



LIZZIE RIDOUT

The Invent-ory: words on imagined repositories, endless indexes and an exercise in collecting beginnings

Spaces on bookshelves, the mathematical preferences of bees, Hiroshima survivors, time-travelling Victorian novelists, incomplete gravestone inscriptions; all starting points to be pondered and to inspire, says Lizzie Ridout, in her endless search for beginnings.

'The human imagination is a museum without walls.'

André Malraux

As this is the beginning, I will start at the end. Or rather, with the idea of the end. And endlessness. Because the end is not the same as an ending, and defining ends, or rather not defining them, has become an integral part of my work.

In 2007 I completed a fourteen-month creative research fellowship at the British Library, where I worked as a 'domestic archaeologist' within the collections, unearthing references to mundane, familiar objects with bizarre or poetic twists. A visual summary of this research formed the basis of *Homeward Bound or An Exercise in Collecting Beginnings*, a loose-leaf book-come-magazine. Interwoven between these 'facts', were new creations, inspired by the real, but teetering on the edge of reality. The project was designed specifically with a view to it remaining incomplete and something that could continually be added to.

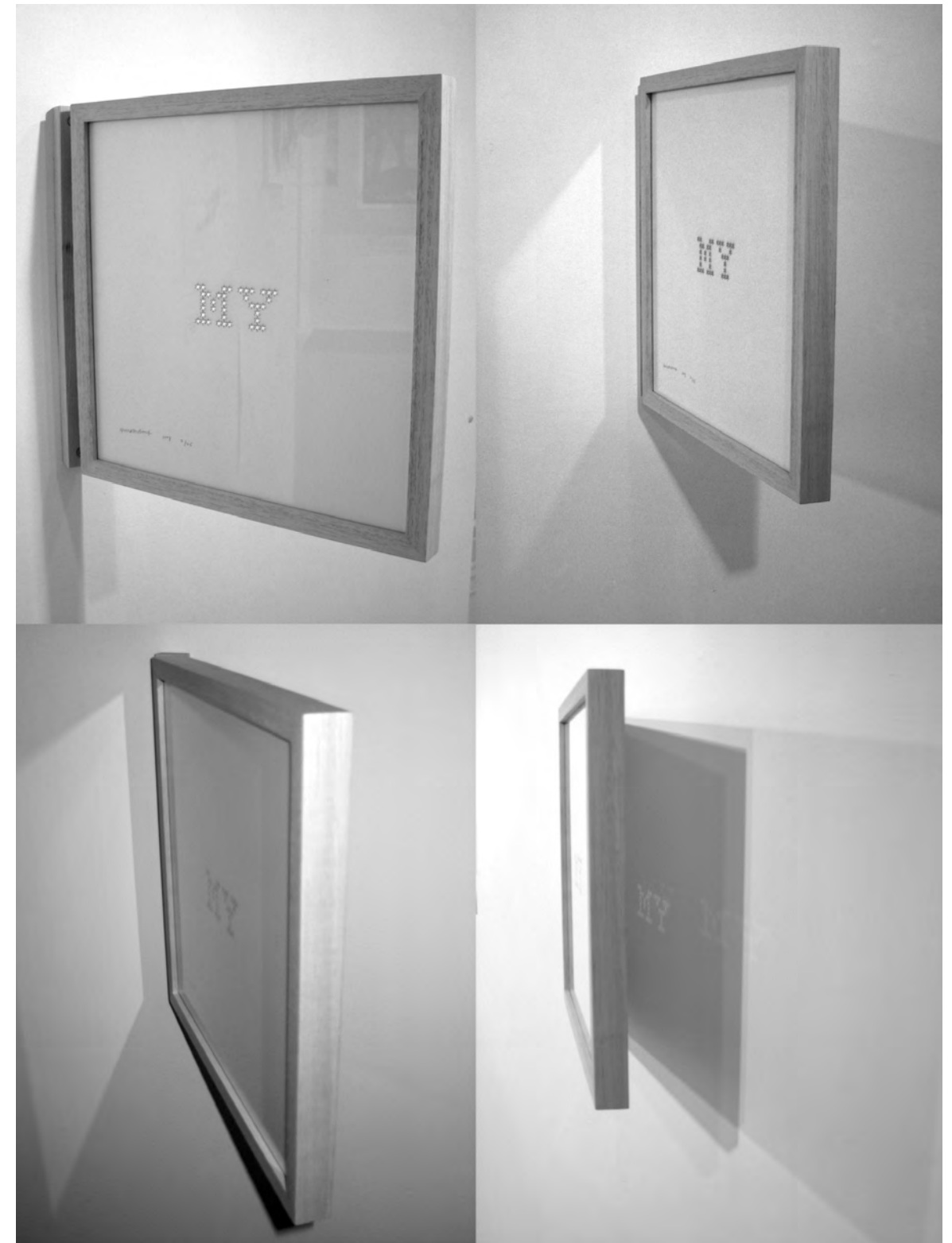
What follows are various noted findings and vagaries that have been forming themselves in my sketchbooks over the last couple of years, further developing the idea of an endless repository and an imagined archive. They are starting points to be pondered and to inspire, and cover musings on collections that are both real and pure fancy, and almost always inexhaustible. They are initial thoughts and references that strive to unite diverse interests whilst also exploring the concept of a collection that can exist humanly – as in a collection which can preserve some aspect of what it is to be a human and attempt to capture the eccentricities of human existence.

