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## MAGAZINE DESK

## THE WAY WE LIVE NOW: 9-19-04: CONSUMED; Sole Mate

By **ROB WALKER (NYT)** 739 words

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### Medium Footwear

Josh Rubin, a blogger and designer based in New York, maintains a Web site he calls Cool Hunting, a regularly updated catalog of things (sneakers, gadgets, household products, etc.) that he finds interesting or inspiring. Not long ago he posted an item about Medium Footwear, a small shoe company founded by designers and "targeting Cultural Creatives -- a class of people who are responsible for designing and communicating many of the products and services you use today." Rubin confessed that he had actually been hip to Medium for about eight months but had held off telling his Web audience because he "wanted them to be my own little secret."

Medium Footwear's shoes started showing up in stores in the summer of 2003, moving gradually from boutiques into high-end department stores -- the SoHo Bloomingdale's now carries some of its models, and some Saks locations will in the fall. There are more than a dozen styles for men and women, ranging in price from \$80 to \$150, and the designs are, as Rubin suggested, striking and original. Each shoe has a title and a byline crediting its individual designer: Alchemist by Eric Meyer, for example, uses a mix of suede, nubuck and nylon on a cork-and-rubber base. As the company's promotional materials and Web site make clear, the pitch to "the cultural creative class" is explicit. "We design the logos, cars, fashion, buildings, coffee machines, television sets, computers . . . even the toothbrushes," a brief manifesto on the site explains. "This group sets all the trends and begins the fads . . . we decide what is cool."

Sadly, members of this group do have one problem, which is that they are hard to identify and thus may not even realize that they form a class at all. Medium, according to its site, "hopes to help this group of people recognize one another."

O.K. But wouldn't the creative semi-artist prefer to spurn group identity altogether, in favor of being a unique individual (who sets trends and starts fads)? Or, at the very least, don't they want to avoid a de facto uniform? Presumably that's one reason Rubin kept Medium and its cool designs to himself for a while.

Medium's co-founder and C.E.O., Scott Milden, has an answer to these questions. One of his partners (and the Alchemist creator), Meyer, was a founder of Vision Street Wear, which makes skateboard shoes. It was preceded by Vans, but those sneakers had just been "sort of adopted" by skateboarders, Milden explains, while Vision identified, catered to and defined a "market segment" that is now a huge category. So, yes, skateboarders may be nonconformist, but they responded with dollars when a shoemaker targeted them as a class.

Designers are "alpha consumers," Milden says. "So we wanted to build a brand that is a designer's brand." And as if being an alpha consumer weren't thrilling enough, these folks deserve attention for their creativity too, Milden argues. "If you're awesome at writing software, then that's cool, that's creative, that's expression, you're actually doing something, building something, rather than being a stockbroker. Stockbrokers can buy their Kenneth Coles."

Here is the flip side of any group-identity signifier: Saying who is not in the group. In his entertaining 2002 book, "Snobbery: The American Version," Joseph Epstein writes about "the need we all seem to have to elevate ourselves

above those among whom we live." This may seem surprising in our supposedly class-free society, where elevating ourselves solely through merit is prized. But snobbery is robust, wily and multifaceted. In fact, as much as I liked Medium's designs, my reaction to the sales pitch was that I wanted nothing whatsoever to do with a bunch of smug design aristocrats. I was overcome, in other words, with what's often called reverse snobbery but is really more like retaliatory snobbery.

As Epstein also writes, snobbery "makes life in at least one respect easier for snobs, freeing people who employ it from the need to pass individual judgments and instead at one stroke to write off entire groups, types, social classes." That's right, and it works every time -- even in a society where true class markers are so fluid that each citizen is left to design his or her own snobbery pattern from scratch.

Drawing (Drawing by Philippe Lardy)