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Modernist Novelty



“The Swell New Thing”¹

The things spilling from modernity’s prop locker may be best understood with reference to the sudden appearance of seemingly inconsequential novelty items—itching powder, exploding cigar, fake dog shit, joy buzzers. Chris Ware’s *Acme Novelty Library* provides an instigation:

Fellas & Gals! Here’s the swell new thing!

Your very own “Osc’r” souvenir statuette!

Wow! It’s the top shelf trophy of our nation’s imperial culture.²

It’s hard to tell if these faux advertisements really mobilize a subjective message about “ironies of commodification,” as David Ball asserts, or if they constitute a kind of homage to the explosive potential of modern novelties to disclose both horrors and charms.³ These are things that, as Sartre puts it, “abruptly unveil themselves [...] as hateful, sympathetic, horrible, lovable.”⁴ Your very own scary, life size monster: “Obeys your commands!” Your very own exploding Army Grenade: “Really scatters the gang when you throw this

¹ Chris Ware, *Entertainment Weekly* (March 22, 1996): 3.

² Ibid.

³ David M. Ball, “Chris Ware’s Failures,” in *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing Is a Way of Thinking*, ed. David M. Ball and Martha B. Kuhlman (Oxford, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2010), 50.

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, “A Fundamental Idea of Husserl’s Phenomenology,” in *The Phenomenology Reader*, ed. Dermot Moran and Tim Mooney (London: Routledge, 2002), 383.

baby in their midst.” Oscar statuettes, life-size monsters, fake grenades: all these items, occupying the imaginary interface between stuff and waste, return us to paleofuturist history and the critical project Bill Brown has termed thing theory.⁵ There is a strange bounty of unkindness, crammed in the uncanny inventories detailed in the back-matter of comic books and *Popular Science* and *Popular Mechanics* magazines, as well as the catalogues of such twentieth-century manufacturing concerns as S.S. Adams Novelty, DeMoulin Bros. & Co, and Richard Appel Co. Modernity gives things a certain inherent theatricality dimension—props, pranks—that registers a profound ambivalence about the “object[s] materialized by human attention,” to borrow a phrase from Brown.⁶ The comic cruelty of the novelty gag provides us an occasion to think about a powerful shift in the relations between goods and hazards with respect to the meaning of the cultural turn and the burden of the new in second modernity.⁷

⁵ Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (Autumn 2001): 1-21.

⁶ Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 7.

⁷ This critical account—which I can’t fully develop here—extrapolates somewhat from Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society* (London: Sage, 1992). Beck identifies a decisive shift between *two* modernities, a transition of cultural logic from wealth distribution (or, “goods”) to risk distribution (or, “bads”). Modernity stops being about extending the benefits (of detraditionalizing modernization) and instead becomes reflexive, undecided, of two minds. It increasingly becomes “its own theme,” concerned not with instrumental rationality but with managing its own ambivalent side-effects, “discovering, administering, acknowledging, avoiding or concealing [...] hazards” (19-20). Modernism’s investments in a variety of negatives come to mind: defamiliarization, alienation, *ostranie*, negative aesthetics, untimeliness, unease, obscenity, mischief, snobbery, outrage, and other rude assignments. As Rebecca L. Walkowitz and Douglas Mao have noted, modernism may be a name for the cultural dynamics of one such side effect: “no other name for a field of cultural production evokes the constellation of negativity, risk of aesthetic failure, and bad behavior that modernism does. But a profound peril lurked in this involvement with badness: it left modernism’s program vulnerable to incoherence once its work achieved wide acceptance as good”; see Walkowitz and Mao, *Bad Modernisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 4. The case for a *second modernism* depends on two observations about novelty and waste; contaminated relations detected in the everyday experience of things implicate experiences of the past and present, and relations of the body’s insides and outsides (Beck, 169).

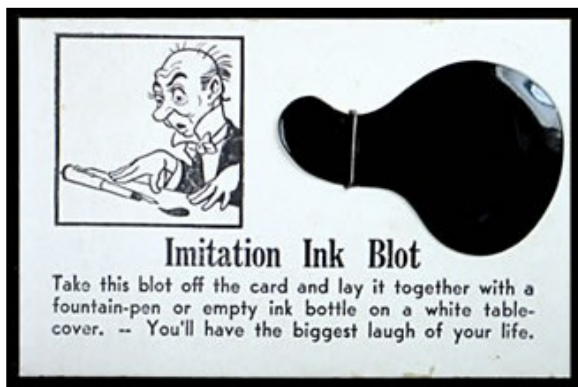


I remember a novelty item one of my classmates smuggled into my second grade class. A fake “spill” made from a solid, resin material so there is absolutely no mess to clean up!—as the ad-copy still reads from the Johnson Smith catalogue. Imagine the fun you can have fooling your friends, family and co-workers. Embedded in the fake spill, there’s a real 12 oz. can, lying empty on its side, haloed in a lake of fake soda: a waste

product manufactured to appear as if vomiting more waste. But, the novelty of it is the doubled surprise, the fakeness of spill; the thing that marks the difference, the prop that organizes the theatre, unmasking bad fortune as merely mock abuse. I don’t remember seeing the fake spill itself until it was already placed, carefully staged for maximum effect upon the desk of our teacher after she’d been called away somewhere. With my fellow second graders, I paraded by, studying it. The effect was catastrophic: the sprawl of important papers—were they lesson plans? our schoolwork? her grade book?—destroyed by the dark liquid drooling obscenely from the aluminum can.

It took dominion everywhere, like Stevens’s jar in Tennessee. We just managed to retake our seats before she returned, finding it hard to suppress giggles. I don’t recall her outburst precisely; only its severity, that it was shocking at the time: You fucking kids—something on that order. There may not have been profanity. I think it was our laughter that must have been so offensive, a conspiracy of juvenile unreason felt by authority. Someone—not the perpetrator—even spoke up: *But, Mrs. H., it’s not real. It’s only a joke. Still*, she said: *that doesn’t change it*, as if the one subject to the exploding cigar, the buzzed handshake, the emptied fart bladder gained nothing by playing along. Imagine the fun you can have—yet whatever the outcome, as every kid knows, the fake and the real are different theaters of cruelty.

