

**Rachel Kesel once waited** out a tornado in a sprawling Kennesaw, Georgia, shopping mall. She chuckles at the memory, since it's been a year and a half since she's bought so much as a new pair of socks without prolonged deliberation. "Now, when I try to shop, it's like I'm broken," the 26-year-old says. "I just can't do it." Today, she is picking through T-shirts and sneakers at a vintage-clothing shop on San Francisco's Haight Street. She never approaches the register.

Kesel looks like a hippie college kid, dressed in a light blue windbreaker accented with reflective tape and a few tears, and a pair of tan nylon hiking pants that zip into shorts. She pushes a 10-speed bike, covered in liberal bumper stickers, down the sidewalk. She has 10 piercings in her ears, but only wears two simple hoops, which she rotates among the holes.

Back on the first of January, 2006, she and a group of nine San Franciscan friends vowed to purchase nothing new for one calendar year. But her January cut-off date came and went, and six months later, the most she can do is what she calls "foraging," better known as window-shopping.

Kesel and her friends had, as their stated mission, a

plan to flee the consumer grid—an idea they sealed in a pact just before Christmas almost two years ago. They called themselves "the Compact," after the Mayflower Compact, the 1620 social contract drawn up by the Pilgrims, those Puritans bent on building a "city on a hill" that would be a beacon to the world. The premise was simple: barter, borrow, or buy secondhand for a year—food, drink, health, and safety necessities excluded. Yes, they could buy toilet paper and new underwear, but, say, a gallon of white house paint or new dog toys? Unacceptable.

It was a tall order, but it seems there's no shortage of people up to the task. Kesel and the other original Compacters claim never to have intended to start a movement, but with an exploding Yahoo group and a metastasizing network of blogs, the Compact has since collected some 9,000 acolytes from Bucharest to Taipei, even some in Orange County, California. Sure enough, a community is rising around the Compact's simple tenets.

"There is no dogma," says Kesel. "No one is out to chide you for not being perfect. We're not out to be environmental martyrs. We're just a group of folks

looking to consciously reduce our consumption and keep trash out of the landfills."

Americans generated 246 million tons of municipal solid waste in 2005—a 60-percent increase since 1980—and more than half of that mass went into 1,654 landfills. That is like a fleet of 1,800 Queen Mary 2 cruise ships being buried every year. Though the ecological impact was what hooked Kesel on the Compact challenge at first, thrifty living has also padded her checkbook, she says. She estimates that she has saved \$4,000 during her period of abstinence.

Even Compacters have trouble resisting the urge to line the nest. Kesel's had her moments of weakness—a red scarf snatched up in a Jerusalem bazaar and a pair of sandals in London (air travel is, indeed, permitted for Compacters). But as the professional dog-walker flirts with purchases on Haight Street, shuffling along in free British Airways socks inside worn tennis shoes, she bemoans a recently broken plastic headband and ponders a "return to normalcy."

When a group of environmentally concerned friends in San Francisco decided to buy nothing for a year, they unwittingly sparked an international trend.

# What happens when people stop shopping and join **The Compact?**

by **ZACHARY SLOBIG**

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Rachel Kesel, Compact member

What she has missed most is not the things she has gone without, but the immediacy of the acquisition. "Normally it's like, hey, if you want it, you just go out and buy it," she says. "I really do want to be able to shop again."

The Compact gets its fair share of detractors, folks who argue that they don't take things far enough. "Some people won't be satisfied until we're living in Idaho and shitting in a hole," says Kesel. Others think the whole notion is downright un-American—that shopping is patriotism. To others, it's just weird.

Ted Nordhaus, the author of the forthcoming *Break*

*Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility*, offers a more thoughtful critique. He cautions that people will not respond on a wide scale to what he sees as the Compact's moralizing. "We can't sacrifice our way out of this problem," he says. "There are 2 billion Indians and Chinese who want to live as autonomously as we do, and no amount of shopping abstention will remotely impact that. To live is to consume, and only technology and innovation can begin to address these global issues."

**John Perry**, the Compact's founding father, is perched at a dining-room table piled high with stuff. Tall and broad shouldered, wearing a baseball cap and Saturday stubble, he's hunched over, filling 40 gift bags for his son's sixth birthday party.

Perry, 43, a Silicon Valley tech marketer, lives with his partner Rob Picciotto and their two kids in Bernal Heights, a gentrified neighborhood in San Francisco that often enjoys sun when the rest of the city is blanketed in fog. The area is known for its high concentration of young families and same-sex couples. A nearby boutique sells T-shirts that read "Maternal Heights."

Perry has found all the gift bags' contents at SCRAP, a warehouse of castoffs originally intended for local artists. When he's done, each bag will contain a race-car patch, a container of peanuts, a baseball, a sheet of temporary tattoos, and a few rubber creepy-crawly bugs. As he sifts through the swag, he marvels at the success of his experiment.

"We're probably getting about 100 new members a week. [It's] way beyond me now," he says. "But it really was just a bunch of friends, mostly right here in this neighborhood." They set up the Yahoo group to share support and tips on creative ways to tackle their task.

It's tempting to snicker at folks debating the minutiae of auto maintenance while keeping the vows of the Compact ("Do new wiper blades count?") or roll your eyes at the discussion of homemade checks ("My understanding is that legally you can write a check on anything you want—a paper bag, a napkin."), but the chatter is multiplying. It's even caught on with one of the most acquisitive demographics out there—teenage girls. Marta Marano, a 13-year-old from Toronto, has started her own Compact blog as a school assignment, fashioning herself the green Pied Piper of her junior high. She blasts sites like Facebook, explaining the concept of e-waste to her peers—"another man-made weapon of mass destruction."

