

Design Noir

The Secret Life of Electronic Objects

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• • Section 03: Design Noir •  
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### 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.

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### 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.

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 principle 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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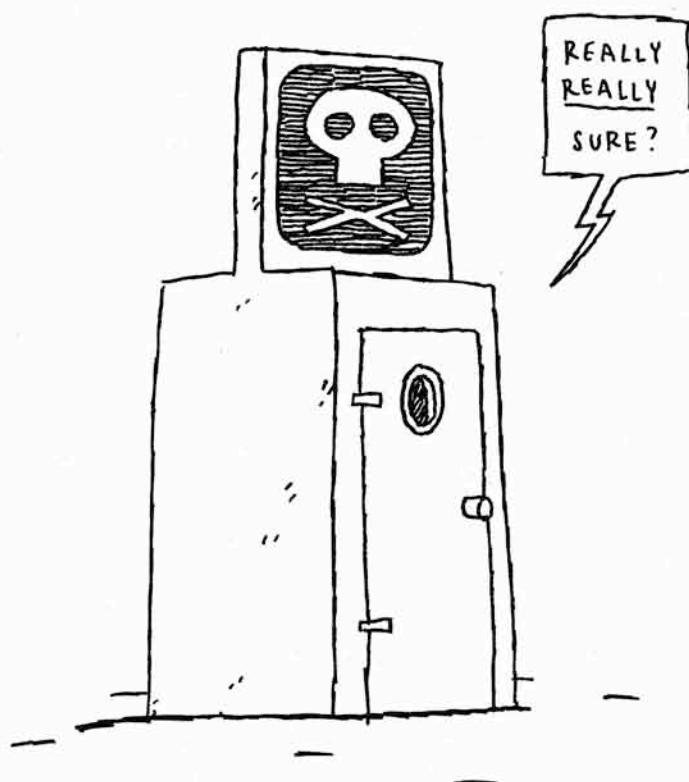
In Japan they have taken this idea one step further. One love hotel there allows you to select a variety of background environmental sounds to give the impression you are calling from a train station, street, bar etc. while you are really on the phone in your hotel room. Like Ace-Alibi.com, this service 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. Slammering a roast into the oven

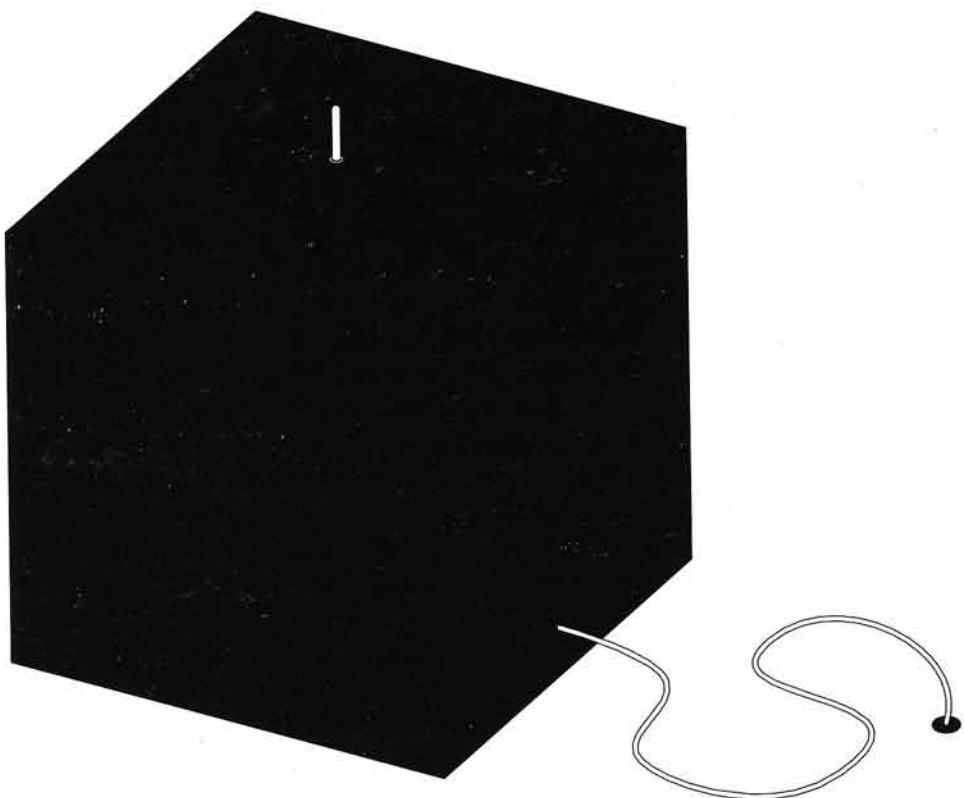
Many products like these have an existential theme. They perplex rather than comfort, even just thinking about them raises many important issues. Objects can be existential in other ways too, for instance in the form of computer-aided existentialism. A suicide computer built to kill patients legally 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  
attach to the arm  
voice comes from  
the speaker  
answer the question  
with the bottoms



