

THE GAME

telescope



share



percolate



tape



amplify

make



identify



walk



assemble

hum



hybridize



ask



TEAM 5



photo by La Kaye Mbah

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For more from this team, go to www.urbanitebaltimore.com/project/teams/team5.

Open this box. It's nothing to be alarmed about—nothing dangerous, nothing valuable. Not a reliquary, not a treasure chest. Just a box filled with residues and potentialities.

We are bombarded by distractions demanding our attention, day and night: advertising billboards, television, telemarketing, radio, RSS feeds, text messages, bumper stickers. All of these entities around us—corporations, governments, friends, and acquaintances—are going to great lengths to tell us something. We don't always notice—and more than that, we can't always notice—this excess of messages.

There are lots of strategies for willful ignoring: looking away, disattending, tunnel vision. But the most popular method is to surround oneself with sleek commodities that channel and confine communication—the way an mp3 player reduces conversations around us to exercises in lip-reading, for example, or the way an expensive automobile is designed to say (over and over again), "I am expensive. I am fast. I am virile," no matter the age of its occupant. These kinds of "transitional objects" (to borrow the well-known psychologist D.W. Winnicott's term) truncate and concentrate communications to a well-worn, highly commodified groove. They "communicate" what they were purchased to communicate.

The irony is that the objects that we purchase to communicate simultaneously cut off communication. That new car that broadcasts my masculinity to everyone on my street also insulates me from a world of meaning flowing outside my windows. Cutting open the packaging on a new mp3 player opens up consumers to a universe of commodity-downloads, but it only does so to the extent that alternative sounds are eliminated.

1. In a 1971 lecture, anthropologist and polymath Gregory Bateson related an incident he experienced while working with diagnosed schizophrenics at the VA hospital in Palo Alto, California. At the request of the ward superintendent, he invited a new patient to his office and, as a way of initiating conversation, offered him a cigarette. The patient took a few puffs, looked Bateson straight in the eye, and dropped it on the carpet. The next day, he again met with Bateson, took a cigarette, lit it, and dropped it on the carpet. Only this time, he walked

20th-century noir-thrillers revolving around the search for jewels, secret weapons, or vaguely described documents.

4. The philosopher of science Michel Serres defines a "quasi-object" as something that weaves a web of social relations through its circulation. For example, a ball being passed around a court. It's not just an inflatable sphere—it's a machine for making a social formation. In the absence of a ball, there's no game.

5. Peter Geschiere reports that traditional healers (*nkong*)

תד תומס סח תזיז תקפס תורמ תקרו תז א קאמפ תזא
הא סו רולס • בץ עאמנויח תזיז קאמפ כארטוללץ
קוט חאפס בכומס א קלפער • יונ אמץ קלא אלונץ
ויוזא א קארנר סו קרטק • קלפץ א סוקס אס קוט
לייל תזח קאס תזפ קאפס אלונץ. סו, דפנר יען,
קלפס א סכפח תומס תזא סו א זמולל אד ויוזל
קוטו חזנרנויח • גיבס תזפ קאמפ תז א תזיז סו
א זנרמקפער, סו לטפס זן סו א קלכפ אלפרס זממסחפ
וילל חזס זן א זנר אדפס • סו חפ סכפח דאפס ארפ
לורפבץ וז כורכטולנויח זרטמח סו כוזץ.

away. Bateson followed him for 100 yards or so, and then he couldn't take it any longer. "Look, man, I've got to know what that cigarette is doing!" They turned back. On the third day, the same thing happened, only this time, when they patient got up to take a walk, Bateson palmed the cigarette as he followed behind. A few yards out the door, Bateson said, "Ed, I think this is your cigarette, isn't it?"

2. The anthropologist Anne Allison describes a new kind of psychiatric patient in 1990s Japan: people who can only relate to the world through their things. These are *mono no katari hitobito* (people who talk about things). As she writes in her book *Millennial Monsters*, "Life is managed by scrupulous cataloging: shoes, kitchenware, meishi (business cards), and phone friends."

3. A MacGuffin is an object that drives the plot of a film—think

among the Maka of eastern and southern Cameroon may utilize magically charged objects (*midu*), as in his account of one healer, Mendouga. "The mirror was a narrow bottle containing five sticks and a viscous liquid. Her *nkong* had first shown her the bottle, then the sticks. Afterward, he had made her sleep deeply. When she had woken up, the sticks had been inside the bottle. When she interrogated a client, Mendouga made the liquid pass between the sticks: if it passed, the client had not 'gone out'; if a drop remained, the client had lied." (*The Modernity of Witchcraft*, p. 55)

6. The contents of Abraham Lincoln's pockets on the night he was assassinated have long been on display at the Library of Congress. They include a Confederate five-dollar bill, some newspaper clippings, a pocket knife, a wallet, a handkerchief, a lens polisher, and two pairs of glasses.

And what about those exclusions? There are a lot of them: the number of messages communicated finite, the number of exclusions infinite. Yet those quiet exclusions are all around us: interactions with each other that we might have had, meanings we might have shared. This is particularly the case with the world of objects that we inhabit—the raw materials with which we express ourselves. Commodities generally say one thing and work to actively exclude, say, the conditions of their production, their lives outside of money. But the small objects in our lives have a more intimate side as well, our side of the story that we never get to tell.

Walk down the street with your eyes trained to the ground. How many objects do you see, each suspended in a kind of half-life of meaning, narrative, and conversation? Soft whispers, perhaps, drowned out by more stentorian communiqués. Some of these are relics of the past, others entangled in our interactions with each other today. None of these objects demand that you respond; none of them form a closed pattern of meaning. Understanding means a different way of looking and listening, but the payoff is finally acknowledging someone who's been trying to get your attention all this time, if you'd only just look. It could be the person sitting next to you on the bus, or it could be people distant from us in time and space, neighborhoods and cities that once existed, now forgotten.

Is this a conversation you'd like to join? We like to think of it as a game (or, as Winnicott observes, a kind of play), one in which the players, the pieces, and the rules are all up for grabs—a kind of emergent social interaction. In fact, we've come to think of it as "The Game": the only one worth playing, where the stakes (whatever the rules) are our connections to our own lives.

Our game starts with opening a box and looking inside. Now you're playing.