

how to unload bags
and practice failure.

Forays into Cocoons.

Dear Con-Edison, Porters and the 6th Precinct, NYPD:



We had our eyes on a bag—a beautiful bag, for quite some time. Con Edison uses them when doing excavations under the street. It must hold a tonne. It is white with blue straps and steel rings, it must be made of a plastic coated nylon. When full they look like industrial sized marshmallows bloated with rocks and dirt and bits of garbage; lovely, actually. They leave the bags on the street or sidewalk until someone comes along to pick it up with a back-end loader.

You see, we were building cocoons, lightweight and portable structures that we could hang in tree tops or construction scaffolding or old buildings. We were building squats, portable squats. With a harness and rope you

can get up almost anywhere and with a backpack that unfolds into a cocoon cities' heights, their surfaces and cracks turn into habitable plateaus. We were building these cocoons from all sorts of free, stolen and cheap materials: ty-vek envelopes from the post office, the netting used on construction scaffolding to stop dust from flooding the streets, and \$1 dollar beach mats. And, we hoped, a Con-Edison bag. We wanted to turn this bag, normally filled with the underground stuff of the city, into a home. We wanted to use the infrastructure of the city against itself.

To do this you have to find cracks. But cracks aren't always easy to find. We hoped we were good crooks. Smart crooks.



So we had our eyes set on two bags. They must have been there for weeks. One on Bergen and Flatbush in Brooklyn, the other on 5th Avenue and 13th Street in Manhattan. We chose Manhattan. And so two Canadians and a Mexican set out to liberate some goods from the biggest energy company in New York in one of the most paranoid and surveilled cities in North America.

We need a plan. The bag is full of 500 pounds of asphalt and it's in plain sight of everyone. We buy garbage bags, about 200 hundred of them and set up our assembly line; we first unload the asphalt chunks into any flower bed and little sidewalk square cut out for trees we can find. All of the beds fill up with this second layer of displaced road. And we fill up garbage bags with dirt and rock and carry them to the garbage piles at each end of the block.

Carry two bags each if you can and be careful not to break anything. And it's starting to get hot and there really is so much stuff in these damn bags. Backs are starting to ache and it's a bit like we are digging ourselves out of prison, tedious, inefficient and a little paranoid.

A waiter from across the street comes to check out what we are up to. "We're sculptors" we tell him, doing an assignment for class, sculpting with asphalt. And we're rooting through this bag to find the perfect piece of rock. As you can see we've put aside some great chunks." "Strange, but good luck", he tells us, "I like art, too". And he gets inside the bag in his tux and shiny shoes for a photo op with his thumbs up.

And as if we were in a stop motion film



the bag empties bit by bit. And the flower beds are stuffed with asphalt while the garbage piles swell with bags of dirt and rock.

About three hours into our work the police swarm us. Three cars take the intersection and drop their headlights on us. They hop out of their cars determined and reassured like only cops can be, and grill us. Again the same story: "We're art students...." They find us funny and cute. One of us is a lady in a dress and the other two, non-threatening young guys. There are times when claiming 'I am an artist' is not an embarrassing thing to say but can be the best strategy you've got at your disposal. As an artist you are allowed to be stupid and incomprehensible, you have a leniency otherwise impossible

to achieve. And this is the first crack we found and slipped into. They even wanted us to call them when we exhibited the stones so they could come see our 'sculptures'. "Just call the 6th precinct, we'll hear about it". "Just be sure to clean up after you are done, ok" and the cops left us to our business and total victory.

How did they know about us? As we realized it was the undercover cop walking the street with an empty McDonalds soda cup and sideways ball cap, and the porter of one of the fine apartment buildings close by was checking us out.

We got back to work as soon as the cops pulled away with only another 8 inches or so of dirt in the bottom of the bag to go. We considered just flipping the bag over, calling a cab and taking off but then we imagined the cabbie driving us straight to the 6th precinct. As we tried to figure out our best course of action stuck in a thicket of victory and paranoia - a fragile kind of hope, a Con Edison truck pulled up, also called in by someone, probably the porter who in a fit of adamant concern over the obviously deeply troubling act of unloading a Con-Edison bag called Con-Edison and the cops at the same time.

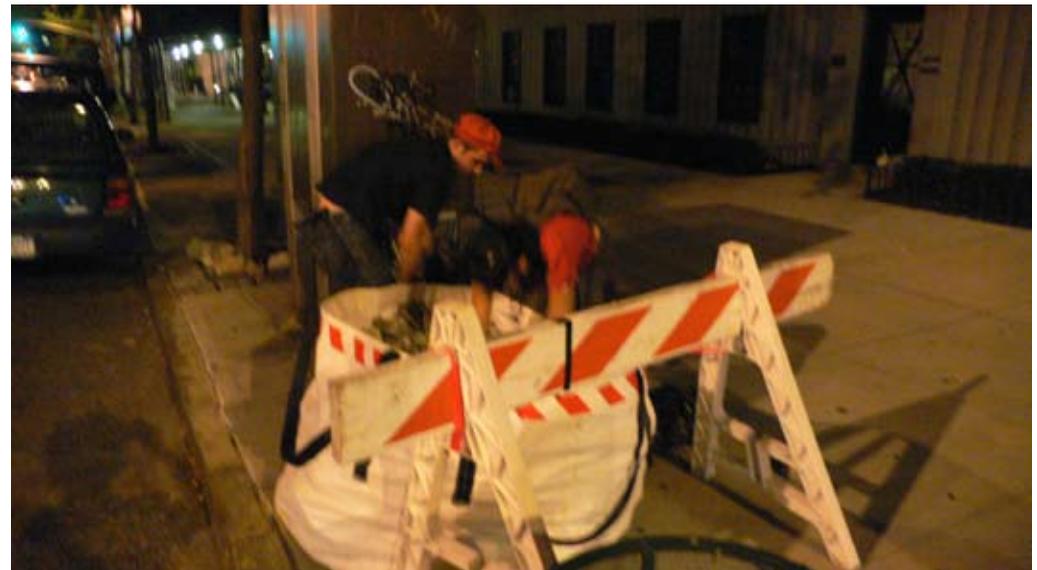
They also thought we were strange but harmless and decided to stick around until we finished up. We were forced then to clean up, grab some rocks to take with us so that it looked like we were actually using them and walked off down the street, leaving the empty bag behind and dropping our asphalt chunks as soon as we turned the corner. Empty handed



and leaving behind an empty bag.

In the end, destroyed a little by the ridiculousness of ourselves, all we did was divert some rock and dirt from a bag to gardens and garbage bags. And the bag, almost empty, with its sides slumped over

like it was exhausted stayed there for weeks. I would ride by it on my bike almost everyday. This stupid little bag that I could really just go over and tip upside down and ride away with. But now it was impossible, untouchable. For some reason we don't quite understand yet.





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It may just have been laziness but it was more like defeat and sometimes you can't go back on your defeats, you've just got to look at it, empty handed, with a little pang in the stomach. But you learn about cracks and you try to find more.



There is something about excessive, inefficient and pointless labour for the sake of art that is kind of beautiful. Maybe it is that labour in other contexts, like at our jobs, is usually equally as inefficient but there is a lie to it, the lie that it matters, which however meagerly keeps people going back to their jobs. But unloading a bag for nothing, for no result just makes its pointlessness explicit, so obviously useless, and in some strange way more satisfying. And, what is also beautiful is when you go into something with a goal and by the end the goal is destroyed and in place of the goal you are left with a situation.