The Ephemerality of IRL: An Interview with Rob Walker

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"Tell me about yourself, and you might mention where you’re from, the music you prefer, perhaps a favorite writer or filmmaker or artist, possibly even the sports teams you root for. But I doubt you’ll mention brands or products. That would seem shallow, right? There’s just something illegitimate about openly admitting that brands and products can function as cultural material, relevant to identity and expression. It's as if we would prefer this weren't true..." — Rob Walker, Exhibition Essay, As Real As It Gets, 2012.
Journalist and author Rob Walker has a long history of projects that look at the intersection of designed objects and consumer behavior. Formerly of the Times Magazine "Consumed" column and currently found at Design Observer, Walker coined the term "marketing" in his 2008 book, Buying In: The Secret Dialogue Between What We Buy and Who We Are, to describe the blurred strategy between marketing and entertainment used to sell products without the associations of an overt branding campaign. Walker's current project swings to the other side of the spectrum, examining brands so compelling they don't need physical manifestations: he has curated "As Real As It Gets" at New York's Apexart about imaginary brands and fictional products. I talked to Walker over email about some of the questions the exhibition raises about our complicated relationship with things.

The show, in many ways, seems like a continuation or synthesis of your own speculative design projects with your different tumbleblogs. The majority of your own practice exists exclusively in the virtual sphere, for example your recent Significant Objects project with Joshua Glenn, where thrift store detritus was listed on eBay along with fictive narratives of their history in order to demonstrate the subjectivity of value (and collected as a book earlier this year). In "As Real As It Gets," you bring these supposedly imagined objects into an actual space.

What attracted you to this more traditional form of curating, and how do you see it as distinct from projects that live exclusively online or in publication?

The honest answer to the specific question of what attracted me to the physical-space scenario for this project is that Apexart offered to let me organize a show! So the process sort of worked in the opposite direction: What could I do with this space? I had this longstanding interest in imaginary brands and fictional products and various art and design work that touched on those notions, and that seemed like it would be a particularly good thing to deal with in this way.
But to get at what I think you're really asking about, I suppose it's a matter of figuring out what works best for a given project. Significant Objects is an interesting example. Back when that was just a vague and unnamed notion, I actually imagined it as a gallery thing — you'd see the objects, the stories would be printed out and displayed, and there would be a live auction. But outside of being a visitor, the art/gallery world is a total mystery to me. So I didn't do anything about it until I hooked up with Joshua Glenn. By then it seemed obvious the way to do it was online. Not to be a big cliche about this, but the tools are there and available to all and easy to use: Wordpress to publish the stories, eBay to serve as the sales mechanism. We didn't have to ask anybody to let us do it, we could just do it. So there's that.

On the other hand, as that project took off, it did have physical-world offshoots -- an event at Litquake in San Francisco, and more recently a book version collecting 100 stories from the project. But the book in particular was a different beast. It's tricky, because I've definitely had the experience of "you've seen this digital picture online, now here it is in a gallery, or a book," and it's actually disappointing. So everyone involved made an effort to avoid that. The book was published by Fantagraphics and designed by Jacob Covey, who did an amazing job of making this into something beautiful and lasting, something that needed to be a physical object.

So things can sort of overlap or go back and forth. Even my stuff on Tumblr really varies by project. Unconsumption, a group Tumblr I co-founded, is put together like a publication, with an audience very much in mind. I also have a thing called Google Image Search Results that's basically an offshoot of a piece I wrote for Design Observer. That could evolve into something else, maybe. But the point is that online/offline also overlaps with subjects I'm dealing with as a writer vs. these other creative projects, whatever you want to call them. Most of my personal Tumblrs are more like notebooks; I'm not thinking about the audience at all, I'm just collecting stuff I find interesting and sometimes patterns emerge from that, leading to something else -- an article, a project. The Hypothetical Development Organization can be traced back to something I wrote on my old blog, just saying "It would be cool if someone did X" (and then Ellen Susan and G.K. Darby said "yeah, us, let's do it!")
For this show, when I got that call from Apexart, I personally just thought it would be really cool to see all this work brought together in physical space, even though I'd seen images of a lot of it online. Of course we also added some more work through commissions, but even if we hadn't, to me it was definitely worth it not only to see these objects and images in person, but to see them together. Plus, we could add sound -- the audio work inspired by The Ladies' Paradise that Marc Weidenbaum's *Disquiet Junto* musicians created. So it's really an experience to be in that space. I hope!

