

Integrative Project Thesis  
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## Subverting the Familiar: Wonky Packages

Whether we like to admit it or not, packaging and branding has an insidious way of influencing our decisions and creating new associations between the visual and the conceptual. Without putting in any conscious effort, we develop a visual lexicon of brands and what they signify. Which of course is the whole point of branding. In this project, taking the form of Wacky Packages, I use familiar graphics as a vehicle for social critique. Using the established narratives of products as a contextual base, I seek to create new understandings both of the products and the issues I link them to.

Wacky Packs, the inspiration for this project, is a Topps trading card series that started in 1967. The cards (which doubled as stickers) featured parodies of well-known consumer products, and were purely comical. My dad collected Wacky Packs as a kid and has a Peanuts lunchbox mostly covered with them. Judging by what he has told me, as well as what I've gleaned from online sources, they were to his generation what Pokémon cards were for Millennials.

Using this format, I wanted to communicate issues that wouldn't normally be associated with the products in question. While the intention of original Wacky Packs was solely to entertain and amuse, I wanted my series to go one step further by provoking the viewer to think about the implications of the way each product is altered.



*Trix*: The concept for Trix/Rights relies heavily on the narrative of Trix commercials and branding. The rabbit is constantly trying to get some Trix cereal, which

the children in the commercials refuse to share with him, chanting, “Silly rabbit, Trix are for kids!” My idea was to take this dynamic and place it in the context of gay marriage to highlight the inane nature of denying gay and lesbian couples the rights enjoyed by straight couples.



*Secret:* My idea for Secret/Secrete was inspired by the gendering of products, particularly those used by both men and women that serve the same purpose but are very differently marketed. While men’s deodorant has names like “Axe” and “Old Spice” I realized that the implication of a women’s deodorant being called “Secret” is that female perspiration should– literally– be a secret, and therefore promote the idea that “women” are not supposed to sweat. While this notion would surely exist even if Secret deodorant did not, it’s interesting how the Secret brand perpetuates and reinforces this gender norm.



*Nerds*: With the Nerds/Kids sticker, the concept hinges purely on the structure of Nerds' packaging. Unlike Trix/Rights, my message is not related to Nerds' branding narrative. I developed this concept after reading the New York Times article "Gifted, Talented and Separated" about the racial division that labels like "gifted" and "talented" create in schools. I had been somewhat familiar with the issue of these labels because both of my parents are remarried with children who are each around six years old. My dad's son goes to Rudolf Steiner and my mom's twins go to Dicken, an Ann Arbor public school. From the day he was born, my stepmother has claimed that her son was "gifted," while my mom has not, and maintains a distaste for parents who insist on claiming the label for their children. Without valuing one over the other, the Nerds/Kids sticker is meant to illustrate the divisions that such labels create.



*100-Calorie Packs*: Like Secret deodorant, 100-Calorie Packs are specifically marketed to women. The idea for 100 Reasons to Hate Your Body came to me while thinking about the gendering of food, particularly things like Hungry Man frozen meals and Campbell's Chunky Soup versus Lean Cuisine and 100-Calorie Packs. The narratives of these products are based on the social constructions of gender that encourage men to be insatiable in their hunger and women to be hyper-vigilant of their weight and caloric intake. As with Secret, 100-Calorie Packs are both the result of a gender norm as well as a product that perpetuates the norm. My alteration of the 100-Calorie package references the highly critical light in which women are encouraged (by the media and society at large) to view their bodies.



*Regenerist:* I thought of the concept for Regenerist/Degenerist when I noticed the number of women’s cosmetics that make claims to not only make you look younger, but more well-rested than you actually are. I find it funny that there are so many products for under-eye circles– god forbid a woman look tired (unless you’re going for “heroin chic”). Degenerist is perhaps the simplest in this series and most similar to original Wacky Packs in that my alteration simply mocks the original product.



