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Learning to talk like an urban woodsman: an artistic intervention

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This paper is an artist's statement about the Re Made project, an artwork that parodies the urban woodsman aesthetic of Best Made Co., which markets designer axes through the rhetoric of authenticity, the appropriation of working-class identities and the revitalization of traditional male roles. Re Made Co. replace Best Made Co.'s \$300 urban axe with a \$300 toilet plunger and satirizes their marketing campaign through social media, graphic design, video and photography. This project uses critical design to pose pivotal questions, such as: What are the implications of transforming a useful tool into a symbolic object? How is working-class labor sold as white-collar fantasy? What are the contradictory references that promise "authentic" experiences? This paper analyzes the Best Made Co. brand's cultural references to masculinity, outdoorsmen and the frontier, their photographic language of snapshot images and designed aesthetic, reveals the consequences of these expressions, and proposes strategies for reassigning value.

Keywords: authenticity; culture jamming; conspicuous consumption consumer resistance; critical design; design; labor; masculinity

... I soon discovered that this was the best-handling and most beautifully balanced ax that I had ever swung. And while I did consider hanging it over the fireplace, I opted instead for what any deskbound American would do: I walked outside and walloped a stump. And damn did it feel good to watch the chips fly. (Steven Rinella, Review, *Outside Magazine*, October 2013)

Introduction

In Corey Kilgannon's 13 December 2013 *New York Times* article, "Teaching City Dwellers How to Make It in the Wilderness," we learn about Jens Rasmussen's wilderness lessons, offered at a campfire in a vacant lot in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, under the Pulaski Bridge. The workshop, "Fire Crafting on a Wilderness Adventure," is offered at \$100 per person; Rasmussen teaches participants "how to build fires in the wilderness before you cook a delicious campsite dinner." While homeless people live outdoors all around the city, the article makes no connection or comparison between their

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subsistence and Rasmussen's activities. Kilgannon describes Jens's fireside squatting as "camping" and comments on his attractive clothing. Rasmussen lives in Greenpoint where, in 2013, the average monthly rent for a studio apartment was \$2300 to \$2600.

Rasmussen's story is part of the growing urban woodsman culture within New York City and other affluent pockets throughout the USA. My incredulity about another *New York Times* article, "Peter Buchanan-Smith and the Urban Ax," published in June 2010, prompted the Re Made Co project. The article featured Buchanan-Smith, a Manhattan-based designer who founded Best Made Company in 2009 when he perceived "a need for a better axe." He purchases the axes from a source in Maine, sands them, paints them in striped colors and then sells them for top dollar, primarily to city dwellers.

The American Felling Axe/artwork

The Best Made Co. website (<http://www.bestmadeco.com/>) shows Buchanan-Smith's collection of axes, purchasable online or in the Best Made Co. store on White Street in the Tribeca neighborhood of New York City. The larger axe, the American Felling Axe, is "perfect for the farm or homestead. It excels at general chopping, bucking, and splitting." Unfinished, it costs \$162. The smaller model, the Hudson Bay Axe, "allows for swift brush clearing, limbing and kindling" (Best Made Co. 2015a). The *Times* article mentions the \$162 lower price, but not the \$350 cost of the painted axes. Nor does the article talk about the utility (or not) of owning an axe in New York City. They do mention that Buchanan-Smith first showed the axes through an exhibition in Andy Spade's (husband of handbag and accessories designer Kate Spade) quasi-art-gallery. The axes are collected in such institutions as the Saatchi Gallery and the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum. Thus, consumers who purchase the axe/artwork can assume an imagined blue-collar identity while simultaneously acquiring the prestige that comes with owning a work of art that an actual laborer would be unlikely to afford (Schroeder and Borgerson 2002).

This conflation of art, commerce, utility and luxury is manifest on the Best Made Co. website, which shows these bladed tools against a white background and labeled as though within a pristine white-walled art gallery. Buchanan-Smith titles each axe and provides a story about each one. The Best Made Co. website presents *Emmett*, an American Felling Axe costing \$300, with a narrative that reads:

We stopped in Emmett to change our city duds for some heavy worsted wool. Snow was coming, we were on horseback and heading into to the Payette National Forest with our best buds Nate Bressler and Remington Kendall to hunt elk. An adventure was had, and a series of axes devoted to some of our stops along the way were adorned and emblazoned (Best Made Co. 2015b)

The *Times* article, written by Penelope Green, brings up issues about masculinity, authenticity and value, but cursorily, in a way that aids the intended aura of the brand. Green calls the axes "manly," without discussing the complexities of this view of "manliness," which relies on physical power and a suggested relationship with the outdoors, and without exploring how this definition is relevant to contemporary and historic gender roles. Neither does she introduce the basic question of why urban men might feel the need to own an axe. Green relays that design blogs have ascribed an "authenticity" to Best Made Co.'s axe. The quotes allow her to appear to be skeptical just before she imbues the axe with this same quality by referring to the

company's highly styled version as a "simple handmade ax." The company's founder defines the product and its consumer experience as existing in a world of "courage," "fortitude" and "playfulness." Finally, testimony by Paola Antonelli, the senior curator of design at New York's Museum of Modern Art, pronounces the axe as the "ultimate antidote to life on the high-broadband lane." A barista in the coffee shop where the interview is taking place cries out, "You're the axe man," and works out a savings plan to purchase one. The article reads as an (unintentional) parody about the appropriation of a useful tool for symbolic purposes and the slipperiness of contemporary brand identities.

