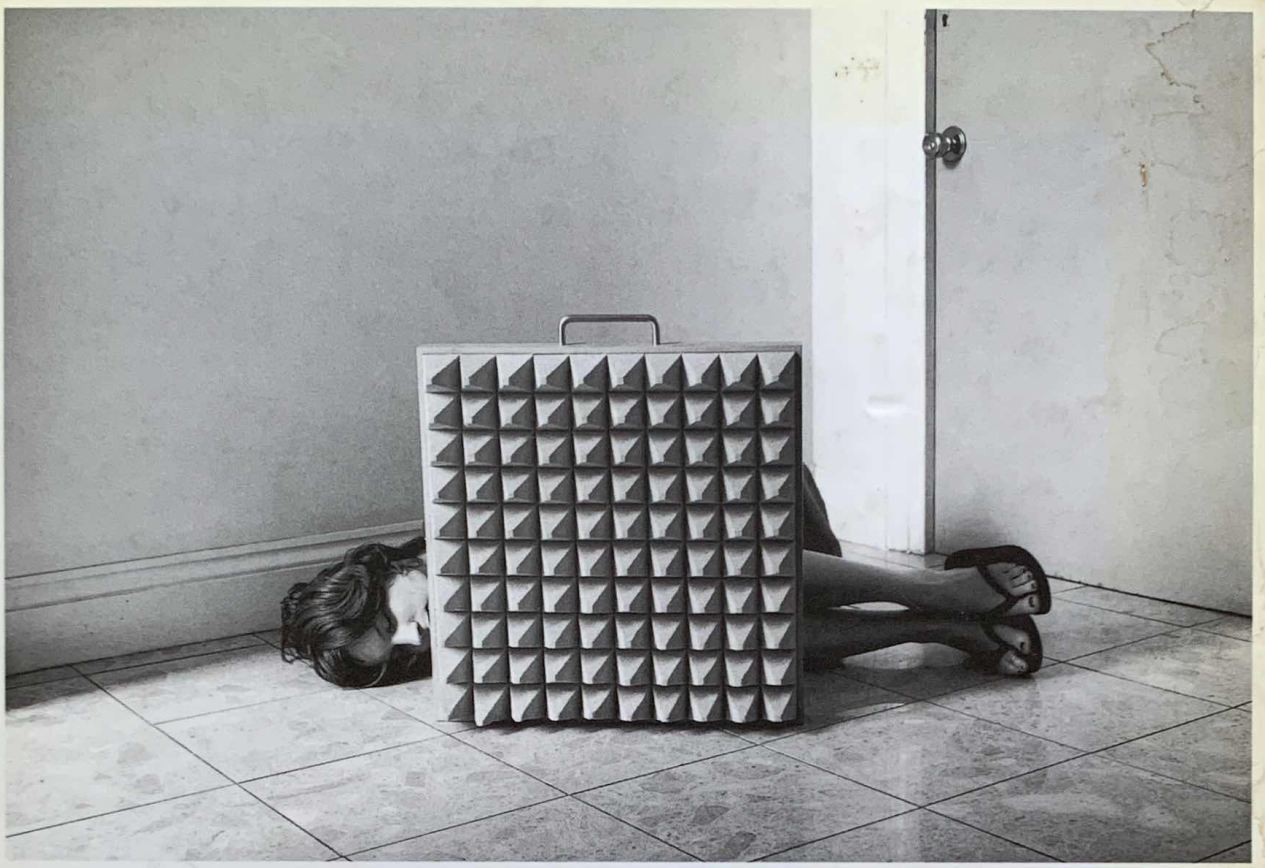

Design Noir

The Secret Life of Electronic Objects

Section 01: DIY Realities

Notopia

Beneath the glossy surface of official design lurks a dark and strange world driven by real human needs. A place where electronic objects co-star in a noir thriller, working with like-minded individuals to escape normalisation and ensure that even a totally manufactured environment has room for danger, adventure and transgression. We don't think that design can ever fully anticipate the richness of this unofficial world and neither should it. But it can draw inspiration from it and develop new design approaches and roles so that as our new environment evolves, there is still scope for rich and complex human pleasure.

