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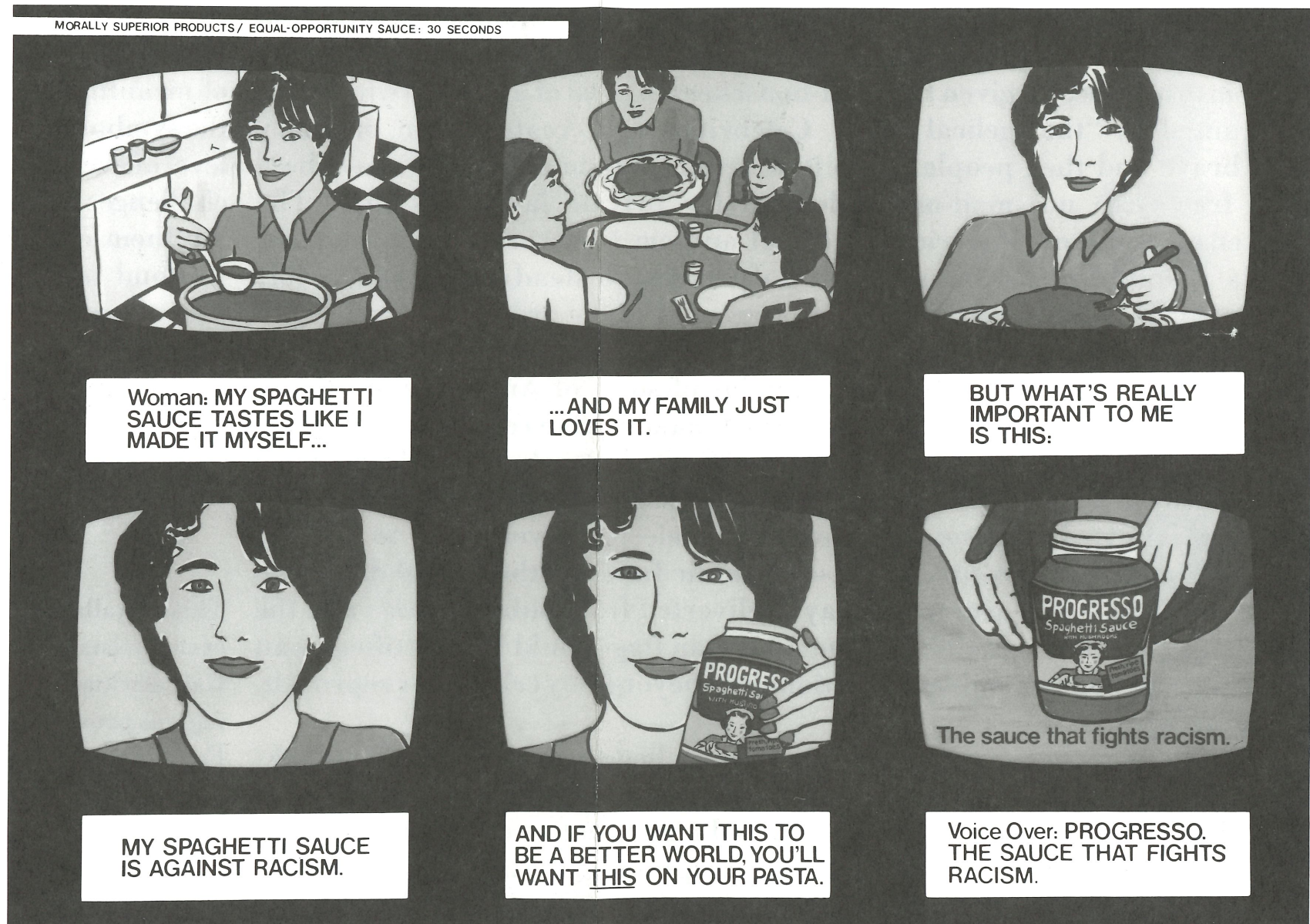
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Have You Attacked America Today? Is this a serious question? Have you attacked America today? (And if not why not?) Of course it's a serious question. It's a question about America and a question about ourselves, and it goes straight to the heart of things. Who are we, what have we done, and what will we do about the state of things in America? (And there is a subtle emphasis on the word "state.")

Have we attacked America today? Should we attack America today? Is it even permissible to attack America? Whose America should we attack? Which America should we attack? As with any substantive enquiry, there

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Erika Rothenberg. *Equal Opportunity Sauce*, 1982. 27 1/4 x 39 1/2". Acrylic on paper.

is no single answer, no unilateral response. Just as America is a complex of systems, economies, cultures, and ideologies, so the explicit answer to this question is equally multiple and ambivalent. There is no answer to this question which can make sense. Instead there can be a response. It makes you think. It makes you think about what is America. Can it be defined, can it be held to singular description, can it be pinned down so easily to become a target? It makes you think about the implied violence in the word "attack." It makes you think about criticism, and in the question which titles this installation, criticism of the environment one lives in and the con-

An Installation By Erika Rothenberg

ditions one lives under, and the rules and commonplace rituals which govern those conditions.

The problems that Erika Rothenberg raises with her work and with this window installation in particular, suggest that some of the things that seem to have been taken for granted in "the home of the brave and the land of the free" can no longer be taken at their face value. This installation points out that many of the freedoms and the liberalism seemingly enshrined within the American Constitution are in fact elusive, and delicately poised between reality and redundancy. In America the space between the hard sell and the soft option in corporate marketing and government policy is rapidly disappearing. The rights of individuals to be different and express difference are being ameliorated in favor of *mass-mediocrity*, a media-based process of transforming independence and difference into homogeneity and equivalence.

The work in this installation adopts satire and irony of the most banal kind, where

advertising and the news media are used as models to re-package desire in exactly the same way as they are used in corporate America, as a reductive and simplistic slogan or product. The ambiguity of the messages the artist has selected are completely ignored or overshadowed by the implications of their promotion and their vigorous display of style. The mundane absurdities, contradictions, and real moral dilemmas of everyday life are transformed into safe, wholesome, and fun experiences. Dissent, controversies, and taboos are given the good-housekeeping seal of approval with evangelical zeal. Celebrities are created from ordinary people. "Do it yourself" flag-burning kits could be a mail-order delight (for private law-breaking). The American national anthem is reworked with pungent references to social problems instead of patriotic fervor. Yet none of this seems out of the ordinary. Or does it?

The resilient agendas of some of America's most stridently repressive law-makers have re-emerged this past summer with a coordinated attack on the freedom of speech in America. Two issues have stood out: the desire of some sections of the elected government to directly control the use of public funds so that social dissent in art images may be diverted from public access; and the desire that the American flag should be sanctified as an emblem of nationalism beyond any critique or reproach.

Rothenberg has approached these questions by invoking the commonplace assaults of the mass media, commodity fetishism, and manipulative corporatism which are so familiar and acceptable to the blasé consciousness of America. By penetrating these styles and reproducing them with oppositional points of view, she neither subverts nor reinforces their message. In this case subversion or reinforcement is impossible, because of the powerlessness of the individual to influence or erode the resistance to change of most aspects of the government, the corporate world, and the media within America. Rather, with considerable wit and humor, she wants to

participate in these debates, to raise interesting and arresting questions, and to make us think about what is happening in America today. Rothenberg's challenge is not to the system, of government or corporations, it is a challenge to the viewer to participate in the exchange of meanings taking place at the symbolic level and at the level of everyday living. She challenges viewers to decide for themselves how best to respond to the broader issues of racism, nationalism, censorship, and the commodification of experience.

Gary Sangster
Curator

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The individual views expressed in the exhibitions and publications are not necessarily those of the Museum.