



Introduction: the dollar store, the public toilet, and My Adidas

A paean to the “five and dime shops” of a quaint American yesteryear, the Dollar Store model is now a global retail behemoth. They have unimaginative names like: Family Dollar, Dollar Market, Dollar City Plus, 99¢ and Un Dollar (a name that would be more amusing if it wasn’t in Spanish). The stores are often franchises or corporate-run, and can be found in every American region, from rural Illinois to the middle of Times Square. They are also a popular retail model in Europe, Australia, and Japan.

The products offered (usually for a dollar or a nominal fee) include new generic or knock-off brand products, overstock products left unsold from bigger retailers, and sometimes, products that appear to be left over from either a warehouse fire or 1985 (on a recent trip to the “Dollar Tree” in Lombard, Illinois, we discovered a skid of boxes of “New Coke”, a beverage decidedly no longer in production).

It is the swirl of activity that is created to get new products into Dollar Stores that concern us. Cheaply-made, often plastic kitchen implements, office supplies, trinkets, toys, food with minimal nutritional value, decorative kitsch, and other miscellany fill their dense shelves and aisles. Many of these items are created in factories throughout the world that employ shady business practices, but are also the only industry and money source in their communities. Dollar Stores create demand by appealing to the consumer’s need to get a bargain and buy in bulk. More consumers buying more products create more stores globally, which demand more factories making more items...that in many cases are useless junk.

The Dollar Store hardly created this genesis of consumer madness. Consumer culture has been an absurdity of human life since the first town crier walked the streets ringing a bell and praising the local cobbler’s skills. These days, we’re enjoying an incredible climax in the linking of public spaces (both geographical and ideological) with the worlds of advertising, marketing, and other methods of massaging consumerism.

Billboards tower over every thoroughfare. Print advertisements cover the sides of public busses, commercials play over grocery store intercom systems, and, (the most insane or brilliant new “strategy”) advertisements are placed at “reading level” over urinals and on the backs of doors in public toilets. Ad jingles play over and over in our heads. “Invasive” is not a harsh enough word to explain the violations.

Artists lacking adequate housing and healthcare surrender their songs and images to advertisers, allowing corporations to hijack even the sweet associations we once had with music and visual art. In many movie theaters, watching a film means sitting through ten minutes of advertisements before the previews.

The cultural institutions we visit to find an escape often further enforce the feeling of walking through a never-ending commercial. Free days, galleries, and even lobbies of museums are increasingly corporate-sponsored and branded. The pressures to get excited about new products and participate in a “community” by buying useless items are overwhelming. [Continues below]

For additional images and writing about our investigations of publicly-trafficked spaces:
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Our current research project is named for a particularly insidious methodology of marketers: Product Placement. The Center for Media and Democracy’s online “Disinfopedia” defines product placement as “(a) Form of advertisement, without, disclosing it to the receiving party.”

While praised by the advertising community as a recent and lucrative model, the origins of product placement in cultural media can be demonstrated by John Huston’s 1951 film, *The African Queen* (Katherine Hepburn’s character famously dumps boxes of Gordon’s brand gin over the boat). Product placement has found a home in the movies, to the extent that the Audi car company actually created a prototype model with the help of the film studio and director of the recent *I, Robot*. Product placement is becoming a very mainstream business practice within all arenas of art -- witness the reported talks that Russell Simmons’ Island Def Jam Record Group had in 2002 with the Hewlett Packard Company about placements in several musicians’ rap songs. Incidentally, Simmons is the brother of Joseph Simmons, a.k.a. Run of the acclaimed rap group Run-DMC, whose 1986 hit “My Adidas” influenced many musicians of the same genre to sing the praises of their favorite products. The advertisers quickly took notice.

Product placement is tolerated in children’s media as well—any library or mainstream bookstore usually has a copy of *The M&M’s Counting Coloring Book* or *The Cheerios Christmas Play Book*. Kids can buy McDonald’s play sets at toy stores so they can rehearse life as a McDonald’s employee ten years early. Perhaps there has never been a difference between Halloween costumes for trademarked cartoon characters and costumes for products, but do kids really ask, “Mommy can I dress up as an M&M this year?” Entire product lines of toy tool sets for kids are made by Home Depot – another opportunity to practice for becoming an adult shopper.

