

afterimage

THE JOURNAL OF MEDIA ARTS AND CULTURAL CRITICISM

726

FUCK
YOUR
RACIST
BORDERS
GATE 4

VOL. 45, Nos. 2 & 3



USA \$5.50/CAN \$7.50

SPECIAL ISSUE:
MEDIA LITERACY IN A "POST-FACTUAL" AGE

PERFORMING SKEPTICISM THROUGH PARODY:

Re Made Company's Media Critique

By Rebekah Modrak & Jonathan Schroeder

The new Re Made Co. store was empty when I walked in, because of course it was. The shop was a couple of weeks old, it was early in the day, and the temperature was somewhere in the mid-20s with humidity even lower, which is appropriate weather for plunger shopping approximately nowhere.

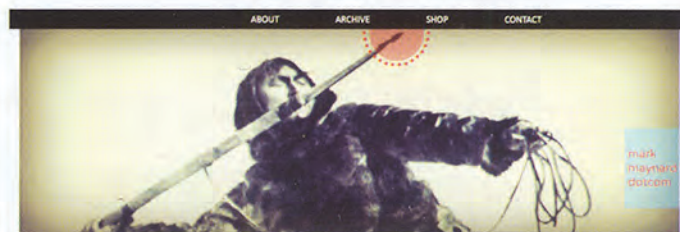
And yet it took only a couple of minutes from the time I walked in to the time that I had a master plunger (\$300) in my hand, with the salesclerk telling me I could remove the sheath from the bowl, provided I was careful. . . .

The plunger was substantial, potent, stern. And it wasn't shy. It arced with real rhythm, taking your arm where it wanted to go. . . . I started out skeptical (Who does this?), then moved to self-conscious (Am I doing this right?), then moved to fervent (How long will they let me keep doing this?). . . .

Few stores access the primal as directly as Re Made. . . . Peter Smith-Buchanan and a partner first started selling artisanal plungers, made in Maine and painted right here in New York, where all the great plungers are decorated. . . .

The store shares space with the company's offices, which are hidden behind a tall curtain. Sometimes, the curtain is drawn back for workshops (a recent one was about plunger restoration). Certainly this is code for self-help, a time to focus and a time to dream. It's all written right there on the handles of the plungers as you walk in the door: COURAGE, COMPASSION, GRACE, FORTITUDE.†

This tableau of fetishized labor composed for an audience of affluent consumers is only part fiction. The quote is from a re-created, that is, fake, *New York Times* article that appeared on the *Re Made Co.* website as part of an elaborate parody of how lifestyle branding, "fake news," and social media interact in the contemporary marketplace. *Re Made Co.* is a multimedia artistic intervention satirizing the brand narrative of Best Made Co., a New York City-based company that sells painted axes and a range of "outdoor" consumer products using calculated and dubious associations with manual labor. Best Made, a so-called lifestyle brand, gained attention for its hand-painted "designer



Artisanal toilet plunger or iconic felling axe... Can you tell which is parody?

by Mark Maynard

Peter Buchanan-Smith is the founder of Best Made Co., a high-end New York-based design boutique specializing in the production of items like this \$330 artisanal American felling axe.



The model above is called "Challis" Here's how Best Made describes it:

"Dependable, versatile and with a rich and powerful history, the American felling axe is the quintessential woodland tool and an icon of American design and ingenuity. Every feature of this axe was meticulously designed by Best Made in New York. The Dayton pattern head is made from high carbon American steel and is drop forged in North Carolina by fourth generation axe makers. The Best Made helve is lashed from Appalachian hickory and its elegant curvature and slender form factor ensure superior efficiency and safety. Every Best Made axe comes numbered with our documentation and guarantee, and a fitted, top-grain leather blade guard. This Special Edition axe will arrive in a hand-built crate with wood wool."

And this is Master Plumber Peter Smith-Buchanan, the founder of Best Made's rival, Re Made Co.



He makes artisanal plungers.

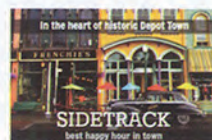
"It's wood and a piece of rubber put together," says Smith-Buchanan, pointing to one of the 16 models in Re Made's American Master Plunger series. "Sitting there in this capsule of stored energy. That's what makes it very powerful. You put a plunger in someone's hand and they feel empowered."

