

apexart

291 church street new york, ny 10013
t: 212.431.5270
info@apexart.org www.apexart.org

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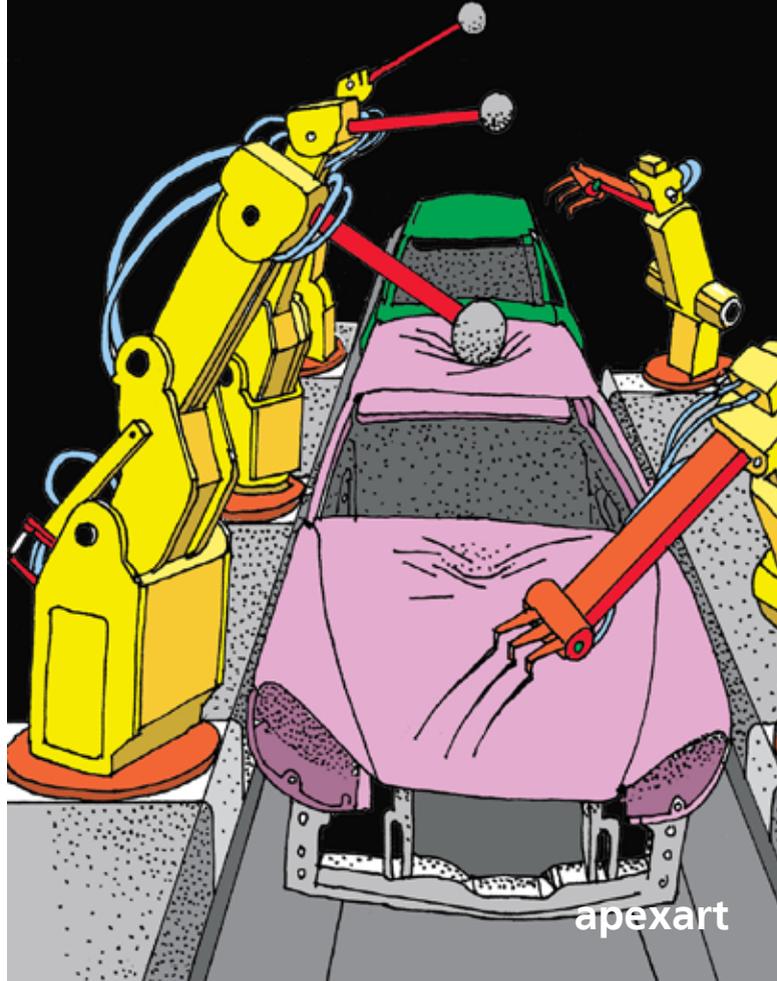
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As Real As It Gets

organized by 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. (But we know it is: Tell me about a neighbor, co-worker, someone you met at a party, and it becomes far easier, convenient, maybe even necessary, to situate that other person within branded material culture.)



Shawn Wolfe, *Gross National Products Presents*, 2012

The underlying discomfort is something I've noted over many years spent writing about brands and products. One reader comment clarifies the dilemma. In a column about products and companies that exist only in the fictional worlds of books and movies, I categorized such things as "imaginary brands." Harrumph to that, this reader replied: *All brands are imaginary.*

I saw his point, but he'd missed mine. The ambiguity in the relationship between our selves and the brand-soaked world we navigate is exactly what's worth taking seriously, not waving away. When such consideration is filtered through an open and unpredictable mind, anything seems possible (even the wildly implausible). Willfully imaginary brands and products can be considered as a medium, expressive of joy, fear, humor, unease, ambivalence — very real stuff, in other words.

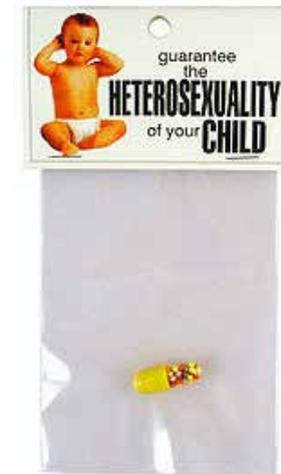
This can be hard to accept, because in the smug 21st Century, we regard ourselves as possessed of unprecedented consumer savvy. We tell ourselves that gullible past generations were easily manipulated by real-life Don Drapers, but today we see the commercial persuasion industry as the absurdity that it is. But we are not so special, and imaginary products and brands have played a prominent role in the very long history of analyzing

the world of branded goods and services. H.G. Wells skewered commercial culture in *Tono-Bungay* (1909), in which the narrator peddles a dubious health tonic with that name, and Emile Zola's *The Ladies' Paradise* (1883) wallowed in exposing the ruthless sales tactics of the first department stores.

