

THESIS

INKY ECONOMY: CULTURAL PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION IN NORTH
AMERICAN LETTERBOXING COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

INKY ECONOMY: CULTURAL PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION IN NORTH AMERICAN LETTERBOXING COMMUNITIES

Letterboxing is a 150 year old hobby that involves treasure hunting, clues, hiking and orienteering. From its roots in the Dartmoor region of England, this practice migrated to the United States in the 1990s and burst into popularity through the use of online resources to connect, educate, and inspire letterboxers. North American letterboxing is a modern incarnation of this old practice that combines the connective power of digital media with the traditional artistry and creativity of this hobby. By providing opportunities for both production and consumption, letterboxing creates its own system of value that can mediate, resist and reinforce capitalistic structures. Using engaged ethnography, interviews, and a broad-scale survey, this thesis draws on theories from political economy, art, and community-building to discuss the ways in which these hobbyists use virtual and traditional letterboxes to create value. Examining both the production and consumption of letterboxing practices provides insight into how this hobby is both reflective of and distinct from broader American systems of value creation.

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DEDICATION

Madison Tanae, Emma Kalisti, and Sophia Pearl.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
DEDICATION.....	iv
CHAPTER 1. Introduction: Collecting and Producing Culture One box at a Time.....	1
CHAPTER 2. Dartmoor and More: The history of UK and US ‘boxing’	7
Dartmoor Letterboxing: A brief history.....	8
The History of U.S. Letterboxing	12
CHAPTER 3. Theory and Methods: Up to my Knuckles in Ink.....	20
Gifts and Commodities: Letterboxing as Symbolic Economy	20
‘Art’ as a Category: Definitions and Perspectives.....	27
Collecting and Consumption.....	29
Methods.....	31
Ethnographic and Interview Approaches.....	33
Survey Approaches	38
The Strength of Mixed Methods.....	41
CHAPTER 4. Production, Or, from Rubber to Art.....	42
Virtual Letterboxing.....	44
Postal Letterbox Production.....	48
Traditional Box Production.....	51
Summary: Where is the Art? What is the Value?.....	58

CHAPTER 5. Consumption: The Art of Letterbox Collecting.....	62
Virtual Consumption.....	62
Postal Consumption	65
Collecting Traditional Letterboxes	68
The Art of Collecting: Taking Stock of Letterboxing Consumption.....	70
Summary: A Question of Motivation	75
CHAPTER 6. Conclusions: What Makes Letterboxing Letterboxing.....	79
Works Cited	84

List of Figures

Figure 1: Example of a letterboxing stamp.....	7
Figure 2: Example of a letterboxing stamp.....	16
Figure 3: Letterboxing variety	43
Figure 4: Participant enjoyment level of letterboxing.	60

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION: COLLECTING AND PRODUCING CULTURE ONE BOX AT A TIME

“Mom, look over here. I see where I threw my ball.” They were common enough words coming from the mouth of my enthusiastic four-year-old daughter Emma. The secret is, though, we weren’t looking for her ball. We were on the hunt for a “letterbox.” That typical sunny Colorado afternoon had found me and my family in search of treasure, a middle-class imitation of a band of pirates. We carefully looked to either side of the trail, feigning interest in foliage and the weather while unsuspecting joggers passed by. When the trail was clear we made our move. Reaching my hands deep within the belly of a hollowed-out tree, I fumbled through bark and debris until I felt the tell-tale hard plastic container. After pulling out the box, we immediately went into secret-agent mode. We placed the box in my purse and walked to find some benches where we could pull out the box and not look suspicious. We sat quickly and pulled out the four journals it contained where we would stamp our personal trail stamps and markers.

Finding the box was only the beginning of our journey. Gently opening the flaps on the Lock n’ Lock container, we hurried to see what the hand carved stamp image looked like. We flipped through the stamps journal to see the marks and information from the other people who had found the box before us: where they were from, what their experience was the day they had found the box. We inked up our individual stamps and each placed our image into the box’s journal. We then passed around the delicately carved stamp of a historical figure to place in our personal journals. When we had

completed the exchange of our stamps with those in the box, we rewrapped everything tightly and returned to the tree to put the box back into its hiding place.

Returning the box can be just as exciting as discovering it, and keeping it secret is important to the safety of the box. Sneaking back over towards the tree, Emma made a diversion by singing and dancing on the other side of the trail; my then-husband Kyle urged Sophia down the path and away from the place where the box would go. I gingerly moved aside the debris in the trunk and placed the box; covering it with a thick layer of bark, leaves and sticks. Satisfied that an unsuspecting person would not be able to see what was there, we continued our walk along the trail.

This adventure may not appear like research to some, but there is rich and evocative information about American culture and counterculture in understanding a practice such as the letterboxing we had just engaged in. In uncovering the practices, cultures, and impact of letterboxing and its communities, I have had the fortune of looking for boxes in New York City, Las Vegas, Rocky Mountain National Park, my neighborhood park, under rocks, in buildings, in my mailbox, in my email inbox, and have even found them attached to my purse. However, as I argue in this thesis, studying the motivations and achievements of people that choose to participate in this recreational practice can provide a lens into important dimensions of U.S. culture more broadly.

While flipping through the latest article of *Family Fun Magazine*, I discovered a small article about a virtually-based treasure hunt that was ideal for families. It involved geographic knowledge, history, the outdoors, orienteering, and rubber stamping. I was enraptured. As the mother of two small children, I frequently found myself searching for new activities that did not involve the Disney Company or the dreaded eye of the

television. At the time we had an infant, a preschooler and a fifth grader; finding activities that did not involve tables in primary colors, overstuffed mascots, or playgrounds was exceedingly difficult. I began letterboxing as a personal enjoyment, and it wasn't until I was sitting in my Anthropological Methods graduate class that I considered researching letterboxing for my thesis. A graduate student from a different discipline announced that he was going to study bird-watchers. At that moment I was struck with how important studying hobbyist groups might be, and my mind began to turn to the idea of studying a leisure group for my Master's degree. Beginning in Fall 2006, I spent hours both for classes and personal enjoyment looking through websites, attending events, carving stamps, solving clues, taking notes, reading emails, scrapbooking, and meeting some of the most entertaining and passionate crafters among the letterboxing communities.

So what is letterboxing? Letterboxing is, at its heart, a type of treasure hunt developed by and for its participants, called "letterboxers." It draws on aspects of collecting and scrapbooking in its emphasis on keeping records of boxes created, sought, and found. It encourages participants to create their own artistic contributions to the process, and often requires extensive research, puzzle-solving, and often, hiking and exploring. Letterboxing consists of an exchange of stamps between an individual and a hidden box with clues cleverly coded on websites created for that purpose. Participants create a personal, distinctive stamp design that serves as a "calling card" to identify the letterboxer throughout his or her participation. Using a wide range of internet sites, letterboxers can choose an area where they are interested in hiking and download clues to discover hidden boxes placed by other letterboxers. Inside each box is a unique stamp

representative of the box's creator or the location in which it is hidden. Once letterboxers discover the hidden box, they stamp their personal design and a few details such as date and time into a notebook kept in the box. Then they stamp the box's unique stamp into their personal journal. By reading the journal kept in the letterbox, seekers can see who has visited the box in the past and add their mark to the list. By adding the found stamp into their personal journal, letterboxers can keep a record much like a scrapbook of the boxes they have had the pleasure of tracking down.

In this thesis, I begin with the idea that letterboxing leads to the creation of particular forms of value and identity, which themselves provide for the creation of alternate forms of community. Though acknowledging this activity to be a hobby, I also suggest it is necessary to look deeper to see what aspects of the values and practices lend it characteristics of a community. Although the development of clues and exchange of stamps relies on a broad community of participants, the search for boxes is an activity that can be done alone and by anyone. In what ways, then, does letterboxing represent a cultural community and social identity? By looking at factors such as specific in-group terminology, social norms, and reliance on others in events and discourse, I will discuss how letterboxing as a community is linked to American culture more generally in distinct and important ways.

This thesis is divided into six chapters. Chapter 2 explains the background of letterboxing as a hobby, including a discussion of an admittedly limited literature to look at the history of letterboxing, its origins in the U.K., and the changes it underwent as it migrated to the United States. It also provides definitions of letterboxing terms and etiquette practices that are accepted as the rules for participation in the hobby. In an

emergent culture like letterboxing with flexible and fluid rules and no formal structure, it is important to understand the basic models in place to define this hobby.

Chapter three discusses the theoretical framework and methodology used in this examination of letterboxing. It is important to note that this thesis draws on both anthropological as well as other perspectives in its examination, including ones from economics, psychology, and communication. In particular, I focus on theories that help explain how value and identity are created through aesthetic and economic production and consumption. The study uses both qualitative and quantitative approaches, including deeply engaged participant-observation and interviews as well as survey analysis. This approach allows for the rich description and inside perspective of ethnography as well as a systematic view of broader patterns of community members' practices, attitudes, and opinions.

The fourth chapter empirically examines three different forms of letterbox "production": virtual, postal, and "traditional." It argues that letterbox production constitutes a form of art and examines how value is created through this symbolic activity. Further, I suggest that letterboxing is a practice that both challenges and mimics capitalist and economic values and commodities. By exploring the tensions between letterboxing as both art and also part of more standard economies of value, I provide a glimpse of the deep meaning it has in the lives of the "artists" who perform it.

Chapter five discusses letterboxing's important collecting and accumulative dimensions. Here, I argue that letterbox consumption takes the form of collecting and allows practitioners to build a meaningful identity and community around their symbolic achievements. I examine relationships between letterboxing activity and capitalist

economy, with a focus on how letterboxes serve as both capitalist “commodities” and also as “gifts” that potentially escape more dominant models.

The sixth and concluding chapter ties together notions of value, identity, consumption and community as manifested in North American letterboxing. The picture that emerges is one of a positive and supportive community (mediated by the internet) of like-minded “artists” that both reflects and contests American culture.

It is important to note that in addition to the social class implications discussed in this thesis, letterboxing as a practice has important gender implications. The letterboxing community in the United States is largely women, and its practices, like those of scrapbooking, are culturally gendered female, including the prevalence of letterboxing projects aimed at women with children (Dymoke & Griffiths, 2010).

Although the gender implications of letterboxing are fundamental to its practice, such a discussion is outside the scope of this thesis. Future research is needed to examine the ways in which gender shapes and is shaped by this hobby for its communities.

CHAPTER 2. DARTMOOR AND MORE: THE HISTORY OF UK AND US 'BOXING'

Letterboxing is not originally a North American phenomenon. Its origins are traced to what is still considered the seat of letterboxing, Dartmoor National Park in England. The annals of letterboxing history give this hobby a record that spans over 150 years and the entire northern hemisphere of the globe. Being this widespread and rooted in a long history, one might think that letterboxing would be more popular than

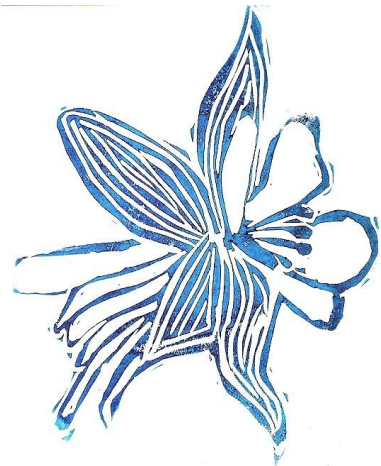


Figure 1: Example of a letterboxing stamp.

it is. But one must remember that letterboxers themselves have deliberately avoided extensive commercial influence and discussion. Publicity about letterboxing has been frowned upon for the risk that it poses to both the delicate land of the Dartmoor area and secrecy of the boxes hidden there.

This chapter examines the historical place of letterboxing in the United Kingdom and its later migration to the United States, as well as a glossary of terms that aid the reader in understanding the specific language employed by letterboxers to communicate within the “boxer” community, and to confuse non-boxers or “muggles,” as boxers call them. To begin to understand what has recently been dubbed “a decade of obsession” in

the North American letterboxer circle it is important to understand the roots of this hobby.

Dartmoor Letterboxing: A brief history

Dartmoor National Park consists of 365 square miles in southwestern England. Letterboxing in the United Kingdom started with calling cards left at Cranmere Pool in 1854 by Victorians brave enough to wander the seven and a half miles through bog land to reach Cranmere (Swinscow 1984: 7). Thus the word letterboxing (letterbox is the British term for a mailbox) denoted a place out on the moor where people would leave a calling card in a bottle to symbolize their tenacity and bravery in reaching Cranmere. In 1888, William Crossing wrote of Cranmere:

In the pool is a little heap of stones, and in a hollow in this is kept a small tin box – I have seen two there – for the reception of the cards of visitors. The spirit of vandalism, unfortunately but too prevalent, may have intruded itself here, but on the whole, the contents of the boxes seem to be respected. I can at all events confirm that I have found names there – my own among them – which had been left at the Pool several years before (Swinscow 1984: 7).

Swinscow reports that the first Cranmere letterbox had survived to at least 1905, when two moorland ramblers put a visitors log into the box. According to Swinscow, “In the first nine months this attracted 609 signatures, in 1906 there were 962 signatures, in 1907, 1,352 signatures in 1908 1, 741 signatures” (Swinscow 1984:8). Since then, the small depression in the ground known as Cranmere Pool has been visited by thousands including the late Duke of Windsor, who was Prince of Wales, at the time of his guiding by J. Endacott May 19th 1921 (Swinscow 1984:8).

Another important box on Dartmoor is known as Belstone Tor and is enshrouded in mystery today, as it has been in the past. There is much speculation about the original box, the contents of box, and even the location in Dartmoor. The location of the box is kept secret, with its whereabouts only being revealed to those that have collected a certain number of boxes in the Dartmoor area. Some local boxers believe that Belstone Tor is the same as another known box in the area, the Taw March box, although there is debate about whether this is the case. Belstone Tor box has a stamp that has been replaced each September in the same location since 1978. This box mystery even prompted some happy hunters to mark in the visitor log:

Yer us be again on Belstone Tor
Us have looked under stones by the score.
Up and down and around this stony tor
Us have spent fifteen hours or more.
A little help us surely needed
From a local gent, who had succeeded.
At LAST! Us found this yer Belstone box
Down yer around these gert big rocks.

