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SUMMARY  In this essay I situate my recent on-going series of drawings, Things that Art, which investigates and deconstructs the ideas of collection and labeling in order to consider how scholars might creatively think with and through methods used by artists.

“But is not every ethnographer something of a surrealist, a reinventor and reshuffler of realities?”

—James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Surrealism”

Open any single anthropology journal and turn to the table of contents: the scope of the phenomena and geography is mind boggling. In one volume you may skip from a Papua New Guinean forest to a Japanese physics lab, and then meander from gay bars in Buenos Aires to funeral pyres in North India. Across journals and decades, the discipline gestures at the complexity and entirety of the world.

A common citational network underwrites the collective language of those pieces and unites seemingly disparate investigations into a coherent framework. The generally cisgendered male canon taught in graduate school and regurgitated throughout a career assembles and translates the worlds collected and created by American anthropologists. The liberal earnestness of these translations belies what James Clifford called “ethnographic surrealism,” a concept that I want to repurpose for finding new ways of making social theory. Or, to put it another way, beneath the veneer of the anthropological project as it has transmuted into scholarship, a deep strangeness rustles. Acknowledgment of this might lead us toward methods that can more accurately reflect and convey the incongruities of the field.

Nina Wakeford, a sociologist and conceptual artist, encourages social scientists to think carefully about choosing the best methods and materials for our questions; the ethnographic essay is not the only tool for the job. In considering a range of inventive methods from both art and social sciences, she determines that “inventiveness can never be known in advance of a specific use” (Lury and Wakeford 2012:7). It is in the spirit of such invention that I enter this essay to discuss the method and the meaning behind a series of drawings I have been engaged in as a side project to my more traditional research.
The drawing series I introduce here, concerned with category and labeling, came about almost by accident. As a mixed-race, gender-fluid person, I have always had an uneasy, even antagonistic, relationship to categories. Ridiculously painful and frustrating as it continues to be in some settings, this unease has served me as a scholar and a social theorist (if not as a capital “A” academic), underpinning my interest in the way power inheres to categories. After one faculty meeting, I noticed that my habitual doodling—this one inspired by a colleague’s perfect Roman nose—had morphed into a gallery of different noses: porcine, wine, my sister’s, clown, and so on. I had stumbled upon a deceptively simple format for a playful but intense investigation of categories that I continued to mine over the ensuing five years.

As the project developed, I formalized the concept of the metalabel by using titles, always beginning with “Things . . .” followed by a set of images and labels. Drawing the images on 5x7 cards echoes the material remnants of historically ossified, even clichéd forms for presenting facts: the library index card, postcard, flashcard, and the illustrated nature drawing. Within each card and across the series—now over 100 drawings—I use collection, list, label, and illustration to pry at the inherent fissures breaching the grammar of category. While I initially used a small format for convenience and privacy, I soon realized that the drawings’ size demands intimate attention and engagement in much the same way as a book or a bacterium might. For example, I once displayed the cards on a table with small microscopes both to enhance the effect and to highlight the sort of artist/observer contract inherent to the drawing. The bodily posture required to use these scopes—that peering gaze, the hunched back—necessitated an active engagement and a willingness to attend to the pleasures of the treasure hunt as found, in say, the archive rather than through a passing glimpse of a large canvas as one strides past.

“Things that Art” operates on two levels. First, the project enters the language, sign, and image territory mapped by linguistic philosopher Ferdinand de Saussure and further explored by artists and scholars such as Magritte, Borges, Haraway, Stewart, and Solnit, as I explain below. Second, attentive to the pitfalls of social-historical categories such as gender and race, I illustrate the work these types of categories do as well as how they can be refashioned. As concepts such as nonbinary gender, women scholars, and hybrid racial identities expand previously taken-for-granted social groupings, they require legible forms of vocabulary and attention. New boxes on the census form are a great start.

These drawings confront issues of contemporary relevance through humor, open-ended provocation, and unexpected association rather than academic prose and argument. By shuffling the typical mode of discourse, I offer one example of how to expand production and consumption of anthropological knowledge.

