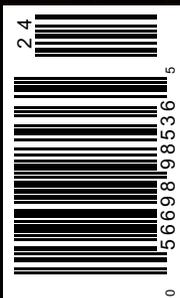
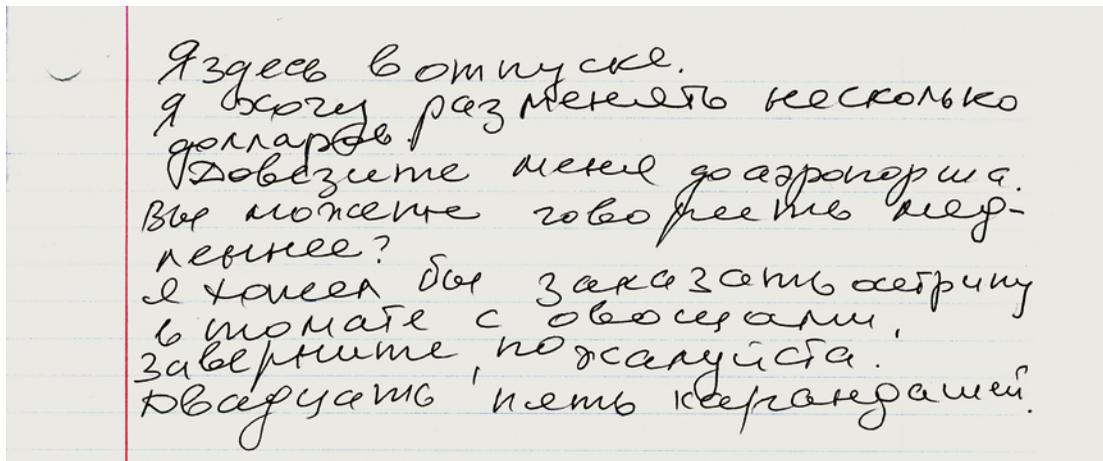


Cabinet

A QUARTERLY OF ART AND CULTURE
ISSUE 44 **24 HOURS**
US \$12 CANADA \$12 UK £7





Nikita Khrushchev's purported to-do list, 25 October 1962. Thanks to the Rostovskys for additional research.

INVENTORY / TO DO

MOLLY GOTTSTAUKE

INTRODUCTION

In 1988, the Archives Division of the University of Oklahoma Library came into possession, by deeded gift, of an unusual private collection: about three thousand manuscript “to-do” lists in various languages, dating from the ninth to the twentieth century, and ostensibly representing holograph material penned by various significant historical personages (Duns Scotus, Walt Whitman, Napoleon, Spinoza, Catherine the Great, Benjamin Franklin, Garibaldi, etc.). Questions were raised from the outset concerning the provenance and authenticity of a number of these documents, and cataloging was delayed, pending proper research. As an assistant to the rare books curator at the time, I inherited the problem, and have worked on it intermittently since, as other obligations allowed. This brief essay represents a preliminary report on my findings, together with an invitation to interested parties who might wish to consult the collection (The Cherwitt Sangster Repository for the History of Self-Organization), now open to the public for the first time.

CONTEXT AND CONSIDERATIONS

The last decade has seen a burst of interest in lists in general, and a flurry of attention to the to-do list more specifically. *Cabinet*'s own “Inventory” column certainly merits mention in connection with this trend. Theoretical and artistic enthusiasm for the genre would seem lately to have reached a fever pitch. In 2009, the distinguished Italian semiotician Umberto Eco presided

over a veritable list extravaganza at the Louvre—a year-long series of exhibitions, lectures, and projects that interrogated the form in a host of poetic and practical instances.¹ Shortly thereafter, the Smithsonian curator Liza Kirwin mounted a smaller, similarly themed show at the Morgan Library in New York City.² While both of these undertakings included discussions of to-do lists, each reached well beyond that idiosyncratic corner of the larger world of paratactical enumeration. The to-do list per se in fact found its muse back in 2007, when the writer Sasha Cagen gave the world a spirited reading of her own collation of such documents, culled from friends, correspondents, and readers of her short-lived *To-Do List* magazine. Unfortunately, a quirky idiom of self-help psychology (and a lowbrow appetite for the voyeuristic aspects of these ephemera) marred her book project, and prevented Cagen from a much-needed delving on the larger historical, political, and philosophical questions at issue.³

The full scope of such problems outstrips my own ambitions (and abilities—I am at heart a librarian), but it is worth keeping in mind that the true history of the to-do list must be understood as inextricable from the broader history of the modern self. As noted by Nicholas Bradshaw, to-do lists are properly conceived as a peculiar and historically specific involution of the older, formal religio-military structure of “orders.” Which is to say (as he does), “We commanded others in written form long before we learned to command ourselves” via such texts. We need not follow Bradshaw’s more extravagant formulations (for instance that the post-1848 rise of the to-do list represents a “watershed in the history of human freedom”) to appreciate his larger point: to

wit, that these forms of aspirational and/or regulative self-programming offer a distinctively externalized expression of bourgeois interiority.⁴

THE SANGSTER REPOSITORY

Unaware of the Oklahoma materials, Bradshaw and others have noted that essentially no to-do lists predating the mid-nineteenth century appeared to survive. Indeed, in English, the first use of the term itself seems to hail from the early twentieth century.⁵ These facts cast early doubt on the authenticity of the three cases of archival materials conveyed to our library in the autumn of 1988 by the niece of Cherwitt “Chet” Sangster, a collector who had passed away that summer.

