As Big As A…

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In 2016, a young woman holds a piece of A4 paper up to her belly. She has an “A4 waist”, which is trending on Chinese social media site Weibo. Two years later, one of my students tells me that the phenomenon has been copied by hundreds of women. As we discuss unhealthy beauty standards, we think, “An A4 waist is skinny, but precisely how skinny? Is it size zero, XXS or 24 inches?”
Coin and dolls' heads (2018).
Image via @thehauntedlamp, Instagram.

Coin and hair donation (2015).
Image via @eleniswong, Instagram.

Pen and emu egg (2015).
Image via Vaikoovery, Wikimedia Commons.

Pencil and sperm whale tooth (2019).
Image via Akrasia25, Wikimedia Commons.

Golf ball and ribbon reel (2023).
Image via at242, Reddit.
in Nova Scotia. Aplys, peonies begin as golf ball-sized buds, and bloom over a period of days into a dense explosion of petals. He’s been blogging about this process, as well as rare varieties of peonies, since the mid 90s. He tells me that the golf ball is not only for size, but also for white balance and exposure – if the dimples on the golf ball disappear, you can tell the photo is overexposed. We discuss the qualities of a golf ball, its shine, weight and texture, the fact that it is bright and visible against dark backdrops of foliage and earth. Later, I begin to see examples of it being used as an underwater sizegiver to scale coral and aquatic plants. The ball sinks, of course, and it reflects light in murky water. Leo sends me a link to a newly discovered shipwreck, photographed for the local news; its rusty anchor is pictured on the seabed with a golf ball for scale.

I begin to understand there are established methods of sizegiving within particular communities. Pick hammers are generally used as sizegivers by geologists, being a tool that they carry with them. Ed Fox (@foxult), an Instagram user, geologist and teacher in Utah, uses a Sharpie pen instead. His close-up images of rocks, cracks and minerals suit the scale of the Sharpie, which is a handy pocket sizegiver (he tells me he also uses it to correct grammar and spelling on handwritten signs that he sees out and about). This type of pocket object appears in other nature contexts too – a lighter is a common sizegiver for rare or giant mushrooms. It feels like a sizegiver is a key part of a good story; its mundanity proves just how amazing the natural phenomenon you discovered actually is.

I find sellers on Etsy and eBay selecting sizegivers for their aesthetic, as well as practical, qualities. Raflees Reclamation in Somerset sells vintage nauticalia and furniture, mainly as props for the film industry. Its co-owner Lee tells me that they use a Coke can as its “obviously world-recognised and gives an instant product size perspective”. Many of their items are vintage, so he thinks a modern, red Coke can gives the correct visual look. I notice that Coke red also calibrates the colour balance of the image, acting a bit like an element in a photographer’s colour chart. I ask Griet, who runs Etsy shop Galerie68, why she chooses a Duracell Plus 9V battery to model her collection of beautifully photographed 1960s Italian homewares. She uses the battery for its universal dimensions, but also because it “does not take up too much space in a photo and therefore does not distract attention from the object”. Batteries exist to collaborate with other objects, but they don’t fit into the objects that Griet sells. This creates a strange and beautiful relationship between the two. The graphic quality of the battery, juxtaposed with the ceramic, plastic and paint-lacquered surfaces of the objects in her shop, again calls to mind the beginnings of a narrative.

Everyday objects have material qualities that we don’t always consider beyond their function. A cork or bottle cap exist to keep liquid in containers, but could have second lives as sizegivers. In Arranging Things, Koren meditates on the sensorial qualities of an object within an arrangement. I start to consider everyday objects beyond their intended function and instead as part-time models and performers of their own physical characteristics. Just as museums, archaeologists or forensics experts use professional scale and colour charts to calibrate a photograph, could a combination of objects convey something similar, or beyond? What could be the potential of everyday things to vouch for texture, softness, temperature, sound, time or weight in an image? I remember the similes that I learned at school, where everyday things are used as points of comparison to enrich an image conjured up by a text: bold as brass, bright as a button, tough as nails. Maybe the sizegiver is a simile in visual form.

In design terms, the most successful sizegivers are the most common, the most famous, the most iconically everyday things that surround us. You could say that they indicate the material culture of our time. For some products, their “design classic” status has meant they have not changed – a Bic 4-colour pen (designed by Marcel Bich in 1969) is universally recognised. For others (not typically noticed as design objects), it is their standardised nature, or the process of manufacture that lets them be reliable sizegivers, such as a 26mm metal crown bottle cap (British Standard En 17177). The more virtual the world becomes, the more i can trust objects: real, simple, everyday objects. They tell me what is real and true. Or perhaps those truths exist temporarily? I’m looking through a Bruno Munari book, From Afar It Was An Island (1971), which plays with the scale of stones found on an Italian beach, and I discover an image and description of small pebbles scaled by a five-lire coin:

So many stones all different:
one very shiny black one, one dull white one,

Coke can and fishing buoy (2023). Image via Rafles Reclamation, eBay.

Sharpie and vintage child’s sweater (2019). Image via @mindseyevintage, Instagram.
one yellow as a pumpkin, one red as a tiny cherry, one is chocolate-coloured, one black with a white stripe, one green with spots in a different green, one grey and black, one gleams as if it contained fragments of glass; so many little stones no larger than a five lire coin.

The coin has a beautiful image of a whale on it, but is now obsolete – replaced by the Euro in 2002. I have no idea what size it is until I buy one on eBay and it arrives in the post. It is the same size as a British 1p, slightly smaller than a European or American 5¢, and unusually lightweight. I try to remember the last time I paid for anything with coins, but can’t. As we move to a cashless society, perhaps we are living through an intermediate period where the only function of a penny is to be a sizegiver, even if it can only function as long as people have living memories of it.

Would a CD still be recognised by gen Z? Many of the sizegivers I’ve found seem to be threatened by obsolescence in one way or another: pencils and paper replaced by laptops; batteries replaced by charging leads; cigarettes, matchsticks, matchboxes and lighters replaced by vapes. Technology is changing fast. Smartphones, cameras and other devices can’t be sizegivers because they update and re-edition faster than they can become familiar. Which everyday objects will become relics of the past, and which will be sizegivers in the future, I wonder? Which timeless, common things will connect my generation with the everyday reality of the next? What objects will live in our pockets in 30 years time? END