



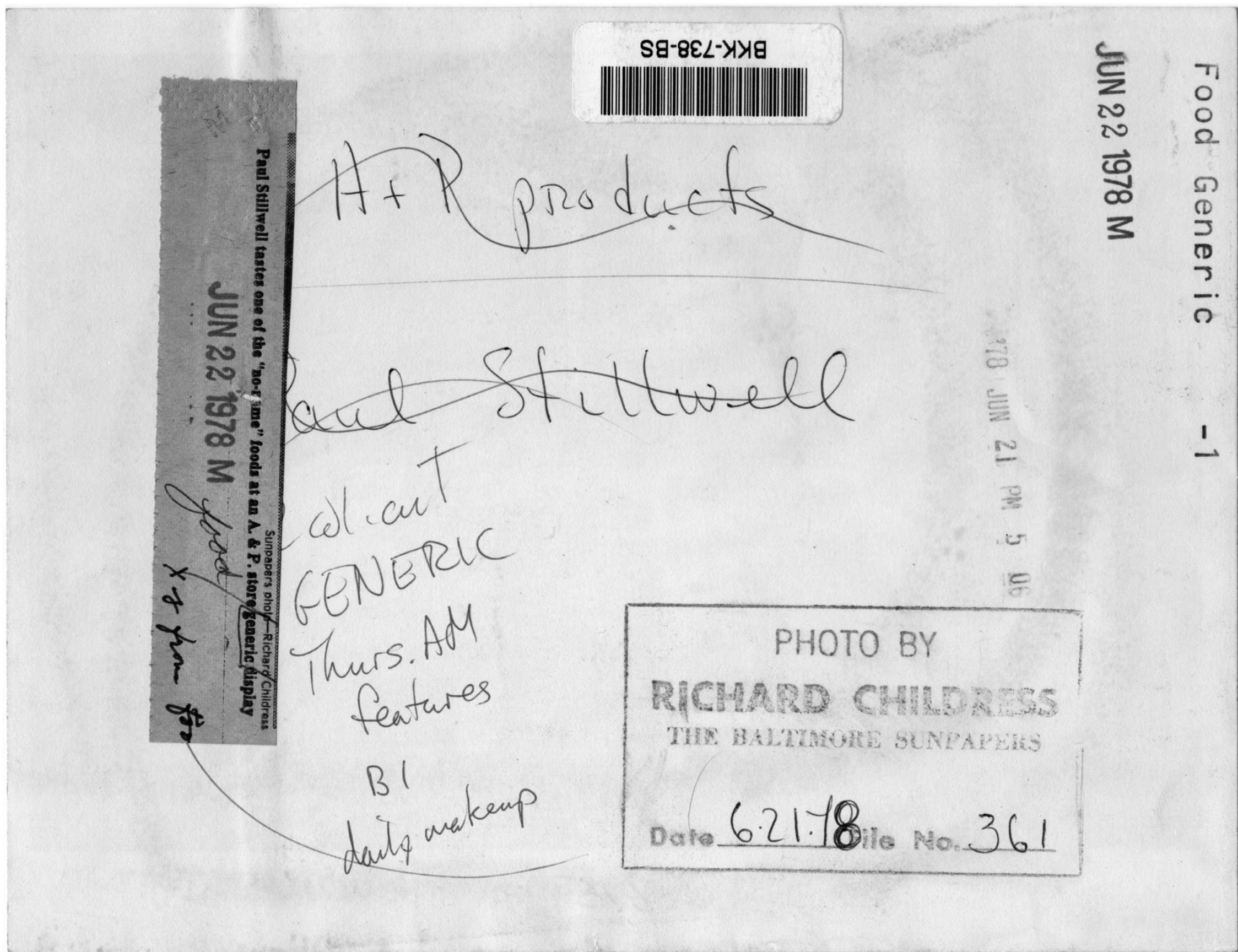
MARYAM JAFRI  
ECONOMY CORNER  
FEBRUARY 25 - APRIL 3, 2016

Generic products were everyday household items that appeared in supermarkets in the late 1970s across the United States. The typical package design was a white label with black text merely identifying the contents. The idea was that by eliminating all design, marketing, and advertising costs, the savings could be passed directly onto the consumer. Regional factories and distributors, often powered by a unionized work force, supplied these generic items to their local supermarkets. The generic items occupied an aisle of their own and were 25–45% cheaper than their branded counterparts. By the end of the 1980s, with the rise of the mega-grocery chains, the plummeting price of color printing, and the increasing importance of branding and design as business tools, supermarkets replaced generic brands with their own in-house store brands that mimicked the look and feel of their branded counterparts and which were placed right next to them on the same shelf.

