

Roping things together: A response to Willems and Warren

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"Form a loop around the object."

I never wear my lanyard. A crap photo over company colours with logo and a rainbow stripe fabric cord that shows how progressive we are. Losers wear them. It's like wearing a sandwich board that announces that you are a corporate kiss-ass who just loves your boss and would cross picket lines to give 110% customer satisfaction. You might as well tattoo your employers' strapline on your forehead. I'm too cool to wear a lanyard, even if it means that I have to reach into my wallet in order to get into a building when it would be much easier to have my pass card hanging around my neck where I can reach it without putting my cup of coffee and laptop on the floor or dropping papers on the pavement. My employer doesn't own me, has not lassoed me. I'm an independent professional, cynical about authorities of any kind, disobedient by nature. A critical free spirit. Fuck your lanyard. See?

"Pass the end around the standing end and through the loop."

But that was too easy, as if a thing only means one thing. If the world was like that, if it spoke clearly, we would have no need for artists, or social scientists for that matter. Because the smallest things are mysteries that allow us to see the world in a grain of sand, following the relations and implications that make things mean many things. So where to begin, if we wish to work the mesh of lanyards and see where they lead?

Interactionist: Waiting in the queue for someone at a desk to find your name on a list, and then turning away to conference network a room, trying to find who matters, and not wasting your time with a postgraduate. Reading the badge, slyly, because you know that you know them but you can't remember their name or where they work. General chit-chat can only take you so far, and you are here to make connections, to entangle lanyards with CVs and promotion applications. And the damn things keep swinging the wrong way, and showing you the blank back, which is what you worry about in these rooms all the time.

Feminist. Workplaces are gendered divisions of space and time, and the markers of these division are written onto and into bodies. The lanyard hangs over blouses and ties, dresses and jackets, and is a matter of interest for female receptionists and male security guards, checking out someone's breasts. The lanyard gains meaning from the body it swings against, from the gaze that evaluates and weighs, that decides whether your sort deserves closer scrutiny. Nice lanyard love.

Phenomenological: This plastic that gently nudges you on the chest reminds you that you are part of this gang, a badge of togetherness. One of us. One of us. Here, this place, is mine. By

tapping my card on the door reader I can show outsiders, with a glance before I close the door, that I have access to secrets that you can only imagine. This is my Olympic medal, my honour bestowed by the monarch. It keeps people like you out. Jealous? You should be.

Actor Network: Actants in an assemblage that entangles a human body with some materials, producing a politics made durable. An ontologically flat assemblage of flesh and plastic which allows the human-non-human through some openings and not through others, that permits specified mobilities, and hence proximity with other actants who have or lack such permissions. If the lanyard could speak, what would it say?

Critical: Lanyards let you in and out of buildings that other people own. You don't own them and those people own you too. That's because you sell your labour to other people and the chain your wear around your neck is a sign of your wage slavery. It's not even yours, because it will have to be returned to HR at the termination of your employment, together with "your" laptop and "your" office key. Throw off your lanyards, you have nothing to lose.

And this is only to mention some of the more popular brands of theory right now. Other varieties are available – new institutionalism, critical realist, queer, postcolonial, agential materialist and whatever happens to be fashionable to wear on your papers this year. Theory lanyards that allow academics to walk into rooms and journals and display their credentials, to show that they know that symbolic approaches to organizations predate the 1980s by decades, or that organizations were imagined as structures of meaning by Weber. To use words and phrases that are not commonly transacted in order to claim belonging, exclusivity, political sophistication and so on. Academic work is lanyard work, the work of marking yourself as someone who fits in, even if you feel that behind the badge lies an imposter, which means that the badge needs to be even bigger so that you can hide behind it and shout slogans from the other side.

"Tighten into a Half Hitch."

Again, too easy, because this is not a response to social science in a social science journal. The piece I have been asked to comment on uses the method of "art" and is spoken by and concerns the work of "artists". So what is the distinction here? What is the method of "art"? The hold that "art" wishes to have is somehow different, less a lanyard that labels, more of a knot which gives purchase on the object of enquiry, tugging it into new shapes and holding them there for a while.

In 1972, R D Laing, the Scottish radical psychiatrist, wrote a book of prose poetry titled *Knots* and I will use him as a lanyard here. He says –

There is something I don't know
that I am supposed to know.
I don't know *what* it is I don't know
and yet am supposed to know,
and I feel I look stupid
if I seem both not to know it
and not know *what* it is I don't know.
Therefore, I pretend I know it.

Perhaps the academic feels stupid, as a condition of their occupation, and doesn't like it so puts a lanyard on it. The world somehow becomes more settled then, weighed down by labels provided by a profession, an institution, a theory. The artist, it seems to me, is happier with the cats' cradle of meanings and relations afforded by things that are good to think with.

Lanyards, necklaces, festivals, fabric furniture and fountains in an endless chain of ingenious links and connotations which require no accountability, just curiosity and creativity.

But then, when the demand for an account is finally responded to, in the text on the gallery wall or a journal about aesthetics, it ends up betraying the multiplicity of the object. Because the materials of the world never mean one thing, however much I might want to rope them with words.

About the author

Martin Parker works at the School of Management, University of Bristol and is the lead for the Inclusive Economy Initiative. His last book was called 'Shut Down the Business School' (Pluto 2018) and his next one is 'Anarchism, Organization and Management' (Routledge 2020).