In fact, imaginary goods that critique or mock the branded world have become a familiar staple of culture, mainstream and underground: from the parodies by *Mad Magazine* and *Saturday Night Live* and Wacky Packages to the dystopian corporations and ridiculous products of futuristic thrillers and screwball comedies; from the mysterious *Ubik* at the center of Philip K. Dick's novel of that name to *I Love Lucy's* Vitameatavegamin; from the pointed "subvertisements" of *Adbusters* to the prime-time practice of using satiric stand-ins for real brands that researcher Gladys Santiago has dubbed "product displacement."

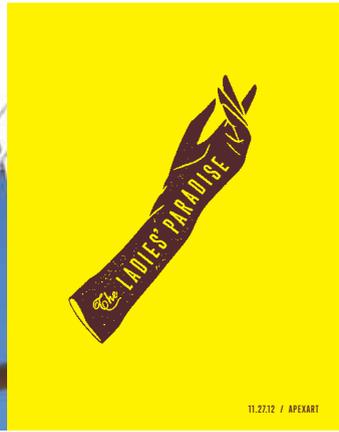
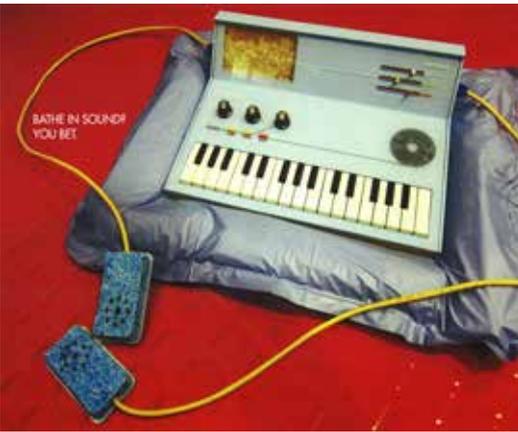
Despite all this, consumer culture marches on. So does the imaginative reuse of its familiar forms. A notable example is what Bruce Sterling calls "design fiction" — prototypes meant to speculate or argue about the future, rather than enter mass production. This iteration of conjectural products has never been more popular.

Meanwhile, you could obviously fill a mega-mall with art that takes consumer culture as its subject. *As Real As It Gets*, however, isn't so much a statement about the marketplace as it is an experiment in using marketplace forms to unexpected and sometimes paradoxical ends. Instead of positing a plainly foolish or villainous corporate Other that we can congratulate ourselves for opposing, these artists, designers, musicians, writers, companies, and even a government entity, offer creations just ambiguous enough to implicate the viewer.



Dana Wyse, Detail from *Jesus Had a Sister Productions* installation, 1997

Shawn Wolfe, for example, promoted his imaginary company Beatkit™ and its self-evidently useless *Remover-Installer™* "product," with posters and stickers and other materials bearing such disconcerting slogans as "PANIC NOW." Despite this, the



Matt Brown, *The Bathub Synth*, 2012

Last Exit to Nowhere, Tyrell Corporation 2019 t-shirt

Kelli Anderson, Logo for Future World, 2012

Ryan Watkins-Hughes, *Shoppdropping* (installation view)

Staple Design, *Branding for Tono-Bungay*, 2012

Oliver Munday, Logo for *The Ladies' Paradises*, 2012

Beach Packaging Design, *Respirer*, 2012

campaign, and even the preposterous *RemoverInstaller™*, are oddly appealing. Conrad Bakker's *Untitled Product* departed from his practice of carving and painting replicas of recognizable goods, and invited the art consumer to join its "distribution network," and sell a thing that non-exists in "concentrate" form. Dana Wyse's "Pills and Remedies" are all in the packaging, which promises such benefits as *Accept that You're Absolutely Alone* or *Enjoy Watching TV*. Michael Arcega and Stephanie Syjuco's array of Montalvo Historical Fabrications & Souvenirs serve as consumable mini-monuments to false histories and commemorations of the regrettable.

For decades, Steven M. Johnson made his living in the future-trends department of an automaker, and spent spare hours drawing and explaining a staggering variety of "inventions." This imaginative work has since gained appreciation from the design press, though his proposals often say more about society and human nature than about product progress. (Amusingly, some have come true: Johnson depicted pre-torn clothing many years before "distressed denim" became trendy.) In a similar spirit, Matt Brown actually builds and packages his fanciful goods, which tend to be positioned as rare artifacts of a past that never occurred. His *Bathub Synth*, supposedly emitting hyper-relaxing sound waves best enjoyed by a fully submerged bather, is one example.