Consideration:

The words 'inventory' and 'invent' – both derived from the Latin *invenire* meaning 'to come upon' or 'to come into' – now encapsulate both what is fact and what is fiction. In the case of the former, an inventory, meaning a complete list of items contained within a building or owned by somebody. In the case of the latter, invent, meaning to create or design something that has not previously existed, but more significantly in this example, meaning 'to make up' or 'to conjure up', particularly 'so as to deceive'.

I met Alison on a train. She was a taxonomist and talked about her world, a place in which she attempted to classify and order things. Her job entailed the creation of systems that link sometimes seemingly unconnected objects, images, relics or ideas. She used complex systems for knitting – and noticed that when she knitted a pair of socks, the second sock was always slightly larger than the first. Everything about her manner suggested that while I was speaking, as she spoke, she was continually shifting and re-ordering images, words, ideas and devising an all-encompassing catalogue of the world.

She had also trained as a beekeeper and told me that bees can identify letterforms and that they are obsessed with the measurement three-eighths of an inch, known as 'bee-space'. If space within a hive is bigger than three-eighths of an inch, the bees will build comb, but if it is less than a quarter of an inch, they will fill it with propolis, the resinous mixture they collect from tree buds and sap, and which is used to seal unwanted open spaces in the hive. Occasionally the inherent hexagonal order of the beehive will go awry, due to a confused queen, and a new and spiralling world of chaos is created. I could see a



'My – with Stars', laser cut text for one of a series of prints created to accompany the publication Homeward Bound.



Above and opposite: A selection of pages from Homeward Bound.



jubilant delight in her eyes as she explained this to me.

Postscript: In total contrast to her professional vocation, Alison also happened to live on a damp barge in Stoke Newington, once shared with several pet giant moths, who had free reign of the boat, fluttering around at night amongst her mildew-covered, hand-knitted clothes.

Instruction:

Take inspiration from Thomas Browne and create a version of his 'Museum Clausum' or 'Biblioteca Abscondita'.

The Museum Clausum, meaning 'sealed museum', was an entirely fictitious inventory of 'remarkable books, antiquities, pictures and rarities of several kinds, scarce or never seen by any man now living.' It contained entries summarizing Browne's vast interests and knowledge.

Examples include: 'A Moon Piece' (a painting depicting dramatic scenes played out in unusual lighting); 'A transcendent Perfume made from the richest Odorates of both the Indies, kept in a Box made of the Muschie Stone of Niarenburg, with this Inscription: "Just one sniff, Fabullus, and you'd wish you could become one huge nose!" Catullus: 13'; 'Draughts of three passionate Looks; of Thyestes when he was told at the Table that he had eaten a piece of his own Son; of Bajazet when he went into the Iron Cage; of Oedipus when he first came to know that he had killed his Father, and married his own Mother'.

A message of peace: ... a request for "mementoes of the atomic bomb."