Corporate futurologists force-feed us a 'happy-ever-after' portrayal of life where technology is the solution to every problem. There is no room for doubt or complexity in their techno-utopian visions. Everyone is a stereotype, and social and cultural roles remain unchanged. Despite the fact that technology is evolving, the imagined products that feature in their fantasies reassure us that nothing essential will change, everything will stay the same. These future forecasters have a conservative role, predicting patterns of behaviour in relation to technological developments. They draw from what we already know about people, and weave new ideas into existing realities. The resulting scenarios extend pre-existent reality into the future and so reinforce the status quo rather than challenging it. Their slick surface distracts us from the dystopian vision of life they wish for. By designing the props for the videos produced to show us what the future could be like, design works to keep official values in place.

An occasional glance through almost any newspaper reveals a very different view of everyday life, where complex emotions, desires and needs are played out through the misuse and abuse of electronic products and systems. A mother shoots her son after an argument over which television channel to watch; a parent is outraged by a speaking doll made in China which sounds like it swears; the police set a trap for scanner snoopers – people who listen in to emergency radio frequencies illegally – by broadcasting a message that a UFO has landed in a local forest, within minutes several cars arrive and their scanners are confiscated. Many of these stories illustrate the narrative space entered by using and misusing a simple electronic product, how interaction with everyday electronic technologies can generate rich narratives that challenge the conformity of everyday life by short-circuiting our emotions and states of mind. These stories blend the physical reality of place with electronically mediated experience and mental affect. They form part of a pathology of material culture that includes aberrations, transgressions and obsessions, the consequences of and motivations for the misuse of objects, and object malfunctions. They provide glimpses of another more complex reality hidden beneath the slick surface of electronic consumerism.

Amateur subversions and beta-testers

When an object's use is subverted, it is as though the protagonist is cheating the system and deriving more pleasure than is his or her due. The subversion of function relates to a breakdown of order; something else becomes visible, unnameable, unable to find a correspondence in the material world. This subversion of function is related to not being able to find the right word, leading to the coining of neologisms that bend language to accommodate something new. Desire leads to a subversion of the

environment creating an opportunity to reconfigure it to suit our 'illegitimate' needs, establishing new and unofficial narratives.

Some people already exploit the potentially subversive possibilities of this parallel world of illicit pleasures stolen from commodified experience. They seek out (ab)user-friendly products that lend themselves to imaginative possibilities for short-circuiting the combinatorial limits suggested by electronic products. This ranges from terrorists fashioning bombs and weapons out of mundane everyday objects, many of which are listed in the Anarchist Cookbook, to Otaku magazines showing Japanese gadget geeks how to modify standard electronic products to squeeze extra functionality out of them. There are no futurologists at work here. The main players in this world are beta-testers, tweaking and adjusting reality on a day-to-day basis. They are dissatisfied with the version of reality on offer, but rather than escaping or dropping out, they adjust it to suit themselves. Concerned with software not hardware, they invent new uses for existing technologies and promote interaction with 'designed' objects that subvert their anticipated uses. In doing so, they challenge the mechanisms that legitimise the conceptual models embodied in the design of the product or system and demonstrate behaviours towards technology that invite others to follow.

Beta-testers have learnt how to derive enjoyment from electronic materiality, from rejecting the material realities on offer and constructing their own. They display a level of pleasure in customisation currently limited to home DIY and custom car hobbyists. Many specialist magazines and books are already available that show readers how to modify or tweak everyday electronic products. Most of them are a little technical, but only because knowledge of electronics is still not as common as other forms of practical know-how. After all, an ever-growing number of home improvement magazines and TV programmes thrive on the pleasure people get from modifying their environments themselves – of customising reality. Maybe in the future we will see popular electronics magazines that show us how to turn our mobile phones into eavesdropping devices in three easy steps?

