

*Spring 2017*

# A UNIVERSITY OF THINGS

**Object Lessons & Exhibition**  
*The Thing Group*

*Princeton University*  
*Department of History*

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Spring 2017

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*While with an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
We see into the life of things.*

– William Wordsworth

“Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey”

**Back Cover:** *Circumstantial Avalanche, 2010.*

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# A University of Things

This volume represents the final collaborative work of ten students who gathered twice weekly for three months across the spring of 2017 to read, discuss, and activate recent theoretical work in anthropology, history, philosophy, and adjacent fields—work bearing on the emergent interdisciplinary domain probably best described as “the study of material culture.”

From *Thing Theory* to *Vibrant Matter* to Object Oriented Ontology to Bruno Latour’s “parliament of things,” the last fifteen years has seen an unmistakable uptick in scholarly preoccupation with *stuff*. A recent special issue of *October* canvassed a broad array of critics, artists, and academics on this trend, and their responses tallied numerous ambivalences and critical reservations. I am myself inclined to see some measure of this general drift as an index of the creeping conquest of university life by an unseemly accommodation to a more or less blatant ethos of consumerism. By these lights, our new interest in “thinking things” can perhaps best be understood as a quiet, on-campus benediction of *the commodity*—academic fetishism being the good kind, no?

Other interpretations are of course possible, maybe even necessary. The whole development certainly has something to do with a kind of “non-discursive re-turn” that can be discerned across a number of disciplines wearied by long marches down the paths that followed the discursive turn of the 1970s. It is further tempting to argue that the current flurry of interest in matter (and particularly matter in discrete and thingly form) amounts to a kind of late hour last call, as if we are collectively rousing ourselves to the

camaraderie of a cozy final round with a bunch of familiar doodads before we are all definitively turned out into the shapeless night of a pervasively dematerialized virtuality. We shall see.

What can be said with some certainty, however, is that starting again, from things, naively; and then gradually submitting, sequentially, to the thing-tutelage of a series of thinkers from Heidegger to Harman (via Mauss, Lukács, Grosz, and others) stimulates a sharpened attunement to the furniture of social life. The work that follows emerged in this context, and reflects, I believe, such sharpened sensitivity.

A few additional words on context. It was the wager of these weekly gatherings that an inquiry into things remains within the (inevitably unthingly) sphere of language and ideas at its peril. Therefore only one of the two weekly sessions took the form of a traditional seminar (books out on tables pulled in a circle; the collective project of trying to understand, appreciate, and find the limits of a text); the other was designated a “Thing Lab” and demanded a willingness to get one’s hands dirty—literally, in the case of our week on trash, refuse, excretions, and detritus (though latex gloves were on offer for those not wishing to rummage barehanded through the surrounding ashcans and garbage stashes). From compiling forensic collections of waste, to conducting exacting ethnographies of door-closing mechanisms, to a field trip to the local toy store in search of idols (we tried to get them to *speak...*), we worked weekly to make our readings *work* in confrontation with the things they were “about.”

Further context: these weekly gatherings were part of a “class.” The discerning reader will likely have surmised as much. The class took place at Princeton University, and appeared in the registrar’s catalog as “History 499: Things” (I was listed as the instructor).

Why be coy about all that? Certainly not out of any ambivalence concerning the aspirational beauty of teaching and learning within a university setting. On the contrary, as the title of this volume indicates, so taken were we by the immediate conditions of our pedagogical environment, that it was the university

itself (ours in particular as well as the thing-culture of universities in general) that became our centering conceit in the last weeks of the term. What we set out to achieve in this final exercise was nothing less than a synoptic practicum in our new thing-tools, which we agreed to test by means of a participatory self-experiment: we would turn these tools on ourselves and our immediate situation, the university, and attempt to understand its mission (and ours in it) via scrutiny of a thoughtful selection of its artifacts.

And so it turned out to be a class that was partly about classes themselves—the places where they happen, the work they do, the world they leave behind (and to which one returns when they end). Hence, perhaps, that slight ambivalence about pinning this little pamphlet down as a (mere?) “class project.” After all, I announced my hope at the outset of the course that we would (within the very real constraints of university policy and tradition) achieve as flat a social and intellectual architecture as possible—that our objective should be the achievement of something like a genuine “community of inquiry” constellated by our topic. I am grateful to this group of students for their work in carrying this project further along its utopian vector than any previous undergraduate seminar with which I’ve been involved. The pamphlet in your hand is perhaps the most tangible artifact of that trajectory: while I mooted as an option some sort of final collective project, it was the students themselves (whose names follow in these pages) who conceived a thing exhibition as a fitting collaborative undertaking, and it was they who settled on the meet theme of the university, and it was they who self-organized to achieve not only the small public performance-display of their chosen objects but also this catalog, with its thoughtful “thing-pieces” that use our readings over the term to open ten small, bright windows onto the *University of Things*. Please enjoy, and appreciate, their work.

D. Graham Burnett

# Campus Map

*Nicolette D'Angelo*



**T**he lack of signage on Princeton University's campus was first declared a problem in the spring of 2012. Between then and 2014, a project called Wayfinding on Campus was fronted by Facilities "to clearly communicate the necessary information to the uninitiated without detracting from the intimate experience of campus for our students, faculty and staff." Over seventy vehicular signs were installed throughout the University as a result, in addition to fifteen walk signs.

A quick look at a campus visitors' map, however, suggests that signage efforts shouldn't necessarily prioritize vehicular wayfinding. Given that Princeton's extensive networks of quads, walkways, and courtyards

are not designed on a grid, undergraduates admit the difficulty of finding certain buildings and giving directions to visitors even in their senior year at Princeton.

A campus map is consequently insufficient, even useless on its own so long as standardized ID signs indicating building titles and addresses have yet to be fully implemented. With confusing visuals on one side of the map and step-by-step directions on the other, the map itself acknowledges Princeton's unintelligibility, nearly taunting visitors who have yet to enjoy "an intimate experience" of campus—or, more likely, never fully will. A lack of signage only reinforces the divide between the on-campus community and people entering through FitzRandolph Gates: tourists, prospective students, and even citizens of the town of Princeton.

These individuals are the so-called "uninitiated" masses to which Facilities refers, implying that a formal induction into Princeton's long-standing traditions, ceremonies, and culture is necessary before navigating its physical spaces. One must be chosen.

"It's as if the institution is saying: If you don't know where things are, or where you need to go, then you don't belong here," a Mathey College dean said in an interview about signage (or lack thereof) and its consequences for the University's residential college system. The institutional imperative behind labeling dorm buildings is clear: while beautiful, the old, collegiate Gothic-style Mathey dorms do an especially poor job of helping guests navigate campus on their own.