Born to farm life in Ponca City, Oklahoma, in 1892, Chet Sangster had the good fortune to fall in with Lewis Haines Wentz on the occasion of the latter’s 1911 visit to the Miller brothers’ 101 Ranch, where the young Sangster was at the time irregularly employed as a hand. Chet was thus present in June when the Willie-Cries-for-War oil well struck black gold—the first of a series of gushers that would make Wentz one of the ten richest men in America by 1927. Reliable, honest, and hardworking, Sangster became Wentz’s right-hand man in Oklahoma, and an indispensable fixture of the Wentz Oil Company. Like Wentz, Sangster never married, and gave himself in his later years to civic and philanthropic activities.

It would appear that Sangster’s devotion to the to-do list had its origins in his personal commitment to the gospel of self-help, and a Sooner taste for the bootstrap. Sometime after World War II, he came into possession of a copy of A. K. H. Boyd’s *Lessons of Middle Age* (1868), to which he became strangely devoted. His marginalia on the following passage suggest how deeply he was struck by Boyd’s own ruminations on the importance of self-scripting:

*Pen ink and paper are the great clearers up of most worried and overdriven minds. If a man have a vague idea that he has a tremendous number and variety of things to do; let him sit down and write a list on one sheet of paper. Well, the list may not be short: but I venture to say it will be shorter than the man expected. And further, the killing thing, the vague sense of indefinite number and magnitude, will be gone.*⁶

Sangster began his collection at about this time, perhaps inspired by a conversation with Wentz’s friend William Bennett Bizzell, who became president of the University of Oklahoma in the interwar period—and who was by that time already one of the great Bible collectors of the US.

Confidence men have been fixtures of the American scene since time immemorial. In the heyday of the Texas-Oklahoma oil rush, such figures proliferated in a region soused with easy money. It was Sangster’s misfortune in this regard to fall into the hands of “Henri DeGuise,” an unscrupulous book dealer and antiquities merchant from New Orleans who fashioned himself the wronged son of an aristocratic French family. He was in fact christened Jean Bec, the illegitimate son of an Acadian brewer. Bec/DeGuise met Sangster in the course of the latter’s building and furnishing of a magnificent 1950s Tudor mansion just outside Tonkawa. How exactly their relationship developed remains obscure, but the evidence at present suggests that Bec/DeGuise first identified and then cultivated Sangster’s native enthusiasm for the genre of the to-do list—an enthusiasm from which Bec/DeGuise proceeded to profit enormously, by means of a set of carefully forged documents.

CONCLUSION

A full reckoning of the contents of the Sangster Collection remains a desideratum, since there is no reason to think that absolutely all the materials therein are false (though most surely are; e.g., Bec/DeGuise appears to have known no Russian and to have copied what is purportedly Nikita Khrushchev’s to-do list on the occasion of the Cuban Missile Crisis from a phrasebook, producing an extraordinarily strange and lively document). Moreover, it is important to state that the power of the collection as a source for reflection on self-scripting and self-organization, while not undiminished, remains robust—if mostly as a window onto ideas about the self in Oklahoma across the belly of the twentieth century. There can be no manuscript in the collection more telling in this regard than shelfmark ST-304, Sangster’s own to-do list of 6 June 1988, the day before his death:

To do:
— *Make list of things to do*
 also
— *Buy lists?*

1 Umberto Eco, *Vertigine della lista* (Milan: Bompiani, 2009).

2 See Liza Kirwin, *Lists: To-dos, Illustrated Inventories, Collected Thoughts, and Other Artists’ Enumerations* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010).

3 Sasha Cagen, *To-Do List: From Buying Milk to Finding a Soul Mate, What Our Lists Reveal About Us* (Clearwater, Fla: Touchstone, 2007).

4 Nicholas Bradshaw, “To Do or Not to Do: Practices of the Self in Victorian Britain,” *Labor History*, no. 74 (May 1998), pp. 310–357.

5 It first arises in the context of checklists for machine operators, which come to be called “don’t fail to do lists.” Bradshaw comments felicitously on the transposition of the to-do list convention from mechanical devices to the human person. (Bradshaw, op. cit., pp. 329–330).

6 A. K. H. Boyd, *Lessons of Middle Age* (London: Longmans, 1869). Italics mine.