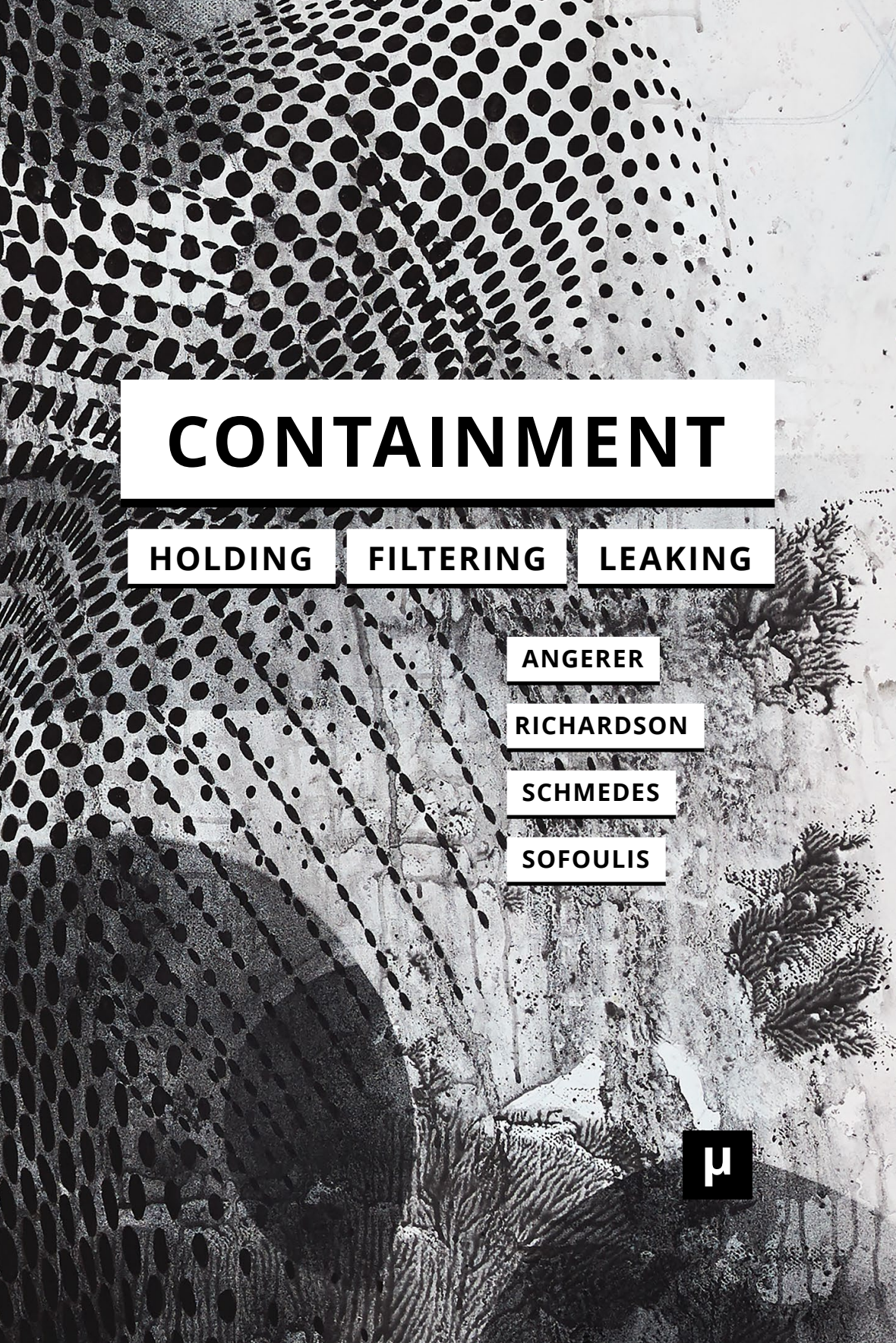
CONTAINMENT
HOLDING
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ANGERER
RICHARDSON
SCHMEDES
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Containment

In memoriam
Marie-Luise Angerer 1958–2024

For Marie-Luise, who made this book possible through her generosity and intellectual openness. Her unique ability to nurture new spaces for thought, her unconditional encouragement and infectious laughter will continue to resonate within us and the lives of so many people she touched.