"None of us is watching this thing very closely, but there are people all over the world now," says Perry. "We've had people on Native American reservations, Peace Corps volunteers in Romania, small towns in Japan." I tell him about Marta in Canada. ►



► “When I hear things like that I really feel kind of abashed,” he says, scooping up another fistful of peanuts into a gift bag.

**This has been done before** in San Francisco. Back in the spring of 1967, along the same San Francisco street where Kesel can't bring herself to buy \$15 vintage T-shirts, a group calling themselves the Diggers opened several “free stores.” No cash needed, just take what you need and leave the rest. (They took their name from a short-lived 17<sup>th</sup>-century movement in the English countryside that temporarily reclaimed land



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John Perry, Compact founder

for common usage, spurning all forms of buying and selling.) By the fall, a Digger named Motorcycle Richie had roared across the country and opened a free store on East 10th Street in Manhattan, too.

The Diggers enjoyed an online revival in 1999, launching Diggers.org, a “virtual free store,” the same year Craig Newmark’s eponymous list became a for-profit site. The Diggers movement dwindled, but in its wake, Craigslist, Freecycle, and the Compact network have become online destinations for freebies. In the real world, so has Dolores Park in San Francisco’s Mission District, on the last Saturday of the month. Here, on the occasionally sun-dappled hillside, the Really Really Free Market assembles in a mass of folding tables and blankets. Propped against a nearby tree, a hand-painted sign trumpets, “No Money, No Barter, No Trade, Everything Is Free!”

Like seconds at a stoop sale, the extras of the city are displayed for the taking. On a recent Saturday I spot an orange snorkel, a dog-eared *Ethan Frome*, a gallon Ziploc bag full of marbles, a three-iron golf club, a sack of potatoes, a pair of pink Barbie roller skates, and three boxes of presumably stale candy canes. The skunky smell of marijuana blends with the aroma of a vegan chili being ladled out nearby.

A guy with a crude Mohawk stretches out next to his bicycle from which dangles a cardboard sign hawking free haircuts. A juggler gives lessons. A guy with shoulder-length sandy blond hair and wire-rimmed glasses reads tarot cards. “The querant may be satisfied with what is being offered at the present time rather than putting forth a little more effort for even greater reward,” he reads to a nodding young brunette. “So, you know, it’s cool to be satisfied with what you have but you don’t want to be complacent, right?” She giggles and nods again.

Anita Carswell, an RRFM devotee, sits cross-legged on the grass with a display of goods tidily laid out, and a haphazard pile behind her, separating her “gives” from her “gets.” She pulls out of the pile some of her favorite finds of the day: a little woven handbag made from shredded barbeque-potato-chip bags, a red plastic rat covered in white hearts (now she has a matching pair), and a spring wet suit (her boyfriend recently got a free sailboat).

“A lot of your trash is exactly what someone else needs,” she says, “so it’s about keeping things out of the landfill.” She whips out a red journal in which she’s recorded all her RRFM transactions over the past year. She flips to February. Under the “got” column: “black-light lamp, *New York Times Book Of Houseplants*, green metal soapdish with rose pattern.” Under the “gave” column: “cell-phone base, half tin of lip balm, denim shirt that looked like something a hooker would wear to keep warm.”

A teenage drag queen with a potbelly and a pink

**DIGGERS** Modern Diggers get their name from a 17th-century English group that believed in economic equality and an agrarian lifestyle.



hula-hoop saunters over to Carswell's display to inspect a gray sweater skirt. "I've been trying to unload that for months," Carswell whispers. Her "customer" slips it on over several layers of clothing and gives a little shrug. Carswell snaps a photograph, and the hula-hoop twirler moves on to the next blanket. "See, now look how happy she is," says Carswell.

The tarot-card reader, it turns out, is Alex Friend, the guy who spearheads the RRFM. "We're all so conditioned," he says. "It's all about the quid pro quo. I'm like, I have this to offer, and there it is and there it goes. It's an opportunity to learn an etiquette of giving and receiving."


**"Everything around here** is secondhand," says Perry, gesturing around his house as he leashes his rescued Gordon setter and golden retriever. The Perry-Picciotto home is no monastic outpost, no monument to deprivation. It doesn't look like a foraged hodge-podge, or the set of *Sanford and Son*. What's strikingly absent is the cache of bright battery-operated toys that so often pile up in the living rooms of families with young children. Today, his 18-month-old daughter, Louisa, is pushing around an empty laundry basket.

Down the block, he runs into Sister Kate, a nun in her 60s who recently moved to Bernal Heights. She's gotten into the habit of collecting day-old confections from the local supermarket and giving them out to her neighbors—Perry among them. "See," he says. "Even the birthday cake tomorrow will be Compacted."

"I don't think we're doing anything new here," Perry says. "The Compact is just a group of people responding to a rising tide of environmental anxiety, and it's broad and loose enough for people to project their own concerns on it." For the time being, Perry and his family will continue Compacting indefinitely. "It's really not that hard—in fact, it's a lot of fun," he says.

Rachel Kesel, on the other hand, has begun to transition back to buying. Opting to take a month off from Compacting, the fruits of her return to shopping were two pairs of shoes, three T-shirts, a handful of underwear, a hand pruner, a bike map of a nearby state park, and eight tomato cages. There was also a pair of earrings she ended up giving away at the RRFM. "I wanted to feel like an average American," she says. "But I guess I still don't know how to shop."

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