The Best Made Co. supporting cast

The Best Made American Felling Axe video is a guide to Best Made Co.'s belief system, presented in Buchanan-Smith's own words (Best Made Co. 2011). The video contains a number of lofty claims; of particular note is Buchanan-Smith's assertion that the axe is "embedded in our DNA" (language that, essentially, rebuilds the human body as a weapon); that "You put an axe in someone's hand, and they feel empowered" (gesturing to the competence and conquest that is key to marketing an object meant to help men feel powerful); that "It's a tool that, in a sense, builds America" (harkening back to America's pioneer past and stimulating patriotic sentiment) and "Best Made is bringing the symbol back but we're also casting a completely new light on it" (assuring men that they are stylish and modern even amidst references to a pioneer past).

Also significant is Buchanan-Smith's list of cultural allusions, including Buster Keaton, Kermit the Frog, Marvin Gaye and John Ford. These references appeal to the urban woodsman and hipster with a complex inventory of masculinity, from the competent victor to the carefree charmer and sensual loner. Buchanan-Smith concludes by proclaiming that filmmaker John Ford "would have loved the Best Made American Felling Ax. I think he would have used it." Here, Buchanan-Smith grants his own product, created in 2009, a posthumous endorsement from Ford, who died in 1973. This appropriation of cultural referents is characteristic of the brand, which liberally associates itself with symbols – the American flag, farmers, whiskey, poker night – and paragons of masculinity – Ansel Adams, Jimi Hendrix, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Butch Cassidy, Martin Luther King and Bruce Springsteen.

In addition to adopting well-known references, Best Made Co.'s website features a series of staged photographs screening their "adventures" with a fly fisherman, a guide, a rancher, multiple "roughnecks" and farmers (Best Made Co. 2015c). Images show outdoorsmen or workers engaged in their craft or labor, hanging out at the bar (with Peter Buchanan-Smith a few stools away) and typically outfitted in Best Made Co. clothing or using a Best Made Co. tool. Facebook postings hail the adventures of a man who parachuted from the top of the stratosphere, link to Harvard's collection of photographs of Theodore Roosevelt's public and private life, and recommend books such as Alfred Lansing's narration of Shackleton's voyage to Antarctica (Best Made Co. 2015d). With these posts, Best Made Co. builds a history and belief system that is based in adventure, robust masculinity and the wilderness. Just as nation states legitimize their actions by celebrating select historical figures and actions (Freathy and Thomas 2014), Best Made Co. uses marketing to authenticate their products in the context of "work" and "adventure" and to establish the "authenticity" of their claims, while simultaneously reinforcing a version of history that speaks to the heroism of

masculinity. These claims are sometimes called into question by browsers who challenge the accuracy of Best Made Co. staged scenarios:

There was a photo shoot they [Best Made] did of a Vermont man who restores cool vintage axes. His work was pretty neat actually, you can buy his axes on etsy. Then they cut to shots of him, in the woods, wearing \$1,000 of Best Made clothes, swinging a Best Made Axe at a down tree. It was an act so bizarre.. one would never cut apart a down tree with an axe, a chainsaw or two man saw would take 1/20th of the time. . . . It was all just a photo shoot of people doing acts they didn't understand. (Seth)

Re Made Co. and the artisanal plunger

A month or so after reading the *New York Times* article on Best Made Co., I was wandering through a dollar store and saw a plunger that was distinctive in its starkness: a long handle of pine punctuated at the end with a red rubber bowl. The object was beautiful and sculptural, and I realized that I was responding to the tool as Peter Buchanan-Smith did to his axe, fetishizing a functional object. In check, this impulse would merely be an appreciation of the plunger's aesthetic value. But taken further, divorcing the symbol from the arduous, messy pains of real work, the plunger could assume a similarly questionable sanitized status as the Best Made axe. Because the axe and plunger are physically similar to one another, and because they share Buchanan-Smith's narrative in ways that ring true (a forceful, phallic, "ancient" tool, associated with manliness), the Best Made Co. narrative could be clearly transferred to the plunger. This comparison allows us to question Best Made Co.'s pretensions in assuming a heroic belief system for an axe that they themselves only use in leisurely performances of "work."

Figure 1 shows Peter Buchanan-Smith with the Best Made Co. American Felling Axe on the left and, on the right, Peter Smith-Buchanan (my spokesperson) holding the Re Made Co. American Master Plunger. I recreated the interview video as a guide to Smith-Buchanan's belief system. The video uses Buchanan-Smith's original text, with minor substitutions (e.g. plunger for axe) so that the language reflects back on those beliefs. For example, in the Master Plunger video, Re Made Co. founder Smith-Buchanan tells us: "You put a plunger in someone's hand, and they feel empowered. It's a tool that, in a sense, builds America . . ." A special edition of this video showing the original on the left and my recreation on the right can be seen at <https://vimeo.com/80278488>.



Figure 1. Still from Best Made American Felling Axe video on left. Still from Re Made American Master Plunger video on right.