Containment: Technologies of Holding, Filtering, Leaking

edited by
Marie-Luise Angerer, Ingrid Richardson,
Hannah Schmedes and Zoë Sofoulis

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HANDBAG

CONTAINER THEORY

PUBLIC SPHERE

PRIVATE SPHERE

MICROWORLD

[4]

Holding and Being Held: Handbags as Container Technologies

Meredith Jones

This paper explores the handbag as a material and symbolic container technology. Deploying Zoë Sofia's "Container Technologies" theory and the phenomenological work of Iris Marion Young, it analyzes the handbag in terms of both *what* and *how* it contains. The mobilities that the handbag facilitates are considered alongside how carrying such an object impedes bodily mobility. The handbag's particularities as a container make it a portable domestic lifeworld—here called a microworld—and a way to take the indoors outdoors, a way to mediate private and public spheres. I consider ways that handbags are connected to feminine ways of being in space, in terms of both enabling and disabling, and their roles in pedagogies of femininity.

Introduction

From famous Hollywood handbag owners like Grace Kelly or the Kardashians to the homeless "bag lady," who has no name and no place, bags have power. We know from Zoë Sofia (2000; Chapter 1) and Ursula Le Guin (1986) that containers and bags have performed fundamental roles in human cultural development, and that these often-unobtrusive technologies are overlooked, glossed over, seen as passive and, like many things "feminine," discounted. I suggest in this paper that handbags have a particular kind of power that lies in their holding capacities—capacities that are both literal and symbolic. I explain how handbags facilitate mobility, acting as mobile and material links between private and public: powerfully connecting domestic and civil worlds, often working as a vital facilitator between the two. Further, I investigate links—material, symbolic, representational—between handbags and the construction, movement, performance, and indeed containment of feminine bodies in space. I argue that handbags operate—symbolically and functionally—at the nexus of complex relations between self and environment.

What Is a Handbag?

Handbags hold and are held. A handbag is designed to be held in one hand (although it may be able to sit in the crook of the arm or slung over a shoulder). It is not a backpack, a crossbody bag, or even a shoulder bag. In terms of design, handbags are often able to stand alone and upright (indeed some have studs called "feet" on their base). Unlike most other sartorial accessories, they do not need a body to encase or be draped upon in order to make sense—they are three-dimensional structural objects. My focus on the handbag to the exclusion of other bags is because the handbag is almost always gendered: "a handbag is a small bag which a woman uses to carry things such as her money and keys in when she goes out" (Collins English Dictionary 2023) or "a small bag used by a woman to carry everyday personal items" (Oxford English Dictionary, "Handbag"). There are more extreme sexist definitions of handbag, as in the example given for the verb *to handbag:* "A lady in the audience—apparently a friend of the composer—handbagged a man who clapped before the end of the playing of Pierre Boulez' Piece for Two Pianos" (Oxford English Dictionary, "Handbag, verb"). In other words, it is a term used to belittle a woman who uses language to exert power. Ursula Le Guin takes proud ownership of this notion in her essay about carrier bags and the origins of human civilization and narrative, declaring "I am an aging, angry woman laying mightily about me with my handbag, fighting hoodlums off" (1986, 168). Le Guin was probably referring to the famous picture taken just a

year earlier, by photojournalist Hans Runesson, of Danuta Danielsson, a Jewish woman, swinging her handbag at a neo-Nazi marching in Sweden (Merrill 2020, 112).

Handbag History

Handbags have not always been associated with women. Indeed, one of the earliest depictions of what appears to be a handbag is of a god in an Assyrian relief carving from Nimrud, ca. 883–59 BCE. This handbag may have represented the cosmos, it may have held important spiritual items—historians do not know—but for my purposes it situates the hand-held bag as one of the oldest we know, and one whose cultural and material meanings have shifted dramatically.[1] Nevertheless, contemporary handbags and ancient ones do share one continual message—they are about privacy, intimacy, and importance. There is a taboo about the inside of someone else's bag—you shouldn't go rummaging about in there if it's not yours. Farid Chenoune, a curator of handbags at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Paris, suggests that the handbag holds "a secret, something forbidden" and is "an inviolable sanctuary, into which no foreign hand has the right to penetrate" (2005, 21). Whether it is the power of an ancient Egyptian god, or the power of a woman carrying things that are most likely significant to her, handbags are able to hold it.