On two separate occasions in the past year, Mathey College has attempted to place large, obvious labels on its assortment of dorms; the first of which occurred in the summer of 2016. One morning while strolling through campus before work I noticed a mysterious addition: large brown name plaques adorned with the Mathey crest affixed to Blair, Joline, and Hamilton Halls, garish-looking and time-disordered against the buildings' classic architecture. They were taken down within days. Later, during the spring of 2017, the same project was attempted again with even less success: this time the new Mathey signs only lasted a few hours.

Afterwards I couldn't help but imagine that maybe someplace far off-campus or in storage, there

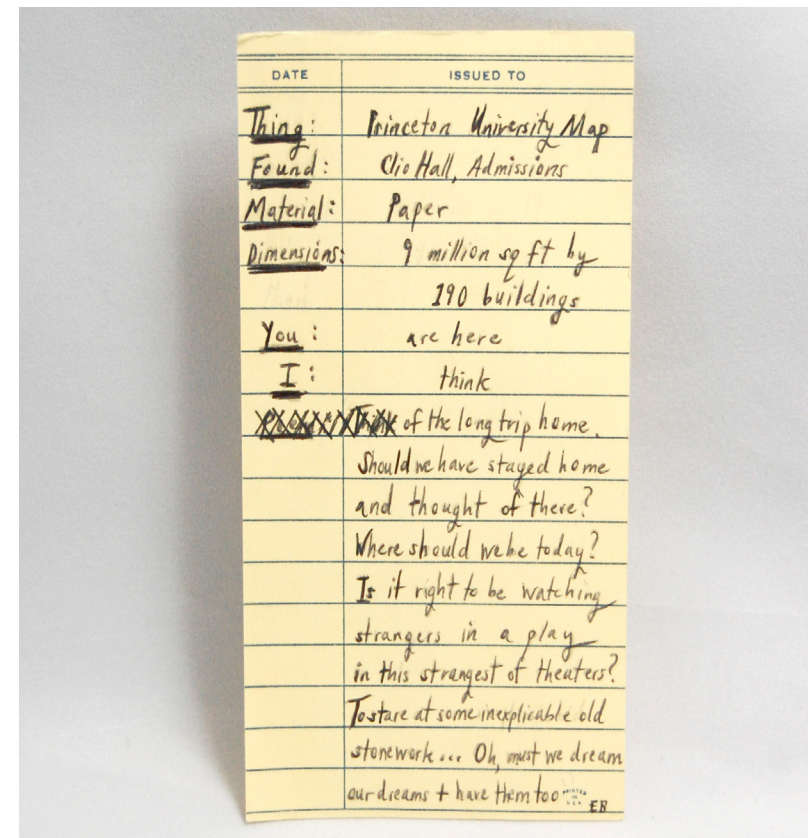
might be whole rooms of vaguely similar, misfit signs sitting in boxes, divorced indefinitely from what they were made to signify. These are signs that exhausted their usefulness before ever being used at all, suggesting that breathlessly aristocratic campuses like Princeton were built for the sort of person who never needed signs in the first place.

In his 2010 article “Where Are the Missing Masses?” philosopher Bruno Latour argues that all objects presuppose this sort of person or “ideal user” in their design. For example, doors “[shape] human action by prescribing back what sort of people should pass through,” circumscribing which bodily abilities and even which “rare local cultural skills” they must have in order to use them. In other words, objects discriminate: we delegate to them “not only force,” as Latour says, “but also values, duties, and ethics.”

Who exactly is the ideal user at Princeton (or a university campus in general)? Which sorts of abilities, cultural skills, values, duties, and ethics do we displace onto maps and signage in these settings? These are all questions which speak to the long-standing problem of access embodied quite literally by the architecture of elite universities like Princeton. In trying to answer them, I’m reminded of Virginia Woolf’s 1929 roman à clef *A Room of One’s Own*, which opens in Oxbridge, the fictional amalgam of Oxford and Cambridge. There, the gated, insular spaces of all-male English universities force a sense of gendered self-consciousness upon the essay’s female narrator. “Only the Fellows and Scholars are permitted here; the gravel is the place for me,” she says after being intercepted by a man on Oxbridge grounds. The encounter is enough to interrupt her stream of thought, showing how structures of privilege, hierarchy, and exclusion can be reinforced at the level of a university’s built environment.

At Princeton, I see this happening insofar as only those “in the know” can navigate campus with ease, leaving outsiders faceless and anonymized like Woolf’s narrator. It is perhaps telling that, during Princeton Preview, buildings are temporarily marked with laminated orange signs so prospective students can find their way around—a tacit acknowledgment of how difficult it is to do so otherwise.

“Preview signs are like training tools,” a classmate of mine pointed out. Indeed, these orange signs that direct students toward Frist Campus Center, McCosh academic buildings, and faraway Jadwin Gym are regular fixtures of campus during admitted student season, a theme-parkification that hints at the fruitlessness of handing prefrosh the alternative (a map). Like Mathey’s infelicitous signs, the Preview signs begin to reveal traces of the complicated bureaucratic processes that surely accompany the bizarre ballet of putting up campus signs to then take them down soon after. When we look at them we should be reminded not only of conference room disagreements and community fractures over such concerns, but also of Princeton’s troubled relationship with its own image, history, and spaces.





# Pipe

*Tyler Bozeman*



**R**esting on its side in the grass behind Marquand Art Library, the pipe—long, intricately carved, adorned with, among its twists and swirls, something resembling a marijuana leaf—almost escaped my vision. Made from wood dark enough to be camouflaged by the earth underneath it, the pipe would have gone entirely unnoticed had I not been looking downward to spare my eyes from the sunlight. There was still some blackened substance in the bowl, the residue of someone's smoke session.

When I think of the pipe in us, I imagine this scene: tendrils of smoke twist themselves in and

around a circle of men as cigarettes find themselves shortened by scruffy, indifferent lips. The smell of tobacco is grumpy, slightly abrasive, and wholly familiar. One man, nearly coughing, stiffens his throat, taking quick and shallow breaths and, recovering, resumes smoking. Another fervently tries to relight his extinguished cigarette, pinching it between his lips, cupping its end against the wind, and repeatedly striking the spark wheel. There is light chatter among the smokers. Perhaps they are miners, bankers, or party-going college students stepping outside for a brief reprieve.

This image is a familiar one; men gathering outside, forming a circle, and smoking among themselves has been a recurring motif in film and television for decades. One can deduce a number of reasons for this; smoking has many functions, including stress relief, providing the occasion to step outside, and establishing a sort of communion with other smokers. Indeed, while walking around Paris, a friend of mine suddenly snapped his fingers in frustration, saying that he should've brought a lighter along with him. Even though he didn't want to smoke, people were always in need of a light, and that could spawn conversation, closing the gap between strangers.

