

LOCHLANN JAIN

THINGS THAT ART



a graphic menagerie of enchanting curiosity

# Things That What?

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The world is all that is the case.

– Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

Sea World is all that is the case.

– Michael Robbins, *Alien vs. Predator*

So much depends upon a letter or two. With the flick of a slithering signifier, the American poet karate chops the Austrian philosopher's austere pronouncement, forcing an expansive yet precise koan to take a fishy downturn into the chum of the real.<sup>1</sup> It's a case in point of a general, even generic, possibility that art affords: the assault on generality itself in favor of prickly, sticky particularity. Metaphysical straight men solicit queer clowns. I think something similar is afoot with the seriously playful title of the seriously playful book you are holding in your hands. It makes your eyes do a triple take. Having expected *Things That Are*, and then *Things That Aren't*, you blink and look again at what is already

before you: *Things That Art*. In this categorical assault upon categories, an anthropologist-who-is-also-an-artist makes drawings-that-are-also-arguments about the manifold, particular ways that we try, and fail, and sometimes succeed, at knowing the unruly things that make up the world.

If it were true that “the world is all that is the case,” that leaves a lot of work to do, but it still sounds as if it could be done. Tally up everything that is the case and don’t include anything that isn’t the case and you’ve got the world: all the things that are and none of the things that aren’t. Hope swells that a sufficiently extensive pileup of the material components of the world would give us not a model of the world but the world itself, an exhaustively inclusive Noah’s Ark from which the imaginary and the non-actual have been discreetly purged. Good luck for hedgehogs and bats, bad luck for unicorns and mermaids. We already know that this can’t work. The world is made up of all sorts of things, yes, but there are also processes and changes, actions and movements, and forces and flows. Things have relationships that are also a part of the world, and often it’s the relationships between things, their messy processes of interaction, domination, and transformation, that make up most of what matters. From babies to tumors to viruses, new forms just keep emerging; from dodos to ice shelves to languages, old forms just keep vanishing. One could never hope to keep track of the two-way traffic between “things that are” and “things that aren’t.”

Accordingly, *Things That Art* insists upon the breathing room provided by a wrinkle of difference, a difference that art can make in how we imagine the ways of being available to us once we surrender the expectation that we could separate “things that are” from “things that aren’t.” From its title’s provocation to

the cabinet of curiosity within, this book insists upon the artfulness already within things, their capacity to cluster and jostle and confound our best attempts to frame and know them, whether they are as homely as “things at the farm” or as open-ended as “things that abstract.” Bypassing both the imaginary black hole of non-being and the impossible enumeration of creation, in these tight, sly drawings, Lochlann Jain stages the disturbing and generative effects of things as they cling to and repel each other, and the tragicomic role of language as it tries and fails to pin those processes down – specifically, on index cards.

Within the whirling galaxy of plural “things” on the move there’s a consistent, singular thing that is always kept in view: the homely yet expansive material framework of the single index card. A stable basis for all of Jain’s drawings, the index card becomes a proscenium stage on which a conceptual drama starts anew, one page at a time: a single phrase beginning with “things that ...” groups together a cluster of examples stacked in orderly rows, comprising eight to twelve subsidiary cases. Each example is itself both a word or phrase and a tiny drawing. Jain works in miniature, with the twitchy energetic lines and sorbet color palette that, to my eyes, recalls the visual work of Roz Chast and Lynda Barry. But if this colorful and instantly accessible graphic style connotes the humble cartoon, its rendition is here cross-pollinated with the kind of persistently estranging attention to micro-implications of usage one associates with ordinary language philosophy and the fieldwork of Jain’s own discipline, anthropology. Do you read these drawings or look at them? Yes.

As one works one’s way across and down and sideways along Jain’s grid of constituent parts, the piece’s title works as both lure and frame, corralling this rebus of semiotic components into a singular-yet-composite family album. Each

case contributes to the total set, but each case complicates it too, as the different timescales of “brain” and “bikini atoll” force one to consider and reconsider the invisible lines of force gathering together “things that are easily broken, slow to repair.” It’s only on a second or third glance that one might think of brain coral, a free associative tendril linking “brain” and “bikini atoll” together, a relationship ready to hand but lying submerged beneath the placid surface of the drawing’s catalog of objects open to injury. The drawing snaps into tighter focus still when one realizes that Jain is in fact the author of an anthropological monograph on the legal and cultural nexus of injury and product design.<sup>2</sup>

At once describing the worn smooth pathways of our brains and building new shortcuts via tart visual/linguistic puns, Jain’s associative networks condense a rich stew of reference into a beguilingly singular new form. In doing so, they resemble what Freud termed the “‘collective’ and ‘composite figures’ and the strange ‘composite structures’” of dreamwork: “creations not unlike the composite animals invented by the folk-imagination of the Orient.”<sup>3</sup> Freud’s Orientalism feels like a defensive distortion of what we know he knows: the chimeras and hybrid monsters of Greek and Egyptian and Hebrew mythology closer to home. That Orientalizing riff on monstrous composite bodies summons its own composite twin in Jorge Luis Borges’s *locus classicus* of taxonomic discontent, the fictitious “Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge,” which divides the animal kingdom into 14 categories:

