



**your
collection
starts here**

COLLECT ALL __ !

NATALIE SIMS — CASE STUDY
A DAY OF FREE ENCHANTMENT

FREE

ENCHANTMENT



THIS IS IT

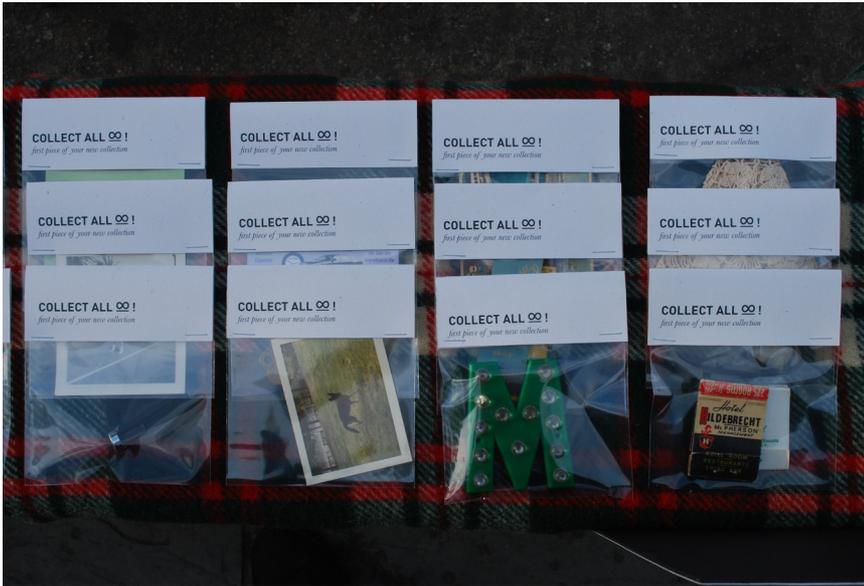
your collection starts here

"i like the feeling of something having several iterations, subtly different but also kind of the same. it forms its own paradigm, and that mantra is reinforced over and over. this is what any good collection does."
/paul lukas

NATALIE SIMS
A DAY OF FREE ENCHANTMENT



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FUTURE APPLICATION

Though this project is particular to an eccentric way of thinking, one component of it that I think is rife with expandable possibility is the visual language of the distribution site. The small table amidst the street of average card tables and predictable collectibles was a remarkably successful visual cue. The mixing of the language of the posters and street vendor aesthetic was also a success point that I think could easily be extrapolated to accommodate any project needing to provoke peoples' curiosity. I think the one-to-many sea change happened just before my final project, when I recognized the value of the data I had collected from Paul and turned it toward all the non-Pauls.



PROBLEM DEFINITION

The core problem I have been attacking has evolved over the course of the semester, but the primary issue identified for the final intervention focused on the enchantment of the object, and the questions that arise when making such a claim. The specific object I was interested in investigating was the item, that for one reason or another, sparks the beginning of a collection. How does a collection start? Why do we find ourselves developing a collection around one item over another? Some thinking around this idea suggests that certain individuals have a more finely tuned sensitivity to the appeal of things, and thus maybe they are better able to pinpoint where a collection begins and where one does not.