(Exeter Boghoppers as quoted in Swinscow 1984:10)

In the 1970's, letterboxing on Dartmoor consisted of 15 boxes on the moor. A scattering of early boxes were put out by local organizations, such as the Duck's Pool box, but it wasn't until 1976 that there was any formal guide to the locations available to boxers on Dartmoor (Swinscow 1984:12). With the new more accessible guide came new people interested in participating in letterboxing. This posed an interesting issue for the

Dartmoor letterboxers because the area is both full of delicate natural flora and historical archaeological sites as well as being a location for the British army to fire artillery (Silent Doug: 2004). Dartmoor Park Authorities began to take note of the people who were tearing apart cairns, placing boxes on Tors and spray painting them, ignoring the delicate ruins while looking for boxes. In October 1977, the Western Morning News had an article “War on Little Boxes littering Dartmoor” in which the author discusses the 32 known boxes that were spread around the Moor. This article voiced the concerns of citizens that people were leaving what appeared to be litter on areas of the moor that contained historical or environmental treasures. It asked that additional letterboxes not be allowed on the moor, and that all new boxes except Cranmere Pool and Ducks’ Pool boxes be removed. Through a series of public opinion letters from both park rangers and letterboxers, a meeting was finally arranged on December 17th between the two groups to preserve and grow the hobby. It was at this meeting that the “rules” of letterboxing were established. They were as follows:

Boxes should not be sited:

1. In any kind of Antiquity, in or near Stonerows or Circles, Cists or Cairns, or in any kind of Buildings, Walls or Ruins, Peatcutters’ or Tinnets’ Huts etc.
2. In any potentially dangerous situations where injuries could be caused.
3. As a fixture. Cement or any other building materials not to be used.

These basic rules along with an agreement between the Park Rangers and the local boxers allowed for a basis of the codes of conduct expected by people exploring the Dartmoor area.

Letterboxing on Dartmoor continued to grow in popularity throughout the 1980’s, and Godfrey Swinscow was on the forefront of this movement. Known as the “unofficial president of a club that doesn’t exist” (as quoted in the Tavistock Times), Swinscow started the now famous “Dartmoor Letterboxes 100 club”. As the number of boxes grew

on the moor, Swinscow thought that there should be some kind of reward or acknowledgement for those that had spent enough time to have collected 100 stamp images from the boxes. According to the 1984 edition of the newsletter Dartmoor Letterboxes written by Godfrey's wife Anne, there were over 700 people that had purchased the patch given to members of the Dartmoor 100 club. According to the Official Dartmoor Letterboxing Club website, there are over 12,800 members of this historic and prestigious club. Today, Dartmoor National Park contains 20,000 hidden letterboxes, with all their clues published as a book.

Letterboxing clues for Dartmoor can be found in local pubs, through local boxers, or through an official printed guide. The code of conduct has been expanded from the original 1977 agreement to one that contains conduct for both owners of boxes and people that are looking for them. There have been concerns about the toll that letterboxing has on wildlife in the protected moorland areas. In 1996, an article by Mike Prestage in The Independent (London) called "Country: Dartmoor/Invasion of the moorland; 'Letterboxing', an activity peculiar to Dartmoor, is taking its toll on wildlife" the concerns between boxers and the park rangers was sparked because the moor by then had an estimated 3,500 to 4,000 boxes placed throughout. The park rangers were trying to gain more control over who was placing boxes and where they were in regards to wildlife and archaeological sites. This request for formality has not been entirely heeded but has made letterboxing on Dartmoor an activity that requires registering your box with the formal catalogue and an agreement to follow closely the modified code of conduct. This modification included nesting sites for birds like the golden plover and the ringed ouzel and respecting private property on the moor. However, even with the concerns for the

firing range used by the British army and the environmental issues, park rangers continue to work with the local letterboxers and even provide a leaflet called *Letterboxing with Moor care and Less Wear* that are available at all of the Dartmoor National Park areas.

Letterboxing remained a uniquely Dartmoor located hobby until a little article was published in 1998 by Chris Ganstrom in the magazine Smithsonian. Many local newspapers had covered the hobby in the United Kingdom, but the Ganstrom article was the first major United States publication to look into the hobby. With the publication of this article a new and different type of American letterboxing began.

The History of U.S. Letterboxing

When the Smithsonian article was published in 1998, it was to explain this curious treasure hunt that was occurring on Dartmoor. The connection of a traditionally face to face, or clue to clue, interaction of UK letterboxing was transformed in the United States, into one that relies on internet-based clues. Boxes on Dartmoor are, for the most part, very localized, with a strong amount of social control from the experiences boxers who have been participating and meeting for the past thirty years. From the beginning, American letterboxing was reliant on the use of the more geographically diverse resources available online.

There is much debate about where and which the first United State letterbox was placed and who placed it. According to the Letterboxing North America (LbNA) website, the first box placed in the United States was the Max Patch Letterbox placed in April of 1998. However, some argue that the first letterbox was planted that same month and year in Sewanee, Tennessee (Fink 2006:16). Either way, prior to April 1998, lore has it that there were no letterboxes in the United States.

“We live and breathe letterboxing” describes Ganstrom’s experiences on the moors of Dartmoor. The article describes the whimsy and treasure hunt aspects of letterboxing including all of the excitement and camaraderie that has been the basis of this secret club. It defines letterboxing as “...something between a sport and a hobby, sort of a combination of orienteering and treasure hunting that consists of using maps, clues and compasses in the search of containers” (Ganstrom 1998:8). Reading Ganstrom’s experiences with challenging weather, cryptic clues and the environmental issues being faced on the moor illustrates vividly the minimal economic impact and rewarding social aspects of finding these boxes.

After this article came out, a group of webmasters, including Wes Garrison, Mitch Klink, Dan Servatius and Erik Davis, began to put together websites into a “web ring” that posted clues to the boxes that were being placed (Fink 2006:16). Out of this web ring grew the desire to see a website that was dedicated to organizing a searchable website that would allow a person to city search for all of the letterboxes in their area. The organization Letterboxing North America grew out of this desire (at letterboxing.org) and provided a means for boxers around the country to post and find boxes in their local areas as well as around the country. They estimate that by 2001, over a thousand letterboxes had been planted in all 50 states. Currently, LbNA hosts 41,767 registered members, with 12,872 logging in within the past year (member counts, LbNA: 2009). To date, there are thousands of personal websites and online groups related to letterboxing and hosting clues, but there are two main letterboxing websites (letterboxing.org from Letterboxing North America, and atlasquest.com) that contain a vast number of clues for boxes planted around the United States, Canada, and other parts of the world.

In 2004, Ryan Carpenter, aka “Green Tortuga,” an unemployed software engineer, started a website to host online logbooks for boxers. What began as a simple project expanded into a full-blown community site. AtlasQuest.com in particular has allowed boxers to connect in ways that were not previously accessible. Through the use of a message boards, event pages, people searching, the user-friendly letterboxing search engine, and the online logbook, AtlasQuest allowed members to connect more directly with each other, contributing greatly to their sense of community and to the dissemination of letterboxing as an American pastime. Letterboxing through the use of the internet, as opposed to the journal based clues of Dartmoor, has brought together an interesting group that move between face to face communication and web postings. The internet has not only enhanced the communication possibilities for participants, it has expanded social connections, sense of community and artistic outlets.

I became aware of letterboxing through an article in the 2006 edition of *Family Fun Magazine*. Boasting a family-friendly treasure hunt through the woods that was entertaining, intelligent and adventurous, this article discussed letterboxing at the national level. I joined AtlasQuest as a premium member and began my research. I found a bevy of resources available to me as a new boxer, including three separate Yahoo! Groups tailored specifically for new boxers, boxers in the United States (or the “Big List,” as it’s known), and even a smaller group for Rocky Mountain Letterboxers.

At the time of this writing, March 2011, there are 175,729 letterboxes located in the United States and 27,004 members signed up at AtlasQuest, up from 12,152 letterboxes and 2,729 members in 2006 (Fink 2006:17). The message board posting have increased from 317 in October 2004 when the site was launched to 12,862 messages in

December 2008 and 538,598 cities are represented. (Atlasquest.aboutus.stats.com). I began my thesis research in September of 2006, and in the past three years, the world of letterboxing has changed and grown. There are new ways to letterbox and interact with other boxers, more frequent events such as national conferences, and online chat rooms have been added to the AtlasQuest site. The clues on two of the major letterboxing online resources, letterboxing.org and AtlasQuest.com, are open and available for anyone who happens across the site or stumbles across a box while hiking. Users are not required to create an account on these sites and clues are freely available through a variety of websites, periodicals, and newspapers. A person could look up the clues, go for a hike alone, “stamp in” (exchange distinctive stamps with the letterbox,) and continue home with his or her logbook without ever seeing another person.

In September of 2008, a group of dedicated boxers organized a massive event to celebrate the ten-year anniversary of letterboxing in the United States. Hosted in at Camp Adams in Mollalla, Oregon for three days, this event proved to be one of the largest undertakings for the U.S. letterboxing community. Camp Adams became the official letterboxers’ paradise for the weekend where hundreds of boxes were planted and hundreds of boxers joined together to box, trade, and carve. I had the pleasure of attending this event where many of the forefathers of letterboxing were in attendance.

Letterboxing has grown in the United States into a wide-spread group of practitioners who consider themselves part of a specific community, often revolving around specific online resources. As AtlasQuest states in their website description, “Atlas Quest started as a set of tools for letterboxers, but has grown into a community of letterboxers. Pull up a chair, meet new friends, and dig into letterboxing.” Although U.S.

letterboxes do not have a physical location with the history and legacy of the UK's Dartmoor, these online spaces have grown into rich sites of connections and resources for U.S. letterboxers.

Letterboxing Vocabulary

To fully understand how and why people box, it is important to understand the terms used by this community. They provide some insight into the basic principles behind the different forms of North American letterboxing.

To begin there are different types of boxes:

Traditional: These are boxes most similar to those hidden in Dartmoor. They are placed in specific physical locations and require the use of clues, either through word of mouth or internet hosted, to find them. These boxes contain a stamp and a journal that is left in the box.

Virtual: These boxes are researched and found using the internet, where the box image and clues are entirely located online. Clues are posted online and oftentimes require the use of internet searching to solve. Images for virtual boxes can be obtained depending on the site that you get the clues from.

Postal: Postal letterboxes are usually very ornate boxes that are sent through the mail to other boxers. Usually done among a group of people organized around a theme or topic, individuals each make a box to send to each person in the group. Each box is sent



Figure 2: An example of a letterboxing stamp.

around the country from person to person and then finally returns back to its original carver. Some of these boxes are then converted into traditional boxes and hidden somewhere and others are made available as single boxes that can be sent through the mail to a list of interested others.

Hitchhiker: A hitchhiker is a box that does not have a physical placement. Hidden within a traditional letterbox a hitchhiker is often a smaller, very portable letterbox that is moved from box to box by the finders. If a person finds a letterbox with a hitchhiker in it, he or she is expected to take that hitchhiker box and place it into the next letterbox found.

Cooties: These are small stamps or boxes that are surreptitiously slipped directly onto a person or into their belongings. They are frequently a part of letterboxing events held in person. Cooties are passed along quickly from one boxer to the next, and because of their small size, they are often stamped with simply a thumbprint or a small personal stamp. The more sneaky one can be with a cootie, the more enjoyment they seem to bring; however, there are those who do not appreciate having cooties placed on them or within their belongings and will often request to not have them given to them.

Boxing Buddies: Boxing buddies are a relatively new feature of letterboxing that started in 2007. A boxing buddy is a stuffed animal or small mascot that has its own journal and signature stamp. These can come along with you for your own personal letterboxing experiences or can be shipped to friend boxers who will take them along to boxes in their own regions.

Letterboxer Trading Cards (LTC): These cards incorporate a carver's signature stamp into an image that is on a card, much like a baseball card. These cards showcase an

artist's talent for carving and are designed for swapping with other people to collect entire set of themed cards or an artist's work. These cards are the newest feature of the letterboxing community in the U.S., but have become an important part of the hobby. There are even events planned around distributing and collecting these cards.

Personal Travelers: These stamps are created to stay with the individual who creates them. They usually represent a specific aspect of the boxer's identity or personality, such as being a dog lover or being from a certain town. A boxer can look up clues prior to attending an event to see which of the boxers present have a personal traveler. To get a traveler stamp, the seeker must solve a clue or perform a task to "earn" the personal traveler stamp. It is considered rude to expose a personal traveler to others at an event, and it often requires a certain amount of stealth and knowledge to obtain these.

There are a variety of other terms that are used within the letterboxing community, many of which are similar to elite languages used in specific online communities, such as the "leet" speak of hackers or gamers. AtlasQuest.com provides a short glossary of some terms, including:

SPOR: A suspicious pile of rocks

Whitelists and blacklists: Lists of people permitted (whitelists) or excluded (blacklists) from accessing an individual's letterbox. These are generally used only for managing online access.

Ecoscavengers: These are identified locations that do not actually hold a box in order to respect or preserve the locations. Boxers can get "credit" for finding these with virtual images.

Plants: Boxes placed by others.

Finds: Boxes found through the use of clues.

Trailname: The personal designation letterboxers use to log and register their authorship in creating boxes and communicating with other letterboxers online. Similar to a screen name in chat rooms or an avatar name in virtual worlds.

PFX counts: A numbering system used by boxers to describe the number of Plants, Finds, and eXchanges they have collected.

From the humble roots of James Perrott's calling card left in a murky swamp-like area in the late 1800's erupted an artistic variation in the United States. Standing at the ten year anniversary of the Smithsonian magazine publication and stamping into boxes owned by carvers from all over the United States really did show the impact that this hobby has for people in the community. These people who are so passionate about letterboxing have been called "eccentric" and "kooky" by a variety of newspaper articles printed about this hobby. There had to be more to this hobby/sport/artistic outlet.

CHAPTER 3. THEORY AND METHODS: UP TO MY KNUCKLES IN INK

Gifts and Commodities: Letterboxing as Symbolic Economy

To tease apart the space in which letterboxing can be understood through Anthropological theories, and in part based on these ideas about the letterboxing symbolic “economy,” I primarily used the literature on “gifts” and “commodities” of Marcel Mauss and the theory of culture and commodities discussed by Arjun Appadurai in his 1986 The Social Life of Things. Overall, I suggest that letterboxing as artistic activity mimics capitalistic processes of “commodity” exchange between producers and consumers, while at the same time frames and creates value closer to what Mauss and Appadurai describe as “gifts”.

To clarify how I use these theories and terms, I should first discuss how I am using the word “commodity.” James Carrier states, “Commodity transactors are self-interested, independent individuals who exchange with people with whom they have no enduring links or obligations. In commodity transactions, objects are alienable private property defined primarily in terms of use value and exchange value rather than the identity of the transactors” (1991:121). In other words, a commodity is form of wealth and value, where producers and consumers of that wealth and value do not need to remain connected.

By contrast, Marcel Mauss was interested in how the transactions of certain objects “reflect and recreate the social understanding of the nature of objects” (Carrier 1991). Mauss discusses “gifts” as possessing value that extend beyond the object itself and connect up to the intention and identity of the giver. When a gift is given, it becomes a *unique* exchange and source of value, whose essence cannot be captured by any other seemingly equivalent object because the original gift is seen to hold the essence of the giver and to capture the social relationship between the giver and the recipient. Gift exchanges represented forms of *social* as much as economic relations, whose form and essence are solidified and mediated through the exchange of objects that only partially capture the rich sets of relations between givers and receivers.