needle will come out to inject  
Nembutal when patient answer  
the yes to the question  
3 times,



Orgasm implant

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

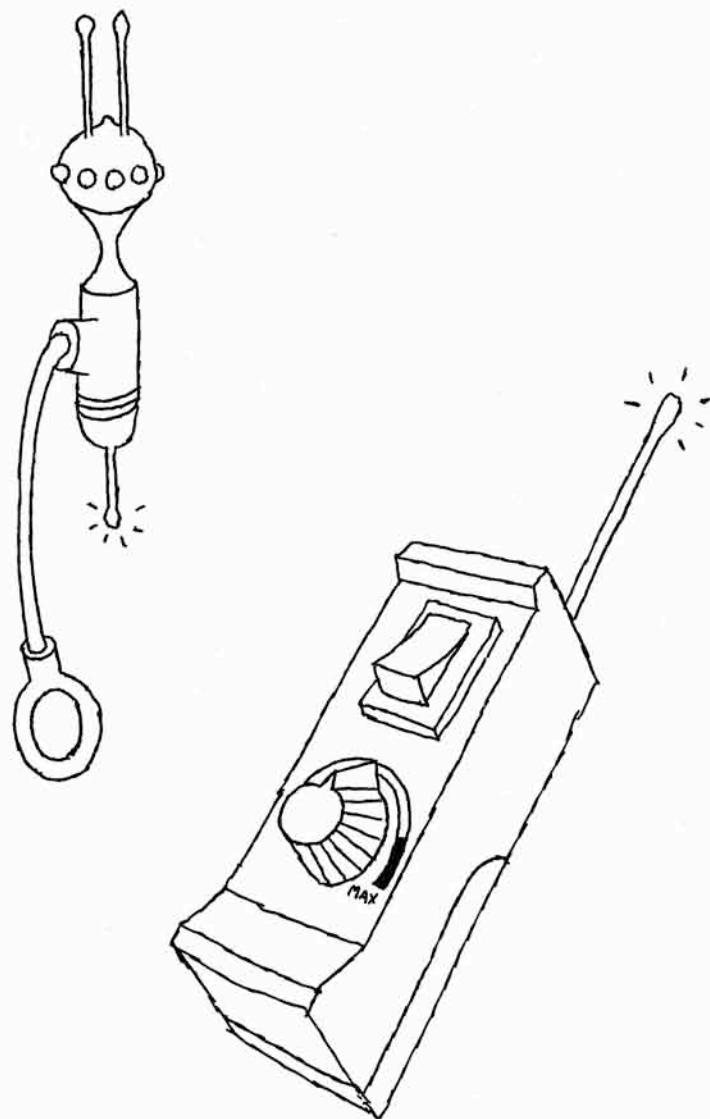
Noir also has an erotic dimension. A doctor in North Carolina recently built and patented an implant that produces an orgasm in a woman by electrically stimulating the spinal cord. He had the idea for the device when a patient he was treating for chronic back pain experienced unexpected side effects 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.