'During a preliminary visit to Hiroshima, it was learned that a survivor of the bombing, Takahashi Akhiro, bore

a 'black nail' on a finger of his right hand. This nail, damaged by flying glass in the explosion, falls off every three years and is replaced by a new nail as hard and as black as the one before. Members of the contents collection subcommittee visited Mr. Takahashi and suggested to him that the memory of the bomb which he carries in this unique, living way would be a profound message to the people of the future. Without hesitation, he offered to give a discarded nail to the project.'

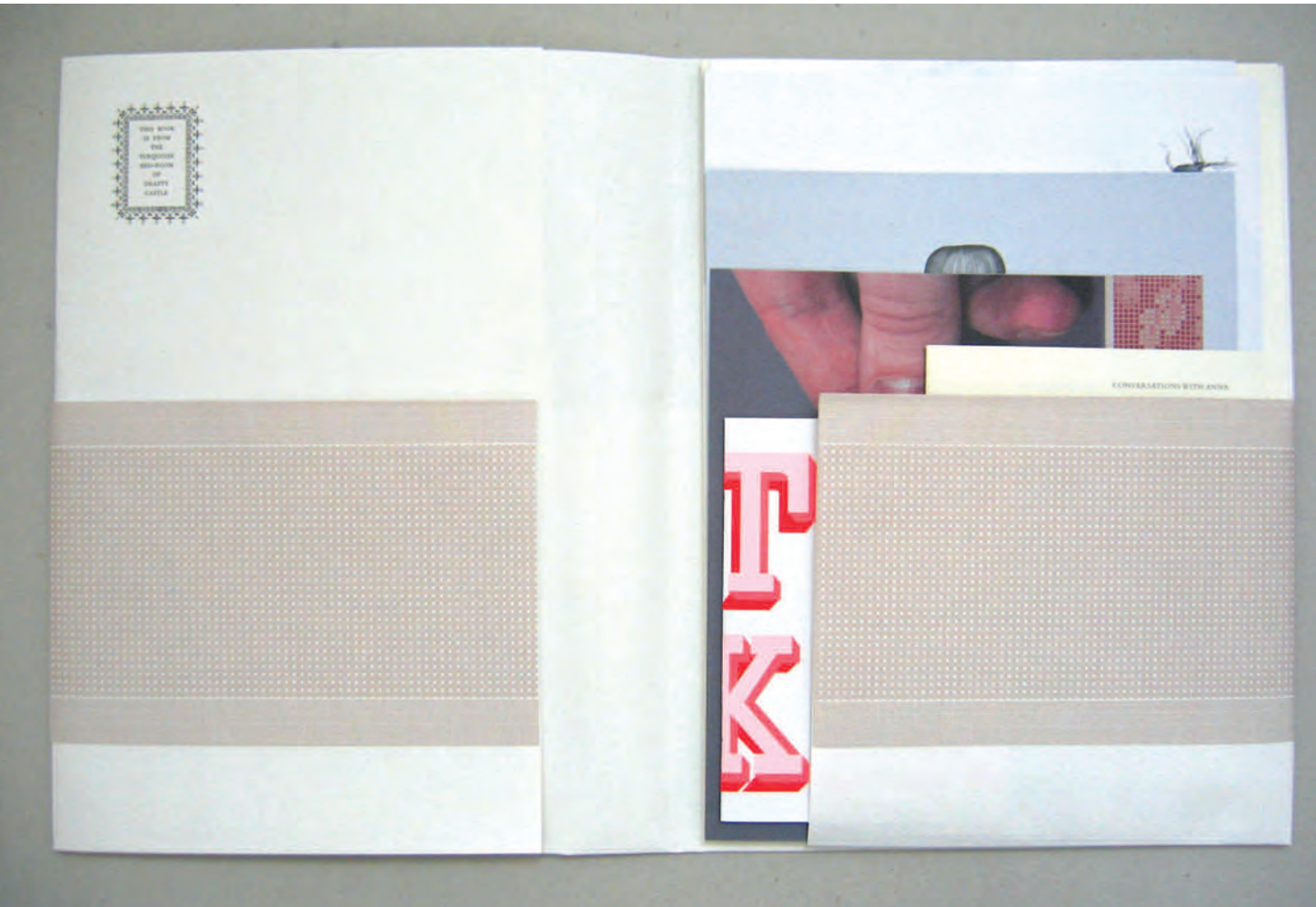
'A stray dog was followed for a whole night until, at dawn it finally obliged with an impressive howl – now recorded for posterity on magnetic film.'

