

ABSTRACT

Liz Kohler Brown, CODIFIED ARTIFICE

Under the direction of Seo Eo, School of Art and Design

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This written report supports the thesis exhibition entitled *Codified Artifice*, images of which are included in this report. The focus of this creative research is the cultural and nutritional implications of packaged foods.

This research is manifested in a ceramic installation consisting of slip-cast food packages, stacked and arrayed to form a confined space. The installation asks the viewer to ponder their relationship to the containers displayed and discuss the role of packages in our food culture, and daily lives.

CODIFIED ARTIFICE

A Report of Creative Thesis

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By

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INTRODUCTION

Concept and Installation

Plastic, Styrofoam, and cardboard food containers are results of the fusion of modern society's desire for convenience, and the abilities of industrial production. The average consumer's appetite for speed, accessibility, and low cost has enabled food packages to become deeply imbedded in our culture.

The effect of these products on our daily lives is two-fold. First, packaged foods have liberated us from the onerous daily labor of critical thinking as it pertains to the food we eat, as well as the need to prepare it. Secondly, and consequently, they often alienate consumers from the knowledge of, and control over, food preparation and ingredients. This research focuses on the latter. I will discuss how packages can alienate, confuse, and even deceive the consumer, and describe how the very objects that are intended to inform often prevent comprehension.

To visually represent these phenomena, I created an installation consisting of ceramic slip-cast food packages, stacked to form an enclosure. The interior space created by the packages conjures up feelings one may have while standing in a fully stocked grocery aisle, scanning the plethora of over-stimulating packaging. The goal of this installation is to create a space for reflection and contemplation on our relationship to food as an industry and a cultural practice. It provides an exonerating space for introspection on the role of industry in our food related habits and beliefs.

Personal History and Nationwide Trends

My inspiration to approach this subject matter began with my grandparents. Growing up in the American Midwest during the Great Depression led them to view the world as a place of scarcity – where the availability of the next meal was not guaranteed. After suffering and scraping by during youth, it is unsurprising that they embraced wholeheartedly the post-WWII shift towards fast, cheap, and easily attainable processed food.

This deeply seeded belief in the superiority of quantity over quality influenced their relationship to food for the rest of their lives – leading to a diet consisting primarily of canned and microwaveable frozen meals. Watching the decline of my grandparent's health, and noticing the effect their lifestyle choices had on their overall health, shaped my own understanding of food. The questions that these experiences arose, made me aware of my own choices, and forced me to ask the questions that I continue to grapple with in this project.

While becoming informed of America's current health crisis, it became increasingly clear that my grandparent's experience was not at all unique. According to the American Medical Association, poor diet and physical inactivity are the foremost contributors to premature death in the U.S. (McGinnis 2209). In 2010, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention stated that 35% of adults and 17% of children and adolescents were obese (CDC) and the AMA found that 65% of American adults are seriously overweight or obese (Flegal 1725).

Fully understanding the implications of the foods we consume is unmistakably essential to our health. Food packages often inhibit or confuse this understanding, preventing consumers from fully grasping the gravity of each food purchase.

This installation analyzes and visually represents the potentially arduous process of choosing and obtaining nutritious foods. With health as my driving inspiration, I will discuss the effects packaged foods have on our ability to make educated choices about nutrition.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Convenience

The disposability and ephemerality of packaged foods make them ideal for the fast-paced lifestyle embraced by our culture. They are not only easy to acquire, use, and discard, but unlike clay or glass, disposable food containers can be handled carelessly, and forgotten by the consumer the moment they are abandoned.

The freedoms these containers provide often overshadow the freedoms they take away, such as control over, and knowledge of, the ingredients and processes used to create each product. Although they have successfully enabled a lifestyle that focuses little time on food preparation and cleaning, they have also alienated the consumer from the complete understanding of what is for sale.

Package Design and Labeling

Using calculated package design, food companies often create a glorified image of their product. They utilize the power of visual suggestion to highlight and exaggerate flavor, health claims, and monetary value, while downplaying unhealthy ingredients and long-term costs.

In 1990 Congress passed the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act, giving the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) authority to regulate the use of health claims and nutrient content

claims on food packages (H.R. Rep 9). The act was created to help consumers make educated decisions about their diet by preventing companies from misusing terms that are arbitrary or undefined.

