Unnecessary, Unwanted and Uncalled-for: A Workshop on Uselessness
UVA, 28-30 March, 2017
‘Uselessness’ as a response to ambiguity: diminished things and marginal places

Neil Maycroft
• There is no theory of uselessness

• Nothing is designed to be useless

• Uselessness is a charge made against ambiguous objects

• Ambiguity is due to unfamiliarity, lack of functional knowledge, brokenness, obsolescence

• Uselessness is a declaration against uncertainty
Nothing is designed to be useless
Chindogu and contraptions
‘Designs on Jerry’
Consumer nonsense
‘...allows pets to retain their natural look, self esteem and aids the pet's owner with the trauma associated with altering’
Useless things in everyday life
Broken things as useless things?
A broken thing
Broken for whom?
LEFT-HANDED BREAD KNIFE

The edge of the Messermeister San Moritz Lite 9-inch Left-Handed Bread Knife is scalloped with a gentle camber. What makes this knife a left-handed knife is that the scallops are placed on the front side of the blade instead of the back side. The Bread Knife is a wider and longer bladed version of a tomato knife. The scalloped edge is ideal for biting into the crust of bread, allowing a smooth slicing action without exerting pressure that can compress the slice. It is also used to slice through soft skinned fruits and vegetables. We don't recommend cutting meat.
Broken things...may be useful

• May provide substitute functionality
• May provide multi-functionality; partially broken
• May allow adapted, secondary use
• Are often ‘waiting’ for repair or moving on
“Strictly speaking there ‘is’ no such thing as a useful thing. There always belongs to the being of useful things a totality of useful things in which this useful thing can be what it is. A useful thing is essentially ‘something in order to…Useful things always are in terms of their belonging to other useful things: writing materials, pen, ink, paper, desk blotter, table, lamp, furniture, windows, door, room. These ‘things’ never show themselves initially by themselves, in order then to fill out a room as a sum of real things…A totality of useful things is always already discovered before the individual useful thing” (Heidegger, ‘Being and time’).
Uselessness and ambiguity
Ambiguity

- Not a property of objects
- Not a category of things
- Arises from uncertainty
- Interpretive frames of classification and ordering
• What is it?
• What does it do?
• How does it work?
• Where does it go?
Unfamiliarity: what is it, what does it do, how does it work?
A unfamiliar thing
How does it work?
A thing of unknown function
Insert key ①

Turn key $270^\circ$
Key cannot now be withdrawn because of notch on key and lip on door plate

Slide key through keyhole ③
Obsolescence
An obsolete thing
CLACK CLACK
Clackers

How long can you keep them going?

Great swinging new CRAZE

INSTRUCTIONS ON REVERSE

MADE IN ENGLAND
Where does it go?
Matter in place
The ‘rammel’ drawer
Matter: in place or out of place?
Matter out of place, or stuff that ‘might come in handy’?
Uselessness...a response to ambiguity?
Coda
A broken, unfamiliar and obsolete thing of unknown function
PENCIL POINTERS

No. 3760 Pencil Pointer Attachment for Drawing Electrode Eraser. Makes a clean, sharp point on refillable pencils in seconds. Drive inner end of pointer blade into end of stub of any drawing hollow shaft erasing EBUR (see page 215). Four precision ground, V-shaped blades precisely produce a uniform, pointed point when pencil is inserted so guide with erasing machine running. Graphite shield is trapped, hardened inside. Cap unscrews for replacing or removing edges of wear-increasing blade. For blade replacement, see No. 3761 below.

No. 3745 Inner Pencil Pointer. Forms a uniform, pointed point on leads of refillable pencils when pencils is inserted into shaft. Provides slow effects in removable, non-screw cap. Contains four precision ground, replaceable four-edged blades. Double-pointed construction, Length: 3/4". For blade replacement, see No. 3746 below.


No. 3750 Universal Pencil Pointers. Contains 12 sheets of felt pads mounted on 1/2" x 3" wooden handle.

No. 3755 Sandpaper Pencil Pointer. Blade, 1/2" x 3/4", is adjustable standard size with felt wiper pad. Mounted with one strip mounted at one end of stick.

No. 3756 Pencil Pointer Refills. For No. 3755. Package of 10. Felt wiper pad included on each end.

No. 3757 Metal Pencil File and Tool Liner. Filing face on both sides. Wooden handle.

No. 3758 Pencil File and Panel Liner. All metal. 1-1/4" long. Picks up edge and gable when sharpened.

No. 3822 Pencil Sharpener. Steel, wedge shape, for sharpening cutting and drawing pencils. Comes in a box, 1 1/2" x 3 1/2" x 7/8".

See next page for pencil sharpeners.

211