In a broad sense, letterboxing is a form of activity that creates objects of value. However, letterboxing stamps – unlike traditional commodities – do not have a value based on the *limit* of their consumption. In other words, any given box can theoretically create an almost limitless set of stamps. There is no notion of scarcity. More importantly, and of importance to this thesis, so-called “boxers” produce the stamps with the intention of sharing parts of themselves, not to make an economic profit. Boxes create connections and relations of exchange between producer and consumer “artists.” They are gifts, not commodities. This is especially true of traditional and postal letterboxing, where the consumer of a box is encouraged and validated through the recording of the box from the producer.

Nevertheless, despite boxing activity being closer to gift exchange, it is important to point out that letterboxes do indeed seem to have elements of a commodity. In some cases, boxes can be seen as *alienable property*, where the value is separated and

separable from the producer. For example, it is not required that a person produce their own original artwork for their letterbox, which will be used to create stamps. In the case of *virtual* boxes, it is extremely rare for such activity to take place—that is, for someone to buy a box from some other producer and start giving out stamps. Nevertheless, it can and does happen. Likewise, in *traditional* boxes, a consumer of a box is not required or obligated to communicate with the box owner or even to stamp into the box that they find. The identity of the producer is not necessarily known by the stamp collector. Thus, such activity can be viewed on some level as a basic capitalistic exchange. In my experience and interviews, however, this was not typically how letterboxers themselves valued or viewed the process of letterboxing. They felt that breaking the rules of gift exchange, though possible, somehow felt wrong.

To emphasize, mirroring Mauss' idea of gifts both signifying and also solidifying important social interactions, letterboxes can work to this end. For example, a person might find a traditional letterbox and stamp into the box their personal stamp – literally leaving their mark on the object they desired – while at the same time taking the creator's stamp image away with them. That person has taken a gift from the producer of the box – the experience, the art and the production of the box. The tie between the two -- planter and the finder -- come with the acknowledgement of logging the box into one of the websites, in many cases emailing or even leaving a personal note within the box. Here, the producer of the original box is allowed to share in the consumer's original pleasure in collecting the stamp. We might say the producer had given an original gift of the box, which is now reciprocated by the collector. A relationship between the two has been created, which feels personal and important. Often repeated in my interviews, a personal

stamp represents a letterboxer and is not just an object. By stamping your personal image into a box you are gifting the box and its owner not only your time but something of your personal essence.

The importance of the difference between commodity and gift exchange can be examined further through Appadurai's work in The Social Life of Things, where he threads together an even more concise differentiation between a gift and a commodity. There, he states: "Gifts, and the spirit of reciprocity, sociability, and spontaneity in which they are typically exchanged, usually are starkly opposed to the profit-oriented, self-centered, and calculated spirit that fires the circulation of commodities (1986:11)." Also of importance to this thesis, Appadurai sought to understand how an object could transition through phases between being a gift and a commodity. In letterboxing, virtual boxes can be considered, for the most part, to be commodities. They embody the idea of an individualistic approach where frequently the planter has invested little to no time coming up with a basic one answer puzzle with the reward being a google searched common image. Traditional boxes encompass what could be interpreted initially as a commodity through the tangibility of the art, which can be assigned a value outside of the letterboxing culture. Letterboxers, though typically aware of the economic benefit that could result from their handiwork, do not go into the market to sell stamps to one another. In fact, just the opposite seems to happen. I learned in my interviews and keeping an eye on forums that when letterboxers approached the boards with the offers to sell hand-carved stamps or premade letterboxes through websites the letterboxing community became furious. The general sentiment was that when a person plants a box, the finder

implicitly is seeking the chance to share with that specific person-creator and not some generalized store-bought or mass-produced box.

I thus argue that letterboxing stands at a nuanced place between more traditional commodities and other gift objects that are somehow by their very nature priceless. Much like a precious gift or item inherited from a special person in your life, letterboxes become the physical representation of an experience that is not fungible or exchangeable with other seemingly similar or even equivalent objects. For example, it would be greatly frowned upon within the letterboxing community to scan images of other boxers' stamps and place them into a logbook with the intention of making it look as though a boxer had found boxes that they had not personally visited. The true value to boxers is the shared experience and new relation of exchange between producers and consumers of boxes.

In fact, there is a certain level of authenticity and expertise that exists amongst letterboxers. Appadurai discusses the idea in relation to the value of art saying that there is authority in who discerns what are good taste, expert knowledge, originality and social distinctions (1986:45). Stamp making and designing are places where letterbox producers receive status and verification of their role within the culture for both being helpful and knowledgeable as well as original and distinctive. In letterboxing, the exchange process and value assessed to a box is through the framework of a commodity, but by allowing the consumer to choose whether to only use the stamp as a commodity or as a gift is what makes up the socially rich fabric of the letterboxing culture. By allowing producers to not be removed from the value of their art and allowing consumers to experience both the object and destination, these exchanges extend past traditional capitalist relations of exchange.

Through extensive exploratory research I found that many letterboxers find intense personal fulfillment in the sense of exchange and sharing with other boxers. It is the desire to share and connect while being allowed to be confirmed and validated where the value of these boxes are. Value then rests not exactly in the physical existence of the item, but rather in the experiences and relations of exchange between producers and consumers. Much like Appadurai (1986) discusses in the regimes of value saying “...where culture is understood as a bounded and localized system of meanings” (15), so it is seen in the process of letterboxing production and consumption. Letterboxes are valuable to letterboxers because of what they represent and mean as “gifted” art, experience, and community—not commodity, material object, and impersonal exchange.

Overall, material cultural studies of gifts and commodities focus on the intersection of people and things. Importantly, gift theories emerged as a counter to the assumptions of commodity-based theories as a means to understanding the exchanging of items of value. Early on, the application of gift or exchange theories was thought to only be of use to understand “primitive” or “archaic” societies. Later, such theories were understood to have significance for exchanges in or near the capitalist marketplace, many involving money (Bloch and Parry 1996:1; Dumont: 1980, Hyde: 1979, Gregory: 1982, Sahlins: 1972, Taussig: 1980). A key idea of contemporary economic anthropology is that material objects, even when circulating in the marketplace as can letterboxes, cannot be separated from cultural symbols and understandings.

Many authors addressed the issues of production (Meillaxxoux 1981; Sahlins 1972; Seddon 1978) and consumption (Baudrillard 1968, 1975, 1981; Douglas and Isherwood 1981; Sahlins 1976). But it was through the lens of Appadurai’s Social Life of

Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective that political economics began to merge the study of culture and commodities. What was so unique about Appadurai's approach, building as he does on key ideas from Mauss, was the idea that objects had a social life of their own. They can acquire and lose value, change signification, become nonexchangeable, become sacred and move into a mere commodity status (Ferguson 1998:491). Moving away from the focus of defining what a commodity is, the focus becomes how such commodities circulate and under what circumstances these objects are exchangeable. Appadurai explains, "the commodity situation in the social life of any "thing" is defined as the situation in which its exchangeability (past, present and future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature" (1986: 13). These "things" are not thought to be inert, neutral instruments, but are understood to carry a rich cultural embeddedness that allows for shifting positions and political influence over a "regime of value." Arguing that special significant objects are frequently a part of the social elite or as a means for status competition, Appadurai reaches a general term of "tournament of value".

Tournaments of value are complex periodic events that are removed in some culturally well-defined way from the routines of economic life. Participation in them is likely to be both a privilege of those in power and an instrument of status contests between them. The currency of such tournaments is also likely to be set apart through well understood cultural diacritics. Finally, what is at issue in such tournaments is not just status, rank, fame or reputations of actors, but the disposition of the central tokens of value in the society in question. (Appadurai 1986:21)

It is through this basic premise that the economic framework of letterboxing is built. But this alone does not explain the motivation and reasons that participants crave letterboxing. To understand the motivations and reasoning behind boxing one has to look at cultural production theory.

‘Art’ as a Category: Definitions and Perspectives

“Art” is one of those terms like “value” that without a concrete definition leaves the reader to assume models of what art is and what art isn’t. I use the term “art” to refer to something that is essentially a value and a taste that is open to cultural modification and interpretation. There are many categories of art: fine art, folk art, impressionist, modern, museum, gallery art. The notion of what art is and who makes art is always subjective and entails purpose and motivations.

Art and taste are viewed along the lines of those within certain social or cultural structures that can benefit or comprehend certain levels of art or education based on their cultural taste. To a non-boxer, a letterbox is a piece of rubber crudely carved with a little notebook in a Tupperware box. This does not constitute fine art or even a creative venture to a person who finds a box without the prior knowledge of what exactly a box represents to both the placer and the potential finders. As categories of value, art has traditionally challenged the idea of something that is used for utility. “Art has been situated in the West as a category of redemptive value, distinct from money and discrete from other sociocultural values” (Myers 2001:7). There has even been a body of literature where “objects are ‘on the loose’” (George 1999) because art doesn’t fit into same categories of classification for everyone.

Objects can change positions within a social or economic structure based on their value or understanding as either a commodity or art (or both or neither). Human knowledge and agency has to be present to make this distinctions and this is always done within the cultural or social structure of the group making the choice. This gets particularly interesting because “at each point in its movement through space and time, an

object has the potential to shift from one category to another and in doing so, to slide along the slippery line that divides art from artifact from commodity” (Steiner 1994 in Myers 2001:11). Postmodernism has blurred this line even further when things previously not viewed as art, even including things viewed as “junk”, began to gain value because artists such as Warhol changed the notions of “high” and “low” art. These exchanges and values all come down to the social – the reproduction, the politics, production of hierarchies, strategies of exchange, and the significance of political manipulation (Weiner 1986, Bourdieu 1977, Strathern 1988). Overall, modern subjects have tended to treat art as part of a cultural hierarchy where there is “high culture” and “popular culture” and “mass culture.” Thus “low” culture and art are mass-produced, kitschy, or inauthentic. “High” culture is made up of art that is nonutilitarian (art for art’s sake), handmade, authentic, expressive of other qualities of the human spirit, and of high quality. (Myers 2001: 33).

Myers’s The Empire of Things (2001) defines “art” as a hierarchy in which objects take part. These objects participate in a “systems of taste, or distinction, built around the market, connoisseurship and hierarchies of value” (Myers 2001: 55). Art thus can give us powerful information about letterboxing as a culture. Letterboxers do not generally approach the hobby from a traditionally artistic perspective. The importance of art in letterboxing, however, became more and more apparent to me when I began to examine what motivated people to both produce and consume letterboxes and participate in an exchange process that can be both satisfying and disappointing. Without the value placed on the handmade, personal stamps hidden out in the world, letterboxing takes on a different purpose – one that is much more like geocaching where the treasure hunt itself

is the value, rather than what is found and placed per se. In geocaching, people leave behind simple trinkets like erasers or paperclips for others to find, rather than hand-crafted, personally meaningful mementos. It is in this sense that letterboxing is art: what is created by the letterboxer is intended to be part of the value of the experience.

Although the search is certainly a vital part of this value, the creation of stamps is a fundamental part of participation and self-expression in the process. Letterboxers express their appreciation for the creations of others as well as ways in which they seek to create something themselves that others will value. The art, community and identity are the means to an alternate source of value. The collection aspect of this process is the focus of the next section.

Collecting and Consumption

Letterboxing involves both leaving behind a personal stamp when a box is found as well as collecting the image contained within the box. This exchange process is what makes the experience of letterboxing so powerful for participants. My respondents explained in interviews that the stamp they give and receive represent a time, a space, an adventure, and most importantly a person. That “someone out there in the world thought it was important that I came here to see or experience something special.” With the rise in consumer society and economic growth, the shift from that of a consumption of survival to a consumption of luxury became more apparent in the West. As Belk explains, “in the view of Lears (1983), consumer societies have abandoned belief in religious salvation for belief in self-realization through goods” (Belk 1995:20.) Collecting is a distinct type of consumption that does not serve to fill a basic survival need. As Belk explains,

For collecting is consumption writ large. It is a perpetual pursuit of inessential luxury goods. It is a continuing quest for self completion in the

marketplace. And it is a sustained faith that happiness lies only an acquisition away. But while collecting may well be the stylized and distilled essence of a consumer orientation towards life, the conceptual relationship between collecting and consuming remains largely unexplored (Belk 1995:1)

Letterboxing viewed through the lens of collecting allows for a more holistic understanding of the type of consumption that is occurring. Collecting is conceived of as a passionate act of consumption where the desire to consume takes on a life of its own. By taking the concept of collecting and economy further, McIntosh states, “collecting allows people to participate in a culture’s economic script” (2004:87).

For instance, a person who collects matchbooks, comic strips, coins, dolls, or plates can distinguish for themselves or other collectors what the importance of certain items are. Their value lies within the eyes of the collecting population and their value is given to them by those that have the knowledge of that value. Moreover, there are distinctions among types of collectors that correspond to different levels of specialized knowledge that can be utilized to place values, taxonomies, and possess and exercise taste and judgment on a specific type of collectable. An amateur collector, according to Belk (1995) is a passionate subjective consumer, whereas the connoisseur is the rational objective expert (45).

Mauss discusses the idea of “precious things,” theorizing that certain items can come to symbolize more than just the items themselves, but instead become extensions of the giver having productive power themselves (1990 [1950] 44.) Appadurai took this idea further into the social life of things, arguing that items can acquiring and lose value, change signification, perhaps become nonexchangeable, or even sacred, only later to sink back into mere commodity status (Ferguson 1988: 491). Applying this perspective to letterboxing provides insight into how the stamps and exchanges themselves generate

value within the community. As participants in a cultural system, letterboxers generate associations of knowledge and power attributed to boxes and stamps that are translated to the producer and the consumer.

Methods

From the beginning of this project there was a difficulty in doing anthropology with the culture moving between that of a virtual one and a physical one. Letterboxers, I believed, were operating at an anonymous level where they were reachable only through the boxes that they placed or through the web. Unlike a research project where one knows where the population is located or at least where the culture meets, letterboxing is a national activity without the convenience of an organized or formal structure or meeting time or area. The game “without rules” also had no centralized physical location for finding information. Beginning this research project in tandem with my Anthropological Methods class allowed for a basis to understanding what methods might work and the importance of understanding the benefits and faults of a variety of different methodological standpoints.

Using a mixed methodological approach seemed the best way to proceed towards a further understanding of letterboxing as a culture and the system of exchange as a fulfillment of a type of capitalistic ideal though by means of nuanced methods. Both qualitative and quantitative methodology were needed to give strength and structure to both the numbers I was obtaining as well as the personal dialogues I was observing. The quantitative methods allowed for a statistical understanding of the letterboxing group as a whole from a national internet driven perspective; whereas the qualitative methods provide the “what and how of culture” (Bernard 2002: 165).