Anyway it was a great experience to do something in this kind of setting and I'd love to do it again, but until the next opportunity comes along, I can bide my time on the Web.

It is easy to see the humor in in the show - both as sardonic commentary and uncanny or unheimlich physical manifestations of products from fictional worlds (Staple Design's iteration of H.G. Wells' *Tono-Bungay* is kind of like a high art Duff Beer can). However, it seems like an oversimplification to just read these objects as satire. Do you see this collected body of work as a heightened version of our present consumer culture brought to its most extreme (but logical!) conclusion? Or is there some room for serious advocacy and futurism in the work as well?
I think the uncanny point is the most important one to me. Interestingly one of the artists in the show, Shawn Wolfe, there’s a book of his work called Uncanny. But the Tono-Bungay piece is a good one to focus on because Staple Design and I talked about this explicitly: We didn’t want the result to read as satire or parody, we wanted it to look plausible, like the kind of thing a branding firm might really do for a real-world client. Only in the case the client is fictional, and in fact Tono-Bungay was invented by H.G. Wells as a kind of stand-in for untrustworthy products. So you have to really look closely to sort out what’s going on.

So you mention Duff Beer, we have some stuff from The Simpsons in the show, and that stuff does read as parody — on the Krusty-O’s box, there are worms in the cereal. So it’s not plausible; at a glance, it’s obviously satirical. The reason it’s in the show is that when the Simpsons movie came out, they produced actual boxes of the stuff, put it in actual 7-11s, and people actually bought it. So it wasn’t just a satire of consumer culture, it was an example of consumer culture. So that seemed like an interesting thing to include in the show.

In a way I think the show is less about consumer culture than it’s about doing interesting things with the language and grammar of consumer culture, recognizing how powerful some of those tropes are and how we take them for granted and thus fail to take them seriously. So there’s a lot in the show that looks familiar at first glance, but the more you look at it the more you realize something else is going on — and that this isn’t familiar at all, it’s very strange. Or uncanny.
There is a fair amount of zombie media-looking stuff included - products designed to intentionally appear technologically outdated and, thus, looking like they have no place in functionally providing any service other than highlighting the failed utopianism of their design and, essentially, standing alone as branded commodities. What do these outdated and low-tech pieces say about the message of the show (whose exhibition design, its worth noting, is itself an anachronistic sort of 1960s elementary school general store chic, itself a product placement for Blu Dot)?

I think the answer here might vary depending on the piece. But maybe to follow up on the point above, I would say there's a lot in the show that's using design language and branding language to express ideas about people, human nature, faith in progress, and so on. And maybe doing so in a way that's more or less the opposite of how, for instance, retail environments work. The point of retail is really to make you stop thinking. And obviously something like Ryan Watkins-Hughes' "Shopdropping" cans, which he would insert into retail environments, that's there to interrupt that mindless process and jolt you into seeing: What is this? Someone could say that the intent there is to speak about consumerism, but I think it speaks about human behavior.

I'm not sure what to say about your description of the exhibition design! I can only say my goal there was that, particularly for some of the more product-y pieces, I wanted to avoid having everything on a traditional Art Gallery Pedestal; I was hoping the make the space feel both more accessible and maybe more chaotic and disconcerting. I had some contacts at Blu Dot and ran this idea by them — I thought it would be funny, just one more weird twist, to reach out to an actual company to loan us a few pieces for the display. I was actually really pleased with the stuff they suggested. And they had a sense of humor about the whole thing -- I mean, the line "product placement courtesy of Blu Dot" is something I thought would be an interesting bit for the viewer to consider, but I wasn't sure they'd go for it, and they totally got it. Anyway, I think the final look was different without being gimmicky. (I didn't want to make the space look like a bodega or a boutique, I've seen that done and that's great, but I wanted the context to be something that wasn't particularly recognizable.)
Having said all that, to go back to your first question, this was something that was incredibly stressful for me — figuring out how to arrange the objects and images. The Apexart folks were really helpful, but it was just something I'd never thought about before in any serious way, and it was quite a challenge. It's a lot harder than picking a cool theme on Tumblr.