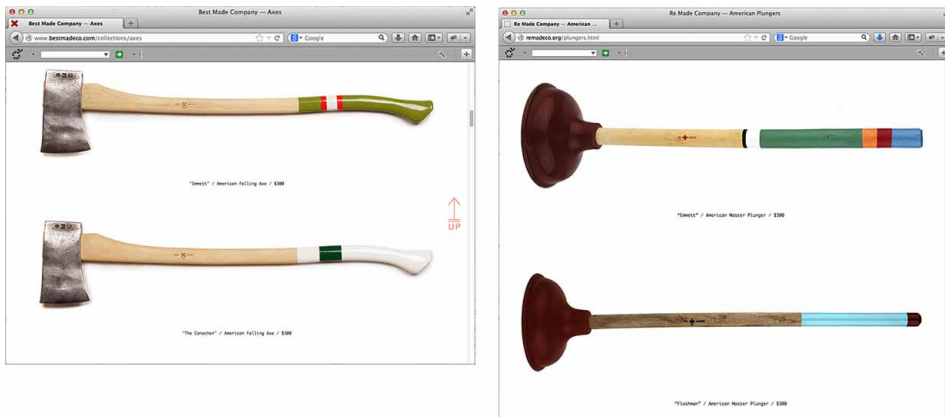


Figure 2. The Best Made Co. website axes on left. The Re Made Co. website plungers on right.

I started the project by recreating the video and then considered how to present the work as part of a complex cultural system. Because I wanted viewers to experience the plunger as a plausible commercial object, its host site would need to seem actual as well; the solution was to create a Re Made Co. website (<http://remadeco.org/>). In a sense, the Re Made Co. project is a kind of kinetic sculpture built from the materials and design strategies that fabricated Best Made Company. As with the video, the goal is to use Best Made Co. text, with slight substitutions, so that the language reveals Best Made Co.'s pretensions and ideologies (Figure 2). This is the narrative for Emmett, an American Master Plunger costing \$300:

We stopped in Emmett to change our city duds for some heavy worsted wool. Snow was coming, we were on horseback and heading into the Payette National Forest with our best buds Nate Bressler and Remington Kendall to hunt elk. An adventure was had, and a series of plungers devoted to some of our stops along the way were adorned and emblazoned ... (Figure 3)

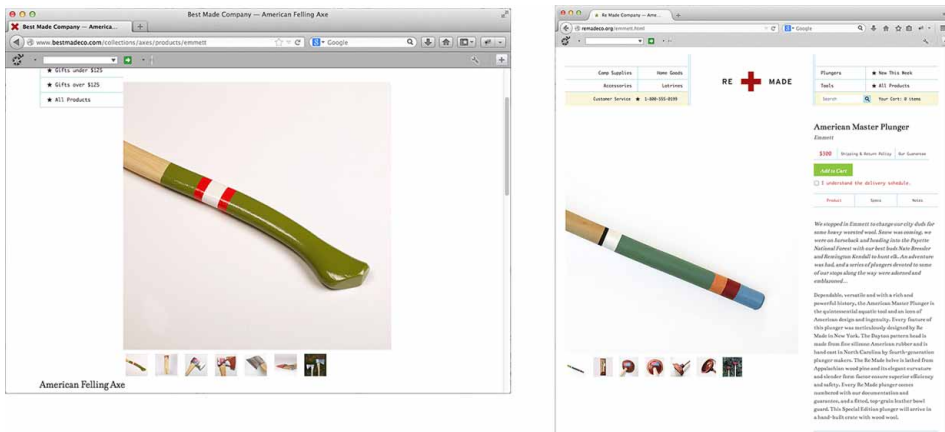


Figure 3. Best Made website: detail page for Emmett on left. Re Made website: detail page for Emmett on right.

Originally, on the Re Made Co. site, a browser who clicked on the “Add To Cart” button would be taken to the website of the Detroit Hardware Company, which sells a \$5 plunger. Several months into the project, I began to understand the “Add To Cart” button as a portal. Just as Veruca Salt was dropped into the bad egg chute as punishment for her gluttony in *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*, any browser showing their readiness to spend money on a stylized plunger by clicking on “Add To Cart” is now dropped into the chamber of Thorstein Veblen. In this “chamber,” staged to evoke a Re Made campfire, Veblen (1912, 74) chronicles the activities of the gentleman of leisure who cultivates a lifestyle full of “manly beverages and trinkets,” apparel, weapons and other goods that establish his notable taste and draw attention to his capacity (in time and money) for cultivating leisure.

Before encountering Veblen, it is critical to treat browsers as potential consumers, encountering a “company,” rather than as viewers contending with an artwork. For that reason, Re Made Co. uses social media to attract its audience. The Best Made Co. Facebook page galvanizes the community of urban woodsman by introducing new axes and other products, by providing tips for restoring tools, by fostering learning about wood samples, sailing and blacking the guns, by promoting workshops in axe restoration or sausage-making and by reporting on their adventures while camping in Lumberland, boarding bush planes in Alaska, roasting pig’s heads and drinking whiskey. So was born the Re Made Co. Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/ReMadeCotools>) (Figure 4), which along with the company website, Twitter page and the actual products, make up the entirety of the artwork.

This multifaceted project works across genres, including internet art that circumvents a gallery system, critical design that challenges the values of design practice (Dunne 1999) and activist art or culture jamming that attempts to introduce a critical discourse into passive consumption (Dery 1993). The Re Made Co. artwork is interactive and extends the boundaries of internet art by encompassing multiple facets of communication (website, Facebook posts, Twitter feeds, emails, blogs, online magazines and legal documents) and by allowing the course of the artwork to be plotted in real time in response to browser comments and Best Made Co.’s changes, posts and instigations.

