

Alex Close

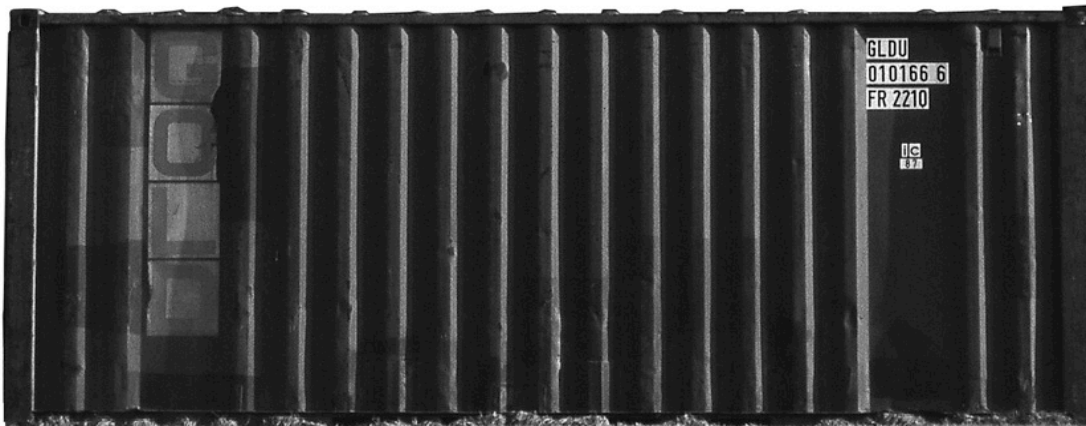
Container Manifesto

or: Why boxes have to be closed.

„Draw me a sheep!“

These are the first words of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's „little prince“. But the narrator – who is confronted with this odd command in a quite desperate situation: after an accident with his plane and a night alone in the middle of the Sahara – is not very good at drawing. Therefore, several of his tries are turned down by the strange little humanoid being referred to as the little prince for not representing what he has in mind. Finally, the narrator loses his patience, and comes down with a rather radical solution. He draws a box and gives the following explanation: "This is only his box. The sheep you asked for is inside." To his utter surprise, the little prince not only accepts this abstract model of mere sheep possibility but claims that it was exactly what he had wanted. They start a little conversation about the needs of the not even physically drawn animal which the little prince after a while ends with the observation: „Look! He has gone to sleep..."

This story from one of the most popular children's books for grownups ever written leads me to my first container rule:



A closed box always contains more things than an open one.

The unopened container stages possibility and invents content. Its imaginary holdings get desirable exactly because they're out of reach. Verification kills the image. Imagination is bigger than life, like French literary criticist and philosopher Gaston Bachelard puts it in his wonderful book „Poetics of Space.“ The closed box serves as a materialization field of imagination. In fact it is becoming an outer part of the inner worlds of people interacting with the box and its possibilities, a materialization ground for projective psychic development.

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Pandora's box

According to a study by art historian Erwin Panofsky and his wife Dora no myth today is as commonly known as Pandora's box: a container sent by the gods and filled with all the evils (or, in an alternative version, all the good things) of the world. Those are released on humankind (or lost forever) through the doing of a beautiful woman, Pandora, who opens the box despite an interdiction to do so. There has been a lot of attention to the socio-psychological aspects of the story, namely the use of the box as a metaphor for the dangers of technology, and the identification of box and woman. But the Panofskys also show that in the original antique versions of the myth the box wasn't a box but a jar, or, to be more precise, a *pithos*, that is: a large container for keeping food, made of stoneware weighing 20kg or more without content; the likes had been in use since the time of the ancient Egyptians. Only in the Renaissance' relaunch of the story by Erasmus von Rotterdam the hardly movable item for stock keeping, the ancient *pithos*, was replaced by a handy little box, a *pyxis*, and thus the mythical container became transportable.

This version was repeated ever after, until today. Thus, the 16th century transformation set the ancient container myth upon the tracks towards a container principle that is essential for 20th century technical modernity – the black box. The black box is a conceptual container that brings even heavy weight material situations as close as possible towards pure operationability, i.e.: calculability. Intermodalism in transportation of material and immaterial goods. This leads to my second container rule:



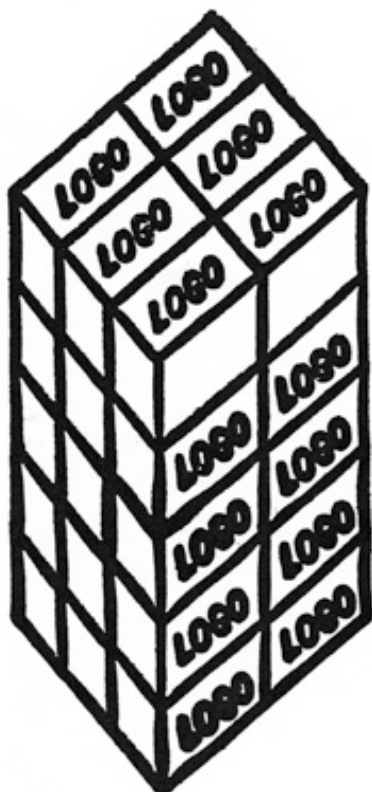
In modernity, every Pandora's box is framed as a black box or as a system of black boxes.

Accumulating mass and complexity lead to an existential need for reduction. Pandora is a container (or a situation) filled with too many things. Black boxes are a way to manage these things. Complexity reduction, modularization, decomposability, principle of hidden information: build a box around complicated things and *keep it closed*.

(There is a strange, somewhat paradoxical relationship between Pandora's box and black box, though. Pandora, always being more than the opposite (or the inside) of a black box – think of principle #1 –, cannot be entirely enclosed or banned. It pertinaciously persists. Therefore, any black box situation can transform (back) into a Pandora situation in an instant. This is what happened after 9/11: the shipping container, the black box of global trade, was suddenly considered a potentially deadly threat.)

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Serial packaging



Andy Warhol, by exhibiting mere tin cans and corn flakes packages moved attention to the basic fact that mass consumption in late consumer capitalism might be functioning much more on the attraction of brand packaging than on the attraction of products. Despite the fact that branding is mostly discussed as an idealistic phenomenon the cultural surplus brands are producing depends as much on the material projection surfaces of the cartons and wrappings. This is where brands emerge. Which leads to my third (and last) container rule:

Serial packaging brings forth the emancipation of the container from its contents.

Mass-production of packaging for mass-produced goods mass-distributed in retail stores where the only possibility of orientation lies in the writing on the surfaces of the closed boxes. This is at the same time (around 1900) the beginning of graphic design and of branding, which are themselves the most dominant world shaping forces of

consumer capitalism. Only through concentration on the material aspects and potentials of packaging the ideal of a virtualized commodity sphere could be developed: a lightweight consumer heaven of familiar brands, and ethical ideals, and moral values in which, paradoxically, more material goods than ever are being processed, but nobody wants to see them anymore.

From micro-logistics to macro-logistics: Mass distribution of closed boxes through a system of larger, standardized closed boxes, the generalization of a production and transportation principle developed inside the factory – *supply chain management* – spread consumer capitalism globally.

The package is something like the material token in this economy: Its main functions are not to protect and to transport any more, but to cover. This abstraction from core functionality and basic material qualities is paid off by making the packages and the containers the most important (and most solid) ground for brand performance.

If the brand is the *persona* of a commodity than the package is its body. (And the content is more or less irrelevant.)

No black boxes, no containers – no consumer culture, no pop art, no globalization.

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