Shopping in the generic section was considered a stigma, a sign of poverty. In an attempt to reassure customers about the quality of generic items, a Baltimore branch of A. & P. set up a taste test between Del Monte brand canned foods and their generic versions, including Whole Kernel Corn and Sweet Peas. The above photograph was published in the Baltimore Sun on June 22, 1978. The caption accompanying the photograph states, “Paul Sitwell tastes one of the ‘no-name’ foods at an A. & P. store generic display.” The blank space in the middle of the generic sweet peas tray, and the absence of a spoon on the left hand side of that same tray, indicate that Paul Stillwell has just scooped up some generic sweet peas.

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Maryam Jafri:  
Types of Specificity  
Prem Krishnamurthy

The objects of Maryam Jafri's *Generic Corner* (2015) appear at first glance as imports from a strange and parallel world: a drab Communist state, a film set with a limited props budget, or a conceptual art gallery. Each object is a commonplace food product — beer, peanut butter, bran flakes, corned beef — identified primarily by its name in black type on a white background. Devoid of the color, imagery, and visual rhetoric we are used to seeing in our contemporary shopping environments, these items are encountered here as readymades within slender upright vitrines and in staged product photographs. Pure products, they announce themselves as objects of nourishment rather than desire, stripped bare of their spectacle.

Plucked out of an odd corner in the history of American consumer goods, the objects are so-called “generic goods”: low-cost products offered in the late 1970s and 1980s in an “unbranded” form. Relegated to a special aisle, they were directed towards low-income or cost-conscious shoppers. But that brief moment of pure product-ness, with packaging reduced to a degree zero and segregated within the store, quickly vanished as supermarkets developed their own in-house budget brands to integrate seamlessly with “regular” products.

As aesthetic objects, Jafri's generic goods at first exude a blank contextlessness. Evocative of early conceptual art, such as Joseph Kosuth's linguistic constructs, the products also recall critical figures including Ed Ruscha and Andy Warhol, whose early artwork grew out of their careers in advertising and commercial art. Warhol's Brillo boxes, first exhibited in 1964, were lionized for appropriating and recontextualizing simple commercial packaging. However, the continued resonance of these pieces is also a testament to the seductive graphic flourishes of the original packaging design, which was authored by James Harvey, an Abstract Expressionist painter who made his living as a commercial artist. Warhol's appropriation of Harvey's daily work imbued the Brillo boxes' populist visuals with value. Half a century later, Jafri examines an alternate moment in that same history of product branding to create a monochromatic, minimal pop art—one that contrasts with existing investigations of vernacular consumer culture.

To the trained typographic eye, the seemingly “unbranded” generic products that Jafri has collected belie their time and place quite clearly. Today they appear specific, not anonymous. Their artistry functions both through their appropriation as readymades and their original form as commercial art. Graphically, Jafri's objects merge the simplicity of modernist Swiss pharmaceutical packaging with unusual typographic choices, which read as a catalogue of “hip” visual options of the era. Which designer decided to set “Corned Beef” in Bauhaus, a nostalgically-named typeface ripe with disco associations? Where was the puffy, outlined lettering to mark “Soap” chosen? Who paired the typeface Cooper Black with “Peanut Butter,” repeated in an endless chubby loop of letters? How did the generic packagers settle upon “Crispy Rice” in a bold, condensed, custom-lettered lowercase, a nod to the 1920s German typographic avant-garde and its utopian aspirations?

Seen from this perspective, Jafri's packages no longer appear blank or unauthored, but rather as nearly perfect cubes or cylinders for the display of typography. They raise the vital question: What would typography in the white cube look like? Outside of type samples, typography is nearly always informed by its context, tethered to use value. Yet every font has its own independent character, however subtle. Jafri's work reveals a broader fact: whenever it appears, typography is both the content and communicator of a visual idea.

It's a truism by now to claim that there is no “neutrality,” whether in writing, architecture, art, display, or design—only the semblance of objectivity, whose patent untruth becomes apparent generations later. As in the realms of post-war art gallery presentation and modernist design, the aesthetics of universal whiteness now appear as obvious constructs. They can be read as high class or low end, haughtily refined or starkly austere, depending on where and when we are doing the looking.

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