While imaginary brands have populated fictions for generations, some have lately been "defictionalized," crossing over into the real world — and into this exhibition, since their existence is uncanny enough to consider in this marketplace of ideas. What does it mean to sport a T-shirt, like those from Last Exit To Nowhere, advertising

Soylent Green, the Tyrell Corporation, or some other menacing product or corporation? When parody goods from *The Simpsons* get sold on actual store shelves, functioning as de facto promotional merchandise for a movie, who gets the last laugh? And when Omni Consumer Products (itself named after a fake company from *Robocop*) plucks the absurd product Brawndo from the lacerating satire *Idiocracy* and inserts it into the retail ecosystem, why did some of us find it impossible to resist buying a can?

The power of the marketplace is similarly revealed, but more overtly subverted, by the very different practice of "shopdropping." Ryan Watkins-Hughes coined the term to refer to the opposite of *shoplifting*: Leaving canned goods, de-branded into aesthetically pleasing art objects, on store shelves, without permission. Others have used this method to more bluntly activist ends: Packard Jennings' *Anarchist Action Figure*, for instance, or the altered toys planted in stores by the Barbie Liberation Army. But the most effective use of ersatz products to make a revelatory point involved applications for "Energy Star" approval on behalf of goods that did not exist. Among the phony items submitted was a silly tape-together of a feather duster and an air purifier. This Duchampian readymade was among several dubious objects that passed muster with the relevant authority, granting the artist — in this case, the U.S. Government Accountability Office — a devastating victory. Sadly this historic object has been lost, but the cunning staff of apexart has crafted a convincing facsimile.

And that's not all! In the spirit of more-is-more consumer culture, *As Real As It Gets* includes a selection of brand-new instances of imaginary branding. Kelli Anderson has devised identity materials on behalf of a frightening com-

pany that exists only in author Nathaniel Rich's forthcoming novel *Odds Against Tomorrow*. Staple Design has created new advertising for an imagined contemporary iteration of Wells's Tono-Bungay that would fit right in at a convenience store near you. And Zola's seduction-machine retailer, The Ladies' Paradise, has inspired a "sonic branding" experiment overseen by Marc Weidenbaum's Disquiet Junto network of electronic musicians, providing a soundtrack to the exhibition; designer and illustrator Oliver Munday adds an updated logo for the fictional store, also available to exhibition visitors in the form of promotional balloons (in a nod to the tactics of Zola's fictional store manager).

Beach Packaging Design offers up the ultimate non-product: air, offered here under the fancy-sounding brand name "Respirer," borrowed from a hypothetical that behavioral economics expert Dan Ariely once used to make a point about luxury goods as economic stimulants. As it happens, an earlier study conducted by Ariely and his colleagues inspired another object in the exhibition: Veladone-RX is the made-up name of a drug used in research demonstrating that the placebo effect extends to a link between the cost of a faux painkiller and its evident ability to kill pain. Exhibition visitors are welcome to take home a promotional Veladone-RX pharma-promotion-style pen.

Finally, I'm thrilled to say that this show includes a special 20th Anniversary Edition of the Shawn Wolfe's *Remover-Installer™*, which will be produced on-site, by a MakerBot Replicator 3D Printer. This seems like a fitting collaboration at a time when MakerBot's devices are closing the gap between products and imagination. With these

machines, you can manufacture your own dreamed-up goods, marking the latest advance in complicating the matter of what, exactly, counts as a "real" product.

This brings me back to my skeptical reader. The sensible-seeming assertion that all brands are imaginary glosses the possibility that an imagined thing might still be quite real. Such as? Well, how about the modern nation-state, which, as Benedict Anderson argued in his 1983 book *Imagined Communities*, exists only as a function of shared, socially constructed, tacitly agreed-upon ideas. In other words, a group mental consensus constructs a reality, whether that reality is the United States, or a successful corporate brand. *As Real As It Gets* embraces this curious fact, and invites you to construct another reality. Taken together, this collection of imaginary brands and fictional products is not about brands and products at all. In this show, the marketplace is the medium. The subject, inevitably, is us. And the payoff is that it just may tell you something about yourself.

-Rob Walker © 2012

Featuring work by:
Kelli Anderson, Conrad Bakker, Beach Packaging Design, Matt Brown, Steven M. Johnson, Last Exit To Nowhere, MakerBot Industries, The Marianas (Michael Arcega and Stephanie Syjuco), Angie Moramarco, Oliver Munday, Omni Consumer Products, Staple Design, U.S. Government Accountability Office, Ryan Watkins-Hughes, Marc Weidenbaum/Disquiet Junto, Shawn Wolfe, and Dana Wyse

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