

THE MAGIC HALF-MILLION

This project was undertaken largely to satisfy my curiosity about the extent of printed paraphernalia used in the marketing of the Reader's Digest Sweepstakes competition. Like other people I know, my name has occasionally made an appearance on the Digest's mailing list and over the years I've received two or three addressed packages crammed with impressive-looking documents, each inviting a complicated response via either a brightly coloured envelope marked YES, or one printed in a dull monochrome marked NO.

I didn't respond to the invitations - partly from a stingy reluctance to throw money away on what I thought was little more than a raffle - but also because I was wary of being caught up in a net of advertising made all the more cloying by the fact it was personalised. In 2012 however, after completing a doctorate on the subject of monetary imitation, I took a more analytical approach to the mailings and entered the 2012 "Magic Million" sweepstakes competition. In order to attract as much direct marketing ephemera as possible I also answered "YES!" to the magazine subscription offer, while at the same time hoping to avoid purchasing any of the accessory products the competition is designed to sell. My singular ambition was to explore the seemingly endless range of graphic devices invented by the copywriters and art directors of the sweepstakes marketing teams. A flood of promotional mail was immediately released - all of it addressing "Dr. Hurlle" with a mix of urgency and affinity that was somewhat unsettling. To my relief much of the paraphernalia took the form of monetary imitation that I was particularly interested in. I was also pleased to discover that in the deluge of cheques, certificates, bonds and even a passport, there was almost no repetition. Everything seemed to have been custom designed for once-only use.

The fact that it had come into the orbit of my doctoral research wasn't the only reason I entered the sweepstakes. Having been an artist for 25 years now and for most of that time living on student scholarships, grants and income from occasional teaching, I've never really entertained the idea of buying a house with savings. Winning a fortune in one fell swoop is the only way I'll ever be able to own real estate and I'm sure this is the case with many other people. It's also the shameful reason I enter charity raffles, not to support the charity, but because I don't have any other chance of affording a new car.

The possibility of purchasing a home (in this case an apartment and studio in Berlin) together with everything else that half a million dollars might buy was, for following eight months, accommodated within the possibility of winning the magic half-million jackpot. In the case of a lottery this chance is embodied in the object of the ticket—a special type of monetary security with a relatively brief period of currency. The sweepstakes, however, distinguish themselves from lotteries by being formulated around winning numbers that have been drawn in advance and so their promotion consists of a persistent stream of encouragement that revolves around the slogan: "You may have already won", an irritating incentive to keep up with the organiser's incessant solicitations and product purchase offers. From the organiser's point of view it is like trying to keep a blood-donor from slipping into a fatal coma. For the entrant it seems like each prompt requires a response so as not to be disqualified for a prize to which they might have already won.

The pay-off (if one discounts for a moment the string of books and accessories on offer) is, of course, the extended and pleasurable fantasy of wealth which cultivates in the entrant's mind from the moment they enter the competition until it is dispelled by the winning announcements. The self-delusion is fuelled by spirited and personalised appeals by the organiser who seems to reach back from beyond the winning-post, urging the entrant to decide now whether they wish to later receive a Mercedes Benz in blue or in green, whether their prize money should take the form a lump sum or payments in perpetuity and what should be included on the menu at the winner's celebration banquet.

Needless to say, I wasn't one of the winners of that year's competition and when I saw the name of Mr. S. F. Douglas of Waitara, NZ heading the list published in the newspaper classifieds, I felt cheated (in spite of any scholarly objectivity I pretend to). It was true that having collected all this material counted for something - a promising foundation for a series of artworks perhaps - but over the duration of the competition it had also accumulated into a certified assurance of success, so when was over I experienced disappointment, scepticism and defeat - a cathartic antidote to the optimism for which the Reader's Digest is famous. The opiate fantasy that I had inhabited for so long turned out to be a shabby form of rental accommodation. To make matters worse, I continued to receive at least one mailing package a week - each one in calculated ignorance of the fact that I had been already been shown up as a loser. On one occasion I even had to call the company and complain about being billed for a book I wasn't aware I had ordered*.

The material exhibited here is presented in a deliberately documentary manner. It reflects an attempt to visualise the extent of the promotional campaign as well my desire to organise what arrived as a serial progression of mail into a total schematic, so as to better appreciate its density and volume.

The collection covers a period of about eight months and actually crosses over two "Magic Millions" competitions - a fact that took me by surprise and which I only discovered when reviewing the fine print on a few of the wordier documents. For all its urgency and time-limited offers, the promotion contains almost no absolute dates—only relative ones: 72 hours to respond, return within 3 days, reply today! Each campaign segues seamlessly into the next, which gives the slightly nightmarish impression that the sweepstakes are running constantly as a backdrop to everything else in your impoverished life - there is *always* the possibility that you may have already won.

Andrew Hurlle 2013

*I did, however, willingly purchase *Extraordinary Uses for Ordinary Things*: a book with which I am still completely satisfied.