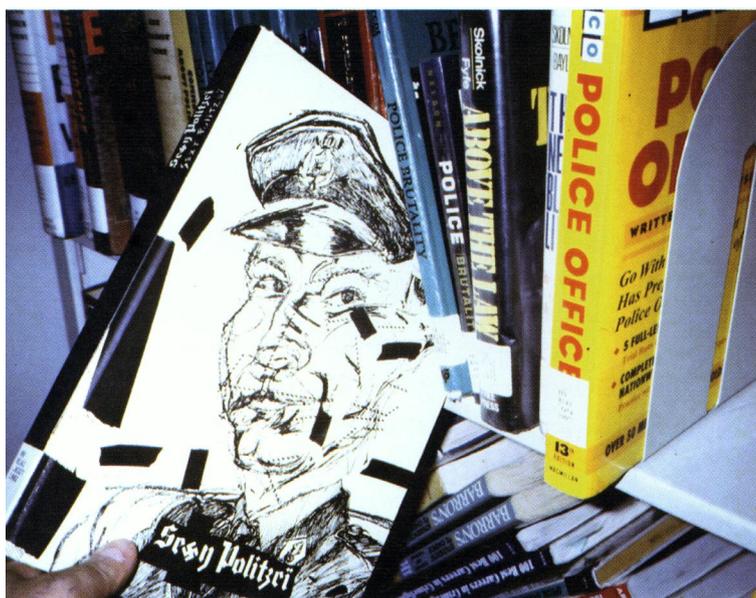
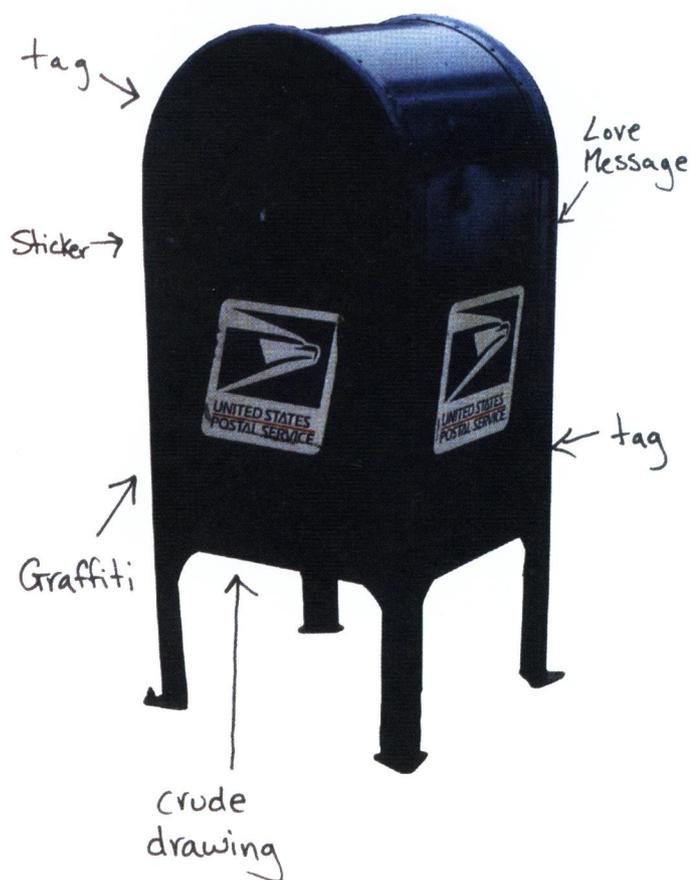
University of Chicago, where both studied with Laurie Palmer, a member of the art collective Haha. One Haha project, titled *Flood* (1993–95), consisted of a storefront that hosted a hydroponic vegetable garden for people living with AIDS. Equally influential was the citywide exhibition *Bicycle Thieves* (1998)—cocurated by Lars Bang Larsen, Jacob Fabricius, Brad Killam, and Michelle Grabner—which featured Scandinavian artists and collectives, including N55 and Superflex, whose work emphasizes service-based processes and experimental styles of living. Temporary Services members also spent time at artist Dan Peterman's multiuse warehouse, the Experimental Station, which serves as a makeshift residency program for the creation of social sculpture and service-based works as well as being home to the muckraking journal *The Baffler*.