Hacking the grammar and semiotics of labels and collections with punning and strange—but ultimately logical—inclusions allows me to experiment with other reimagined relations: singular and abstract, drawing and
thing, visual and verbal cliché, existence and nonexistence, conditionality and temporality. Using doodles to explore theoretical concepts gives the project an extra layer of entry—the visual—and a sense of permission and levity around the questions raised. Writing an academic essay would not have allowed me to investigate these issues as freely.

Part I: “Things that Are Not a Pipe” and Other Examples of the Cards

The series of drawings takes its key design principle from a basic cornerstone of knowledge creation, access, and production: the labeled object. This classic form of annotation is a seemingly transparent way of organizing thought and world. But in the Internet age, such an officious, banal identifier seems nearly antique in style and materiality. The object-label paradigm has two basic components. The first component is showing—an object will either take a very specific form (Neolithic skull, 1943, found in Timbuktu) or may appear as generalized or representative. Sometimes an actual object, say, a pinned insect or taxidermied antelope nose, may be substituted with a drawing or photograph. The second component is telling—a label organizes and conveys knowledge about the object to generations of school children and museum goers. Zoos, art galleries, and museums—as well as printed materials such as maps and guides—follow the same format as the lowly flashcard and child’s alphabet book. Each object is framed, shown,
and told. So seamless is the adhesion of signifier and signified, or word and thing, that the system itself is virtually invisible.

The drawing titled “Things that Are Not a Pipe” offers a double meaning, displaying items that are factually not a pipe while also offering a nod to Magritte’s specific confluence of line and color and its role in art history. On the drawn card, the facsimile of Magritte’s piece is labeled “ink and paper” (not “Magritte,” or “this is not a pipe,” or “this is not not a pipe,” all of which would also be accurate). With this choice, I refer to artist’s materials as they often appear in curatorial notes at a gallery. “Ink and paper” could of course describe any of the other objects/drawings in the image, which are all ink and paper (unlike Magritte’s image, which was of paint and canvas). It also occurred to me (though I chose not) to draw an image of ink and paper, rather than a pipe resembling the original painting, therein bypassing Magritte altogether while making a similar point.

In explaining the power of Magritte’s famous 1929 painting, “The Treachery of Images,” Michel Foucault (2008) relied on a concept of calligram, a poem written in the shape of an object it discusses. Foucault maintains that the calligram—known in some circles as a concrete poem—enables us better to understand both scientific labeling and “The Treachery of Images,” because they operate in the same way. That is, the labeled object, and Magritte’s painting each purport to have two components, an object and a label, that are mutually illustrative. Foucault says this is an illusion, though, as the two components are not distinct at all: they are inseparable. They are, in effect, calligrams—the form is an essential aspect of the content.

The form of the calligram poses the word/representation as self-evidently factual: “The entire function of so scholarly, so academic a drawing is to elicit recognition, to allow the object it represents to appear without hesitation or equivocation” (Foucault 2008:19–20). This insight stands knee deep in history going back to at least 500 CE, including illustrated botanical work and the very invention of taxonomy as a field. The classification project depended on: 1) holding and seeing a piece of paper with ink yet perceiving it as a monarch butterfly, or an antelope nose; and, 2) accepting something unfamiliar (a “Pygmy” or a platypus) as truly existing within a legitimate habitat despite an incomprehensible foreignness. The levels of meaning circulate seamlessly. The drawing/label simply is what it says it is.

This context better arms us to reflect on both the mechanism and the continuing relevance of Magritte’s famous work, one that I play on and expand from in my drawings. In Magritte’s painting, we see a formal illustration of a standard pipe, and below it, we read a tidy, didactic annotation: “ceci n’est pas une pipe.” One expects an inscription to “support [the image], name it, explain it, decompose it, insert it in the series of texts and in the pages of the book” (Foucault 2008:22). Yet, rather than the label’s expected revelation, we behold a denial.