The Official Record of Time Capsule Expo '70: A gift to the people of the future from the people of the present day, Matsushita Electric Industrial Co., 1980.

In Max Beerbohm's book *Seven Men*, the character Enoch Soames makes a pact with the devil to travel to a British Library of the future, to see if his writings are held in the reading rooms, and if he is the recognized writer that he hopes to be.¹

Imagine a library in which every person has the opportunity to create a work – be it visual or textual – that captures each of our understandings of the world in which we live, of humanity, and of existence. As I ponder this thought, I think of Alison and what sort of formidable and awe-inspiring inventory she would conjure up.

1. *Library: An Unquiet History*, Matthew Battles, Vintage, 2004.



Above and opposite: pages and front cover of Homeward Bound.

[The Cairo Genizah] is a battle-field of books, and the literary productions of many centuries had their share in the battle ... Some of the belligerents have perished outright, and are literally ground to dust in the terrible struggle for space, whilst others ... are squeezed into big, unshapely lumps.

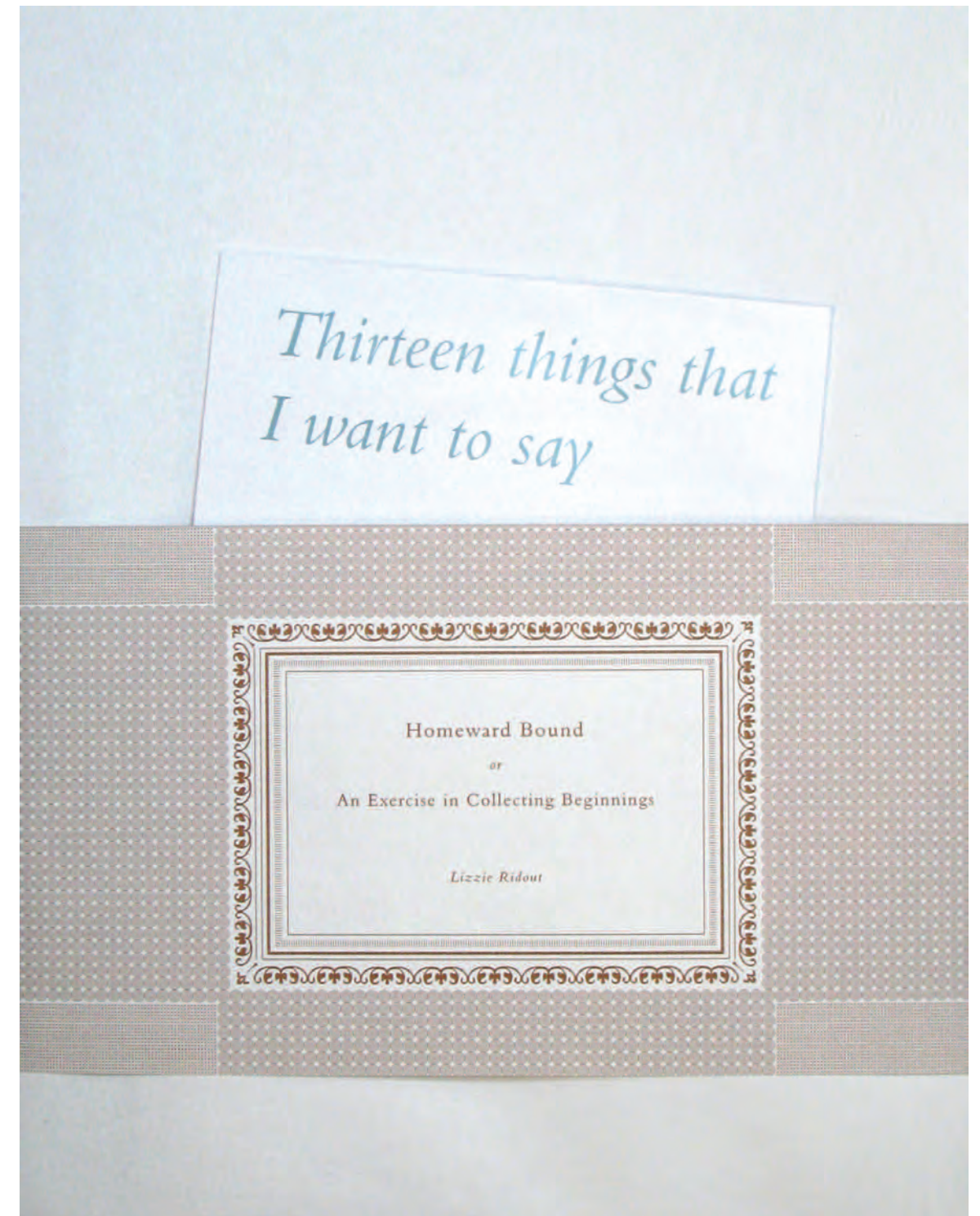
Solomon Schechter, The Times, 1897.