Consumers as anti-heroes: some cautionary tales

The almost unbelievable stories reported in newspapers testify to the unpredictable potential of human beings to establish new situations despite the constraints on everyday life imposed through electronic objects. We are interested in people who have assimilated electronic technologies so fully into their lives that they feel comfortable doing things others would think of as almost too sacred or highly charged for technology. These individuals can be thought of as sad, based on the view that playing out deeply human narratives through technological objects is degrading and inferior to more traditional media. Or they can be seen as early adopters, able to find meaning and recognise the potential of new technologies for supporting complex human emotions and desires.

Teenagers are now using their mobile phones to intimidate each other. A new form of bullying has emerged since Christmas 1999, when a huge number of teenagers in Britain received pre-paid mobile phones as gifts. Earlier in the year, a 15-year-old was driven to suicide after receiving up to 20 silent calls in half an hour. The teenager left a suicide text message on her mobile phone the night before she died. The fact that her suicide note was in the form of a text message rather than handwritten will seem even more tragic to some, but to this girl text messages played a more vital role in her life than letters.

As a society we are struggling to define and communicate the safe use of new media to teenagers. Just as we have developed models of safe behaviour for the street and for dealing with strangers in cars, we will have to do so for phones and computers. It is not that these technologies are in themselves harmful, it is their use and misuse that we need to understand. Another distressing example is that of the 16-year-old schoolgirl raped by a man she chatted up with phone text messages. She swapped messages for weeks before agreeing to meet the stranger in a car park. For many teenagers, the mobile phone is a gateway to romance, and new hybrid services are fusing the lonely hearts column with text messaging. It is only a matter of time before purely text-based romancing matures as a genre of its own.

A more humorous example is the man in Australia who married his TV. During the ceremony, he placed a gold wedding ring on top of the TV set and one on his finger. He even promised to 'love, honour and obey' the product. One day it just occurred to him that his TV was the best companion he had ever had – he watched up to ten hours a day. It is easy to criticise people who watch so much TV, but in many ways this form of happiness shows what might be in store for the rest of us as society becomes even more electronically mediated. Though it is not necessarily a good thing, some people clearly find the company of electronic products more satisfying than that of people. These individuals are not rejecting other people because of technology; they have found happiness with technolgy instead. Before the advent of television and the web, they might have been lonely.

Maybe these obsessive behaviours provide glimpses of a future where electronic products have been fully assimilated into everyday culture and our psyche. They are cautionary tales; they push our relationship with the medium of electronic technology to the limit. This is despite the design of the products: in fact there is a contrast between the banal design of many electronic products and the extreme misuses they are subjected to. Products could offer more complex and demanding aesthetic experiences if designers referred to this bizarre world of the 'infra-ordinary', where stories show that truth is indeed stranger than fiction, and prove that our experience of everyday day life lived through conventional electronic products is aesthetically impoverished.

When objects dream...

Electronic objects, from mobile phones to washing machines, are often described as 'smart'. But using this term to describe objects with enhanced electronic functionality encourages a bland interpretation of the things that are an integral part of our daily lives. Electronic objects are not only 'smart', they 'dream' – in the sense that they leak radiation into the space and objects surrounding them, including our bodies. Despite the images of control and efficiency conveyed through a beige visual language of intelligibility and smartness, electronic objects, it might be imagined, are irrational – or at least they allow their thoughts to wander. Thinking of them in terms of dreaminess rather than smartness opens them up to more interesting interpretations.

The dreams of electronic objects are made from electromagnetic radiation. These dreams radiate outwards from the object, creating a new, invisible but physical environment that we call hertzian space. It is here that the secret life of electronic objects is played out, secret not only because we rarely glimpse it, but also because we are only just beginning to understand it. The electromagnetic spectrum covers an enormous spread of frequencies, ranging from the fields given off by electrical wiring (50 Hz),

Section 03: Design Noir

Electronic product as neglected medium

The unique narrative potential of consumer electronic products has received surprisingly little attention from artists and designers. Even though industrial design plays a part in the design of extreme pain (e.g. weapons) and pleasure (e.g. sex aids), the range of emotions offered through most electronic products is pathetically narrow.