Marcel Mauss, in his discussion of gift giving and receiving in Polynesia, remarks that there is a certain responsibility on either side of the gift. With that in mind, perhaps the most interesting way to think about smoking is not through an individual, but a shared means of tobacco consumption, such as in the form of a pipe shared among a group of men. A particular ethic applies: one, perhaps two puffs, then on to the next set of lungs. To hold on any longer would be greedy—particularly if one did not supply the means of smoking—and would disrupt the progression of the smoke session. There is a code that all participating members of the circle are responsible for upholding. In this formation smoking is truly a communal activity, though it remains open only to a specific membership. Sharing a smoke has become a sign of trust, a signal that certain agents are participating within the same communal existence.

This bond is essential, especially if marijuana is present, considering its illegality in most of the United States, including New Jersey. So when my friend told me that the passing of a shortening joint was among the most intimate of touches, she was wholly correct. She was referring to the gentle brush of finger against finger as the joint changed hands, but her words could be understood as referring to the camaraderie communicated in each pass.

One mustn't neglect the fact that the boundary-making in these smoke circles excludes certain bodies from the picture. For centuries, smoking was—as reflected in the scene above—exclusively a man's activity. It is still seen as a battlefield on which a man must repeatedly perform his masculinity, perhaps by taking a deep draught and demonstrating his adeptness by blowing out a billowing cloud of smoke (and not coughing). These indicators suggest a peculiar fitness, allowing entrance to the circle only to those who are “manly” enough. Women are often excluded from such scenes in popular culture. Though it has gradually been the case that more and more women are depicted smoking, they are still largely absent from the smoke circles as we view them. The reasons for this span across identities.

Mauss does not give much attention to class in his rendering of the exchange economy, though it too reveals something about this boundary work. In poorer communities, one is perhaps more likely to find hand-rolled cigarettes or gas station brands (indeed, it has been shown that cigarette companies market more heavily in underserved communities of color). Thus one may be more likely to discover a mass of cigarette butts behind factories. Cigarettes are easy to stash in pants or jacket pockets. Smokes may be shared more out of necessity and may, in effect, become a commodity for which one may trade a task.

On the other end of the spectrum, the smoking device can serve as a means of displaying one's good taste or high class. The pipe on display is so painstakingly carved that one can imagine purchasing it as much for the purpose of showing that one can afford to

smoke as for smoking itself. The pipe, though likely having belonged to a student and primarily used for marijuana, still conjures images of a quixotic past on campus. One can imagine an older man, perhaps an alumnus, after reading *The New Yorker* or *The Washington Post* outside of Marquand Library, packing up his picnic blanket and his pipe, still packed with tobacco, slipping out of his tote bag. Or perhaps a professor, standing in a smoke circle among colleagues, dropped it on his way back inside the library. A pipe like this indicates free time and leisure, and when displayed to and shared with friends and colleagues, owning a pipe is a reification of sorts. Even within the context of a smoke circle, a space where an admitted number is communing, the pipe can serve as a reminder of one's place in the world, one's manliness, one's power.

DATE: 4/25	ISSUED TO
Thing:	Pipe
Found:	Gross behind Marquand
Smell:	Grumpy, abrasive, standoffish, reflective, condescending, uptight, austere, manipulative, anachronistic, homogenous, privileged, narcissistic, insecure, indolent, acerbic, solipsistic, gendered, insalubrious mandolin, atavistic, bombastic, parsimonious, flippanant, disgruntled, exclusive, extra-legal

# Chalk

Lucina Schwartz



I remember my father coming home from the university with chalk smeared down the front of his t-shirt. At the time, I didn't know much else about universities.

My freshman physics professor pulled on blue latex gloves, menacingly, at the beginning of each lecture. He said he was allergic to chalk. By then I thought I knew enough about universities to look reproachfully at his chalk in all colors of the rainbow. (*Thou shalt not profane the hallowed chalkboards of Princeton...*) I copied his meticulous scrawling straight into my notebook. In

contrast, one of my English professors last semester would write in big loopy swoops, giant unintelligible important words on the blackboard. He did so when he was especially excited. This semester my Things professor, Professor Burnett, draws little pictures of the things he's thinking of on the blackboard as he talks.

Recalling my own experiences, I begin to suggest that chalk is near the life of the university. Taking inspiration from Martin Heidegger's "The Thing," I ask, when and how does chalk do its thing? In his words, what is its *thingness*, its *chalk-character*? Does chalk gather his fourfold Earth/Sky/Gods/Mortals? I would like to come yet nearer to the elusive idea of *university* by attending as closely to chalk as Heidegger attends to the jug.

I consider the piece of chalk before me. It's the only large piece of chalk in the box of Crayola Anti-Dust White Chalk, which is unsurprising because chalk breaks so easily and inconveniently. Despite the name, a bit of white dust rubs off on my hand as I finger its eerie, chalky smoothness. Heidegger's jug and my chalk are both held in the hand—the jug as it gives the gift of the outpouring and the chalk as it meets the board and moves on it. In this dance—hand, stick, board, dust—chalk *things*.

Chalk makes soft scratching or hard tapping sounds depending on how hard I press. The harder I press, the thicker the line. The blackboard resists; here there is none of the whiteboard's slipperiness. When I draw, I can angle the chalk however I want, or make a hazy sweep by rolling it along its length instead of the point. The way I write is reflected in a change of the chalk's form.

In other words, a stick of chalk is a thing that, as it *things*, loses its out-of-the-box form by losing particles of itself. Yet I might also call these particles—arranged as letters, numbers, lines, words, pictures, thought in all its shapes—the chalk's proliferation of new forms. These forms are whole and fluid when seen from afar, but up close every line has a fuzzy edge. The particulate nature of the forms on the board also becomes clear when I erase. I smear the particles around



and I imagine, if the blackboard is unwashed, that I am adding another layer to its sedimentation of chalky meaning. As I smear, particles float into the air, betraying that soulless *anti-dust* label.

Chalk's life is not stick to dust but dust to dust. The cylindrical "form" of the stick of chalk is scarcely more solid than the particles it becomes; traditionally, it is an extrusion of ground-up limestone mixed with other materials like clay and water. Even if the stick of chalk were today made of other materials, like gypsum or talc, its etymology still points to limestone. Limestone, a sedimentary rock, acquires its solidity from the slow aggregation of the skeletons of little marine organisms. To come from the depths of an ancient alien ocean back to the chalk on the blackboard is dizzying but fruitful. Chalk gathers Earth and Sky—the ocean whence it comes is undergirded by earth and fed by sky. As chalk *things*, it grinds against the earth of the board while some of its dust dissipates into the air, skyward. (Again, even if the blackboard is no longer made of slate, we still imagine the feeling of rock against rock, earth against earth.)