In “The Discovery and the Use of the Fake Ink Blot,” originally published in *Playboy* in 1966, Woody Allen facetiously chronicles the development of a cognate novelty item, the fake ink spill, with bottle. The story begins with the following sentence: “There is no evidence of a fake ink



“Imitation Ink Blot”⁸

blot appearing anywhere in the West before the year 1921, although Napoleon was known to have had great fun with the joy buzzer, a device concealed in the palm of the hand causing an electric-like vibration upon contact.”⁹ According to Will Self, Allen’s tale is “a mock serious commentary on the very unfunny nature of the pratfall.”¹⁰ In fact, oddly enough, Allen’s premise is more subtle: he twins the rise of the “cunning little gimmick,” the disposable item of juvenile sadomasochism, to the rise of the cunning of history, the self-positing world-historical actor. In effect, Allen points to the etymology of catastrophe—overturning—by connecting unexpected reversals at wildly different scales. Not only did Napoleon deploy joy buzzers on “unsuspecting” dignitaries but Antonio López de Santa Anna, the Napoleon of the West, devised spring-loaded chewing gum booby-traps for cheering up the holdouts at the Alamo. Catastrophe, minor and major. Robert E. Lee goes in for squirting flowers; J.P. Morgan, sneezing powder; Rockefeller, snakes-in-a-can. Something of this dynamic—the incongruous idea that figures astride world history occupy themselves with novelty items—can be seen in the ubiquitous lore of exploding cigars as staple of global intrigue—supplied by Hemingway or U.S. Grant to various grandees, or

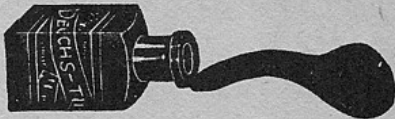
⁸ Kirk Demarias, *Life of the Party: A Visual History of the S.S. Adams Company* (Neptune, NJ: S.S. Adams, 2006), 29.

⁹ Woody Allen, “The Discovery and Use of the Fake Ink Blot,” in *The Insanity Defense: The Complete Prose* (New York: Random House, 2007), 99.

¹⁰ Will Self, *Junk Mail* (New York: Grove/Atlantic, 2006), 140.

by the FBI to Castro. Does the prank item promise a thing for striking through visible objects as so many pasteboard masks, like Ahab putting an explosive stogie over the whale?

Who Made That Blot?
A MARVELOUS ILLUSION



Just imagine the horror of the careful housewife when she suddenly discovers a huge blot of ink on a valued tablecloth or a costly book, or think of the unspeakable rage of the pernicketty accountant when finding one of his immaculate pages hopelessly disfigured by a stream of ink apparently pouring from a leaky fountain pen. There is an instant outcry! A call for blotting paper, and indignation let loose! Huge fun for those "in the know" and even the victim is gratified when the clever hoax is disclosed. Get one and startle your friends. You can carry it in your vest pocket ready for instant use. Don't wait until everybody knows about it be the first in your district to have it. No. 2111. Imitation Ink Blot.....6 cents

When it comes to fake ink blots, Allen writes, they were first crude and uselessly large, "eleven feet in diameter, and fooled nobody," until 1921, when a certain Swiss physicist discovered the concept "that an object of a particular size could be reduced in size simply by 'making it smaller,' [and then] the fake ink blot came into its own."¹¹ The fame of this fake ink blot—the novelty of the item—doesn't come until 1934 when FDR figures out how to use it to settle a strike, bringing labor and management together in mutual culpability as suspects before spoiling someone's

sofa. First, it's made small, then it's put in service of big business. In each of these cases, taking a page from e.e. cummings, the victim safely plays with "the bigness of his littleness / —electrons deify one razorblade / into a mountainrange."¹² The novelty is a real abstraction, an inert stopgap between theoretical possibility and functional application. The blot came into its own and remained in its own, as Allen's odd assertion has it, until it was removed from its own and placed in someone else's.

Allen's chronicle makes a hash of the historical record of the advent of manufactured novelty items. Certainly, there were precursors—improvised jokes of various types—but the manufacturing boom yielded sneezing powder, itching powder, exploding gimmicks of all sorts from cigars to pencils to golf galls, fake

¹¹ Allen, "The Discovery and Use of the Fake Ink Blot," 101.

¹² e.e. cummings, *100 Selected Poems* (New York: Grove/Atlantic, 1954), 89.

vomit and dog shit, joy buzzers, whoopee cushions, bugs encased in fake ice cubes—all goods that make their historical appearance in the first decades of the twentieth century. The joy buzzer may have been the flag-ship item, but the large-scale manufacture of novelty items was borne in a nimbus of sneezing powder. In effect, this paradigmatic novelty item closely follows the cultural style of second modernity, in particular mimicking the genius of new forms of applied knowledge—namely, chemical engineering—for extracting value from by-products, side-effects and waste. Adams wasn't a chemical engineer himself, but in 1904 he was working as a salesman for a concern that manufactured chemical dyes. These dyes were derived from coal tar, itself a left-over from refining coal into coke, discovered to yield fantastic new chemicals in the late nineteenth century. Adams's firm obtained coal tar from Germany and was in

CACHOO!

Make the whole family and all your friends "just sneeze their heads off," without knowing why, with CACHOO, the new long distance harmless snuff. Sent anywhere for 10c, 3 for 25c.

Revolver Pipe

We show here a Smoking Pipe in the shape of a Revolver. Wooden pipe with rubber stem, worth 50c as a smoking pipe and \$2.00 to scare a burglar or tramp with. GREAT NOVELTY. SAMPLE BY MAIL...

25c

ROYAL NOVELTY CO., 250 East Ave., SOUTH NORWALK, CT.

"Cachoo!"¹³

turn left with various waste products of no known use, including most notably a certain fine brown powder that caused sneezing fits. Adams saw potential in bottling and selling this irritant as a social prop, dubbing it Cachoo. By 1906, he had quit his job, secured a supply from his former employer, and set up shop. The following year Adams applied for a patent for a miniature bellows for

¹³ Cachoo advertisement, *Popular Mechanics* (January 1917), 137. Accessed January 13, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/app9bw3>.

delivering his brand name product surreptitiously in social settings.¹⁴ Make the whole family and all your friends “just sneeze their heads off,” without knowing why, with CACHOO, the long distance harmless snuff, read the ads.



“Harmless Fun!”¹⁵

Long distance irritation was exactly the order of the day: the fad for Cachoo took the country and the world by storm, eventually the stuff was banned by bewildered customs agents in such far-off places as Australia. More to the point, some fifteen years after Cachoo’s introduction into the marketplace, it was chemically identified in a scientific paper, and, somewhat later, this mucous irritant was discovered to be a hazardous material—dimethoxybenzidine—shown to cause tumors in rats.¹⁶ For our purposes, the story isn’t a moral fable about the inescapable dangers of science but rather a culture message about the ways the novelty item vernacularizes regressive uncertainties of the inevitable side-effects of modernity.

A concern takes a former non-thing—a waste product—and processes it into a good—blue dye. What’s left-over in turn—more waste, in effect—is known to produce a side-effect—sneezing—for which a market is adduced, a destiny in the world of goods. Even though the appeal is always framed in terms of a decisive harmlessness, it’s never a secret that the desired end entails the unleashing of

¹⁴ Mark Newgarden, *Cheap Laughs: The Art of the Novelty Item* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2004), 104. See, also, Demarias.