Magritte liberates the “it/ceci” from its mooring in pipe-ness (or its mooring in this particular illustration of this particular pipe). Yet this disengagement of image from text tricks the viewer. The shape we thought illustrated a pipe disintegrates into mere marks, and the label that seemed to describe the pipe-making-markings also collapses into squiggly lines that only
resemble letters. The object–label system that anchored meaning itself, in all its redundant and recursive brilliance, has not just buckled but has been shown up for what it always was—mere inscriptions on a page, as meaningless as hieroglyphics in 1798. The simple negative form of the label undermines the whole system: it is not a pipe, and it is not not a pipe (Foucault 2008:20). But it is not a pipe.

The representations in the collection “Things that Are Not a Pipe” purport that knowledge is less dependent on an existing object—a real pipe, say, that we can represent—than on a shared notion of what a pipe is and what relative meaning it carries with other objects. The etymology of “thing” derives from the term and concept of “assembly,” which brings home the valid point: How do we know a thing except by the company it keeps?

Riffing on that theme, “Things that Are Not a Pipe” contains objects that mingle with the conceptual pipe by association. (Yes, the pipe is banal and every day, but it is also rich with nostalgia and symbolism in ways that it was perhaps not in Magritte’s day, in part because of a century of energy around promoting and debunking smoking). “Brandy” and “leather chair” conjure intimate masculine spaces into which pipe smokers might be welcomed, if only in their imaginations. “Yellow teeth” hints at an unsexy consequence of smoking, while “cinnamon sticks” and “nicotine patch” allude to a potential next chapter in a smoker’s life. The drawing of the cigarette as a blueprint instead of a cigarette itself calls attention to its production as a designed commodity, a piece of technology with a history and a politics. Making this link overt gestures at the way association reconfigured cigarettes from cool (James Dean, cowboys, Marlboro Man) to tacky (redneck, yellow teeth, black lung). The anti-smoking campaigns had to tackle a century of advertising that promoted a smoking mythology in order to undermine it. By gradually changing the collections into which the cigarette was placed, over the decades, they succeeded.

None of the objects drawn in “Things that Are Not a Pipe” are actually a pipe; indeed, they explicitly are not a pipe (in a way that resonates with but differs from Magritte’s not a pipe). But in aggregate, the collection of “Things that Are Not a Pipe” convey the pipe and its post-Magritte history just as surely as a pipe is an object made of a small plastic or wooden bowl with a hollow stem.

This allusive nature of the set of sketches contained in “Things that Are Not a Pipe” begs the question: What other “things that” collections might reasonably house Magritte’s painting? The possibilities lead us from the obvious to the surreal: things that are famous; things that question the nature of a pipe; things made in 1929, or by Belgians, or by men; things that are (not) puzzles; things that may cause cancer or reproductive harm; things that once meant “I’m cool” but now mean “I’m tacky.”

Early on in the development of “Things that Art,” before I knew it would be a series, the things I drew on cards tended to span sets of clear-cut categories, free associations, or interesting facts. To the straightforward “Things that Come in Threes” and “Things that Fall,” I added “Things Used as Crash Test Dummies,” for example, based on some research on the history of automobile safety testing that suggested the bizarre eclecticism at work in
figuring out how to measure quick shifts in velocity when flesh and metal are at play. My missive in that card is simply: “What a strange history that was.” Another card, “Things that Contain Missives” includes glass bottles, pigeons, and the like.

Some cards in the collection diverge from delivering factual answers and point to immediately recognizable category errors that result from figures of speech, such as “Things with Nails,” “Things One Draws,” and “Things that Peep.” “Things that Refer to Heroin” offers a grammatical play on synonym and illustration: When is heroin “horse,” and when is it boy “brown”? I opted to draw versions of heroin for each of the different descriptors, but one might also have labeled each image “heroin” and drawn an “H,” a “smack,” a “horse,” and so on, thus altering the alliance and location of the thing that refers to heroin. This slippage draws attention to the calligram not just of each separate drawing/label but to the calligram form of the whole card: of the set of things that refer to heroin.

“Things Worth Categorizing” draws attention to the abstraction and ranking implicit to category making, while “Things that Describe this Onion,” and “Things that Abstract” reflect on similar questions.