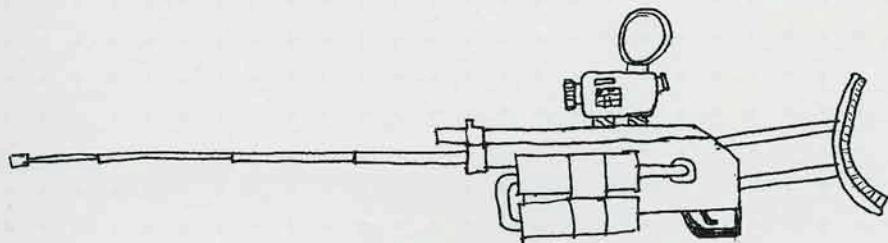
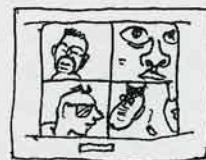
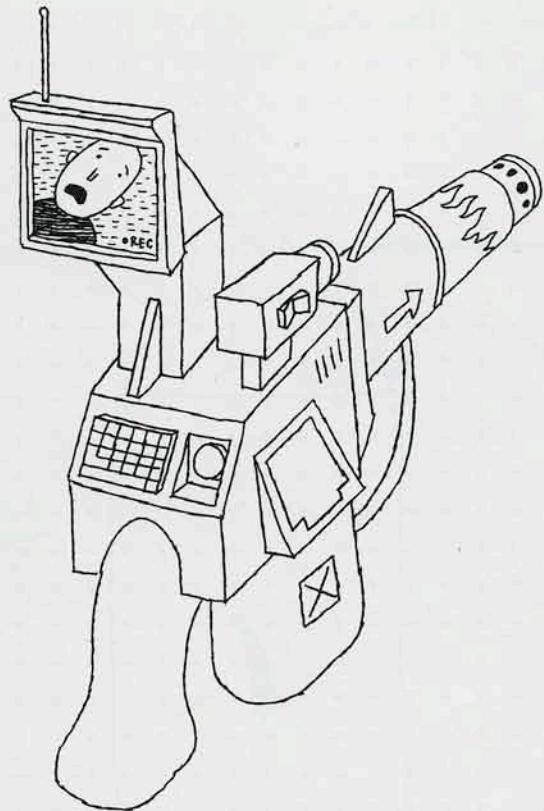
Noir products of the type we propose would not really be designed for mass consumption, they would probably be expensive, often exist only as prototypes or in low numbers. While their effectiveness would eventually wear off with increased familiarity, it would still be valuable to live with them for 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.

Orgasm implant, drawn by Tom Gauld, p.51





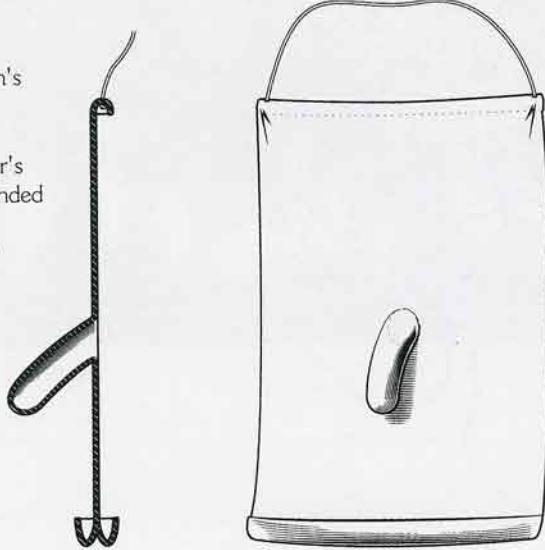
Anatomically correct dolls, p.51



A3 P3 gun drawn by Tom Gauld (top) and Alex Rich (bottom), p.51

— *Safe Sex Inventions for the Age of AIDS* —

Mark Grubman's  
condom apron  
invention tied  
around the user's  
waist and extended  
to mid-thigh.  
No. 4,781,709  
(1988)



## Section 04: Designer as Author

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### Design is ideological

When technology is developing as rapidly as it is now, reflection and criticism are particularly important. We need to consider alternative visions to those put forward by industry. Design, being accessible, contemporary and part of popular culture, is perfectly positioned to perform this role. But in order to achieve this, some significant shifts need to occur. We need to develop a parallel design activity that questions and challenges industrial agendas.

Most designers, especially industrial designers, view design as somehow neutral, clean and pure. But all design is ideological, the design process is informed by values based on a specific world view, or way of seeing and understanding reality. Design can be described as falling into two very broad categories: affirmative design and critical design. The former reinforces how things are now, it conforms to cultural, social, technical and economic expectation. Most design falls into this category. The latter rejects how things are now as being the only possibility, it provides a critique of the prevailing situation through designs that embody alternative social, cultural, technical or economic values.

