



T O T E B A G S

This book comes out of finding and photographing discarded tote bags all over New York throughout the past year.

It is a litany, or a lamentation: Part of the task of people alive today is to dig through piles of conflicting information and assumptions in order to assemble a life of seemingly virtuous action. Periodically, being unable to adequately estimate their value, we gather portions and discard them next to the other detritus that chokes the globe and its inhabitants.ⁱ In service of virtue, whatever is kept maintains the *image* of goodness, no matter the actual nature of the thing.





In 2008, the UK Environment Agency (UKEA) published a study of resource expenditures for various bags: paper, plastic, canvas tote bags and their recycled-polypropylene doppelgangers. Contrary to what one might expect, the authors found that, given typical patterns of use and waste, consumers seeking to minimize pollution and carbon emissions should probably use plastic grocery bags and then reuse those bags at least once, as trash can liners or for other secondary tasks.ⁱⁱ Conventional plastic bags made from high-density polyethylene (HDPE) have the smallest per-use environmental impact of all those tested. Cotton tote bags, on the other hand, have by far the highest and most severe global warming potential and their production and distribution are likely more toxic to the environment.

Such results feel deeply counterintuitive.

HDPE bags (the plastic sacks found at grocery stores, bodegas, gas stations, and stuff) are used needlessly, doubled up. They lodge in trees, congeal in the esophagus and innards of animals, fester in landfills, gutters, clot fields and cities, are reduced to small particles floating in a Pacific gyre, for hundreds of years into the future. They break into smaller pieces, but don't easily degrade. They multiply and coat.

But because they require very few resources to manufacture and transport, they don't produce much waste or runoff or byproducts. They're recyclable. They're strong, lightweight, durable, and cheap. They're also, for those reasons, ubiquitous. And they remain, long after their usefulness has been exhausted.

The UKEA study calculated an expenditure of a little less than two kilograms of carbon per HDPE bag. For paper bags it estimated seven uses would be needed to achieve the same per-use ratio. Tote bags made from recycled polypropylene plastic require 26, and cotton tote bags require 327 uses.ⁱⁱⁱ



For at least a few decades, Americans have been drilled in the environmental superiority of reusable bags, the necessity of using them, and the dangerous inferiorities of plastic bags. These claims seem so obvious that municipalities across the country have moved to restrict the consumption of disposable shopping bags; many cities and businesses have stopped offering plastic sacks, or provide them for a modest but punitive price. Bag-recycling programs have been introduced nationwide, but have had little success.^{iv}

Simultaneously, the modest tote has grown in stature, as a replacement and more. Many stores offer inexpensive (or even free) reusable bags at the register, stamped with logos. Designers have latched onto the form and increased its fashionability. Totes are handed out as promotional gifts by nonprofits and businesses, a gesture that sends two contradictory messages: one of conscientious consumption, another of conspicuous consumption.



They may have appeared much earlier, but design historians seem to pretty much unanimously date the tote bag's modern debut to LL Bean's Boat and Tote, which was first offered in 1944. The basic rubric remains more or less unchanged: a rustic and skeletal thing, an essentially form-less pouch with straps on each side of an open mouth. Tote bags were probably first recognized by many of today's young and liberal consumers as incentives for public television and radio funding drives before making the jump to grocery stores, clothing chains, and malls. They carry with them the scent of an informed, engaged, and conscientious middle class. As it happens, these qualities are also those that make for ideal consumers.







Just like plastic bags, totes multiply. In a 2009 article about the bags for *Design Observer*, designer and Urban Outfitters marketing executive Dmitri Siegel claimed to have found 23 tote bags in his house, collected from various organizations, stores, and brands.^{vii} Such a collection may not seem far-fetched to a lot of readers. Like plastic sacks, tote bags, too, now seem essentially unending. They've propagated to the point that they're now perceived as inexhaustibly abundant and therefore disposable, without losing any of their aura of eco-beneficence.



Boat and Tote® Handbags

Our popular Boat and Tote® Bag in a handbag size. Sturdy construction of extra heavy white duck. Inside zippered pouch pocket for wallet, eyeglasses, small items. Remainder of bag for larger items. Shoulder strap handle or carry strap handle. Dimensions: 10"x13"x4".

