

Surprised by Everyday Objects assembly

We tend to trust the things we see everyday, on the basis that they are familiar. Surely, we think, if there were any suspicion that this everyday object held surprises, we would have seen them by now. However, that is not always the case. In fact, it is a measure of our ignorance about the world about us, that there is much to learn about things we think we know well. Take, for example, red things. You might be surprised to realise, after thinking it through, that things that are red, aren't red. That is because when 'red' objects are illuminated with white light, which is an amalgamation of all the colours of the rainbow, they absorb all the colours *but* red, which is reflected back to hit your eye. Thus, a red thing is really every colour other than red, which bounces off. Nothing is actually the colour it presents itself as, but its opposite...

That prompts us to ask what colour white things are as, if *all* the colours are reflected off it, what is left? I suppose we could consider white things to really be black.

What else might we be surprised by? It is widely known that tomatoes, in addition to not being red, aren't vegetables – they are a fruit. Specifically, they are a berry. Bananas, pumpkins, avocados, grapes and oranges are also berries. However, strawberries aren't berries. They aren't straw either.

How about this? Next time you buy something, you will see it being swiped though or zapped by a barcode reader. But things aren't what you might think. We are all familiar with the zebra stripes of the barcode that is found on every product. But contrary to what you might think, barcode readers read the white stripes, not the black.

Or what about clicking your fingers? Most people assume that the distinctive click is made by the tips of the two fingers. It isn't. It is made by your index finger hitting the base of your thumb. Please don't practice now...

There are other familiar objects that can be equally mind-bending, and some of them might make us feel as though we are being cheated or duped. Let us consider one of them and ask: 'Does pressing the pedestrian crossing button actually do anything?' Many people don't bother to press the button at pedestrian crossings. They have come to the conclusion that buttons at pedestrian crossings *don't* do anything. A clue is in the alternative name for pedestrian crossing buttons - they are sometimes called as "placebo buttons", as in many locations they appear to have no effect. A cynic might argue the button is there merely to give the pedestrian the illusion of control.

So are the buttons useless and cosmetic? Well, it depends. At a standalone pedestrian crossing, unconnected to a junction, press the button and it will turn a traffic light red. At a busy junction, it is more complicated. During the day, the button probably has absolutely no effect. You are wasting your time pressing it and the light will change when it wants to and not before. However, it is different at night, when the button does work, but this is usually only between the hours of midnight and 7:00am.

I have time for one last item: the hole in the wall cash machine, with its comforting whirr as the cash is dispensed. The assumption most people jump to is that the 'FFFFFF' sound you hear is produced by rollers delivering the notes to the collection slot. In fact, I am told that the sound is an entirely artificial addition to the process.

The noise is a sound effect produced by a speaker and is only included in the transaction to reassure you that your money is on its way. Without the added noise, the ATM would be practically silent. I don't know about you, but I definitely feel a bit cheated by that.

To conclude, may I share a wonderful poem by Louis McNeice called 'Snow'. In the poem, he is inside on a snowy day, and looks out of the window, which has a vase of pink roses on the windowsill. The contrast between these two apparently opposite things makes McNeice think again about the world, which he had thought he understood. It reads:

The room was suddenly rich and the great bay-window was
Spawning snow and pink roses against it
Soundlessly collateral and incompatible:
World is suddener than we fancy it.

World is crazier and more of it than we think,
Incorrigibly plural. I peel and portion
A tangerine and spit the pips and feel
The drunkenness of things being various.

And the fire flames with a bubbling sound for world
Is more spiteful and gay than one supposes –
On the tongue on the eyes on the ears in the palms of one's hands –
There is more than glass between the snow and the huge roses.

The world *is* incorrigibly plural and strange – sometimes we can take it for granted. Please don't – it is bigger and stranger than we can imagine – even the things we thought we knew. Enjoy everyday life and everyday things afresh.