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## Cozy Mart: Convenient Aesthetics

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Cozy Mart: Convenient Aesthetics

Eric John Edvalson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Daniel Everett, Chair  
Brian Christensen  
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Department of Art  
Brigham Young University

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## ABSTRACT

### Cozy Mart: Convenient Aesthetics

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Convenience stores in their various forms are not only commercial outlets of foodstuffs and sundry items but are also experiential in nature; the act of going to a convenience store is a culturally shared experience. In homage to these spaces, *Cozy Mart* is a public art installation and performance which recreates this shared experience in an idealized form. Based on do-it-yourself culture, appropriation of public space, and artistic traditions of sculpture and printmaking, *Cozy Mart* invites interaction with art outside of the traditional gallery space and capitalizes on alternative methods of art distribution.

Keywords: relational aesthetics, performance art, installation, sculpture, printmaking, do-it-yourself, social practice

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to thank the professors on my graduate committee— Daniel Everett, Brian Christensen, and Chris Lynn— for their insight regarding my thesis exhibition during studio visits. This show could not have happened without the help of Susan Krueger-Barber who put me into contact with Bill Graff, who generously provided me a public location to mount the exhibition. Thanks is due to Maddison Colvin who was of great assistance in the development and editing of the written documentation of the project. I'd also like to acknowledge as a whole the work of the various artists and musicians who contributed to the project, the people who assisted in the installation of the public exhibition, and especially the immeasurable help of Greg Caldwell and Michael Sharp whose assistance contributed a great deal to the construction of *Cozy Mart*.

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## INTRODUCTION

At the end of summer 2015, while aboard a return flight from Washington state to Utah for the upcoming school year, I found myself contemplating my intentions for the second year of my MFA program. A priority on my mind was planning my thesis exhibition. I already had some working ideas but I wanted something better. I knew I wanted this body of work to do something sculptural, or culminate in some sort of installation.

The summer was waning and I began to reflect on summers past. Certain things stuck out to me as constants, both in my formative years and now. Like many people, one thing I often did and still do in the summertime is go to a nearby convenience store for some sort of snack or cool drink. It is ritualistic behavior.

One thing that reaffirmed the ritualistic nature of these almost daily pilgrimages was a trip to Japan in May of 2015. Even there I found myself regularly visiting all the ubiquitous Japanese convenience stores—Family Mart, Lawson, 7-11, etc. It turned out that my attraction to convenience stores isn't geographically specific; I feel like I have similar idealized experiences wherever I find them.

Certainly convenience stores in their various forms— the corner store, the bodega, mini marts, gas stations, etc.— function by providing efficient access to popular goods. However, what I find myself interested in is not just the commodification of foodstuffs and sundry items but also how convenience stores work as public spaces. Despite their relatively small size, they provide a sort of sublime experience that is rooted in an emotional escapism; especially in their mini market/gas station form. Convenience stores function as oases that dot the landscape of America. They hum softly on dry summer nights while small insects flutter about, outposts connecting the populace in a network of gentle consumerism.

The perpetuation of nostalgic ritual is something I share in common with many other people. It exists across generations, geography, and economies. With all this in mind, compounded with an interest in making an exhibition that would be ambitious, I developed the idea of creating my own mini mart.

My art practice has strong roots in do-it-yourself (DIY) culture, which is for me primarily born out of skateboard and punk culture. I find satisfaction in the appropriation and repurposing of public spaces. While in undergrad I built a small 8-square-foot art gallery (7-feet tall, 2-feet deep, and 4-feet wide) which was constructed like a miniature version of a typical gallery space. The walls were framed and sheeted with drywall, painted, followed by the installation of fluorescent lighting and a laminate floor. Somewhere between a small model and a full size gallery, this unique gallery could be wheeled into various locations in the art building on a hand truck. It allowed me to explore what it means for the artist to become a curator and how curation itself can function as art.

This miniature gallery installation served as an excellent proof of concept for how a mini mart structure might be built. Unlike that small gallery space however, accommodating customers entering the space was important, so I settled on 100 square feet as a ballpark size. Basing it on a modular wall system, this structure would be patterned on a loose interpretation of what I considered an idealized architecture of a mini mart, or an amalgamation of mini marts I had seen in my life.