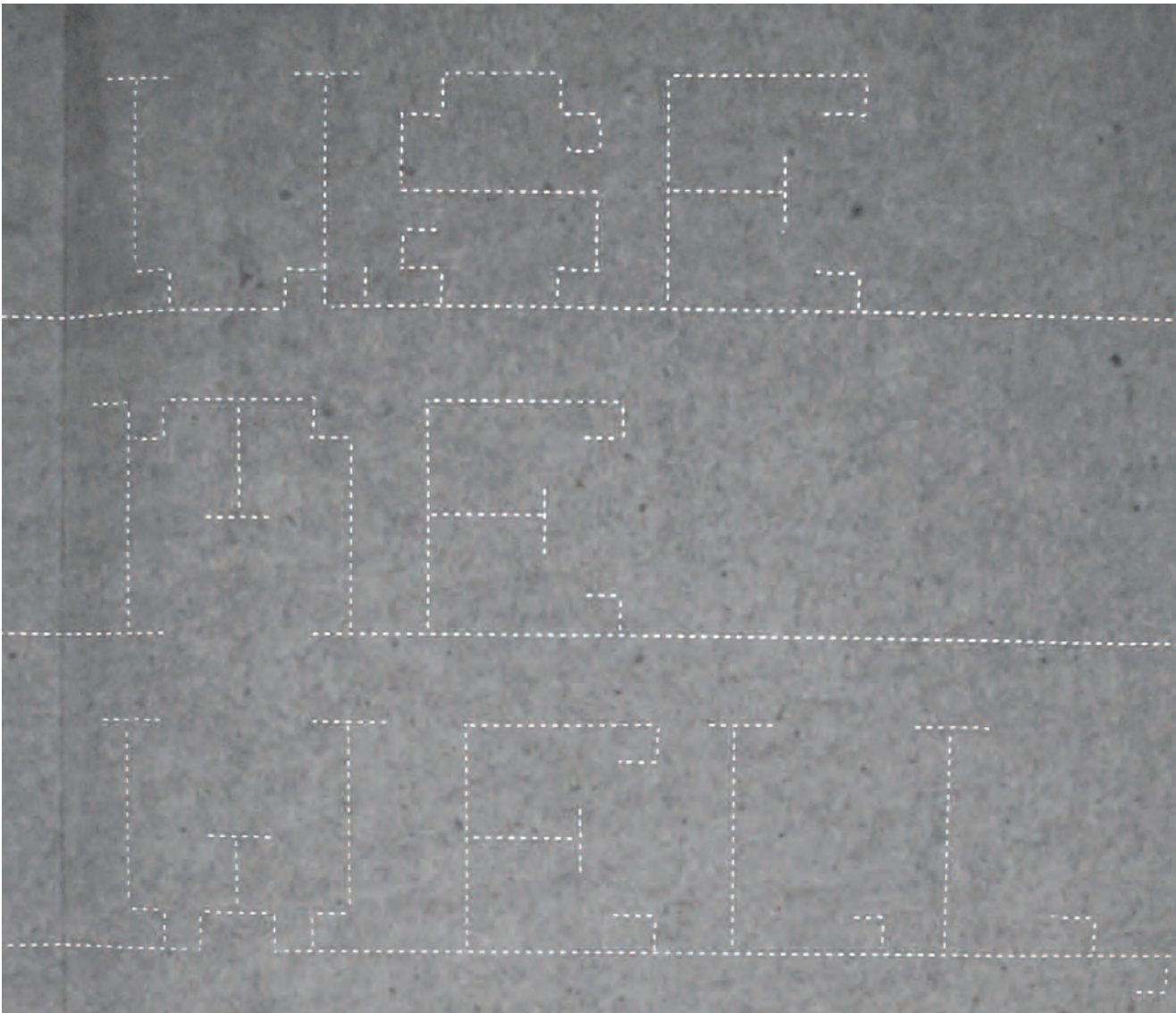
A genizah is described as a storage area within a synagogue in which religious documents, or in fact any written texts containing references to God are placed when they have become worn out, contain scribal errors or are simply no longer usable. Here in the genizah, they await a ritual burial, usually taking place every seventh year.

