

# PRODUCT RECALL

“Economic forces have a great effect on us. But actually, people’s ideas have enormous consequences.”

Adam Curtis in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, New York, 2012<sup>1</sup>

When, in 2007, Amsterdam advertising agency Tribal/DDB issued a print advert ‘recalling’ the 1974 Volkswagen Golf Type I motorcar, the company cleverly subverted the protocol for retrieving manufactured items with potentially injurious defects. This protocol, whereby a recall notice for the product must be published in the national press, via broadcast media and the internet, follows set criteria. The object is generally visually identified, the faults and potential danger described, and the method of returning or reporting it to the manufacturer outlined.

The Volkswagen advert used these criteria to imply the very opposite of a sub-par item, apologising for possible issues with the glove compartment of a vehicle more than thirty years old. The ad men overturned the usual message carried by those dowdy little public service announcements that occasionally appear in the back pages of the newspaper.

I have collected these notices for many years, drawn to their ugly aesthetic, dull copy, and poorly reproduced commercials far from the slickly produced commercials we are accustomed to. There is a pleasing hubristic undertone around the fact of the powerful marketing colossus reduced to placing adverts that appear with no more fanfare than the humble classifieds advertising used cars and second-hand sofas. Recalled products can include anything from killer toys (such as the infamous lawn darts, banned from sale in the USA in 1988) to health campaigns gone wrong, like the New York State drug awareness crusading pencil bearing the legend “Too Cool To Do Drugs”. Unfortunately for the campaign, the text was oriented so that as the pencil was pared down, the precise opposite message was communicated.

This trope of the defective product, and its correlation with socialist views of neoliberal capitalism, is one starting point for this exhibition. Mass consumerism and its roots in the post-colonial free market economy has long been a focus of the art world. Appropriation art, where the product is recast, has stoked debate (chiefly about whether or not it is art) since the unveiling of Duchamp’s readymades, through to Warhol’s ersatz product objects and to the present, where artists such as Richard Prince appropriate popular images. This returning again and again to the use of the ‘thing’ is more than just the sharp subversion evidenced by the self-referential Volkswagen advert. In the art ecology, there is agency in this purloining of the object. In his trio of essays *Art and Thingness*, critic Sven Lütticken maintains:

Anne Mullee  
May 2015

(1) Obrist, H. Ulrich, In Conversation with Adam Curtis, Part I, [www.e-flux.com](http://www.e-flux.com), 2012, New York. (2) Lütticken, S., *Art and Thingness, Part III: The Heart of the Thing is the Thing We Don't Know*, [www.e-flux.com](http://www.e-flux.com), 2012, New York.



The hoax ‘recall’ advert for Volkswagen was produced by advertising agency Tribal Amsterdam and published in Dutch national newspapers in 2007.



Produced as part of a New York drug awareness campaign in 1998, the ‘Too Cool to Do Drugs’ pencils were inadvertently noticed that when old student notices that when the pencils are sharpened and get shorter, the message becomes ‘Cool to Do Drugs,’ then simply ‘Do Drugs.’

Lawn darts were banned by the US Consumer Protection Society Commission (CPSC) in 1988, following an investigation that showed that over a period of eight years, lawn darts had sent 6,100 people to the emergency room, 81% of those cases involved children 15 or younger, and half of those were 10 or younger. The majority of injuries were to the head, face, eyes or ears, and many had led to permanent injury or disability.

