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Greed In the Name Of Green

To Worshipers of Consumption: Spending Won't Save the Earth

By Monica Hesse
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Congregation of the Church of the Holy Organic, let us buy.

Let us buy Anna Sova Luxury Organics Turkish towels, 900 grams per square meter, \$58 apiece. Let us buy the eco-friendly 600-thread-count bed sheets, milled in Switzerland with U.S. cotton, \$570 for queen-size.

Let us purge our closets of those sinful synthetics, purify ourselves in the flame of the soy candle at the altar of the immaculate Earth Weave rug, and let us *buy*, buy, buy until we are whipped into a beatific froth of free-range fulfillment.

And let us never consider the other organic option -- *not* buying -- because the new green *consumer* wants to consume, to be more celadon than emerald, in the right color family but muted, without all the hand-me-down baby clothes and out-of-date carpet.

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There was a time, and it was pre-Al Gore, when buying organic meant eggs and tomatoes, Whole Foods and farmer's markets. But in the past two years, the word has seeped out of the supermarket and into the home store, into the vacation industry, into the Wal-Mart. Almost three-quarters of the U.S. population buys organic products at least occasionally; between 2005 and 2006 the sale of organic non-food items increased 26 percent, from \$744 million to \$938 million, according to the Organic Trade Association.

Green is the new black, carbon is the new kryptonite, blah blah blah. The privileged eco-friendly American realized long ago that SUVs were Death Stars; now we see that our gas-only Lexus is one, too. Best replace it with a 2008 LS 600 *hybrid* for \$104,000 (it actually gets fewer miles per gallon than some traditional makes, but, see, it is a hybrid). Accessorize the interior with an organic Sherpa car seat cover for only \$119.99.

Consuming until you're squeaky green. It feels so good. It looks so good. It feels so good to look so good, which is why conspicuousness is key.

These countertops are pressed paper.

Have I shown you my recycled platinum engagement ring?

In the past two weeks, our inbox has runneth over with giddily organic products: There's the 100 percent Organic Solana Swaddle Wrap, designed to replace baby blankets we did not even know were evil. There's the Valentine's pitch, "Forget Red -- The color of love this season is Green!" It is advertising a water filter. There are the all-natural wasabi-covered goji berries, \$30 for a snack six-pack, representing "a rare feat for wasabi."

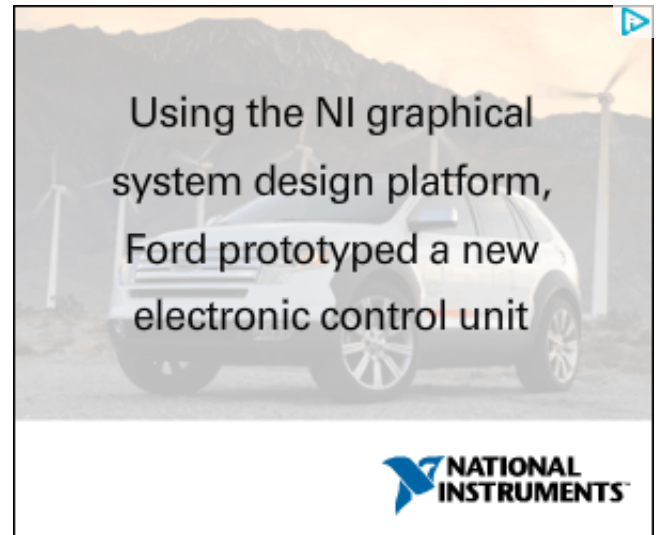
There is the rebirth of Organic Style magazine, now only online but still as fashionable as ever, with a shopping section devoted to organic jewelry, organic pet bedding, organic garden decor, which apparently means more than "flowers" and "dirt."

When renowned environmentalist Paul Hawken is asked to comment on the new green consumer, he says, dryly, "The phrase itself is an oxymoron."

Oh ho?

"The good thing is people are waking up to the fact that we have a real [environmental] issue," says Hawken, who co-founded Smith & Hawken but left in 1992, before the \$8,000 lawn became de rigueur. "But many of them are coming to the issue from being consumers. They buy a lot. They drive a lot."

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They subscribe, in other words, to a destiny laid out by economist Victor Lebow, writing in 1955: "Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction . . . in consumption. . . . We need things consumed, burned up, replaced and discarded at an ever-accelerating rate."