The Cairo Genizah, in the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo, is unique due to its vastness: it contains over 200,000 fragments of Jewish texts stored from between the eleventh and nineteenth centuries. Due to the hot,

dry and dark conditions creating a near perfect environment within which to preserve paper, and the fact that the genizah was not emptied, it has inadvertently become a hugely significant religious, cultural and economical archive of Jewish daily life.

The writer Antipater of Sidon is often credited as the author of a well-known list that we know as 'The Seven Wonders of the World'. His inventory, written in the second century BC, compiled what he considered to be the most marvelous, the most awe-inspiring, manmade monuments of his time. It is questioned, for several interesting reasons, in an essay by Stephen E. Weil, who gently muses over Antipater's lack of consideration for the passage of time that would ultimately lead to the ruin of these once majestic structures. Secondly Antipater did not contemplate the fact that what he considered to be 'the world' was in fact more the world that he knew, and





Use Me Well, I'll Never Cut You, a fold out poster created from perforated text."

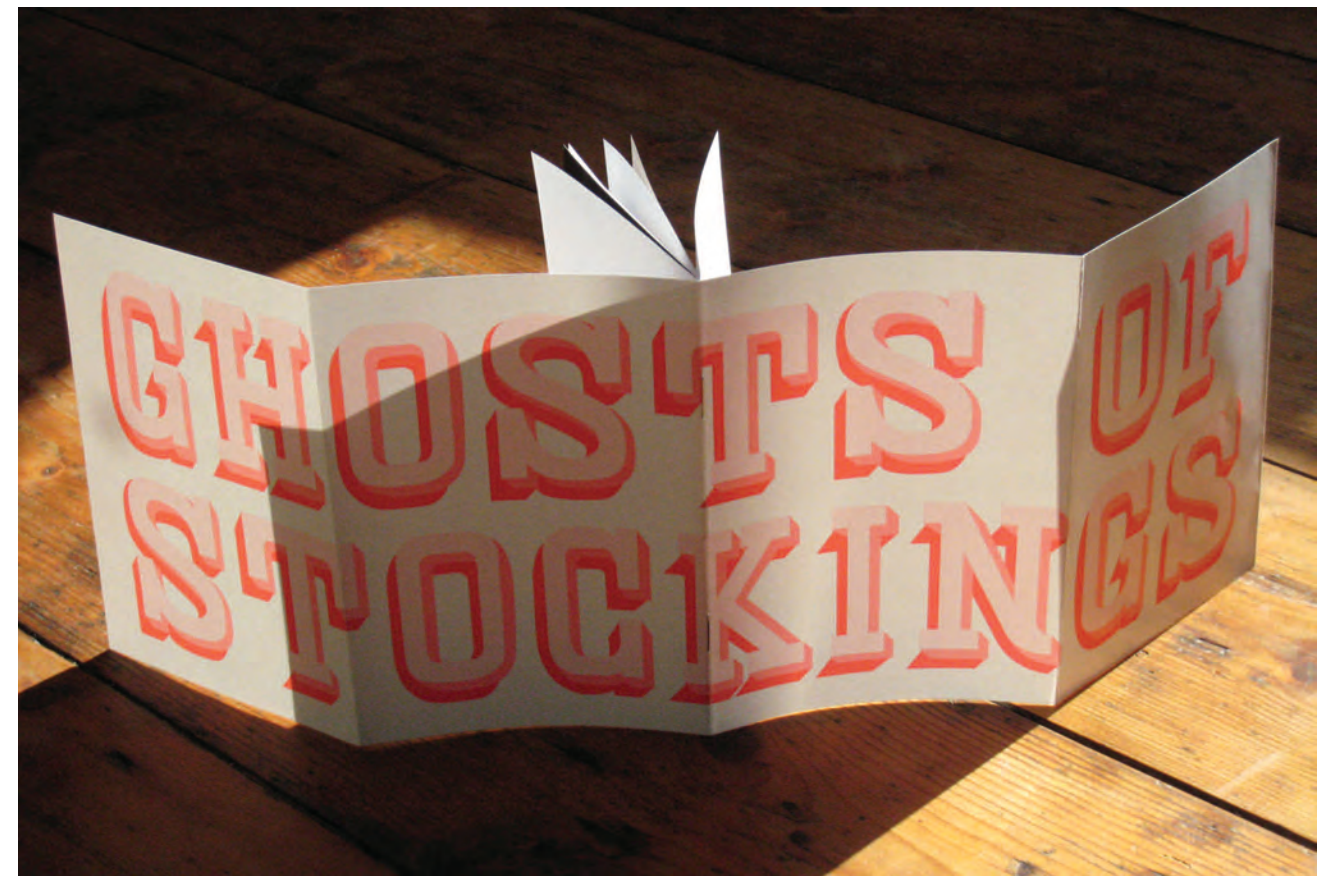
therefore excluded many other wonders that were beyond his sphere of knowledge. Finally Weil contemplates why Antipater fixed upon what is physical or built, in his list of what is truly wonderful, whilst omitting to mention human creations that are less tangible but more inherent, such as language, religion or law.