The act, although a step towards protecting consumer health, has not been adapted to many modern food industry issues. FDA Commissioner Dr. Margaret Hamburg said in a 2009 speech to the National Food Policy Conference that food label standards have “not been substantially addressed since the FDA implemented the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act, more than 16 years ago.” Hamburg also noted “We’ve seen the emergence of claims that may not provide the full picture of their products’ true nutritional value. It will be important to reestablish a science-based approach to protect the public”. The FDA however, has not yet created a system to regulate many modern food issues, such as caffeine content in energy drinks, and undefined phrases like ‘all natural’ and ‘heart healthy’ (Silverglade 6). Current standards also do not list the recommended daily allowances of sugars or trans fats, two main contributors to diet related disease (Silverglade 2).

In 2010 the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) released their report on the misuse of food labeling. The report called for modernized nutrition labels and stated that ingredient names should be put into layman’s terms. Current ingredient list standards allow ingredient names that are unrecognizable by the average consumer, thus unhelpful for decision-making. Current standards also allow the use of umbrella terms, such as natural flavoring, which encompass a plethora of ingredients that are not required to be listed separately.

The current standards for food labeling do not prevent the misrepresentation of food products, and therefore do not allow consumers to make educated choices about their health.

When packages fail to convey coherent or accurate descriptions of the food within, making healthy food choices becomes difficult if not impossible to achieve.

Discovery and Recognition

The many facets and participants of a food culture are closely intertwined, yet play vastly different roles in affecting the habits and beliefs that motivate food choices. As consumers, we hope to make the best decisions concerning our dietary choices and restrictions. However, often the high volume of mislabeled and misrepresented products inhibits educated decisions. This installation creates a visual aid for the complexities of food culture and packaging, while placing the viewer in a familiar yet altered setting that encourages reflection and deliberation.

SPECIFIC AIMS

Create an Experience

Upon entering the cylindrical enclosure composed of food packages, the viewer is encapsulated and confined. Minute openings in between packages serve as the only outward view available, while the foreboding tower wraps around its participant. The experience in the interior is much like that of roaming through grocery store aisles, attempting to find a comprehensible item in a sea of misinformation. The blank packages stare back at the viewer, offering only subtle hints about their contents in the form of cryptic writing on the surface of selected packages.

Package Selection and Symbols of Food Culture

Each clay package originates from a mass produced container that once held a convenience food. The types of packages chosen range from produce to processed desserts, exhibiting the fact that it is not solely processed foods that are mislabeled or misrepresented. The intended use of each package is intentionally unclear, yet evokes a familiar uniformity of design reminiscent of common packages. Each individual piece references not a specific food, but rather serves as a symbol of the food industry and its role in our convenience-based food culture.

METHODOLOGY AND CONTENT

Materials

Throughout human history, clay was used to create tableware and food storage vessels, yet over the last century clay has been largely replaced with plastic and Styrofoam. Clay was the most convenient material for food storage because it was readily available in large quantities, and required little more than fire and labor for production. As our standards for convenience have advanced, so has our desire for highly mechanized systems of production that require no labor from its' user. By utilizing a material that is an integral part of our food storage history, I suggest that disposable packages represent an important shift on the timeline of our food culture. The packages exhibit both glazed and unglazed surfaces, revealing bare clay in some areas and presenting a shiny stark white glaze in others. The color and uniform application of the glaze evokes industrial production, sterility, and the role of clay in the history of our food culture.

Process and Production

Each package is replicated using an industrial ceramic process known as 'slip casting', which was introduced into pottery production during the 1800's. Similarly, many modern food processing techniques such as pasteurization, canning, and vacuum sealing were developed in the early 1800's in order to provide preserved foods to military forces. Both ceramic and food

related processes were greatly influenced by the Industrial Revolution, which introduced a new found ability to provide for the ongoing demand for convenience, low cost, and access to a wide range of options. The slip casting process references this significant shift in our food culture that was made possible during the Industrial Revolution.

Slip casting – similar to the methods used to create plastic and Styrofoam food packages - is used to mass-produce identical objects. In order to amass a large quantity of clay packages, I created reusable plaster molds of each package. Each mold must be filled with liquid clay and left to sit while the mold absorbs water, creating a thin skin on the inside of the mold. After the remaining clay is poured out, the mold must sit overnight, allowing the clay to firm. The next day each piece is removed from the mold and left to dry until firing.