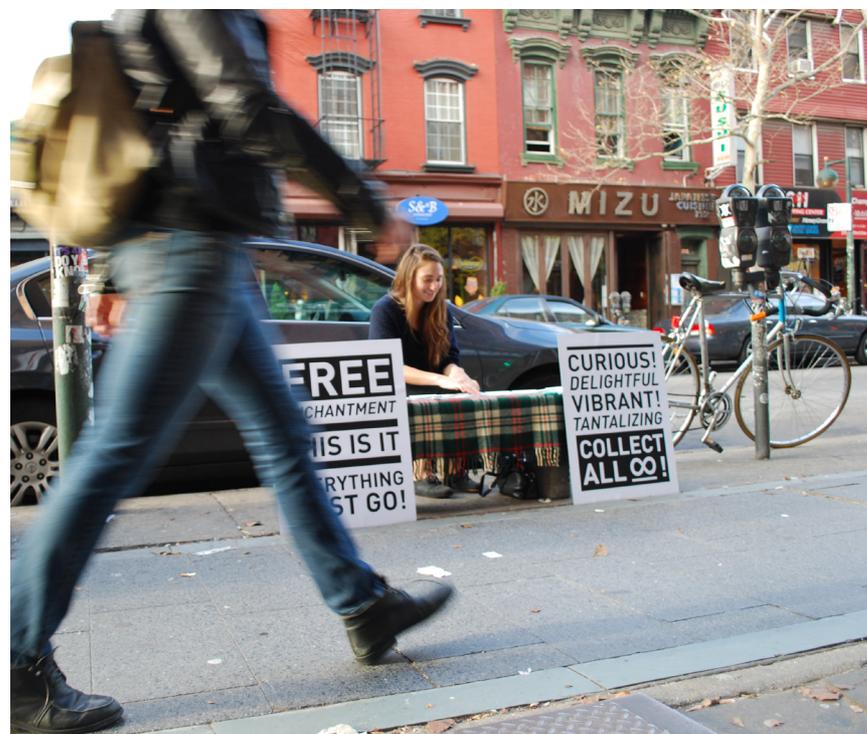
Another idea is that we ourselves are in fact the enchanters, and it is just a matter of determining what bit of material ephemera we are compelled to enchant next. Another still is that there is just an inexplicable moment of creative impulse when one encounters the “right” thing, a moment that they could never craft for themselves. Whatever the case may be, this project revolved around me asking these questions, to myself, to the public, and to the things.

PROJECT PLAN

Over the course of a week, I paid attention to the things around me that spoke up, gathering all the artifacts that seemed to jump out of their environment. These ranged from found objects in the street, stray things lying around friends' houses, and small tokens purchased from thrift stores. By taking them out of the context entirely, I was endeavoring to wipe them clean of their history and origin, allowing them to exist and present themselves on their own accord. In this way, I deemed them enchanted and anew, poised to offer themselves up to a new possessor. Co-opting the visual language and space of street vendors in Brooklyn, I set up a humble table in between all the vendors on Bedford Avenue in Williamsburg who are out there everyday selling things not all that different from my own. Sitting at a small table about half the height of the others, I was a small break in the landscape, and as such demanded a kind of quiet curiosity of passersby. I took advantage of my booth being a temporary and alternative distribution site, and made oversized posters espousing "free enchantment" and delightful curiosities.

Using the language of going-out-of-business and clearance sale posters, I urged that "everything must go!," referencing the fact that these things were at the end of their lifespan. Curiously, however, when people stopped to find out what all was being sold, they were informed that these things "had to go" to then only be collected. Each was packaged separately with a tag notifying potential possessors that this was the first piece of their new collection. In this way, I attempted to transfer the aura of the object from the hands of the knowing collector into a found facsimile. In giving meaning to an otherwise mundane object, I intended to manifest the hope and promise of a collector and that moment when they know they've stumbled upon the perfect catalyst.

I hoped to create a space where it was possible to have a conversation about things from this eccentric perspective, letting the public into the discussion about enchanted matter and the possibility of transferring that enchantment to new people and new possessions.



PERSONAL REFLECTION

This was such an enriching process. Those afore mentioned positive interactions were truly gratifying. They served to put everything into perspective, and really affirm the trials I went through along the way. This was a big landmark for me. For so long the conversation had been between me and things, me and the environment, and me and a curmudgeonly Paul, but witnessing the pure delight I brought to a few strangers made the semester of experiments worth it.

Another huge landmark was learning how and when to let Paul go, and how to turn all of my exasperation with him into productive and positive goals for moving forward. It forced me to turn the burden around on myself and really think clearly again about what I wanted this to do and what I hoped to gain. On a slightly more personal level, this project helped me to locate and achieve a level of communication and language that really elevated what I was doing, that made my installation accessible rather than off-putting. This has been a challenge of mine throughout my year and a half of grad school, and I think really having to think about strangers and literally putting myself out there pressured me into designing for people, and not just grad students.