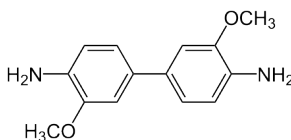
¹⁵ Newgarden, 105.

¹⁶ See, for instance, <http://ntp.niehs.nih.gov/ntp/roc/twelfth/roc12.pdf> and <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:31983L0264:EN:HTML>.

side-effects, that the form of mischief promises an unknown portion of mayhem, and that this good is at best morally ambivalent. In this way, the thing at hand, to adapt Brown's formula, is an "object materialized by human attention" to unknown consequences.¹⁷

Two remarkable organic identifications. JAMES MOIR. *J. S. African Assoc. Anal. Chem.* 4, No. 2, 15-9(1921).—The steps taken to find out that the active constituent of the sneezing powder "**cachoo**" was *dianisidine* and that a druggist had dispensed *novatophan* in place of aspirin are described in interesting detail. W. T. H.

"Two Remarkable Organic Identifications"¹⁸



Dianisidine¹⁹

S.S. Adams's storied meeting with admiring Henry Ford suggests that heroic fables of mass-produced goods run side by side with the fables of mass-produced hazards.²⁰ Woody Allen's expressive link between the catastrophic arrival of the Romantic hero and the shock of the vernacular modernist object has its appeal. To think things such as these as goods is itself strange—the secret life of novelty items puts pressure on the received idea that goods are good. It's useful to consider that novelty items were produced and sold by the same concerns that shifted magic tricks. If things want something from us, an affective accommodation to their agencies, the novelty item suggests that things want to trick us in some fundamental way. Or, phrased differently, the novelty item discloses a decisive unwillingness about our perfunctory accommodation to the unconscious lives of things.

¹⁷ Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*, 7.

¹⁸ Accessed January 13, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/b2kxyhw>.

¹⁹ Accessed June 22, 2013, <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/b/b9/Dianisidine.svg/454px-Dianisidine.svg.png>.

²⁰ Maurice Zolotow, *It Takes All Kinds* (New York: Random House, 1954), 122ff.



"I Had a Little Hobby Horse"²¹

The novelty remains the apt designation for this stuff—better than the trick, trinket, widget, prank, or gag—because it means both a thing and a property about a thing. "Something new, not previously experienced, unusual, or unfamiliar; a novel thing."²² Importantly, it carries a pejorative undertone. Thus, 1868: "They're *the novelty* quite, but chancy things to sell."²³ "An often useless

²¹ M.L. Kirk, "I Had a Little Hobby Horse," *Favorite Rhymes of Mother Goose* (New York, NY: Cupples & Leon, 1910), n.p. Accessed January 13, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/9wlotyv>.

²² "novelty, n. and adj.," *OED Online* (Oxford University Press: 2013). Accessed June 21, 2013, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/128781?redirectedFrom=novelty>.

²³ Holme Lee, *Basil Godfrey's Caprice*, 3 vols (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1868), 1.93, cited in "novelty, n. and adj.," *OED Online*.

or trivial but decorative or amusing object, *esp.* one relying for its appeal on the newness of its design.”²⁴ Specifically, “a small inexpensive toy or trinket”; of “an unusual, innovative, and often decorative or frivolous design or type.” The OED defines the novelty item this way: “a new item; something which has never been encountered before (with the implication that it will quickly disappear); *spec.* a frivolous thing, which has a certain amusement value, but usually little else to recommend it.” Ironically, considering the wasteland of defunct manufacturing concerns in the US, these products which are still made by many of the factories that originated them decades ago are remarkably healthy today in the postindustrial present. The unmentionable item produced by the family firm of Chad Newsome in *The Ambassadors* may well be a fart bladder or one of these:



A LOW-DOWN BUCK



D763

“A Low-Down Buck”²⁵

²⁴ “novelty, n. and adj.,” *OED Online*.

²⁵ “A Low-Down Buck,” *The 1930 DeMoulin Bros. & Co. Fraternal Supply Catalog*, No. 439. Accessed January 13, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/ar5aetk>.

—or one of these:



Duchamp, *Bicycle Wheel* (1913)²⁶

—instead of the speculated pencils, coat hangers, or toilet seats. What ever else these are they are unquestionable good goods. The novelty comes specially marked with its own special form of value. Not value in use or exchange: novelty value has its own appeal. “Novelty value is about all it’s useful for” is the OED’s example. Make it new may not mean make it small, frivolous, and out of control; but configuring a thing, a property, and a theory of value under the sign of novelty is modernist formula par excellence: make a thing shot through with

²⁶ Marcel Duchamp, *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), replica. Accessed January 13, 2013, http://www.marcelduchamp.net/Bicycle_wheel.php.

risk; know that stuff might be waste, that the hand before you stretched to greet you might conceal an unpleasant jolt.



“Himmel!!!”²⁷

In “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863), Baudelaire writes that “the child sees every thing as a novelty; the child is always ‘drunk.’ Nothing is more like what we call inspiration than the joy the child feels in drinking in shape and color.”²⁸ For this side of novelty think of the fate of the glass merchant of Baudelaire’s fable, where, in effect, amusement and intoxication enter modernity astride a dribble glass.

Baudelaire’s splenetic narrator throws the door-to-door salesman out the door and to the curb for not stocking pink, red, or blue glass, for having no “magic panes,” no “panes of Paradise”: “Scoundrel,” he tells him: “what do you mean by

²⁷ *Commercial Catalogs Collection: Magic Tricks* 148 (1938): 231. See, also, *The Whole Fun Catalogue of 1929* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1979).

²⁸ Charles Baudelaire, *Selected Writings on Art and Literature* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 398.



“Dribble Glass Advertisement”²⁹

going into poor neighbourhoods without a single glass to make life beautiful!” As the merchant retreats, the narrator bombards him with a flower pot—he calls it an engine of war—and at last achieves a desired effect, a “shattering noise as of lightning striking a crystal palace,” and, more importantly, a profane view through x-ray specs onto paradise: “drunk with my madness, I shouted down at him furiously: ‘Make life beautiful! Make life beautiful!’”³⁰ Napoleonic joy buzzers aside, this scene is certainly ground zero for the modernist novelty item, in which what’s for sale can’t live up to the desires it mobilizes. About two points Baudelaire is quite clear, first, it’s prank, and second, the prank’s function

²⁹ Demarais, 97.