Screenshot of blog post by Mark Maynard, "Artisanal toilet plunger or iconic felling axe . . . Can you tell which is parody?" *I Cannot Escape This Blog*, December 4, 2013 (<http://markmaynard.com/2013/12/toilet-plunger-vs-felling-axe/>) from the artwork *Re Made Co.* (2013–present) by Rebekah Modrak; courtesy the artist

axes" that have come to typify the ripe-for-parody "urban lumberjack" target market, as well as the wider discourses of contemporary branding.

Evolving since its launch in July 2013, *Re Made Co.* extends and confounds the terrain of internet art, fake news, and parody by encompassing multiple facets of communication (website, Facebook posts, Twitter feeds, emails, blogs, magazines, and legal documents); by plotting the course of the artwork in real time in response to browser comments and Best Made Co.'s updates, posts, and instigations; and by implicating media sources in ways that expose the muddled relationships between journalism and marketing. Peter Smith-Buchanan is the fictional founder of *Re Made Co.*, mirroring Best Made Co.'s founder Peter Buchanan-Smith. This essay is jointly written by the artist who actually created the intervention and a branding and communications

CONNECT
Find us on Facebook



RECENT COMMENTS

- Mark Hergott on 12/04/2013: I provide that our local writer supplements don't realize that not all Civil War memorabilia celebrate the Confederacy?
- Anonymous on 12/04/2013: I provide that our local writer supplements don't realize that not all Civil War memorabilia celebrate the Confederacy?
- Mark Higbee on 12/04/2013: I provide that our local writer supplements don't realize that not all Civil War memorabilia celebrate the Confederacy?
- Ed on 12/04/2013: I provide that our local writer supplements don't realize that not all Civil War memorabilia celebrate the Confederacy?
- Bill on 12/04/2013: I provide that our local writer supplements don't realize that not all Civil War memorabilia celebrate the Confederacy?
- Marnie Edwards on 12/04/2013: I provide that our local writer supplements don't realize that not all Civil War memorabilia celebrate the Confederacy?
- Craycatch on 12/04/2013: I provide that our local writer supplements don't realize that not all Civil War memorabilia celebrate the Confederacy?
- Lee Markham on 12/04/2013: I provide that our local writer supplements don't realize that not all Civil War memorabilia celebrate the Confederacy?
- EOS on 12/04/2013: I provide that our local writer supplements don't realize that not all Civil War memorabilia celebrate the Confederacy?
- Krump on 12/04/2013: I provide that our local writer supplements don't realize that not all Civil War memorabilia celebrate the Confederacy?



ABOVE & FACING PAGE: Screenshot of *New York Times* article by Penelope Green, "Peter Buchanan-Smith and the Urban Ax," June 30, 2010; and screenshot from the *Re Made Co.* website, "Peter Smith-Buchanan and the Urban Plunger" (re-creation of *New York Times* article by Penelope Green) from the artwork *Re Made Co.* (2013–present) by Rebekah Modrak; courtesy the artist (<http://remadeco.org/article1a.shtml>)

scholar. We are interested in how parody and satire can hold consumer culture to accountability and transparency. Through analysis and critique of both the Best Made and *Re Made* campaigns, this article reveals the consequences of media-based narratives and connects the *Re Made* project with broader issues of parody, critique, and media literacy.

THE RE MADE CO.

Re Made Co. intervenes into the online media landscape of web design, social media, and video-sharing platforms at the intersection of art, activism, media literacy, and consumer culture research to analyze and critique how brands use media to create myths of working-class identity. The Best Made Co. lifestyle company has gained attention for its hand-painted \$350 "designer axes" that have come to typify the so-called "urban lumberjack" target market. As the Best Made Co. website's "About Us" page states: "We equip customers with high quality products and dependable information they can use and pass down. We empower people to get outside, reconnect with their hands and nature, and in doing so, embark on a life of great adventure."²

Artist and writer Rebekah Modrak's shadow company, *Re Made Co.*, mimics Best Made, complete with website, promotional films

with beautifully rendered photographs, product lines, and company histories; and the home page parrots Best Made: "We equip customers with high quality products and dependable information they can use and pass down. We empower people to get outside, reconnect with their hands and nature, and in doing so, embark on a life of great adventure."³

