

**Shawn Shafner, The POOP Project
The 12x12 Project
“Latch/Attach”**

Context

Stuck inside our tiny New York City apartments, who doesn't feel the need for more space? A spare bedroom, a basement storage unit, or—Carrie Bradshaw's dream—a walk-in closet? More shirts, more pants, more cocktail dresses and shoes, shoes, SHOES! However, when each of us opens our wardrobes every day, we generally go for the same items over and over again. De-clutter company California Closets asserts that we wear 20% of our clothing 80% of the time. We think we want more, but we're already making do with less. The Tao of Poop teaches us that when we give things away, we create space for something else to come in.

As William Powers asks in the preface to *Twelve by Twelve*, “How could humanity transition to gentler, more responsible ways of living by replacing attachment to things with deeper relationships to people, nature, and self?” My project, “Latch/Attach” is one model proposing an answer to this question.

Project Overview

From 12-7pm, Aug. 26-Sept. 1, 2013, the 12x12 in First Park became a donation site for unused clothing, and a space for crafting, community cohesion and conversation about our collective consumption. Passersby, visitors and clothing donors were invited to sit, drink sun tea, and create their own square patch of latch hook rug, 12 rows across and 12 columns up and down. Primary materials were repurposed or recycled—vintage latch hook canvas, used latch hooks, and yarn made from donated t-shirts cut into strips. The resulting rug is beautiful but practical, and about the size of a welcome mat.

Signs facing the street and the park enjoined visitors to stop by for “clothing donation and transformation” during open hours. Donations were stacked in the North East corner of the 12x12, below where The Happiness Lab had recorded visitors' happy moments. Shoes and belts hung from nails against the East and South East walls. Socks rested above our heads in a net of red yarn left by The Happiness Lab. Plastic bags filled with upcycled yarn and sorted by color hung along a line of twine in the open doorways facing Houston Street. On the adjoining wall hung a latch hook rug of an owl, completed by my parents before I was born.

In the middle of the space was a table surrounded by six chairs in which visitors sat, chatted and crafted. Supplies, tea and my copy of William Powers' book was available for reference and reading.

Outcomes

This work grew out of the assumption that consumer goods (“stuff”) often replace real human connection and meaning. The market encourages us to see our stuff as evidence of accomplishment or happiness, yet we report being less and less satisfied. Our fashion diet is remarkably similar to our actual diet—cheap, processed products that fill us up fast but flow right through us, in one season, out the next. As the project evolved, however, it became clear that there are many ways in which our stuff can foster community building.

Weeks before the 12x12 opened, I worked on a prototype amongst friends at a crafting party. I shared lovely emails with the lady on Etsy from whom I bought the canvas, and learned how she picked them up from an estate sale. I wrote WNYC Member Services to see if I could get a solar radio, a gift I am allowed for my donation but have never claimed. They told me the warehouse couldn’t get it to me on time, so they shipped it from their office. And it wasn’t just the people who popped up along the way. There were the rats that live in First Park, the ants I’d find on the table and the cocoon that magically appeared, suspended by the entrance to the 12x12. I pickled green tomatoes and peppers from the garden on the side of the structure, and thought about how, in fermenting the vegetables, I was actually creating a “culture” of the space, down to its bacterial participants.

Each bag of clothing told me a story about my community—each article evidence of a family’s tastes, their physical build, changes in their lives. I excavated bags looking for t-shirts from which to make yarn, and felt like a voyeur looking in on someone else’s house. While collecting during open hours at the 12x12, I occasionally had the chance to engage people about their clothes. One woman told me, “This bag represents one bad divorce, three different dress sizes in two years, and the willingness to finally get all that baggage out of my storage space.” She brought another bag the next day. Another woman dropped off tap shoes. One gentleman came in and asked a lot of suspicious questions. The next day he brought two large bags of clothing and bedding, and emptied them into the corner. “I’ll keep the bags, thank you,” he said, and huffed back out the door.

Visitors to the 12x12 came in two forms. There were people who came in, looked around, and asked questions. I had many great conversations and nods of recognition about over-crowded closets, fear of environmental calamity, working too hard for material things that don’t make us happier. Ironically, many of these people could only stay but a moment before heading back to work or on to the next tourist destination.