The history of the contemporary handbag is strongly associated with the nexus of capitalism, shopping, consumerism, and demonstration of respectable, public-facing femininity. As department stores and arcades developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and more street commerce moved indoors (Kowaleski-Wallace 1997, 80), shopping became leisurely (sometimes luxurious), and associated with sociality and engagement. Griselda Pollock reminds us that before this, "going out in public and the idea of disgrace were closely allied [for women]" (1988, 69). Arcades and department stores allowed women to leave the domestic sphere without risking exposure to the dangers of the street, while also restricting, containing, and directing movement through their enclosed architectures. As white middle- and upper-class women began to venture out into the social world without guardians or servants, little bags became essential—mainly for carrying cash. Thus, in parallel with urban architectural developments, the handbag came to

1 Archaeologists and museum curators seem to agree that the "handbag" held by the eagle-headed Assyrian deity was actually a bucket of water into which was dipped the tree cone (likely the spathe of the male date palm) held in the other hand, to artificially fertilize female date palm trees, and/or to sprinkle water in a purifying ritual. We like Jones's (mis)reading for the rhetorical work it does, and for its resonance with Le Guin: whether bucket, handbag, or cosmos, a "carrier bag" of some sort is evoked — Eds.

represent a specific kind of freedom that signified independence whilst also constraining women's movements.

In the second half of the twentieth century the taxonomy of the handbag became more complicated, developing its own nomenclature, a subset of vocabulary for the fashion-literate. The clutch, the tote, the bowling bag, the baguette, the doctor's bag, the pouch, and the slouch are styles of handbag, while the Hermès Birkin, the Chanel 2.55, the LV Speedy, the Balenciaga Motorcycle, the Givenchy Antigona, and the Lady Dior are recognizable high-end branded designs. Each has its own history, narrative, desirability, cruelties—most handbags are leather, some of the most expensive are made from rare and endangered species (Christies 2019)—associated celebrities, black-market knock-offs, etc. Stephanie Pedersen writes that "modern handbags are as much about function as they are about self-expression and even status" (2006, 7) and many luxury fashion houses sell more handbags than clothes (Kasuma et al. 2015).

Handbag Pedagogy

Two major exhibitions[2] have shown that the handbag's material form hasn't changed much in a century, although some of its contents have (for example phones, lifeworlds in themselves, are ubiquitous while lipsticks remain largely the same). Handbag historians note a transitional moment in the 1940s when smaller, more refined, bags like the clutch gave way to larger, sturdier ones—a change that reflected women's more active "Rosie the Riveter"-inspired lives during World War II. In 1945, an article in *The New York Times* advised that:

> A woman without her handbag feels as lost as a wanderer in the desert. And she wants it large. If she cannot get it in leather—now growing scarce—she will take it in fabric, fur, or even plastic. The handbag is the movable base of her supplies—the depot of her expected needs. (Daniel 1945)

This is sophisticated propaganda: ideal US wartime womanhood described using militaristic language via the handbag. The discourse is also pedagogic, informing women that their patriotic citizenship relies on having a large and mobile "depot," without which they could be lost in the desert, like a soldier gone missing in action or AWOL. Here the handbag is deployed as metaphor for politics, for contemporary lives and deaths, and for America at war. It is characterized as a technology of supply and support, as a *tool* as well as a social statement. This is one example of how handbags have holding

2 *Le cas du sac: histoires d'une utopie portative* at the Musée de la Mode et du Textile par l' Union centrale des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, October 6, 2004–February 20, 2005; and *Bags: Inside Out* at the V&A in London, October 13, 2021–January 16, 2022.

capacities that are both literal and symbolic, reflecting contemporary lives and politics, and how they are communicated and taught in public discourse.

