



★
Carton Charisma &
The Cucumber Orca
(no nightlife whatsoever?)
★



Nicholas Hatfull





Jörgen Ahlström
Don't be shy for Pret a Manger 2013

The routinely jettisoned sandwich carton has an inscrutable presence. Little prisons for a little something to keep body and soul together; it seems quite possible these vessels deal in some variety of animism. Pret a Manger frequently invokes a kind of spirit-world germinating from their fresh ingredients with their in-store advertising tableaux confecting teapots from fennel and chilli, butterflies from radicchio and asparagus, and a whole menagerie of other friends. Hitting a note of informal, dining table invention and eyelash-fluttering twee, photographer Jörgen Ahlström carries the torch for Armando Testa's fun with food. These pleasantries are well-pitched; tourists have delighted in the 'Don't be shy' vinyl carried throughout its London outlets this summer, in which a pear's skin has been daintily scalpel-ed away, leaving slivers that suggest bikini briefs. Chirps of approval are easily sounded out online, too; the fennel-chilli teapot inspired a blog from someone in Hong Kong. An expat in London found that Pret UK catered less satisfactorily to a stateside palate, but, powerless to resist contemporary Arcimboldo-ism, continued to patronise the chain nonetheless.

Armando Testa
Nocero Umbro 1991



Ahlström's assemblages deal in charm and sweetness more than Testa's comparably spare studies, in turn less eery to the eye than Arcimboldo's mannerist paintings. Perhaps due in part to their situation in a misty white space, introduced with no peripheral distraction like new forms to infant vision, Ahlström's Pret work murmurs the friendly, simplified zoology of design for children such as Enzo Mari's animal puzzles. The layout, too, of Ahlström's tableaux shares something with books for children by Mari, and Bruno Munari; floating, morphologically simplified elements with unobtrusive islands of text. The Pret sandwich cartons - characterised by easily discernible folds and apertures, carrying starkly associative symbols like a stonehenge of glow-y butter, strawberry-chilli heart or boat improvised from half an avocado and salad leaf - are tonally consistent with the tableaux, and their elemental prompts for association and projection on the part of the consumer beg comparison with Mari's *Il posto dei giochi*. Produced for Danese in 1967, this folding card screen is printed with signs pruned just at the border of abstraction, suggesting bodies of water, the sun, sheaves of wheat.



Jörgen Ahlström
Pot-pourri for Pret a Manger 2012

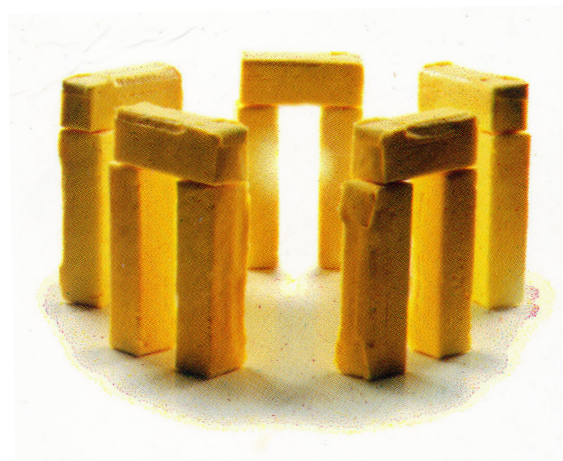


Armando Testa
Elefante 1986



Enzo Mari
Il posto dei giochi 1967
 Folding corrugated card screen with prints

Where the *Place of games* displays pure keys releasing associative wafts of play, a zone unhampered by serrated lines or malice, the Pret sandwich cartons' grocery fetishes hint at an arcadian realm of noble sustenance, the self-effacing haikus of text a land of inviolable principles. *Place of games* encourages bambini to arrange their own space. Stretch the Pret carton to bambino dimensions and you have a stylisation of a dwelling-place sure to get an infant's attention.