As of this writing, there has only been one academic piece written about letterboxing, a dissertation written by Marisa F Fink, submitted for the Department of Education at Ball State University. Fink uses a large scale survey to provide a basic demographic base for those involved in the hobby. I found many of the books that I would have liked to read were located in libraries in Canada and the U.K., so I relied on the non-academic hobbyist books to give me a stable foundation and vocabulary on which to build my research. I learned that the majority of letterboxers are married, middleclass, college educated, white women with an average age of 35 to 50. I learned the basic vocabulary of the hobby and what the basic rules of the hobby were. I learned about the hierarchical status based on the number of boxes that a participant has planted, found or exchanged.

My literature review continued past the basic premise of an academic piece on letterboxing and began to entail reading past posts through the AtlasQuest website which at the beginning of my research required slogging through volumes of benign posts about pretty much every topic under the sun. The website at the beginning of my research had very little differentiation between subject matters and required that one look through posts about carving, finding, beer, kid antics, funny stories, work boredom, and whatever else people were compelled to share with the group. This has since expanded into an increase of board topics that allow a person to focus their attention only on the boards that directly interest them. Reading these posts allowed me to understand social hierarchies, nuances of status, chatterboxes, new boxers, flamed (or dead lemurs) conversations and the very language that letterboxers used to communicate with one another.

Ethnographic and Interview Approaches

Beginning my research as a novice letterboxer put me at an initial disadvantage over many of the older seasoned boxers. I knew to begin this research I was going to need to go out and actually find a letterbox or two to understand without hesitation what my population was actually up to. Participant observation was needed to gain a firm understanding of what letterboxing consisted of, how to navigate the websites, and importantly, how to speak to other letterboxers about letterboxing. Participant observation proved to be invaluable to me as a researcher throughout this project. Bernard states, “Participant observation involves immersing yourself in a culture and learning to remove yourself every day from that immersion so you can intellectualize what you’ve seen and heard, put it into perspective, and write about it convincingly” (2002: 344.)

To begin, I bought myself and my family a series of cheap white erasers to carve our stamps with. I drew crude designs on the erasers, carved them out and purchased some scrapbooks for us each to document our letterboxing experiences. I was thrilled at my carving ability and delighted in finding a box that was located in a cemetery nearby with some relatively easy clues to decipher. Though I began boxing in November – one of the colder months in Colorado – I was not going to be deterred from finding this box and getting my first glimpse into an actual letterbox. In effect, my “going native” meant that I was going to have to be a letterboxer. If I wanted to gain the trust and comfort of the community as a whole I was going to need to have some experience in what boxing was about – how to plant a box, find a box, exchange my information and open myself up to the language of the community as a whole.

Becoming one with an online community looks a bit different than moving out into the field to remove yourself from your daily life and feel totally immersed in this culture. Again, with letterboxing having no formal structure or hierarchy or location – the best that I could do was to take on the role of an active boxer. On average, for the first two years I researched letterboxers I spent roughly one to two hours a day reading correspondence, reading emails or checking on board posts. I responded to inquiries, made friends with boxers, and engaged in dialogs with a variety of people from all over the country.

When I began looking at trail names for myself, I thought it would be fair and honest to make my name Anthrogradjess. Each boxer has a unique trail name that can represent either an individual or a boxing unit that is associated with their log-in for the Atlasquest website and all of the postings and emails generated from the site attach this name to your work. As either a planter, finder, exchanger, or board poster you become “known” by the trail name you choose. These trail names can be illuminating about a specific hobby, number of children, the weather, initials, funny nicknames, or a silly combination of letters. Each boxer can post information about themselves on their profile page – I chose to utilize this space to discuss my role as a researcher. I did not stress my presence on the boards as one of a researcher, but I participated first as a new letterboxer and then as I became more comfortable as both a researcher and a full-blown experienced boxer with both plants and finds behind my name.

Having begun to grasp the basic vocabulary and premise of letterboxing, I began a series of semi-structured interviews with participants of the letterboxing community. My first contact was a local boxer that had placed boxes around the Fort Collins area that

were listed on the LbNA website. There was a series of boxes that she had planted which I believed signaled a strong commitment to the hobby and an interest in being a producer of boxes, not just a finder. I managed to find a person who participated in the hobby only sparingly and did not feel herself to be part of any organized culture or community. My additional interviews had more parameters to focus on the more active participants. This initial interview took place when I had only recently begun to letterbox and my novice abilities at a semi-structured interview were tested strongly by finding an informant that was actually active in the hobby.

Back to the drawing board I went with more participant observation, including joining three separate letterboxing Yahoo! User groups. The first group that I joined was the Newboxers list, which was recommended quite heavily by a variety of posts on both the AtlasQuest and LbNA websites. This forum allowed for older, willing, boxers to help explain nuances of boxing to new enthusiastic but not always well informed participants. While very helpful in the fledgling stage of research, the questions began to become very similar with new boxers going over and over the same ethical and technical issues that plague a new person who just wants to get out there and find boxes.

The second group I joined was the LbNA group, which is basically known as “the big list”. LbNA, unlike AQ, does not have website access to other boxers in a message board setting. To compensate for this lack of communication for the community, the LbNA Yahoo! Group was formed. There is considerable overlap between the people that post on the big board and those that post on AQ, however, there are quite a few boxers that prefer the Yahoo! Group and use that space to discuss issues they are having with AQ or with the changing face of letterboxing. Many of the older more seasoned and less

technologically interested folks use the big board exclusively to air their thoughts regarding letterboxing. Through reading and responding to the bevy of posts that go through that group each day, my understanding of sensitive issues, hierarchy, and tact were made clearer. This board sees the most “flaming” or airing of grievance and infighting amongst boxers.

The third board that I joined was the Rocky Mountain Letterboxing group on Yahoo!. This board was specifically set up for boxers who were in the Colorado area and extended into boxers in surrounding states like Utah. I initiated the majority of my contacts with boxers in the area from this board. These boxers were located around the state of Colorado but had exchange meetings and events that occurred with a fairly regular basis. It was through this avenue that I found my key informant Ravenwolf. I attended a letterboxing event in March of 2007 called “Doors open Denver” and after attending the initial exchange portion of the event where boxers sit down together and exchange images of their personal stamps with one another. After this portion of the morning was complete we sent off to find more of the urban Denver boxes. It was during a chance encounter inside the Denver Public Library that I was really able to talk to Ravenwolf.

My informal interviewing and participant observation at these gatherings provided me with the insight towards understanding who the people behind the boxes were. I began to see patterns of families with small children, middle-aged single women with a thirst for adventure, and what essentially amounted to an odd assemblage of people from all walks of life working with each other to build this hobby up in the Colorado area. I took diligent field notes from the two formal events that I attended in

Denver. During one of the events I took time out to do a semi-structured interview with Ravenwolf and Samurai Stamper to get more of their feelings about the direction in which my research was going. At that time I exchanged instant message and email contact information with Ravenwolf and began interviewing and questioning her through AOL instant messenger, talk lists, and telephone calls.

I conducted a total of five taped interviews with four women and two men in Fort Collins, Denver, and Las Vegas. Interviewing informants – especially from a cyber context in the real world relies heavily on trust and comfort – as none of the interviews I conducted besides Ravenwolf had I met the interviewees prior to interviewing them. The interview I did in Las Vegas was with a charming couple that met me at the food court within the Luxor casino to discuss letterboxing and art. I found that with my interviews of boxers it was harder to focus on the interviewing task as oftentimes the act of the exchanging of stamps or recollecting about adventures took away from the actual structure of the interview itself. It was apparent and obvious through repetitive exposure to boxers that these are people who are passionate and engaged with the hobby and the culture as a whole and are happy to share that with others.

Through each of my experiences with different methodological choices I gained a richer and more rounded idea of the culture I was looking at. I began to develop my understanding and argument about the importance of the cross-over cyber and physical community and the types of people that would be interested and passionate about participating in letterboxing as a hobby. Because my scope was limited to only the regions of the country that I visited or lived in it was necessary for me to reach out to those other boxers through use of the internet.

Survey Approaches

Over the three years I spent conducting research with letterboxers I conducted four separate surveys. The first survey I submitted to the general newboxer group through Yahoo! and was a short general survey for me to gain a small perspective on the general population and attitudes about letterboxing. It had a total response of 40 people who sent me emails stating they were interested and I would forward the email questions to them and they would respond and send them back. Needless to say this process was exhausting and awkward and required that all of the answers be typed into a separate Excel spreadsheet to be analyzed.

The second survey I conducted was with Rocky Mountain letterboxers only. I was working on a cultural consensus model of letterboxers and the environment and did not require a large population sample for the project. I had 12 respondents that I entered into SPSS, and I looked into a consensus about attitude towards the environment in the process of letterboxing. Based on the small population group and the limited scope of this survey, I did not include information on the strong correlation between Colorado letterboxers and environmental stewardship. A main reason that I chose to leave out the results of this survey from my thesis is linked to the high environmental consciousness and prevalence of outdoor activities in Colorado as a state overall.

The third survey I conducted was administered in person at the “We live and breathe Letterboxing” in Molalla Oregon in September 2008. The survey consisted of sixty-two questions; 54 on a seven-point likert scale rating system and eight demographic questions. I administered the surveys during dinner on the second day of the event with the organizers announcing my project and handing out individually surveys to each

member sitting in the lodge house. Of the sixty surveys I personally handed out I received 38 completed back to me by the end of the evening. I left the additional surveys out for people who may have not been present at the lodge during dinner time in the general meeting area with a sign, but no further responses were gathered. Based on my hypothesis regarding letterboxing and economics I began to question how valid of a cross-section of boxers I would be exposed to on a “get-away” trip that included travel money, accommodations, food, and other vacationing expenses. I did use this survey as a baseline of the “very dedicated letterboxers” who were of an economic potential to make this trip. Represented in Oregon were some of the oldest and most experienced of boxers; it would be unspeakable for them to miss the ten year celebration of letterboxing in the United States. There were, of course, exceptions to this, including a set of my roommates which were a large family that had traveled only a couple of hours to come to the event.

After analyzing the results of the above Oregon survey, I felt that many of the questions could be expanded to create an even more clear explanation of letterboxing as a means to cultural consumption and production. Being concerned with reaching the boxers who I believed were economically unable to attend Oregon’s event, I decided that I would conduct a large full-scale internet-based survey with many of the same questions of the original Oregon survey. I found surveymonkey.com, wrote the survey, and tried a new method of getting informants.

On January 11, 2009, I contacted letterboxers through a posting on the general board at AtlasQuest and both Yahoo! letterboxing groups I am a member of. My first post read:

I am finishing up (finally) my Master's Thesis at Colorado State. For the final piece of research I have a survey that I would like to have at least 250 respondents

(this means you guys) answer the questions for. In exchange for taking time out of your day to help me with my research I will send you a hand-carved virtual image. Please know that this survey is confidential and only numbers will be associated to the answers given. I will also be cross posting this on the Yahoo boards - so I am sorry if you get this link more than once from me. :-)
Happy boxing, Anthrogradjess

In less than 12 hours, I had 129 respondents; by the time 24 hours had passed I had 199 completed surveys. In one week, 262 respondents had completed the survey. I closed the survey for new respondent in September of 2009. I had a total of 290 respondents. I chose to use a stamp in exchange for the time the boxers took to complete the survey because so much of the letterboxing system is set up on a system of exchange and reciprocity. There is always the potential that the informants that answered the online survey were not interested in giving the most genuine answers and were more interested in the stamp reward; however, this is not uncommon anytime a researcher offers an incentive for participants. Out of the total participants that began the survey there were 283 that completed the survey in entirety.

The majority of the questions that I presented on the online survey were set on a seven point Likert scale; I had a section of questions with word ratings; there was also a blank section at the end of the survey for participants to comment on the survey, letterboxing as a whole, and space for the participants to put their trailname for the stamp pass code. Based on the program that surveymonkey has available, I was able to apply cross tabulations to each individual question and filter information based on a variety of topics or groupings. Based on the amount of data that I had collected prior to conducting this survey I decided that higher level statistical analysis would be beyond the needed scope for this thesis. Additional analysis of the data can be employed to elucidate even

more nuanced attitude about letterboxing and addiction and letterboxing as a cultural whole.

The Strength of Mixed Methods

To understand the complexity of letterboxing as a culture, especially with the limited amount of scholarly research available, it was only through the use of “mixed” qualitative and quantitative methods that a more genuine approach could be developed. Having this group that exists both in the sphere of online culture and also in a corporeal space, gave me a fair amount of freedom to employ a variety of methods and use trial and error to find which methods were most successful and comfortable for both for me and my informants. Participant observation allowed the space I needed to gain a level of rapport with my informants, the ability to speak the language of boxing with my interviewees and survey respondents that established a consistent level of trust and openness.

Letterboxing and letterboxers have shifted and morphed during the course of my research with this group. Having used both types of methodology allowed for a fluid, yet consistent picture of what the hobby has been, where it was during my research period, and how it may change based on the needs of the group and the ideas of the participants. Without being able to see the group as a whole through the use of widespread surveys, I would have been limited to Rocky Mountain letterboxers that were willing to talk to me. Likewise, my local informants provided me with the “real” side of letterboxing by planting, exchanging and participating in events. These boxers provided me with the perspective of being both a planter of my own boxes and finder of the boxes they put out around this area.

CHAPTER 4. PRODUCTION, OR, FROM RUBBER TO ART

So are letterboxes just things? Are these little Tupperware containers reducible in worth to the carving materials and paper that are left in the boxes? To letterboxers the answer is a resounding “no.” In fact, I will argue in this chapter that they can be viewed as a form of art and the producers of such boxes thus artists.

Still, letterbox trades do take on the appearance of economic exchanges. In fact, this seems to be part of their appeal. I was continually struck by how much I wanted to possess these wood and rubber “commodities.” However, they are removed from the actual economic structure of modern day capitalism in the United States and thus not exactly commodities. Appadurai states: “a commodity is a product by definition, in the institutional, psychological, and economic conditions of capitalism” (1986:7). To insiders, boxes are only partially tied to an actual economy and thus only partially commodified. Regardless of the monetary and even “commodity” value of an actual box and its production, there is a sense of giving and deep generosity on the part of the producer. Again, the value of the box production is tied to the idea of these boxes as representative of gifts and sharing. It occurred over and over to me as I would rush to the mailbox to open a postal box just how special and how much sharing was possible with these little rubber slabs. That is, they are gifts as much as they are commodities.

This chapter will examine three different styles of letterboxes and their role as art in a production stratum that nevertheless partially resembles an economic domain. More specifically, I have chosen to elucidate the activities surrounding virtual, traditional, and postal boxes. This is based on these three styles' popularity as well as my own personal engagement with these styles over the past three years. Traditional boxes are undeniably the basis for which most participants become involved in the hobby. Virtual boxes offer an alternative to boxers who are experiencing inclement weather or illness or just looking for a way to flex their mental muscles. Postal boxes have been declining in popularity in the past year because of increasing postal rates and the advent of Letterboxing Trading Card (LTC) and their increased popularity; however, they still provide an important form of exchange in letterboxing culture. The 285 participants in the survey conducted for this research demonstrated that many letterboxers experienced a varied of types of letterboxing, as shown in Figure 3.