Chalk also gathers Mortals and Gods. Mortals teach and learn together at the university, and the chalk mediates their rituals of lectures and seminars. The *thinging* of chalk is the moment that a Mortal inscribes an idea for other Mortals and as a gesture to Gods. What Gods? Art, Literature, Science... How often do we use the language of divinity in the contemplation of great works and great knowledge? And if something is important enough to inscribe on the board—I am thinking now of those ageless equations I saw my freshman year—is there not something of an invocation in the chalk's scratching? *Yea, come dwell here Truth and Beauty; come dwell in our lecture halls and classrooms!*

The oneness of the fourfold Earth/Sky/Gods/Mortals that gathers in chalk points to the university's relationship to the past. Even when chalk and board are synthetically made, they still evoke the old materials: they are made to imitate them. The use of chalk is a university ritual just as the outpouring of the jug is a libation ritual. Ritual and continuity are essential to

the university, where we want to know what others thought before us so that we can think again and think further. It is slow work and the institution changes slowly. Indeed, consider the slowness of writing with chalk. Its resistance against the board entreats, *think before you inscribe*.

DATE	ISSUED TO
Thing:	piece of chalk - "CRAYOLA ANTI-DUST WHITE CHALK"
Found:	McClush 26, in box
Length:	as long as my index finger
Color:	white
Texture:	smooth; slightly rough on the writing end
Odor:	none
Sound:	scratchy, on a chalkboard
Function:	writing instrument - involved in communication, teaching
Shape:	cylindrical
Weight:	light in the hand
Fragility:	easily broken
Belongs to:	the university; no one in particular

# Broken Stapler

Erin Lynch



For decades now, we have nervously awaited the prophetic “paperless office,” where everything is computerized and the stationary industry is rendered obsolete. This transformation, though slower than expected, still steadily marches on in offices, homes, hospitals, schools and universities worldwide. Piece by piece, the traditional instruments with these institutions operate are changing and disappearing. Let us consider them one last time.

The stapler is an instrument at the core of these “paper-based institutions.” Since it first met the

demands of an increasingly bureaucratic, document-based nineteenth-century, the stapler has been indispensable for the efficient organization of these aforementioned institutions, particularly in the context of the university and the production of bound text and knowledge. Ostensibly a somewhat mundane tool, the stapler is actually a rather impressive product of mechanical ingenuity. With relative ease, the conventional “four-way paper stapler,” constituted of up to thirteen separate parts, operates as a second- or third-class lever, meaning force is placed either between the output force (the “shooting” bit) and the fulcrum (the base), or force is placed at the end and the output is in the middle. The carrier is “loaded” with staples, locked to the roof, and then shoots staples to the bottom, where the “anvil” of the bottom jaw works with the crimper and spring to bend the staples compactly up and in place. The complicated interdependent mechanisms of springs, locks, and levers are neatly concealed by the deceptively simple design of the hood, hence when the stapler eventually does break down or jam, the user is panicked by the unfurling mechanical spectacle.

In its institutional setting—office or university—the shared stapler works somewhat like a door, a shared portal; it is the access point to something or somewhere else, such as a text. The fascicle that the stapler binds together *relies* upon every single stapler user’s upkeep, refilling, and respect. Moreover, without the binding mechanism of a stapler, the modern research university can’t realize its essential goal of producing knowledge in the tradition of the bound book or codex. And so, one wonders how it has come to be that practically every stapler encountered on this campus seems to be nonfunctional. In theory, university administrators should supply a steady stream of staplers and staples in libraries and computer clusters across campus. Students flow between the channels of dorm room, library, and classroom; the stapler gets used, refilled, and suddenly, somewhere along this chain, the seamless procedure is ruptured by a jammed staple, an empty container, or some other negligence of a previous user. And so the desperate paper yielder is left to



scurry to class with a ream of disordered, crumpled pages. Staplers refuse to cooperate with such frequency that we students develop an almost Pavlovian reaction to the stapler, anticipating its failure before the act. And it is this interruption, the fracture in the lifespan of the stapler, that, according to Bill Brown, renders the stapler a thing rather than a mere object, a moment that allows us to have a glimpse at its thingliness, to read into its life and perhaps into its significance.

Brown writes, “The story of objects asserting themselves as things then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.” In our example, the shared and mundane object is named after its verb, or vice versa—the lineage is unclear. The staple staples, the thing things. But when do objects assert themselves? The stapler asserts itself by performing this function, by stapling. Or perhaps this is wrong, and it asserts itself in the panic of non-functionality, in its jamming, snapping, blocking, or the absence of its essential parts, the staples. This breakdown reminds the user not only of the stapler’s constituent parts, but also that it has constituent parts and that it is the combination of said parts that allows the tool to function with the ease and simplicity I mentioned earlier. In this sense, it is with the “breaking down” of a stapler that we get a glimpse into its essence. Staplers, wearied from old-age or negligence, are regularly retired from their institutional circuits. Their afterlives are unclear. Considering the hypothetical disappearance of paper, we must now contemplate what it would mean for the university and text-making if the stapler were to recede into object obscurity and the paperless age were to arrive in full force.

There are many frameworks through which we analyze things. So far in this essay I have looked at both the “essential” mechanics of a stapler and the networks it finds itself embroiled in. Alternatively, we might want to evaluate the stapler in a more “raw” and “instinctual” way; my mind’s first reaction is to find visual corollary. A stapler looks like a closing jaw,

human or crocodilian. My three-year-old nephew plays with empty staplers (safety first), enjoying both the visual corollary and the way it reacts to his touch, the abrasive snap it makes. For him, the broken stapler is not broken at all; it realizes a function to him as a toy. The etymology of “staple” comes from a Proto-Germanic use of “post, pillar, tree trunk or steps to a house.” This etymology illuminates our understanding of the stapler’s lives, stretching our imagination to understand the stapler as a signifier and a portal, or something through which other things grow. If we are indeed hurtling towards a paperless, stapler-less era, maybe we can breathe new life into the stapler as a thing; it, like all things, is rich in history, function, and significance.

[illegible]

# VR Headset

*Benjamin Perelmuter*



**I**n the last few years, news outlets like *The New York Times* and organizations like the United Nations have pumped money into making you believe that you can "step into" Syria from your living room. Such is the project of Virtual Reality (or VR) Journalism. The outlets send production crews to places like Syria and Ukraine, or, more locally, to an artist's studio in New York. They use complex 360-degree cameras to film scenes on location, which are then edited into a video that a user can download onto a smartphone.