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### Critical design

Critical design, or design that asks carefully crafted questions and makes us think, is just as difficult and just as important as design that solves problems or finds answers. Being provocative and challenging might seem like an obvious role for art, but art is far too removed from the world of mass consumption and electronic consumer products to be effective in this context, even though it is of course part of consumerist culture. There is a place for a form of design that pushes the cultural and aesthetic potential and role of electronic products and services to its limits. Questions must be asked about what we actually need, about the way poetic moments can be intertwined with the everyday and not separated from it. At the moment, this type of design is neglected and regarded as secondary. Today, design's main purpose is still to provide new products – smaller, faster, different, better.

Critical design is related to haute couture, concept cars, design propaganda, and visions of the future, but its purpose is not to present the dreams of industry, attract new business, anticipate new trends or test the market. Its purpose is to stimulate discussion and debate amongst designers, industry and the public about the aesthetic quality of our electronically mediated existence. It differs too from experimental design, which seeks to extend the medium, extending it in the name of progress and aesthetic novelty. Critical design takes as its medium social, psychological, cultural, technical and economic values, in an effort to push the limits of lived experience not the medium. This has always been the case in architecture, but design is struggling to reach this level of intellectual maturity.

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### (Un)Popular design

Developing a critical perspective in design is made difficult by the fact that the design profession, and product designers in particular, see the social value of their work as inextricably linked to the marketplace. Design outside this arena is viewed with suspicion as escapist or unreal. At the moment, the only alternatives to the Hollywood genre of corporate design are design consultancies promoting themselves to corporate clients with slick mocked-up products that are never intended to be developed any further. These objects are purely about PR, they are designed to sell the consultancy's potential for innovative and creative design thinking.

To be considered successful in the marketplace, design has to sell in large numbers, therefore it has to be popular. Critical design can never be truly popular, and that is its fundamental problem. Objects that are critical of industry's agenda are unlikely to be funded by industry. As a result, they will tend to remain one-offs. Maybe we need a new category to replace the avant-garde: (un)popular design.

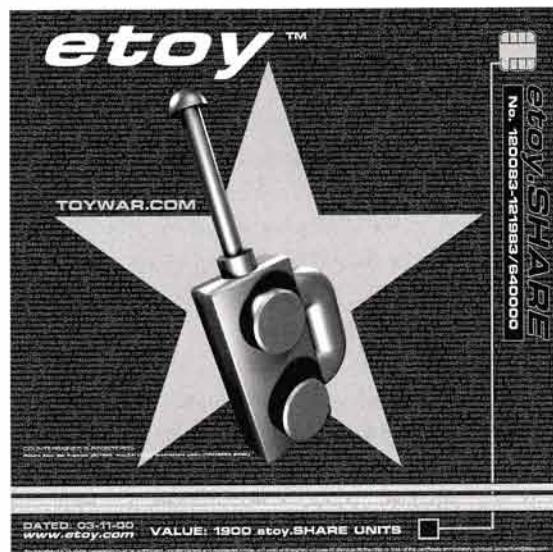
The design profession needs to mature and find ways of operating outside the tight constraints of servicing industry. At its worst, product design simply reinforces global capitalist values. It helps to create and maintain desire for new products, ensures obsolescence, encourages dissatisfaction with what we have and merely translates brand values into objects. Design needs to see this for what it is, just one possibility, and develop alternative roles for itself. It needs to establish an intellectual stance of its own, or the design profession is destined to lose all intellectual credibility and be viewed simply as an agent of capitalism.

We are not against industry, although it could direct more of its profits into serious design research rather than facile PR exercises. Industry is after all in the business of making money for its shareholders. More disturbing is the unwillingness of the design profession to take on a more responsible and pro-active role within society. Before this can happen, designers will have to redefine their role, embracing and developing new methods and approaches that simultaneously appeal and challenge in the way a film or book does. More could be learnt from fine art where there is a history of critical strategies for asking questions through objects and stimulating debate in engaging ways.

Instead of thinking about appearance, user-friendliness or corporate identity, industrial designers could develop design proposals that challenge conventional values. But critical design must avoid the pitfalls of the 1970s by developing strategies that link it back to everyday life and fully engage the viewer. Things are far more complex today than they were 30 years ago. It is not enough to simply offer an alternative, new strategies need to be developed that are both critical and optimistic, that engage with and challenge industry's technological agenda.