When the Sony Walkman was introduced in the early 1980s, it offered people a new kind of relationship to urban space. It allowed the wearer to create their own portable micro-environment, and it provided a soundtrack for travel through the city, encouraging different readings of familiar settings. It functioned as an urban interface. Nearly twenty years on, there are hundreds of variations on the original Walkman, but the relationship it created to the city remains the same. This scenario reflects how product designers have responded to the aesthetic challenge of electronic technology. They have accepted a role as a semiotician, a companion of packaging designers and marketeers, creating semiotic skins for incomprehensible technologies. The electronic product accordingly occupies a strange place in the world of material culture, closer to washing powder and cough mixture than furniture and architecture. Form and texture are manipulated to evoke a world of fantasy and fiction, blurring distinctions between everyday life and the hyper-reality of advertising and branding.

Product genres

This is just one approach to product design, one genre if you like, which offers a very limited experience. Like a Hollywood movie, the emphasis is on easy pleasure and conformist values. This genre reinforces the status quo rather than challenging it. We are surrounded by products that give us an illusion of choice and encourage passivity. But industrial design's position at the heart of consumer culture (it is fuelled by the capitalist system, after all) could be subverted for more socially beneficial ends by providing a unique aesthetic medium that engages the user's imagination in ways a film might, without being utopian or prescribing how things ought to be.

Electronic products and services could enrich and expand our experience of everyday life rather than closing it down; they could become a medium for experiencing complex aesthetic situations. To achieve this, designers would have to think about products and services very differently. There could be so many other genres of product beyond the bland Hollywood mainstream: arthouse, porn, romance, horror – noir, even – that exploit the unique and exciting functional and aesthetic potential of electronic technology. Although many products already fall into genres – Alessi products attempt design as comedy, designs for weapons and medical equipment can shock and horrify, sex-aids are obviously a form of design porn and white goods express a wholesome and romantic idea of settled domesticity – they do not aesthetically challenge or disturb.

Design Noir

If the current situation in product design is analogous to the Hollywood blockbuster, then an interesting place to explore in more detail might be its opposite: Design Noir. As a genre, it would focus on how the psychological dimensions of experiences offered through electronic products can be expanded. By referring to the world of product misuse and abuse, where desire overflows its material limits and subverts the function of everyday objects, this product genre would address the darker, conceptual models of need that are usually limited to cinema and literature.

Noir products would be conceptual products, a medium that fuses complex narratives with everyday life. This is very different from conceptual design, which uses design proposals as a medium for exploring what these products might be like. Conceptual design can exist comfortably in book or video form, it is about life whereas conceptual products are part of life. With this form of design, the 'product' would be a fusion of psychological and external 'realities', the user would become a protagonist and co-producer of narrative experience rather than a passive consumer of a product's meaning. The mental interface between the individual and the product is where the 'experience' lies. Electronic technology makes this meeting more fluid, more complex and more interesting.

Like in Film Noir, the emphasis would be on existentialism. Imagine objects that generate 'existential moments' – a dilemma, for instance – which they would stage or dramatise. These objects would not help people to adapt to existing social, cultural and political values. Instead, the product would force a decision onto the user, revealing how limited choices are usually hard-wired into products for us. On another level, we could simply enjoy the wickedness of the values embedded in these products and services. Their very existence is enough to create pleasure.

Many interesting examples of noir products already exist, but they are not created by designers. The best examples of how design responds to the psychological and behavioural dimensions of electronics can be found at the edges of anonymous design. These products and services work on a radically different aesthetic principal from traditional products: it is what they do that creates pleasure, not how they look and feel. It is the thrill of transgression that counts here. Even if we do not use them, just imagining these objects in use creates a strong and perversely enjoyable experience. They show how design products and services can function as a medium for producing complex psychological experiences.