³⁰ Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen* (New York: New Directions, 1970), 14.

is to mobilize risk: “Such erratic pranks are not without danger and one has to pay dearly for them,” reads the penultimate non-moral: “But what is an eternity of damnation compared to an infinity of pleasure in a single second?”³¹



“Paris”³²

Nineteenth-century Paris was designated as the nexus of this experience, modernity as an encounter with the now as a child-like show-and-tell with novelty, where new sensations about goods, feelings of exultation, and ambivalence about commodities whirl about in a vortex. “Modernity’s child is sated by surface alone,” Brown writes.³³ Where all the stuff and waste originates is another story—in the East perhaps, with the eleven-foot diameter ink blots—but here is Paris, the cosmopolitan site where everything is displayed under glass: it’s all put in dialectical relation. Of course, this is Benjamin’s position,

³¹ Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*, 14.

³² Charles Crichton, *The Lavender Hill Mob* (1951).

³³ Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*, 7.

but one sees the persistence of a similar fable one hundred years after Baudelaire in *The Lavender Hill Mob* (1951), the Ealing Studios caper film about smuggling commodity gold out of London to Paris in the form of dummy Eiffel Tower mementos, fated to be sold to English tourists.



Man Ray, *Cadeau* (1921)³⁴

Return to the scene of the modern and you find the novelty item. In *Kora in Hell* (1920), William Carlos Williams writes “if a thing have novelty it stands intrinsically beside every other work of artistic excellence. If it have not that, no

³⁴ Man Ray, *Cadeau* (1921). Accessed January 13, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/d8lanog>.

loveliness or heroic proportion or grand manner will save it.”³⁵ In novelty alone an item, in effect, holds its ground against other more properly aesthetic—if unmodern—virtues: loveliness, heroic proportion, grand manner. Man Ray’s *Cadeau*, or *Gift*, comes to mind. Exhibited in Paris in 1921, alongside works he brought in a steamer trunk from the US, this novelty was fashioned the very afternoon the show opened: “he glued a row of fourteen tacks to the bottom of [a painted flat-]iron. [...] With its menacing blend of domesticity and sadomasochism, the object apparently attracted unusual attention—by the end of the day, *Gift* had vanished.”³⁶

Two years earlier, T.S. Eliot had mentioned novelty three times in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”: first, to say, with Williams, that “novelty is better than repetition”—however lovely, heroically proportioned, or grand. Second, more famously, that the “existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing



“Gift”³⁷

order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.”³⁸ The appearance of the extraneous thing takes on an aesthetic dimension but one wholly dependent on its careful

³⁵ William Carlos Williams, *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1962), 25-6.

³⁶ MoMA Gallery Text. Accessed January 13, 1913, http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=81212.

³⁷ Demarais, 37.

³⁸ T.S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1975), 38-9.

placement among more traditional furniture. Third, discussing eccentricity in poetry, Eliot warns that to “search for novelty in the wrong place” is fraught with hazards, which he describes as the discovery of the perverse.³⁹ Yet, an encounter with the perversity of novel sensation is also somehow the source of the charm of things. “Is there something perverse, if not archly insistent,” asks Brown, “about complicating things with theory?”⁴⁰ And, one might also ask, a similar perversity in complicating things with novelty? The pervert’s guide to things—taking a page from Žižek—is a suitable name for a novelty item catalogue. Jean Sheppard calls novelty-item catalogues “an exotic mixture of moralistic piety and violent primitive humor.”⁴¹ The role of catalogues, not merely as practical tools for measuring relative exchange values, but also for reckoning exchange value with novelty value: Johnson Smith & Co side-by-side Sears Roebuck.

All the Latest Surprising and Joke Novelties

Pharo's Serpents Eggs, box . . .	10c	Modern Dancer (gift)	15c
Miniature Water Pistol . . .	10c	September Morn Squirt Ring . . .	30c
Cleopatra's Snake (very lifelike) . . .	10c	X Ray Novelty	10c
False Moustache	4c	Trick Pencil	10c
Big Roll Stage Money	10c	Rubber Tacks (in good joke) . . .	10c
Ford Auto Puzzle (latent)	15c	Memorized Penny (defies the law of gravitation)	20c
Wagic Plate (anyone can play it) . . .	10c	Caution! Squeezing Powder	10c
Rubber Razor (very formidable) . . .	20c	Mysterious Tumbler and Vanishing Coin Trick	25c
Window Sashers (greatest joke cut)	25c	Enchanted Bottle (what makes it lay down?)	6c
Pocket Detective (see behind your back)	15c	Magic Plate Lifter	20c
Thurston's Mysterious Trick Cais . . .	10c	Imitation Gold Teeth	3 for 5c
Fighting Roosters, pair	10c	Great Eclipse Puzzle	10c
Cover the Spot Trick, a scene, nov. . .	10c		

Large catalog (300 pages) of unique, novel and useful articles (unobtainable elsewhere) free with all orders, or mailed on receipt of five-cent stamp. Agents and dealers write for wholesale prices. Mail order dealers and beginners supplied with 32, 64 or 148 page catalogs at cost. Send 10 cents (credited) for sample of each and particulars of our proposition.

Johnson Smith & Co., 7151 N. Clark St., Chicago

Only Concern of its Kind in America

Flotsam and jetsam, ply-on-ply. In 1912, Hart Crane’s father invented Life Savers. The reason they look like small life preservers owes something to the then recent Titanic disaster and the sudden novelty of a particular thing in popular

culture, the life preserver. One prevalent idea is that Live Savers have their form—clean white tori—because their inventor’s daughter choked and died on an unsafe, unimproved mint. As urban legend, the story rehearses a familiar form of semiotic literalism, detecting a causal relation between signifiers and signifieds. Mint-formed use-value: the mint holed to expresses a message, a warning of sorts, mint surrounding the void to signify the risk that a small thing might get lodged in a small place. Tellingly, the actual, daughterless confectioner is not interested in things but words: the proper name, the trade-name Life Savers, sold to buyers the following year. It was not sold as a patented process or a safety advance—enough information alone to refute the literalists—even if the

³⁹ Ibid, 43.

⁴⁰ Brown, “Thing Theory,” 1.

⁴¹ *The Whole Fun Catalogue of 1929*, v.

novel shape does imply the application of patent pill-making know-how to confectionary, a story from cough drops to gum drops familiar enough from druggist trade. The reason the Life Saver patent is superfluous is that “Life Saver” effectively designates the alpha and omega of form itself: “For That Stormy Breath”—of briny seamen, who ought reach for one—prominently featured on the illustration of Crane’s packaging.⁴² Like his father, Hart Crane is a confectioner of metaphoricity. “At Melville’s Tomb” explains a wager concerning the submerged currents and communications in things:

Often beneath the wave, wide from this ledge
 The dice of drowned men’s bones he saw bequeath
 An embassy. Their numbers as he watched,
 Beat on the dusty shore and were obscured.