As the number of drawings started to grow, I began to explore what had first been intuitive play to see how the elements I had somewhat unthinkingly developed—things, labels, illustrations, and collection—might be used to reflect on this form, so basic to dominant forms of knowing and cataloging. If “Things that Come in Threes,” “Things that Fall,” and “Things that Abstract” were ironically simple, how could this modest linguistic convention and organizational form be harnessed toward more complexity?

How to include negatives and futures within linguistic conventions of things? If a noun is a person, place, or thing—as every school child knows—is a thing always necessarily a noun?
“Things that Are Not Fair” makes sense as a set. But the category “Things that Are Not” would seem itself to be filled with precisely nothing: strictly speaking, there are no things that are not. Populated with “fair,” “alive,” and “concrete”, the category is at once satisfied and negated, as each object converts the title from a classification heading into an unfinished clause. What do “fair,” “black and white,” “alive,” or “perfect” have in common? What feature unites them? Not that they are things that are not—because of course, they are things that can and have been represented by illustrations. “Things that Are Not ... Safe” at once fulfils the grammatical demand of the collection while undermining the collection’s own mandate. Simply that they have become figures of speech have given these things powers to subvert the meanings of things.

“Things that Will Happen When” address a personal fascination of mine: the sacrificial future, the mortality effect (Jain 2013). By way of a common medical and experimental—not to mention capitalist or religious—justification, people are called upon to sacrifice their own present for the promise of a better social future. “Things that Will Happen When” begs the question of the nature of human and social coming into being. The things under this heading all modify the “when” (“when daddy comes home,” “when the fat lady sings”) and so the “Things” never climax into their full classificatory imperative, and the subject melts away. The collection makes grammatical but not substantive sense, as the collection offers a set of object-events that are in some sense parallel at the same time as each sets up its own exclusive category as an open threat. What “Things, will happen”? When?
These works, I would suggest, make sense in the “Things that Art” collection, but a liminal sense, not the kind of sense that one, well-trained in Linnaean thought, would expect. Objects and categories can mean nothing and
yet signify everything. In another example, I raise gender in different ways across the set of cards as a thing that is not a thing, as a thing that can be used to interrupt, and as a convention so thoroughly integrated that many people believe it to be true: as “Things Valuable Only as Signs of Other Things.”

**Part 2: Collection, Category, Label**

The power of any collection lies in its presentation of a curated reality as if it were self-evident. Susan Stewart, in *On Longing*, brilliantly disassembles this mythology by showing how a collector in fact invents a plane of meaning and then locates objects to elaborate on it. This process requires stripping each object of its history and context and then reimagining it in a new framework. She writes, “The point of the collection is forgetting—starting again in such a way that a finite number of elements create . . . an infinite reverie.” (Stewart 1992:152). Noah’s Ark offers an archetypal example of this logic, as the animals had to be severed, two by two, from their habitats to attain the status of exemplary types within the Ark’s collection (Stewart 1992). These animals were ostensibly being saved from a flood as well as becoming stock for a new world, but for the animals plucked from their native geographies (tree limbs, tide pools, grasslands), any reason would have produced an equally disastrous result.

The father of modern taxonomy, Carl Linnaeus, settled on his system of “nested hierarchies” in the 1700s, relying in part on standard-sized cards to record, reshuffle, and store information: a prototype of the modern index card” (Blei 2017). It is no accident that such labeling emerged at the same time as a new global system of extraction: the two systems required each
other. After all, who could have sat at a window in dreary England and imagined a hippo or an orchid, let alone imagined it in a specific relation to all in heaven and earth?

One of taxonomy’s keystones is the injunction that an object cannot belong to more than one category; like puzzle pieces and children, each has its place. In Jorge Luis Borges’ 1942 short story, “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins” (2001), a famous list demonstrates the necessity of parallel groupings. Borges’ fantastical entry, ostensibly found in “a Chinese Encyclopedia,” categorizes animals as: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off “look like flies”. Philoso-


But if some objects fit many categories, any closed system runs into the opposite problem: those which fit none. What to do with the exceptions? Consider the platypus. First sent to London in 1798 as a pelt by the Governor of New South Wales in Australia, its blended reptilian and mammalian characteristics wrought consternation and sparked an 85-year-long battle about whether to slot it into the animal kingdom at all or whether it was a hoax. That “first” platypus soon became an exemplar specimen with which to compare subsequent platypodes; it still resides in London’s Natural History Museum, in a drawer, with a label attached to its toe, while the circulating version includes a drawing with a label neatly perched underneath (Gould 1863).