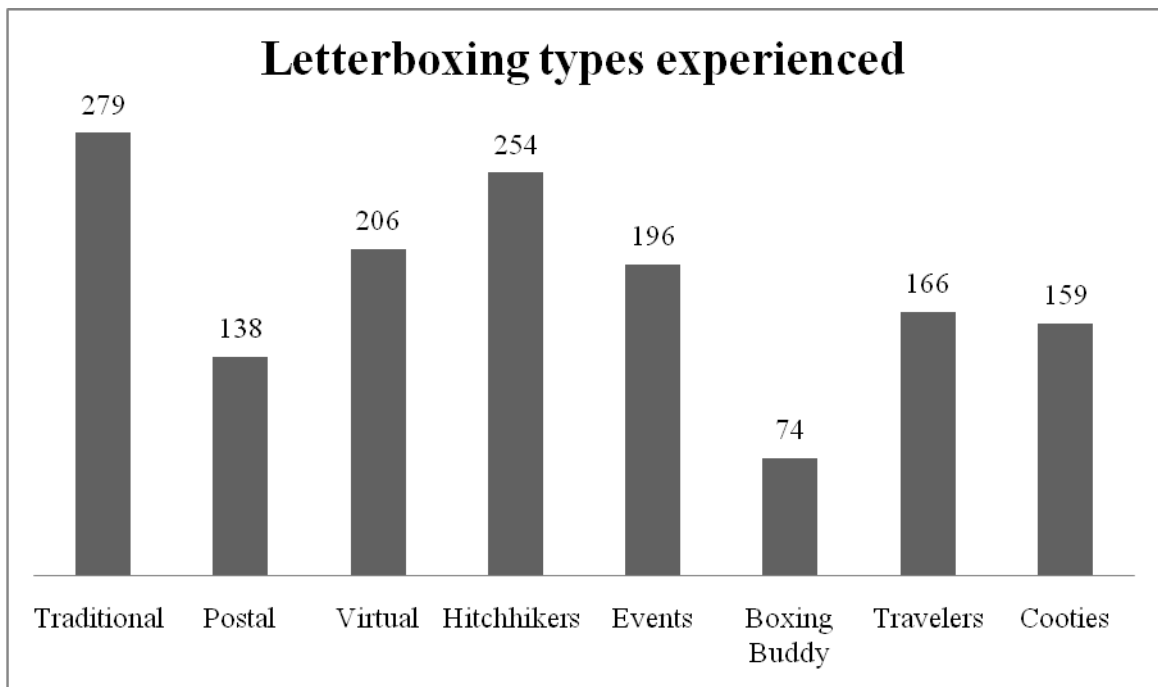


Figure 3: Letterboxing variety
Letterboxing Online Survey: January 2009 n=285

This chapter explores how the value of letterboxes and their stamps straddle the boundary between a form of art that is both gift and commodity. Indeed, it is this straddling, I will argue, that lends the activity its value. I show how the “production” of boxing creates identity and value within a community, allowing boxers to turn potentially capitalistic commodity-like exchanges to new ends.

Virtual Letterboxing

“Letterboxing means planters, who risk their creations to the uncertain fates of the world” (Uneksia 2008).

Virtual letterboxing occurs when a participant creates an online mystery with clues that are published on a website, like AQ, and require a passkey to obtain the virtual image. The initial investment for producing a virtual letterbox is minimal. There is little to no capital invested in these boxes, yet the producer still gets the satisfaction of watching people consume their boxes. Despite the minimal material investments, makers of virtual letterboxes can be ranked and thus social status can be bestowed on “good” as compared to “poor” box producers. By examining the hidden economic process of virtual letterboxes, the values and norms of the culture are revealed.

So how does one produce a virtual box? Historically, virtual letterboxing began when people wanted to solve clues to find mystery boxes in other areas of the country that they did not have access to. It is rumored that the idea of virtually boxing began with the Kimball Library letterbox placed by Tom Cooch when people managed to solve the clues to this box but could not travel to Vermont to stamp in (We Live and Breathe Letterboxing 2008:5). Tom began allowing partial credit for solving the box online after a

person had cracked the clues to the boxes physical location. Virtuals morphed from this to a full-blown independent section of boxing in the United States.

I currently have six virtual letterboxes posted on the AtlasQuest website. I solved 131 virtual boxes between January 4, to March 31, 2007. As is requested through letterboxing message boards and FAQ's, I waited to launch my first virtual box until I had seen the ways that others had organized theirs. I planted my first virtual box on February 21, 2007 and entitled it "The Mad Queen". To begin the process I had to decide what my clues were going to be. I chose to do what is known as a "drive-by" letterbox where the clue was a single question with a single answer to solve it. I then entered the clue into the website for a new virtual box. Then the next webpage appeared: where you put the solution for the virtual box and where a boxer uses a drop-down answer sheet with the appropriate number of spaces for the solution. Then an image is uploaded as the reward for the finder. This image is placed in their virtual logbook and is also printable if the finder wants to have a physical image to put into their logbook. I chose a generic Google image of the Queen of Hearts that I had found through a search. To date, that box has seen 83 hits from people looking at the clue; with nine being from the year 2009. That same evening I posted another virtual box entitled "A Gem of an Album", which has had 535 hits with 52 being in 2009. My least popular virtual box is "Mephitidae" with 69 hits, 6 being from 2009.

The production of virtual letterboxes has changed with the needs and interests of the culture of letterboxers. When I began my research in 2006, 520 boxes were located on the AtlasQuest website; currently there are 23, 565 listed on the website. The production of these boxes is left entirely to the planter themselves; this however is not removed from

the cultural whole of letterboxing. These boxes can take from a few moments to make or can extend to months, as seen in this posting by a prominent boxer, “Northern Village' took 3 months to create. Most of {sic} virtuals took days to create - researching the questions and carving the stamp, then scanning and resizing and uploading. The feedback kept me motivated. Maybe the more work we put into a virtual the more we care about comments.” (AtlasQuest message board: October 21, 2008) This boxer was discussing how the sense of validation was linked directly to the amount of responses the box received.

As with a capitalistic system of exchange and production, such activity is not fulfilling if there is no consumption of the product; where there are no finders there is no need for planters. For example, a heartfelt note written by one of the top virtual box planters reads:

Okay a tiny confession... I'm addicted to virtuals. Not solving them - but writing them! And do you want to know why? Because of the people solving them!

I know virtuals are not everyone's cup of soup... but I personally have:

1. Made a new friend
2. Kept restless snowbound kids from driving parents insane
3. Helped a couple new mother's make it through a few all night sessions with cranky newborns
4. Stumped people to generate some hysterical questions and pleas for help
5. Helped someone stay on their mental game
6. Remembered this about myself growing up that I had forgotten
7. And shared twisted little pieces of what makes me, me

Virtuals will never solve world hunger, stop people from suffering, or make me millions of dollars! But the messages people send me make me SOAR! People are funny, charming, and even telling me private pieces about themselves that I probably would never know (and thankfully for some I forget so fast because of lack of brain capacity!). People on AQ are wonderful... but in my little piece of the virtual world... the ones that are plugging through the ones I write are TERRIFIC! I try to respond to all

your messages, but if I miss one... know I read it, and cherished the time you took to write me!
Thanks for this outlet that helps to keep me SANE! (AQ Board March 27, 2007).

The Hall of Fame on AtlasQuest currently boasts only four member who have planted over 1000 virtual boxes but 18 finders with over 10,000 virtual finds (AQ Stats : September 17, 2009). Virtual boxes do not count towards the traditional PFX numbers that are featured on the AtlasQuest website.

There has been much discussion about the validity of even calling these internet-based and thus virtual puzzles letterboxes because in essence one is not exchanging stamps with another individual. As virtual letterboxing began to gain in popularity on the AtlasQuest website, there began to be more and more planters who were striving for more and more boxes placed on the site. This prompted a fairly huge backlash from both the site owner, Green Tortuga, as well as from many of the older virtual finders. A modification to the way that boxes are allowed to be placed has seen the removal of boxes that do not contain either a hand-carved stamp image that is scanned into the system as the clue reward or other personal art. One planter commented “So, looks like non-stamp based (web image) virtuals are being phased out here at Atlasquest. Sad day. I posted my last virtual letterbox today. For all of you who followed my boxes that I tried to make educational; thanks, it has been a fun ride. “ (411007 AQ July 2009). Another planter commented, “Unlike a lot of the top planters, it took me more than 3 years to create and plant my VLB's. I just don't have that much free time anymore.” (411949 AQ July8, 2009).

When the production of virtual letterboxes moved away from the idea of art and individual expression, many of the planters were no longer interested in keeping up with

them. The boxes began to be more and more simple, requiring only one word answers that yielded an image that was taken from a website and thus became less and less personal for the people that were producing them. Letterboxing has the most meaning for people when they feel like they have contributed something of themselves. It is the concept of “imbued artifacts” that seems to draw most people to the hobby.

Similar to the idea of overproduction in capitalism, when there was an onslaught of virtual boxes of a lower quality the overall value decreased for all of the producers of the commodity. Creativity, art and self-expression began to be less and less inherent in the ways that virtual letterboxes were being produced and their value went down. These boxes are, by far, the cheapest to produce when using a web image and but can require much preparation time if the planter is interested in sending the finder on a long chase of intellectual prowess around the web. The concept of supply and demand within a capitalistic state became the obvious victim of too many producers can lower the value of anything. One finder sent out a missive to the planting community, “For now, I challenge those creating VLB's to be just that - creative. Tell me a story, find me an interesting topic to research, let me learn! Take the time to create something of value, rather than having it be a numbers game! (4/19/85 2009)”

Postal Letterbox Production

Postal letterboxes take the level of artistry to a different level while still maintaining a more “traditional” letterboxing feel. By allowing people to produce their original artwork through the mail in a more controlled environment than outside, many boxers who are interested and motivated by pushing their carving abilities and logbook making abilities find this avenue more satisfying than planting a box in the wild. The

basic process of how a postal box works is that a person signs up for either a single postal box or a postal ring. A postal ring is where a person picks a theme for the ring of participants to carve and then each person involved picks the specific contribution they want to make to the ring as a whole. Each box is sent from one group member to the next through the post office until each member of the ring has received every other box and then finally their box in the mail. A postal single is where a single box is sent through a list of participants that have signed up to receive the box. In the case of a single, the production aspect of the box is only the original person who made the box and those who receive the box are not required to produce their own box. Based on the limited amount of production in a postal single I am going to focus on the production of postal boxing rings.

To begin, postal ring participants are encouraged to join a “new postal boxer” ring where older postal boxes are sent to new participants to give them an idea of what a postal box should be and how the process of sending and receiving boxes works. The first box I received was on December 14, 2006 and was part of a small ring with five boxes and ten participants. After completing my initiation into postal boxing I thought it would be interesting to see how the process worked from a planter and finder perspective. I participated in ten separate postal rings from January 22, 2007 to January 17, 2008. I hand-carved stamps with themes from Disney characters, tattoos, punk rock bands, and television shows. With each box I found my desire to be more creative and detailed with my both my stamps and logbooks increasing.

The use of materials that would not fare out in the open are frequently used when producing a postal letterbox. The producers of these boxers are expected to try and

keep the weight of each box to a minimum to prevent the shipping costs from being too prohibitive to the other participants in the ring. The benefit of postal boxes for many of the letterboxing participants is the ability to share boxes with others who are not located in the vicinity where you live and to spread your own box art around the country. With the prospect of shipping these boxes around the country comes the risk of them never being returned or losing them through the postal system.

My very first postal ring exposed me to both the positive and negatives of this type of boxing. I diligently found the perfect image of a Disney couple for my first full postal ring exchange. I spent a beautiful winter afternoon transferring the image and carving my stamp. I then took time to create my own handmade logbook, with dog bone stamp punches and the history of Pongo and Perdita in Disney history. I double-checked my address, secured the envelope and sent my little rubber couple off into the world. Two weeks past, the box hadn't been logged by the person I had sent it to. I began to email her, asking if she had seen my box or the other boxes I had sent to her from the ring. After three weeks missing I was crushed. My box was gone. I never received anything back from the United States Postal Office and neither did my sender. I sadly re-created the box as quickly and efficiently as I could, to avoid looking like I was not participating, and mailed it again to the next person in line. Six days later, she logged that she had found my couple. I saw this happen with four more boxes in the rings that I participated in. Postal boxes, like traditional letterboxes, can go missing. The loss that one feels when the box that they worked so hard to produce seems to be equivalent to those that lose their traditional boxes, however, postal boxes should be, in theory, more protected by the

mechanisms of choosing who participates in the ring and the lack of environmental factors that put traditional boxes at risk.

The producers of postal letterboxes are in an exchange process that looks similar to the North American Potlatch identified by Marcel Mauss. Each of these postal letterboxes produced are a gift. Of the potlatch, Douglas says in the forward of The Gift: “Spelt out it means that each gift is part of a system of reciprocity in which the honour of giver and recipient are engaged. It is a total system in that every item of status or of spiritual or material possession is implicated for everyone in the whole community” (1986:viii) These boxes are produced with the idea of reciprocal exchange coming from other producers, hopefully with the same care and concern that the producer themselves invested in their box.

Traditional Box Production

Most letterboxers begin the hobby based on the idea of hunting for the boxes in the wild. The treasure hunt aspect that is discussed widely through local publications and national magazines is directly connected to the idea of getting families and individuals out in the environment where they hike to a box. Inherent in the idea of treasure is the means of economic validity of exchange and value of the item being searched for. All of the informants I interviewed and boxed with were producers of traditional letterboxes. Traditional box production mimics the boxes in Dartmoor to a certain extent, but much of the letterboxing I examined and researched is the very American style of box production. Dartmoor boxes are frequently made with store-bought stamps with custom designs carved into them. The importance of the exchange in the traditional Dartmoor boxes can be seen in the personal interactions with which clues were obtained. American boxes are

almost exclusively hand-carved and much of the box production interaction occurs within the online context of communication.

Traditional boxes are the most prolific boxes on the AtlasQuest website with 89,796 represented on the website; of those, 59,779 are active boxes out in the world. Producing boxes is generally not done until a boxer has found some boxes from others in the wild. The topic of how many boxes should be found prior to planting is a topic of frequent discussion on the letterboxing boards with people encouraging new boxers to learn from the experiences of the planters that have successful boxers in their area. It seems that a fair “rule” is to find around ten traditional boxes, preferably planted by different people prior to planting a first box. Like most everything in letterboxing, traditional boxes planting can vary drastically from state to state and have been tailored to specific natural and social environments.