As I formulated this idea of a mini mart structure in my mind, I became very excited about its many possibilities. Certainly a convenience store is nothing without merchandise, and I began to think about how it could be stocked with products. They could function not only as commercial commodities but also as art objects. I am very interested in the printmaking tradition

of editioning. I often wonder how the idea of editions can be applied to other mediums, especially sculpture or even non-art objects. I began to consider how every item in this shop could be an editioned object and that even non-art items, such as food and snacks, are editioned sculptures.

I also wondered if I could feasibly make “art” versions of more esoteric items. For example, magazines are common to find at most mini marts, and even music CDs or cassette tapes are sometimes sold as well (especially at truck stops). Remembering how my first small gallery space structure operated on the concept of me performing an artist-as-curator role, I thought it advantageous to integrate a collaborative effort on this front. I decided to invite friends that are musicians and artists to create specially made cassette tapes and artist zines just for the project.

Like any convenience store, my mini mart would need employees. While it would be interesting to arrange a cast of characters to act as these employees, I was not interested in a theatrical experience. I maintain an ownership over what happened in my mini mart and decided that I wanted to be the sole employee. While in a sense this put me in the role of performer, it did not function like a traditional work of performance; it was not about me, my body, or an assumed character. I would be myself in the space and my interactions would be real. This has roots in the development of relational art, a movement beginning in the 1990s and popularly theorized about by critic Nicolas Bourriaud. In his writing about relational aesthetics Bourriaud says that relational art takes “as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space.”<sup>1</sup>

Ultimately the premise for this project culminated in the following parameters: I would build a 9-by-12 foot structure assembled from a wooden modular wall system that I constructed.

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<sup>1</sup> Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. (Dijon: Les Presses Du Réel, 2002), 14.



This would lend itself to easy installation in public spaces. This structure would be designed to have consistent image and branding, from the paint job on the exterior to the products and items available on the interior. The products inside would include various snacks and soft drinks, as well as zines created by a curated set of artists and cassette tapes by local musicians. The installation would be erected in public and operated for one night only on a cool summer night, vanishing the next day. The convenience store would ultimately be named *Cozy Mart*.

## CONTEXT

While *Cozy Mart* is heavily based on my own experience, it also works upon various precedents in art history. Some predate my work significantly, yet others exist within such a brief historical timeframe that they could almost be considered a mutual discovery, something I'd hypothesize could be attested to the cultural influence on a generation.

The primary precedent for *Cozy Mart* however is Claes Oldenburg's *The Store* from 1961. As a prominent pop artist, Claes Oldenburg's work is typified by sculptures of popular commercial goods and food items. While working in a variety of media including large scale public sculpture, Oldenburg is also known for his "soft sculpture". These sculptures were often made of various textiles, sometimes painted, and stuffed like a plush toy. Made in various scales as recreations of everyday objects and foods, these soft sculptures alternate between feeling enticing and unsettling.

Preceding his vinyl sculptures, Oldenburg's work in his 1961 exhibition and installation *The Store* transformed his storefront studio space in Manhattan into a representation of a commercial space, filled with sculptures of various foods and clothing. These visceral sculptures were mainly constructed with plaster-coated muslin and painted wildly in rich colors. While *The Store* is made only in the appearance of an actual store and not functioning as one, everything in

the installation “is based on an industrial model but is also handmade and thus insists on its relationship to a subject.”<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to the aesthetic looseness of Oldenburg’s *The Store*, *Prada Marfa* by Elmgreen and Dragset feels incredibly specific. While still not an operational store, in 2005 artists Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset crafted a public installation that is every bit a recreation of a real Prada store.<sup>3</sup> Due in part to its rural desert location in Marfa, Texas as well the history of the area with the work of artist Donald Judd, *Prada Marfa* offers a similar theatricality that is found in most minimalist work.<sup>4</sup>

Oldenburg’s *The Store* and Elmgreen and Dragset’s *Prada Marfa* are both excellent examples of artists taking the idea of commercial spaces and transforming them into art installations. The aesthetics of retail environments are relatable to everyone. However, with *Cozy Mart*, I was interested in not just visual aesthetics. I wanted *Cozy Mart* to be installation at its base level, but moreover I wanted it to be experiential.

