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Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal

Title

A Catalog of American Things

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2tx4j89p>

Journal

Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal, 4(1)

Author

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Publication Date

2021

DOI

10.5070/R74155768

Supplemental Material

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2tx4j89p#supplemental>

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Peer reviewed

A Catalog of American Things

Marisa J. Futernick



Figure 1 Marisa J. Futernick, *still image from A Catalog of American Things, 2021, single-channel video slideshow with sound, 10:18. Courtesy of the artist.*¹

¹ Marisa J. Futernick's *A Catalog of American Things* (2021) can viewed at <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2tx4j89p#supplemental>.



Figure 2 Marisa J. Futernick, still image from A Catalog of American Things, 2021, single-channel video slideshow with sound, 10:18. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3 Marisa J. Futernick, still image from A Catalog of American Things, 2021, single-channel video slideshow with sound, 10:18. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4 Marisa J. Futernick, still image from *A Catalog of American Things*, 2021, single-channel video slideshow with sound, 10:18. Courtesy of the artist.

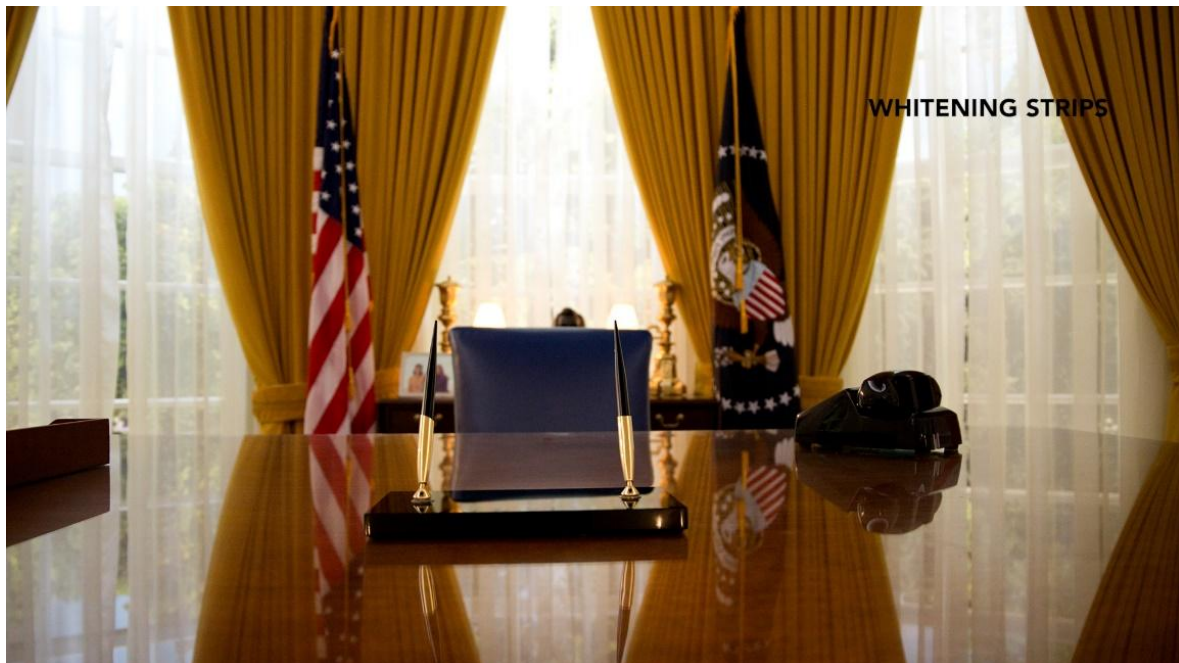


Figure 5 Marisa J. Futernick, still image from *A Catalog of American Things*, 2021, single-channel video slideshow with sound, 10:18. Courtesy of the artist.

Artist Statement

Presented as a video slideshow, the ongoing work *A Catalog of American Things* borrows the notion of the encyclopedia—an “exhaustive” record of the world. Alternately sardonic and deadpan, the work consists of original photographs overlaid with text and is itself an active archive with the potential to be continuously added to and updated. The attempt to catalog “American things” (from government policies to consumer goods) highlights the impossibility of including everything. What is intentionally omitted or missing due to the subjectivity of organizing material? What are the limitations of a catalog and its presumption to be an “official” document?