CRITERIA FOR SUCCESS

The criteria for the success of this project was based around a few, somewhat speculative concerns. First and foremost, I aimed to facilitate for people a spontaneous moment of creative impulse with an object, that they obviously could not have anticipated experiencing. This coming to pass would be a definite surface level success. Going a bit deeper, I hoped draw people into conversation by utilizing familiar cultural tools mixed with humor to pique curiosity. I wanted to temporarily resist the intended structuring of distribution sites,

opening the familiar up to new possibilities. I wanted to become apart of the content, the material, and the process so that I could physically act as the medium, transferring new meaning to a well-worn situation, and also to the things themselves. That said, the most ambitious criteria for success resides in my being able to present to a stranger the promise of that moment when a collection begins. As a first step, however, I would be happy having at least conveyed the intention of rethinking that capacity, and transferring to the objects some aura that wouldn't have existed prior.

PROBLEM BACKGROUND

This all started with me thinking about the nature of collections, the vibrancy of matter, and the differing lifespans of things. How do collections unfurl? They almost always seem to encapsulate an essence of the mundaneness of objects, yet offer things a new life and a new position in the world. Why do they start with one thing and not another? What, if anything, do they narrativize about their possessor and about their constituents? To what can we attribute the sense that their whole is greater than the sum of their parts? What ignites and sustains the impulse to collect? Why do the most successful collections seem to be the ones that most thoroughly repurpose, or cloud the things' original justification? Do they need to be comprised of things that are otherwise kind of defunct in the world? To what can we attribute the "call" of thing that originally enchanted its possessor?

ASSESSMENT

As I stated earlier, my primary surface level criteria for evaluating the success of this project was simply engendering an unanticipated moment of creativity or joy around a material artifact. By this standard I do feel like it was a success. Every person who left with a collection-starter found something on the table that spoke to them and made them smile, something they were happy to take home. As a secondary goal, I was hoping to create a space to have honest conversations about our material condition, and to not shy away from a eccentric, or otherwise unpopular perspective about the world of things.

I think I got very close to succeeding in the presentation of my booth and the assembled items. I think the visual language was in line, but that maybe the wording was intimidating at times.

Even though it was a very simplified version of the sorts of things Paul and I talked about, for the street audience, it probably could have been simpler. I think my co-opting of familiar cultural tools was well-received and actually did generate a lot of interest in getting people to come over to speak to me. In this same vein, I think I successfully resisted the intended structuring of the vendor space on Bedford Avenue. I reworked the landscape for a day and installed an alternative kind of distribution site, energetically giving away things meant to be saved and collected.

I think perhaps in a small number of cases that day I achieved my most ambitious goal, which was presenting to an unsuspecting stranger the promise of a collector, the promise of enchantment. These few moments were very rewarding. These were giving an arrowhead to the girl with the unloved rock collection, an old typewriter key to an ecstatic writer, and the Swedish postcard to the exchange student. It was in these instances that I really felt that I had fulfilled the criteria I had laid out for myself.



OUTREACH METHODS

In search of people who might be able to shed light on some of these questions, I began attending events at the City Reliquary in Brooklyn. They are a not-for-profit community museum with rotating exhibitions of members' personal collections, allowing real-life objects and the honesty of the collection to be what is on display. They employ all the familiar language of a museum, galleries with rotating shows, guided tours, exhibition catalogues, receptions, and even a turnstile, in order to glorify the everyday and often overlooked objects near-and-dear to someone's heart that found renewed purpose in the venue of an exhibit. I participated in a show-and-tell night and met a fellow by the name of Paul who was a regular visitor to the reliquary. The circumstances of the night, as we were both there showcasing prized objects, facilitated our talking about things and why we loved them, and in particular what sorts of things we were compelled to assemble.