In league with my interest in the experiential element applied to simulated retail spaces is the work of several other artists and artist collectives. In 2009 Austin, Texas based art collective OK Mountain presented their installation *Corner Store* at the 2009 Pulse Miami Contemporary Art Fair. As a small scale recreation of a convenience store, it was stocked with art objects made by members of the collective and was staffed by them as well. Notably more inexpensive, these

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<sup>2</sup> Hochdörfer, Achim, Barbara Schröder, and Claes Oldenburg. *Claes Oldenburg: The Sixties*. (New York, NY: Prestel Publishing, 2012), 44.

<sup>3</sup> *The Prada Store That Got Lost in the Desert*. Messy Nessy Chic. July 18, 2012. Accessed October 06, 2016. <http://www.messynessychic.com/2012/07/18/the-prada-store-that-got-lost-in-the-desert>.

<sup>4</sup> Fried, Michael. *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 151.

artworks were sold by the members in the store for the duration of the art fair.<sup>5</sup> All of the work inside relied heavily on the use of humor and parody. Although I find the juvenile nature of this work interesting, with my work in *Cozy Mart*, I found myself more interested in creating art objects that are both sincere and actual merchandise.

In similar fashion to OK Mountain's *Corner Store*, the *Juxtapoz Newsstand* debuted as an installation at the Scope Miami 2014 art fair. First conceived as a cover illustration for an issue of the art magazine *Juxtapoz* by Kimou "Grotesk" Meyer, the *Juxtapoz Newsstand* was patterned after those commonly seen in New York City and sold a curated selection of artist books and prints.<sup>6</sup> Later installed in Times Square in New York City, the *Juxtapoz Newsstand* comes closer to my intentions for *Cozy Mart*. Especially in the case of its public installation (less so at an art fair), the *Juxtapoz Newsstand* more closely approximates its real-world counterpart in both appearance and function, something I wanted to translate to *Cozy Mart*.

Around the same time, the 8 Ball Zine Collective ran a newsstand in an abandoned New York subway storefront where they peddled various art zines. *The Newsstand* was then recreated in 2015 as part of the Museum of Modern Art's annual New Photography show.<sup>7</sup> One thing that is of value to me found in *The Newsstand* versus the *Juxtapoz Newsstand* is that while both are selling art objects, the cheap zines distributed by the 8 Ball Zine Collective are strongly rooted in punk and DIY culture. I wanted *Cozy Mart* to encompass elements of the anti-corporate and community driven sensibilities of punk and DIY ethics.

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<sup>5</sup> Nosari, Kelly. *Miami Art Fairs: Okay Mountain (Corner Store)*. DAILY SERVING. December 05, 09. Accessed October 06, 2016. <http://dailyserving.com/2009/12/miami-art-fairs-okay-mountain-corner-store>.

<sup>6</sup> *Juxtapoz Magazine - Announcing the T.SQ Newsstand*. *Juxtapoz Magazine*. October 08, 2015. Accessed October 06, 2016. <http://www.juxtapoz.com/news/announcing-the-t-sq-newsstand>.

<sup>7</sup> Wolens, Ariella. *The Newsstand: From MTA to MoMA*. Alldayeveryday. November 05, 2015. Accessed October 06, 2016. <http://www.alldayeveryday.com/articles/the-newsstand-from-mta-to-moma>.

Despite department store spaces and newsstands having similarities to convenience stores in a taxonomical way (if retail was a taxonomy), I wanted to know if other artists besides OK Mountain had done work based on convenience stores. In an exhibition titled *Canadissimo* in the Canadian pavilion at the 2015 Venice Art Biennale, artist trio BGL created several linked installation works, the first of which was a re-creation of a Canadian convenience store complete with typical merchandise from popular brand names. However, this convenience store was a front, in a physical sense, for the rest of the work. It acted as a threshold through which viewers could enter the rest of the installation.<sup>8</sup> The appearance of BGL's convenience store is the most realistic representation I discovered, but like *The Store* or *Prada Marfa* it was devoid of transaction based interaction. Still, one aspect that I liked about this part of *Canadissimo* is that it dispenses with the parody and cynicism found in projects like OK Mountain's *Corner Store*.

Of all the recent projects that set precedent for what I wanted to do with *Cozy Mart*, it's Tom Sachs *Bodega 245* that actually operates most similarly to the ideal I had in mind. Sculptor Tom Sachs has had his studio in New York for years and in 2015 set up the front of it as *Bodega 245*, a functioning bodega that sells typical fare: cigarettes, snacks, gum and more. *Bodega 245* also sells fake Swiss passports and other small inexpensive artist made items.<sup>9</sup> Like *Bodega 245*, I wanted *Cozy Mart* to sell the typical fare of a convenience store, or at least the equivalents of such. However, a bodega is an East coast interpretation of convenience which I don't necessarily relate to. As a native of the West coast, I view convenience stores mostly as free-standing buildings, and that is what I conceived *Cozy Mart* as.

