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 team 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.)

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.

This can be hard to accept, because in the smug 21st Century, we regard ourselves as possessed of unprec- edented 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 know it is: 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 team 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.)

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The Bathtub Synth. Michael Arcega and Stephanie Syjuco's ar-
or benefits as Accept that You’re Absolutely Alone
Enjoy non-exists in "concentrate" form. Dana Wyse's "Pills and
to join its "distribution network," and sell a thing that
of recognizable goods, and invited the art consumer
a T-shirt, like those from Last Exit To Nowhere, advertising
in this marketplace of ideas. What does it mean to sport
a ray 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 propos-
als 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 fanci-
ful goods, which tend to be positioned as rare artifacts of
a past that never occurred. His Bathrub Synth, supposedly
emitting hyper-relaxing sound waves best enjoyed by a
crossing over into the real world — and into this exhibi-
tion, since their existence is uncanny enough to consider
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
In other words, a group mental consensus constructs a
reality, whether that reality is the United States, or a suc-
cessful 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 In-
dustries, The Marianas (Michael Arcega and Stephanie Syjuco),
Ange Moramarco, Oliver Munday, Omni Consumer Projects,
Watkins-Hughes, Marc Weidenbaum, Shawn Wolfe, and Dana Wyse

machine placement by Blu Dot

Soylent Green, the Tyrell Corporation, or some other men-
acing 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 idio-
city 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 blantly 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.

How many brands are imaginary? The Bathtub Synth, a
sound machine 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-ma-
chine 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
ame "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 collabora-
tion 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
products, 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 gloses
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, tactic agreed-upon ideas.

As Real As It Gets is a celebration of the modern world as
dystopian imaginary, where daily life is populated by
products and packaging that are as much cultural expres-
sions of our society as anything "real."