Colors: White with Red Trim. White with Blue Trim. White with Beige Trim.

4153D Boat and Tote Shoulder Bag, \$11.75 ppd.
4152D Boat and Tote Handbag, \$10.50 ppd.

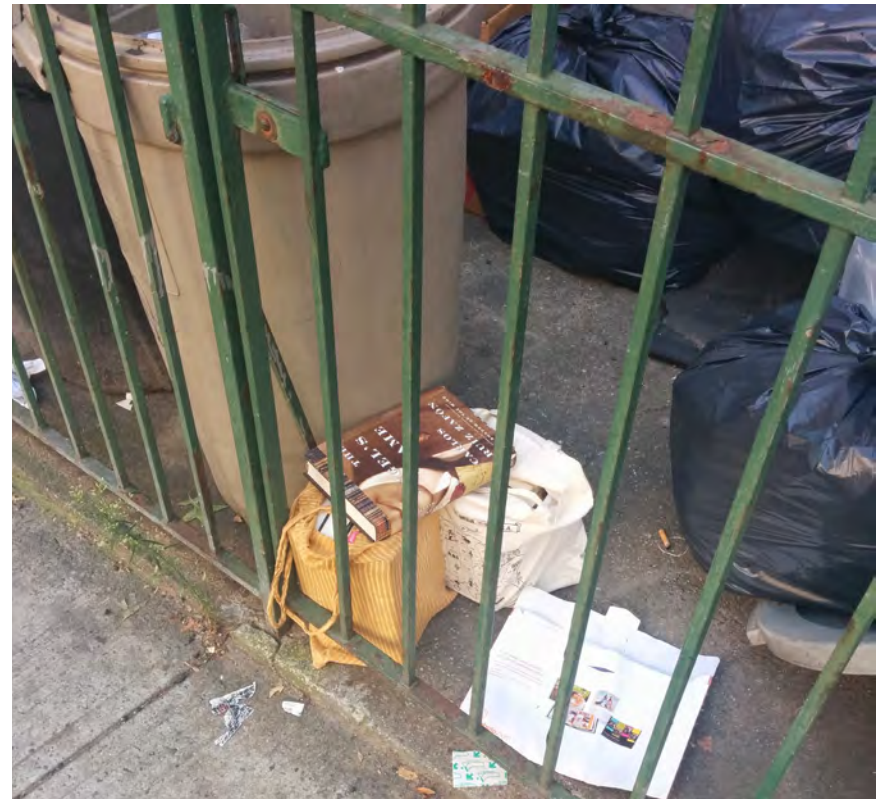
There's nothing inherently wrong with tote bags; they're actually great. I use one everyday.^{viii} Just like plastic bags, the problem lies only in their excess, misuse, and disposability—the obscenity of the ideal image masking fallible (foulable) reality. They're a synecdoche for a bait-and-switch that we play on ourselves and others, and for the stab-wound-like measures taken to save the planet's collapsing lungs.

Viewed through a certain lens—pessimism, melancholy, depression—the planet is gilded with such sparkling symptoms of human plague: tote bags are more potentially harmful than the products they were intended to replace, and are wasted just the same. Cute house cats decimate bird populations.^{ix} Botanical gardens are reliquaries of ecological displacement. The water usage of almond groves is decried over a steak dinner. Conscientiously piled garbage overflows from public trashcans to rot in the street. It is discovered that Kenya-grown roses flown into England have a lower carbon footprint than those grown and shipped from Holland, that it's less ecologically damaging for Americans east of the Mississippi to import wine from France than from California.^x Biodegradable corn plastics proliferate as single-use containers and utensils. Fuel economy and emissions standards for cars and trucks are considered, barely, but not those of oil tankers, container ships, military escapades.^{xi} And it seems certain that increased destructiveness and increased (true and false) information about our destructiveness are both bound to greater productivity, wealth, stability, and scientific knowledge.

The low-grade, unfocused mania for averting impending ecological disaster has led to efforts that may be more harmful than helpful. Some contributing factors are ignored completely. Risks and benefits are hazy and difficult to evaluate. And the entire project is tempered by an aim at maintaining status quo consumption and waste.