This work was originally conceived as an ongoing piece that would expand over time (hence the “Volume I” subtitle). As with anything that purports to be an exhaustive collection of something as vast and unwieldy and in flux as the “things” that make up an entire nation, there is no definitive end point; even the category of things itself is unlimited in scope. The expansion and updating of the work could theoretically go on forever. And indeed, this is what historically happened with traditional encyclopedias, in the days before Wikipedia. Printed encyclopedias, which claimed to be collections of all human knowledge, were revised, updated, offered in “new expanded editions.” Since 1925, *The World Book Encyclopedia* (first published in 1917, and familiar to many generations of American schoolchildren) has released a new edition every year. Wikipedia, the contemporary descendant of the now-obsolete encyclopedia, is a “living document” (a phrase most often associated with the US Constitution). It, too, is constantly being added to, expanded, changed, but without the physical limitations of a set of printed books. And rather than impose the presumptive authority of a traditional encyclopedia, Wikipedia offers a democratically gathered repository of knowledge through its method of open-sourced entry creation and editing. Wikipedia aims to be a catalog of everything, everywhere—and made by everyone. Alternatively, *The World Book*, whose very name implies that it is a definitive record of the world, prompts the questions: Whose record? And whose world? The same can be asked of *A Catalog of American Things*: Whose America is being cataloged? And who is recording it? Like histories, and archives, and documentaries—who is telling the story? Who decides what gets included and what gets left out?

The majority of photographs in *A Catalog of American Things* (in its present iteration) were taken from 2018 to 2020, in places across the United States. In many ways, these photographs are a factual record of a contemporary America questioning its identity more than any other period in my lifetime. The

photographs serve as a record, as evidence of the present and the very recent past, as an act of preservation of what this place is made up of right now. But this is also an artwork, and one of the great advantages of being an artist—and not an academic—is being able to play fast and loose with material, even if that material is “history” or “fact” or “truth.” That is not to suggest that artists are not responsible. In my practice, I have my own parameters for historical accuracy and faithfulness to upholding the facts. But I also make a lot up, weaving rigorous research together with invention. This leads to a different kind of truth: a deeper understanding of history that can come from using fiction to humanize true stories.

There is subjectivity in the ordering of images too. *A Catalog of American Things* is not a reference volume. It is not arranged alphabetically or chronologically. It is not searchable. The sequencing of the photographs and phrases is based on artistic choices—aesthetic, intuitive, narrative. It is not made for looking things up; rather, it takes the viewer on a “road trip” through the accumulation of material, of images and text. Sometimes the words feel connected to the images; sometimes they seem like non sequiturs. Some are pointed; some are funny. They reference “American things” spanning the clichéd and the ubiquitous: from food to religion, politics to consumer culture, “free refills” to the “atomic bomb,” “same-day delivery” to “Manifest Destiny.” The way the texts are used borrows from vernacular signage, the billboard, roadside advertising—the very American feature of language made visible in the landscape. But it also alludes to television advertising, the rapid cut, and other familiar forms of commercial visual communication. The aphoristic mode of the phrases references the disembodied, authoritative voice of on-screen text, of product descriptions, of the “truth telling” of an advertising slogan. Placing a piece of text with an image changes both. They add to each other and alter each other. The phrases in *A Catalog of American Things* are not directly illustrated by the photographs and may sometimes seem arbitrary, but something new is created through each combination. In the format of a slideshow, words can intensify or politicize images in powerful ways.

So, too, can music. The soundtrack was a later addition to this work. There is a ridiculousness in the juxtaposition of John Philip Sousa’s “The Stars and Stripes Forever” (1896),² the official national march of the United States of

² “The Stars and Stripes Forever,” Official National March of the United States of America, written and composed by John Philip Sousa, 1896. Performed by “The President’s Own” United States Marine Band, <https://www.marineband.marines.mil/audio-resources/patriotic-favorites/>.