However, instead of selling axes, *Re Made Co.* specializes in artisanal toilet plungers. *Re Made's* sustained and evolving parody satirizes Best Made to reveal how the company's marketing campaign hijacks the idea of "labor" from the realm of manual work and transforms tools of labor into objects of consumption and display, trophies of "work" for an affluent, white-collar consumer base. In her analysis of the *Re Made* project, marketing scholar Laurie Meamber notes that:

The Best Made Co. has crafted the brand strategically through an expert understanding of design, presenting images and narratives intended to communicate meaning to its audiences. Modrak critiques the substance of the Best Made Co. brand as using motifs such as physical labor and adventure to advance the selling of the axes as luxury items.⁴

The *Re Made Co.* project uses tactical media to put consumer culture into crisis, thereby agitating consumers into critiquing brand narratives, in a performative aesthetic intervention into the contemporary media landscape. The work "offers a captivating example of an arts-centered approach to the examination of brand identity construction."⁵ The *Re Made* project also implicates contemporary concerns about media literacy, parody, and fake news.

THE RE MADE PROJECT, FAKE NEWS, AND MEDIA

While stand-alone spoof videos (such as Paul Riccio's 2015 *The Timmy Brothers* video satirizing Mast Brothers chocolate, or CBC's 2015 *Maker Series: Artisanal Firewood*) uproariously ape the pretenses of brand marketing, *Re Made Co.* pushes parody into the realm of art by exhaustively rebuilding the company's entire online presence, including company website, Facebook page, and Twitter feed. Moreover, *Re Made Co.* buttresses the parody and validates the brand by rewriting published reviews of the Best Made store and products, with only minor alterations to the original, such as substituting "plunger" for "axe." As an example, the introductory passage to this article farcically recreates journalist Jon Caramanica's sarcastic, yet reverential, actual review of the Best Made retail store in the June 10, 2013, edition, of the *New York Times*.⁶ We began this article with a direct quote of *Re Made Co.*'s re-creation of that story ("Brick and Mortar and Cold Rubber: *Re Made* Store Opens in Manhattan") so that you, the reader, are first introduced to *Re Made* through the seductive language of the press, rather than through the critical lens of an artist and scholar. Here, and on the website, *Re Made Co.* is able to use a parodic version of "fake news" to expose the news and cultural media that feign criticality while simultaneously promulgating brand messaging.

Available within the “Our Story” page of the *Re Made* website, the “Selected Press” section broadcasts re-created articles such as from the *New York Times* (“Peter Smith-Buchanan and the Urban Plunger”), *MoMA Design and Violence* (“American Master Plunger: Peter Smith-Buchanan”), and *The Wall Street Journal* (“Urban Woodsmen With Plungers to Grind: Re Made Company Offers Workshops on Plunger Restoration, Other Survival Skills”) that strictly adhere to the original articles’ language and tone.⁷ Unlike Caramanica, who feigns a measure of criticality, the other authors have drunk the artisanal Kool Aid, and enthusiastically praise the axe’s position as an uber-virile tool of survival for the urban man. The fictional *Wall Street Journal* article by David Shapiro Jr., begins with:

Nick Zurrie, a plunger aficionado, sat on a neatly arranged pile of pipes inside Re Made Company, a store in TriBeCa known for its high-end plungers, holding forth on the shortcomings of the mainstream plunger.

“Oh, you can definitely get a plunger at Home Depot, but you’re not going to like it,” he said, shaking his head.

If this didn’t sound spectacularly silly to David Shapiro Jr., the real-life journalist of the same name, when he originally used identical language to cast a glow on the Best Made artisanal axe,⁸ this parody aims to help that process along by using the language of authority and the mainstream media to critique their own failures: the glorifying of a group of white upper-middle-class men sharpening their axes, “drinking cups of whiskey and eating barbeque” without any discussion of race, class, and the cultural appropriation of labor; and the base promotion of products and workshops geared toward “New Yorkers’ ancient, contemporary and post-apocalyptic skills”⁹ in the guise of significant journalism. While the media industry may bring a critical perspective to political investigative reporting, they increasingly champion the corporations whose advertising revenue funds their own practices, as well as the capitalist impulses of the upper middle classes—including the urge to shop, conspicuous consumption, and upscaling.¹⁰

These fake stories about the *Re Made Co.* attempt to thwart “real” news, proving effective even beyond the artwork’s credibility. For example, even viewers “in the know,” who are well aware that *Re Made* is a parody, have congratulated the artist on being reviewed in, say, the *New York Times* when the fake article posted on the *Re Made* Facebook page. Apparently, whereas brands or companies may be viewed suspiciously, any communication purporting to be from the mainstream media is seen as authentic and reliable, even when it celebrates such imaginative items as artisanal plungers.