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<sup>8</sup> *Video: BGL's Installation Unveiled - Canadian Art*. Canadian Art Video BGLs Installation Unveiled at the Canada Pavilion Comments. May 06, 2015. Accessed October 06, 2016. <http://canadianart.ca/features/bgls-canada-pavilion-opening-video>.

<sup>9</sup> Boyce, Simone. *Tom Sach's Bodega 245*. March 24, 2016. Accessed October 06, 2016. <http://www.fox5ny.com/news/113301536-story>.

## WORK

As previously mentioned, *Cozy Mart* has a physical structure that exists in a 9-by-12 foot footprint. Standing over 7-feet tall, it is constructed from modular wall sections that I built (each 34.5 inches wide). The entire structure is easy to assemble on location and also easy to store in a stack, not unlike the flat pack construction often employed in products by Swedish furniture maker Ikea. Two faces of the building feature open windows without glass, one of which has an open doorway for entry. On the interior the walls are covered with a clean white pegboard, suitable for display of various merchandise on hooks and shelves. The building is painted in a two-tone blue color scheme with any visible framing and rear exterior walls painted a rich medium blue and any inset paneling a calm light blue hue. On top of the structure is a small awning painted in broad alternating stripes of white and pink.

Due in part to rudimentary construction and bright and childlike color schemes *Cozy Mart* almost has a carnival like feel. Nevertheless, true to its name, *Cozy Mart* is an inviting space. The bright fluorescent lights which were installed inside the structure were a source of clear illumination. The small scale begs the viewer to enter. The way people interacted with the building, both from the outside and the inside, seemed to mimic the way children respond to the presence of playground equipment.

Primarily for promotion of future exhibition, an early iteration of *Cozy Mart* was first displayed as an empty shell in Brigham Young University's Harris Fine Arts Center in March 2016 (Fig. 1). The public exhibition of *Cozy Mart* took place from 7 to 11 p.m. on September 16, 2016 at 30 East 300 North in Provo, UT (Fig. 2). This performance was dependent not only on my presence as the artist operating *Cozy Mart* as a physical store, but also on the contents within.

I invited and supervised a group of artists I knew to create artist zines that could be sold in store as if they were part of the traditional magazine rack or newsstand (Fig. 3 & 4). The word zine is actually a truncation of the word fanzine, itself a portmanteau of the words fan or fanatic and magazine. Zines are typically self-published magazines or booklets, often photocopied, and are written or designed to cover a topic or topics suited to the author's interests. Popularized by early science-fiction and fantasy fans and then part of the DIY and punk rock movements of the 70s and 80s, zines have flourished to cover a wide range of subjects and are often made as an artistic pursuit.

Keeping in mind branding as part of my overall concept, I kept all the zines in *Cozy Mart* constrained to a few design parameters. All zines conformed to one of three sizes (half letter, half legal, or half tabloid), were only printed in black and white, and had a single color paper cover. Topics of these zines as produced by artists included the mundane, the spiritual, science, aesthetics, and more.

In tandem with the artist zines, I also produced a stock of music cassette tapes that featured songs by many different musical acts (Fig. 5 & 6). Each tape was a cassette single of a different musician or band featuring a single A side and B side track. Each cassette tape was packaged in a jewel box with a cover printed in black and white on a single color piece of paper using designs, photographs, or found imagery I prepared. The various colors of paper the covers were printed on were chosen to mimic those of the colorful covers of the artist zines.

I also created *Cozy-Mart*-branded merchandise to sell in the store (Fig. 7 & 8). This included T-shirts, foam mesh baseball caps, bandanas, and drink “koozies.” These were all available in the *Cozy Mart* colors of blues and pinks.

Lastly, no convenience store can exist without its primary commodity of snacks, candy, and beverages. I was initially interested in how I could personally manufacture all of these things on my own, but the feasibility of such an endeavor led me down a path that focused more on the curation and presentation of such items in *Cozy Mart*. I did manage to mold my own candy bars, packaging them under various names (Fig. 9) such as “Triple Threat,” “Cookie Bustups,” “Dr. Almonds,” etc. but for all other types of snacks and candies, from banana chips, nuts, gummies, hard candies and more, I looked to emulate the products of the Sather's brand of candy which typically sells in gas stations and mini marts nationwide.