For years Temporary Services' practice remained obscure and quirky in the city's larger, fairly myopic arts community. Their projects rejected a lot of the pop narcissism that lent recognition to independent spaces, and their deeply anticommmercial posturing made them somewhat off-limits for another sector of the art community. Nevertheless, they developed a devoted following. If you were an artist making critical work in the Chicago area over the past decade, your path would

have led you to Temporary Services at some point, either to one of their free dinners, collaborations, or to Mess Hall.

So what do their projects look like? *Free For All* (2000), a one-day event in a large storefront, consisted of nearly 10,000 multiples, produced by more than fifty Chicago-area artists, that were given away to the public for free. In large part the event was an alternative to the commercial Christmas multiples frenzy that had seized the Chicago galleries. The objects ranged from audio recordings on cassette to Bible prayer books. According to Fischer, "The most important criteria for the inclusion of works in this show were that the objects should be portable, self-contained vehicles for ideas, expression, thought, images, or sound and that they should be available or provided in significant quantity." This form of gift exchange fed into a similar project from 2001 called *The Library Project*. Artists in Chicago and elsewhere, such as David Shrigley, Hans-Peter Feldmann, and Bruno Richard, were encouraged to make or remake books that were to be surreptitiously inserted into the racks of Chicago's Harold Washington Library Center. Temporary Services produced new call numbers that were attached to the spine of each book to make them look like their legitimate neighbors. Thus, these books entered virally into the library and participated, even if only temporarily, in a system that advocates for the civically minded free circulation of ideas. Ultimately only a handful were ever logged into the system and received bar

Mailbox: Perfect Location for Guerilla works



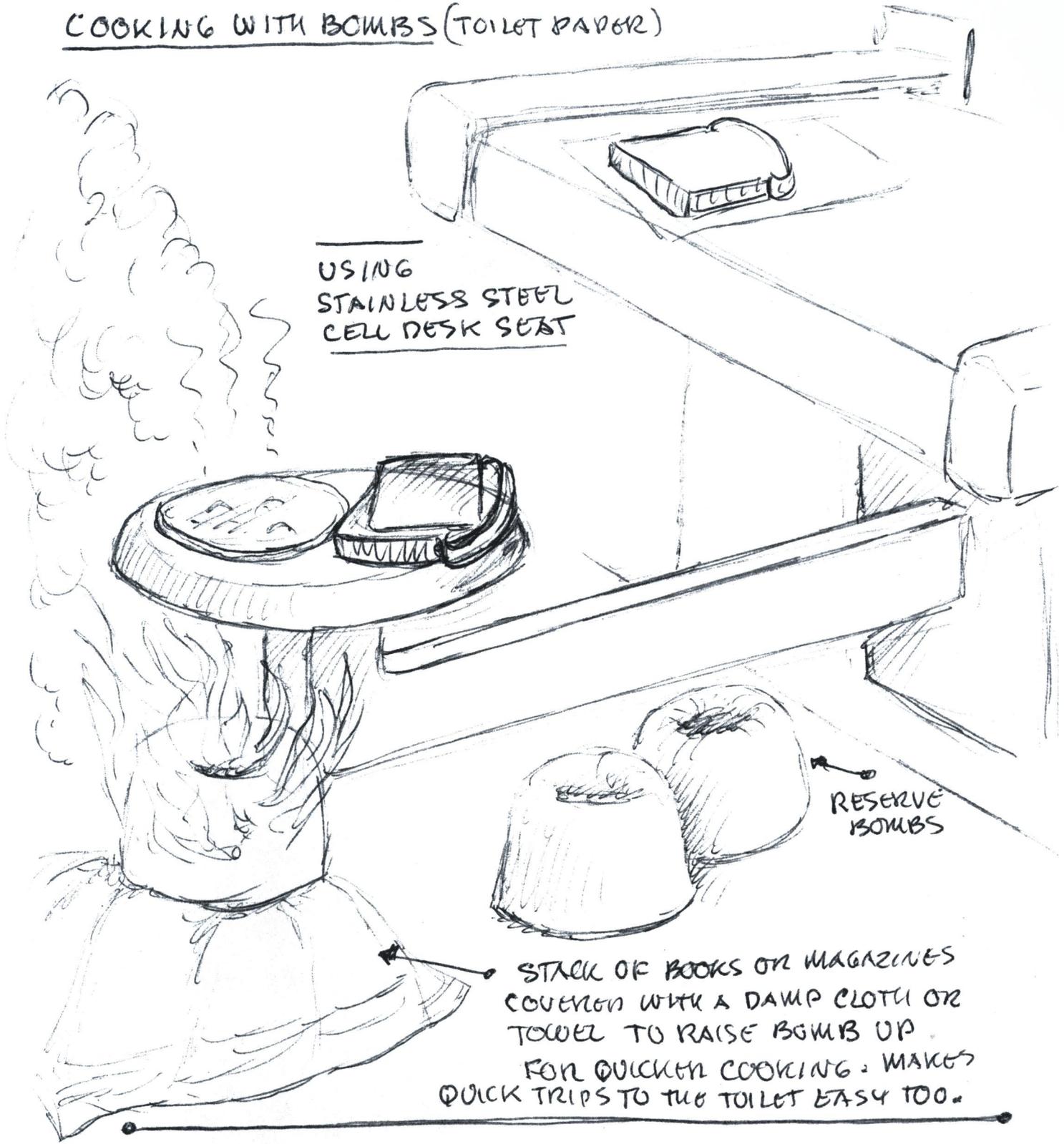
Left: *Sexy Politzei*, a book remade by Bruno Richard, being placed in the library as part of *The Library Project*