Living in the city, deprived of front lawns, and with no unregulated outdoor spaces for open experimentation, we have to make our own space for creativity and play. Contrasting with the abundant opportunities we have to view ads and buy things, there is a paucity of situations where we can express ourselves in places that other people move through. Advertising dominates outdoor urban visual culture. Chain stores give birth to carbon copies of themselves with astonishing efficiency. Rats that pass by Starbucks’ garbage dumpsters looking for a bit of biscotti to nibble on must be jealous of the coffee chain’s ability to breed and grow so quickly.

Our streets and our culture don’t have to accept the product placement pollution that drives them. Every surface in public need not have a sales pitch. Our cities should be places where we can play, be absurd, risk embarrassment, experiment, build temporary things outdoors, entertain ourselves and others, and live freely.

Product Placement is a series of actions and experiments designed to use products non-commercially – as raw materials that can be employed in creative and imaginative ways to alter surfaces, create new social and perceptual possibilities, and add poetic moments to the daily routines of the people who encounter them. This poster includes documentation of some things we have tried so far. Of course, there is much more to try, and more fun to be had in our public spaces. We invite you to join us.

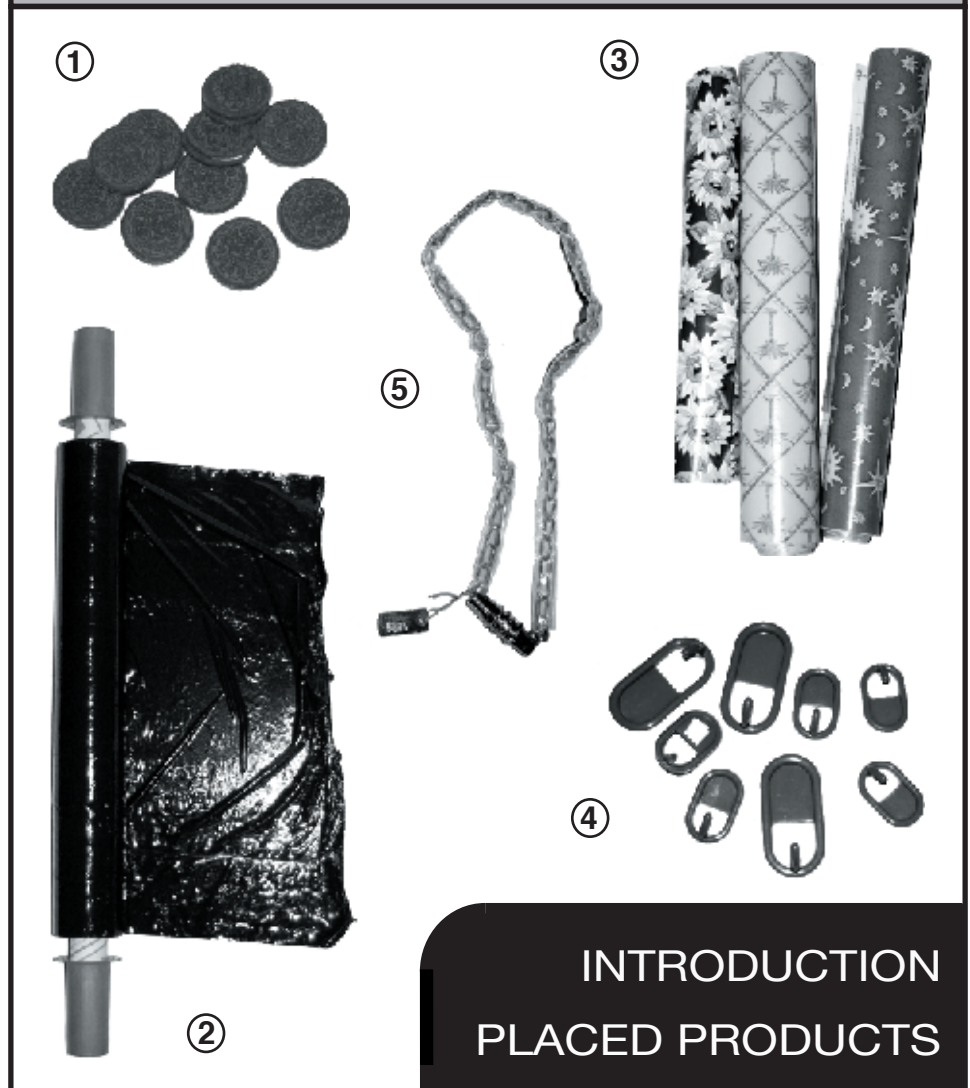
Placed Products

① **Cookies:** Sandwich cookies with solid cream filling in the middle are readily available and can be used to create biodegradable patterns. Slowly separate the cookies so the cream will adhere more completely to one of the sides. You will be using the cream side. The other side can be eaten, crumbled for birds, or composted. Slowly press the creamed half to a public surface. Be gentle, but make sure you press firmly enough to get the cookie to stick. You may want to moisten or lick the cream filling to make it adhere better.

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INTRODUCTION PLACED PRODUCTS

② **Palette Wrap:** You can find pallet wrap in wholesale warehouses that sell directly to other businesses. The material is typically used to affix large quantities of boxes or loose materials together as they rest upon a wooden or plastic pallet. The pallet wrap is sold with cardboard handles making it instantly ready for multiple applications.

We picked up garbage or discarded items and affixed them to poles, parking meter poles and other public furniture. The material can be used to blockade pathways and sidewalks or make abstract spatial separations. We have also used pallet wrap to conceal banks of free newspaper dispensers that are heavily oriented toward advertising. The pallet wrap is a very flexible material and you can creatively direct it to many ends.