The Truth Phone, a real product produced by the Counter Spy shop, is one example of how a Noir product might work. It combines a voice stress analyser with a telephone, and shows how electronic products have the potential to generate a chain of events which together form a story. If you consider products in this way, the focus of the design shifts from concerns of physical interaction (passive button pushing) to the potential psychological experiences inherent in the product. Imagine speaking to your mother or a lover while the Truth Phone suggests they are lying. The user becomes a protagonist and the designer becomes a co-author of the experience, the product creates dilemmas rather than resolving them. By using the phone, the owner explores boundaries between himself and the paranoid user suggested by the product, entering into a psychological adventure.

The Truth Phone and similar electronic objects generate a conceptual space where interactivity can challenge and enlarge the scheme through which we interpret our experiences of using everyday electronic objects and the social experiences they mediate. The effect is not only limited to products: as its name suggests, Ace-Alibi.com is a service for creating false alibis. When you subscribe, you might choose an option that involves being sent a letter inviting you to a conference. The letter will be postmarked with the correct area code, and you can also arrange to leave a contact number which will be answered in the correct regional accent. Franchises of this service are available, although the people behind the scheme are nervous about offering the service in the United States, in case they are sued for their part in helping employees bunk off work. We find this service interesting because it meets a real need not fulfilled anywhere else. You may not agree with it or choose to use it, but many people use this service. The pleasure provided by the existence of a service like this lies is in resolving the dilemma it presents. It is as though the internet reflects human nature in all its imperfections while the material world of consumer products only reflects idealised notions of correct behaviour.

Along similar lines to Ace-Alibi.com is the Alibi CD produced in Germany by Silenzio. It contains recordings of street sounds, airport announcements from different countries, train stations, bars and beaches. Designed for those 'little white lies in between', the CD is intended to be played in the background while you are making a telephone call from a place you should not be. This soundtrack CD allows you to cut and paste reality. Its very existence triggers a chain of thoughts and narratives in the imagination.

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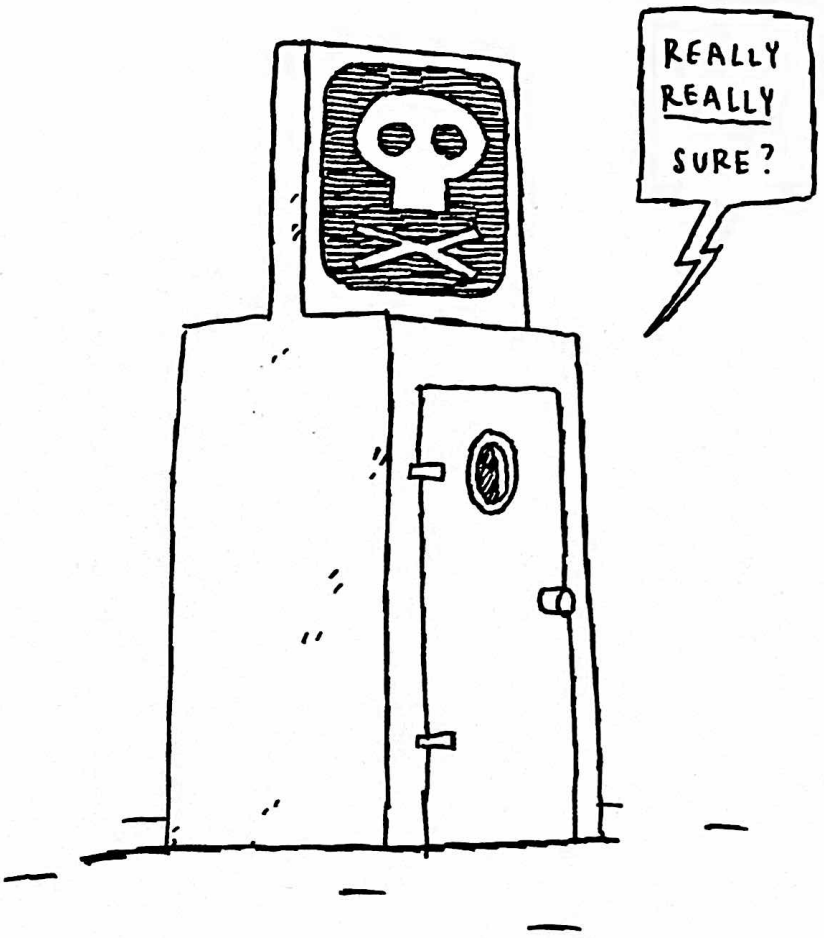
In Japan they have taken this idea one step further. One love hotel there allows you to select a variety of background environmental sounds to give the impression you are calling from a train station, street, bar etc. while you are really on the phone in your hotel room. Like Ace-Alibi.com, this service may not be to everyone's taste, but it uses technology to satisfy unacknowledged but genuine needs, rather than manufactured ones. On another level, this love hotel is an interesting counterpoint to the typical 'smart home' familiar from futurologists' design predictions, with fridges that automatically order more supplies when you are running low on milk. This is an example of what a really smart home would be like: it would help us lie.