Somewhat ironically, the faux article simultaneously advances the *Re Made* critique of the sale of products using hyper-masculine imagery and rhetoric while reinforcing the plunger brand’s validity. Other news sources looking at *Re Made* buy in and review the artwork as an actual company. The echo chamber feeds itself. Media outlets and social media posts add to the initial confusion about the veracity of the plunger company/artwork, with some admiring the parody,

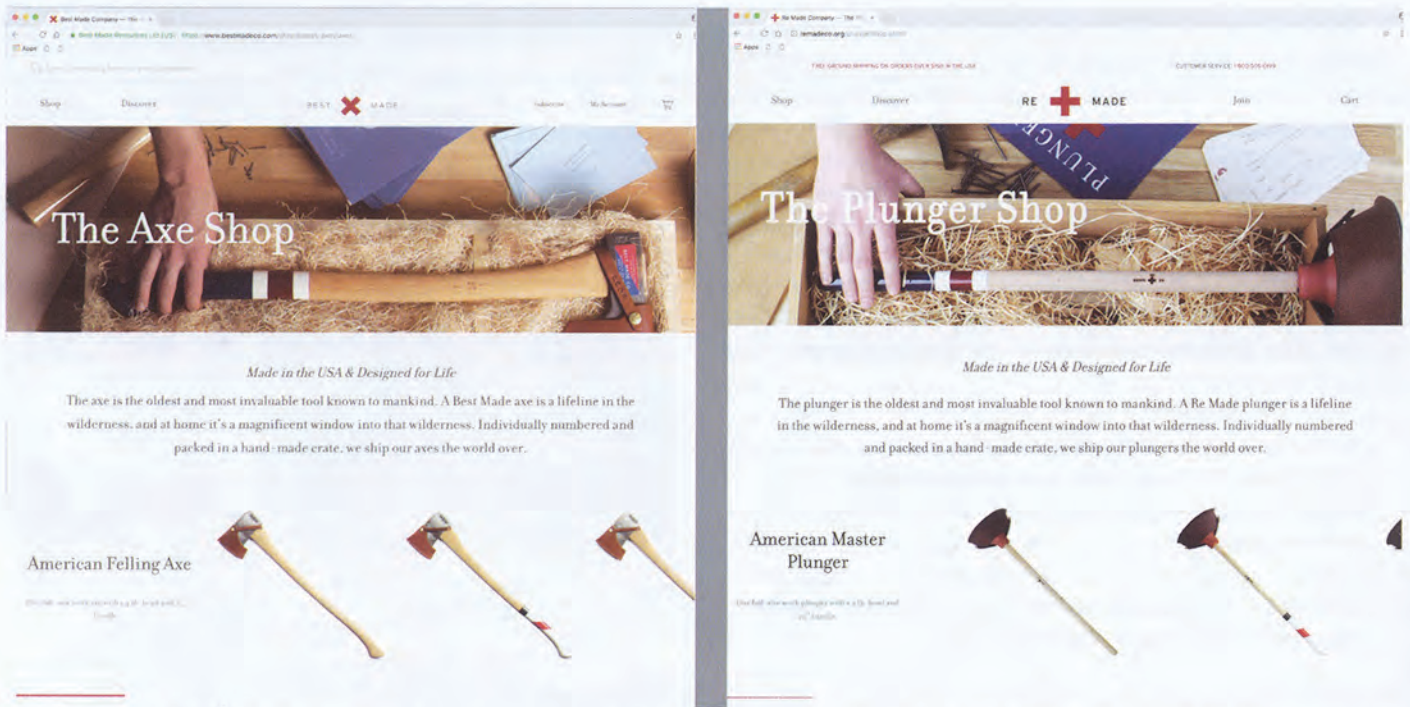


and others venerating the craft and design of the “products,” all becoming absorbed into the vortex of the artwork.