Global corporations are becoming more powerful than states, as Noreena Hertz points out in *The Silent Takeover* (2001) – the annual values of sales of each of the six largest transnational corporations, ranging between \$111 and \$126 billion, are now exceeded by the GDPs of only 21 nation states, and as a result, governments and politicians are losing power. Corporations have a bigger influence on reality than government, and buying power is more important than voting power. A world where shopping has more political impact than voting is a threat to democracy.

etoy.SHARE-CERTIFICATE No.124,  
courtesy of etoy.SHAREHOLDER  
Richard Zach, representing 1900  
etoy.SHARES (value on  
10.08.2001: \$6'593, actual  
value: [www.etoym.com/value](http://www.etoym.com/value))



There has also been a shift in the intellectual landscape as relations between popular culture, the market and critical positions have changed. The marketplace is viewed as the only reality, or as Thomas Frank writes in *One Market Under God* (2001) a form of 'market populism' has taken hold, where people's true desires are expressed and fulfilled through the marketplace. Anything outside of the marketplace is regarded as suspicious and unreal. This state of affairs makes critical positions almost impossible, they are dismissed as elitist. It is almost taboo for an industrial designer to reject what the market wants.

As the intermediary between the consumer and the corporation, the design profession is in a perfect position to host a debate in the form of design proposals about technology, consumerism and cultural value. But first designers will need to develop new communication strategies and move from narratives of production to narratives of consumption, or the aesthetics of use. That is, they will have to shift emphasis from the object and demonstrating its feasibility to the experiences it can offer.

Designers can learn much about this from the approaches developed by artists during the 1990s, when a general blurring of distinctions between fine art, design and business began to develop. For instance, the artist collective Atelier Van Lieshout has worked on the design of a Dutch abortion ship to be anchored off the coast of Ireland and other catholic countries where abortion is illegal. Liam Gillick, who explores decision making mechanisms in corporate culture and their impact on history, also designs exhibitions, interiors and is working on a building.

Other artists have concentrated on appropriating the business world's organisational structures to produce work that fused fictional and real, legal, economic and cultural systems. Probably the best known example is etoy, a corporation, art group and brand formed in 1994 by a group of architects, lawyers, programmers, artists and designers. Their original aim was to create a purely digital identity ([www.etoym.com](http://www.etoym.com)) and break out of narrow art world constraints. All participating artists agree to sell their individual identity to etoy corporation for shares and to live an anonymous life as etoy agents.

It is not possible to buy etoy products, its art exists solely in the form of stocks. The value of etoy in share units is equivalent to the cultural value of etoy corporation which in turn consists of the electronic brand etoy.

Etoy do not merely adopt the rhetoric of the corporate world though, they play big business at its own game. In 1999 etoy embarked on a campaign called Toywar, financed through experimental investment strategies. This campaign was directed against the multi-national corporation eToys, an on-line toy store ([www.etoys.com](http://www.etoys.com)) that attempted to use its superior size and financial power to force etoy to give up its domain name, even though the artists' site had been established long before the retailer's. Afraid that potential customers might confuse the two similarly named sites, eToys originally tried to buy out the etoy brand, but their \$500,000 offer was turned down. The toy company then set out to sue etoy, accusing the internet artists of unfair competition and trademark delusion. With the help of 1,800 volunteer etoy agents and activists, who served the cause by publicising the case on the net and in the news media, filing counter suits and establishing alliances, etoy succeeded in getting eToys to back off. During the course of the Toywar campaign, the value of the on-line toy store's stock dropped from \$67 to \$15 a share.

Not all artists choose to wage war against the corporate world. Instead of seeking arts funding, Lucy Kimbell preferred to present one of her projects as a business proposition and look for investors. Her proposal was for a vibrating internal pager (VIP) using the same technology as vibrating mobile phones. If you liked someone, you could give them your VIP number and receive a gentle buzz when they called you later. The product was never realised, in fact there is not even a picture of what it looks like. VIP exists as a description, a business proposal and an on-line application form.

Artists presenting themselves as employees of imaginary organisations or companies can also yield some interesting results. Originally from an engineering background, Natalie Jeremijenko now describes herself as a staff engineer working for the Bureau of Inverse Technology (BIT). She has left the idea of artist as individual behind to work on a fictional organisation where she is just one employee. In Suicide Box (1996), BIT installed a motion detector and video camera near San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge to count the number of people jumping off. Later, a report was produced (engineer's report SB03: Jan 23-97) with recommendations for how the BIT Suicide Box data could be used to calculate a 'robust and market responsive value of life'. There is something more sinister about the idea of an organisation rather than an individual carrying out subversive work like this.