Jörgen Ahlström
Before Dawn c.2011

Why the baby-talk gurgling from the walls and shelves of environs largely patronised by lunching adults? Testa accounts for this when he admits “...my job as an adman has constrained me to...the obligation to communicate in a simple and pleasant way so as to “park” a given product in people’s memory...” Why are animals such powerful ambassadors in this business? The convention of introducing the animal kingdom as playmates for infants despite their overwhelming absence from our lives might be the continued momentum of wild horses drawn on the cave wall. I wonder if it’s ancestral feeling that stirs people to praise the ‘delightful’ and ‘quirky’ charms of Ahlström’s photos. Their qualities seem to reside more in their refinement, poise and panpipe tone than wit or originality. Search for ‘Animal-themed Party Food’ on Pinterest and hordes of kitchen sculptures stand to attention, a channeling of the same compulsion that sent a hare-shaped food mould to the Pompeii and Herculaneum show at the British Museum.



Till Nowak
Salad 2006

This is not to criticise Ahlström's work, which is distinctively beautiful, rather an attempt to locate its accent. The provenance of these Pinterest works' influences is harder to follow, a promiscuous output that canoodles with some outlandish partners – see a vegetal Alien. Perhaps it's for the best that Ahlström sticks to simple morphology – mannerism seems to yield unsettling results. Anyhow, this food play is common practice; my parents tell me I preferred to call broccoli 'tree' as a child and the coincidence that Pret follows suit (theirs has a cinnamon-stick ladder) probably underlines how commonplace this modest imaginative leap is. Perhaps the hewing of a woman's back and bottom from a William pear speaks to a primal mode of representation that carved Venuses from bone in the Ice Age.



Unknown Pret Twitter contributor
Godfrey Hot Tub 2013

Lurking in the inclement backwaters of Twitter, there's even a sub-culture of Pret fan-art. Some are devoted to Pret's gingerbread-man, Godfrey. An Instagrammer's finger dunks him in a cup of tea, captioning the scene 'hot tub'. If you want to go weirder, an instalment of the Pret account's regular 'Relax – It's the Weekend!' tweet shows two sushi rice golems easing into a bath of indeterminate meat sauce (unwittingly- I guess - evoking the grimmer scenes of *Salò*).



Unknown Pret a Manger Twitter contributor
Relax it's the weekend
 Early 2013



Jörgen Ahlström
Frog for Pret a Manger 2012

This vein of activity, the readiness of a metropolitan public to embrace lunch rendered as personality-fauna, stands not just for the incontrovertible freshness of Pret's ingredients but also an irresistible joi de vivre with the charisma of brilliant design and the open-hearted purity of a toddler's picture-book. I'm inclined to read this not as a willingness to be infantilised but as a disposition to culinary animism. Maybe, though, blueberry eyes and gherkin tongue for a ball of mozzarella are just the training wheels for such an outlook. Maybe the un-sculpted sandwiches needn't be endowed with features to have a voice. Gazing at the various fillings in their serried cells cartons on the shelves, I sense beings remote and fated. If the carton wedge resembles an open casket, we can reasonably conclude they ferry souls. If limbo's in the refrigerator, the hot cupboard must be hell (the mortuary to cremation).



If this seems unreasonable, ask yourself whether the urge to summon an orca from whittled cucumber is any odder. Anyone who likes such faraway creatures on Pinterest is an inadvertent animist. Nor am I the first to link packaging food and wrapping the dead; mummifying is referred to in a contextualising sketch in *Food Packaging* (ed. Kadoya).

Unknown Pinterest contributor
Coming out of a veggie dip bowl

Familiarising myself with the vicissitudes of carton packaging with a view to working in the form, I developed a unexpected appetite for technical data sheets and their detailed breakdown of the products' micro-qualities. As with anything, I suppose, you dip your toes in and find a subject wreathed in evocative jargon. Curious epithets sprouting elemental poetry – windows, mists, protection and freshness – are sown throughout these texts that one might unfairly presume drily opaque. Coffin production, for sure, would also have attendant technologies giving the lay-artist pause for wonder. For now, I am concerned with the sandwich carton; specifically the originators of the carton wedge, the first company to hermetically seal the carton tray, charismatic folk at the frontier of the packaging world, Rapid Action Packaging, who have supplied Pret since 1997.