[Here's a total downer: it has to be acknowledged that humans—like all other species, only far more and with horrific devastation—have altered their environment since they first appeared, about 1–200,000 years ago. As much as we will ourselves to save the planet, this is going to continue until we are extinct and cannot be prevented.]^{xiii}





Siegel, in his essay, identifies designers as particular culprits in the over-saturation of tote bags in the world. He notes that the bags are large, flat, and are easily printed on, making them great for embellishment and product placement. And plus they were hyped. He describes the 2007 launch of the “I’m not a plastic bag” tote, by fashion designer Anya Hindmarch:

“The bag was originally sold in limited numbers at Hindmarch boutiques, Colette and Dover Street Market in London, but when it went into wide release at Sainsbury’s 80,000 people lined up to get one. When the bag hit stores in Taiwan, there was so much demand that the riot police had to be called in to control a stampede, which sent 30 people to the hospital.”^{xiii}

Other large fashion brands have followed suit, selling their own versions for hundreds of dollars. Simultaneously, the bags have become vulgar and omnipresent, appearing more and more in every sort of up- and down-scale market. They’re given away with purchases at galleries, bookstores, eyeglass boutiques, grocers, tattoo parlors. Whole Foods abandoned plastic bags in 2008 and was one of the first stores to offer inexpensive tote bags at the register. Such bags display not only the bearer’s environmental concern, but also discrimination, a willingness to pay more to shop from a business that apparently shares their punctiliousness.

Because of their ubiquity—or perhaps as ubiquity’s identifying mark—tote bags that have been used very little (or not at all) pile on curbs, trashcans in city parks, wait in dumpsters, rot everywhere. They carry a perverse sense of self actualization: discarded tote bags are filled with almond-milk cartons, with literary novels, tracts and textbooks, dog toys, MacBook cables, detritus from home repairs and personal improvement projects. They’re found with both men’s and women’s paraphernalia in them. They are more prevalent in the effluence of affluence. Their abundance makes them disposable, defeating their very purpose.

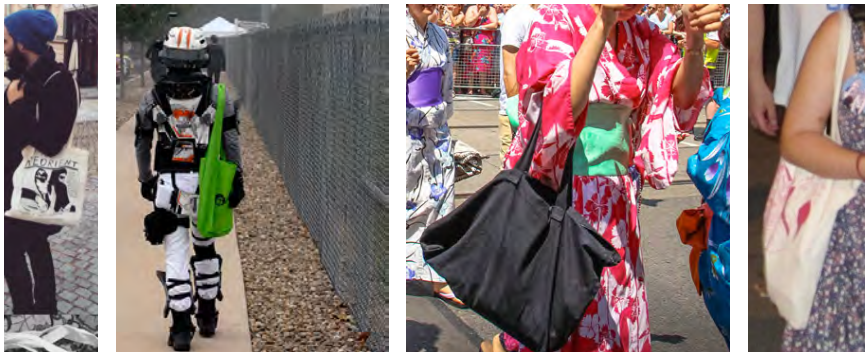


Obviously, prevalence ought to be their virtue. Presumably, the more tote bags in circulation, the fewer plastic bags are used. This may or may not be true. An online poll, conducted in 2014 by marketing research firm Edelman Berland, found that about half of respondents typically choose to use plastic over reusable bags, despite also owning reusable bags and recognizing their benefits.^{xiv} Only 20% of those polled said that they prefer using plastic bags, but almost half of all respondents said that they usually do, foregoing reusable bags even when they're the easier, cheaper option.

It would seem that along with tote bags' virtue comes virtuality. Every product is manufactured and consumed with some ideal in mind: the way it's grasped by the hand, its flavor on the tongue, the weight and balance, the arousal it evokes, the need it satisfies, the imaginary world of play that the thing conjures, the persistence of its value. Within the market, maker and buyer construct for objects these and other fantasies of sensuality, merit, utility. And there they both converge on the image of the object.

What phantasm does the tote bag describe?