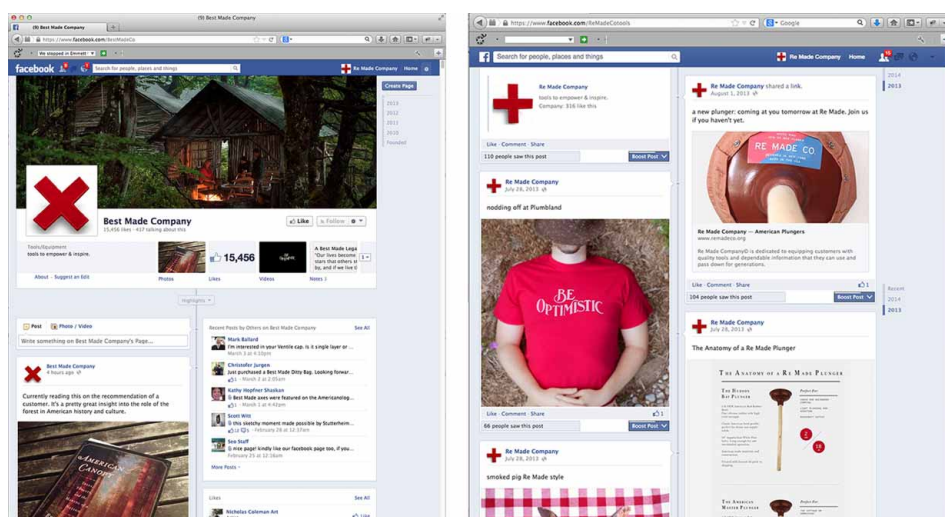


Figure 4. Best Made Co. Facebook page on left. Re Made Co. Facebook page on right.

Strategic images and design: the woodsman and the wild beast

In their strategic imagery, Best Made Co. uses the snapshot aesthetic (Figure 5) to help customers perceive the brand as authentic. Jonathan Schroeder has written about the amount of work a contemporary image-making team – film crew, stylists, photographers – does to produce a strategic photograph that “isn’t stylized” (Schroeder 2013, 12) (Figures 6 and 7). For Best Made Co., photographs of fastidiously composed still-lives are a staple in their visual repertoire. These arrangements often present design and guide books, treasured pictorial paraphernalia such as maps and postcards,



Figure 5. Best Made Co: “And each day he rose and begged: ‘The Morning question: What good shall I do this day?’” on left. Re Made Co.: “And each day he rose and begged: ‘The Morning question: How shall I sell this plunger?’” on right.



Figure 6. Best Made Co. “‘mellow as the moonlight’ in the George Dickel workshop taking place now at 36 White” on left. Re Made Co. “‘mellow as the moonlight’ in the George Dickel workshop taking place now at 36 Black” on right.

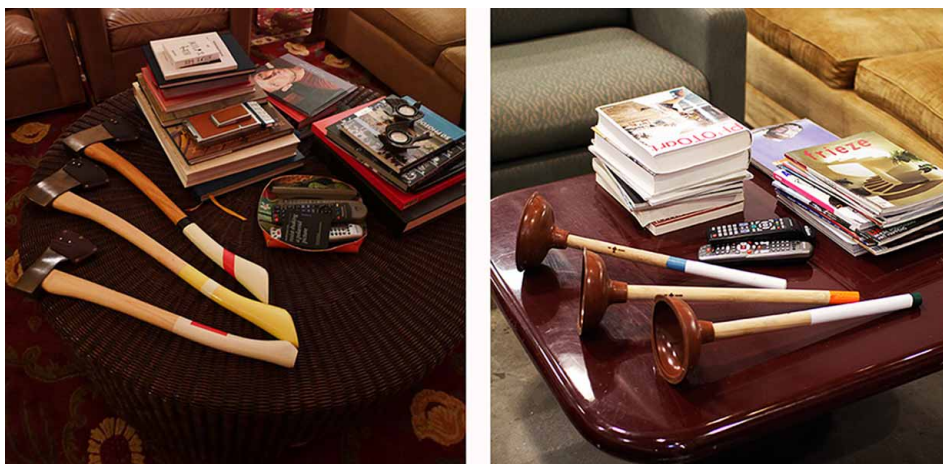


Figure 7. Best Made Co: “happiness is coming home to Best Made axe!” on left. Re Made Co.: “happiness is coming home to Re Made plunger!” on right.

beer cans and other evidence of manly gatherings, and saws, axes and other tools, meticulously positioned within a studio or home environment (still-lives are not usually imaged in their campsite setting, which depicts active use of the tools).