Rapid Action Packaging
Pret a Manger – DayFresh Carton Wedge
Various iterations since 1997

Versus other retailers' pedestrian offerings, every aspect of Pret's cartons emerges airily finessed. Consider the contours of the pack; care is taken in the origami-like stage of cutting, folding and creasing. It transpires that the envelope feature you slide your finger under to access the sandwich is a sympathetic contour particular to Pret – protected in fact. Contrast it with another retailer's and the competition looks club-footed, a gulf of finesse yawning apparent. Instead of Sainsbury's brown povera, the white laminated carton board for Pret's biopak provides a high quality print surface for its promotional dialect, and shrunken reproductions of Ahlström's images. The integral window, contiguous with the 20 micron laminate, removes the risk of window glue gaps. Julian Money, founder of RAP, says when first introducing the carton wedge, retailers were concerned the design rendered too much of the sandwich invisible. Now, of course, the form has been widely commissioned or imitated. There is a tantalising effect created by the screen-like focus on a cropped view of the fillings. Julian tells me he'd like to gradually constrict the aperture of the window, eventually arriving at a finger's breadth glimpse. Touring RAP's riverside Mortlake HQ, I see new prototyped versions of the Pret carton where the window aperture hugs the contours of avocados and prawns decorating the exterior. Within the parlance of the form, this amounts to something like lyricism. Carton and film, pruned to sing.

Hot melt adhesive spiral, interior of
Pret a Manger wrap packaging, 2013
(author's photo)



The glue ensuring the integrity of the pack is *low migration UV flexo*. This concerns the effort to eliminate the chance of substances migrating from the adhesive to the interior of the pack and the unthinkable consequences of interaction with the product. In the case of the wrap design variation, the hot melt glue linking carton sleeve with polypropylene jacket is applied as a miniature Twombly spiral (whether the elegance of the squirt has any effect on adhesive migration, I can't say). Incontinent glue, however, is not the only prospect of the inhabitant's freshness being compromised. The violently named phenomenon of *aroma scalping* is the removal of flavour components through absorption and adsorption-based losses to the packaging itself. Rest assured, though, with Pret we're talking *DayFresh*, and I can't imagine scalping rates are high enough for through-wall migration loss of aroma volatiles. As the tamper-evident custom label says,

*'Made today, Gone today.
No sell-by date, no nightlife'*



Pilfer-evident seal
Pret a Manger

Pret, as trumpeted on the packs themselves, demur at *heat-sealing* and *gas-flushing*. For sandwiches destined for a longer shelf-life, however, RAP has pioneered the world's first hermetically sealed carton wedge, capable of hosting *Modified Atmosphere*. The active technique of *gas-flushing* rebalances the blend of gases inside the pack, with Nitrogen - commonly acknowledged as inert - replacing oxygen. In particularly vigilant circumstances, packets containing *scavengers* may be used to remove oxygen - a sachet equivalent of a pest-controlling house-cat. Developed by Mitsubishi, the naming of scavenging agent "Ageless" and oxygen sensing agent "Ageless Eye" seem intimations of the Afterlife as much as Shelf Life. RAP declines to employ scavengers, already capable of achieving <1% residual oxygen. This capacity for preservation, if not embalming a person for eternity, can safeguard a sandwich for extended shelf life. Apparently the cold chain supply in the UK is so fine-tuned that the outer limits of these cartons' capabilities aren't often required. Still, the limbo of modified atmosphere is a poignant location.



Jörgen Ahlström
Yoga bunny for Pret a Manger c.2011



Andrea Branzi
TX 0204
From the series *Blister*
Moulded plastic with magnetic closing, transparent glass
2004

Certain remarks by designer and theorist Andrea Branzi encourage my detection of animist properties in Pret packaging. Addressing his 'animist roots', Branzi says "The relating space between man and objects can be an opaque relation, not all is done in the sunlight...(contemporary design) has lost this charismatic capability". Not so the Pret carton. Thinking of Julian's dream of progressing to ever-more mysterious packs, adjusting the balance of seclusion and reveal, it seems a technology parlaying charisma. Considering the related field of blister packs, Branzi identifies "...a way of seeing the world through an opacity that surrounds a delicate part, and separates it from an excess of contacts and consumptions...". Blisters, to Branzi, are something philosophical. Describing a "reciprocal" relationship between us humans and the environmental presence of packaging, he implies a respectful distance that should be maintained. Choosing a sandwich in Pret, I can become absurdly hesitant, perhaps troubled by a funereal aspect of the caskets cartons. I can't help but wonder what life is like on the other side of the polypropylene.