Above: Page from the booklet *11 People 16 Spaces / How To Guerilla Art*, by Temporary Services, 2006

codes; many were discarded. Librarians did, however, assign art reference numbers to a few, making them available in the noncirculating section of the library.

A more curious element of Temporary Services' oeuvre is the group's ongoing projects with society's excluded. In 2001, for the *Warming Center* project, the group opened the doors of their space at the time to anyone who needed to get out of the brutal cold, and provided them blankets, clothes, tea, soup, shiatsu massages, even live music. Their facilities quickly

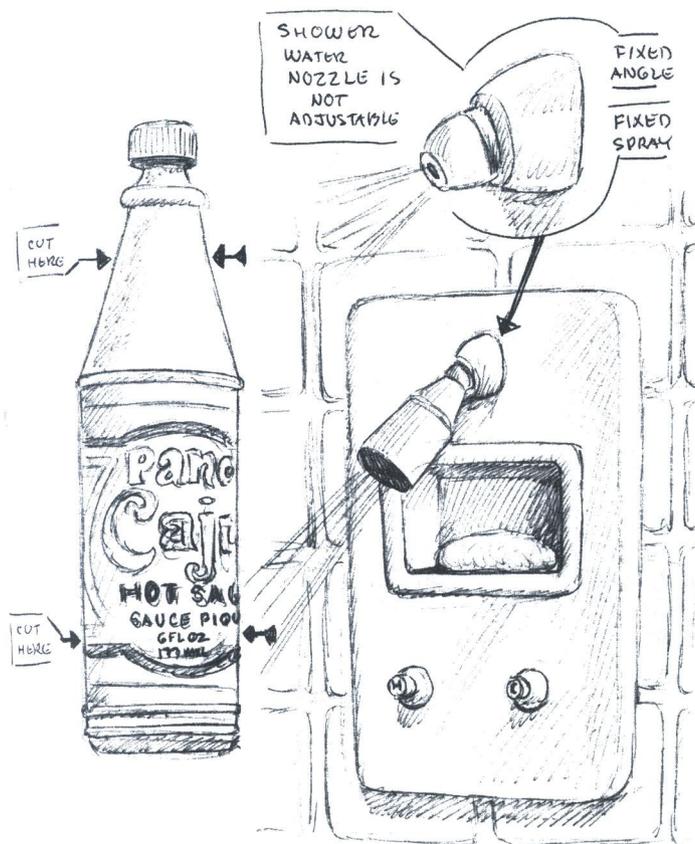
COOKING WITH BOMBS (TOILET PAPER)



USING
STAINLESS STEEL
CELL DESK SEAT

RESERVE
BOMBS

STACK OF BOOKS OR MAGAZINES
COVERED WITH A DAMP CLOTH OR
TOWEL TO RAISE BOMB UP
FOR QUICKER COOKING. MAKES
QUICK TRIPS TO THE TOILET EASY TOO.