He turned out to be a avid collector with quite an eccentric background and career that uniquely positioned him to speak on the enchantment of things. A number of years back, he noticed he had a propensity for analyzing small details in things, and found a niche blogging about the intricacies and eccentricities of sports uniform design. He also had an article published in Slate magazine about a collection he has of vintage report cards from a girl's trade school in the 1930's. He simultaneously collects vintage pencil sharpeners, vintage cooking booklets that have the word "meat" in the title, coin-operated gadgets, and any ephemera depicting the cultural intersection of bowling with beer.

All in all the public reception was quite positive. Responses ranged from confused about why these things were free, to genuine intrigue and excitement, even coincidence. I had lengthy conversations with everyone who stopped to peruse the items about the origins of collections and our inexplicable fondness for certain types of matter. There were two instances in which people already had small unloved collections started that fit the trope of one of the pieces I was giving away. There was another traveler from Sweden who found a vintage postcard she liked, only to turn it over and find out it was an image of her home town from the early 1900's. A Spanish speaking man came by and I tried in my best mangled Spanish to explain to him what I was doing. He found a photograph he liked and without needing to know anything but "free" ("gratis") he happily took it with him. One girl told me she didn't feel right taking it out of the bag. A group of people promised to "try it," see if the enchantment worked and if their chosen objects truly did start collections. The neighboring vendors wouldn't take anything, but one did tell me I had "good marketing."

PUBLIC FEEDBACK

Based on Paul's lack of responsiveness in our emailing, I had to rethink the definition of my public after the first two interventions. Though frustrated, this was actually a very good jumping off point for me. I realized that Paul was more a tool in helping me clarify my intent and test my hypotheses than he was my recipient audience. Taking everything I had learned from my primary research and experiments with him, I shifted focus to the general public who has no reason to think about things in this way, or for whom the provided enchantment is necessary. In desiring to transfer the aura of the collected item from someone like Paul to an "unconverted" stranger, it was necessary and indeed quite helpful to just simplify: "your collection starts here."

b.

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"It becomes a sort of mantra: new notes in meat, your meat calendar for 1964, 250 easy ways to cook meat"

-
"Once you realize there is a trope, you have to continue the collection. You have to invent the category"

ETHNOGRAPHY

We attended several more events at the reliquary together, we had coffee and he showed me around his neighborhood, and finally I went to his house for an extensive interview and to see some of his things. One thing I learned very quickly interacting with him is that he has a huge amount of rules, rituals, and philosophies that govern even his most idiosyncratic behaviors. While at first this made it hard to know where to fit myself in to his routine, it made for very clear data points to design interventions around, and ultimately to some succinct ideas about our material condition and the nature of the collection.

For example, he believes that he is in a very delicate balance with the material world (especially considering that he relies on it professionally), and places a lot of importance in "responding to the trope." He describes the trope as that spontaneous creative reply that an enchanting object provokes in us. He is a journalist literally in the business of not letting those moments pass him by. He sees the right collection as eliciting a kind of mantra in its repetition. He is similarly infatuated with the idea that in finding the mantra, he in turn creates new categories, and thus collections that are uniquely his own.



EXTERNAL RESEARCH CONT.

With regard to matter and collections, the external research coupled with my interactions with Paul helped me to formulate a simple and concise, yet appropriately mysterious way to represent the starting point of a collection. Offering "free enchantment" not only turned a lot of heads, but clarified my hypothesis very straightforwardly.

This helped me to think about the presentation of the items, giving each its own separate and unique packaging and stripping them of their history or baggage. I presented them in a far more meticulously organized fashion than my neighbors were presenting their knickknacks, taking advantage of the power of mimicking high design and a museum presentation strategy, which seemed to instantly give me more credibility. These readings helped me to find the potency in intersecting not only the collection and the museum, but the domestic interior and the street.

