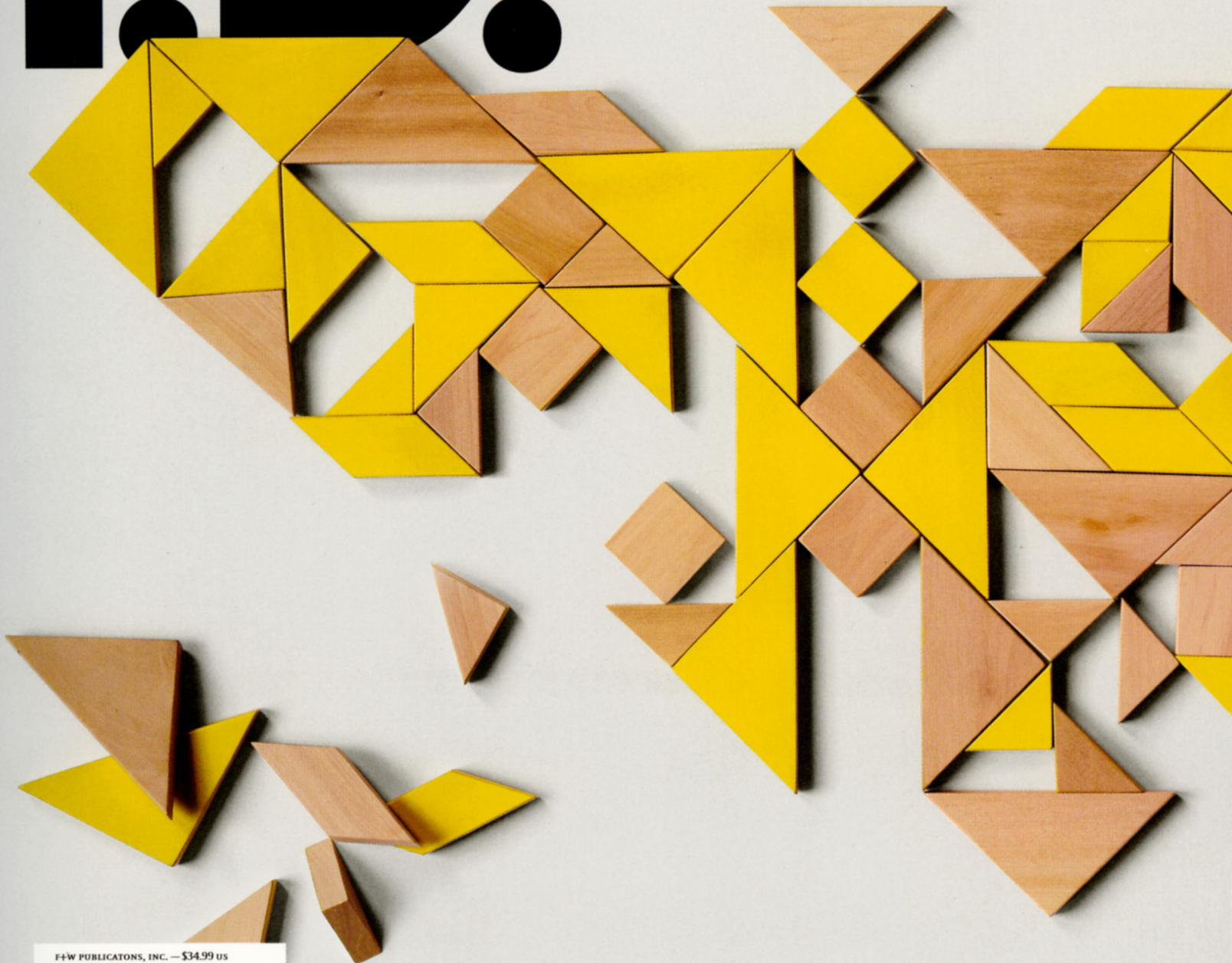


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Puma PT3 Ultramagnetic Collection

Among the big three sneaker brands, Puma strives hardest for an identity. Denied Nike's weekend-warrior loyalty and Adidas's old-school authenticity, Puma now cross-trains almost exclusively in fashion and design. Seeking its own sport to colonize and accessorize, the shoemaker hit, improbably, upon Ping-Pong.

Eager to appeal to hipsters more than Chinese Olympians, Puma charged the New York firm Aruliden with creating a grand prize and emblem for its Puma Table Tennis Tournaments (a.k.a. "PT3"), held annually since 2006 in downtown Manhattan. There was no brief, no market research to consider, and no tradition of table tennis gear for the designers to draw upon, either. All they had to play with was the Ping-Pong ball and paddle.

Principals Rinat Aruh and Johan Liden first toyed with reengineering the standard glue-and-balsa paddle for the carbon-fiber age, but ultimately balked at such heresy. Electing instead to invent a sleeker package for the sport, they produced a balls-and-paddle set encased in a smooth expanse of milky black or white plastic and cushioned in EVA foam—the material science of a bicycle helmet mated with the aesthetics of an iPod.

Their coup—the one that lends the set its name—was embedding magnets in the rim of each case, which snap it together seamlessly. "Look at the role magnets play in lipsticks or the power cables of the MacBook," Aruh says. "There's such beautiful functionality involved."

The jurors couldn't have agreed more. They discovered the Ultramagnetic Collection with a joyous whoop and brandished the cases all morning. ("We thought this could be the paddle itself!" said Burks.) They not only praised the use of materials, but also raved, while practicing their forehands, about the understated application of Puma's logo—a single cat debossed on each case. "I love that there's no printing on this," said Reyes. "The lack of a big logo makes it unique. You have so much loud stuff on the shelves these days."

"You're not trying to show off the brand," said Burks. "You're just carrying this useful thing. And maybe that's why I like it. It's Puma, but it doesn't have to scream it. It's confident about what's inside."

Q+A with Rinat Aruh and Johan Liden, Aruliden

You're a small, young firm (less than a year old when the PT3 came about) and you hadn't done work for Puma before. Did you pitch this as a concept? Or did they approach you?

Aruh: Puma came to us and said, "We're doing this great event called PT3. It would be great to have a product built around it." We looked around and saw there were no accessories for Ping-Pong in the industry, which raised an interesting question: How do you design something that is not part of Puma's core line, but is strong enough to be timeless, iconic, and create fans? So we came back to them with the idea for a case. There really wasn't a brief.

The only other paddle case I've ever seen is in waxed cotton, by Jack Spade. It obviously couldn't look and feel more different from yours. What was your inspiration?

Liden: Ping-Pong hasn't had a facelift in a long time, and we introduced some new ways of thinking: This case has no zippers or seams, for example, like old-school cases from the '70s did. Simplicity was our inspiration from a graphics point of view—pure reduction. And it was important to find a material that was unexpected. We wanted to change the whole feel of the case and to find some intuitive way to open and close it. We didn't want to make how the thing works obvious. You can't see the magnets; it just snaps shut, like that.

The judges were immediately drawn to the functional simplicity of your design. Is that a hallmark of your approach?

Aruh: We went with magnets because it was the one solution that didn't need an instruction manual. Keeping it simple goes back to what we're about: The product should be so good that you don't need an ad campaign. You can set it on a table and photograph it. There's your ad campaign.

Design Aruliden (New York): Rinat Aruh and Johan Liden, principals;

Tyler Askew, graphic designer

Client Puma

Materials ABS plastic, EVA foam