The company that produces the Alibi CD also produce Nie Mehr Allein (Alone No More), a CD of the familiar sounds of everyday domestic tasks that became a cult hit. Bernd Klosterfelde had the idea for this product shortly after finding himself living alone after a divorce. He asked a friend to invite his girlfriend around, and then proceeded to record her doing everything from the washing up and the laundry to reading the newspaper. Imagine if this were one of many radio stations you could tune into. The producer claims this CD is a manifesto for singletons. This product not only recognises loneliness, but celebrates it.

Alone no more

1. The fridge is full again at last
2. Cappuccino break
3. Reading the paper
4. Time to do the washing up
5. A shirt is quickly ironed
6. Baking a cake for the beloved
7. A bath is just the thing
8. And straight onto the sunbed
9. Getting out the hairdryer
10. Nature calls
11. Forgot to do the vacuuming
12. Just typing up that letter on the computer
13. There's nothing on TV again, at least the crisps are good
14. Better off reading and having a smoke
15. Slamming a roast into the oven

Many products like these have an existential theme. They perplex rather than comfort, even just thinking about them raises many important issues. Objects can be existential in other ways too, for instance in the form of computer-aided existentialism. A suicide computer built to kill patients legally was developed by Dr. Philip Nitschke in the Northern Territory of Australia, where euthanasia was legal for a brief period in the 1990s. The machine consisted of a computer that asked the patient three times whether they really wanted to die. If the patient agreed each time, then 100 ml of liquid Nembutal was pumped through a needle into the patient's arm. They fell asleep and died within a few minutes. The machine was first used in Darwin in 1996, and was bought by the Science Museum in London in 2001.