Linnaeus’s taxons Monstrous (in which he placed “wild and monstrous humans, unknown groups, and more or less abnormal people”) and Para-


To return the monstrous to the mundane is to note that the very use of language requires classification; it is the bedrock of epistemology. To perform even the most basic communication, a child must learn to name a specific object in relation to the class of objects denoted by a word. So just as collections gain a kind of taken-for-granted grammatical and logical correctness in their presentation of the world, categories create cliché. Once a category has been designated and internalized, one need not continue to think about how individuals fit within the abstracted forms, which is partially the point. While this strategy makes knowledge acquisition faster, it has obvious
drawbacks. It took decades of activism for “women” to get the vote or for schools to desegregate, precisely because women and African Americans were captured in a powerful, closed, systematic category box while science, economics, and politics sat heavily on its lid. We have come a long way in realizing the offense of “boy” as a term of address for black men but have a fair way to go to dispense with the equally insulting “miss” for women. As we know all too well, once calcified, such categories and stereotypes take generations to shift.

The concept of “perceptual expectancy” illustrates the point from another angle. Psychology experiments demonstrate that much of what we see depends on the form in which it is presented, especially when we have strong expectations about that form. Someone shown the colors purple or brown will likely describe them instead as red or black if appearing on a playing card in the shape of a heart, club, diamond, or spade. Subjects in one related psychology experiment even devised elaborate explanations for the lack of redness in the color they described as red (Bruner and Postman 1949). “Bounded rationality” expands on the notion of perceptual expectancy with the idea that decision making unconsciously relies on preconceived categories. Thus, the paradox: the categories necessary for any language, let alone knowledge, constantly mislead us.

Rebecca Solnit addressed bounded rationality in her brilliantly titled essay, “The Pigeonholes When the Doves Have Flown,” which discusses the uneven application of categories when it comes to humans. That is, some people are always already boxed into expectations: “Any individual woman is liable to be treated as a walking referendum on women—are we all emotional, scheming, math-averse?—while men are relatively free of being thus measured.” Similarly, in thinking about race, “We don’t hear a lot of generalizations about whiteness, and Roof or Charles Manson is not considered a disgrace to his race or gender” (Solnit 2017:126).

Traditionally, the key players in laying out and naming Natural History have themselves resisted the categorizing effects that have worked so powerfully to pigeonhole others. Solnit describes the singular privilege of living beyond and outside of a category, namely, to live as an individual rather than as a specimen whose actions is always linked somehow to one’s group—either in need of correction or punishment. “It’s to be allowed to define yourself and given room to do so” (Solnit 2017:126).

Those who have set out the categories have played what Donna Haraway has called the “God-Trick,” taking it upon themselves to piece together a puzzle made of categories into which individuals are hailed. In taking on this role, they have been able to maintain a singularly efficient form of power; that is, they avoid categorization while imposing it on everyone else. Solnit gives an example: “We don’t even have a word, let alone a conversation, for the most common kind of mass homicide ... the furious man who takes out children and other family members ... as well as the woman who’s the main focus of his ire, and sometimes himself” (Solnit 2017:126).

It is exactly the unavoidability of classification and the necessary—if highly political—obfuscations that “Things that Art” attempts to undermine
by echoing this rudimentary form: a simple list of things with certain distinguishing features. In each drawing, the text comes from a basic, generic, category-making phrase, “things that . . .” and the drawings complete the sentence and, by extension, the thought. But like any human endeavor, each list has slippages, with higher and lower stakes. Any non-native speaker can point to minor annoyances in the English language, and coincidental homonyms and synonyms form the basis of word play and humor. The higher stakes come in the formation of race, class, and gender identities, which any child will gradually need to absorb or grapple with to become a social member.