Flaws are interesting and deserve more attention.

Speaking About Museums: A Meditation on Language, in Inquiries into Museums and their Prospects, Stephen E. Weil, The Smithsonian Institution, 1995.

A list of some of the things I'm currently collecting, in no particular order:

Photographs of locations in which something might take place; visible pauses or places where time stops momentarily and historical references to the passing of time generally; photographs of gravestones upon which a space has been left for someone who has not yet passed away; novels and reference books containing handwritten dedications; photographs that can be catalogued by their predominant colour; words that are obsolete; photographs of good food that I eat; references that I find relating to birds and a divine language; documentation of any daily small risks that I undertake; found photographs that have been edited, cropped or defaced in some way; words that could form 'perhaps-titles' for works; photographs of photographs and objects preserved under glass; various small pieces of ocean,



A small booklet, 'Ghosts of Stockings', from Homeward Bound. The front cover, printed in fluorescent ink, is designed to fade over time when left in direct sunlight.

after Italo Calvino; visualizations of silence and studies in indirect communication; mourning paraphernalia; shadows and other absences; examples of gazes; photographs of the first day at school; the spaces left on a library bookshelf once a book has been removed.

'A multitude of words doth rather obscure than illustrate, they being a Burden to the Memory, and the first apt to be forgotten before we come through to the last. So that he who uses many words for the explaining of any subject doth, like the Cuttle-Fish, hide himself, for the most part, in his own ink.'

John Ray, The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation, 7th edn, 1717.

Don't. Stop. Stop. Stop.

Lizzie Ridout is currently gathering material for a new folio to be added to the publication, inspired by St Bride Type Library.

Homeward Bound or An Exercise in Collecting Beginnings is available to look at and to buy, priced £15, from www.lizzieridout.com, or from the British Library bookshop (<http://shop.bl.uk>).

If you would like to contribute existing or imagined objects, images and ideas to an ongoing Invent-ory, please email info@lizzieridout.com. All contributions will be credited.

For more information about Lizzie's work, please go to www.lizzieridout.com and www.artsparklets.co.uk

Lizzie Ridout is an artist and graphic designer working on both self initiated projects and to commission. She lectures in graphics and illustration at University College Falmouth and the University of Plymouth.