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Obscure Objects

ANDREW HULTKRANS ON *THE THING*



The Thing Quarterly 8 (September 2009). Trevor Paglen's coffee mug.

HALF MACGUFFIN, HALF HOLY GRAIL, the “impossible object” driving Jonathan Lethem’s novel *Chronic City* (Doubleday, 2009) is a vase of transcendent attractiveness called a chaldron. Some readers may take the word to be the author’s coinage, but it dates back to at least sixteenth-century England (an early spelling of *cauldron*) and denotes an inexact measure of volume, generally of coal. For an elusive object that appears as different things at different times and whose meaning shifts depending on who’s looking at it, the name is well chosen, carrying metaphoric weight that implies specificity but remains indeterminate.

Such is the case with *The Thing Quarterly*, a “periodical in the form of an object,” edited—or, better, curated—by Bay Area artists Jonn Herschend and Will Rogan, with each “issue” commissioned from a different artist, writer, musician, filmmaker, or designer and mailed to subscribers through the US Post in oddly shaped brown cardboard boxes. Issue 7 of *The Thing*, released in June 2009, is a pair of designer eyeglasses in a royal blue case with the words CHALDRON OPTICAL SYSTEM debossed on its surface. Conceived by Lethem, the glasses were designed by Selima Salaun of Selima Optique and former Jack Spade designer Matt Singer. While they play no role in *Chronic City*, the glasses—a nod to the paranoid science-fiction thriller *They Live* (1988), which featured similarly reality-clarifying shades, and whose writer-director, John Carpenter, also shot a remake of *The Thing* (1982)—purport to allow the wearer to see that obscure object of desire, the chaldron, amid the snares and delusions of conventional reality.

The Thing’s patrons were willing coconspirators in Lethem’s campaign to introduce an impossible object into the real world. Narrative-based artists themselves, Herschend (whose funny, deadpan works blend text, performance, video, and implied though never quite revealed backstories) and Rogan (whose photographs and installations center on melancholic moments of architectural entropy and freak occurrences) had already

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manufactured and mailed to subscribers window shades silk-screened with angsty handwritten text (Miranda July), a rubber doorjamb inscribed with the artist's childhood fan letter to Billie Jean King (Anne Walsh), a white baseball cap printed with "The Thing 3" in Arabic (Kota Ezawa), and a blank hardcover book called *Problems and Promises* attached to a tennis shoe by its lace (Allora & Calzadilla), among other Things. Future issues will be created by Starlee Kine, Chris Johanson, the design collective Doo.Ri, Matthew Higgs, and Dave Eggers.

Issue 8, released in September 2009, is doubly impossible: Commissioned from "experimental geographer" Trevor Paglen, it is a white coffee mug emblazoned with a military-style patch design depicting a gray cartoon alien in a slave chain, encircled with the words ALIEN TECHNOLOGY EXPLOITATION DIVISION and YLTLHOBQO' JAY'. After publishing his book *I Could Tell You but Then You Would Have to Be Destroyed by Me* (Melville House, 2007), about "black" (or beyond top-secret) military and intelligence projects, Paglen appeared on *The Colbert Report* and described an Area 51–esque patch he'd heard about from one of his sources. The designer of the patch, Robert Fabian, formerly of the Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility at US Space Command in Colorado, saw the show, e-mailed Paglen, and allowed him to use the image. Fabian had made the patch for himself and his colleagues as a joke because they were being teased by others at the facility about the secrecy of their project. ("YlthobQo' Jay" is Klingon for "Don't ask!")

The latest *Thing*, issue 9, was created by artist Ryan Gander and released in December 2009. A deck of "parallel" (double-sided) playing cards Gander originally made in 2006 in collaboration with the London-based design collective Europa for the Standard hotel in Miami, this third edition is printed in acid Pantone colors in a photonegative version of the original (backgrounds are black; numbers and suits in color). Inspired by *Back to the Future* (1985) and Roald Dahl's children's tale "The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar" (1977), the deck comes with instructions for "parallel blackjack" (players north and south; dealer west). The parameters Herschend and Rogan set for their collaborators are clear: They must create an everyday object that somehow incorporates the written word. Partially influenced by *McSweeney's* and text-based art (Lawrence Weiner, Roni Horn, Jenny Holzer), the pair are wedded to the idea that *The Thing* is a magazine of sorts, though they're aware this is a bit of a stretch. Indeed, while they think of themselves as publishers, what they are ultimately most adamant about is objecthood. "The physicality of the object is crucial to *The Thing*," Herschend says. "What happens to objects in the world is of interest to us—the unpredictable way in which they accumulate meaning through their interactions. We love their tangible pointers to their intangible histories. The crack in the Liberty Bell is more interesting than the bell itself."

Like chaldrons in *Chronic City*, recent *Things* will no doubt end up on eBay. As tawdry and unintended as that sounds, it will probably please Herschend and Rogan as much as any other result. As the old cyberpunk maxim goes, "The street finds its own use for things."

Andrew Hultkrans is the author of Forever Changes (Continuum 33 1/3, 2003).