Then there were those who dwelled with me: tourists, college students at the end of their summer, freelancers, moms with kids, and those without homes. These people often stayed for an hour or longer, crafting and confessing. A young woman coming from her lover’s house told me how she wanted to end the relationship and travel around the world. I found myself sharing a table with a young, blonde teacher recently moved to the city, an older, black man quoting scripture from the Koran, and a wily-haired hipster who stopped in on his way to buy dumplings, and feeling

close kinship with these former strangers. One person would learn the craft and then teach it to a newcomer. The latch hook craft, itself a mechanism for attaching yarn to a larger web, became a conduit for connecting strangers to one another.

It's only fitting that the 12x12, which existed to provoke the question, "how much is enough?" should attract those living with less than. George and Tito were two men living without homes who created the most compelling stories to come out of my time in the 1212.

Tito found me Tues afternoon, and was initially disappointed that he wouldn't be listening to Jonathan's guitar. He soon warmed to me and the project, and became my right hand assistant. Tito cut yarn, took pictures of me at work, and was there before me Wed morning, already watering the grass. We sat inside the 12x12 while it rained that day, listening to the radio and singing along to "Raindrops Are Falling On My Head." Tito told me about how much he missed his wife, who had passed away, and how he didn't want to burden his children with his problems. I shared my lunch with Tito and George, and Tito told me that when he got his check on Friday, he would buy some snacks for us all to have a party. He wouldn't take no for an answer. Some friends of his came by Wednesday night, and he went off with them. The radio disappeared that night, too. I never saw either of them again.

George I had met while unpacking on Monday. He was very friendly, and showed me the wood carving he was working on. It was a buffalo, really incredible. I trusted George. I let him use my phone to make a call, and he helped me throw the socks up into the red thread net. Tuesday I didn't see him at all, but Wednesday morning George was there when I arrived, pacing and agitated. He had been up since 7:30am walking the Bowery and East Village, trying to find an animal shelter that would help him take care of an injured bird. Now it was noon, and the poor thing was still sheltered in George's cowboy hat—his only hat, now caked inside with bird poo.

Once inside the 12x12, George crafted a cradle out of an old milk jug, complete with sod and grass for the bird to rest in, and a little water cup. The bird slept in the 12x12 that night. In the morning, George upgraded her surroundings to a handcrafted, upcycled diaper box house. She slept suspended in the air on a nail George made from a broken umbrella, so she'd be safe from rats.

A friend, moved by George's actions, gave me \$20 to give to him. When I gave it to him, he got very excited. "What kind of bread do you think the bird would want?" George asked me.

"I don't think she's choosy." I said. "This is a lot of money, George. Why not buy yourself a good sandwich and give the crusts to the bird?"

"Pumpernickel? Not sourdough. Something with lots of seeds in it."

I couldn't believe this man was real.

By Friday, the bird was strutting proudly around First Park under George's watchful eye. He was going to get a ride upstate where he has a place to stay for the winter,

but he couldn't leave before he knew she was better. "I can take care of her today. Who knows about tomorrow?" George laughed. "Maybe I'll die in my sleep. So I better take care of her today." He scooped the bird up and slipped her past the gates of the 2nd Street Cemetery. "At least there, I can keep an eye on her," George told me.

How much is enough? And who is responsible for who? George's life is contained in far less than a 12x12, yet he was content, and generous to the point of selflessness. Perhaps it is up to the smallest of the small to protect the smaller.

While a beautiful art object was begun during my time in the 12x12 (and will be in progress for the foreseeable future), the community, their personalities, stories and ideas, emerged for me as the real art. It was important to have a 12x12 in friendly yellow. It was important to have an activity that modeled open communal space and creative repurposing. It was important to be in a free, public park. But at day's end, these became structures in the service of catalyzing conversations. In a city where we often avoid human interaction, over 150 people dropped in throughout the week to ask questions, talk and share space with a stranger in their community. Over 50 people collaborated on the completion of 23 latch hook squares, and over 223 pounds of clothing were diverted from the waste stream.