Whereas “fake news” via the internet, as in the context of the 2016 Trump/Clinton election, poses serious concerns for democratic processes and critical perspectives, the “fake news” of *Re Made* can be seen as an important training tool to teach necessary skepticism about information presented via internet-based media—an elaborate effort to enhance media literacy. As such, these re-created articles ask readers to be more critical of how news sources choose to tell stories and to be more attentive interpreters of “distorted signals uncorrelated with the truth,” that is, “fake news.”¹¹ Further, satirical false news should make readers reconsider how the sources of “news” play critically important, yet often overlooked, roles in acknowledging, understanding, and evaluating news stories. Finally, it places parody at the center of the “fake news” discussion, at the same time as it invokes wider issues of media literacy.

ART, BRAND CRITIQUE, AND MEDIA LITERACY

Re Made Co. joins a growing conversation within consumer culture research on art and artistic methods.¹² Many artists have engaged with issues of brands, consumer culture, and marketing. To name a



Screenshots of the Best Made Co. Axe Shop (www.bestmadeco.com/shop/blades-axes/axes); and the Re Made Co. Plunger Shop (<http://remadeco.org/plungershop.shtml>) from the artwork *Re Made Co.* (2013–present) by Rebekah Modrak; courtesy the artist

few well-known examples, Hans Haacke creates conceptual works “that expose connections among money, art, and politics”¹³; Banksy gained international fame with his stealthy street art and recently drew attention to Disney with his parody *Dismaland* park (2015)¹⁴; and Kara Walker’s recent installation at the former Domino Sugar compound in Brooklyn, *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* (2014), shed light on colonialism and slavery in the sugar industry and deployed social media as an aesthetic and political tool.¹⁵

Re Made Co. helps illuminate “what otherwise may be taken for granted and left unquestioned with regard to lifestyle brands, such as Best Made Co.”¹⁶ By mimicking—and mocking—contemporary lifestyle brands, and the fawning attention they often receive, the *Re Made Co.* project provides insights into how what has been called “brand culture” permeates contemporary media, and how brands exist not only as marketing icons, but as cultural, ideological, and political objects—and as fodder for artists.¹⁷ In particular, the *Re Made Co.* project offers somewhat rare tools for artistic interventions in media literacy: humor and parody, with intriguing implications for how artistic parody sits within discussions about fake news.

Media literacy generally includes critical thinking skills and encompasses the ability to *produce* media and visual communication—for example, the Media Literacy Project aims “to transform people into critical media consumers and engaged media justice advocates who deconstruct media, inform media policy, and create media that reflect their lived experience.”¹⁸ An

emerging conception of “brand literacy” exists, focused on how consumers understand and deal with brands and the marketing machine that promotes them: brand literacy constitutes “the ability of the consumer to make sense of and compose the signs of a brand culture and to understand the meaning systems that are at play.”¹⁹ However, conceptions of brand literacy rarely involve the critical dimensions that characterize media literacy.²⁰ Media literacy about brands is not merely an act of “reading” brands and deciphering brand messages. Rather, brand literacy reveals an active consumer and an active brand, co-creating meanings and culture, and, in this case, an active artist interested in highlighting brands’ roles in contemporary culture. As Modrak has written about the *Re Made Co.*: “Artistic projects can use re-creation 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.”²¹

CONCLUSION

The *Re Made* project continues to develop, with the artist recently offering “The Faultless and Faithful Enamelware” for sale within *Re Made’s* Accessories & Badges.²² In addition, she has written and presented on her battle with Best Made over copyright, fair use, and



Screenshot from the Design You Trust website (<https://designyoutrust.com>) featuring Re Made Co. American Master Plungers from the artwork *Re Made Co.* (2013–present) by Rebekah Modrak; courtesy the artist



Screenshots from the Best Made Co. and Re Made Co. Facebook pages: "smoked pig Best Made style"; and "smoked pig Re Made style" from the artwork *Re Made Co.* (2013–present) by Rebekah Modrak; courtesy the artist

artistic expression, in which Best Made has made repeated attempts to shut down the *Re Made Co.* site.²³ We offer the *Re Made Co.* and the media response it has created as a useful case study into the intersections of branding, social media, and visual art that showcases an entertaining and illuminating intervention into media literacy.