When a producer decides to place their first box there are many factors that they must consider when preparing. A box is only successful if the clues to find it are clear enough for others to follow them, the location is secluded enough to prevent theft from non-boxers, not located too near to another box (unless there is an agreement). Research is frequently done prior to planting boxes to increase the interest in the area, the history, or the series. Each of these boxes placed take anywhere from two hours to two months in preparation for being placed into the wild (Ravenwolf: 2006). Though not a science, the more planning and observation of an area done prior to placing a box ensures a better chance of placing it in a location where a person will not be observed or the box will not be exposed to non-boxing “muggles.” It is with this lens of increased awareness of

personal choice and effort that boxes become treasure for people: the value is increased by the amount of time and effort that a planter puts into a box.

My first interview with a local boxer from the area discussed the production of boxes at length. Shelia was a professional working at a local mental health facility in a supervisory role. The mother of three found letterboxing through a special interest article in the local newspaper and added it to the repertoire of outdoor activities she and her family participated in. Based on the young age of her twins (age 4), Shelia looked for boxes mostly with her daughter (age 8) around town. When she decided that she wanted to start producing stamps it was something she took up as an indoor activity they could do when the weather was dissatisfactory and still feel like they were participating in the hobby. She picked a theme based on an art initiative that took people around town to look at different mediums and artists from around the area. Adding to the theme of the existing art structures and public friendly locations made this an easy way to participate in the community art awareness, possibly exposing new boxers to the idea of local artistic community support.

When we hide it's just a place I always have in mind, you know, bringing a person, to a place where they otherwise might not have gone. Or sharing something with them that they might not have known. For instance, the Art in Public Places, people might never have gone to see that specific park, or that specific big art exhibit or whatever, had they not gone to see that letterbox. So there's, I always look for something that there's something additional to just finding the box. I think the other things make it something worthwhile. But it could also just be that this is a beautiful field, it's close to us, and that is some of the stuff that we're thinking when we are...when things slow down...um you know, doing some in places that we tend to hang out in, that we like and want to share with other people. (Sheila 2006)

Time and time again the idea of boxing as a means to sharing, exchanging, and connecting with other people out in the world was echoed again and again in the postings

on AQ, LbNA and the Yahoo groups. People were anonymously connecting with others, both in a virtual sense through communication about the traditional boxes as well as in the corporeal world. People from all over the country had signed into Shelia's boxes. Each person that signed into those boxes became part of the larger narrative of the box being valuable – the planter's pat on the back for making a box that was worth looking for and enjoyable to participate in.

Another interview I conducted at the Luxor in Las Vegas with a boxing couple showed more of the intensity for creating and sharing that permeates the production side of the hobby. Jerry and Mary were artists living on the edge of Las Vegas who boxed primarily in California. Las Vegas is a popular place for tourists to visit so it is not surprising that there is a strong desire for there to be boxes hidden within the city limits. When I asked Mary why there were not more boxes on the strip, she explained it as a placing problem. Las Vegas is covered in video surveillance throughout all of the casinos and when a person approaches a bush or other area like that looking like they are not doing something it rouses the interest of security and the boxes get destroyed or discovered by people. This issue of placing in their local city, even with the option of trying urban boxing forced these boxers to plant in the surrounding desert areas and even their work environment and out of state to prevent the loss. Considering each of their boxes an extension of their art made them very protective about the likelihood of a box having longevity on the strip. Placing a box on the strip was the same as putting a box into the wide open areas where people would assume that it was a worthless piece of Tupperware – thus taking away the ability to share the value with the audience that would value it appropriately for the producer.

Traditional boxes face lack of direct control when compared to other boxes that were examined in this study, yet people genuinely enjoy creating these boxes. A Rocky Mountain boxer that I participated in events and boxing with was one of the most prolific planters in the area and regularly commented and corrected new boxers about finding her boxes, going as far as putting restrictions on how many boxes a person had to have found before her clues would even show up on the search for Denver boxes. This small piece of insurance for planters was oftentimes a point of perceived elitism for certain boxers to prevent others from boxing in certain areas. Boxing loss for traditional boxes is very high and can be quite devastating for the planters; however for many boxers it is worth the risk of loss to get their art out. One AQ poster says of this, “We just had a conversation about the trouble of taking something you've spent heart-felt time with and putting it in the dirt, or vines or in between rocks. Know that you put your art (heart?) out into the universe and it's better for it. Even if that art has gone missing. (445602)

Consistent throughout my interviews and observation with letterboxers was the fear of loss. Losing a box could cause strain and disappointment and even lead to complete disinterest in the hobby. These little rubber boxes provide an opportunity for people to share, which ultimately seems to be the purpose for most people involved. Much like the Kula ring of Mauss' *The Gift* there are obligations within letterboxing production. In the potlatch much like in letterboxing: “To refuse to give, to fail to invite, just as to refuse to accept, is tantamount to declaring war; it is to reject the bond of alliance and commonality (Mauss 1950:13). There is, of course, no obligation from people to plant letterboxes; however, the bond and commonality comes from the sharing of ideas. There was a large discussion on the private members only board on AQ about a

person who was finding boxes and not planting any of their own and the other planter's dissatisfaction with it not being a reciprocal exchange. People are encouraged by others in the group to learn how to create boxes, how to find good places to hide them, and how to mentor and encourage people to get out and put boxes in the wild.

Lacking any formal structure of authority, box producers rely strongly on the bonds that they build both through the virtual community and their own boxing experiences in the real world. Ideas are freely exchanged and tips and status is given through the group for those that produce not only quantities of boxes but quality boxes as well. There is the obligation of care that has to be present for each box that is planted for a boxer to maintain their status. For example, if someone goes out and plants boxes in poor places or with low quality work and then doesn't maintain them, they do not have as high of status within the group as someone with a lower number of boxes that are well maintained and high quality. Essentially, it's not just numbers that equal status within the group. The aim is to try and encourage and acknowledge the people who are very responsible planters with beautiful boxes, locations, clues or all of the above; AQ started placing icons next to boxes that received consistently high ratings from people finding them. These boxes are called "Blue Diamond" boxes. According to the AQ website:

The blue diamond signifies some of the most enjoyable and interesting traditional letterboxes on Atlas Quest. Letterboxes marked with the blue diamond might have particularly witty clues, or perhaps an astonishing hand-carved stamp. Maybe the logbook is extraordinarily well-done, or the letterbox takes you on an amazing hike in one of the most scenic places on earth.

When the Blue Diamond rating system was first suggested, it was to help people weed through boxes and acknowledge a job well done for the planter. Needless to say, having a Blue Diamond rating on a box is a huge sign of status and recognition within the

boxing community. As one boxer put it, “Getting this distinction is more thrilling than getting an Oscar or Grammy. Wow, what a great way to celebrate three years of Lbing and 35 years together!” (2010:536347). Another boxer posted “I just updated a box in my logbook and saw some beautiful gems. Next to a series I actually did all by myself. My Crime in a Small Town went blue diamond! I'm so honored you guys like it! It was lots of fun plotting and planning it” (2010:543158). On the glossary section of AQ the explanation of Blue Diamond includes: “The blue diamond also acts as kudos to those who plant particularly memorable letterboxes. A pat on the back for their efforts, and a way to let the planter of the letterbox know the extra care and effort that went into the box was appreciated.” The rating system is fluid, however, and the rating for boxes changes on a daily basis based, so a box does not maintain a Blue Diamond status unless people continue to find the box and rate it highly.

Whether virtual, postal or traditional; producers of these boxes put pieces of themselves in not only their time and creative efforts but also in their attempts to share and connect with others. Production in an economic sense shows the ability to provide a service or experience for people to consume for their own enjoyment. The ability to give others experiences, art and connection makes the recognition of producing these boxes a highly valuable and sought after position within the letterboxing community. As one local boxer pointed out, boxes go missing and people lose the effort and time that the box represents for them. Nevertheless, in this boxer's words:

Though as a placer it SUCKS, sucks, sucks (can you tell I'm a fan of placing boxes??) Let us never forget that Lost Art...isn't really!
Placing letterboxes is an act of love. And love never dies regardless of time frame...even if it really hurts sometimes. 296569

Summary: Where is the Art? What is the Value?

“Art is an institution that purports to judge, place and define a range of differences within its own hierarchy of value. As a medium of objectification, the materiality of art and its meanings have made it particularly productive, in the context of modernity, as an arena for constituting and considering human difference and value” (Meyers 2001:31) .

Letterboxes are art. The production and allowances for creativity are all held within a system of values and norms that are specific to letterboxers and are judged within the hierarchies of value peculiar to the culture. The ability to look upon letterboxes as works of art can be seen throughout the activity with each sub-set of boxing representing an outlet for each producer to be most fulfilled and creatively appreciated.

Letterboxes, and the production of letterboxes, are inherently something done by those with leisure time and the financial means to have supplies needed to produce a box. A letterbox is nothing more than a notebook with a little rubber stamp to those that are not involved in the hobby. The person out hiking with their children in the woods can look like nothing more than a traditional hiker on a trek, when in actuality they are on a secret mission to find these little imbued artifacts that were left behind by another sneaky hiker. It is the knowledge of the meaning of the artistic pieces that gives them power and importance. It was during the time that I produced postal and traditional boxes that the factor or the artistic side of letterboxing became wholly apparent. People are encouraged and allowed to come up with novel box hiding locations, clues, artistic stamps and creative adventures for others to experience. Letterboxing as a culture is bound by art. In fact, it is the art that has the value the boxer pursues.

It is interesting that the concept of art in letterboxing is not readily expressed and few people even identify art as their first motivating factor for getting involved. There are, of course, exceptions to the idea that boxing is all about the hike. One boxer

commented on boxing, “I’m a wish-I-were-an-artist first, probably in it for the adventure/visiting new places second, hiking for the exercise third. For me the stamp doesn’t have to be amazing, a hand-carved stamp is what I desire – I want to see someone’s personal art – a piece of themselves that they share with me and other letterboxers. I find that aspect so cool” (436672: 2009). Oftentimes, when faced with the idea of having to create a stamp new boxers are afraid and hesitant to start. Older boxers spend hours of time online writing tutorials and words of encouragement to new boxers, giving tips and ideas of easier ways to produce quality stamps. “Wow...thank you for the encouragement! I admit I get very frustrated trying to do knife stamps, and just resolved to give up. But I thought back to when I first began to carve, and I never thought I would get it down. It's all about persistence, right?” (449176: 2009). One poster says “Carving a rubber stamp is considered an art and everyone is a critic, but nobody should write off a carver because 1 or 2 stamps look horrible or maybe 10. We all start somewhere and some are natural artists that we cannot all become. It doesn't mean boxes should not be planted. Last I knew, most letterboxes are found because it is fun finding them, not because we are searching for the Mona Lisa of the stamp world.” (442965: 2009). During my interview with Ravenwolf she made the comment, “A box is a small representation of the person who leaves it there. Both in the quality of the box itself, and how carefully it is placed.” (Interview 5: 2008)

Clearly the production of the boxes themselves is highly motivating as seen both in my interviews, participation in the message boards and personal experience. It is to some extent the learning curve that increases the value of stamps and expresses the continuation of imbued identity within the stamps that are produced. Each stamp is a part

of the person placing it – it holds the importance of the trail and the persons’ personal desire to share with others.

Survey respondents also identified the importance of creating boxes as being one of the most enjoyable aspects of letterboxing as a hobby. 79.4% of survey respondents found carving/creating boxes to be either “enjoyable” or “very enjoyable” as part of the reason they letterboxed, seen in Figure 3 below. It is interesting to note that some letterboxers answered that they were neutral or actually did not enjoy carving or creating letterboxes. This may be because such participants are more focused on the process of discovery, collecting clues, and exploring online and offline spaces than they are on creating the letterboxes themselves. This suggests that value in this activity comes not only from its creative, but also its exploratory characteristics as is discussed in the next chapter.

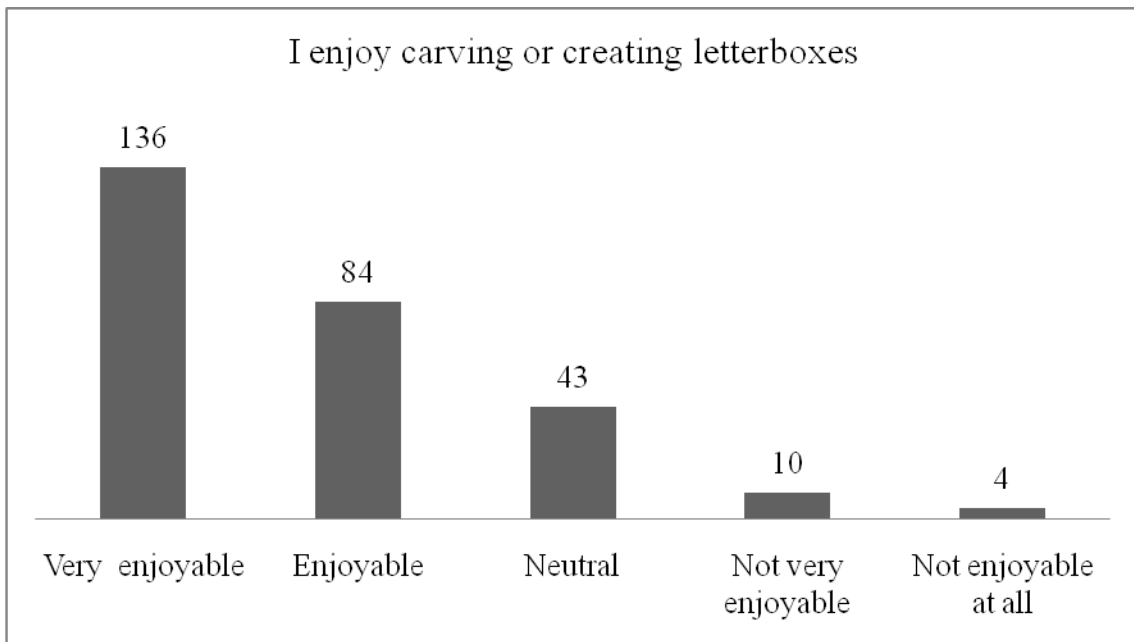


Figure 4: Participant enjoyment level of letterboxing.
Letterboxing Online Survey: January 2009 n=285

My research found that the majority of letterboxers were educated, middle-class, white women, often without formal or traditional employment. It is not surprising, then, that an important motivation for letterboxing is in the production of a tangible item that produces social value, albeit within this specific community rather than within society at large.

CHAPTER 5. CONSUMPTION: THE ART OF LETTERBOX COLLECTING

When most letterboxers find out about the hobby it is generally from the perspective of hunting and finding boxes. Countless articles have circulated through newspapers and magazines that discuss the treasure hunt, the nature walks and the surprise that are as frequently touted as the draw to letterboxing as a hobby. Most letterboxers are encouraged to find at least ten boxes before they begin planting their own boxes so they understand the process and gist of the hobby. Like any system of exchange, letterboxing exists within the framework of production and consumption. This chapter will focus on the consumption of virtual, postal and traditional letterboxes as they relate to the building of community, the collection of art and stamps and the value that letterboxing brings to the boxers.