Handbag pedagogies have continued. For example, in ca. 2020–22 instructions about how your handbag could help you stay safe during the pandemic became common in print media and online. Lavie Exclusive, a clothing brand, posted on Facebook a picture of a capacious handbag with its logo and a list of crucial in-handbag items to help navigate the "new normal," including a travel-size handwash, a spare face mask, a travel cutlery set, a small hand sanitizer, a water bottle, and a packet of wet wipes (Lavie Exclusive 2021). Once again, in a time of international emergency, a larger handbag became a practical and social necessity and a sign of responsible citizenship.

In an article which professes to explain "what your bag says about you," readers are advised on the best ways to hold their bags, for example, "the bag should never be gripped too tightly or squeezed against the body as this can send a signal of nerves or insecurity" and "if the bag is held to the side [it can be displayed] without it obstructing the rest of the outfit" (Vince 2017).

Of the many websites set up to help trans people "pass" (if they want to), there is a particular genre aimed at femme trans women. These sites share information on makeup, hair, fashion, voice, walking style, etc., and are demonstrably pedagogic. They bring to the surface the lessons in femininity that most cis women learn as they grow up, almost unconsciously, via (often unspoken) social regulation. One of the things the sites focus on is the proper purchase, carrying, and filling of handbags. The blog *Femme Secrets* lists "15 Items You Should Always Keep In Your Purse" (note that in the US "purse" and "pocketbook" can mean "handbag") and informs the reader that:

> one of the perks of being a girl is getting to carry a purse. More than just a stylish accessory, your purse is a toolbox for your femme self. And while a cluttered bag isn't chic, there are some essentials you shouldn't be without. You never know what life will throw at you – and a lady is always prepared! (Sorella, n.d.)

The article then lists phone, lipstick, mints, nail file, $20 cash, hand cream, blotting paper or powder, bobby pins, mirror, stain removal pen, Band-Aids, safety pins, card with emergency info, painkillers, and a healthy snack.[3] Claudia Liebelt has written:

> Trans women [show] that femininity is not simply socially constructed but tied to particular material becomings, consumption choices, and somatic technologies that may facilitate a (visual, social) recognition as feminine. (Liebelt 2022, 2)

3 The comments section has readers adding a gun and pepper spray to the list as well as tampons and pads "in case I am asked in a restroom," a torch, and condoms.

Lucille Sorella recognizes this and expresses it in the blog, noting that a handbag (purse) is a "toolbox" as well as an "accessory" that enhances performing femininity literally and metaphorically. These examples show how handbags are vessels of containment and supply as well as conduits by which mainstream femininity can be expressed, which is why, as journalist Barbara Hagerty notes, they are perhaps "the most quintessentially feminine of belongings" (2002, 11). Indeed, handbags are so important that they could be said to hold and/or to be metaphoric worlds.

Handbag as Microworld

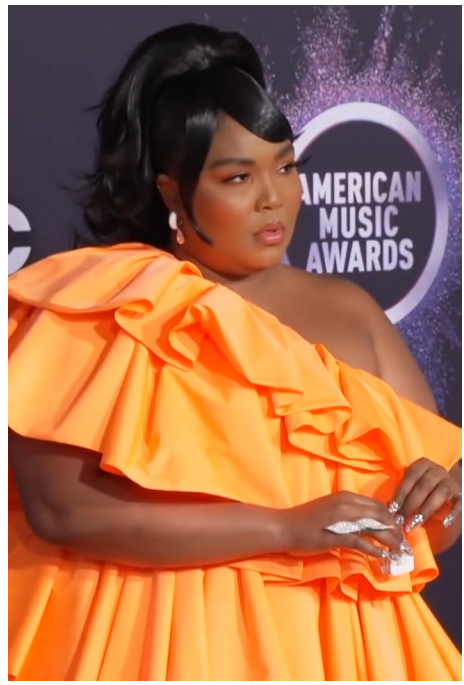
A small universe, a mini version of the world. The handbag is the modern woman's own

