



*Beer Frame's domain is the polymorphous perversity of American consumer culture.*

## Consumerism

# Shelf Life

*Beer Frame* is the 'zine that roughs up the smooth designed surface of anything packaged. "I like stuff," admits editor, designer and publisher Paul Lukas of his modestly diminutive, 48-page "Journal of Inconspicuous Consumption." With its sixth issue now available, *Beer Frame* assumes work more often associated with cultural historians and anthropologists. Each issue features a collection of products, catalogued and interpreted so that we might better understand our culture's values. But while academic criticism may tend toward long-winded analysis and multi-syllabic "isms" to explain our relationship with the things we make and market, *Beer Frame* offers consumers "straight talk and a low cover price."

*Beer Frame* is organized around "the major categories that shape daily living: products, services, records and printed matter." Analysis is conducted based on the editor's personal and very biased tastes, often including correspondence with a manufacturer's public relations department. A recent issue reviewed the perplexing new packaging for Hostess Cup Cakes with Creamy Filling, 3.2-oz. size. "I've always liked this product, but my favorite part has been removing the cakes and running my finger along the cardboard, thereby salvaging the pastry residue," Lukas reports. To understand why the familiar cardboard had been replaced by a pre-molded plastic tray, *Beer Frame* turned to the Hostess Consumer Affairs office in St. Louis, which explained that the change was necessary to prevent shipping damage.

In another review Lukas devoted nearly five pages and the cover to a major exposé on sauerkraut juice, including detailed descriptions of label images, packaging graphics and discus-

sions with the National Kraut Packers Association on the elaborate post-Depression history of this "medicinal" Midwestern beverage.

Aside from an occasional "obligatory music-related comment," criticism in *Beer Frame's* Records section centers on the construction and appearance of CD cases, vinyl, advertisements, logos and photography. "If you wanna know what these discs actually sound like," Lukas warns, "go read reviews by 'real' critics... who get their records free and depend on ad revenues from the labels they cover." The Printed Matter section has featured examinations of the illustration style in government technical manuals and a close reading of the ingredients on the label of Reese Hickory Liquid Smoke. "I love a good mystery," Lukas says.

*Beer Frame* may favor the warm nostalgia of vintage products like the Brannock Device, but its editorial depth is considerable. Readers, now numbering around 2,500, enthusiastically submit products for review and Lukas obliges with clever skepticism and sarcastic evaluations that peel the pretentious labels off packaged goods. Lukas-brand criticism is a welcome addition to the growing field of those writing about design, and a *Beer Frame* book published by Crown should be out sometime in the next year or so.

All of Lukas's reviews include the full address of manufacturers so readers can write and get more information on musk flavor Lifesavers or 666 Preparation with Quinine. As for the name, Lukas will only say, reluctantly, that he's an avid devotee of bowling.

DAVID COMBERG

Contact *Beer Frame* at 160 St. John's Place, Brooklyn, NY, 11217.