Cabinet
A QUARTERLY OF ART AND CULTURE
ISSUE 19 CHANCE
US $10 CANADA $15 UK £6
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Cabinet wishes to thank the following visionary foundations and individuals for their support of our activities during 2005. Additionally, we will forever be indebted to the extraordinary contribution of the Flora Family Foundation from 1999 to 2004; without their generous support, this publication would not exist. Thanks also to the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts for their two-year grant in 2003-2004. We would also like to acknowledge David Walentas/Two Trees for their generous donation of an office in DUMBO, Brooklyn. All contact information remains unchanged.

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INVENTORY /
PEEL, PUCKER, PINCH, PUNCTURE
LOUISE HARPMAN & SCOTT SPECHT

We are both collectors. We love scavenging and finding things, especially objects that participate in the designed environment but do not necessarily register as design objects. Items and artifacts that are highly specific and yet do not conform to any particular self-conscious taste culture have a special appeal for us. The ability of some objects to be highly designed without signaling the fact of their design is their allure, their interest, and their beauty.

Our collection of independently-patented drink-through plastic cup lids is the largest in the United States. We are ever-vigilant, and make new additions to our collection in the most obvious of places—in convenience stores, gas stations, diners, and delis. Ours is a collection of the ordinary, not the esoteric. It has no monetary value, but rather operates as some modest form of intellectual capital. We have collected most of the lids ourselves, but have also, over the years, benefited from the bemused indulgences of both friends and acquaintances who send us their contributions. We have multiples of almost every lid, preparing ourselves for queries from fellow collectors, with whom we might fashion a trade to secure the elusive 1935 Stubblefield lid, the earliest patented drink-through lid, or the 1953 Delbert E. Phinney lid/cup combination.

Although the earliest examples of drink-through lids were designed for cold beverages, the true efflorescence in drink-through lid design and production can be traced to the 1980s, when we, as a culture, decided that it was important, even necessary, to be able to walk, or drive, or commute while drinking hot liquids. A quick survey of the US patent registry reveals nine patents for specialty drink lids in the 1970s, jumping to twenty-six individual patents in the 1980s.

We began our collection during college in 1984 when the purpose-built cup lids began to appear with some frequency. Up until that time, coffee drinkers who wanted a drink-through lid had to go DIY: beginning from two points along the outer edge of any flat plastic cup lid, the drinker would peel back the plastic rim along two radial axes toward the centerpoint of the lid, creating a jagged wedge of an opening. This operation yielded a reliable aperture, but also a triangular bit of garbage which design writer Phil Patton calls the “guitar pick.” The strategy was serviceable, but inelegant. Some degree of improvement was surely mandated, though not the “dizzying array” of lid designs that we now see. “There is no coffee lid that occupies the same status as the paper clip,” agrees Patton. There is no model that is “the winner.”

Forms, and many of them, have followed this function. Each new patent designation identifies an “improvement” so as to differentiate it from other models. Mouth comfort, splash reduction, friction fit, mating engagement, and one-handed activation are some of the current innovations, any of which could easily describe other, more intimate, bodily pleasures.

The wide variety of lid designs inspires the collector to formulate a specialized taxonomy. To better understand the range of drink delivery options, we offer the following genomic categories by means of operation: the peel, the pucker, the pinch, and the puncture.

PEEL
The peel-type lids follow directly from the DIY strategy so familiar to cab drivers and early 1980s college students. And yet, “follow” is not quite accurate; some of the earliest lids were designed with removable wedges. Patrick T. Boyle’s design for a Splash Proof Drink Through Container Lid (1977) features radial score lines “defining a central tear tab” so that removal of the tab can be accomplished with “predictable tears,” leaving the remainder of the lid intact on the container. Later models of the peel-type lid include the peel-and-lock type lid, where the peel-back section is received in the deck of the coffee lid but not removed. In fact, the most recently-patented lid (10 May 2005) is of the peel-and-lock type, with the added benefit of one-handed activation.

PUCKER
Certain lids, such as the Solo Traveler (1986) designed by Jack Clements, require the drinker only to place his or her mouth over the protruded polystyrene proboscis. The pucker-type lid requires its user to drink through the lid, not from the cup, as is the case in the peel-type lids. The Solo Traveler is the lid that Phil Patton championed in his 1996 article in I.D. magazine and also the lid that art and design curator Paola Antonelli selected for inclusion in last year’s Museum of Modern Art exhibition, “Humble Masterpieces.” This type of lid offers a certain degree of “mouth comfort” and also has added “loft” space within the structure of the lid to accommodate beverages with frothy tops.