> private but portable boudoir, office, bank and emergency kit, without which she would undoubtedly feel lost. Even the smallest handbag will defy the laws of physics to hold mobile phone [the mobile phone itself being a microworld, see Richardson 2007], Filofax, Psion organizer, lipstick, mirror and hairbrush, not to mention money, credit cards, keys and the odd mint. The handbag is the lady-in-waiting to the woman who gets by without a chauffeur to drive her and a butler awaiting her arrival at home. (Allen 1999, 6)

Setting aside Carmel Allen's sexist tone, her observations (which echo many others in popular culture) bring to mind Doctor Who's Tardis. The Tardis is a time machine but has important spatial qualities. From the outside it is a static, solid object (an old-fashioned English police call box that represents the law and safety) but its interior spaces appear vast and it has transportive powers. Equally, it reminds us of Mary Poppins's carpet bag—seemingly empty—from which this itinerant governess/nanny (a precarious feminine profession) magically pulls a hatstand, a wall mirror, a rubber plant, and a tasseled standing lamp, serving to astonish and awe the difficult children she is to nanny as well as to temporarily cement her in a new place that is not her own home. Thus, the handbag is capable of holding far more than one would assume: it is also transportive, and facilitates a certain freedom in relation to social movement.

At the 2019 American Music Awards, Lizzo, playing with the trend for micro bags, made it outrageously clear that her tiny white Valentino bag (Fig. 1, no more than 2 cm x 1.5 cm x 1 cm, and described as "nano" or "granular") held nothing but a good time: "There's a lot [in it], I got tampons in here, a flask of tequila, some condoms" (quoted in Newbold 2019).

Hagerty writes that handbags:



[Figure 1] Lizzo at the 2019 American Music Awards, November 24, 2019 (source: YouTube: The Best Outfits at the 2019 American Music Awards, *Cosmopolitan UK*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z6S9PA7EpV8).

> echo female anatomy in their essentially female shape. They suggest womb, heart, breast, and psyche. They are worn or carried in the body's most intimate zone. They are a small extension of the self that goes forth into the world while maintaining an utterly private dimension. (2002, 10)

Germaine Greer is far more critical:

> Why do women always carry bags, and why are those bags so often heavy? Why is it that most women will not go out of the house without bags loaded with objects of no immediate use? Is the tote bag an exterior uterus, the outward sign of the unmentionable burden? (Quoted in Lloyd 1999)

Certainly, it is no stretch to see the handbag as a sort of external womb. This recalls Le Guin's wish to reframe the technology/science narrative from "weapon of domination" to "cultural carrier bag," indeed to a "womb of things" (1986, 170), not to mention Sofia's observations that the womb is the "primal container technology … a space where, all going smoothly [the fetus's] needs are unobtrusively supplied" (Chapter 1, 22). In fact, Sofia urges us to reconsider important objects from a wombic point of view:

> The skyscraper, so obviously phallic but from the inside a "womb with a view"; the car, advertised in terms that emphasize on the one hand its phallic/excremental "grunt," and on the other its womby comfort and storage space. (24)

Handbags are held and they *hold*. Holding is neither passive nor simple; Sofia explains how holding is active. She recalls Heidegger's jug, which has two activities/capacities: to take in fluid, and then to keep that fluid. These capacities generally aim at facilitating a third—which is what Heidegger calls "the outpouring"—in Sofia's words, "whereby the container's contents gush out" (30). The jug gives back that which it has taken in and held, and its purpose is fully realized when its contents pour, drizzle, or drip out. In the same way, the handbag takes objects in and keeps them safe, but only temporarily, for its purpose is also to give them back. Unlike the jug, a handbag's contents tend not to pour out, except for those embarrassing moments when we need to upend them to locate the urgently-ringing phone or find a tampon. Rather, handbags offer us a flow of timely "gifts" throughout our journeys. Really these are presents to ourselves, via the bag, and might be in the form of music, reading material, nibbles, drinks, money, lotions, pens and papers, business cards, etc. In this way then, the handbag is a technology of containment that, in Foucauldian terms, practically assists in the care of the self and is "a matter of the formation of the self through techniques of living" (Foucault 1997, 89).