Sather's packages bulk candies in cellophane bags with a paper hangtag. Taking this form as a pattern, I purchased a large amount of various snacks and packaged them with bright blue, pink, and yellow hang tags simply labelled in a bold font 'SNACKS' (Fig. 10 & 11). I made several of each kind and considered them to function as semi-readymade sculptural editions.

I knew I had to stock existing brands of soda because I could not manufacture my own. I had considered the implications of what it might be like to include popular brands such as Coke or Pepsi but I felt that artistically these are usually relegated to use in critiques of consumerism. I am more interested in a unified and sincere experience, and I felt that these brands would be outliers among all the other products. Ultimately, I decided that I would use a variety of flavors of soda pop made by Shasta (Fig. 12). I felt that Shasta was both generic enough to fit within the aesthetics of the rest of *Cozy Mart* yet had just enough brand familiarity that most people have heard of the company. Further, due to its low cost and generic product positioning, Shasta is a sometimes maligned brand, and for me that felt pitiful and endearing and thereby deserving of a spot in my store.

With *Cozy Mart*, I assumed several different roles. On one hand, I am artist-as-curator. I am both exhibiting the work of others in an act of communal promotion as well as using the work of others as a material component of an installation, not unlike a painter uses a palette of different paints. Secondly, the performative aspect of *Cozy Mart* places me in the position of convenience store clerk. I want to stress that while this is performative, it is not performance art proper; my role as the clerk of *Cozy Mart* is more accurately positioned as being an analog of a gallery attendant in mini mart guise. In this way I am modifying traditional art-world roles to function in alternative modes.

As much as it was intended to simulate a real convenience store, *Cozy Mart* actually exists as an intersection between what a convenience store is and what an art exhibition is. This relationship of art exhibition *as* convenience store presented a set of challenges. Typically art, or high art, is sold as an aesthetic commodity for large dollar sums. Conversely, typical convenience store goods are nominally inexpensive. Further, I was interested in the idea of *Cozy Mart* operating from an anti-profit standpoint. In other words, I was not concerned with making money, and so I priced the items in *Cozy Mart* such that even if I sold everything I would never get anywhere near the overhead of the construction of the installation itself or the manufacture or acquisition of the products within. By pricing all the shirts and hats at just \$7, and all the zines, tapes, bandanas, and koozies at only \$2 each I wanted to foster an environment of economic generosity, an idea that can be traced back to DIY and punk ethics which historically stress the importance of affordability. In addition, all snacks and sodas were free of charge. While partly a practical consideration in relation to food handling regulations, providing these items for free to attendees can be seen as analogous to providing refreshments at a typical exhibition, and also serves to reinforce the “cheap-or-free” economy I sought to create. I felt that this really



democratized the experience of what it means to go to an art exhibition and for the viewer to so freely be able to acquire works of art.

At the exhibition a large group of people were in attendance (Fig. 13). While it tapered off after an initial rush, there were frequent visitors through the rest of the evening. Due to some of the hype in the way I had advertised the exhibition in the week leading up to it, some of the products sold out rather quickly, namely t-shirts and hats. With such a large crowd it was to be expected, but it did not necessarily undermine the experience or aesthetic of *Cozy Mart* as the night wore on.

It was also interesting to see the sort of surprise and awe when *Cozy Mart* was encountered by a passerby who was not previously aware of its existence. A pop-up shop might be a known occurrence to a typical resident in a large metropolitan city, but for a place like Provo, the situation feels more peculiar. I am interested in this peculiarity and how it can make something like *Cozy Mart* seem inviting yet alien, as if it were a timeless scene plucked out of cinema.

#### CONCLUSION/POTENTIAL

The operation of *Cozy Mart* served as an alternative mode of exhibition. Largely attended by the local art community, it felt like a community gathering just as much as a store. Certainly the inclusion of work by other artists influenced this as attendees came to acquire this merchandise in addition to visiting *Cozy Mart* as an exhibition.