Routed plaque, Pret a Manger, London
Author's photo

In *Domestic Animals*, Branzi says the 'metropolis of objects' has cloned 'human and animal species', leaving humans to sit comfortably in the stalls while a system of objects play 'the leading role in the tragedy'. Go to a Pret and this is overwhelmingly apparent. An ecology of sandwiches and their well-photographed dreams could do quite nicely without us. His notes on the modern retail environment – to his mind "sets...in which an ambient story is staged...specialized places, with a highly religious character" – sound like Pret Ah Maw(n)-Jzay to me. In the scene-setting of the Pret shop, every surface, every whisper on a serviette is carefully mannered, sermons in Paleface Palatino piously intoned in routed hardwood panels. Most otherworldly is the *Petit Pret* located in King's Cross, squeezed in a limbo-floor amidst the Oyster card machines, the adjacent escalators descending to the ~~Underworld~~ Underground. Why Pret particularly? They are ahead of the pack in lacing their products with 'a sliver of mystery'. Their cartons belong in Branzi's category of objects with soul, beloved of man;

"certain tools... possess an extraordinary dignity, a nobility of presence, a formal rigour that goes beyond their function or requirements of marketing. It is almost a form of animism, a complex identity that enriches the act of utilization. The objects that people love ...often come to resemble domestic animals....."

Jörgen Ahlström
Ginger Beer Dog c.2010



And their extraordinary propagation in London makes Pret cartons a 'solid and far-reaching presence', a 'screen and substitute for man himself'.

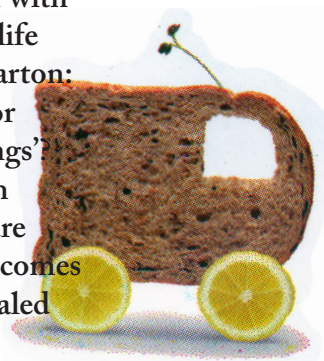


Federico Fellini
A sun from the *Book of Dreams*

For my part, the honorific housing of sandwiches suggests another sort of perishable. 'Brittle, evanescent things', Fellini's *Night Work*. In his assiduously kept ledgers, Fellini ensured his florid creative nourishment remained eternally fresh by capturing it with experienced cartoonist's verve on waking. Committing fleeting visions to paper in febrile, classroom colours is an act of preservation akin to sealing them in a Modified Atmosphere Package. Letting his leaves continue to transpire, delaying signs of senescence. The pages yellow, but the mysteries endure.

Deterioration in the organoleptic characteristics of food leads to, for instance, *Maillard reactions* or *non-enzymic browning*. Glycosylamines undergoing *Amadori rearrangements* reduce nutritive value. This spoiling, accounted for in specialist literature, is of no concern to a "Made Today Gone Today" philosophy, but what of obscurer sandwich behaviours? Bored and awaiting their fate in a Londoner's throat, they must allow themselves some territory of the imagination. In their solemn enclosures, surveying Ahlström's chorus, what constitutes the sandwiches' inner life? One interpretation of the flow of animals from cartons to framed prints decorating the shop is that they are a dream-emanation, the voice of the produce, codified. A soothing art speaking to the sandwich animus, providing a frieze of recognisable cousin forms to play with in their dreams.

Yes, my question concerns the sandwiches' Night Work. Uh huh, the sandwiches' dreams. Do they recognise their world in Ahlström's pictures, do they yearn for a wholemeal bloomer car with lemon tyres? No Nightlife Whatsoever, says the carton: how can you account for 'brittle, evanescent things'? Can we flush them with Noble Gases and capture them forever? What becomes of their hermetically sealed dreams? "No Nightlife whatsoever" protests too much.



Jörgen Ahlström
Pret Delivers for Pret a Manger c.2011