The exhaustive presentation of tools is a strategy Best Made Co. uses to convey the illusion of authenticity, which Jefferson Pooley terms “calculated authenticity” (Pooley 2010, 78). On the website, Best Made presents each axe using multiple photographs, showing every angle (Figure 8). They fastidiously package their hand-painted axes with a custom sticker, tags with registration (customers are encouraged to name their tool) and care instructions, and a leather axe sheath, then set these within a wooden box packed with wool straw (Figure 9). The company tapes the packages with *Measure Twice, Cut Once* tape (Figure 10). Available accessories include a leather sling for carrying the axe on your back through “the thickest of brush” (Figure 11). Sophisticated graphic design is important because it reassures consumers that identifying with their pioneer selves does not mean compromising the comforts of modern living (Botterill 2007) (Figure 12). Images document the Best Made Co. restoration workshops, which allow consumers to create (or purchase membership into) a tribe

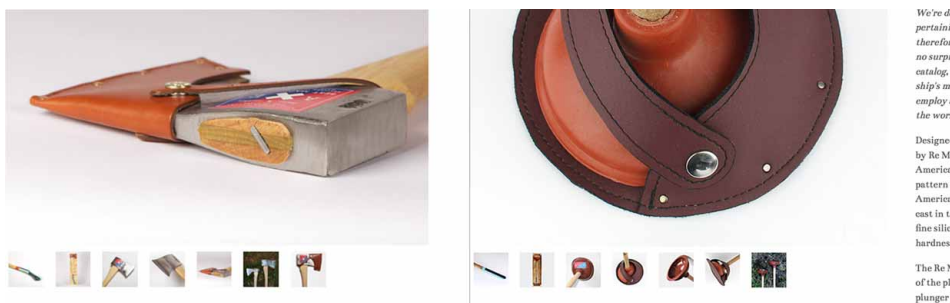


Figure 8. Detail thumbnails of the Best Made Co. American Felling Axe on left. Detail thumbnails of the Re Made Co. American Master Plunger on right.



Figure 9. Best Made Co: “Challis is about a 4 hour drive from Boise, or, for those inclined, a 36 hour drive from New York City. We’ve tramped some of the better parts of the Gem State and named an axe after one of the finest towns. Wherever your Challis may be, this Challis is the reminder to get back ‘out there’ // This week at Best Made” on left. Re Made Co.: “Inspired by Manhattan’s most eligible bachelor and bon vivant, Pale Male, the famous Red-tail hawk of Central Park. Paler Male (redux) is a variation of our discontinued Pale Male design (circa 2010). // This week at Re Made” on right.

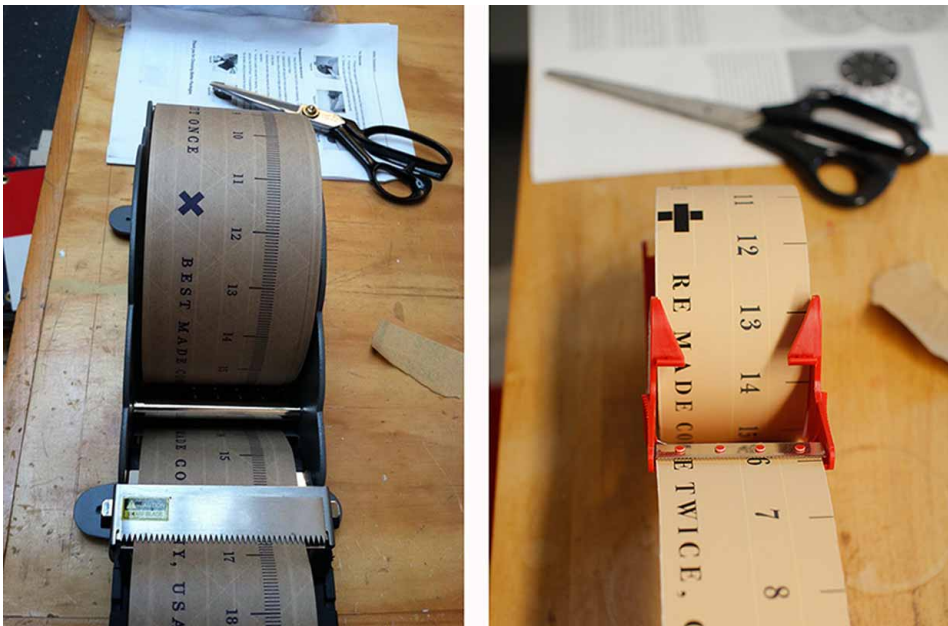


Figure 10. Best Made Co: “Our measure twice, cut once ruler-packing tape just came in” on left. Re Made Co.: “Our measure twice, cut once ruler-packing tape just came in” on right.



Figure 11. Best Made Co.: “Who wants an axe sling?-PBS” on left. Re Made Co.: “Who wants a plunger sling?-PSB” on right.

and to invest “psychic energy” in the product (Belk 1988, 144). Workshops provide opportunities for men to cultivate their Best Made Co. masculinity, “subtly reminding them that this masculinity is tenuous, . . . in need of constant stoking by consumer choice” (Schroeder and Zwick 2004, 45) (Figure 13). In Figure 14, the guide in a Re



Figure 12. Best Made Co.: “The Enduring Gift: A Best Made Axe” on left. Re Made Co.: “The Enduring Gift: A Re Made Plunger” on right.



Figure 13. Best Made Co: “Just Announced, February Workshops” on left. Re Made Co.: “Just Announced, March Workshops” on right.



Figure 14. Best Made Co. axe restoration workshop on top. Re Made Co. plunger restoration workshop on bottom.

Made Co. workshop teaches participants techniques for caring for plungers, including sanding in the direction the tree had originally grown.