I had only planned for *Cozy Mart* to occur one time, but after a positive response from those in attendance, I wondered how it would work to reprise the work. Just in the act of the initial showing *Cozy Mart* was stripped of most of its contents. If I were to reprise it, more merchandise would need to be made, but it seems both sterile and impractical to try to reproduce

what was in it before. I think what would be most interesting is collaborating on zines and other new products with a different cast of artists, especially if the reprisal was in another locale. In this way, *Cozy Mart* not only becomes a project that is experiential but also communal; every time it is performed it is different, and each iteration could be a reflection of the community it currently exists in.

IMAGES



Fig. 1 - *Cozy Mart* as installed in the Harris Fine Arts Center on BYU Campus.



Fig. 2 - *Cozy Mart* publicly installed at 30 E 300 N in Provo, UT.



Fig. 3 - Selection of artist made zines available at *Cozy Mart*.



Fig. 4 - Selection of artist made zines available at *Cozy Mart* (cont.)



Fig. 5 - Selection of music cassette tapes available at *Cozy Mart*.





Fig. 6 - Selection of cassette tapes available at *Cozy Mart* (cont.)



Fig. 7 - Branded merchandise available at *Cozy Mart* (hats and shirts).



Fig. 8 - Branded merchandise available at *Cozy Mart* (drink koozies and bandanas)



Fig. 9 - Handmade candy bars available at *Cozy Mart*.





Fig. 10 - Packaged candy and snacks available at *Cozy Mart*.



Fig. 11 - Packaged candy and snacks available at *Cozy Mart* (cont.)