And wrecks passed without sound of bells,
 The calyx of death’s bounty giving back
 A scattered chapter, livid hieroglyph,
 The portent wound in corridors of shells.

Then in the circuit calm of one vast coil,
 Its lashings charmed and malice reconciled,
 Frosted eyes there were that lifted altars;
 And silent answers crept across the stars.

Compass, quadrant and sextant contrive
 No farther tides . . . High in the azure steep
 Monody shall not wake the mariner.
 This fabulous shadow only the sea keeps.⁴³

As Crane explains to Harriet Monroe:

⁴² Paul L. Mariani, *The Broken Tower: A Life of Hart Crane* (New York: Norton, 2000), 24. See, also, “Clarence A. Crane,” *Ohio History Central*. Accessed July 28, 2006, <http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/entry.php?rec=2634>.

⁴³ Hart Crane, *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose of Hart Crane* (New York: Anchor, 1966), 34.

Dice bequeath an embassy, in the first place, by being ground [...] in little cubes from the bones of drowned men by the action of the sea, and are finally thrown up on the sand, having “numbers” but no identification. These being the bones of dead men who never completed their voyage, it seems legitimate to refer to them as the only surviving evidence of certain messages undelivered, mute evidence of certain things, experiences that the dead mariners might have had to deliver. Dice as a symbol of chance and circumstance is also implied.⁴⁴

That mute, undelivered things have messages is no certainty. Consider Eliot’s Phlebas—Crane’s secret sharer—and his rejected life-saver:

Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,
 Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell
 And the profit and loss.
A current under sea
 Picked his bones in whispers.⁴⁵

What Crane tells Monroe is merely a dicey, communicational wager about entering this whirlpool: amid all the anonymous plastic micro-pellets in the great oceanic trash vortex, a handful of novelties, a few auto-associational buoyancies, are bound to pop up from the deep.

In *Graph, Maps, and Trees*, Franco Moretti notes the “extreme visibility” of certain things when they first appear in village chronicles of the late eighteenth century—the Age of Wonders, he calls it.⁴⁶ Not yet manufactured goods but goods of long distance trade, goods of Empire, these novelties—sugar, coffee, salt, a parrot, a coconut—designate things from the outside world, another world: “They shine for a moment on the horizon of the everyday,” he writes, “leaving behind a sense of incommensurable universes: on the one side birth, labour,

⁴⁴ Hart Crane, letter to Harriet Monroe, 1926, quoted by Colm Tóibín in “Hart Crane & Harriet Monroe debate the ‘logic’ of poetry.” Accessed June 22, 2013, http://www.lit-hum.org/2011_06_01_archive.html.

⁴⁵ T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991), 65

⁴⁶ Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps and Trees* (London: Verso, 2005), 49.

marriage, and death; on the other, coconut.”⁴⁷ In the world of novelties, “wonders appear, are admired, and then vanish.” They vanish not because they physically disappear but because they become ubiquitous. We get from Moretti’s coconut to Baudelaire’s orange, when we consider the ways manufactured things try to squeeze the same affective currents stolen from novelty items, more juice forced out from old, borrowed fruit.

Returning to Brown’s formula: a thing is “an object materialized by human attention.”⁴⁸ The recent interest in thing theory is really little more than a thing preoccupation: a thing thing. The thing for things is prepossessed by a distinction Heidegger draws between objects and things whereby things are objects re-formed.⁴⁹ An object becomes thing when it stands out, when it holds itself up to



Graffito⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Ibid., 46.

⁴⁸ Brown, *A Sense of Things*, 7.

⁴⁹ Martin Heidegger, “The Thing,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: HarperCollins, 1971).

⁵⁰ Graffito. Accessed January 13, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/cgw78hn>.

a higher standard. Reformed in things, raw materials extracted from the object-world, are made self-supporting and ready to use. Heidegger's key examples—a jug, an axe, and a shoe—get at this in-forming and elicit his primordial nostalgia about putting handcrafted stuff in reach by dispelling distance. The earthenware jug nearby—arresting a void, promising libation—provides an occasion to expound a “cosmological poetics,” in Brown's phrase, the so-called fourfold of earth, sky, divinities, and mortals.⁵¹ Reaching for the thing discloses a kind of secret about spending time with companionable smalls—to use a word picked up from *American Pickers*. As opposed to the inert object-world, where nothing stands at the ready, smalls release agencies, personalities, private lives, desires, interiors, lies, and irresponsibilities.

What happens to a thing in a market, then? When stuff is counted as goods, it's sent out, elsewhere to distant places. Strange things ensue, as Marx observes:

At first sight [a table] appears an extremely obvious, trivial thing. [...] The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless, the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will.⁵²

Is there such a thing as a circulating thing—or does circulation mean the end of thingness as things are leveled, stripped of sensuous distinctions, set in motion and sent away? The Heidegger-Marx dispute seems to recapitulate an unsettled fall out about use and exchange, recapitulating two seemingly incommensurate modes of value: one felt in the solidity of things at hand and the other felt in their slipping through one's fingers. In both cases, one is left with an uncanny aftertaste of agency.

⁵¹ Brown, *A Sense of Things*, 171.

⁵² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1978), 215-16.

Novelty items go a long way to demonstrating that this quarrel between use and exchange is not particularly helpful when understanding these agencies, the respective niceties and perversities of modern things: tipped-over jugs encased in faked spills, shoes that occasion the hot foot, axes with the



“Wonderful X-Ray Tube”⁵³

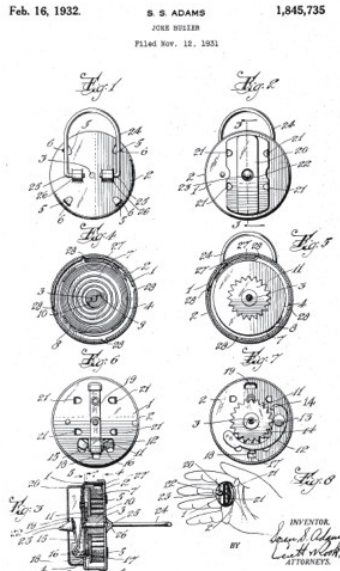
rubber handles. Robert Chodat observes that there’s “widespread uncertainty about what kinds of things should be treated as sentient and sapient, as doers and thinkers.”⁵⁴ It makes sense to think of novelty items as the material expression of this uncertainty. Side-effects, waste-products—quasi-things, following Michel Serres, unstable non-things, following Vilém Flusser—however auto-theorizing, take no side in the controversy of precedence concerning subjects, objects, or even things for human attention.⁵⁵ Recall once more Benjamin’s notion that

⁵³ “Wonderful X-ray Tube,” *The Whole Fun Catalogue of 1929*.