One of the most comprehensive fusions of art and corporate culture has to be Maywa Denki, an art unit set up in 1993 by two Japanese brothers, Nobumichi and Masamichi Tosa. Describing themselves as 'parallel world electricians', they are organised as a business whose core activity is producing a variety of devices. They even produce a Maywa Denki company profile explaining all the company's activities for potential job applicants. During their performances, or product promotions as they like to call them, they wear costumes designed to look like those of a typical Japanese small to medium sized enterprise (SME). Maywa Denki produce three kinds of object: prototypes (NAKI), which are one-of-a-kind products and are not for sale; multiples (GM-NAKI), which are reproductions of NAKI products and are for sale; and industrial Goods (TOY-NAKI) which are mass-produced in a factory and sold in the mainstream marketplace. They also produce CDs, videos, books, uniforms and stationary.

Their NAKI series is a collection of fish-inspired nonsense machines. Many of the products in the NAKI series have a darkly humorous side. Uke-Tel is a cage with a tank at the bottom, with two or three fish swimming around in it. The cage is connected to a speaking clock. When the number is dialled, a spike is released and drops on to the fish below. It may or may not kill one. Sei-Gyo is a cross-shaped, water-filled container mounted on a robotic vehicle. The direction the vehicle takes depends on which arm a fish inside the container swims into. Grafish consists of a sheet of paper surrounded by a box into which a living fish dipped in ink is placed. The dying fish leaves a graphic pattern on the sheet: 'as each fish has a unique life, it also has a unique death'. Maywa Denki's industrial goods (TOY-NAKI) are so popular that some Japanese department stores have a dedicated Maywa Denki department. Most of these products are not unlike the merchandising used to promote a new film – plastic miniature versions of fictional characters.

Although their work borders on entertainment, Maywa Denki offer another way of thinking about design in relation to both art and product markets, cutting across several genres and types of activity. Originally signed to Sony Music Entertainment as musicians producing CDs and performances, they later transferred to the amusement and entertainment division of Yoshimoto Kogyo Co. Ltd, a well-known agency for managing TV personalities and comedians. In 2000 they were awarded 'A good design award for theme category' by the Japan Industrial Design Promotion Organisation. Maywa Denki use design as a form of entertainment, a dark counterpoint to the 'happy-ever-after' world of Alessi products.

Similarly subversive, Surrender Control is a poetic service by Matt Locke and Tim Etchells that was delivered to participants through their mobile phones. An experimental narrative in the form of SMS messages, Surrender Control drew users into an evolving game of textual suggestion, provocation and dare through instructions such as 'break something and pretend it was an accident', or 'call somebody and tell them something that you have already told them. Don't explain'. The idea was to invite people to live life in a strange dialogue with a distant other; to surrender some control.

Television is medium ripe for subversion. Watched by millions, it touches nearly everyone's life but is heavily policed, in the US especially. The fear of being boycotted by the extreme Right, of alienating sponsors and incurring the wrath of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) means serious issues are rarely addressed on the main commercial TV channels. One attempt to change this situation was a project to infiltrate the American soap opera Melrose Place, which is set in a Los Angeles apartment complex. Artist Mel Chin had the idea of using TV as a medium for 'public art' that raises important issues about gender, violence and infectious diseases. He approached the set designers of Melrose Place and offered to provide free art to put in the background. When they agreed, Chin formed the GALA Committee, made up of students and teachers from University of Georgia and CalArts (Los Angeles), to collaborate on the design of props for the show which they called non-commercial PIMs (product insertion manifestations).

On closer inspection, many of the GALA paintings hanging in the Melrose Place apartments turn out to depict infamous LA locations where horrible violence or death occurred – Marilyn Monroe's bungalow on the day she died, the apartment from which Rodney King's beating was videoed, Nicole Brown Simpson's house. Having noticed that characters on the show have a lot of sex but are never shown using condoms, GALA produced bed linen for one bedroom scene that is covered in images of unrolled

condoms. Although it is not clear how many people actually noticed these subtle interventions, it is a fresh and playful combination of set design and art.