Many of Best Made Co. images involve men working with their hands, often posed in environments, such as the woods, that suggest work might happen. These strategic images and performances help consumers ease the anxiety they face from the demands of their white-collar jobs (Moisio, Arnould, and Gentry 2013). Scholars, such as Belk and Costa, write about the mythical significance the American frontier holds as a site for Americans to play out virtues of “self-reliance, initiative, and ruggedness” (Belk and Costa 1998, 221). Best Made Co.’s images (Figure 15) show the nostalgia for pioneer life that has surfaced for those of us who no longer live in the plains, build our own homes, chop our own wood, butcher our own meat, or are stricken with lockjaw or malarial fever. The urban woodsman plays pioneer with urban agriculture, sausage making and field medicine workshops. The axes appeal to customers suffering from the loss of identity that comes with the ease of contemporary, technology-based, urban life (Figure 16).

In telling the Best Made Co. story, the company relies on several symbols related to the pioneer. The lead actor of these images (Figure 17) is born from a combination of several characters, all related to notions of authenticity – the hobo who renounces the urban grind to live under the stars; the hipster who wants to be at the edge of culture



Figure 15. Best Made Co.: “We met Woody Welch at our last axe restoration workshop at Design Ranch in Texas. Here are some shots of him getting down to business down south!” on top. Re Made Co.: “We met Woody Welch at our last plunger restoration workshop at Design Ranch in Texas. Here are some shots of him getting down to business down south!” on bottom.

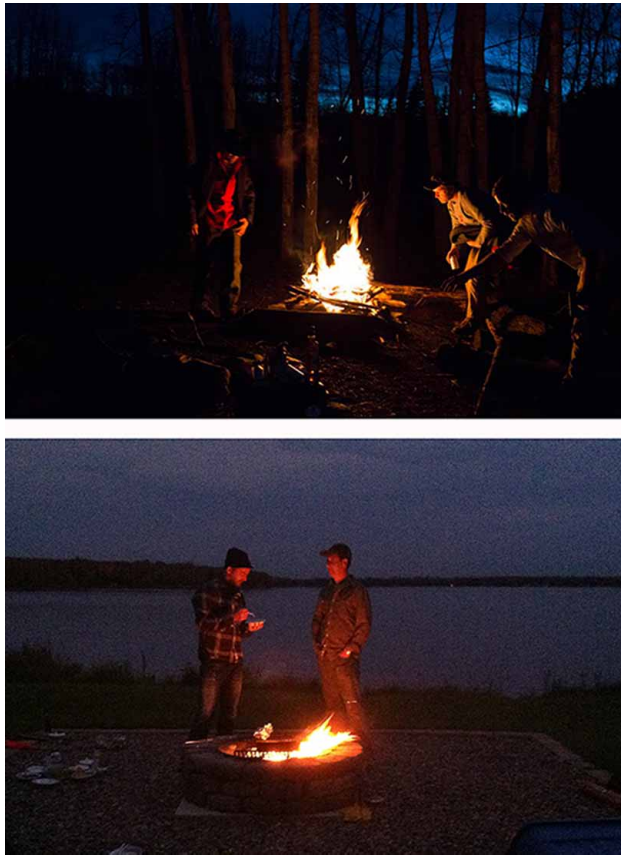


Figure 16. Best Made Co: “It was their first night in the park and our boys tended a blazing fire in Wrangell, AK” on top. Re Made Co.: “It was their first night in the park and our boys tended a blazing fire in Buckskin Mountain, AK” on bottom.

(Botterill 2007, 109) and the woodsman who believes that nature is the true test of a man’s worth. Other symbols include the open road (Figure 18), the American flag (Figure 19) and the wild beast (Figure 20).

Since Re Made Co. launched in August 2013, I have recreated over 200 of the Best Made Co.’s Facebook images as content for the Re Made Co. Facebook site. It has been tempting at times to fabricate “new” material, but any such fabrication would introduce a sense of fantasy or fiction into the work rather than reflecting back on Best Made’s strategies. The recreated images have been photographic and graphic. In the process, I have become aware of categories of images and how they speak to Best Made Co.’s intentions regarding its customers. Holt (2002, 72) asserts that “Consumers can fend off the marketer-imposed code if they are able to disentangle the marketer’s artifice from the use value of the product.” My study of Best Made Co. images and my subversion of them through recreations provide a means to begin this process.

As I worked with this archive of images, categories started to emerge with an unsettling familiarity. I recognized that Robert Frank used a similar grouping in his *The Americans*, published in 1959 as a scathing indictment of American hypocrisy and consumerism. Throughout the book, Frank repeatedly uses several symbols. The



Figure 17. Best Made Co: “Greg with hudson bay in hand between swings up in the high sierras on a backcountry ski adventure” on left. Re Made Co.: “Greg with Hudson bay in hand between plunges up in the high sierras on a backcountry ski adventure” on right.

