

Conceptual-Art 'Shoppers' Challenge, Spoof Consumer Behavior

SWAP AND SHOP

BY KORKY VANN | SPECIAL TO THE COURANT

There's a running joke in Lily Tomlin's one-woman show "The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe" as Trudy, the narrator, tries - unsuccessfully - to explain to a group of visitors from outer space the difference between an everyday object and art.

"I show 'em this can of Campbell's tomato soup. I say, 'This is soup.'"

"Then I show 'em a picture of Andy Warhol's painting of a can of Campbell's tomato soup. I say, 'This is art.'"

"This is soup. And this is art."

"Then I shuffle the two behind my back."

"Now what is this?"

[Frustrated by the aliens' inability to distinguish the difference.] "No! This is soup, and this is art!"

A similar theme runs through artist Zoë Sheehan Saldaña's exhibit on display at Real Art Ways in Hartford. As I observe her work, I understand the aliens' confusion.

At the core of the exhibition is "shopdropping," a conceptual-art phenomenon involving the surreptitious introduction of merchandise - or art, depending on your point of view - to a store's stock. Described by some art critics as an intervention into the standard relationship between consumers and vendors, shopdropping (also called, "reverse shoplifting") has been labeled as a political statement, a spoof and a challenge to normal consumer behavior.

Examples:

Ryan Watkins-Hughes, a Brooklyn photographer, has replaced can labels with wrappers featuring his photographs and the products' original bar code, as well as his Web address, then put the goods back on supermarket shelves.

Artist Packard Jennings constructed a Benito Mussolini doll, packaged it, placed it on a Wal-Mart shelf, then tried to buy it. A spycam film of the attempted purchase was included in his exhibit of the process.

Other retail pranksters, such as the Ministry of Reshelving Project in the San Francisco area, have gone into bookstores and relocated copies of George Orwell's 1984 from "Science Fiction" to "Current Events" or "Politics." Moved books contain a bookmark reading: "This book has been relocated by the Ministry of Reshelving." A notecard reading: "All copies of 1984 have

been relocated," is left in the empty spot the books originally occupied.

For her Real Art Ways exhibit, Saldaña, a Brooklyn, N.Y., resident who teaches graphic design at City University of New York's Baruch College, purchased six items from the Hartford Wal-Mart: khaki linen crop pants, \$14.57; a green camp shirt, \$9.97; a white camisole, \$8.87; Levi stretch boot-cut jeans, \$19.69; a yellow-and-orange canvas tote, \$7.84; and a reversible floppy hat, \$3.23. She took the items home and duplicated them by using similar fabrics, trim, beading, buttons, zippers and tucking.

After transferring the brand labels from the mass-produced items to her re-creations, the 32-year-old artist photographed the reproductions, attached the original price code tags, returned to Wal-Mart and placed the counterfeit garments back in stock.

The exhibit at Real Art Ways displays the six original Wal-Mart items alongside life-size photographs of the handmade reproductions.

"Once a UPC is on a garment, for all intents and purposes it becomes a Wal-Mart item, regardless of its origin," says Saldaña. "I didn't go through a return process. I wasn't trying to get money back. I simply walked into the store, placed my items with similar stock on the floor and left."

Saldaña has never tried to buy back anything she has "shopdropped" or stuck around to see if other shoppers noticed or purchased the ersatz clothing.

As we talk, I realize that I am wearing a pink linen shirt (White Stag, on sale, \$5.99) purchased at the same Hartford Wal-Mart, and wonder if my blouse could be an artist's original. Saldaña claims not to recognize my shirt but says it could be the work of another shopdropper - or not.

Does the possibility make my closet a gallery, I ask?

"I think the mystery of the whole transaction is more interesting than knowing. A conceptual piece comes alive in the talking and thinking about it," she says. "It introduces a whole range of questions about the shopping experience: 'What are you looking for?' 'What will make you happy?' 'What will disappoint you?' 'Would you rather have the mass-produced item or the artist-created item?'"

Depends on how it fits and how it washes, I think.

Will K. Wilkins, Real Art Ways executive director, says Saldaña's work was chosen from a pool of 220 applicants for the gallery's Step Up series, which features six emerging artists.

"Her work was totally distinctive," says Wilkins. "It looks at and questions just what consumerism is. We're very much removed from the process of producing the goods we purchase. Zoë's project makes you wonder about those who make the items we buy every day."

Saldaña says that unknowing shoppers could have purchased her artist-created objects at Wal-Mart prices.

The works of art - comprising the Wal-Mart original and the accompanying photograph of the piece shopdropped back into the store's inventory - are priced from \$1,500 to \$2,450.

"It raises the questions of what is the original and what is the knockoff and which [location] is the museum and which is the store?" asks Saldaña. "That might be a little artsy BS, but it interests me."

Shopdroppers are not the first people to delve into the mysteries of "I shop, therefore I am." Retail anthropologist (yes, there really is such a thing) Paco Underhill explored the differences between the mundane act of "buying" and the deeper, more meaningful experience of "shopping" in his book "Why We Buy" (Touchstone; \$15).

"Let's stipulate that shopping is more than the simple, dutiful acquisition of whatever is absolutely necessary to one's life. It's more than what we call the 'grab and go' - you need cornflakes, you go to the cornflakes, you grab the cornflakes, you pay for the cornflakes and have a nice day," writes Underhill. "The kind of activity I mean involves experiencing that portion of the world that has been deemed for sale, using our senses - sight, touch, smell, taste and hearing - as the basis for choosing this or rejecting that."

Saldaña admits that some consumers - and retailers - might find the process confusing at best and annoying at worst.

"Some people think the whole concept is horrible, and others say they wish they had bought one of my items," says Saldaña.

"What art is depends on the audience viewing it."

Like Trudy said, "Soup or art?"

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