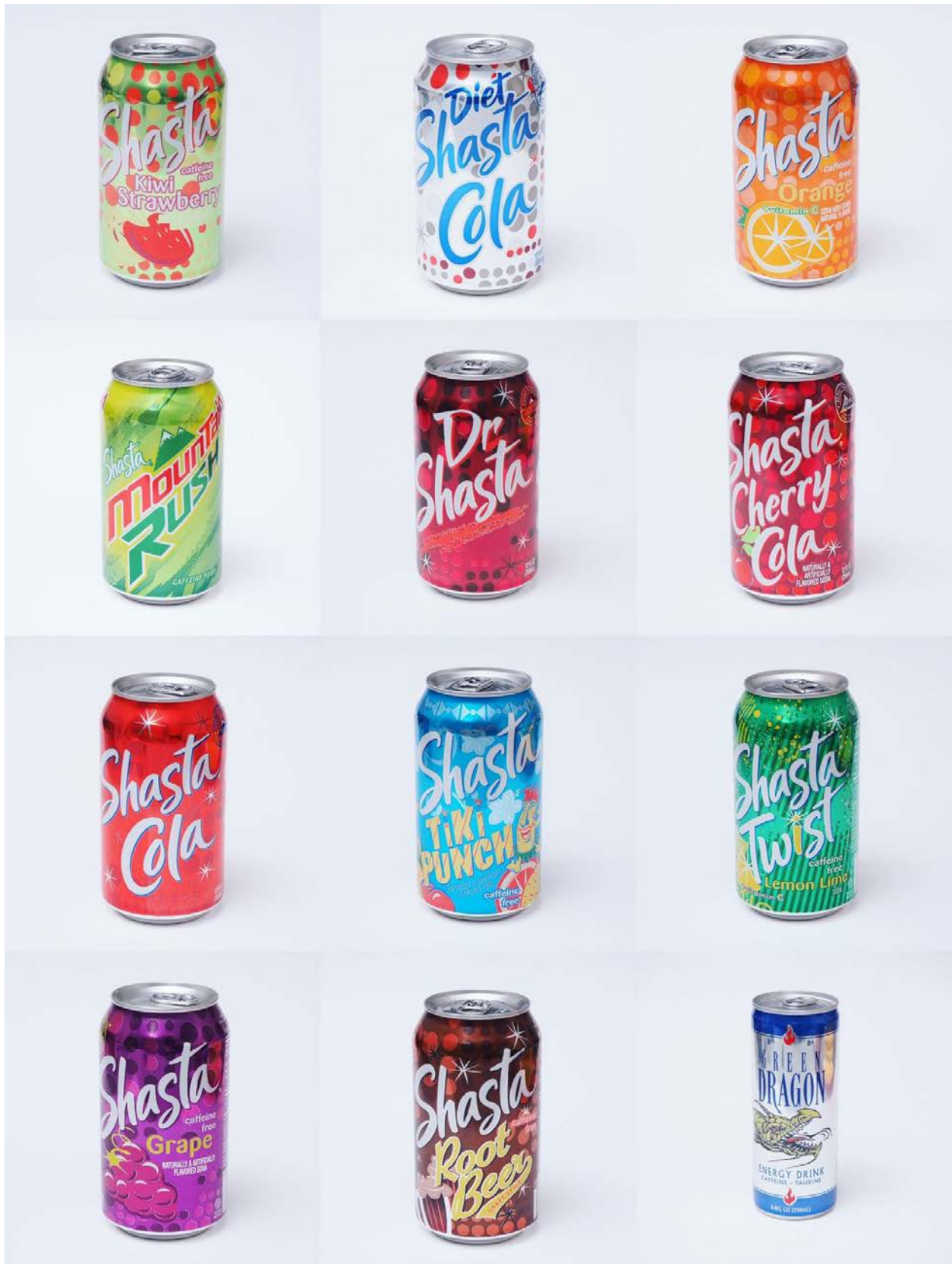


Fig. 12 - Curated selection of soft drinks available at Cozy Mart.



Fig. 13 - Performance of *Cozy Mart*.

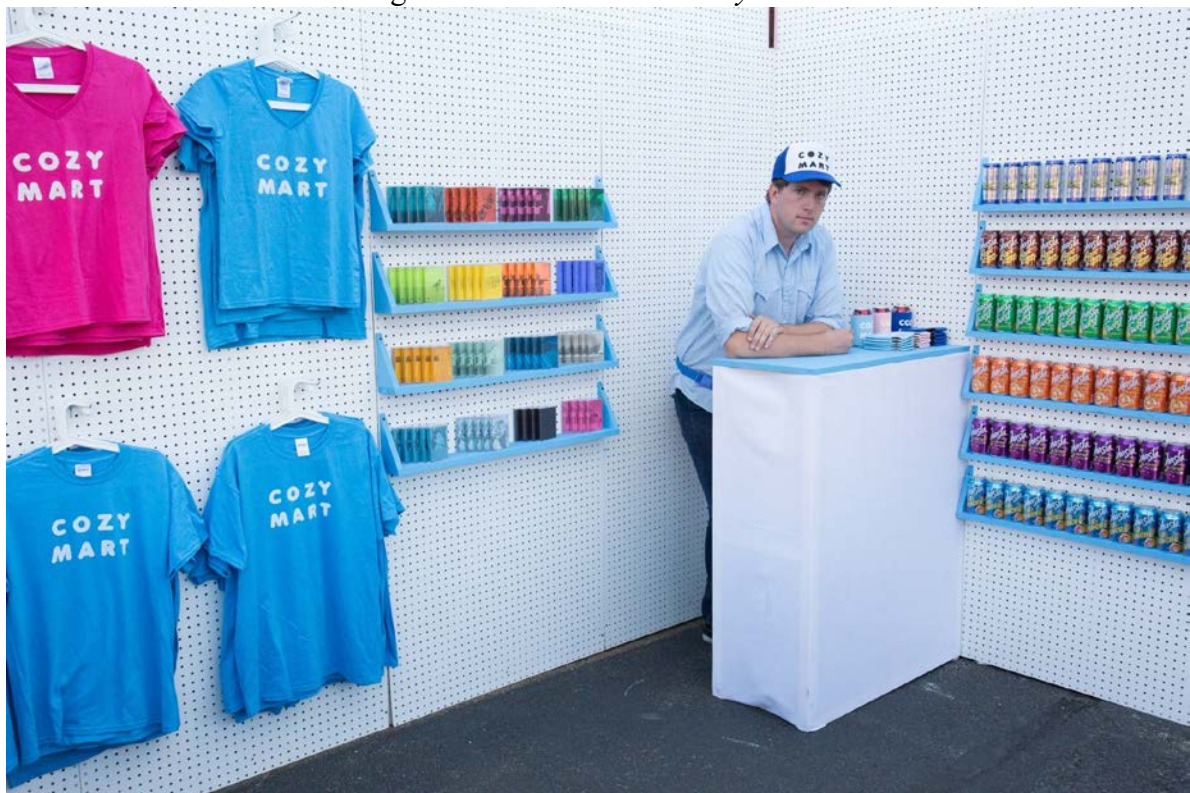


Fig. 14 - Performance of *Cozy Mart*/installation view.





Fig. 15 - Installation view.



Fig. 16 - Installation view.

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