This process is both repetitive and monotonous, akin to the process of factory food production. Like processed food, each piece I create is not unique or individually cared for, but a meaningless sign of being one step closer to a quota. Many of the pieces are left with the imperfections created by the slip casting and patching processes, exhibiting the hierarchy of quantity over quality that is imbedded in processed food production.

Package Appearance

Each container is two-sided and symmetrical, and contains elements of common food packages such as compartments and uniform ridges. Although the viewer may recognize parts of an egg carton or TV dinner, the hybrid objects made of clay do not resemble actual packages.

The initial confusion, and slight familiarity, asks the viewer to look more closely, and attempt to identify the objects and information on their surface.

The intentionally sealed packages prevent the viewer from accessing the inner contents. Much like packaged foods, they present only their outer surface as a means of communication. A seam that is created by the slip casting process is left on the package to reference the industrial processing of the container and its contents, and as a reminder of the uniformity and anonymity of factory food production.

Selections of the packages have cryptic text inscribed on their surfaces, listing ingredients, health-claims, and diet related conditions. The text is obscured, written backwards and in scientific jargon or Latin. This makes deciphering nearly impossible, much like the experience of reading a food label and having no understanding of its contents.

The use of Latin is a reference to both the esoteric nature of ingredients lists, and the fact that average Americans are not familiar with the language of food science. The scientific language of processed food ingredients - words like 'butylated hydroxyanisole' and 'pyridoxine hydrochloride' - mean nothing to the average consumer, serving as yet another layer of confusion.

When the packages are brought together to form a single enclosure, an overall blankness pervades the viewer. This references the dumbfounding experience of being surrounded by a mass of over-stimulating information, while still feeling uninformed.

Display

The enclosure serves as a Codified Artifice, or an organized series of deceptive objects. Masses of clay packages are stacked high in a cylindrical shape with a single entry point. The world outside is visible only through the negative spaces formed by the packages, suggesting that the packages block one's view of the reality of its contents. It evokes feelings one may have while standing in a fully stocked grocery aisle, scanning the plethora of over-stimulating, non-informational packaging.

A curved grocery aisle, composed of an overwhelming number of containers, will surround each viewer as they enter the cylinder. Initially they may undergo a slow realization of what each container is meant to hold, then attempt to decode the cryptic text displayed on selected packages. By providing a location for introspection on food choices and consumption, the space allows the viewer to contemplate their relationship to the packages and the foods they hold. It provides the viewer with a space in which to reflect on their own food habits and beliefs and consider how family, culture, media, and industry affect their daily choices.

PROJECTED OUTCOME

Psychological and Cultural Impact

This installation will help reshape the viewer's recognition of packages by creating a forum for discussing and considering the benefits and costs of packaged foods. The overwhelming experience of entering the enclosure will affect the viewer's perception of packaged foods, and influence their next encounter with these objects.

The goal of this work is to create an opportunity for personal reflection and discussion on the role of food in our health, family lives, and culture. By implementing familiar visual references, I am opening this discussion to all viewers and asking them to offer their own experiences as examples of how food culture plays out in our daily lives. Through the use of visual representations of the food industry, this work asks the viewer to consider their connection to packaged foods and the companies that produce them. Upon their next visit to the grocery store, viewers may question the implications of their choices.

CONCLUSION

Grocery shopping has evolved into an intimidating series of choices, in which the consumer chooses the lesser of two evils and foregoes the right to know exactly what is for sale. We meander through store aisles, overwhelmed by abundance, and dumbfounded by the wide array of health claims and ingredient lists staring back at us. We hope at best to discover a package that touts claims aligning with our beliefs and dietary restrictions. Accepting that we know very little about the food before us, we place our trust in forces that may or may not hold our best interests at heart.

Packages exist as an essential form of communication between consumers and producers. This vital interface is the consumer's only window into the specifics of a packaged food. However, it is also a surface on which companies are permitted to misrepresent their product. The paradox leaves the consumer's health at the mercy of companies, whose main priority is most often profit.

This installation explores these contradictions between appearance and reality through the metaphor of surface and interior. It is both a private space for personal reflection and a communal space for cultural discussions. The work creates a heightened awareness or sensitivity to the process of food selection, which includes the physical and psychological aspects of our food culture. The uniform and daunting enclosure itself, the contents of which are reminiscent of the boundless quantity yet pervasive low quality of a supermarket aisle, is meant to invite consideration from the viewer.