The viewer watches the videos through a small, simple VR headset made of cardboard. The headset blocks out the user's peripheral view of the rest of the world, so all the viewer can see is the Virtual Reality video, which, viewed through the headset, appears to be "real". As the viewer moves his or her head, the video's point of view changes accordingly, creating the illusion that the viewer is really at the scene of the video. As a result, VR journalism makes viewers feel as though they are in the scene being reported on, often eliciting verbal exclamations or even tears from them.

While VR is successful in making a viewer feel, "feeling" has not been the intent of VR producers. So far, the project of VR journalism has been to present objects to the viewer as "facts." VR pieces imply that they are unmediated accounts of a place and time. Simple and unassuming, the headset is designed to minimize its own presence, thereby masking the idea of mediation—that the video is a curated, edited version of real life. It literally hides the phone used to project the video. The decades and millions of dollars invested in technological advancement, the trip to a war-zone, and the complex editing of the film, all reified by the phone, are hidden from the viewer by the headset, meant to be forgotten. Given the relative weightlessness and simplicity of the headset, the viewer is not forced to reckon with it while putting it on or wearing it. Instead of watching an edited video with a bias and point of view, the viewer is supposedly experiencing an unmediated account of a child going through life in Syria or an artist's design in a studio in New York. As opposed to a normal journalistic report, the consumer is not provided context or counterpoints. Instead, the perspective of the video's subject is fact.

The power of this object became clear to me in a Princeton journalism class. The headset was given out to students for free and presented as something between a toy and a journalistic tool. As opposed to the critical eye students had taken to essays and reports read in class, students reacted to VR with an assortment of "wow," "whoa," and "cool." The pieces were



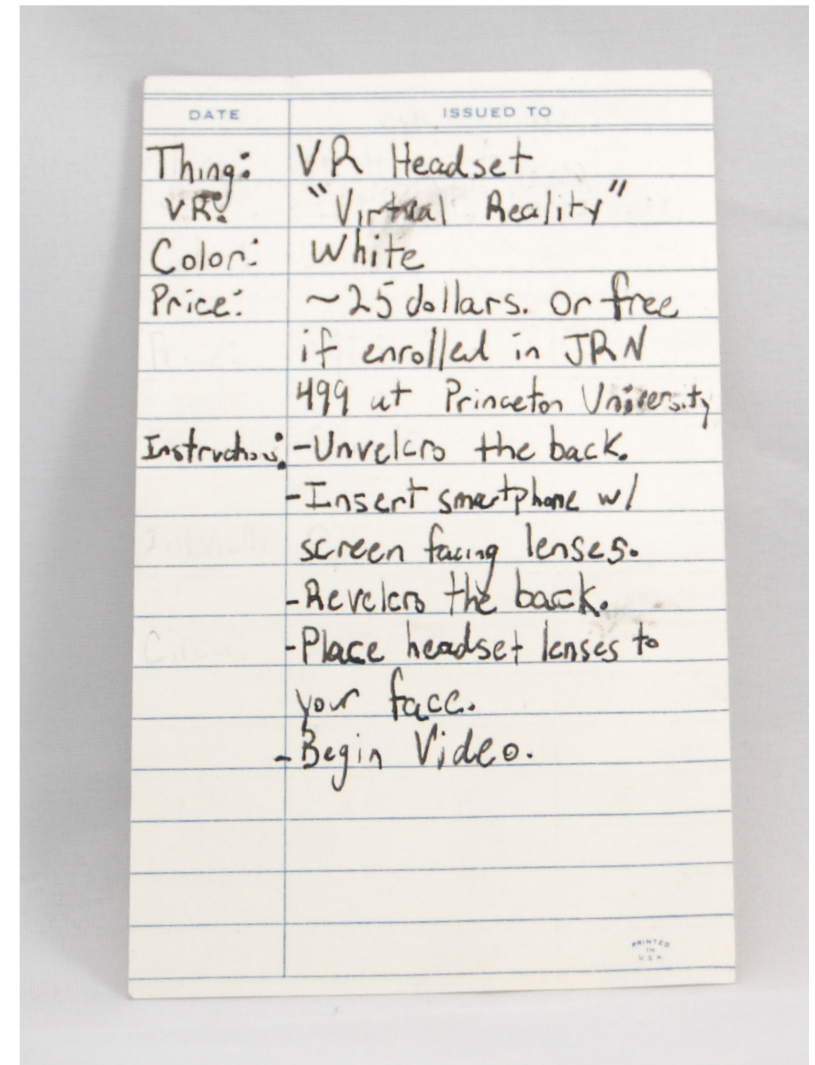
shocking and stimulating, but were not read with the same level of criticism as normal assignments. The assertions of the piece, backed by emotional content, were taken as fact.

Journalism deals with facts, and the class considered VR as a valid medium of journalism. VR has been used to assert “matters of fact,” as Bruno Latour puts it. Even the name implies as much, VR is “reality.” However, VR journalism is literally subjective. It is filmed from one very specific perspective, not pulled from multiple sources as in normal media. Since only select groups can afford the technologies to make VR journalism, the breadth of subjects’ perspective are limited, specifically to those curated by the wealthy or well-connected. Consequently, consumers of VR journalism lack context for the pieces they watch. They have no critical framework to assess the piece. Even in the Princeton classroom, students take for granted that they are experiencing “reality.” The danger of VR is that it is perceived as a matter of fact, when the videos are by no means objective truths.

Since VR effectively creates empathy, it could be more useful if seen as pointing toward “matters of concern.” VR reports are not objective, but they do highlight pressing political and social issues. The UN has produced VR journalism pieces to highlight the Ebola epidemic, the Israel-Palestine conflict, and the Syrian refugee crisis. In fact, VR journalism pieces are very successful in creating an emotional response in their viewers. They literally create more concern. If we see VR not as fact but as a means of creating empathy, we can start to build a more constructive case for VR journalism as a useful part of our political discourse.

The line between matters of fact and matters of concern is an important one. In “From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik,” Bruno Latour highlights the way politicians assert convenient objects or stories as matters of fact for political gain, using Colin Powell’s UN speech on WMDs as an example. If VR is to be a useful technology of representation, the intentions of its makers are important. The production technology cannot be owned by a political party or self-motivated

institution. The technology must be accessible to those willing to reckon with its power and use it to generate empathy, rather than merely make assertions about the facticity of a given time and place. Its makers and its viewers must understand that they are taking scenes out of context for the sake of empathy, for the sake of concern.