*those that belong to the emperor, embalmed ones, those that are trained, suckling pigs, mermaids (or sirens), fabulous ones, stray dogs, those that are included in this classification, those that tremble as if they were mad, innumerable ones,*

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*those drawn with a very fine camel hair brush, et cetera, those that have just broken the flower vase, those that, at a distance, resemble flies.*<sup>4</sup>

Taken together, we have a Push-Me-Pull-You monster in which authorial hand-waving toward the “Orient” becomes a thin scrim beneath which the turbulent process of ordering knowledge roils and breeds. Freud promises an etiological explanation via dreamwork that can be reverse engineered to show the component parts that make up the chimeras of the mind, while Borges reveals the specters of caprice and unreason that haunt the scene of creating the very categories into which discrete objects get placed.

Modeling this *mise-en-abyme* as if in homage to Borges’s self-destroying categorical artifact, Jain’s “things you chart” contains “things you chart” within itself. Borges, and Borges’s influence upon Foucault, surfaces explicitly in an essay – also titled “Things That Art” – that Jain published in the journal *Anthropology and Humanism* about their practice. Speaking as both an anthropologist and an artist, Jain flags the personal stakes of their disciplinary intervention into the mesh of anthropological knowledge and its objects: “As a mixed-race, gender-fluid person, I have always had an uneasy, even antagonistic relationship to categories.”<sup>5</sup> Identity matters, because the story of how categories work to orient and localize knowledge is itself a historical and contingent process, one that serves some interests (for Borges, the emperor; for Freud, the analyst; for Western anthropology, the university) and holds back others. In playfully constructing new categories, Jain’s work models how re-zoning the freestanding categories we have inherited might dislodge their hold and make space for something else to emerge.

There's something ambitious at work here. Much of the push-pull of these drawings takes place in the tethered relationship between image and language, what Freud taught us to see as the fundamental axes of *Sachvorstellung* (thing-presentation) and *Wortvorstellung* (word-presentation) as they mesh and grind against each other to produce psychic life. Continuously probing this basic conceptual antinomy, Jain's drawings gather things on behalf of words. They help us to see language's function as a sorting mechanism, but they also draw out the latent perversity of that operation, producing comedic riffs and uncanny rebuses as a given conceptual frame opens onto vistas of application or fixates around a set of shared problems. These linguistic unions of disparate materials belong together, but the sheer arbitrary nature of how they are gathered displays the ad hoc nature of language's capacity to snag itself en route to order.

This comes to a head in "things connected by n'," because that drawing not only co-creates the assemblage it gathers, but it is also, itself, about the everyday work of assemblage making. Are the adhesions of "slip n' slide" really comparable to "mac n' cheese"? If the cuddly homosocial bonhomie of "Fred n' Barney" prompts a smile, sidling up to "Bonnie n' Clyde" pushes into the murderous terrain of *folie à deux*: whether one remembers the Peckinpah slo-mo of Bonnie and Clyde's fatal finale or not, one already senses in this drawing that the couple form isn't always quite so "soft n' cozy." To borrow a phrase from *Hamlet*, the drawing invites us to "consider too curiously" the happenstance within a seemingly trivial connection point. If "soft n' cozy" belong together through the sheer force of linguistic repetition, their link looks suddenly tendentious, subject to inversion. The drawing invites you to snuggle, but it also

quietly challenges you to think of various repellent substances that are soft but far from cozy, and of cozy things (fireplaces, bed frames) that are far from soft.

There's an oddity here to Jain's encounter with the everyday, a slight but pervasive distance that is the counterpoint to its squinting proximity to the tiny. In *Light without Heat*, literary critic David Carroll Simon describes a precipitating emotional stance that has gone under-described in histories of the genesis of scientific rationalism: the dawn of a notably cool gaze upon phenomena. If that mood is one of "nonchalance" that brackets partiality as a means to try to hold its object in place, it is not without its own emotional tenor, which Simon flags in his reading of the natural philosophy of Francis Bacon as a kind of "luxurious abandon."<sup>6</sup> Perhaps something like this stance animates the humor that predominates in Jain's quasi-anthropological taxonomy of linguistic and material quirks, a holiday from responsibility that permits the serious work of looking at things as they are to take its own time to unfold. There's humor in this book, but it's not the sort to trigger a guffaw or a gut-bursting explosion of carnivalesque subversion. Rather, these drawings produce the quiet but precise clicking into place of a chiropractic nudge. One feels as if little adjustments are being made to one's mind as one progresses from drawing to drawing.

That sense of intuitive rightness mixed with surprise, and the relentless everydayness of its primary concerns, calls to mind an uncanny poetics of the quotidian that animates certain queer memoirs. It may just be me, but Jain's work bears a striking similarity in both tight conceptual organization and loosely paratactic feel with poet Joe Brainard's celebrated work *I Remember* (2001).<sup>7</sup> A list-like canticle of identical sentences, which all begin with "I remember ...," Brainard's text threads the needle of consciousness by



stringing along candy bars and erections and pop songs and humdrum tasks as one continuous and seamless manifold of memory, a ticker tape of experience that darts and weaves across the tacit norms of autobiography as it hoovers up a promiscuous grab bag of examples that make up a life.