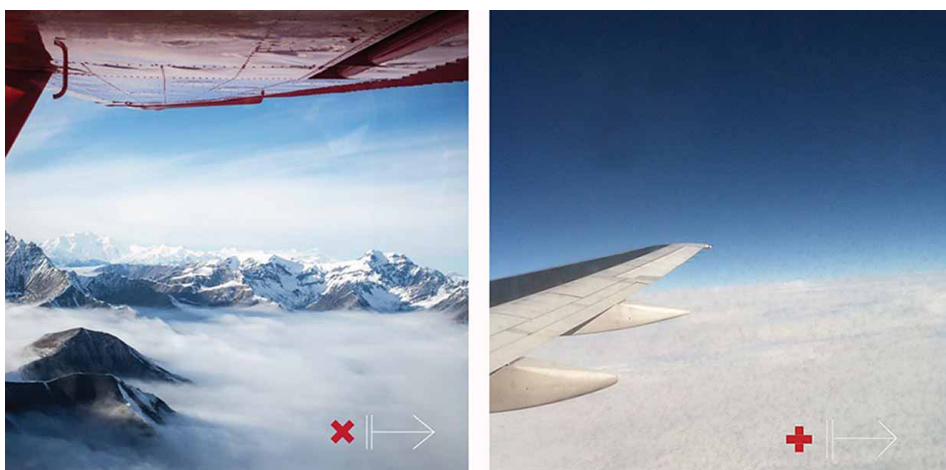


Figure 18. Best Made Co: “Guided by Paul Claus, one of Alaska’s greatest bush pilots, a team from Best Made hopped a fleet of small Piper Clubs and headed East down the Chitna river, bound for Hubert’s Landing: a circa 1920s one room cabin built in the bull’s eye center of Wrangell St. Elias National Park” on left. Re Made Co.: “Guided by Paul Plaus, one of Alaska’s greatest bush pilots, a team from Re Made hopped a fleet of small Piper Clubs and headed East down the Chitna river, bound for Hubert’s Landing: a circa 1920s one room cabin built in the bull’s eye center of Wrangell St. Elias National Park” on right.

American flag is often obscuring someone or causing trouble, while the *open road* symbolized open-mindedness and open energy. Frank photographed *outsiders* and subcultures – bikers, cowboys, African-Americans and jazz musicians – with admiration. Best Made Co. uses similar symbols. It is a complicated comparison, but if Frank’s *The Americans* fell down a rabbit hole where commerce fuels the engine

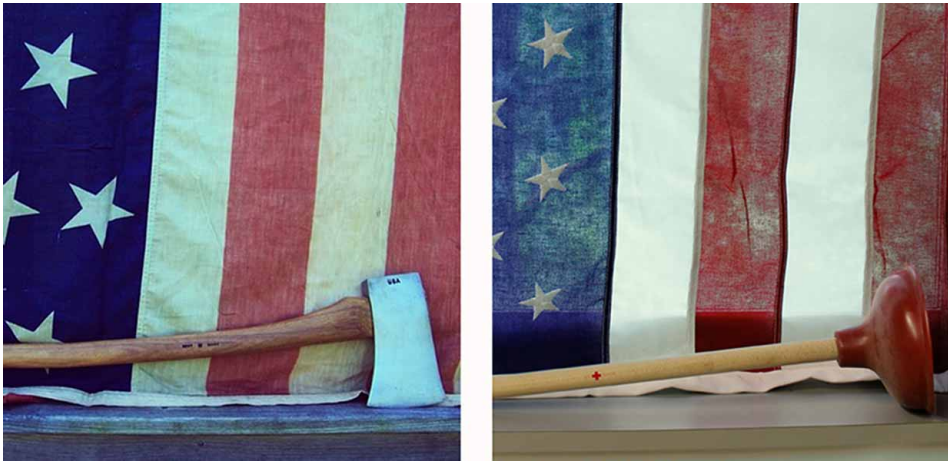


Figure 19. Best Made Co: “happy 4th of july” on left. Re Made Co.: “happy 4th of july” on right.



Figure 20. Best Made Co: “smoked pig Best Made style” on left. Re Made Co.: “smoked pig Re Made style” on right.

rather than being the target of criticism, that collection would come out looking like the Best Made images. The flag is revered, the road tends more toward the majestic and the outsider is the adventurer/pioneer leaving the New York metropolitan area for the weekend to explore uncharted land in his gated campsite. One of the many contradictions here lies in the fact that the outsider of Best Made Co. fantasies would, in actuality, have practiced an ethos of “thrift” and “self-control” (Pooley 2010, 74) that is quite different from the lifestyle of abundance upon which their brand depends and communicates. A further irony, described later in this paper, is that this lifestyle contributes to the displacement of people who actually are on the edge of the mainstream culture and economy.

Dudes at play

While the Re Made Co. plunger company is designed (in the image of Best Made Co.) to be “masculine,” I did not intend or anticipate that the artwork itself would be considered “male.” Yet, blog and online magazine postings, emails to the company and comments on the video all ascribed maleness to the work’s author. Not only was the tool masculine but, apparently, this type of humor and parody also read as gendered: viewers assumed that the artist behind the work was a man. Men writing to or about Re Made Co. used words that I had never before seen in correspondence to me, such as “Dude” or “Pussies,” revealing a swagger, solidarity and immediate familiarity in their phrasing. As Peter Smith-Buchanan, I had to figure out how to write back in a similar language and tone. Months into the project, I learned to adopt this new language proficiency and bravado, which allowed me to tell a menswear blogger that I, as the avatar of my character Peter Smith-Buchanan, was not impressed with his “kick-ass” review of the plunger. In one of the two inventions on the site, I tested my developing abilities by giving myself the task of creating a plunger narrative:

You call it Whitefish, Montana. We still call it Stumptown. This time, we were there to visit Big Mountain. The snow was heavy but we hiked to the top of Hellroaring Peak and reached the vertical of 2000 feet. With no trails, we watched for stumps and hidden rocks, glad to have our Whitefish Master Plunger along. One of our buds borrowed the stuffed wolverine from the lodge on Wisconsin Avenue, and we saluted that skunk bear throughout the night.