# Eyeglasses

*Alexandra Palocz*



I almost don't see them until I walk through with the broom and they glint in the changing light. There, under a chair in the middle of the theatre, next to two crumpled programs and a loose screw, lies a pair of eyeglasses. They seem out of place here, unlike the usual bits and pieces that fall off the corners of people's lives while their attention is focused elsewhere, immersed in the story on the stage. I have found other queer items in my time cleaning the theatre—phone chargers, lost shoes, and even a plastic beach ball—but

for some reason I cannot yet bring myself to articulate how, in this moment, this pair of glasses is particularly fascinating.

Part of what made the glasses feel so odd to me was that their solitary nature seemed contrary to their usual function. I am used to seeing glasses on people—almost, one could say, as a part of people. If somebody wears glasses every day, they become, to the outside world, simply a feature of that person's face. What is more, they are not like just any piece of clothing, able to be borrowed and shared among other people of the same size. Instead, they are paired specifically to one person. These glasses are useless to me. When I try them on, my eyes strain as the world around me becomes bent out of shape. Only in the hands of the right person do they regain functional significance and become integrated as a useful part of experience.

What is the place of these glasses in formulating that experience? The glasses can act as part of a person, but here, separated from the person they were connected to, I am forced to consider them on their own, and so I wonder not only what they are doing *here* but also what they are *doing* here. Glasses are far from passive objects. They serve an important function, letting us see the world more clearly and shaping the way we interact with it. In the setting of the University, that function becomes tied up in a very specific value system—one that places a disproportionate emphasis on sight. The image of the eyeglass-wielding scholar may be something of a stereotype, but there is a reason why we associate glasses with academic work. In its most normalized form, academia relies extensively on sight—on seeing the blackboard in a classroom, reading and writing and drawing figures. It is built into our very language, where phrases such as “point of view,” “seeing clearly,” and “framing device” abound when conveying our ideas on an academic stage. Glasses, as a literal framing device, re-contextualize the world in a way that is consistent with this emphasis on clear vision. We have norms about how students and scholars should interact physically with the world that glasses help enable. In this context, then, these glasses belong

Glasses, then, serve as a mediator between the self and the environment, not belonging neatly to one or the other. Physically, they can sometimes be considered part of a body, but at times of separation, as with the pair of glasses considered here, they assert their independence. As such, they stand with a larger category of object—that of the prosthetic. Eyeglasses are rarely treated in discourse as prosthetics, even though it is not entirely clear what separates them—and, to an even greater extent, their cousins the contact lenses—from objects such as prosthetic legs and hearing aids, which are more readily included in the category. This is a shame, as they have a lot to bring to the table. Eyeglasses embody their own distinct world of discursive possibility in the way they stand physically between observer and observed, but they could also be a valuable part of grounding the discourse surrounding the word “prosthetic” as a metaphor.

If eyeglasses and contact lenses were more widely considered a category of prosthetic, then it may

[illegible]

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# Perfume Bottle

*Helena Klevorn*



**T**o “curate” has obvious connotations of the museum; I imagine an older man with trendy spectacles earnestly considering what pieces to hang on the white walls of his gallery. But choosing to surround myself with possessions or decoration that I find pleasing is also a form of curation, albeit of a different nature. As a student living in a dorm room and having

the freedom to choose neither furniture nor paint colors, I’m limited in my ability to decide with what to surround myself. Furthermore, I operate with limited space; thus, the designed elements of the stuff I *am* able to choose become more important. Every decision down to the smallest of details makes a difference.

The most ideal object would be something that serves the dual purpose of functionality and aesthetic pleasure and occupies both camps in equal measure. Such an object is epitomized by the perfume bottle. While serving only to spray a liquid, a notable characteristic of the perfume bottle is the attention put on its package, practically demanding that it be left out on display and not tidied away with other cosmetics.

My perfume bottle is made of thick, semi-transparent glass that encases the reservoir holding the perfume itself, making the volume of liquid quite miniscule; the lack of functional utility in the extra glass forces me to consider it more as an aesthetic piece than just as a glass bottle. The glass’s density and soft curves manipulate anything seen through it, creating an abstracted amalgam of colors, forms, and curves, like trying to see something far away through a pair of reading glasses. This brings a whole new meaning to the oft-used interior decorator’s phrase that a singular piece “transforms a space.”

Even before the bottle makes it onto my desk, it goes through a rigorous design process not unlike that of an art piece. It’s supposed to not only visually capture the essence of the scent within it but also fit into the broader aesthetic that already exists in the user of this specific perfume’s room, wardrobe, or personality. Thus, the bottle isn’t supposed to just describe itself; it must also, to a certain extent, describe its purchaser—the bottle fits in my space and its scent fits my body.

When I push down on the nozzle, the scent moves from the bottle’s interior and is gently dispersed via minuscule droplets into the air and onto my skin and clothes. While the motion is no different from that of any other spray bottle, the action engages more than just the pressure of my fingertip. The chemicals mix in a unique way upon my skin; my choice of scent may be



predicated on how I want to feel at a certain event, so this perfume must transform me into that version of myself. While the bottle's utility is just to replace the liquid inside of it with air through a hydraulic mechanism, the liquid it moves consequently affects a phenomenological interaction rather than a utilitarian one.

This stimulating, functional cosmetic coincides with the static, aesthetic object when I take the bottle from the table and pull off its cap. In picking up the bottle, I feel the weight of the excess material and satisfy the need I always have in the curator's gallery to feel the works of art; I see how the glass manipulates everything passing behind it as I lift it from the table. In the moment I remove the white, silver-edged acrylic cap with a satisfying pop, the scent of the perfume starts to waft from the bottle even before I apply it. I engage with the perfume and its bottle on every sensory level—I'm observing the art object while interacting with a functional object, taking a portion of its aesthetic essence and applying it to my own body.

Beyond curating the self-image, the bottle must interact with its surroundings in order to satisfy its aesthetic duties as an art object. My perfume bottle sits on my desk—relinquished from its academic use to serve as a vanity and house my myriad cosmetics—but is not positioned haphazardly. It's arranged next to other similarly attractive cosmetics; the aesthetically unworthy but no more infrequently used items are hidden away in a nearby drawer. The emollients, powders, creams, and gels are supposed to not only make me more pleasing to the eye (or nose, as the case may be) but also be themselves attractive. To display these pieces maintains an air that not just my person but also my surroundings and my possessions are "beautiful."

The act of curating extends further than placing an object in a space as the bespectacled curator does in his gallery. The perfume bottle lends an aesthetic light to its individual existence as a designed object, my taste in choosing the piece and situating it properly in my space, and to the way that I present myself, not just in that my scent is pleasing but also in that it is

synergistic with the rest of my personal presentation.