As a metaphor for the womb then, the handbag is about safe passage, transformation, and holding. The person who carries the handbag is mothering themselves, anticipating and supplying their own needs, caring for themselves. Might we extend this metaphor, and theorize the handbag not just as an external womb, but also as a vagina, vulva, and clitoris? Then, is the constant *attention* we must pay it (for it can't be forgotten or ignored like a backpack), the *clutching* of it and *fiddling* around inside it, a form of self-pleasure? Freud noticed something of the sort:

> Dora's reticule, which came apart at the top in the usual way, was nothing but a representation of the genitals, and her playing with it, her opening it and putting her finger in it, was an entirely unembarrassed yet unmistakable pantomimic announcement of what she would like to do with them—namely, to masturbate. (1963, 95)

While for him Dora's seemingly obsessive actions are part of her hysteric pathology, Dora responds to his questioning by simply saying "*why should I not wear a reticule like this, as it is now the fashion to do?"* (quoted in Freud 1963, 95). And indeed, why should we not all wear such things, if we so desire?

Carrying Handbags

The brilliant blogger Twisty Faster, on *I Blame the Patriarchy* writes: "Do you see the insanity? Do you grasp the fiendish plot? You have to dedicate a whole limb to this bag. Who wakes up in the morning, flings open the shutters, and cries out, 'Today I only need one arm!'" (2005).

The most problematic aspect of the handbag is that it *constrains*. I have shown how it is pedagogical, teaching women how to walk, how to maneuver space. Feminist phenomenologist Iris Marion Young, in her groundbreaking essay "Throwing Like a Girl" examines "some of the basic modalities of feminine body comportment, manner of moving, and relation in space" (2005, 30). She writes:

> The young girl acquires many subtle habits of feminine body comportment—walking like a girl, tilting her head like a girl, standing and sitting like a girl, gesturing like a girl, and so on. The girl learns actively to hamper her movements. (2005, 43)

Handbags, no doubt, hamper movement. We clutch them, shoulder them, grip them, swing them, and we are weighed down and encumbered by them. For all their practical and symbolic usefulness, handbags restrict arm movement and are not ergonomically friendly. Young notes that "a focus upon ways in which the feminine body frequently or typically conducts itself in such comportment or movement may be particularly revelatory of the structures of feminine existence" (2005, 30).

What can the handbag, or more accurately *carrying* a handbag, tell us about structures of feminine existence? How do handbags affect comportment and movement, how do they change our bodies? Like high-heeled shoes, corsets, shapewear, and tight skirts, handbags constrain. They are not simple to carry, they reduce use of one arm, they make us lopsided, and can even cause musculoskeletal injury and pain (Gunnam, Thajudeen, and Sivanandam 2018).

However, no matter how dainty, handbags make us bigger—augmenting the curves of the body. In this way we can call the handbag an "extension of woman" in parallel to Marshall McLuhan's "extensions of man" (1964). They provide one of the very few culturally acceptable ways for women to take up more space. While men sit with legs spread, women cross their ankles; we rarely sprawl, legs akimbo, in the ways that men do, such that this pose is colloquially known as "manspreading." Women's body language is contained, we stand with feet together (Young 2005, 32) and, of course, we are encouraged to diet and exercise to reduce our bodily dimensions.

More than mere accouterment, the handbag changes our relationships with space as well as our self-perceptions. Writing about clothing, not bags, fashion

theorists Alexandra Warwick and Dani Cavallaro note that "in the body/dress relationship, the ostensibly inanimate and hence powerless item of clothing is transformed into an agent by its ability to furnish the body with signifying powers that the unclothed subject would lack" (1998, 60).

Handbags, which may in this sense be understood semiotically as a form of clothing, also change the meaning of the body. Warwick and Cavallaro continue:

> The body image does not end with the skin. In fact, it is largely determined by the body's relation to the space that encircles it. This space is only precariously quantifiable, because there is always an indeterminate zone between the body image and the rest of the world, which may be narrowed or expanded depending on social circumstances. (1998, 61)

The handbag may be burdensome, but it allows women to take up a little more space, space that is both real and symbolic. The more elaborate, expensive, and recognizable the handbag, the more important that space is.