Something is a little unsettling about the appearance of a 3D printer concurrent with all these branding and product design campaigns without a concrete physical form. While several of the campaigns cite professional, empirical evidence for their direction (more than one, interestingly, cite the writing of behavioral economist Dan Ariely) while the production system, the 3D Makerbot Replicator, a compact little desktop model made for casual "at home printing" is attempting to democratize a process that formerly required a high level of skill. What does this inversion of professionalization say about the current state of design?

So when I had the first meeting with the Apexart crew, somehow the subject of 3D printing came up randomly. It was something they were interested in and I knew a fair amount about MakerBot because of an article I'd written. Then when I was putting together my wish list of stuff to pursue for the show, and I was thinking about Shawn Wolfe's work, I remembered at that one point he'd created this plastic "toy" version of his RemoverInstaller™, the non-product non-sold by his imaginary not-brand BeatKit™. I looked up a picture of it to refresh my memory and it just looked like something that could be printed on a MakerBot machine. And, yes, that bringing that into the show could introduce another dimension to the whole idea. For one thing, we're producing a non-product, on site.

But also, if this whole show is about the intersection of imagination/fiction and brands/products, doesn't the rise of 3D printing actually have to be addressed somehow? Part of what the MakerBot people talk about is that, you know, you can use this thing to dream up your products and print them at home, instead of going to a big box store. There are various ways to respond to that notion, of course. But to push a little further in that direction: One of the events connected to the exhibition is a pair of MakerBot workshop sessions (one for kids, one all-ages) led by Liz Arum, who's in charge of their education outreach. This sort of opens up the whole concept of the show in a participatory way -- you (or your kids) can come dream up your own fictional object and get it printed in the gallery.
I appreciated your stab at an "exhibition trailer." Actually, I'd love to see those for more shows... But that leads to the question: do you have a brand strategy for the exhibition? If you did, what would it be?

We intend to target key influencers across critical demographics who can leverage their social networks to maximize —

Just kidding. The trailer, as you've deduced, is not something that I particularly planned. I didn't know what I was doing, both in the sense that I have no training in making videos, and was just using whatever the editing software is on a MacBook Pro, and also in the sense that I put it together and then asked: Well, what is this? It's certainly not a document of the show, and it's not really an ad. It seemed like a Kickstarter video that wasn't asking for money. And then I decided it was like a "book trailer," but for an art show. And yes, having reached that conclusion, I agree, I think others should do that for art shows, particularly people who actually know how to make videos. I think it could be an interesting and useful category.

To the branding question: We did at one point talk about maybe making locally run ads for the show, but that never went anywhere. The only branding tactic I can point to is the giveaway objects, which was one of my favorite things about this entire process. Apart from postcards and a brochure for the show, there are a number of things people can just take from the gallery: Ladies' Paradise balloons, Veladone-RX pens, FutureWorld business cards, and Tono-Bungay stickers. All promotional objects for things that don't exist. And each conceived in a way that I hope it has some kind of life of its own after the show is over.

Which reminds me of one last point about the physical-space vs. online-space issue, actually. When I got to New York the day of the opening (I live in Savannah) and saw everything in real life, in that room, I was really blown away — it was just so much cooler in person than I'd imagined. (And I had high hopes.) But the next thing I realized was: Oh, wow, so five weeks from now, this will be gone! Which is totally different from a Web site. The Significant Objects site will be in place for as long as Josh and I care to keep it up, but "As Real As It Gets" will end on December 22. Downside of doing something IRL, I guess: It's more ephemeral.