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TheArtsSection

ALEX CLOSE

The Container Manifesto

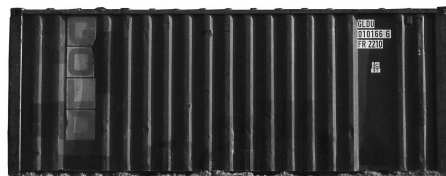
or: Why Boxes Must be Closed

'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:

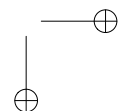
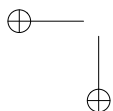
'This is only his box. The sheep you asked for is inside.'

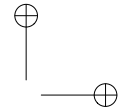
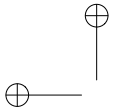
To his utter surprise, the little prince not only accepts this abstract model of mere sheep possibility but claims that it was exactly what he had wanted. They start a little conversation about the needs of the not even physically drawn animal which the little prince after a while ends with the observation:



'Look! He has gone to sleep ...'

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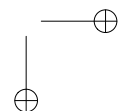
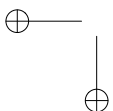


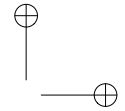
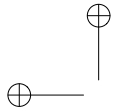
This story from one of the most popular children's books for grownups ever written leads me to my first container rule:

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

The unopened container stages possibility and invents content. Its imaginary holdings become desirable exactly because they're out of reach. Verification kills the image. Imagination is bigger than life, like French literary critic and philosopher Gaston Bachelard puts it in his wonderful book on the *Poetics of Space*. The closed box serves as a materialisation 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 materialisation ground for projective psychic development.

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 interdict 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 of which had been in use since the time of the ancient Egyptians. Only in the Renaissance relaunch of the story by Erasmus of 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. By radically reducing the size and weight of the physical container the ancient container myth was set upon the tracks towards a container principle that is essential for 20th century technical modernity – the black box.

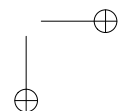
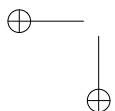


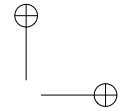
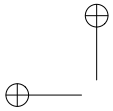
The black box is a conceptual container that brings even heavy weight material situations as close as possible towards pure operationability, i.e. calculability. This leads to my second container rule:

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, modularisation, 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 rule 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.)

Serial Packaging Andy Warhol, by exhibiting tin cans and corn flakes packages moved attention to the basic fact that mass consumption in late consumer capitalism is functioning much more on the attraction of brand packaging than on the value of products. Despite the



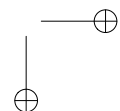
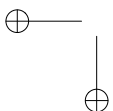
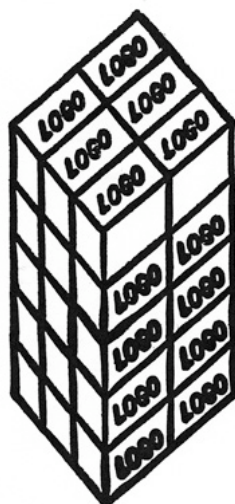


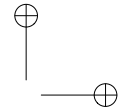
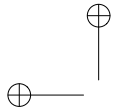
fact that branding is mostly discussed as an idealistic phenomenon, the cultural surplus that brands produce fundamentally depends on the material surfaces of the cartons and wrappings – the physical space where content is projected and brands emerge. This leads to my third (and final) container rule:

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 writing on the surfaces of the closed boxes. This is at the same time (since around 1900) the beginning of graphic design and of branding – 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 virtualised 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, standardised closed boxes, the generalisation of a production and transportation principle developed inside the factory – supply chain management – spread consumer capitalism globally. The package is 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, then the package is its body. And content? Faint memory of a reference (like gold after Bretton Woods), a phantasmic projection.

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The idea of TheArtsSection is to provide a forum for the discussion of art, artists, and the ideas of artists. Our intention is to make this journal an outlet for more than what Thomas Kuhn famously called 'normal science': the never ending spiral of puzzle-solving of the academic enterprise. For TheArtsSection we encourage submissions and proposals from all walks of intellectual life: essays, reports, letters, and diaries. In 23(2) Martin van Hees discussed a philosophical issue embedded in a Bob Dylan song; in 23(1) Bruno Frey wrote about cultural tourism; and in 22(3) Nicola Atkinson Davidson published a diary of an exhibition. All that counts is that the contributions or proposals contain inspiration and experimentation – in Nicola's case, a Los Angeles motel cleaning woman found her work beautiful and this opened her mind to 'other possibilities in life'. In 23(3), Monika Mokre published a photograph and a reflection on the nature of art and politics entitled, 'This is not Art'.