Represented in images of tote bags, such as those culled from stock photo websites, are the codified tags and signals of the significance we project upon them. The actual reality of the object may be superseded by the image of the eco-friendly, traditional tote bag, detectable in the depictions of sunny people carrying fresh fruits and vegetables in their tote bags at the farmers' market. These people are seen in intimate groups. They wear casual, conservative, warm-weather clothing. They don't handle digital devices. People take their bags to the beach, the park, art openings, concerts, through cosmopolitan urban communities and idyllic rural escapes.



They are moral and fulfilled and creative. They are petit bourgeois. They inhabit a landscape of our tote-bag dreams: healthy, waste-conscious and ecologically responsible, ethnically diverse, carefree but productive, connected, affluent, tolerant, adventurous, optimistic.

A cultural cancer attaches: used as (perhaps often unintended) implicit signifiers of status and intellect, as billboards they are rendered ephemeral, while their regard as climate-change repellent marks them as charitable. And they suffer from the same vulgarity of the rest of civil society as inequality increases. Chic designer bags, such as those mentioned above, can run into the hundreds of dollars. Recycled plastic tote bags and lightweight cotton bags often cost a dollar or less. They all use valuable resources. Few of them are made to last long enough to obtain the number of uses required to reach resource-expenditure parity with the plastic bags they were meant to supplant. Though they promise timelessness and sustainability, they develop holes, straps come undone, seams disintegrate, they become fouled with stains and grime.



The Tote

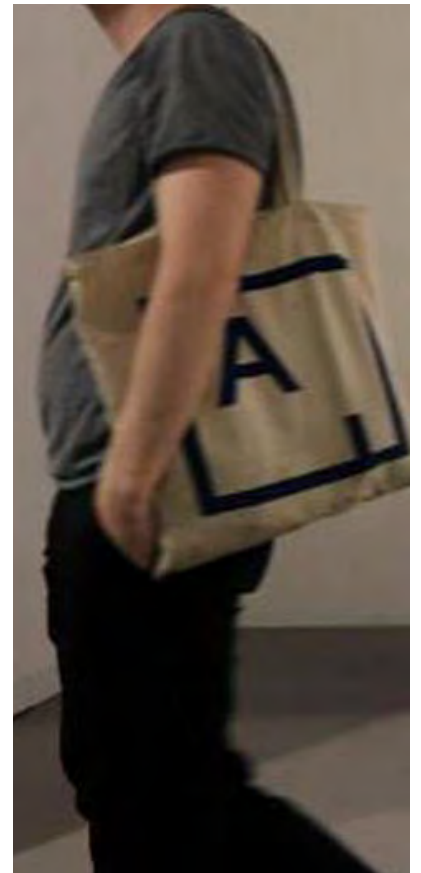
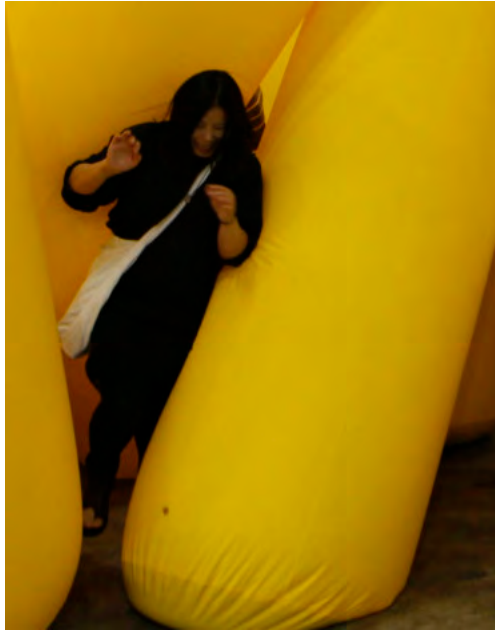
Elegant yet everyday, this essential combines buttery soft Italian leather, fresh yet classic hues, and clean, timeless design with ultra-durable leather, serious roominess, and work-to-weekend versatility.



Caramel

SOFT LEATHER TOTE (SHORT) \$150

Made in the USA



Tote bags are pictured in this book because of this problem. They are signifiers of a collective interest in making the world better, and yet they contribute to its violation, or are at the very least indicative of it. They manifest the desire that possession of a thing will nullify complicated dilemmas.

The palliative is profuse and then it is discarded.