Thus, my series of drawings probes and distrusts sealed systems but widens the scope of investigation. If the Australian platypus, removed from its family and home and shipped across the world, posed a challenge to the category of mammal, so does same-sex marriage to nuclear family ideals, or tomboys and sissyboys to gender. The move from archetype (a typical example) to stereotype (a simplified idea)—whether related to human agency or the role of animals in the natural world—can be nearly imperceptible and once complete, practically impossible to reverse. Thus, concepts such as gender and race gain an uncanny solidity, fooling us into thinking they are concrete, knock-on-able, seeable things. “Things that Art” optimistically (and against my character) proposes that we can reverse that solidity by attending to the ways we demarcate categories.

Conclusion

Max Ernst described his interest in collage through an experience with an illustrated catalogue from 1919: “There I found brought together elements of figuration so remote that the sheer absurdity of that collection provoked a sudden intensification of the visionary faculties in me and brought forth an illusive succession of contradictory images, double, triple, and multiple images, piling up on each other with the persistence and rapidity which are peculiar to love memories and visions of half-sleep” (Ernst, cited in Ubi 2013:2).

Anyone returning from the field or involved in collecting the “data” for an ethnographic project might recognize this delirious feeling. Then one moves on to the workmanlike collecting, cutting, and assembling central to article and book authorship. Scholarly writing is perhaps not so unlike collage building, albeit underwritten by different criteria.

In historicizing the simultaneous movements of surrealism and ethnography in 1930s France, Clifford assigns these overlapping investigations similar efforts to interpret “cultures and their norms,” to make the familiar strange, and vice versa (Clifford 1981:541). Surrealism and ethnography intersected in at least two crucial ways. First, building on Walter Benjamin’s observations of post-World War I life, Clifford observes, “The self, cut loose from its attachments, must discover meaning where it may—a predicament, evoked at its most nihilistic, that underlies both surrealism and modern ethnography” (Clifford 1981:541). The second, related commonality shared by the movements was “a belief that the Other . . . was a crucial object of
modern research.” Breaking from nineteenth century explorations of exoticism, which searched for a “temporary frisson” from a “more or less confident cultural order,” surrealism and ethnography “began with a reality deeply in question,” a position that enabled modern cultural relativism to take hold. “The ‘primitive’ societies of the planet were increasingly available as aesthetic, cosmological, and scientific resources. This presupposed something more than an older Orientalism; it required modern ethnography” (Clifford 1981:542). Even in the context of a shifting reality, both the surrealist and the ethnographer could position themselves as detached observers ready to analyze and compare their findings.

In Clifford’s description of the surrealist hunt for objects in Paris’s sprawling flea markets, an anthropologist might recognize the not-dissimilar pursuit of data. Half a century later, we scuttle through back alleys and board rooms in search of treasures: the telling anecdotes, or willing subjects during deep hang-out sessions. Clifford writes: “The surrealist elements of modern ethnography tend to go unacknowledged by a science that sees itself engaged in the reduction of incongruities rather than, simultaneously, in their production. But is not every ethnographer something of a surrealist, a reinventor and reshuffler of realities?” (Clifford 1981:564). For the surrealist artist, the production of incongruity happens on the page, canvas, or display. For the anthropologist, incongruity pops up in that wide-ranging table of contents, the graduate seminar syllabus, and the bibliography of the monograph. Anthropology is—at least in part—a discipline of assemblage, wherein the progress narrative central to science is backgrounded in favor of lateral thinking.

This thread of ethnographic surrealism may be a lifeline tossed from the 1980s and I find Clifford’s insights a valuable jumping off place for considering the potential benefits of expanding the material practices of the disciplines and the modes of attention to materials and process that might drive our scholarly engagements. Clifford’s insight helps me rethink what questions we ask, what investigations we undertake, and how we communicate our results. Perhaps such an invitation could only come from a scholar outside of the systems of career advancement in Professional Anthropology. Because of that status, Clifford is differently attentive to the discipline’s processes of and potential for exploring and organizing knowledge. Hard-earned seniority in a discipline comes at the cost of following, if not entirely loving the flavor of, its rules—and serving the Kool-Aid in graduate seminars.