PINCH
The pinch-type lids play a game of one-upmanship with the peel-type lids. Again, in these examples, a scored section is
removed from the deck of the lid to allow liquid to pass. Yet the means of removal, “applied squeezing pressure,” is claimed to be more direct, therefore distinct. In these models, such as the model patented by Thomas Winstead (1985) and manufactured by the Sweetheart corporation, the thumb and forefinger clasp or pinch the declivity through its prepared “gripping surfaces,” thereby effecting its extraction.

**PUNCTURE**

Other lids offer liquid delivery through a push-button mechanism. David Herbst’s Push and Drink Lid (1990) operates by applying “downward force” to a raised element on the lid, thereby puncturing the lid to allow liquid to pass through its surface. The puncture-type lids are perhaps the most over-designed of the lid types, what we have begun to call the “extreme lids.” Not only must these lids be designed to allow the delivery of the hot beverage, their activation requires additional stiffening to resist the downward pressure placed on the lid surface, while maintaining its positive attachment to the rim of the cup. The Push and Drink Lid, for example, requires no fewer than five lateral braces to allow its safe and proper use.

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Two lids in our collection seem to defy these tentative typologies. These may be one-offs, or may be the first members in as-yet-unpopulated new categories. The first is one we discovered in a small coffee shop across the street from the Islesboro ferry terminal in Maine. In this example, the lid and the cup are both patented and together create a unique liquid container and delivery system. The drinker is not required to mar or mutilate this lid, only to place it within the walls of the cup. This lid sits within the conical body of the styrofoam cup, rather than clipping on top. The “lid” (or strainer, really) sits approximately one inch down into the body of the cup and allows liquid to flow through its surface when tilted up for drinking, but also provides a shallow funnel to encourage the overflow coffee to find its way back into the reservoir. The drinker using this lid actually drinks coffee from the cup, unmediated by a polystyrene lid. In addition to the obvious “mouth comfort” found in this model, we speculate that this particular lid/cup combo might have found favor in the Maine coffee shop because it allows for considerable “splash protection” during harbor crossings.

The other lid that seems to be a category unto itself is one that has a self-closing rotational, rather than radial, means of operation. This lid does not rely on any real or implied radius for its use, but instead is purely perimeter. We first came across this lid at a 7-11 convenience store in Austin, Texas. This lid is really two lids in one and, from a design point of view, is literally over the top. This design seems to have evolved from the Solo Traveler pucker-type lid and offers a top lid that rotates over a lower lid to form a positive lock around the drinking hole. This is a truly re-sealable lid. Because there is no deformation during activation, unlike the case of the peel or puncture-type lids, this lid can be opened and closed multiple times without affecting its performance.

In addition to molding the drink delivery mechanism, the thermo-forming process used by all modern lid manufacturers allows for a great deal of legible information to be printed on the deck of the lid. Coffee lids can be imprinted with a vendor’s logo and now come in many colors, including black, green, red, blue, and tan. Most lids contain some kind of warning, CAUTION CONTENTS HOT, and also offer some means of indicating the contents of the cup. The most frequent information offerings on the lid refer to possible additions that might have been made to that particular cup of coffee; through marking or dimpling, the mass-produced lids become “personalized” to the user. B for black, C for cream, S for sugar, D for decaf. The new red McDonald’s lids, like the older white McDonald’s lids, offer two triangular dimples which can be depressed to indicate “decaf” or “other.” We find the “other” designation mildly amusing, since “other” carries no information in an otherwise highly specific constellation of design decisions. Language, in this case, loses.

The development of the coffee lid can be seen as a uniquely American phenomenon, responding to a particularly American set of expectations. Yet, as American fast-food franchises have established themselves around the world, our coffee and coffee drinking conventions have followed. And still, there is resistance. An architecture school graduate reported to us that, during a recent visit to Paris, she was looking for the “French style” of coffee lid to add to our collection, but hadn’t seen any during the two-week trip. Finally, on her last day, she went to a café and said in her halting French, that she would like her coffee à emporter, or, “to go.” The waitress shrugged in response and gave her the coffee in a porcelain cup. “Go with it,” she said, “but bring back the cup.”

*overleaf: Photos Louise Harpman and Scott Specht. Islesboro ferry terminal lid at bottom right: atypical 7-11 lid to its left.*