It's no small irony that many of the bags captured here are from Urban Outfitters, whose marketing executive (Siegel) has written so engagingly about their apparent problems, their misuse. Out of about 100 photos selected from for this book, almost 20% were Urban Outfitters bags. Another 12% were from IKEA and Whole Foods. This is likely in part due to the geography in which these were shot—mostly lower Manhattan, northern Brooklyn, hip neighborhoods in Queens. Still, there is something ironic about the continuous re-appearance of brands identified with health and sustainability, simple living through utilitarian furnishings, and imitation thrift.^{xv}

Type of carrier	HDPE bag (No secondary reuse)	HDPE bag (40.3% reused as bin liners)	HDPE bag (100% reused as bin liners)	HDPE bag (Used 3 times)
Paper bag	3	4	7	9
LDPE bag	4	5	9	12
Non-woven PP bag	11	14	26	33
Cotton bag	131	173	327	393





This book is not art.



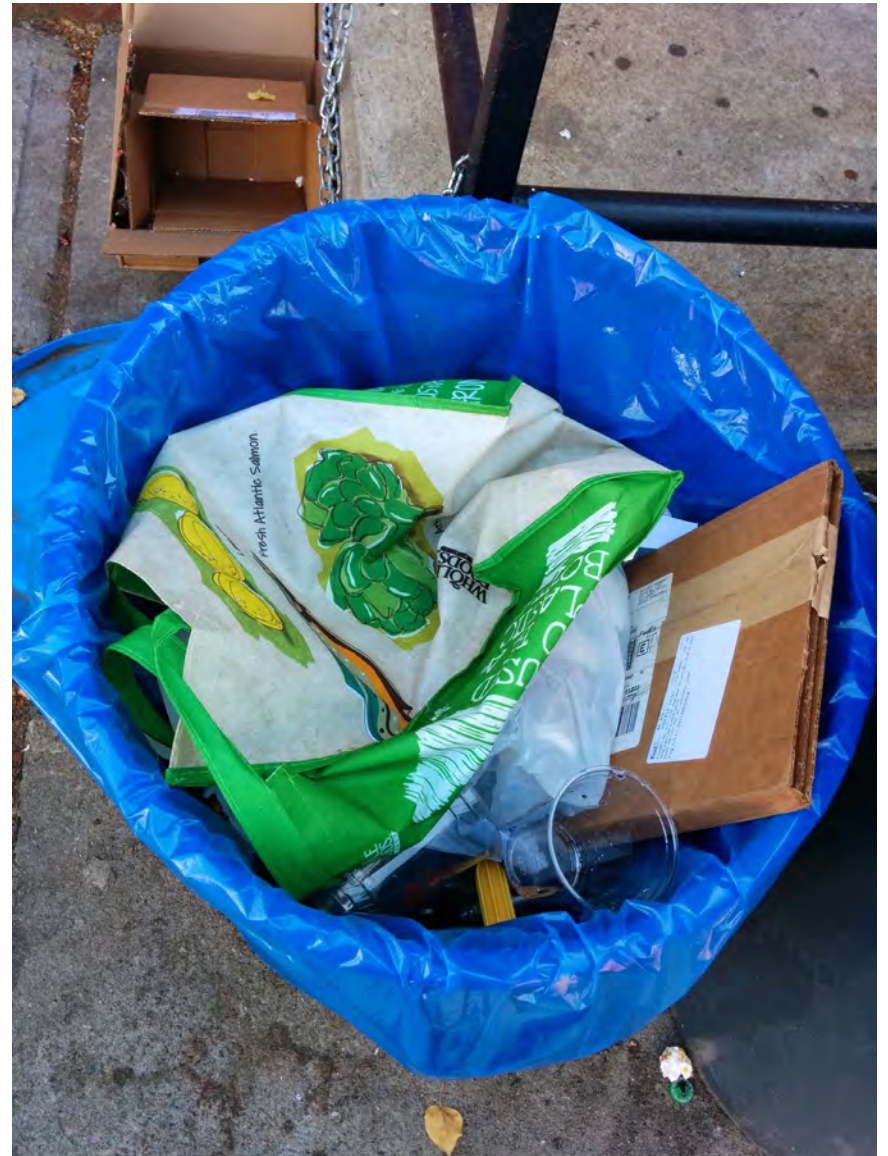
Art, like the disposable tote bag, is often practiced as a shell game. Its image as social truth-teller, free play, bohemian insouciance, secular spiritualism, essentialism, is contradicted by its practice of ostracism and stratification, professionalization, securitization, emptiness, pseudo-intellectual vapidty, its friendship with power. A shock is incorporated by sleight of hand and substituted with a more favorable image. The Futurists are remembered only as great artists and less as warmongers. *Guer-nica* (1937) is held as an anti-war monument, and it never saved a single human life. Fascist architecture is re-imagined as efficient and liberating office space. Duchamp and Beuys demonstrate that art can be anything and that anyone can make it, but this is met by a closing up of the arts into a credentialed clique.

