

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

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PURE PRODUCTS GO CRAZY

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Christopher Chiappa, *Speedstick*, 2006-2008

It's not infrequent these days to glimpse parity between aesthetic currents and business headlines. The ageing Fujifilm corporation recently announced that, since the demise of film photo, the company had begun repurposing its leftover stock of antioxidant film chemicals into a new enterprise: Astalift cosmetics for anti-ageing skin care. Human skin fades somewhat like film, through the oxidization and deterioration of collagens. Astalift's antioxidants ward film and skin from future wear and tear ('Asta' is a homonym of the Japanese word for tomorrow 'ashita'). The products are ruby-red, like space capsules to a future where nobody gets old. Who wouldn't want to have that silky, sepia 35 mm sheen? Aren't we supposed to look like film stars anyway?

If there's a love story here, it's the tale of a bond between the corporation and the consumer, which become a second skin to each other. In an age where no one is free from the pull of branding, companies and users unite in delirious adoration. Think of the laudatory wake at Steve Jobs's passing, the 'unboxing' videos posted on YouTube or our committed outrage at Mark Zuckerberg when he stutters blankly at an interviewer. Upended is the old-world truism that a product is something created for buyers. As social networking teaches us, consumers are now products to be logged, tagged and sold by corporations, not the other way around. On any news site, more page space is taken up by user comments than articles. The global success of *Mad Men* (2007–ongoing) – a look back at the American ad world in the 1960s – might be attributed to our obsession with public image, brand-creation and the fusion between the person and the product. Or as American presidential hopeful Mitt Romney said, disquietingly, 'Corporations are people,' too.

Inspired by this bond, artists are creating amalgams of consumption, pre-packaged products and mass-produced disposables – all mashed and morphed alongside traditional media like painting and sculpture. **Christopher Chiappa's** *Speed Stick* (2006–8) turns the men's deodorant into a monochrome green rainbow. With *Axe Effect* (2011), Timur Si-Qin takes a somewhat more literal approach to the men's shower gel brand Axe and puts a sword through the bottles, which are left bleeding nuclear-looking goo. Of course, there's a long tradition of artists using and deforming commodities in their works. *Speed Stick* seems like a distant cousin of Alan Belcher's *Energizer*

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No. 2 (1985) – two Pepsi Light cans joined by flames instead of a rainbow – while *Axe Effect* has the iconoclastic twists of an Isa Genzken work and the slapstick combinations of a Rachel Harrison sculpture. Yet this new tendency addresses today's overlapping relation between the individual body and the collective body proper to the corporation (from the Latin *corporare* for 'combine in one body'). In light of the bond between corporations and commodities, it's no surprise that Chiappa and Si-Qin revamp men's personal hygiene products which are used directly on the body. While stealing brands and deploying advertising shock strategies like their older peers, these younger artists are enabled by the mobilization of the crowd in social media, by the Cloud's ethereal masses.

On the production end, they are trained by the filters and layers of Photoshop and AfterEffects, Tumblr and mobile upload feeds. Their insistence on culling from and manipulating their cultures, like verbal exaggerations or chopped-and-screwed musical vocals, is taken as given, as ho-hum. Photoshop is no metaphor here, since the relationship between visual editing software and objecthood is blurred – for example, in Anne de Vries's sculptures of Photoshopped images *Steps of Recursion* (2011) or in Marlie Mul's *Cigarette Ends Here (The Global Cigarette)* (2011), a silk scarf printed with twisted cigarettes, anthropomorphic smoke and globe-like men, menacing and cartoonish. On the distribution end, the artists aim for the rapid dissemination of their works online; even their sculptures are not quite sculptural but exist first as flat screen images with an instant, Pop-like, amphetamine iconicity: ready to be circulated, adapted and parodied as JPEGs on message boards or blogs. The formal distortions – the commodities seem corrupted or hacked – are reminiscent, not of Surrealism, but of CAPTCHA tests used to distinguish between computers and people. We sit, like Josef K. cyborgs, before the law of today's IP gatekeepers.

If Marx's commodity was a 'social relation' – not primarily a monetary one – these artists seem to ask how relations change when everything bears the imprint of the 'social', from marketing to networking. How should one relate to a collectivity at a moment that seems to empower the individual, yet only as a statistic, as mere page hits? What is the price of personal data, and how should we feel about the quantification of aesthetic taste through user input, trend forecasting and market algorithms? Today's proximity between the consumer and the commodity – individual and corporation – is foregrounded by the commodities used in these art works: not only traditional Pop products, like soda or soap, but also elements that once stood for the absolute limits of commodification – water being a case in point. Traces and motifs of water have recurred in several recent exhibitions, from the skin-eating garra rufa fish (*Fish Spa*, 2012) at Oliver Laric's Orientalism-influenced *Be Water My Friend* (2012) exhibition at Tanya Leighton Gallery in Berlin this past spring to Pamela Rosenkranz's skin-coloured bottle series *The most important Body of Water is Yours* (2010). Or take Josh Kline's molted 'spring water' bottles (*It's clean, it's natural, we promise*, 2011) or Yngve Holen's water appliances. Water – standing for bodily necessity, fluidity, changes of state and transparency – has also become a luxury object, an environmentally fraught commodity and an identity politic: both free and purchased, natural and Vitamin®-infused, tasteless and a marker of taste. The most commonplace element on the planet and inside the human body is our most fluid vehicle of manufacturing and branding.