REBEKAH MODRAK is an associate professor in the Penny Stamps School of Art & Design at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. **JONATHAN SCHROEDER** is the William A. Kern professor in the School of Communication at Rochester Institute of Technology.

NOTES 1. Rebekah Modrak, "Brick and Mortar and Cold Rubber: Re Made Store Opens in Manhattan" (*Re Made Co.* re-creation of *New York Times* article by Jon Caramanica, "Brick and Mortar and Cold Steel: Best Made Store Opens in Manhattan," February 13, 2014), [www.remadeco.org/article2.shtml](http://remadeco.org/article2.shtml). 2. Best Made Company, www.bestmadeco.com. 3. *Re Made Co.*, <http://remadeco.org>. 4. Laurie Meamber, "Commentary on Learning to Talk like an (Urban) Woodsman: An Artistic Intervention," *Consumption Markets & Culture* 18, no. 6 (December 2015): 562. 5. Ibid. 6. Jon Caramanica, "Brick and Mortar and Cold Steel: Best Made Store Opens in Manhattan," *New York Times*, June 10, 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/06/13/fashion/best-made-store-opens-in-manhattan.html.

7. "Our Story / Selected Press," *Re Made Co.*, www.remadeco.org/story.shtml. 8. David Shapiro Jr., "Urban Woodsman With Axes to Grind: Best Made Company Offers Workshops on Ax Restoration, Other Survival Skills," *Wall Street Journal*, February 2, 2014, www.wsj.com/articles/urban-woodsmen-with-axes-to-grind-1391397941. 9. Ibid. 10. Jonathan Bean, Avid Khorramian, and Kelsey O'Donnell, "Kinfolk Magazine: Anchoring a Taste Regime," *Consumption Markets & Culture* 21, no. 1 (February 2018): 82–92. 11. Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 211–36. 12. See, for example, Albert M. Muñoz Jr., Toby Norris, and Gary Alan Fine, "Marketing Artistic Careers: Pablo Picasso as Brand Manager," *European Journal of Marketing* 48, no. 1/2 (2014): 68–88; and Jonathan E. Schroeder, "Aesthetics Awry: The Painter of Light™ and the Commodification of Artistic Values," *Consumption Markets & Culture* 9, no. 2 (June 2006): 87–99. 13. Hans Haacke, "Fighting the Establishment," San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2014, video, 3:38, www.sfmoma.org/watch/hans-haacke-fighting-the-establishment. 14. See The Lip TV, "Dismaland: Banksy's Anti-Disney Theme Park," August 18, 2015, video, 4:08, www.youtube.com/watch?v=GT28vP5PbQ. 15. See Roberta Smith, "Sugar? Sure, but Salted with Meaning: A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby" at the Domino Plant," *New York Times*, May 11, 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/05/12/arts/design/a-subtlety-or-the-marvelous-sugar-baby-at-the-domino-plant.html?_r=0. 16. Meamber, "Commentary," 559. 17. Jonathan E. Schroeder, "The Cultural Codes of Branding," *Marketing Theory* 9, no. 1 (March 2009): 123–26. 18. "Introduction to Media Literacy," Media Literacy Project, 2017, <http://medialiteracyproject.org/learn/media-literacy>. 19. Anders Bengtsson and Fuat Firat, "Brand Literacy: Consumers' Sense-Making of Brand Management," *Advances in Consumer Research* 33 (2006): 375–80. 20. Jonathan Schroeder, Janet Borgerson, and Zhiyan Wu, "A Brand Culture Approach to Brand Literacy: Consumer Co-Creation and Emerging Chinese Luxury Brands," *Advances in Consumer Research* 42 (2014): 366–70. 21. Modrak, "Learning to Talk like an Urban Woodsman: An Artistic Intervention," 557. 22. "Accessories & Badges," *Re Made Co.*, www.remadeco.org/accessories.shtml. 23. Modrak, "Fair Use Stories: Prof. Rebekah Modrak and Re-Made Co.," Fair Use Week, Harvard Library, February 24, 2016, <http://fairuseweek.tumblr.com/post/139920767687/rebekah-modrak-associate-professor-school-of-art>.