Suicide computer

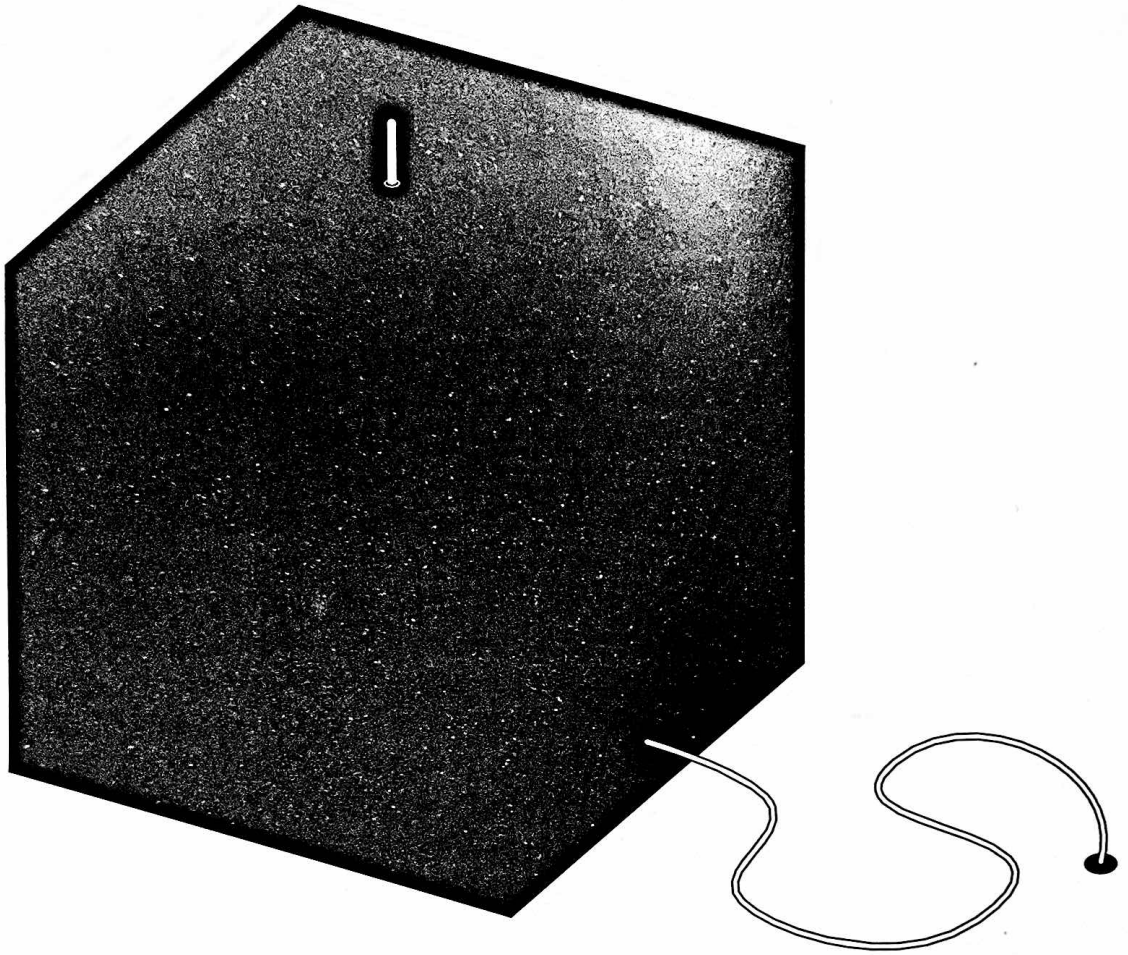
atatch to the arm

voice comes from the speaker

anser the question with the bottams

needle will come out to inject Nembutal when pasiant answer ~~the~~ yes to the question 3 times.

Orgasm implant, drawn by Jon Hares, p.51



Orgasm implant
.....
this object is similar in size to a washing machine
.....

Even if we choose not to interact with this noir landscape ourselves, its existence acknowledges a far more complicated and realistic view of human drives, desires and values than official material culture. Loneliness, deception, paranoia, hopelessness and lust are just a few of the conditions these objects and services respond too. It is not just a matter of noir products, environments can also be designed to cater for complex and specific needs. On the outskirts of Rotterdam in the Netherlands, the local council has created a special drive-in facility for use by prostitutes and drug users called an afwerkplek, which roughly translates as a 'finishing place'. The prostitutes sit in shelters arranged along a well-lit driveway, on display to the potential customers driving slowly past. Once a driver has made his choice, prostitute and client can drive around the corner into one of the numbered cubicles, discreetly screened-off from the others. Rubbish bins are also provided, and there is even a sterile needle point for shooting up. Upfront and practical, this is a typically Dutch approach to dealing with controversial social issues. It also hints at another world where, once again, a realistic approach is taken towards people's needs. Artist Dennis Adams recreated a scale model of one of these places for the exhibition Hortus Conclusus at the Witte de With centre in Rotterdam in 2001. The piece looks like a children's play area: while parents wander through the gallery, their children sit in mini versions of the prostitute's shelters and drive miniature vehicles into the lay-bys.