In line with this I see a complex interplay between handbag as tool, as object, as microworld, as sign, and as extension of the body. I suggest that the handbag is a boundary-crosser in several ways. It is detached from the body in a way that clothing is not. It is extant, and is part of one's identity: more like carrying around a "mini-me" or a conjoined twin than wearing clothing. Novelist Anne Rivers Siddons wrote, "a woman has no need to wear her heart on her sleeve. To the astute observer, she is showing you who she is every time she takes her purse out her door" (quoted in Hagerty 2002, 8).

In runway shows, models carry bags that seem weightless. They appear light, filled with air, their carriers unburdened, able to stride on their platform on stiletto heels. This is the best of both worlds: a bag that augments the body without the weight, and all of the status that comes with a handbag without movement being impeded. Part of the attraction of the oversized designer bag is not that it can fit a lot of stuff, but that it can be left roomy and loose without much in it at all: these bags say "I have a lot of space, but I don't need to carry a lot of stuff." Their emptiness is the antithesis of the overflowingness and uncontainability represented by the bag lady, a figure I discuss below.

So why do we continue to bother with them? Why don't all women move to crossbody bags or backpacks, or, like many men, no bag at all? Young deploys De Beauvoir's reckoning of woman's position in patriarchal society as one that constantly negotiates immanence and transcendence:

> The female person who enacts the existence of women in patriarchal society must … live a contradiction: as human she is a free subject who participates in transcendence, but her situation as a woman denies her that subjectivity and transcendence … the modalities of feminine bodily

> comportment, motility, and spatiality exhibit this same tension between transcendence and immanence, between subjectivity and being a mere object. (Young 2005, 32)

The handbag offers, for many, freedom of movement in the patriarchal public sphere where women are unwelcome, perhaps under threat, even as it hampers that movement. The "quintessential femininity" of the handbag is a hindrance, but also a protection and a comfort.

Charlotte Knowles interprets the oscillation between transcendence and immanence in De Beauvoir's schema as

> the way in which complicit agents are active in their own complicity can be understood as a kind of self-deception, resulting from a reluctance to destabilize the norms, self-understandings, and social roles in which agents have immersed themselves. (2020, 258)

In other words, being a woman is hard. Women face hostilities and dangers that men do not. Handbags help some women to negotiate the world. They shackle but also armor us, and are often a continual, reliable source of supply.

Young writes that "feminine existence lives space as enclosed or confining, as having a dual structure, and the woman experiences herself as positioned in space" (2005, 39). For Young, space is experienced by women (which I would clarify as anyone living a feminine existence) as both transcendent (freely lived in, moved within) and as immanent, in which a woman's own corporeal materiality is always tempered by her status as other and as object, and remains at the center of her being.

Mobility and Public/Private

Handbags help us to traverse public and private spheres, holding the personal within and putting on a "public face" without: "the bag you carry tells people who you are—for better or worse! Show yourself off to your best advantage: The next time you step out, give extra thought to what your bag is saying about you" (Pedersen 2006, 10). They thus facilitate movement between public and private spheres, operating on complex levels in terms of *holding space* as well as *moving through* space.

This object of containment helps with the daily public care of the self by firstly giving, at appropriate times, items that we need, credit cards, sunscreen, notebook, etc. It is a portable assurance that one's needs will be met. What rests within the bag is private and personal, while its outside is like a billboard, advertising one's place in the world. The handbag is a portable domestic lifeworld—a way to take the indoors outdoors, a way to reconcile private and public spheres. Handbags are about fixity *and* mobilization; the handbag ties

us to a place (home) but allows us to move away from and then back to it. This is both practical and symbolic. For example, a series of cross-media Louis Vuitton advertisements showed white celebrities in acts of contemporary colonization—ostensibly performing "activist tourism" for the cameras (see Armstrong 2011). The Vuitton bags in this campaign represented the colonizer's right to be-at-home no matter where in the world.