America, with phrases like “all-you-can-eat” and “whitening strips.” The driving rhythm of the march sweeps the viewer along, through Amish country and butter sculptures and cattle auctions and country clubs and Black Lives Matter protests and Confederate monuments and corn dogs at the gas station and a NASA control room and payday lenders and the opioid crisis and whiteness and masculinity and patriotism in the age of Donald Trump. “The Stars and Stripes Forever” is edited together with two versions of the Duckworth Chant, the military cadence familiar from countless movie depictions of the army. This famous “Sound-off” call-and-response work song, also known as a “Jody call,” is attributed to Willie Duckworth, a Black soldier in the segregated US Army of 1944.³ *A Catalog of American Things* includes excerpts from the original 1945 V-Disc recording of the chant,⁴ as well as another 1945 V-Disc featuring a unit of the Women’s Army Corps doing a WAC-specific version of the chant.⁵ And two songs by Mister “Yankee Doodle Dandy” himself, George M. Cohan, complete the soundtrack: “Over There” (1917)⁶ and “You’re a Grand Old Flag” (1906).⁷

The aggregation of this military music, the building up of images and phrases through the work, becomes a collection in and of itself—an archive—that begins to form a vision of America. America is all of these things together and all of the things that are missing from this work too. Like an encyclopedia, *A Catalog*

³ “Sound Off: Where the Military’s Rhythm Came From,” Frannie Kelley, *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, June 16, 2014, <https://www.npr.org/2014/06/16/322589902/sound-off-where-the-militarys-rhythm-came-from>.

⁴ Duckworth Chant, Fort Slocum, New York, composed by Pvt. Willie Lee Duckworth Sr., led by TSgt Henry “Jack” Felice, 1945 V-Disc, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6bhv4i8qso>.

⁵ Duckworth Chant, Fort Slocum, New York, composed by Pvt. Willie Lee Duckworth Sr., led by S/Sgt Gladys “Woodie” Woodard of the WAC detachment, 1945 V-Disc, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mq2_1S_ZPAs.

⁶ “Over There,” 1917, written and composed by George M. Cohan, performed by the “Hellcats” of the West Point Band, 2010, Wikimedia Commons and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxuu0SzH8YE>.

⁷ “You’re a Grand Old Flag,” 1906, written and composed by George M. Cohan, performed by the United States Army Europe Band and Chorus, 2013, *Wikimedia Commons*, <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0e/%22You%27re%20a%20Grand%20Old%20Flag%22%2C%20performed%20by%20the%20United%20States%20Coast%20Guard%20Band%20of%20New%20London%2C%20Connecticut.way>

of American Things attempts to gather and organize information about what a world is made up of, but it is as much about what is left out—not just the omissions, both willful and overlooked, but the sheer volume of what could potentially be included if it were not for the limits of time and space (a six-hour-long work would not pack the same punch as this ten-minute edit does). Whether I will actually add to *A Catalog of American Things* remains to be seen. What matters is that, like the very idea of Americanness, it could be endlessly expanded to be newer, bigger, and broader.

* * *

Marisa J. Futernick is an artist and writer who tells stories about the promise of the American Dream and expressions of “Americanness,” intertwining the personal with the historical and fact with fiction. Through the combination of text and images, she explores the less visible social and political histories of the United States and its complex mythologies, from the Hollywood Sign to home ownership in Detroit, the corn industry to the ten missing floors in Trump Tower. Taking an interdisciplinary approach, she uses a variety of media including photography, film/video, installation, writing and artist’s books, radio, and painting. She weaves rigorous archival research together with fictional narratives filled with deadpan humor and the poetry of the everyday, in an ongoing effort to understand and humanize history. Her work has been presented at such venues as Whitechapel Gallery, London; Royal Academy of Arts, London; ICA, London; British Library, London; Arnolfini, Bristol, UK; Oxy Arts, Occidental College, Los Angeles; Monte Vista Projects, Los Angeles; Orange Coast College, Costa Mesa, California; Harvard University; and Yale University. She is a recipient of the prestigious Deutsche Bank Award and holds a BA from Yale and an MFA from the Royal Academy Schools. Books by the artist include *13 Presidents* (Slimvolume, 2016), *How I Taught Umberto Eco to Love the Bomb* (RA Editions and California Fever Press, 2015), and *The Watergate Complex* (Rice + Toye, 2015). Her work has been featured in the *Los Angeles Times*, *LA Weekly*, *Die Tageszeitung (taž)*, and *Art Papers*. She lives and works in Los Angeles.

Notes