The culture of obsolescence has become so deeply ingrained that it's practically reflexive. Holey sweaters get pitched, not mended. Laptops and cellphones get slimmer and shinier and smaller. We trade up every six months, and to make up for that, we buy and buy and hope we're buying the right *other* things, though sometimes we're not sure: When the Hartman Group, a market research firm, asked a group of devout green consumers what the USDA "organic" seal meant when placed on a product, 43 percent did not know. (The seal means that the product is at least 95 percent organic -- no pesticides, no synthetic hormones, no sewage sludge, no irradiation, no cloning.)

Which is why, when wannabe environmentalists try to change purchasing habits without also altering their consumer mind-set, something gets lost in translation.

Polyester = bad. Solution? Throw out the old wardrobe and replace with natural fibers!

Linoleum = bad. Solution? Rip up the old floor and replace with cork!

Out with the old, in with the green.

It's done with the best of intentions, but all that replacing is problematic. That "bad" vinyl flooring? It was probably less destructive in your kitchens than in a landfill (unless, of course, it was a health hazard). Ditto for the older, but still wearable, clothes.

And that's not even getting into the carbon footprint left by a nice duvet's 5,000-mile flight from Switzerland. (Oh, all right: a one-way ticket from Zurich to Washington produces about 1,500 pounds of carbon dioxide.)

Really going green, Hawken says, "means having less. It *does* mean less. Everyone is saying, 'You don't have to change your lifestyle.' Well, yes, actually, you *do*."

But, but, but -- buying green feels so *guilt less*, akin to the mentality that results in eating 14 of Whole Foods' two-bite cupcakes. Their first ingredient is cane sugar, but in a land of high-fructose panic, that's practically a health food, right? Have another.

"There's a certain thrill, that you get to go out and replace everything," says Leslie Garrett, author of "The Virtuous Consumer," a green shopping guide. "New bamboo T-shirts, new hemp curtains."

Garrett describes the conflicting feelings she and her husband experienced when trying to decide whether to toss an old living room sofa: "Our dog had chewed on it -- there were only so many positions we could put it in" without the teeth marks showing. But it still fulfilled its basic role as a sofa: "We could still sit on it without falling through."

They could still make do. They could still, in this recession-wary economy, where everyone tries to cut back, subscribe to the crazy notion that conservation was about . . . conserving. Says Garrett, "The greenest products are the ones you don't buy."

There are exceptions. "Certain environmental issues trump other issues," Garrett says. "Preserving fossil fuels is more critical than landfill issues." If your furnace or fridge is functioning but inefficient, you can replace it guilt-free.

Ultimately, Garrett and her husband did buy a new sofa (from Ikea -- Garrett appreciated the company's ban on carcinogens). But they made the purchase only after finding another home for their old couch -- a college student on Craigslist was happy to take it off their hands.

The sofa example is what Josh Dorfman, host of the Seattle radio show "The Lazy Environmentalist," considers to be a best-case scenario for the modern consumer. "Buying stuff is intrinsically wrapped up in our identities," Dorfman says. "You can't change that behavior. It's better to say, 'You're a crazy shopaholic. You're not going to stop being a crazy shopaholic. But if you're going to buy 50 pairs of jeans, buy them from this better place.'"

Then again, his show is called "The Lazy Environmentalist."

Chip Giller, editor of enviro-blog Grist.org, has a less fatalistic view. He loves that Wal-Mart has developed an organic line. He applauds the efforts of the green consumer. "Two years ago, who would have thought

we'd be in a place where terms like locavore and carbon footprint were household terms?" he says, viewing green consumption as a "gateway" to get more people involved in environmental issues. The important thing is for people to keep walking through the gate, toward the land of reduced air travel, energy-efficient homes and much less stuff: "We're not going to buy our way out of this."

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Congregation of the Church of the Holy Organic, let us scrub our sins away with Seventh Generation cleaning products. Let us go ahead and bite into the locally grown apple, and let us replace our incandescent light bulbs with those dreadfully expensive fluorescents.

But yea, though we walk through the valley of the luxury organic, let us purchase no imported Sherpa car seat covers. Let us use the old one, even though it is ugly, because our toddler will spill Pom juice on the organic one just as quickly as on the hand-me-down.

Amen.

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