Virtual Consumption

I'll have to admit I'm kind of competitive and wanted a ribbon of recognition once I figured out what they were for. I did like 50 letterboxes (virtual ones) one day just to see my profile graphics change. I was a little disappointed when it didn't. Needless to say I've been out recently and now have 10 REAL letterbox finds! They are way more rewarding than virtuals, but I was wondering just the same. (447451)

With the enormous amount of found virtual boxes, 960,743 currently, and 74% (211) of my respondents answering that they had participated in virtual letterboxing, it is apparent that virtual boxes are very much a part of letterboxing culture in the United States. Unlike the planter side of the Hall of Fame, the virtual finders are numerous with

large find counts. There are 141 boxers listed on the Hall of Fame for find counts that number between 1000 and 10,000 virtual boxes solved. It is evident that the consumption of these boxes is very powerful and compelling to the participants of virtual boxes. As noted in this discussion of just finding virtuals available to them – one boxer replied:

They can be ADDICTING!

I had fun in the winter doing them, promising myself I would only solve the ones I could without the help of Google. Well, I got past 1,000, then past 1,600 and I just wanted to see my name in the F-2500 group {found category}. So I went back and found some more that I realized I could do without Google. Then I Googled. I'll be the first to admit I don't know much about Wizards, anime, and the many games and merchandise that bombards today's youth. It was AQ that introduced me to Hannah Montana.

Then I had to remove my favorite virtual search that notified me of all new virtuals. I am tempted, but I will wait until next winter to begin again....
(Speedsquare: June 20,2008).

The term “addiction” is thrown around quite regularly to describe the compulsion that these virtual boxers feel about consuming these types of boxes. The drive and desire to solve just one more box is driven both from a personal desire, as well as a cultural one.

Virtual boxes, unlike postals or traditional boxes, afford the seeker the ability to flex their mental muscle without many of the limitations. A person who wants to be boxing at 2 a.m. is going to have a much harder time finding a physical box out in the world. But a similar person can find a virtual box whenever they want to. Letterboxing does assume a fair amount of mental strength and puzzle solving ability and this is especially true for virtual boxes. There are a variety of time commitments and requirement for these boxes. One box set I worked on was a series of hand-carved stamps for the “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” series. To solve the puzzle you had to solve a part of each episode and a take a letter from that solution for each episode for a total of over 140 episodes watched for the entire virtual box series. There are also those boxes that you can

solve almost immediately through a search with Google. This issue of ease of accumulating numbers through many of the “easier” boxes became a large issue for many letterboxers, including the founder of AQ:

Sure feels like it's about the numbers when most of the virtual board posts are filled with announcements from VLB enthusiasts who publicize that they've reached a new target. Many people feel this is a great achievement. I conclude from the responses that many consider that the primary goal of creating and solving virtuals is to reach a target number. What the puzzle is like and what the reward is, doesn't matter to most VLB enthusiasts. I think the numbers game has discouraged the contribution of meatier virtuals that take some effort to create. Why bother putting in the effort if an easy web image VLB is on par? (504896)

In sync with the theoretical view that value is based within a supply and demand model, when virtual boxes began to flood the market their value decreased. When the older and more experienced virtual boxers saw the flood of production, many of them began to place value on the more complex puzzles and the virtuals that had hand-carved stamps. One boxer said:

Nice to see that someone else feels the same about the direction virtuals have taken in the last few years. I too started about the same time you did, with my own hand-carved stamped images as rewards and have lost interest with the direction virtuals have taken. But people are definitely enjoying the quick puzzles and web image rewards, so that's fine if that's a preferable evolution. But I liked the idea of a virtual hunt to find a virtual hand-carved image, felt more like letterboxing to me. (344618)

The way that accomplishments and pride about solving virtual letterboxes and the validity of them as letterboxes at all is an argument that has changed and morphed in the time that I researched them. They seem to provide an almost false sense of consumption that many boxers find to be hollow or without as much value as the traditional.

When I was involved in participant observation with virtual letterboxing, I found 131 boxes. There were days that I solved dozens of boxes in a matter of a couple of hours. It is rare in letterboxing to collect dozens of boxes in a day, particularly in areas

with a thin planter base. This type of consumption still has power and impact and relevance to those that find themselves desiring the sense of puzzle solving with a reward. In meeting with the idea of being an accomplished virtual boxer, people continue to push the idea of what is valuable and serves as important within the community of virtual boxers. For those boxers that spent hours solving and searching for the clues to answer these boxes their accomplishment can be completely internalized or can be shared with others that continue to see the value in consumption – creating a subculture of boxers within the main framework of letterboxing as a whole.

Postal Consumption

Postal letterboxes differ from traditional and virtual boxes in consumption because of the very presence of postal box rings. Most postal boxes operate within a ring status: a producer makes one box for a certain theme and in return they receive every other creator's box in the mail. There are postal singles that are put out by planters that have boxes available to go out to whoever is interested in seeing them, or boxes that they wanted to produce without a specific theme. Having a large number of consumed boxes through postal boxes is relatively easy, but rings require that production coincides with the exchange of the boxes. Postal box rings in particular allow a boxer to see a wide variety of carving techniques, logbook creation and art.

I participated in eleven postal boxing rings with themes from Disney Characters to Greek Gods to Punk Rock music and tattoos. I received 166 boxes in return for the eleven boxes that I produced. There were days that I would arrive home to find six to eight new letterboxes waiting in my mailbox for me to open and exchange with. It was like having a treasure in my mailbox with each box that arrived. Some of the boxes were

complex with themed envelopes, handmade logbooks, stickers, and beautiful stamps; some of the boxes were simple and unadorned. Most boxes had additional information that taught me about the stamp, the person, the movie or another cultural piece. Each box becomes a tiny window into sharing with another person.

Postal boxing allows the boxer to see different styles of boxing, carving, logbooks, and ideas that are happening across the country. This style of boxing exposes people to new ideas and areas that they may not have access to by traveling there and allows for the sharing of personal and intimate almost “special” boxes. One boxer says of the reason to participate in postal boxing:

Oh, there's another good postal reason...when you've run out of boxes in your area! Hadn't thought of that, since my stretch of NY is packed with boxing fun now (haven't even TRIED to do much in Syracuse yet...holy moly, Lock Wench!) :-)

And it does seem to be true that more people put serious effort into those postal logbooks than in the boxes I've found in the real world...I redid mine for the Fairy Ring just so I wouldn't feel so goofy! (13380)

The idea of loss with postal boxes is less when the protection of location is taken into account and the idea of the safety of the postal service. However, as I discussed in the previous chapter, the chance of losing postal boxes is a very real possibility either through a disinterested participant or an error within the postal system.

Postal box consumption tends to attract the boxers that are most interested in the artistic side of the hobby. These boxers want to see and create amazing pieces of art, they want to share ideas and thoughts with one another in a way that is more difficult, or at least more risky than traditional letterboxing. Stamp size limitation, logbook delicacies, and extras like DVD and CD exchanging are all issues with traditional letterboxing that are eliminated when one participates in postal boxing. One box that I received was called the “Safe Side” postal and was both a letterbox and a copy of the Safe Side DVD about

stranger danger for children. Part of the requirement of the box sender for this postal was that people watch the video with their children to help ensure that everyone have the tools to talk to their children about kidnapping and safe practices for dealing with unknown adults or strange situations. This type of sharing is powerful and allowed for twenty families to view this DVD and share the stamps and logbooks that came along with it. Another ring that I participated in was related to music and everyone included a CD of the artist that they carved for everyone to enjoy.

Postal box consumption can be a problem for people because of the cost and commitment necessary to do these boxes. When I was shipping postal boxes the average box cost \$2.13 to \$4.15. This amount does not seem terribly high when you think of one box being sent at that rate, but rings require that you ship around 8 to 10 boxes at these rates. When you participate in more than one ring – your financial commitment increases with each new ring. People reported on the AQ postal board of spending \$200 to \$1000 on postage to participate in these rings. One boxer commented about postal costs, “It’s cheaper than a shrink lol And art us(sic) so much more fun...And in my opinion, better results.” (544133) People discuss the cost of postage frequently on the boards, being as it is a monetary commitment to other people as well as the trust of the stamp and logbook.

One boxer says to the financial commitment piece:

I feel your pain. I hate going to the post office anymore because I never leave spending less than \$20-\$40 and that is now after I went on a PLB hiatus until the summer is over (just finishing the ones I already committed to and not joining others) it was a lot worse when I had postal after postal to send. It has gotten to the point that I had to buy a tote to carry the packages in. I am sure the mail lady sees me coming in with my bright neon green tote and thinks OMG, here comes that crazy lady again. Instead of grief the post office should roll out the red carpet when we and other hopelessly addicted people come through the door ;-) (527258).

The cost can be quite prohibitive for people. People that become “black holes”, or boxers that get postal boxes, but don’t send them on, are frequently begged to send the boxes on with other members offering to cover shipping costs to get the boxes moving again:

Another solution is to buy a flat-rate box and put the postage on there. Then, wrap that up in brown paper and mail to Okie Travelers, so all they have to do is stick everything (or as much as will fit) in that one box and drop it off at the Post Office.

I’ve done this before, but only after the recipient had agreed to the solution. This probably costs about \$20 (532817)

Postal letterboxing has a certain almost cult-like following of people that either for geographical, physical or other reasons participates almost primarily in letterboxing through it. This type of boxing can increase the stress for the participants because of the monetary commitment and the time needed to get to the postal office and mail these off. Many people find them compelling and sign up for as many rings and singles as they can and then find themselves overwhelmed by the postage and time commitment needed to complete these. The consumption of these boxes is acknowledged much more so as boxing than virtual boxing. The appearance of a stamp – almost exclusively hand-carved – with the logbook and exchange process makes this type of box consumption much more in line with the more basic type of boxing that has come to exemplify letterboxing in the United States. I have not come across a single boxer, however, who does not consume traditional letterboxes.

Collecting Traditional Letterboxes

Traditional letterboxes encompass the basic meaning of what letterboxing means to most participants. In my survey, the majority of people responding stated that letterboxing was their primary hobby with 46.3% (131 respondents) answering at either a 6 or a 7 for strongly agrees. Of my total respondents, 99.6% (279 respondents) stated that

they had participated in traditional letterboxing. All of my interviewees were passionate about traditional boxes and felt that traditional boxes were the quintessential piece of what the hobby represented to them.

Traditional box consumption is the highest ranking form of letterboxing on Atlas Quest with 91,332 boxes planted in the United States. In 2006, when I first began researching boxes there were 114,356 boxes found; in 2010 there have already been 283,541 boxes found (AQ Stats site 2010). Accounting for the actual number of total boxes found in the United States is difficult, if not impossible, as there is no requirement to record all found letterboxes on the AQ server. There are a certain number of planters that refuse to use Atlas Quest for a variety of reasons and some boxers that only share their clues through “word of mouth”. Many boxers use the site for retrieving clues and do not use the online logbook feature to keep track of what boxes they have been to. It would be fair to assume that in the past twelve years, around 100,000 letterboxes have been secreted away around the country and the number of finds would exceed the millions.

Box longevity, clue difficulty, proper boxing technique, and interest all come into view when looking at how traditional letterboxing consumption is understood and examined. The importance of a traditional box seems to fulfill both the artistic drive that many boxers have expressed, the connection to others that compel them and the desire to collect and obtain both the stamps and the experience that is associated with the stamp. Traditional box consumption is the main mark of status amongst boxers and carries with it the prestige of being “known” on the lists and given authority on how to participate within the hobby. It is within the realm of traditional boxes that the aspect of collecting,

sharing, interacting and consumption make the biggest mark for the boxers. A discussion on an Atlas Quest board regarding finding these older unlisted boxes shows the power that these boxes have for people:

You can't do anything with it once you've found it, can you?

I can have the sense of achievement of finding a box that few others have found, or that has not been found for some time. I can have the pleasure of seeing the image in my logbook and remembering the hunt, the find, and whatever process I went through to get the clues in the first place.

You can't log the find anywhere that tells others "Hey! This box is still in place!"

You can still log finds on boxes in LbNA's basement. If you find boxes that are only listed on the Yahoo 'basement' group, you can post to that group with a sitrep. And, as a premium member, you can log it as an unlisted find on AQ. But, frankly, my interest is in finding the box, not in making it easy for others to find it. Why spoil their sense of achievement when/if they hunt it in their turn?

The box wouldn't be listed as historic if he were still active and maintaining it.

Not always true. I have - admittedly not often - received replies from box owners who are no longer actively participating or maintaining their boxes, but who were glad to get a status report.

Really, it's up to each boxer to determine their style. Some only want to hunt boxes when they have a good sense that they'll be rewarded with a find. Heck, most of the time we box that way ourselves, especially when we're traveling - and we travel a lot! - but every now and then we get the itch to go after an historic box...just to see if it's still there. Maybe we're in an area where the only boxes *are* historic, or maybe we've found all of the newer, clearly active boxes in an area and decide to use the search for an older box as an excuse to hike (trust me, we need all the incentive we can get!)

EllBee (417685)

The Art of Collecting: Taking Stock of Letterboxing Consumption

My first survey was administered to 40 random individuals through a Yahoo listserv to establish an idea of a basic population. Based on the strong reliance to internet access and time for recreation and leisure, it is not surprising that the majority of letterboxers were white (38/40), making upwards of \$50,000 annual income (28/40), and had a college degree (36/40), and married (32/40). As I began to look further into the

whys of letterboxing, I was struck with the economic aspects of trade, gift culture, and collecting as a hobby unto itself: As I matured as a researcher and participant in this culture I began to see linkages and ties between successes, happiness, and collecting through the process of letterboxing.

Letterboxing is generally described through the lens of finding boxes. It is indeed, through the capitalistic view of consumption that understanding the appeal of boxing for both personal identity and value as a boxer within the community become apparent. A person begins being a letterboxer by carving out their own identity within the community in the forms of trail names and unique signature stamps. The trail name and stamp become how you are identified in a semi-anonymous way through the community boards, the logbooks you stamp into and discussions within the major Yahoo groups. People are discouraged from using their family name or real names in the first interactions with letterboxing. In creating an identity, people are identifying a personal aspect to themselves, similar to an avatar, which allows others to identify a person or family within a coded context. Once chosen, it is uncommon for a person to change their moniker as their status and connection is directly connected to the name and image they have chosen as their own.