The isolation the viewer feels upon entering is a reflection of the very same separation induced by cryptic marketing messages and unrecognizable ingredients that increase the distance between our understanding and the reality of what we consume.

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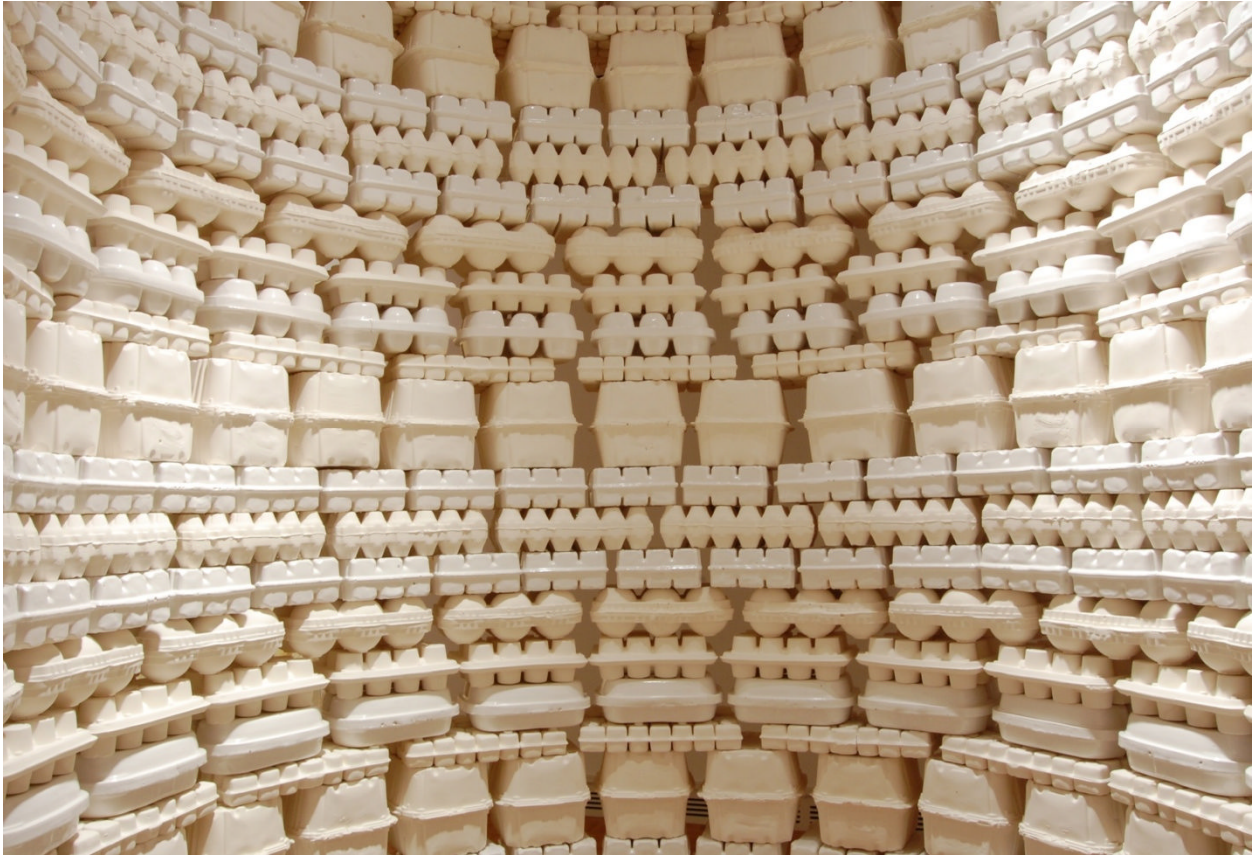
PLATES

PLATE 1



Codified Artifice, Slip-Cast Earthenware, 8x5', 2013

PLATE 2



Codified Artifice, Detail of Interior, Slip-Cast Earthenware, 8x5', 2013

PLATE 3



Codified Artifice, Detail of Exterior, Slip-Cast Earthenware, 8x5', 2013

PLATE 4



Codified Artifice, Package Detail, Slip-Cast Earthenware, 8x5', 2013