Another shell game: the humble and basically dumb symbol of the tote bag is given extra significance by the claims others make for it (including this whole essay).

This is a collection of documents, visual facts—invented, selected, culled, compiled—all of a single subject that seems *sui generis* out of the froth of human relations. Rather than try to examine its cultural logic and mechanisms through allegory, metaphor, mimesis, representation, allusion, etc., the collection runs out a list of text and images. In trying to find context it may simply provide more clutter to sort. But this book attempts to focus a small corner of the world, and maybe to use that corner as an entry to larger concerns: of ecology, of cultural contradiction and disingenuousness, of facing real gloom.

New York, 2015









ENDNOTES

ⁱ Here, you see? The ballooning endnotes are a perfect example of scientism and data-flooding that lead to confusion, exasperation, and indifference.

ⁱⁱ Edwards, Dr. Chris, and Jonna Meyhoff Fry. "Life cycle assessment of supermarket carrier bags: a review of the bags available in 2006." UK Environment Agency: February 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ Although they weren't included in the study, one can presume that those designer totes made with leather adornments and/or metal and so on drive the required number of users into basically astronomical numbers.

^{iv} Siegel, Dmitri. "Paper, Plastic, or Canvas?" *Design Observer*: 20 January 2009. Efforts to collect and recycle plastic shopping bags have been all but useless, with a recoup rate of around 1%. Siegel further asserts that many consumers attempt to add them to their usual curbside bins, though they often cannot be processed by local recycling centers and likely end up in the garbage.

^v LaFrance, Adrienne. "How NPR Tote Bags Became a Thing." *The Atlantic*: 16 April 2015.

^{vi} *Ibid.*

^{vii} Siegel 2009.





ADD TO TOTE



^{viii} Look: I've got no moral high ground here. I use a tote bag *and* plastic bags. I take pictures of poorly disposed trash without cleaning it up. I waste things. I'm part of the problem as much as anyone else. I'm complicit!

^{ix} Milius, Susan. "Cats kill more than one billion birds each year." *ScienceNews*: 29 January 2013.

^x Specter, Michael. "Big Foot." *The New Yorker*: 25 February 2008.

^{xi} In 2009, *The Guardian* reported on research showing that the large container ships can produce pollution equivalent to 50,000,000 cars. In 2011, it was reported that flying gasoline to remote outposts of US occupation forces in Afghanistan cost upwards of \$400 per gallon.

Vidal, John. "Health risks of shipping pollution have been 'underestimated.'" *The Guardian*: 9 April 2009.

Eaton, Sabrina. "Rep. Marcy Kaptur says gasoline for troops in Afghanistan costs \$400 a gallon." *PolitiFact/Ohio*: 23 May 2011.

^{xii} That doesn't in any way alleviate us of the responsibility to minimize the ecological catastrophe caused by the emanations of our fingers and stomachs and loins and machines.