In the large internet survey I conducted, 57.5% (163 with a 5 or higher) respondents stated that their trail name really personified them. On the question whether their stamp was a good representation of who they are 51.4% (145 with a 5 or higher) agreed. This shows a strong connection between their “real life” identity and their virtual letterboxing identity. Many boxers start out by purchasing a store-bought stamp that they like – or feel represents them; but commonly through time most will change that initial

stamp into a personally carved one that becomes their calling card within the letterboxing community. It is however, very common that when the stamp image is changed it is oftentimes only to recreate or enhance the original image. I found that 76% (215) of my survey respondents answered that they had not changed their trail name or identity with a score of 1. I believe that this shows the strong connection of identity and continuity that is important to boxers – a frequently changing stamp or trail name means that the acknowledgement of who you are is more difficult for boxers to maintain.

When I first started this research I purchased four simple white erasers and a carving kit for around \$20 and some cheap scrapbooking albums that we each could individually stamp images into. Unsure of how to carve I picked some very simple images from the internet that I could trace with a pencil and transfer onto the erasers. My first signature stamp was a tiger lily, a favorite flower of mine, my daughter had a crude turtle, my ex-husband had the “Om” symbol and my step-daughter had a duck. I carved each of these images with extreme excitement of being able to find some boxes in our area and leave our mark on them. I took simple Crayola markers along to give us a variety of colors to choose from when we found the box, in the case that the box itself did not contain ink. I spent around twenty minutes mapping out a route for some boxes that had been placed in honor of local historical figures in locations that I was familiar with. None of these boxes had clues that had to be deciphered and all were marked to be friendly for children.

On a very cool afternoon in November 2006 we embarked on our first find. The initial box was located in a historic graveyard at the tombstone of the local historic figure. The clues were easy enough to follow; the box was well-hidden and had been at the same

location for over a year (and is still active five years later). There is some debate about whether or not letterboxing, and thus creating a larger amount of traffic is respectful or a cavalcade in a cemetery, though this box did a fantastic job of protecting other graves and appreciating the sanctity of the location. The thrill of being in the cemetery with another purpose made the entire morning exciting and our extra caution with the others around the cemetery was reminiscent of a super game of hide and seek with people who had no clue they were participating. We stamped our little crude images into the box and quickly packed it back up and re-hid it as carefully as we could. The feeling of getting away with something that you are not supposed to do can be intoxicating – letterboxing taps into that feeling of being involved with something that the average person has no idea of. There is the feeling of success and stealth combined with a twinge of fear of being caught with each box discovery I have experienced. It was like having a familiar location exposed to me with a new lens of perspective. Each tree, rock, path maker, and landmark became pieces of a great big search with a little artistic reward at the end.

Each of the traditional boxes that I have found since starting letterboxing has been tailored to either the location or series and all have been hand-carved. This trend was also true for the 166 postal letterboxes I received while participating in multiple rings and single exchanges. My virtual finds only had one single hand-carved image, the majority of the images I received while virtual boxing were jpg. images that could be found easily by entering a Google image search and were not a piece of art that I even valued enough to print off the screen. Each of these different types of letterboxing offer different opportunities for the finder. Traditional letterboxes are undoubtedly the primary style of letterboxing, but for a variety of people and locations it is impossible to find a large

group of boxes to find and attachment to different styles of boxing become a more appealing way to stay connected to the community. Each of these styles of boxing has their own hierarchies, status accomplishment markers and levels of satisfaction that participants are aware of and seek. It is indeed through these markers of success and appreciation that box consumers participate in the cycle of economic exchange. Again, using a producer/consumer framework in this research allows for these boxers to be discerning and specific about the boxes that they are interested in attempting to find.

Each boxer creates a logbook for themselves that collects the stamps that they consume and find. These logbooks are the guideposts, the memory keepers and the way of legitimatizing the level of accomplishment that each boxer has obtained. There are no rules about how these are to be maintained or created. Some people scrapbook the stamps that they find, some people jot down the name of the planter and date that they found it, some people journal along with the stamp and take pictures of the find. I found that in my survey that scrapbooking the stamps was not a very high priority with 37.3% (100) being neutral to doing it and an additional 30.6% (82) rating it as either not very enjoyable or not enjoyable at all. This indicates that after the stamp is collected only 32% of my respondents are working with the image after the boxing experience is over.

There is no right way to collect the stamps. The act of collecting the stamp is so much more valuable than what happens with the stamp image after it's collected. There are very few opportunities to share these collections with others that would have any true value outside of the context of letterboxing. These pieces of paper stamped with a picture and a few words does not have economic value in the United States right now, but to letterboxers these are the symbol of memories and the imbued pieces of the planters that

were shared with them. These become collections of memories with the value, much like that of the Kula ring, where the exchange has more significance and social meaning than the object being exchanged. I asked my survey respondents if they letterboxed more for the experience or the stamp and 68% (172) answered that they agreed to the experience being more important. Collectors, by their very nature, are motivated generally by the desire to improve their sense of self – oftentimes to improve their own positive sense of self (McIntosh 2004:87). By collecting these stamps, participants are ensuring their place within the culture of letterboxing and are thus preserving their legacy, their goals, and the positive feedback loop that is possible with collecting.

Summary: A Question of Motivation

So why do boxers box? This was one of the main questions I asked all of my interviewees, and I found the responses from all to be so similar. All of my informants found out about boxing through media – either newspapers or magazines – though I know of many boxers that begin because of friends. These articles espouse the “fun, adventure, puzzle” and “nature” aspect of boxing. The article I read in Family Fun was similar to this, talking about boxing as a modern-day treasure hunt that is great for families to participate in with little to no gear. So these aspects appear to be the hook that gets people interested in the hobby to begin with, but what makes people want to continue to do it? This is where the idea of economic exchange that is subverted, yet nevertheless satisfying, can be seen so clearly. These boxers are drawn to the idea of collecting and consuming. They can do so through letterboxing with little to no investment of actual material resources and capital. Boxers, however, did respond to purchasing good supplies to letterbox with ease and proficiency with 73% of my respondents stating that they had.

I found with my informants that the joy of sharing, artistry and accomplishment were driving factors behind finding boxes. Common interests and connection are oftentimes one of the most important factors in what keeps a culture or group as a cohesive unit. In traditional letterboxing the participants have more of an opportunity to meet other people in real life settings. During the course of my research, I attended five events where people participated in collecting traditional letterboxes in a larger group setting with more emphasis on socially connecting with others participating. Each boxer that participated brought along with them their experiences, logbooks, and oftentimes personal traveler stamps that expressed pieces of their identity. Boxers discussed ways to be more efficient, better hiders, planters, carving tips. But most importantly they shared stamps. They spent the afternoon exchanging pieces of their art and their knowledge with one another. One boxer from Denver was a prolific planter and finder and oftentimes the leader of these events, so frequently her view of how things should proceed in the Rocky Mountain were taken as word for new planters and finders in the area.

Traditional box consumption value can be seen when considering the impermanence of the hobby. When a box goes missing, a planter can contact a person listed as finding the box and possibly get a copy of the image from this boxer as a reminder. When a box goes missing – that image is then lost – it's similar to having rare prints of classic art. Those who were fortunate enough to see the box in its natural state are like people that see the Mona Lisa in the Louvre versus being able to see a facsimile of the image.

The value of these traditional boxes therein lies with the person that finds them to some extent. These images represent the experience, the hike, the day, the plan and even

the puzzle solving before leaving. Entire days can be summed up by these box finders and they can look through their logbooks and have the memories of the day brought back to them. Especially beautiful stamp images or locations they have never been to before can be such an amazing gift for the finders. The feeling of connecting with another person – someone who has been to this location before elicits the feeling of discovering something that was once lost or misinterpreted by others only to be found and solved by only you.

Boxers enjoy showing their logbooks to each other. Each boxer can go through their logbook and discuss the details of the clues, the hike, and the planter and oftentimes express their personal experience with the box. My survey respondents reported experiencing joy from looking back through their logbooks (68%). The box in each exchange takes on more and more value with more and more people placing their identity into the box and their personal experiences into the logbooks. Letterboxing can thus serve as means to participate in a capitalistic cultural exchange system that touches on art, identity, and value for people who are needed to subvert the dominant system. By giving these little pieces of rubber an imbued value, a story, a connection, and a part of the planter they become only important if you have the ability to understand the meaning of the cultural artifact. For the people that find these boxes and document their existence as valuable it completes the cycle of production and consumption.

A large piece of my survey data was related to understanding if economics were actually influencing or informing the way that people boxed. I asked some general questions regarding their household income, personal income and self-evaluated economic security and health. On a seven point Likert scale, 26.6% (73) boxers reported

neutral on the question of being wealthy with material success. 44.1% reported a 3 or lower on this question. When combined with the question I asked regarding economic security where 22.3% responded neutral and 28.2% answered 3 or lower, a picture of the current letterboxing emerges. The majority of boxers that answered the survey did not self-identify as economically secure or as people that collected things of material wealth. To tease out the idea that boxing was fulfilling a type of capitalistic consumption and collecting pattern I asked whether during these hard economic times letterboxing provided people a chance to feel like they were obtaining something of worth without a high cost attached and 75.3% (204) responded with a 5 or higher with the majority answering with a 7.

For some enthusiasts, letterboxing appears to fill that void for people who are interested in obtaining goods and experiences but do not necessarily have the means to invest in a highly economically expensive hobby like skiing or scuba diving. Allowing the participants to both produce a box which satisfies the desire for self-expression and art and also consume the boxes which allows for the feeling of gratification and collecting gives letterboxing a highly attractive exchange patterns that I believe speaks to the core of American values of capitalism and consumption. Identity, value, art and collecting make up the overarching theme of why people box and how this little hobby took such a hold in the United States more apparent and salient when looking at large survey results.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSIONS: WHAT MAKES LETTERBOXING LETTERBOXING

Overall, this thesis has explored how letterboxing creates alternate spaces—much like the internet and new communication technologies—that allow practitioners to create and connect in new and intriguing ways. In fact, some forms of letterboxing rely directly on these new technologies. Letterboxing in the U.K. has always relied upon local participation, word of mouth access and physical tomes of clues. In contrast, when letterboxing came to the United States it was at a point of rapid expansion and use of the internet and can explain some the of this rapid growth. Letterboxing is a hobby, but this thesis argues that it can be seen as symbolic activity, which, much like art can allow practitioners to reconfigure their value, identity, and community. In this sense, letterboxing would seem to form a straightforward kind of critique of dominant culture. But in fact my research has revealed otherwise; letterboxers recreate more dominant values and practices as often as they critique them.

Speaking of the letterboxing experience as a whole, one participant told me, “It is the combination of all the elements as one whole event, adventure, experience that makes letterboxing, letterboxing. Hike, location, clues, box, carving. Remove any one of them and you have something else altogether.” (436943) For many letterboxers, this intersection is the heart of their experience. This hobby is important and relevant only if the art has value, if you can see the personal importance of the box, if you do the work to

seek out and solve the clues, and if you are willing to participate in the sharing that has to happen to keep the hobby alive and relevant to the participants. Though similar and often compared to geocaching, letterboxing has different and more personal implications for those involved. Letterboxers do not leave behind simple tokens such as an eraser to mark off a location. Rather, they are leaving a piece of art that they consider an important part of themselves. As letterboxing has grown in the U.S., it has developed into an active online community of participants as well as shifted form to include not only physical but also virtual clues, boxes, and art.

The internet has allowed letterboxers to move beyond geographical boundaries into broader and more accessible symbolic spaces, as has been seen among many other types of communities that form virtually (Rheingold 1993). The current research found that letterboxing as a relatively new and growing phenomenon allows for a new look at classic theories of economic production and consumption as they play out in new media and new mechanisms for cultural transmission. When the home computer was first introduced as an appliance that could be utilized for basic typing and accounting purposes, personalization was not as important of an issue. Through the past thirty years of PC use, people have become users, defined as “a user is involved with the machine in a hands-on way, but is not interested in the technology except as it enable an application” (Turkle 1995:32). Virtual spaces, time allocation, and affection for the internet have rapidly changed how people interact with technology and each other, allowing them to express themselves in previously impossible manners. Letterboxing, along with a variety of other “subcultures” or alternate communities, are thriving in these environments. They

provide spaces for people to participate in the dominant culture while still subverting and changing the definitions of what it such participation means.

When looking at online ethnography, it must be clear how a virtual community is different than traditional spatial communities. Sherry Turkle notes that:

We have the opportunity to build new kinds of communities, virtual communities, in which we participate with people from all over the world, people with whom we converse with daily, people with whom we may have fairly intimate relationships but whom we may never physically meet (1995:9-10).

Letterboxers have the choice between involvements with a physical community in their region or wider online communities, or a combination of both of these.

Letterboxing does use a production/consumption exchange principle, but it does so without capital that is recognized by the dominant culture. A boxer cannot take his or her logbook to a group of people unfamiliar with boxing and expect to have social or economic status or validity from those pages of inky images in the same way that a bank account statement might.

Letterboxing research can invite us to ask new questions as well. Is letterboxing an art one that could have a value from the perspective of dominant cultures? How do other identities such as race, class, gender, and geographic location affect boxers participation within the letterboxing communities? This research suggests that some internet-mediated activities like letterboxing actually make people happier. From many perspectives, my respondents were emphatic about their choices to letterbox and what place it has taken in their personal spectrum of positive mental health, success and achievement. To what extent could we look at letterboxing as therapeutic? Is this sometimes disembodied collection of pirates grouping with one another actually beneficial to the participants in specific psychological ways? Do they benefit from the

use of the internet, making stronger and more intense connections with a variety of people? Or does increased focus on this often solitary medium isolate them from their other communities?

Two years after those initial sunny afternoons pushing strollers and faking out joggers found me en route to the 10 year anniversary of letterboxing in North America with my daughter. It was the grand finale for a decade of boxing among letterboxers. People came from all over the country to celebrate, exchange and interact with other letterboxers from all over the country. An exceptional group of boxers converged onto a small town in Oregon during the beautiful month of September. Hands were inky, jokes were told, bonds were formed, songs were sang, minds fooled, accomplishments acknowledged, and the glue of this community was applied just a little bit tighter through this event. Boxers in Oregon shared laughs, stamps, living spaces, and stories. It was a space where the value of the stamps was understood, the identity of boxers revealed and relished, friendships were formed and collections were expanded.

American letterboxing is enmeshed in the dominant cultural paradigms of treasure, adventure, independence, and self-sufficiency. Yet it relies on the sharing, giving and lack of financial capital to thrive. It is within this familiar and yet novel position that letterboxing sees a growing number of boxers. People want to share this hobby, they seek out new ways to participate and interact. Further research on these types of emergent communities that create overlaps between virtual and physical spaces show us more and more what it means to be part of a culture and how the internet has allowed us to break down economic, social, and physical boundaries to connect with people with similar interests to our own.

For me, the end of this research brings with it an increased desire to share this hobby with people in my life. I have six boxes that carved and waiting to be placed out into the world. I look forward to planting more boxes as my life moves into new and interesting directions. Yet I know that at each point in my life I can capture those moments in rubber and leave them behind to share with anyone who is clever enough to figure out the clues to their location.

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