Margaret Thatcher, the first woman prime minister of the UK (from 1979 to 1990) made a point of straddling two identities and two worlds—homemaker and politician, private and public—for decades. This can be read visually in early photos, when she was still an ordinary member of parliament, in which she carries both briefcase and handbag. We might assume that as her power grew and she approached leadership, she would stop using the handbag, but in fact it was the briefcase that was dropped. Thatcher cannily chose, in light of her gender, the container that proved most powerful, the one that protected her from being accused of interloping in a man's world. The handbag powerfully connects domestic and civil worlds. Thatcher's London-made hard-cased boxy Launer (also carried by the Queen, and which at the time of writing cost over 2,000 GBP each—less than a Hermès bag but well out of reach for ordinary humans) became an infamous example, symbolizing her deep conservatism and nationalism as well as her "homemaker" femininity *literally* at work in the public sphere. Her bag symbolized a very specific kind of authority that was never "manly." This role could not have been filled by a briefcase. The stern black Launer supported Thatcher's static, stoic, austere, and respectable femininity, a femininity that allowed her to impinge on traditional masculine territories in seemingly non-threatening and deeply conservative ways that often disarmed and baffled her critics. The handbag, in other words, was part of her power, enacting a weaponized femininity (literally, if we consider the Falklands War).

Years ago, pushing my new baby in her pram and carrying shopping bag, handbag, and swimming gear bag, I passed an older woman on the street. She said to me "woman, beast of burden." Most likely meant as a salutary, supportive comment, it crushed me, making all the bags seem heavier, the hill steeper. For there is a fine line between carrying a bag to express authority and belonging-in-the-world, and carrying too many bags.

If handbags are representative of power, and they signify domestic worlds as well as mobility away-from and back-to them, then what of the unhoused woman, often known as a bag lady (Fig. 2)? She is all bags, even her name. Her bags, despite their overflowing contents, say "I have nothing, I am nothing." A life lived in public, in constant movement, a life denied a private space, is expressed by out-of-proportion baggishness. There is a distinction between carrying a bag that is useful, i.e., expressing authority and status, showing belonging-in-the-world, and being compelled—because of poverty or

[Figure 2] *Homeless Woman*, May 11, 2013, Lisbon, Portugal (source: Pedro Ribeiro Simões).

displacement—to carry too many (heavy) bags. For the bag lady, distinctions between private and personal spaces are limited. Unlike the single handbag that mediates between domestic/private and public spheres, her bags multiply to become portable domestic spaces. The bags are her world/home.

Conclusion

It is an easy feminist task to read handbags as objects that we're burdened with, as things that diminish our capacities, making us less able. They are certainly part of the sociocultural mechanisms that lead Young to state that "women in sexist society are physically handicapped … as lived bodies we are not open … to master a world that belongs to us, a world constituted by our own intentions and projections" (2005, 42). But as Georges Canguilhem has so famously pointed out, what constitutes disability is contextual, dependent on time, space, and circumstance (1991). We must remember when critiquing the handbag that, while problematic, it also lubricates movement between public and private spheres, it signals status, and is a metaphorical signal helping us to defend ourselves when exposed. Le Guin says there is still "room in the bag of stars" (1986, 170) for thinking about narrative differently. The Assyrian god may have been holding a cosmos in the form of a handbag, and out of handbags may spill galaxies. I have shown that the handbag is a portable microworld, a source of supply and giving. Let us not discount this object that holds and is held. It can teach us about domestic and public worlds, about

femininities, and about enabling and restraint. Let's take pleasure in the handbag, and enjoy the paradoxical abundances it offers.

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Marie-Luise Angerer, Ingrid Richardson, Hannah Schmedes and Zoë Sofoulis (eds.)
Containment: Technologies of Holding, Filtering, Leaking

Containers are ubiquitous and inescapable. From handbags to houses, barrels to databases, captivating gameworlds to the "bag of stars" that Ursula Le Guin calls the universe, containers furnish infrastructures for living and action while extending our capacities for managing things across space and time. They not only give shape to our lifeworlds: they form and transform our bodies and being.

The chapters in *Containment: Technologies of Holding, Filtering, Leaking* traverse technologies, bodies, ontologies and imaginaries, reflecting on what different container technologies, containment strategies, and container metaphors tell us about ourselves and how we relate to our worlds. With common reference to Zoë Sofia's (2000) foundational essay on container technologies, contributors draw on media and cultural studies, social history, architecture, and postdualistic approaches in philosophy and social science to explore liminalities of containment both as and beyond holding.

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