Even the world of toys has its own parallel darker material culture. Anatomically correct dolls combine the playful and abstract world of children's toys with the sordid world of adult desire. Though these dolls are designed for use by counsellors working with children who have suffered sexual abuse, their anatomical realism, expressed through a language we associate with child-like abstraction, makes them very disturbing indeed. Again, the mere existence of the object acknowledges that all is not well. For us, they are more powerful than artworks.

Not everything about noir has to be disturbing though. This genre also includes humour, albeit a little black. A research company recently designed a prototype non-lethal gun called the A3P3 (A3 stands for Aerosol Arresting Agent, P3 for Pulse Projected Plume) for use by the police in crowd control situations. The gun has a sensor that gauges the distance a person is away from it, and adjusts the level of cayenne pepper spray accordingly. It also has a tiny built-in video camera that records the incident and wirelessly transmits the footage back to police headquarters. We like the idea that somewhere, many hours worth of digital imagery of a particular gun's victims would be stored. Of course this is done for legal reasons, but it has almost metaphysical implications: this is a gun with a memory, a personal history expressed through video clips of gesticulating victims.

Noir also has an erotic dimension. A doctor in North Carolina recently built and patented an implant that produces an orgasm in a woman by electrically stimulating the spinal cord. He had the idea for the device when a patient he was treating for chronic back pain experienced unexpected side effects while electrodes implanted in her spine were tested. Operated via a wireless remote-control, the Orgasmic Dysfunction Device opens up all sorts of interesting possibilities: the existence of objects that activate it through proximity; relinquishing control and handing the remote to a partner; malfunctions where the device is accidentally switched on. A device like this, designed to alleviate genuine medical conditions, would be highly ab-user friendly and could lend itself to many functional variations.

Although discovered by accident, the orgasm generator is part of an almost secret history of inventions for pleasure. Very few of them have made it to the market place, but a look through patent records throws up some very interesting and strange ideas that again tell us more about the diversity of notions of pleasure than anything else. The US Patent Office provides a history of technological pleasure in the form of patents for sex aids collected over the last 150 years. The list includes contraception devices, anti-masturbation devices, wet dream prevention devices, impotence aids, bionic penises, anti-rape technology, mechanical stimulators, sex furniture, training/exercising devices, and safe-sex inventions (including sex robots). The strange narrative of pleasure documented in patent drawings offers a technological reflection of human frustration, fantasy, fear and pleasure. These objects are not science fiction or art, they were documented because they either solved a problem or provided exceptional pleasure. Their inventors were motivated by the hard reality of financial gain. They believed that each of these devices had a potential market, for example the need for methods of making sex safe in the age of AIDS. The contents of the patent office represent a material cultural history of desire.

Today, large corporations know that as many of our basic needs are met, we desire to satisfy more abstract ones, but they are unsure what these might be. The current focus is on wellness and well-being. We think it is necessary to go beyond this and embrace danger, excitement and transgression. In the search for new content, designers would need to become like authors, drawing from the fringes of material culture, where products and services satisfy difficult and unusual needs. Not everyone has to participate, but the fact these things exist means our material culture reflects more accurately the range and complexity of human desire and needs, and we might be faced with real choices at last.

Noir products of the type we propose would not really be designed for mass consumption, they would probably be expensive, often exist only as prototypes or in low numbers. While their effectiveness would eventually wear off with increased familiarity, it would still be valuable to live with them for a while. What if they could be rented? Not like a video or library book – although the function is similar – but like musical instruments are today, and even paintings. We believe there is room for a new category of objects that provide complex aesthetic and psychological experiences within everyday life. They could come in a variety of genres of which noir is just one.

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