

Call for Papers:

KNOWLEDGE IN A BOX:
HOW MUNDANE THINGS SHAPE KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

Organizing committee:

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The topic:

We invite proposals from scholars in the history of science, technology, and medicine, science and technology studies, the humanities, visual and performing arts, museum and cultural studies and other related disciplines for a workshop on the uses and meanings of mundane things such as boxes, packages, bottles, and vials in shaping knowledge production. In keeping with the conference theme, we are asking contributors to include specific references to the ways in which boxes have played a role—commercial, epistemic or otherwise—in their own particular disciplinary frameworks.

Boxes have always supported the significance of the objects they contained, allowing specific activities to arise. In the hands of natural historians and collectors, boxes functioned as a means of organizing their knowledge throughout the eighteenth century. They formed the material bases of the cabinet or established collection and accompanied the collector from the initial gathering of natural specimens to their final display. As “knowledge chests” or “magazing tools” the history of box-like containers also go back to book printing and the typographical culture. The artists’ boxes of the early nineteenth century were used to store the paraphernalia of a new fashionable trend. In the late nineteenth century the box became the pharmacist’s laboratory and a device for standardizing and controlling dosage of oral remedies. In the twentieth century radiotherapy the box was elevated to a multifunctional tool working as a memory aid to forgetful patients or as “knowledge package” that predetermined dosages, included equipment, and ready-made radium applicators.

Focusing on medicine, boxes have played a crucial role since the eighteenth century when doctors ought to bring instruments to their patient’s house for surgical or obstetrical interventions. In modern operating rooms boxes organize the workflow and build an essential part of the aseptical regime. Late twentieth century biomedical scientists store tissue samples in large-scale biobanks, where samples contained in straws are placed in vials, then the vials in boxes which in turn are stacked up in “elevators”. This storage system facilitates retrieval with barcodes, indexing each individual sample so that additional variables can be retrieved from a database. Thus the container and its content are tied up in a close epistemic and material relationship.

As it is usually the case the box embodies the knowledge that goes into the chemical laboratory and its function; it classifies objects into collections of natural

history; it meaningfully orders letters in a printer's composition or painting equipment for the artist' convenience; it standardizes pharmaceutical dosage forms and allows pharmacists to control the production and consumption of their remedies; in the commercial world it misleads or informs customers; it persuades consumers for the integrity of the product that they enclose; it hides the identity of the object(s) that contains, it shapes professional identities and is essential for mobilizing, transporting, accumulating and circulating materials and the knowledge they produce and embody.

Furthermore, if we do understand matter and materiality not as given, solid, continuous, and stable but rather as something being done, performed, shaped and embedded in practices, then we should examine closer how bottles and boxes themselves materialize differently in a set of diverse practices. How do they change their ontologies by migrating from the kitchen to the laboratory, from the workshop to the operating room?

We welcome innovative understandings of the role that boxes and containers have played historically and continue to play in technology, medicine, and science. We see the workshop as contributing to an ongoing interest in science and technology studies on the importance of mundane things in scientific practice and technological innovations.

Dates:

July 26-29, 2012

Submission guidelines:

Deadline for proposals: January 15, 2012

Please submit a 300-words abstract along with your name, institutional affiliation, email and phone number as a word or pdf attachment to the organizers of the conference

Proposals will be reviewed and notification of the outcome will be made in February 15, 2012. We are pursuing publication outlets for selected papers from the workshop. Therefore we expect full papers from those that will participate by May 30, 2012. Details will be provided after notification.

Conference registration fee: 50 euros

Place:

The venue of the conference is a wonderful tobacco warehouse renovated to host the tobacco museum of the city of Kavala in northern Greece.

Contact info:

For further information please contact the organizers:

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