⁵⁴ Robert Chodat, *Worldly Acts and Sentient Things* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), vii.

⁵⁵ In *The Parasite*, Serres likens the quasi-thing to “an explosive novelty,” or the joker, which alters the pattern of play, by altering direction: “That joker is a logical object that is both indispensable and fascinating. Placed in the middle or at the end of a series, a series that has a law of order, it permits it to bifurcate, to take another appearance, another direction, a new order. The only describable difference between a method and bricolage is the joker. The principle of bricolage is to make something by means of something else, a mast with a matchstick, a chicken wing with tissue meant for the thigh, and so forth. Just as the most general model of method is game, the good model for what is deceptively called bricolage is the joker.” See Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 161. Flusser’s non-thing, by contrast, is anti-novelty itself, the gadget heralding the dominion of the “vicious cycle” of second culture (“nature to culture to waste”). Non-things “flood our environment from all directions, displacing things,” he writes, yielding unscalable mountains of junk: “This throw-away material, all those lighter, razors, pens, plastic bottles, are not true things; one cannot hold on to them. And

newly “tumescent” items spill onto the stage of modernity as if from a prop cabinet. In so many words, he reminds us that they come saturated with explosive theatricality. The suffix *-zeug*, familiar from *Spielzeug* and *Werkzeug*, Benjamin notes, on its own does double duty as the word for prop and for ordinance. Indeed, it’s a word that also means trinket, in essence, novelty item.

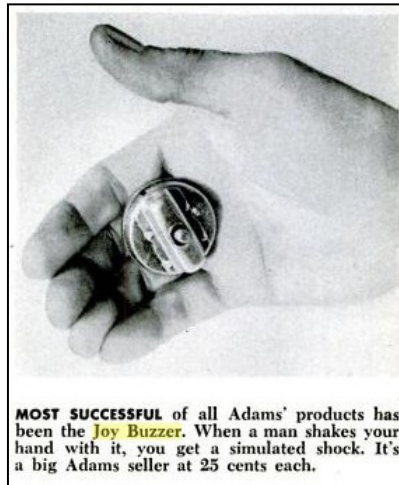


Joy Buzzer Patent, 1931⁵⁶

just as we get better and better at learning how to feed information into machines, all things will be transformed into the same kind of junk, even houses and pictures. All things will lose their value, and all values will be transformed into information.” Ephemeral and eternal, the non-thing is “impossible to get hold of,” yet it’s at the disposal of the information zombies, remote-button-pressers, trigger-pullers, fuse-lighters and fingertip-swipers, those who set in motion pre-programmed chain reactions. Modern things—or better, the jokers and the non-things—come with conditions. Making sense of them means making sense of these conditions; above all, the appearance of new things, novelties, and the inability to differentiate anything from anything else, waste.” See Vilém Flusser, “The Non-Thing 1” and “The Non-Thing 2,” in *The Shape of Things* (London: Reaktion, 1999), 85-94.

⁵⁶ Joy Buzzer Patent, filed November 12, 1931. Accessed January 13, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/c2qrhyu>.

One way to consider the on-board theatricality of things is in terms of a widespread uncertainty that inheres in them, and the moral ambivalence of our inescapable accommodations with them. Take the truism, attributed to Oliver Wendell Holmes in 1919, about good goods that “the ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas [and] that the best test [of this good is] to get itself accepted in the competition of the market.”⁵⁷ It’s a faulty analogy—among other things—because all goods are not good, or because goods are not always good. The good that seems like a fetching hand reaching out to meet and greet you may well conceal an unpleasant jolt with a joy buzzer.

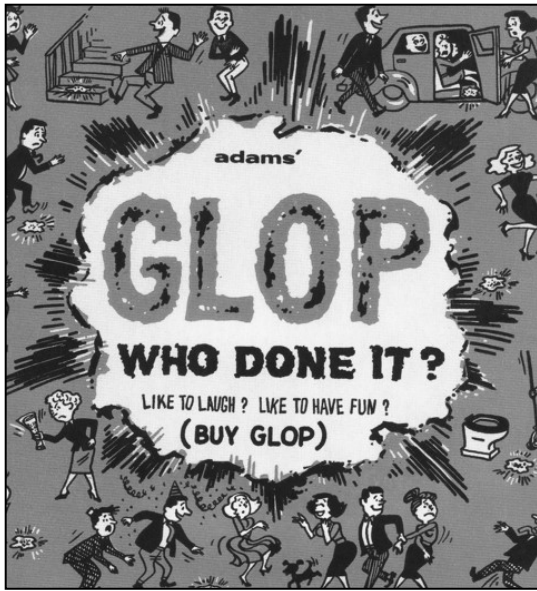


“Fun’s Henry Ford is Still Inventing”⁵⁸

In fact, as we’ve seen, marketplaces take special note of such things, the novelties, the things that stand out. The analogy that figures ideas as goods forgets that, like quasi-ideas, goods come steeped in risks and side-effects, and non-things are encountered in foretastes and aftertastes of waste.

⁵⁷ Oliver Wendell Holmes, “Dissenting Opinion,” *Abrams v. United States* (1919). Accessed 22 June, 2013, http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC_CR_0250_0616_ZD.html.

⁵⁸ Gardner Soule, “Fun’s Henry Ford is Still Inventing,” *Popular Science* (January 1955): 123. Accessed January 13, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/b66a7bw>.



“Glop: Who Done it?”⁵⁹

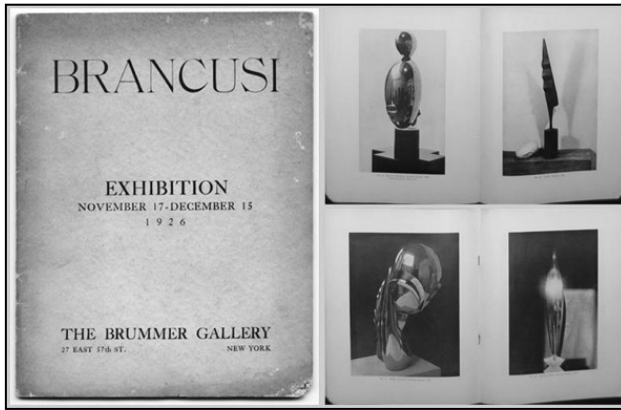


Mina Loy, “Brancusi’s Golden Bird”:

The toy
become the aesthetic archetype

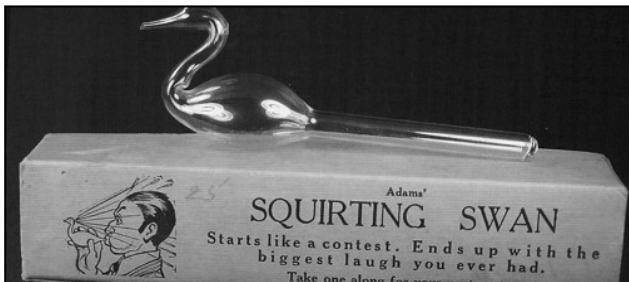
As if
some patient peasant God
had rubbed and rubbed
the Alpha and Omega
of Form
into a lump of metal

⁵⁹ Demarais, 127.