EXTERNAL RESEARCH

On Installation and Site Specificity, from *Space, Site, Intervention*
Erika Suderburg (2000)

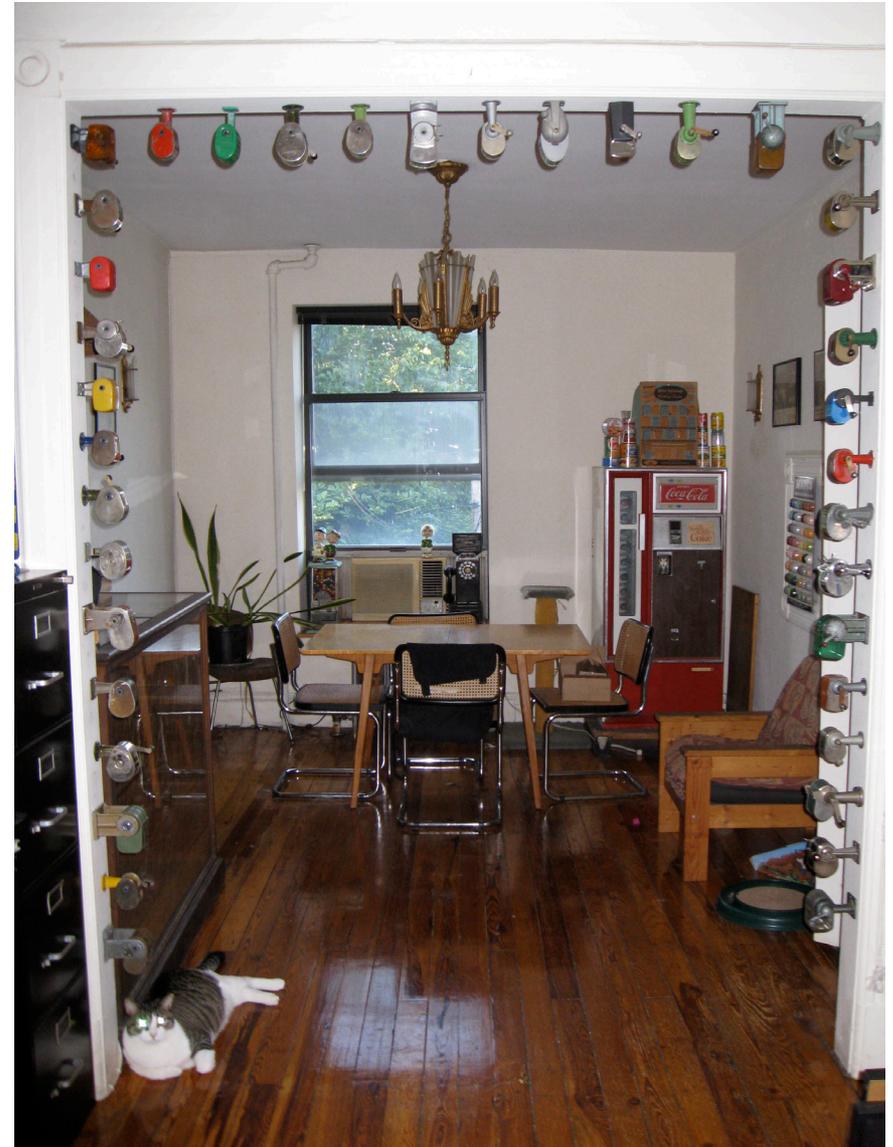
Trespassing Toward Relevance, from *The Interventionists: User's Manual to the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life*
Nato Thompson (2004)

Vibrant Matter
Jane Bennett (2009)

Art and Artifact:
Museum as Medium
James Putnam (2009)

I chose a selection of readings addressing the three main components of my project: tools for site-specific installation, the nature of collections, and the vibrancy or enchantment power of matter. The research about installations and interventions was helpful in formulating how I was actually going to put into action what I was setting out to do.