In his essay "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology", Alfred Gell argues that in the aesthetically valued object "there resides the principle of the True and the Good," and that believing an aesthetic object has those qualities is not dissimilar from believing the same thing about a religious idol. But to extend that idea, to have something that not only in itself is aesthetically valued but also reflects the aesthetics of my own space and increases my own aesthetic quotient through good smell means that the aesthetic object stops existing for itself; it exists to identify me, with a discerning eye for curation of my space and my identity, as the aesthetic individual, an embodiment of all that is True and Good.

DATE	ISSUED TO
Thing:	Perfume Bottle
Materials:	Glass
	Acrylic
	Metal (nozzle)
	Plastic (straw-internal)
References:	Bauhaus/Interior Design
	International Modernism
	Black Dahlia
	Old Hollywood
	Femme Fatale Brochure
	Sprite before a premiere
	Mom spritzing her perfume
	Mom's vanity set
	Mom
Function:	Small use

# Condom

*Noga Zaborowski*



In every residential college, student advisors are required to provide their advisees access to free condoms. This usually manifests as a bag or envelope tacked to a bulletin board outside the advisor's room, filled with condoms for the taking. Residential college administrators order condoms in bulk to their office, where student advisors come to replenish their local stock.

In Butler College, the condom of choice is Atlas brand "premium latex condoms." Holding a condom in the hand, the sleek, dark-colored packet, the wide, silver lettering proclaiming "ULTRA-LUBED," and the depiction of a muscular Atlas (of mythological fame) all give off the aura of a luxury product. Certainly, as a device used for sex, the condom may be considered part of "leisure activity." Yet these condoms are extremely cheap (ordered from Global Protection Corp. in units

of 1000, at about eleven cents apiece), come in plain, economical packages, and live in plain, unassuming repositories in residential halls. The university does not frame condoms as luxury products but as tools for protection from disease and pregnancy. These considerations seem to weigh against considering condoms as luxury products. So, what kind of thing are these college condoms?

As Wiebe E. Bijker demonstrates with the late nineteenth century high-wheeled bicycle, processes surrounding objects may be analyzed through "relevant social groups" who relate to the object in distinct ways. Just as the high-wheeled bicycle did not have a single, unambiguous meaning, but was thought of in different ways by different social groups, the college condom is a complex object whose meaning is constructed through various relevant groups. A simple outline of the condom's journey from producer to university halls has already identified manufacturer, administrators, residential advisors, and students as relevant social groups. I will trace the processes of development, manufacture, distribution, and use with regards to this condom, considering social groups that define those processes and therefore define the condom.

The modern-day condom is made of latex. Compared to its ancestors (made of treated animal bladders, linen, leather, and rubber), the latex condom is stronger, thinner, significantly more affordable, and has a much longer shelf life. The technical development of today's condom reflects producers' and designers' hopes that condoms be accessible to the public, not just to niche, high-end he transition from expensive, bulky sheaths to cheap, thin, disposables turns the condom from exclusive, luxury product to common device for the masses.

Global Protection Corp. stands out as a leader in the condom production and distribution industry. It manages over twenty brands of condoms and several lines of related products. The company's mission statement identifies current problems it wishes to address: surrounding stigma and a lack of safe sex practices. In addressing these problems, Global Protection aims to

"pioneer the integration of condoms into popular culture" evidenced through creative innovations like (FDA-approved) glow-in-the-dark condoms. This vision certainly defines the condom as more pleasurable and fun than a mere utilitarian tool. Thus, Global Protection works to redefine the condom as something enjoyable and, yes, luxurious—for fun and leisure. No wonder then that the experience of holding an Atlas condom gives off an air of indulgence.

The university as an institution also designates certain meaning to the condom. Of course, the university's primary concerns are academic performance and essential services that may interfere with it (e.g. accommodations, meals). Sex is not directly within that scope; health, however, is. Condoms, when conceived as devices for disease and pregnancy prevention, are included under the university's provision. They are not only vehicles to enable sexual activity. Thus, residential college administrators justify provision of condoms, "If students choose to have sex, these condoms provide the option for safe sex." Even student advisors, in their capacities as university representatives, only talk about sex to the extent that resources are provided for safe sex. (Even issues dealing with consent, harassment, and misbehavior are delegated to the sexual harassment office.) If advisors have more personal conversations about sex with advisees, they go beyond their official university roles and the university's official message.

Finally, there are university students. Following Bijker's methodology, we might distinguish between user and non-user groups. But for the condom, these groups are too heterogeneous to define any cohesive meaning. Among users, there are students who equate usage with sexual activity, full stop—perhaps a habit born of previous sexual education. For other users, for whom the connection between sex and protected sex is a bit looser, the condom may emphasize responsibility—or restriction. Within the group of non-users, dimensions of meaning may correspond to factors influencing non-use. To students who want to have sex, condoms may represent a metric for social comparison.

As condoms disappear from the advisor's container, non-users encounter evidence of what their peers are doing and what they aren't. For students practicing abstinence for moral reasons, condoms may take on a dimension of moral sentiment. Cutting across user and non-user groups, gender and relationship status may also influence the significance of the condom. Relevant social groups that confer meaning on the condom may not be so easy to delimit; education, community, moral beliefs, social ties, and demographic qualities transcend simple types of user and non-user groups.

The college condom, attributed such different and diverse meanings, seems to elude primary signification. We can't describe it as a single "kind of thing," not even as a product of luxury. We must be relativistic in our understanding: its "kind" relates to particular social groups. Finding no home in absolute meaning, the condom's status as a luxury product is consigned to where we first found it: in the feel and appearance of the condom in a particular viewer's hand.

DATE	ISSUED TO
thing:	condoms
found:	residential college
size:	2" x 2" (5.08 cm x 5.08 cm)
color:	blue, silver, grey
material:	(premium) latex
brand:	Atlas®
expires:	January 2021
cost:	11¢ / condom (residential college)
	free (students)
features:	ULTRA-LUBED
made in:	Malaysia
manufacturer:	Global Protection Corp.
	Boston, MA



# Prox ID Card

Kyle Berlin



It seems I fall in love every time I open a door at my University—or, rather, a small image of myself on my student ID card falls in love with the small square device that unlocks the door. My ID card is made of inert plastic, but when it is within five centimeters of one of the card readers located outside every campus door, it is suddenly jolted to life. The radio waves from the reader awaken the miniature antenna buried within the plastic, allowing the ID to convey its (my) unique 125 mHZ frequency back to the reader. The scientists call this process “resonant energy transfer,” “resonant inductive coupling,” or “magnetic phase synchronous

coupling”—names that sound a whole lot like euphemisms for love, sex, or both.

