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Introduction

This essay takes the form of a study of the process by which an essay is put together: the series of exchanges it involves; how the ideas developed in it are inspired by objects and experiences encountered while working on it just as studio work also is the product of daily experience.

The essay is not intended as an exhaustive study of the many different systems of exchange that exist, but will refer to some of them. It will also examine some of the unexpected results of the processes of exchange.

Starting Point

The first object I encountered in the course of my research work was the brass token given to me in exchange for a black leather coat and a sixties retro briefcase at the cloakroom outside the University College Library. The token was a brass disc with a number inscribed in the centre. Worn smooth with use it suggested the many people through whose hands it had passed and the objects for which it had temporarily been exchanged.

At first I considered returning with a bag full of old newspapers so that I could hand these in and keep the token for myself. However I shrank from the idea of breaking the unspoken contract I had entered into with the cloakroom staff. I also feared that at some later date I would be recognised by the cloakroom staff who would insist on restoring my belongings and the return of the token.

My second thought was that I could create an object that I could in conscience leave in permanent exchange for the token, turning the cloakroom into a kind of exhibition space without the knowledge of its staff.

The object I envisaged leaving was to be a bag full of books – the second type of object I encountered while working on the essay. Having left the books I would then have been free to display the token elsewhere. But I decided in the end not to make an object but to leave the exchange process impersonal by depositing the 1960's black retro briefcase, and then only when I was in the library.

The Legitimacy of Exchange

A symbolic exchange, which reflects both a need and a desire to communicate, such as that of the token for my belongings relies on trust – the belief in this case that the coat and case would be returned when I surrendered the token. While I was in possession of the token, for all practical purposes it was the coat and case. The loss of the token could, for example, have led to the loss of whatever it symbolised. I panicked briefly when I thought I had lost it and was reassured when I found it again in my pocket.

The Books

For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign, Jean Baudrillard. Translated with an introduction by Charles Levin, Tells Press.

Language and Symbolic Power, Pierre Bourdieu. Edited and introduced by John B Thompson, translated by Gino Raymond and Mathew Adamson, Polity Press.

Free Exchange, Pierre Bourdieu and Hans Haacke, Polity Press.

The Gift, Marcel Mauss. Translated by Ian Cunnison, with an introduction by EE Evans, Pritchard Cohen and West Ltd.

Two of the books I wanted were unavailable so I reserved them via the library reservation system. In doing so I discovered the existence of the book written in collaboration with Hans Haacke and reserved that as well. I received notification by post several days later that all of the books were now available to be borrowed.

The books were to be an essential part of the creation of the essay though not in the way that I expected them to be. At first they represented a potential source of material, a point of departure for the project. But as time went on they became less useful in terms of their content and more important in terms of their history, their worth as objects and their status in a series of processes of exchange that would lead to the delivery of the essay.

Keeping possession of the books was harder than I had imagined. Two I could keep as long as I wanted, but the terms of the loan of Language and Symbolic Power altered almost as soon as I borrowed. The loan period was shortened and it was recalled the day after I took it out. In order to read Free Exchange I had to take part in an elaborate ritual. The book was available only on overnight loan. I signed it out every day for a week at 4pm and returned it each day before 10am. During the day the book worked its way through the system reappearing on its shelf in the late afternoon in time for me to sign it out again. The merry-go-round was eventually interrupted by a fellow library user who reserved the book several days in advance so that it was not there when I went to look for it.

The loan status of the books in the library was, according to one of the librarians, partly a function of their popularity and partly, and more arbitrarily, to do with how old they are. New books are typically automatically put on overnight loan, I was told. Students seeking to avoid an experience like my own often use these books during the day, hiding them on the wrong shelf at night so that they can use them again the following day frustrating the exchange process for which they are intended. Eventually the librarian agreed to give Free Exchange one-week loan status so that I could read it during the day.

Signs of Exchange

Once I had mastered the means of getting hold of the books and had begun to read them I became interested in what made them distinctive as objects and in their history. Each had the evidence of the frequency with which it had been exchanged stamped on a form attached to the flyleaf. Evidence of the process of exchange through which the books had gone had become part of them.

Each also had the annotations of previous readers scratched in the margins. These addenda ranged from amplifications to the text signifying that the reader had absorbed some information – a process of exchange – to strangely tangential observations about a previous readers state of mental and physical health.

Bourdieu's observation in *Language and Symbolic Power* that science often invokes scientific authority to ground arbitrary divisions in reality and reason prompted one reader to observe that 'Potassium in Postachio (sic) nuts is equivalent to Red Blood Cell's, while comparison of 'objective' and 'subjective' criteria elicited an optimistic affirmation about the benefits of healthy diet and medication. These comments are clearly of a personal nature and must have some relationship to the text, and yet they are curiously out of place in what is effectively a public space, and in any event strange pieces of information to pass on to subsequent readers.

Embossing

On my way back to the library to hand in the notification I had received and take possession of the books I was aghast to be handed a plastic token in the cloakroom in exchange for the briefcase. I had arrived at 9am, early enough; I thought to ensure a brass token. Then when I decided to check in the coat as well the plastic token was replaced with a brass one. You only get a brass token with your bag if you check in your coat as well.

I decided to make a series of blind embossings of the brass tokens, which would enable me to enjoy much of their appeal without actually keeping the tokens themselves. I would not have been able to do this with the plastic token on which the number was only printed, and would anyway not have wanted to do so. The embossings preserve all the tokens symbolic value but none of its utility, at once providing a reminder of the original use for the token, but in its new form freeing it from its past.

In fact the embossings proved more than simply symbolic, and I was able to exchange one for a drawing by another artist. My fellow artist had the same response to the embossing that I had to the original token and suggested the reciprocal exchange, which echoed the original exchange between the cloakroom attendant and me. In the end I decided to give one of the embossings, the reversed image of the token to the cloakroom returning it to where it had originally come from just as the token itself and the books had eventually been returned.