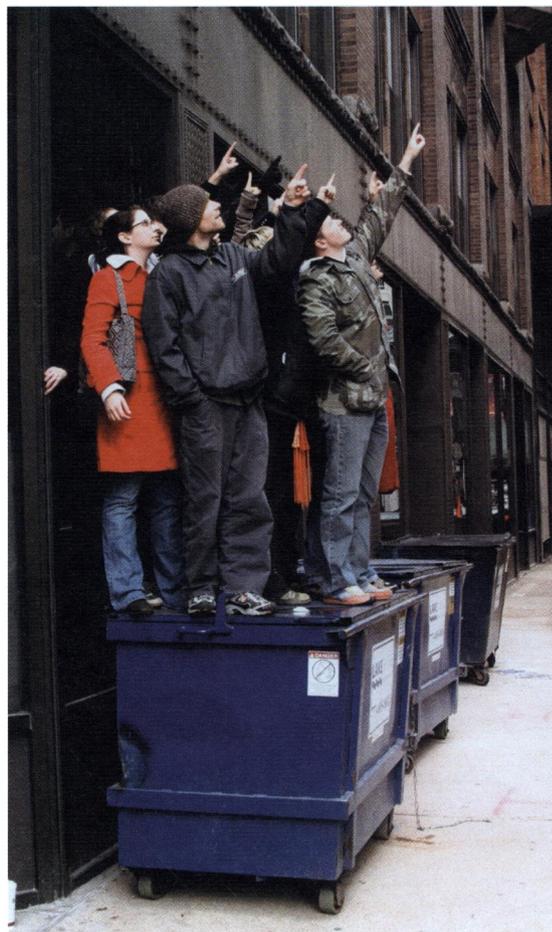


Group Work, which includes essays, interviews, and other material on art collaborations. In all their publications, the writing retains a clarity that avoids the art jargon often found lurking within socially minded art books.

Ultimately, Temporary Services operates in a deeply social manner. Putting a finger on where their specific projects end and their community building begins is impossible. Not content to operate under the constraints of a specific genre, their overarching work continues to create worlds. Their process is hardly flawless. Some projects bend toward the naïve or the questionably ethnographic, but such a robust practice (and one that has inspired many incredible projects in Chicago and beyond) demands a level of critique that takes seriously the demands that such a project requires. It is no longer about art. It is no longer about a privatized experience. It is about building new forms of meaning, a process that requires hundreds of collaborators.

became popular, and the scope of the project became more than the collective could endure. At MASS MoCA, I worked with Temporary Services on *Prisoners' Inventions* (2003), an exhibition and book that emerged from their ongoing correspondence with a prison inmate named Angelo. An incredible draftsman, Angelo had drawn instructions for and pictures of inventions cobbled together by his fellow inmates. The inventions themselves were not the series of shanks and drug use items one might imagine; they were far more domestic and included everything from methods for lighting cigarettes, to salt and pepper shakers, to chess sets. Seeing Angelo's drawings of the makeshift items lends a humanity and depth to an often-abstract political issue. In fact, the inventions, like the public phenomena found on the streets of Chicago, open a space by which the remaking of the world under conditions of oppression (whether going to work or residing in prison) becomes both a magical and deeply integral part of being alive.

Whatever the Temporary Services project, you can be sure to find an 8 1/2 by 5 1/2 inch booklet to accompany it. To date they have produced seventy-seven such booklets, an exhibition of which recently debuted at Printed Matter bookstore in New York to coincide with the release of their book



Opposite and page 61:
Pages from *Prisoners' Inventions*, written and illustrated by Angelo. Published by WhiteWalls, Inc. © 2004 by Angelo, Temporary Services, and WhiteWalls, Inc.

Opposite bottom:
Page from the booklet *11 People 16 Spaces / How To Guerilla Art*, by Temporary Services, 2006

Right: Cover of *Group Work*, edited by Temporary Services, 2007. Cover image by Esteban Garcia and Nick Martin. Booklet © 2007 by Temporary Services and Printed Matter, Inc.