An important facet of site-specific installation designated by both authors was the building and deconstructing of familiar situations, and utilizing your temporary occupation of space to open up new ways of thinking about established models and landscapes. To this end, the site is integral. This propelled me to find a very specific type of visual language and location in setting up my table for distribution. I observed the street vendors in my neighborhood over the course of a few days and reiterated the language of their distribution site, placing myself in the middle of the pack but making myself smaller and lower. Additionally, I introduced the expressions and visual language of another type of distribution situation with the oversized clearance signs. Confounding these two clear and distinct modes of exchange to create an alternative free market, was recognizable and yet intriguing enough to get almost every one who passed to at least look twice, if not stop.

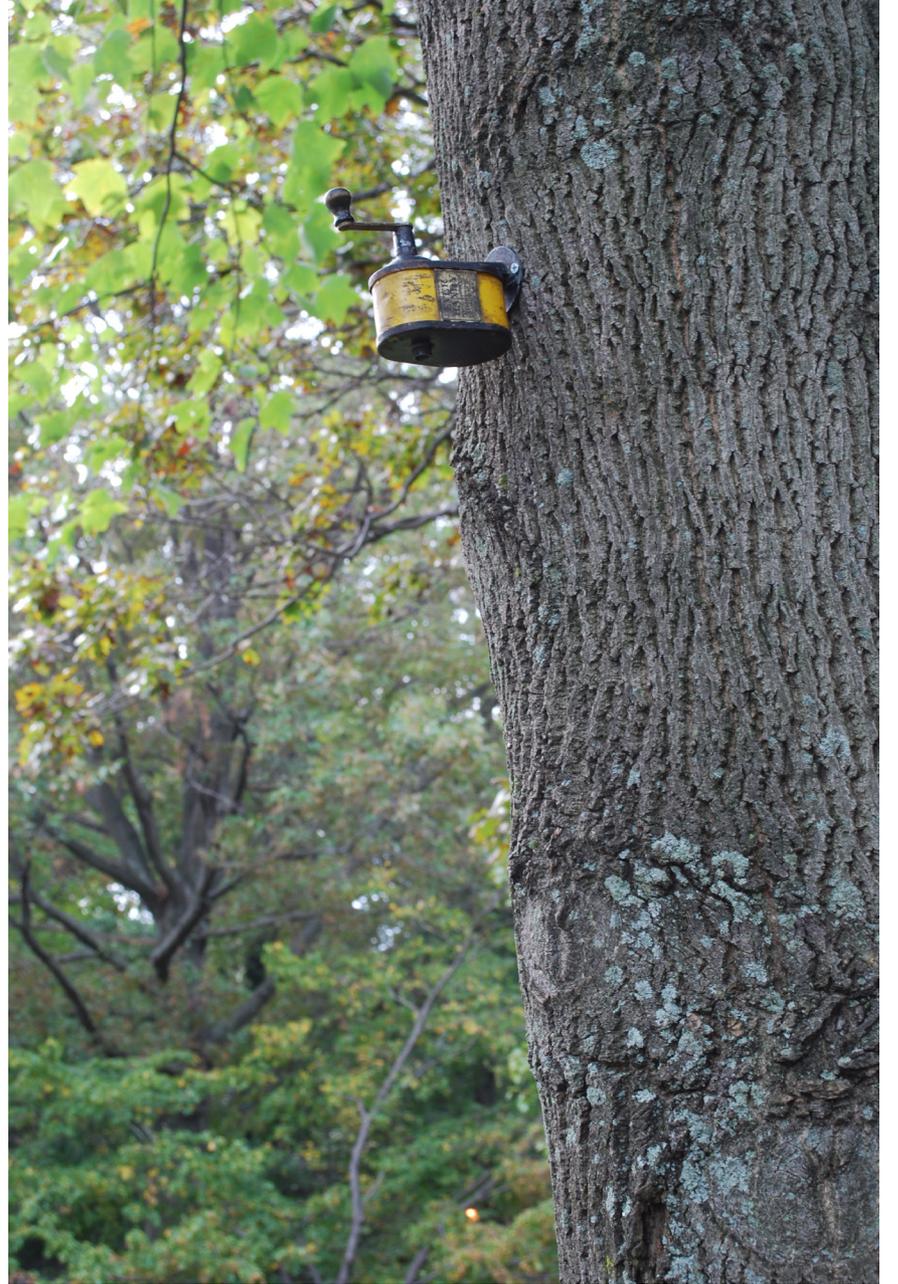


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On the heels of Paul's expressing his disinterest in being an active participant, I tried to then come up with a way for me to communicate with him indirectly. If he was not inclined to interact with me, but was inclined to interact with material components of his environment, then I too would interact with his environment. From our conversations, I knew that outside of working from his home, he rides his bike three times around Prospect Park everyday at 4 o'clock. Using the park as an avenue of access to his life, I scouted a tree along his route and installed a small installation in hopes to spark a moment of spontaneous creative exchange with his domain. I secured a vintage pencil sharpener, much like the ones in his collection, to the tree at slightly above eye level. To draw attention to the space, I made a chandelier of unsharpened number 2 pencils in the same vein and suspended it from the branches overhead.

I hoped to facilitate for him an inspiring interaction with the material world of the sort we had talked about based on the failures of my previous intervention.

It was low confrontation and in a space independent of me. It was sensitive to his discomfort with the prior project, and it did not ask him to force anything on objects, but rather allowed for that unprompted joy of experiencing the material world without my direct and immediate intervention.

The result of this project is slightly more difficult to interpret, as I did not feel like it was right to ask him if he saw the installation, or what he thought about it. I felt as though directly engaging him about it would contradict its poetics and its intention to provide an unplanned and inspired dialogue with his environment. The problem with this, of course, is that there is no way of gaining data about his reaction. It did have a "message in a bottle" quality to it, and I am sure that anyone passing by would have enjoyed it as well, but even banking on this would be tricky unless I had been very specific and succinct in my decision making about its placement and the signs pointing to it in the surrounding environment. On a positive note, I made a thoughtful attempt to turn his feedback from the first intervention into very specific criteria for the second one.