And why shouldn’t they? The card with my image is formally called a “proximity card,” after all; as in human romance, it only works when it gets intimate with just the right type of reader. My miniature face approaches that right kind of reader for me and kisses it—or, tantalizingly, almost kisses it—and the little light at its head flushes Gatsby’s green for go, inviting me into our orgasmic future beyond the threshold of the door.

But, also as in human romance, it is good to remember that interpersonal love is founded upon exclusion. The door, as the heart, only opens for a select few; the rest, by function, are kept out: wrong make, wrong frequency, or wrong time and it remains closed. In that case, there’s no spark, no chemistry to activate the plastic. The scientists have another name for these types of cards: “passive cards,” they call them, because they lack the electronics to initiate their own communication. They merely wait until the right reader—feeling them, recognizing them, loving them—brings them to life.

Love as a sort of life-giving: this is what I’m thinking about. Love as the process by which the seemingly inert becomes vital, even if only for an instant.

I examine how the ID card does this in part because if *it* can come alive, so can we; if *its* reader can give life, so can *this* reader—you, right now. The text, as the card, as the human, is dead on its own.

In fact, the University does for us the work of collapsing the divide between plastic and person. In the context of the University, my ID is who I am. For the University, there is no me beyond the me that is represented to it—no self beyond the self that is captured on the ID card, which holds all my data. Even the small photo of me in the upper-right-hand corner is emblazoned with hologram tigers, such that my human face is literally underneath the familiar animal that the institution has defanged and made into a symbol.

For an image, Taussig makes clear, is also a type of identity, a mimesis that “acquires the power of the represented.” The identification card formally co-opts the individual image and re-presents it in the institution, whose machinery requires that very cooptation to function for something as simple as the opening of doors. “In some way or another we can protect ourselves from the spirits by portraying them,” Taussig reports. The University has learned his lesson: it protects itself from our loose spirits by forcing us to portray ourselves in their framework, under their

By now, even the prox card, with its electric instant in a hollow mimesis of love, is outdated. The system, they tell me, will adopt a new technology soon. "Contactless smart cards," they call them—a good name for a Princeton student if I ever heard one.



# Shoebox

*Charles Argon*



**A** shoebox is a last refuge. College students are not allowed to accumulate detritus; they are limited bi-annually to a car-sized quantity of stuff. Even for those

who store their belongings over the summer, the cost and hassle of boxes militate for pruning.

The academic calendar, especially in an era of geographic mobility, requires that we periodically purge our things, and the shoebox thus becomes a dam against this deluge. The shoebox marks the margins of what Jean Baudrillard called a “functional system”; within a room of mass-produced objects geared towards a productive life, objects in the shoebox seem out of place. Perhaps you have such a place—closets are a close cousin—for objects not quite yet trash, but too distracting, too useless to warrant space in a drawer.

Shoeboxes lend themselves particularly well to this enterprise. For one, they’re acquired frequently and at first may be used to hold the shoes themselves. At the very least, the box asks to be set aside until the shoes have proven themselves. Having put its foot in the door, the shoebox raises its sights. It no longer holds shoes, which have established themselves through use. Yet the box is frequently just durable enough to feel worth keeping, and just small enough to avoid being thrown away. It probably, as you likely imagined, settles to roost somewhere out of the way: under a bed, in a closet, or on a shelf. There the shoebox finds its purpose. It collects those objects that, like the box itself, are used infrequently enough that they risk getting misplaced and are useful enough that they ought not to be: a passport, a Boston subway ticket, a blank envelope. These are not the objects of daily—or monthly—use. No, objects accumulate here as in a resting place: safe, contained, and out of the way. Walter Benjamin suggested that collection is the most intimate relation we can have to things. In our accounting, this intimacy is tested when an object is removed from an accessible drawer and trembles on the limit of drawer, shoebox, and trashcan. Its intimacy is proven by admittance to the shoebox.

In fact, many of the objects in my particular (pictured) shoebox declare their importance as not-trash: fat envelopes of insurance terms printed with injunctions to be kept, instructions for a clothing iron saved out of a childhood compulsion to “keep the

obligations of twenty-first century life gather here. The box must stay closed and hidden, though, because otherwise calls to “deal with me!” would infect the room. In other words, these objects require action and claim significance. Their lengthy tenure in the shoebox suggests otherwise but does not succeed in smothering their hope for the future. Like our intimate friends, the shoebox’s contents *nag* us to do what we ought.

A second category of desiderata is composed of things too sacrilegious to declare trash: postcards, birthday cards, the case of a lost mixtape made by a friend's college band, admission tickets from summer vacations. Too intimate for public display and felt too deeply to throw away, at least some of these must be kept. If credit cards are its twenty-first century portion, objects of nostalgia link the box to the 1800s. My grandmother keeps a lock of her grandmother's hair. Strange? Yes, but having been kept this long, how could she ever throw it away? Pushing the point—that is, asking if the hair is still useful—is itself profane. This is a box of ties and memories that gesture towards the sacred.

“Useful” can only describe past and future portions of their lives. For a short week in June 2016, my Zhejiang Provincial Library card had a moment in the sun. One day, I may return to Recreation Equipment International (REI) or (God forbid) need to know the details of my insurance policy. The shoebox is a place where questions of usefulness are muted. For this reason, its contents remain unorganized. Ten British pounds, likewise, are too valuable to be thrown away and are too insignificant to warrant exchange. The ten-pound note is temporarily paper.

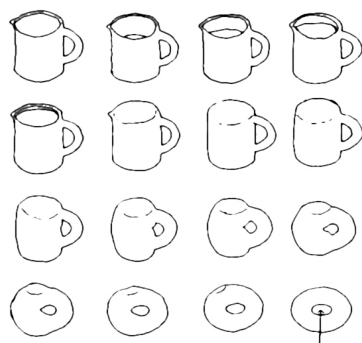
Its years in the shoebox, however, imply a future as much as a past. Why keep the note, unless it will one day be used? Surely inflation will do its slow work on the currency's value. If that anthropology syllabus will never serve as an intellectual reference, why keep it? Perhaps because in the shoebox nestles our hope that one day these objects will return to daily life. This boundary-crossing draws the lines of our neuroses. Which are the objects worth keeping while they take a

manual,” loyalty cards that announce their restrictions and birthplaces. The intimate and international hiatus from usefulness? Because they, too, demand our commitment.

DATE	ISSUED TO
Thing:	Shoe box
Passport:	488481610
letters:	will return, not to worry
other:	too much to catalog

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