*Barnum’s Animal Crackers:* I based my concept for this sticker entirely on the underlying narrative of the animal crackers– P.T. Barnum and his circus freaks. The four circus animals contained in the train car are replaced by people that Barnum put on display as objects of curiosity– General Tom Thumb, “Giantess” Anna Swan, conjoined twins Chang and Eng, and “man-monkey” William Henry Johnson. The main implication I was going for with this one was that “hey, a century ago these animal crackers could have featured humans rather than animals” but also the idea that “if this was considered acceptable back then, what will we think of captive circus animals in another hundred years or so?”

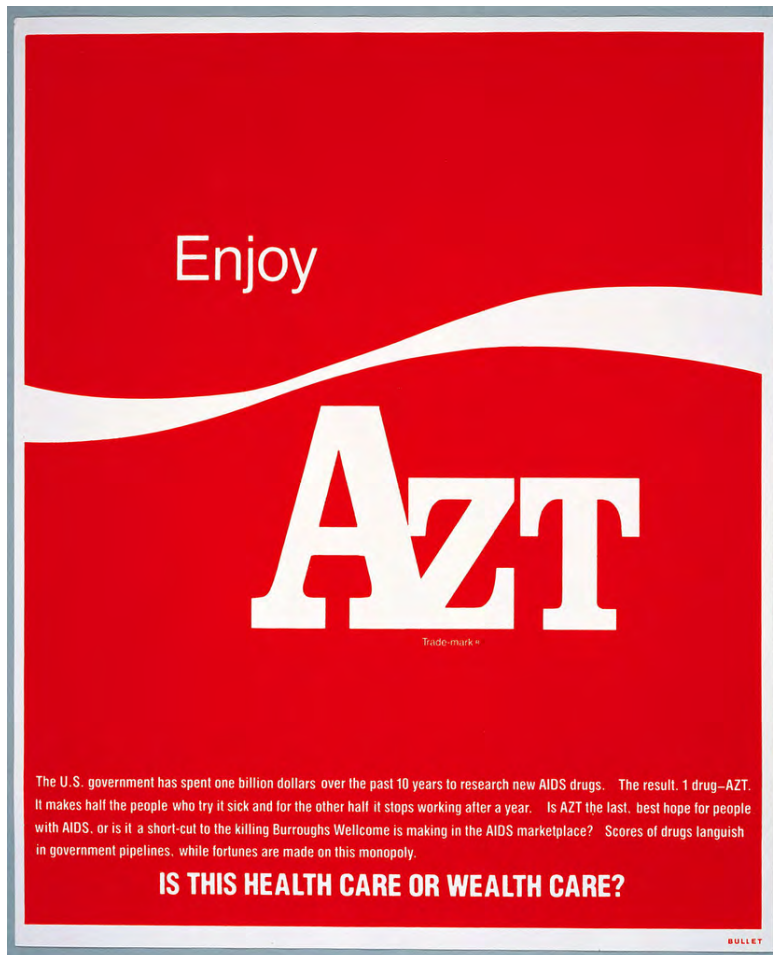
Through this project and the work I did over the course of this year, I have gained a better sense of my thought process and how I prefer to approach things like “spreading awareness” and social criticism. In the work I made before settling on the Wacky Pack idea, themes of satire and parody were prominent, as well as playing with the contexts of seemingly disparate narratives. I am fascinated by the power of branding and how it can be used/alterd/butchered to convey something totally new. Some people lament the influence brands have over us as inescapable capitalist propaganda. While this is kind of true, I think branding also presents a new lexicon of symbols and images that we have at our disposal. So while the goal of branding is to sell products and services, brands can also be enlisted to convey totally new concepts and ideas from those they were created to– and it’s up to consumers to decide what those will be.

Looking to the future, an idea that came to me a few days ago was to take greeting card messages and give them different meanings by changing the accompanying illustrations– for example, a retirement card saying “The best is yet to come” turning into a graduation card with an image of student loan bills piling up. Through the studio practice that IP has instilled in me, I want to continue to explore appropriation and satire to communicate issues that are important to me.

Original Wacky Packs:



Poster by Gran Fury that inspired my exploration of appropriation and parody:



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