MICRO-INTERVENTIONS

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For the first intervention, I asked him to give a voice to things around him in order to see if anthropomorphizing was part of his enchantment process. I sent him a series of things in my immediate surroundings which I had affixed with a note stating what I would imagine the things would be saying to me if they could talk. I wanted to make it low pressure by both setting up a playful scenario and by allowing him to do something he is good at, responding to the material world by writing creatively, but in a less professional setting.

The result was a series of honest emails discussing his level of discomfort with the project. While frustrating, I soon realized what good data his rejection of my idea was.

He didn't believe in how contrived and artificial it was, which solidified my ideas regarding his suspicion that it is much more about that unpredictable moment of creative impulse that the world presents to us, rather than us retro-fitting our things. I learned that anthropomorphism doesn't account for very much of his enchantment with things, as he was uncomfortable trying to force that out. I ascertained here as well that he takes seriously his relationship with the material world. He is aware that his career in many ways depends on his ability to continue to locate and share small enchanting details about things with his readers. It was the complete wrong approach for someone who regards what they do as "responding" to the things that show up. On a more pragmatic level, I learned that he had neither the time nor the energy to actively participate in additional projects, which was a bit of turning point in the ways I began to frame my investigations so as not to disregard his time, space, and comfort zone.

b.

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As a sort of cathartic response to his initial disinterest, I anonymously created a Wikipedia page about him and something I had stumbled across in our early interactions. I noticed that none other than Michael Bierut has mentioned Paul in the comments of one of his columns in Design Observer. He had written a brief piece about the Brannock foot measuring device that foretold all of our adolescent shoe sizes. Paul formerly published a zine by the name of "Inconspicuous Consumption" that featured the device angled within a circle, forming a no signal (a circle with a slanted line running through it). He also has this image tattooed on his upper arm, of which Bierut had commented on in his column. As a designer, this was clearly a fascinating find, and so I wanted to commemorate how noteworthy this was to me in a form that was not intrusive to Paul's routine, in a public and very temporary medium. At the risk of sounding morbid, I envisioned this act as akin to placing flowers on a gravestone, or memorial sending something out into the ether.

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