CCCC 2023 Paper | “The Computer Stand” | Hannah J. Rule | ruleh@mailbox.sc.edu

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I. DESCRIPTION

Made of a metal or metal-like material, the stand is black, with a smooth feel and finish that is dull or matte. The stand is to stand on a desk or table; and itself mimics an actual table in its basic shape, though in much smaller dimensions. The stand is between 13-15 inches wide and about 8 inches in depth, with a pattern of drilled holes across its top. It features 4 legs, each with a silver ball bearing that can be depressed to raise or lower the height of each leg. The depressed bearing then pops back out to secure the stand at its new height. The ball bearing-like mechanism remains visible on all four legs; along with two empty holes (those for use at the other heights). There are 3 height levels. At its tallest, the stand sits 5-6 inches higher than the table it rests on, at its lowest, it clears about 3 inches. The stand is substantial though not heavy. Its edges are layered (now) with light dust.

II. Intro

I come at this stand as the center of my comments today inspired by method in material culture studies – a discipline or mode of investigation employed across various fields like art history, anthropology, cultural geography and more and which at its core examines material objects not as illustrations but as themselves historical evidence of culture. Specifically, I perform an improvisatory and incomplete Prownian analysis, a method named for Yale art historian, Jules David Prown, and described most extensively in Kenneth Haltman and Prown’s 2000 book, *American Arifacts: Essays in Material Cultu*re. Only some of this process will come through in my comments today. I take up my stand as a resonant object from the period of—what a colleague of mine off-handedly called—*long 2020*, with its global pandemic, shut downs, the murder of George Floyd, emergency online teaching, assaults on democracy, and many more crises we watched largely from home.

I purchased this stand—the WALI Monitor Stand Riser—on January 15 of 2021 from Amazon.com.

Prownian analysis is often historical method, a way of encountering objects as material culture through the physical senses of the present-day analyst, a means of, as Prown himself puts it “engag[ing] the other culture in the first instance not with our minds, the seat of our cultural biases, but with our senses" (Mind in Matter 5). This analytical method is not as much deployed with personal objects like my stand, where original users and analyst are one in the same. However, long 2020 was (or maybe still is) a period we experience as a kind of living history, and as such, its objects might uniquely open access to this period of despair and of hope. Its objects may elucidate individual practice, affect, sensations that accrete to connect one user’s lived experience to a wider human story. In this spirit, I approach the stand strangely.

III. DEDUCTION

Prown’s analysis process occurs in three main stages – the first is description, the place where I began. As described by Kenneth Haltman, in that first stage the analyst is meant to “just describe what you see." Description is key to Prownian analysis and should be carefully guarded from presumption. Only Describe. Next is deduction, a stage where the analyst carefully follows the objects sensory details to logic some conclusions about use and resonance, to, as Haltman puts it, “*entertain hypotheses concerning what your chosen object signifies, what it suggests about the world in which it circulates or circulated”*

Just *one* observation about this stand is its adjustable height. Adjusting each leg however is no easy challenge. One has to fiddle. Since this stand has been in my home, the legs have never been adjusted to anything but the highest height.

Engaging experientially with this object now, I wonder: was this product actually even designed FOR a laptop? That’s what I bought it for and used it for. During pandemic online teaching, I wanted this stand for my laptop: to a create height suitable for zooming and also to create space beneath for various teaching materials. However, the height I needed to create a somewhat acceptable visage on zoom, at the same time, made for extremely clumsy use of the laptop. Before each zoom class, as I sat in my PJ bottoms and professional shirt, I would try to arrange the screens in advance and practice the clicks necessary to use the laptop simultaneously as my video portal, chalkboard, powerpoint display, discussion chat, writing device, breakout room manager and more, all while arching my hands awkwardly over a keyboard and MacBook trackpad elevated 6 inches in the air.

To cut to the chase: I felt a driving need for this stand. But, basically, the object didn’t help me at all better choreograph my online teaching. Indeed, when I go back and look at the product listing, though laptop is mentioned, better height for looking at a screen or decluttering your workspace is emphasized.

So, what made me buy it, and continue its awkward use, in the spring and into the and fall of 2021?

IV. SPECULATION

Cutting ahead to—and cutting short—the next stage, speculation in Prownian analysis asks the analyst to “**Think creatively about what research would be necessary to test your interpretive hypotheses**” (Haltman 7). Many questions come to mind when I ponder this stand: among just a few of them include: What labor conditions were required for the stand’s manufacture, market, and delivery? How many Americans have one of these that worked from home? That taught from home? That leaned on them during long 2020? But I put these questions aside as I want to cut a different direction.

When the idea occurred to me to write about this stand, I had lost track of where it was. By then, I had returned, in a mask, to classrooms on my campus. No more online teaching. Eventually I discovered its resting place: as a permanent fixture in my husband's work-from-home set up, one that includes three monitors and one laptop for a total of 4 screens. His laptop too happens to be the machine that is placed on the stand. But he doesn’t type on that one, but on a separate keyboard that sits on the desk.

If this stand evidences material culture from long 2020, one thing its journey through my house surfaces is a cultural shift in work that we’re still experiencing. My husband didn’t start the pandemic in a remote position. Rather, he applied for and started a new job which necessitated this 4-screen set up, in an industry which *only* by virtue of the pandemic was able to make fully and permanently remote work sufficiently safe and secure. The conditions of work and life more permanently altered, the stand functioning now as permanent background to this new normal.

But I still haven’t answered what made me buy this stand or why I believed so hard I must have it. Again, it did not make things easier.

These days, there are still routine zooms – for committee or collaborator meetings, but now I make my way much more ad hoc - looking around for something, anything, for a video call that will give my lap top some height to create an acceptable angle for my vanity as well as a modicum of privacy as I set up at a dining room table in a pass-through. My driving desire for the stand has dissipated, though my use of the laptop for video goes on. Why?

The psychology and material culture studies scholar, Mihaly CHICK MENT SI HIGH, can assist. In “Why We Need Things,” and meditating on the sheer amount of objects that populate modern life, CHICK MENT SI HIGH muses, “Whenever someone buys a new food processor, that person is not expressing an essential human need but acting in terms of a consciousness shaped by appliances” (21). No doubt my need for that stand was conditioned by belief that an occupation like teaching requires special equipment in a specific setting. No doubt the pandemic made me feel less than professional, as I would routinely, for example, struggle to shower because I was doomscrolling before I made my way to zoom class. More than a cultural sense of specialized goods for specialized work, though, CHICK MENT SI HIGH speaks of a stronger drive. He writes, “**The point I wish to emphasize is that our dependence on objects is not only physical but also, more important, psychological. Most of the things we make these days do not make life better in any material sense but instead serve to stabilize and order the mind**” (22).

This tracks. It’s not just that the impracticalities of this stand-in-use that made me let it migrate to my husband’s desk. It’s that the stabilization I sought was no longer an acute need, as the COVID emergency at least, slowly began to wane. As we ask as a panel—how do our material investments help us sustain writing and make it through dark times? The stand stabilized, not the laptop nor its ergonomics nor facility of use. If anything, it’s work was to stabilize *me*, its consumer, at least a little.

**Works Cited**

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