But more hopefully, recent resources for broadening anthropology’s investigative spirit include work by Michael Taussig (2011), Andrew Causey (2017), and Hamdy et al. (2017)—all of which offer encouragement in taking seriously the multiple material and expressive forms available, including drawing, for investigation and narration. Still, the most instructive resource in terms of understanding methods from art over and above drawing as a way to see is the book Inventive Methods (Lury and Wakeford 2012). As Lury and Wakeford point out in their description inventiveness, the best methods for a particular investigator/investigation requires an open mind and experimentation. In fact, I could not have conceived the form and method
outlined in this article without simply jumping in. The method came exactly at the same time as the inquiry and, at a certain point, became an inquiry itself. Over the course of the project, my intentions shifted from inventing and populating headings to investigating the format itself through devising provocative heading/object/label relations.

The method I accidentally found for interpreting categories seemed intuitively right to me, both at the start and over the years as the “Things that Art” series grew. This medium of drawing and its attendant structures for storytelling (object and label) gave me both the limits and freedom that suited my investigation, and I will stick with it until the inkwell runs dry. Whether anyone in the field wants to embrace or encourage this kind of work as properly anthropological remains an open question.

Clifford suggests that ethnographers and surrealists are both intrigued with locating the objects and images that “allow us to properly see culture.” After all these years as a professional anthropologist, I am still not exactly sure what culture is or who the “us” refers to, let alone what it would take to properly see. But of this I am more and more certain: we have tools at our disposal that bear further use, not for resolution but for proliferation, suggestion, and new kinds of meaning for a new kind of Us.

Editor’s Note

To access additional examples of the “Things that Art” drawings discussed throughout this article, please see the author’s web site: www.cards-thatart.com

Notes

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1. “In its millennial tradition, the calligram has a triple role: to augment the alphabet, to repeat something without the aid of rhetoric, to trap things in a double cipher. First it brings a text and a shape as close together as possible. It is composed of lines delimiting the form of an object while also arranging the sequence of letters. It lodges statements in the space of a shape, and makes the text say what the drawing represents. . . . it distributes writing in a space no longer possessing the neutrality, openness, and inert blankness of paper. It forces the ideogram to arrange itself according to the laws of a simultaneous form” (Foucault 2008:20–21).

2. Borges’ story, from which this list is cited, imagines a world in which sounds and written language can sufficiently describe the world such that the visual representations are completely unnecessary and redundant. He writes of a chap named Wilkens who has systematized the world and all in it: “The impossibility of penetrating the divine pattern of the universe cannot stop us from planning human patterns, even though we are conscious they are not definitive” (Borges 2001:229–32).

3. As happens in response to any recontextualizing effort, ethnographic surrealism has critics. Hal Foster (1995:304) frets that Clifford’s thinking bears witness to a sort of “artist envy” in which “the artist becomes a paragon of formal reflexivity, sensitive to the difference . . . is this figure not a projection of a particular ideal-ego—of the anthropologist as collagist, semiologist, avant gardist?” I tend to disagree with
Foster’s basic understanding of Clifford’s essay, though to be sure, the “grass is greener” assessment is as alive among academic disciplines as in suburban backyards. I also do not think envy is necessarily a problem; surely projection and ideals can actually incite the process of learning and ambition. See also Hollier (1992), White (1978), and Rutten et al. (2013).

4. Professional members go out into the world to study what interests them, bring back cultural phenomena, and proceed to explain them by comparison to what others have found and named. The implicit goal of the discipline’s professional members—pursued in better and worse faith—is to join the canon and to structure the terms of that language, such that one’s theory, jargon, or description becomes one of the unifying touchstones of the field. This is a complex process, in that other scholars will need to use citations that are adequately known and already in circulation, and that are both descriptive enough and open enough that one can use them to structure a new argument. The complex dynamics of citation, in my view, need to be better studied and understood, particularly as the politics of citation determine scholarly advancement.

5. See also Lochlann Jain, “Book Review: Lissa,” forthcoming in MAQ. Also, a shout-out to the editor at the University of Toronto Press, Anne Brackenbury, is required for encouraging this line of ethnographic investigation.

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