“Brancusi Exhibition Catalogue, 1926”⁶⁰

A naked orientation
 unwinged unplumed
 —the ultimate rhythm
 has lopped the extremities
 of crest and claw
 from
 the nucleus of flight



“Adams’ Squirting Swan”⁶¹

⁶⁰ *Brancusi Exhibition* (November 17-December 15, 1926), The Brummer Gallery, New York. Accessed January 13, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/bfxsnv7>.

⁶¹ Demarais, 36.

The absolute act
of art
conformed
to continent sculpture
—bare as the brow of Osiris—
this breast of revelation

an incandescent curve
licked by chromatic flames
in labyrinths of reflections

This gong
of polished hyperaesthesia
shrills with brass
as the aggressive light
strikes
its significance

The immaculate
conception
of the inaudible bird
occurs
in gorgeous reticence . . .⁶³



Brancusi, *Golden Bird*⁶²

Loy's poem—published in the celebrated November 1922 issue of *The Dial* that also launched *The Waste Land*—glosses the main points of my essay. An instructional manual for accessing both Brancusi's *Golden Bird* and Adams's *Squirting Swan* at once, it provides, in effect, counsel about the mode of sensible being proper to modernist artistic products, an anticipatory amicus brief—recommending a second look at things which first appear more akin to manufactured objects than anything else. Indeed, it anticipates the very terms of

⁶² Constantin Brancusi, *Golden Bird*. Accessed January 13, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/an32553>.

⁶³ Mina Loy, *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 79-80.

the legal case brought only a few years later to contest import taxes levied against one of Brancusi's space-age birds that seemed to resemble either some kind of kitchen utensil (a potato masher, supposedly) or a surgical instrument of mysterious utility (an x-ray tube, perhaps).⁶⁴ Instead of the familiar *ut pictura poesis* analogy—poetry mimicking painting, as it were⁶⁵—Loy's poem poses a critical legend. The modernist aesthetic event re-mediate the situation of humans and things caught up in the all-too-modern fate of novelty and waste. Sequence is screwy here: toys precede archetypes; raw materials get second-handed in their otherworldly resting places; exteriors get tethered to interiors with explosive consequences long before their conception. The hard past participle of Loy's second line ("become") suggests that the staging of form happens outside any creaturely workshop. Inside the archaic junkshop, then, the "patient peasant God," streamlining *ex nihilo*, is *not* a proxy for the direct carver—*not* a mythic artificer of wooden or stone prototypes suited for sub-creation through metallurgy. Instead, this figure is a long-suffering collector of novelties browsing amid all the inhuman yields of entropy.

The famous incident that inspired Duchamp's Readymade is relevant here. Arthur Danto calls it "the defining anecdote of modernist art."⁶⁶ Eyeing a propeller at an aviation exhibition, Duchamp tells Brancusi: "Painting's washed up. Who'll do anything better than that propeller? Tell me, can you do that?" Amazingly, Brancusi's own reception arrives via an interzone Duchamp foresaw where novelty gets redeemed from waste; *Golden Bird* resembles, according to one bemused journalist, nothing else besides "half of an airplane propeller."⁶⁷ In effect, a ruined instrument (of human flight) cracks the mirror to nature. Unlike

⁶⁴"The Case of Constantin Brancusi vs. the United States of America." Accessed on 22 June, 2013, <http://bellevuecollege.edu/artshum/materials/art/Tanzi/Summer04/203T/BrancusiCourtCase.htm>.

⁶⁵ As in, for instance, "[a]s Brancusi shaped in brass, so Mina Loy in the poems on art shapes and polishes language to achieve exquisite verbal sculptures." See Virginia M. Kouidiss, "Rediscovering Our Sources: The Poetry of Mina Loy," *boundary 2* 8.3 (1980): 182.

⁶⁶ Arthur C. Danto, *The Madonna of the Future: Essays in a Pluralistic Art World* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000), 178. See, also, William Camfield, "Marcel Duchamp's Fountain: Aesthetic Object, Icon, or Anti-Art?," in *The Definitively Unfinished Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Thierry de Duve (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1991), 152.

⁶⁷ Danto, *Madonna of the Future*, 179.

the urinal, the bottle-rack, or the bicycle wheel fastened to the stool—manufactured items liberated from their applications, as it were—Brancusi’s animal-machines become crucibles for transforming associative interruptions into hard gem-like flames. Extraneous animal spirits get vaporized (“extremities / of crest and claw”) and all that’s left over is a protean bolus. The remainder qua remainder crucial to this critical alchemy is a luminescent tube as Loy describes it, an “incandescent curve / licked by chromatic flames.” These “labyrinths of reflections”—repositioning subjects and objects—announce peculiar second modernist outcomes that, in Ezra Pound’s words, “revolt against [...] solidity” (213).

Insofar as Loy’s poem “tries to fuse artist, object, and viewer response into one synesthetic experience,” it’s worth noticing that her brief on Brancusi—like Pound’s essay on the same front—depends on an already mediated experience.⁶⁸ One way this happens is by re-directing traffic over highly polished surfaces at an item reflecting photographic flash—flash which originates not incidentally in Brancusi’s own efforts to promote his work. The striking images of the “polished hyperaesthesia” in the Brummer Gallery exhibition catalogue and which accompanied the publication of Loy’s poem and Pound’s essay are all taken by the artist himself. As Margherita Andreotti notes, they advance an aesthetic of

mirrorlike surface [that] brings light, space, and the immediate environment into the work while reducing the sense of weight and mass traditionally associated with sculpture. When struck by a source of light, the reflective surface can give the illusion that the sculpture actually radiates light, an effect captured dramatically in Brancusi’s photograph. As Man Ray, the artist who is generally credited with introducing Brancusi to photography, recalled upon seeing the sculptor’s early photographic prints, “One of his golden birds had been caught with the sun’s rays striking it so that a sort of aura radiated from it, giving the work an explosive character.”⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Richard N. Masteller, “Using Brancusi: Three Writers, Three Magazines, Three Versions of Modernism,” *American Art* 11.1 (1997): 60.

⁶⁹ Margherita Andreotti, ““Golden Bird”: A New Species of Modern Sculpture,” *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 19.2 (1993): 142.