The boldness of the Best Made language and imagery is darkened by a palpable undercurrent of violence that runs through their branding. The aggression begins with the product itself, the axe, and with years of “ordinary” strategic images showing white men finishing and striking the axe, accompanied by the accouterments of American machismo: whiskey, beer, the American flag, the wilderness, survival workshops, etc. The narrative of this retro masculinity is entrenched with an historic ardor of conquest: Best Made Co. is based on the nineteenth-century ideal where man stands at the edge of the wilderness armed with his axe, prepared to turn these natural resources into commodities. Best Made Co.’s axe, the men’s stance (as in their *What the Tree Remembers, the Axe Forgets* video, which shows four men taking turns watching each other strike a tree; <https://vimeo.com/53042594>), and the recurring presentation of maps in their marketing make it clear that these men are out to conquer nature, and culture, too. In their videos, Best Made Co. couches this aggression with terms such as “stewards of the land” and “an object with real character,” with a folksy just-us-guys-camping “hope to see you there” attitude, and with sophisticated graphic design that disguises the retro behavior as a more enlightened contemporary version.

Design becomes a tool, used to stage privileged positions of aggression in refined terms. Solnit (2014, 15) refers to the latent violence of well-mannered aggression through belittling or patronizing conversations as “one way that, in polite discourse, power is expressed – the same power that in impolite discourse” suppresses women through “acts of intimidation.” If one of Re Made’s goals was to reveal the aggressive underpinnings and economic motivations behind Best Made’s folksy “just for the love of the outdoors” rhetoric, this became most clear on 3 April 2014 when Best Made Company’s attorneys sent the University of Michigan and me a 33-page cease-and-desist letter. In the document, the law firm of Ellenoff Grossman & Schole LLP and Best Made Company “demand that Ms. Modrak immediately take down the Re Made Website and

all of its content,” claiming that the artwork Re Made Co. violates their intellectual property “and the only main difference between the two is that . . . Re Made refers to a plunger instead of an axe.” In this brief, the illusion of the renegade, the woodsman, the hipster and the campfire cowboy dissolves in the fluorescent light of capitalists protecting their economic assets.

Hard work

Since receiving the cease-and-desist letter, Re Made Co. has expanded beyond the virtual world to brick and mortar enterprises. *Incident Report*, an experimental viewing station on Warren Street in Hudson, New York, invited the project to its store-front window in August 2014. Over the past 10 years, people relocating from Brooklyn, Manhattan and San Francisco have transformed Warren Street, Hudson’s main business artery. The new residents often describe themselves as pioneers, remaking the main corridor of the city into an enclave of expensive home design stores, many of them selling products that reference “rural” or “rustic” working class traditions and labor. In contrast, according to the most recent U.S. census, 23% of Hudson’s residents live below the poverty line. Longtime residents say their kids no longer feel comfortable hanging out on the newly gentrified main street once old high school hangouts were priced out of the market. A local businesswoman tells of recently closing her family’s 80-year-old bar because her “cocktails weren’t the price of an entrée” as favored by new residents.

From Hudson to Pittsburgh to San Francisco, working class individuals are being displaced from communities whose main streets now sell luxury brands trading in objects and images of manual labor. In the window-front gallery of *Incident Report*, Re Made Co. reached out to all constituents of Hudson. The Re Made Co. storefront



Figure 21. Re Made Co., exhibition at Incident Report, Hudson, New York.



Figure 22. Re Made Co., exhibition at Incident Report, Hudson, New York.

enticed the “tastemakers” with beautifully painted, high priced (\$300) plungers, design-savvy leather plunger sheaths and artful graphic design that speaks the language of “creative” types (Figures 21 and 22). These highly curated home goods at inflated prices mimic the wares being sold in other stores along Warren Street. However, a plunger adorned in its finest cannot be completely sanitized and still carries connotations of real physical effort. In this absurdity, Re Made Co. destabilizes the claims of luxury on the traditions of manual labor.

Conclusion

This project considers the slipperiness of brand identity that suggests consumers can move comfortably between contradictory selves: between the urban and rural, worker and manager, farmer and craftsman, maker and consumer, luxury object and functional tool, and between a work of art and a commodity. Historically, the wealthy classes saw manual labor as a debased activity, as “the exclusive occupation of the inferior class” that de-valued one’s status (Veblen 1912, 8). Today, the symbols of “physical work” are sold as stylistic trends and labor is performed and consumed as a leisure activity. Brands sell designer versions of tools that encourage affluent consumers to imagine themselves as rugged, efficient and handy. To sustain such a fantasy, brands rely on the appropriation of cultural identities and symbols to construct skewed versions of history that strip actual “work” of meaning and value and that often perpetuate imperialistic and exaggerated masculine stereotypes.

Sophisticated design is used as a means of staging privilege and aggression in refined terms.

Interactive artworks and culture jamming present opportunities to challenge consumer experiences. Brands appropriate from other cultures and ethics, turning the *real* into calculated experiences. Artistic projects can use recreation of brand activity as a means of analyzing language and commercial messages and of holding up a mirror that reflects back the shallowness of these references. The strategy here involves not presenting the marketplace with new forms of counterculture to absorb as fodder for future campaigns, but using mimicry as a form of resistance to reveal the flaws in problematic brand messages.

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