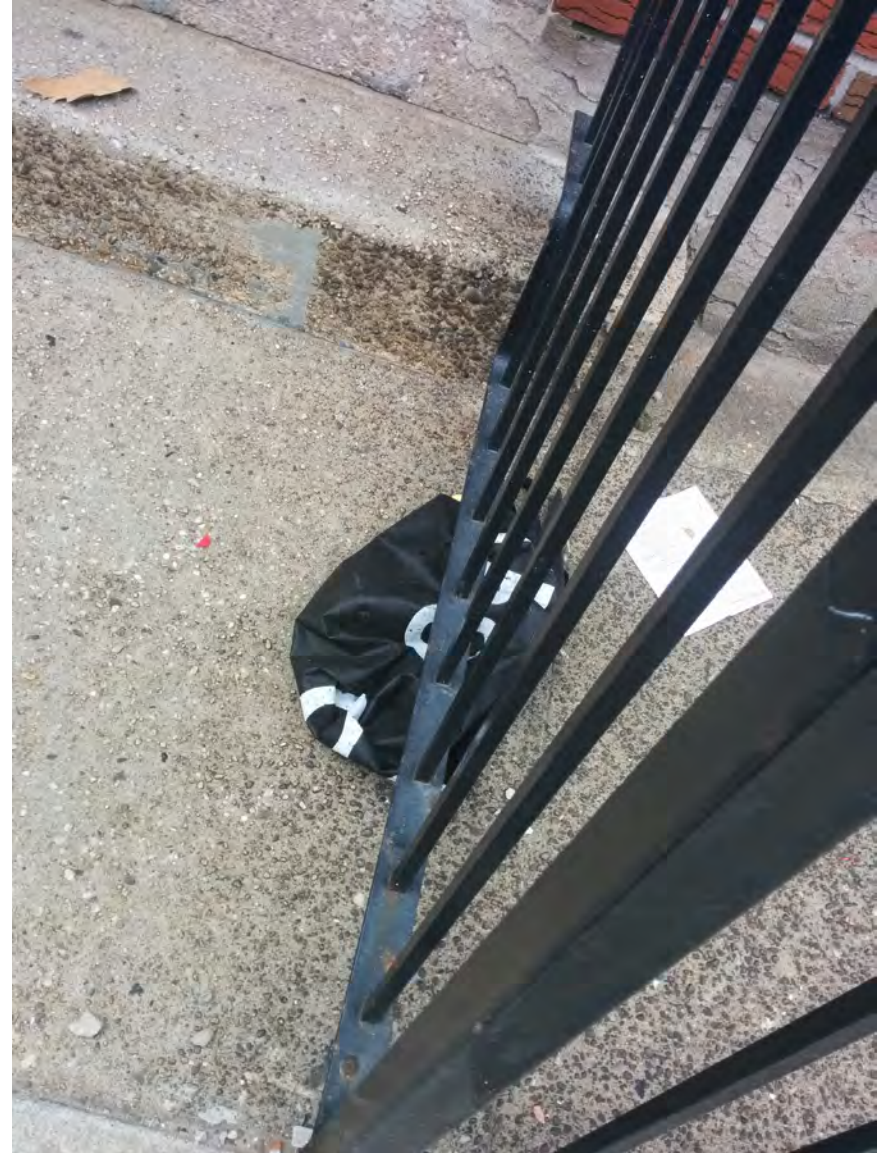
^{xiii} That doesn't alleviate us of the responsibility to minimize the ecological catastrophe caused by the emanations of our fingers and stomachs and loins and machines.

^{xiv} Siegel 2009.

^{xv} Edelman Berland. Reusable Bag Study: May 2014.

N.b. It should be acknowledged that the methodology here might be a little sketchy, scientifically speaking.

^{xvi} In some ways, Urban Outfitters is a bit like an inverse or perverse United Colors of Benetton in its ham-fisted attempts at inclusivity. They've drawn vitriol for their cheeky, crude, and idiotic references to Jews, blacks, left-wing causes, Palestinians, Native Americans, the Irish, and LGBTQ people.





Tote Bags by Noah Dillon

2015

Edition of 12

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Acknowledgments:

Thanks to friends and family for your assistance and for putting up with my pedantic ranting about fucking tote bags.

Additional found photos are reproduced on pages 2, 3, 5, 9, 11 – 13, and 19 – 23

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March 16, 17, 18
P.S. 20 Alpha Silver
(near Alphabet St.) / F to 1
March 18 (Meditation)
Turtle Bay Music Sch
(near 20th Ave) / F, M to 1
All events are
For more info
www.NYCMed