Displacing the subject or self that would organize experience, Jain starts at a different level, and it's a simple decision with crucial consequences: putting one's faith in things. This too is a modernist tactic, hearkening back to William Carlos Williams's pithy poetic slogan from his 1927 poem "Paterson": "No ideas but in things." Things were going to upstage thoughts, stand in for watery impressions with their urgent facticity and juicy, material force. To proclaim the inspirational power of "things" was to advocate for a return to the real and to charge poetry with that power. Pouncing upon the generativity that comes from starting at the level of "things," Jain's drawings take Williams at his word. But at another level, as verbal constructions, they're also not unlike poems in their compression and poise, in the exactitude of their observation and the punch of their surprise. Read straight through, "things lips do" has the zip and sting of verse. Consider how "purse/smack/stick/lick/service/fat/kiss/pucker/whistle/chap" swerves around the mouth. Neither prurient nor prudish, Jain's taxonomy of lips in motion implies all the softly powerful ways that lips can go to work on someone, including the reader in a scene of oral intimacy that both jolts and whispers. Taking compression further, "things inside things" runs anagrammatic rings around the word's hoard of alphabetical resources, finding "sting" and "gin" and "night" and "tin" and "hi" within.

This project could go anywhere, but tendencies and fixations do emerge over the course of reading *Things That Art*. As the author of *Malignant: How*

*Cancer Becomes Us*, a critically celebrated analysis of the body's interanimating relationship with disease processes, Jain exhibits scholarly fixations that spill over into *Things That Art* without overly defining its exemplary range. Medical jargon bobs to the surface in "things (some) with epi," in which the Greek prefix binds together "epithelial," "epiphyte," "epidemiology," "epicenter," and "epidemic" into an ominous garland, and Jain's familiarity with the social history of medicine returns in the causal insertion of "cholera" into "things you chart." For those with the eyes to see, the microscopic drawing quietly evokes Dr. John Snow's celebrated mapping of a London cholera outbreak to a particular water pump on Soho's Broad Street, and, by extension, the possibility of charts to not only describe the world but intervene in and upon it, in this case for the public good.<sup>8</sup> Alert as they are to how categories harm and distort, Jain reckons with their occasionally lifesaving potentialities, too.

Is there any limit to what we can find within "things"? Language tricks us into thinking that the singularity of a verbal descriptor will produce a limited field of reference, but when the word in question is "things," the flood of instances keeps widening and expanding. Worrying at the limits of their own commitment, Jain asks: "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?"<sup>9</sup> In pursuit of the messy processes and unstable motion within things, Jain activates the word. This leaps off the page in "things a dollar does," which turns properties into actions and spins currency off axis. The capacity of the money form to accumulate and crash is belied by its status as all-too-fragile matter: a dollar may buy, but it can also "float" and "burn." If, as Sara Ahmed puts it, "objects bring worlds with

them,<sup>10</sup> the object of a dollar here stands in for capitalism's world-building force, but it also reminds us of a material surround that stands outside and beyond the economy. In that pointed reminder of the capacity of a dollar to float and burn, Jain forces us to remember our own purchase – so to speak – upon the world. To state the obvious, it matters whether we are a philosopher in a villa in Vienna or a dolphin caged in a tank in Florida: who has what range of motion, and why? From “things at the farm” to “things that abstract,” the world of objects is a world of both constraint and possibility, a world made up of things and the frames for things, an assemblage of ongoing categorical work of inclusion and exclusion, containment and release. Sidestepping the distinction between things that are and things that aren't, Jain reminds us that that a shared world remains open to change, or, to use another word, to art.

#### Notes

- 1 See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981) and Michael Robbins, “Downward Facing Dog,” in *Alien vs. Predator* (New York: Penguin, 2012).
- 2 S. Lochlann Jain, *Injury: The Politics of Product Design and Safety Law in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).
- 3 Sigmund Freud, “On Dreams,” in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), 153.
- 4 Jorge Luis Borges, “John Wilkins' Analytical Language,” in *The Total Library: Non-Fiction 1922–1986*, ed. Eliot Weinberger, trans. Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine, and Eliot Weinberger (London: Penguin, 2001), 229.
- 5 S. Lochlann Jain, “Things That Art,” *Anthropology and Humanism* 43, no. 1 (2018): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1111/anh.12198>.

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- 6 David Carroll Simon, *Light without Heat: The Observational Mood from Bacon to Milton* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 5.
- 7 Joe Brainard, *I Remember* (New York: Granary Books, 2001).
- 8 For more on Snow's map, see Steven Johnson's *The Ghost Map: The Story of London's Most Terrifying Epidemic – and How It Changed Science, Cities, and the Modern World* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007).
- 9 Jain, "Things That Art," 10.
- 10 Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2014), 41.

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