③ **Contact Paper:** Contact Paper comes in a wide variety of decorative patterns. It is unlikely to peel off smooth surfaces but, if necessary, it can usually be removed without damaging the support. It sticks very well to the metal on phone booths and newspaper boxes. It also adheres exceptionally well to glass, Plexiglas, and printed advertisements such as the kind that are fitted into the backs of some bus benches. Contact paper is not messy to apply like wheat-pasted flyers. People will not get dirty by rubbing against it; it is highly resistant to rain and snow.

You may want to measure the surfaces you would like to cover before getting started. It also helps if you get a corner or two of the protective paper on the back started and folded over for easy peeling. This will save you time and make the application of the contact paper less stressful.

In our experience, sloppily applied contact paper was removed from bench ads quickly. Neater contact paper coverings that are perfectly measured for the metal frame borders blend in seamlessly. Some of these have lasted for weeks or months.

④ **Adhesive Hooks:** Find hooks with adhesive backing and apply them to the public surface of your choice. Obfuscate advertisements in humorous ways or cover things that have dull colors or patterns. Encourage the use of the hooks by others: place mittens or other lost clothing items on one of the hooks. Place them on the sides of dumpsters so people can use them to hang unwanted clothing, bags of aluminum cans that scrappers can recycle, or other things that people may take. Note that the adhesive that comes on the hooks is not permanent. If you want to make the hooks hard to remove, consider applying epoxy glue around the edges on the back of the hook. Be aware that this might cause more damage upon removal.

⑤ **Chain Locks:** This strategy consists of chaining and locking found detritus to fences and other surfaces. We easily scavenged chairs and other pieces of furniture in alleys that we then relocated to bus stops that lack seating. Chairs were then locked to the fences of empty lots adjacent to the bus stops. Milk-crates were added to make cubby spaces; tables create a perverse approximation of a domestic setting. A suspended kiddie pool in the dead of winter is more decorative and eye-catching. New objects were added one at a time over a spread of days – allowing for passers-by to observe a slowly changing situation.

Not surprisingly, people have been seen sitting in the chairs waiting for the bus. At one point the crates were stocked with someone’s leftover fries and unused dipping sauce packets from a nearby fast food joint. It remains to be seen if more people might try using them to redistribute food or other items, or if they were merely acting as a trash receptacle on a block that lacks a public trashcan.

All of these cheap locks could be easily smashed open with a well-placed hammer swing. Wood or plastic furniture will be less interesting to most ‘Scrappers’ than furniture made with metal. Fences on lots that are for sale or rent are more likely to be untended than sites that are in use.