In effect, what “shrills with brass / as the aggressive light / strikes / its significance” is the inevitability of technical mediation—in this case, an encounter with flash. It’s this interruption, above all, that overburdens Brancusi’s bird-associations—the ones that call to mind Pound’s comments about his “research for the aerial” releasing us from the inevitable grounding owed the Earth: now propeller, now antenna, now flame.⁷⁰ Whether cylinder or container, concave or convex, the void contained inside is exposed as if flashed from inside blown glass. *Starts like a contest. Ends up with the biggest laugh you’ve ever had.*



René Magritte, “Treason of Images”⁷¹

Ceci n'est pas une pipe. As Foucault describes it:

The first version, that of 1926 I believe: a carefully drawn pipe, and exposition underneath it (handwritten in a steady, painstaking, artificial script, a script [...] like that found heading the notebooks of schoolboys, or on a blackboard after an object lesson): “This is not a pipe.”⁷²

⁷⁰ Ezra Pound, “Brancusi,” in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1954), 443.

⁷¹ René Magritte, *La trahison des images* (1928-1929). Accessed January 13, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/aypbw8s>.

⁷² Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 26.

The most familiar reading of this image is as a structuralist gloss on representation: a drawing representing a pipe is not the pipe itself. This is the standard gloss, one promoted by Magritte himself: “[C]ould you stuff my pipe? No, it’s just a representation, is it not? So if I had written on my picture ‘This is a pipe,’ I’d have been lying!”⁷³ What ever else this is, reads the legend, this is not a pipe. Magritte saw it as an emblem of the ascendancy of poetry over painting. As Foucault writes in his book: “a drawing representing not a pipe at all but another drawing itself represents a pipe so well that I must ask myself: To what does the sentence written in the painting relate? Do not look overhead for a true pipe. That is a pipe dream.”⁷⁴ Foucault calls this an object lesson, reminding us that it’s as much a lesson about things—*could you stuff this pipe?*—as it is as lesson about poetry and pictures. This is not a thing. In fact, Magritte’s title—*La trahison des images*—which recalls Julian Benda’s *La trahison des clercs*, created the same year—points to the affective failings of the word-image as a ministry of things.



Stuffed or unstuffed, the pipe bowl—the jug, the container—alights. Consider, for instance, this object lesson about waste: a garbage can, carefully placed under the whiteboard in my classroom, and upon it, a sentence on a sticker, in pedagogical boldface: “THIS IS ALL THE GARBAGE WE MAKE.”⁷⁵

What is the nature of this form of address concerning a container, I wonder. Is it a command? A form of self-congratulation? A categorical imperative? However passive aggressive in intent, does the can advertise its wish or its capability? Emphatically, like Magritte’s painting, it seems to



⁷³ Harry Torczyner, *Magritte: Ideas and Images* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1977), 71.

⁷⁴ Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, 27.

⁷⁵ Photographs by the author, April 2011.

announce, at the threshold of its legend, as it were, a bar across the fortunes of non-things and our desires to un-riddle them. This is where things are decommissioned back into objects, the non-thing says. In fact, this is a ruse; this is merely another risk destination, an occlusion where non-things are placed out of view by a strange catechism of sophistry. As part of the same campus initiative, another yet smaller plastic container appeared on my desk: a miniature green garbage can.

The slogan on the “Mini Bin”—“This is all the GARBAGE I make!”—is a constant reminder to recycle more and produce less garbage, reads the elaborate directions that accompany it.⁷⁶ The very smallness of this canister—that it sits on (not next to) my desk—that it comes paired with instructions that when it is full I empty it into yet another container located in the men’s room—suggests that this novelty item is framed by the risk positions of second modernity. The can is the designated totem for my becoming minimal—for reducing the impact that is me.



“I Am Not a Paper Cup”⁷⁷

The can’s overt proposition is belied not only by the multiplication of other containers it implies, like so many telescoping cups, but also by gears of commerce set into motion by my employers to extract wealth from my proposed sorting of my own by-products. This very non-thing on my desk does not so much disclose itself as it dresses-up a telescoping sequence of risk propositions for further administration as a kind of gift.

⁷⁶ Photograph by the author, April 2011.

⁷⁷ DCI, “I Am Not a Paper Cup 12-Ounce Porcelain Travel Cup with Lid.” Accessed January 13, 2013, <http://www.amazon.com/DCI-Paper-12-Ounce-Porcelain-Travel/dp/B0016CSBJS>.

The FAQ, for example, includes this fallacy of presumption dressed up as call and response:

- My desk is too small and cluttered. I don't have any room left to put the Mini Bin on it.

If someone gave you a box of chocolates to sit on your desk, you'd find space for it, wouldn't you?

Q: What if my desk is already too small and cluttered?

A: If someone gave you a box of chocolates to sit on your desk, you'd find space for it, wouldn't you?⁷⁸

Items for the trick mini-bin include “soiled tissues and napkins, apple cores, banana peels, foil lined snack bags, candy bar wrappers.”⁷⁹

These mixed materials are not so much essentially harmful as they betray the characteristic chain reaction of the uncertainty of risk epistemology, either because they can't be cleanly disaggregated—laminated foiled papers too expensive to sort—dirty tissues and napkins too contaminated for further processing. Items for the bigger container are so designated not because they are intrinsically able to be returned to the state of objects—and are therefore good for the environment—but for their ability to be further monetized. Doing something is better than nothing, unless nothing is already the only something we have.

Take, as a last thing, a plastic bottle. This one that sits before me as I write, for instance. The very sort that whirls around in the great Pacific trash vortex. The ones Kevin Costner drinks from in *Water World* (1995). What is its message? The fact that it towers over the mini-can tells me that it is not fit for that



⁷⁸ http://www.cleanriver.com/recycling_programs_and_education/mini_bin_program/mini_bin_fa.aspx.

⁷⁹ <https://louisville.edu/kppc/intranet/references/recycling-info.pdf>

impossible green enclosure. It belongs in the container we share in the hallway; it is garbage fit for reprocessing. And, on the bottle, there is another legend of the novelty item, a self-congratulatory bit of news about its lid:

Smaller Cap = Less Plastic

Did you notice this bottle has an Eco-Slim cap? This is part of our ongoing effort to reduce our impact on the environment. This bottle and cap contain an average of 20% less plastic than our original 500 mL Eco-Shape® bottle and cap. Be Green.⁸⁰

And, beneath this announcement, another warning about new risks: “WARNING: Cap is a small part and poses a CHOKING HAZARD, particularly for children.”



“Choking Hazard”⁸¹

⁸⁰ Accessed January 13, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/blat2trf>.

⁸¹ Photograph by the author, April 2011.