Holen's sculptural cut-ups are forays into the anatomy of the 'aqua' appliance. For his work *Parasagittal Brain* (2011) at the exhibition *Based in Berlin*, the artist used a water jet to bisect appliances like an electric water kettle, a water cooler, a shower head and a VOSS water bottle. The halves are separated and lined up on counter-like plinths, so viewers can walk through the excluded middle of this object corridor. The chambers and coils of the kettle summon the brain or the contours of a large intestine but with the translucent contour lines of computerized 3D-renderings or vector graphics. This series may recall Jeff Koons's 1979 exhibition *Pre-New*, which paired rice boilers and Teflon pans with fluorescent lights on a wall. Yet Holen is interested not only in product fetishism or market appropriations but also in a biological humour, where the brand and the human body, water and the appliance all become indistinguishable. Foucault's term for the set of state-related institutions that regulate and control individuals was 'bio-power';

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Holen suggests a contemporary analogue, which might be termed the 'bio-brand': the body not as *corpus* but as *corporation*, as political and economic 'body', speechless, flabby, like an irreverent consumer choosing between wash cycles.

Simon Denny's works draw on tech appliances and consumer product displays. *Deep Sea Vaudeo* (2009) offers another take on water as a commodity, this time visual. Denny screens underwater ocean footage from a relaxation video on a series of historical television monitors – lined up from oldest to newest, thick to flat, analogue to digital – like a natural evolution of technology. Fusing the television set with the aquarium, the piece suggests how both domesticate the oceans, which become a metaphor for the flow of information: a repetitive screensaver to be enjoyed at home, a place holder for content. The word vaudeo is a 1950s term for talk shows, which were themselves inspired by travelling vaudeville theatre. In this technological progression, the classical notion of form evokes today's concept of format: the commercial category that determines how information is arranged and how data is understood (A4, mp3, HDMI). Denny's televisions are not only an exploration of technological positivism but also test cases for the way the value of objects (televisions and sculptures alike) can surge and decay through branding, markets and crashes. This economic theme recurs in *Corporate Video Decisions* (2011): Denny lines up seven faux-screen canvas collages made with images from a trade magazine dating from the economic crisis era of the 1980s. His *Cruise Line* (2011) installation at the Neuer Aachener Kunstverein placed ropes – not velvet but the ones used on ships – along the wall in front of canvas paintings of mazes: both 'don't touch' barriers and hands-on guides for the exhibition. The question recurs in these pieces: How does spectatorship change with the technology of display? How should we navigate these streams of content?

Economics, pseudo-politics and Pop materialism run through Helen Marten's sculptural and video works. *A is for Anarchy... (half Baked)* (2010) houses Pepsi bottles under an A-shaped aluminum tent while *A is for Anarchy... (ABC's)* (2010) features a similar tent but covered in the designer plaid Burberry tartan: a low-end and a high-end take on political escapism. It has been noted that Marten handles material objects as if they were Photoshopped, but what's crucial is how she negotiates the iconic as a vehicle of meaning. Her works feed on the viewer's cognizance of cultural signs: plaid, soft drinks, songs. Her sculptural pieces stage – and frustrate – signification and identification. The icon – a handbag, the Mac hourglass .gif (graphics interchange format), a Nokia logo – has the same relation to the art work as accents or jokes have to language: markers of status within a community. In this way, Marten's works interrogate the social: how belonging and exclusion are influenced by the commodity. *All the single ladies* (2010) sticks nine outdated cell phones into a pinkish slab of corian – a non-porous material used for kitchen countertops and bathroom vanities – although the phones seem to have missed out on current digital and social connections, like a tired pop song out of circulation. *Do it yourself!* (2010) includes a stuffed cat sleeping on a chair which recalls Gerrit Rietveld's classic but without its trademark primary colours; instead, four black stripes – the Black Flag logo made by Raymond Pettibon – cross the cat's fur, like tyre marks. Marten's visual cosmology is at turns earnest and deadpan, the way a remix seems to violate the face of the original, even as it offers a tribute.

The new proximity explored in these works between the consumer and the commodity – through corporatized burlesques like bio-branding, the neo-ready-made and Photoshop-ready product placement – may appear as a complicity with the market, if not a neoliberal savviness. Such a critique would gel with the charges sometimes levied against the digital native generation: from being political apathetic to confusing real activism with the virtual effects of YouTube and Twitter. But to decry this generation as apathetic confounds topicality with collusion. Rehashing past critiques – the generation of '68, the Frankfurt School or Naomi Klein's *No Logo* (1999) – would give the present a melancholic desire for the past. Critique would become mere serialization and repetition, which are capitalist devices par excellence. Even the Occupy! movement mirrors the tactics of its opponents, like the self-regulation associated with the free market. Instead of choosing sides, these artists seem to embrace the catch-22 of living and working in a society

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whose contradictions are self-generating. Think of paradoxical coinages like Glocal, Human Resources, crowd-sourcing or free market. Viewing their works – on a screen or IRL (in real life) in a gallery – means taking in their temperament, between effervescence and bleakness. Such works could emerge only from a time that advances, on the one hand, an Internet-aided populism with the technological liberation of the individual user and, on the other, capital inequality and individual paltriness. Critics and experts are part of the system they evaluate – a predicament evinced by Marten's stereo-lithograph *An economist is particularly hard to represent* (2010): the Communist hammer and sickle – uniting factory and farm labour – reproduced through rapid prototyping. In Marx and Engels's utopian vision of daily life in the *German Ideology* (*Die Deutsche Ideologie*, 1846), we 'hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening ...'. Today, we're expected to eat gluten-free in the morning, wear a corporate smile to get through the day, Skype in the evening, tweet in the shower, go to the studio at night, enjoy a quasi-intimacy with our products and be lulled to sleep by our smartphones and computers – while these close companions are feeding our every digital gesture into a black cloud of marketable information. In short, we are wandering – just like images – with little purchase on our brands and faces.

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