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### Complicated pleasure

We believe that in order for conceptual design to be effective, it must provide pleasure, or more specifically, provide a type of experience that Martin Amis has called 'complicated pleasure'. One way this could happen in design is through the development of value fictions. If in science fiction, the technology is often futuristic while social values are conservative, the opposite is true in value fictions. In these scenarios, the technologies are realistic but the social and cultural values are often fictional, or at least highly ambiguous. The aim is to encourage the viewers to ask themselves why the values embodied in the proposal seem 'fictional' or 'unreal', and to question the social and cultural mechanisms that define what is real or fictional. The idea is not to be negative, but to stimulate discussion and debate amongst designers, industry and the public about electronic technology and everyday life. This is done by developing alternative and often gently provocative artefacts which set out to engage people through humour, insight, surprise and wonder.

The suspension of disbelief is crucial – if the artefacts are too strange they are dismissed, they have to be grounded in how people really do behave. The approach is based on viewing values as raw material and shaping them into objects. Materialising unusual values in products is one way that design can be a very powerful form of social critique. The design proposals portrayed in value fictions derive their interest through their potential functionality and use. One of the main challenges of using value fictions is how they are communicated: we need to see them in use, placed in everyday life, but in a way that leaves room for the viewer's imagination. We don't actually have to use the proposed products ourselves, it is by imagining them being used that they have an effect on us. Value fictions cannot be too clear or they blend into what we already know. A slight strangeness is the key – too weird and they are instantly dismissed, not strange enough and they're absorbed into everyday reality.

The following examples, drawn from recent graduate projects at the Royal College of Art in London, show how design proposals like this might work. The projects explore the psychological and behavioural dimensions of our relationship to objects and services, rather than the technical, formal or structural possibilities of consumer technologies. The emphasis is shifted from the aesthetics of production to the aesthetics of consumption, an imagined aesthetics of use. Like the examples from the art world described earlier, these projects mix fiction and reality, borrow commercial structures and combine different media in an effort to engage and challenge the viewer.

Ippei Matsumoto uses product design to explore the powerful need for individual identity and meaning within a context of global culture. With Life Counter (2001), you choose how many years you would like to or expect to live for and start the counter. Once activated, it counts down the selected time span at four different rates: the number of years, days, hours or seconds to go are shown on different faces. Depending on which face you choose to display, you may feel very relaxed as the years stretch out ahead or begin to panic as you see your life speed away before your eyes. The counter is designed to be visually unassuming and could easily fit into the slightly retro-futuristic style of the moment. It is a classic noir product, its power lies in its precise function and low key display of disturbing information.

In *After-Life* (2001), Jimmy Loizeau employs design to dramatise a taboo subject. Although he is an atheist, Loizeau felt a need for an alternative idea to a spiritual afterlife when a relative and then a pet died. He imagined the consequences of a long term cultural shift where people fully embraced an electronically mediated culture, a time when electrical culture took on some of the dignity of more traditional cultures. Could a battery be as significant as a ceramic urn? Loizeau's exploration of value resulted in a device for maintaining an 'after life'. It consists of a raised bed/trolley, body bag, zinc/copper wet cell battery, extraction tube, voltage meter and 1.5v battery and holder. When someone dies, their stomach contents are drained off to provide acid to charge a special 'after-life' battery, which is engraved in the way a gravestone might be. As an object, it allows an atheist to grieve. Once the battery is charged, it can be used to power all sorts of existing and specially designed devices: night lights, torches, vibrators.

In Noam Toran's short film *Object for Lonely Men* (2001) the protagonist desires to be at one with Jean-Luc Godard's 1959 film *A bout de souffle*. Toran explains: 'In the film, the whole set-up was that the character was preparing for his night out, which was no more absurd than our normal nights out. He stays in, and goes out in a different way.' The project explores not only our relationship to electronic objects but how these objects mediate fantasies. The physical design consists of an extended TV dinner tray which includes among other things a child's steering wheel, a female head and a cut-out gun. It could be used as a kit you borrow when you rent a video, or it could be a place-setting in a special restaurant for lonely men where you choose your meal, and you interact.

Another project by Noam Toran, *Accessories for Lonely Men* (2001), consists of a collection of eight products designed to provide some of the incidental pleasures of shared existence for those who live alone. The idea for these products arose when the designer began to wonder whether we missed an individual or the generic traces they leave. During the night, the Sheet Stealer winds the bedclothes up into a tube attached to the side of the bed. Once woken by the cold, the sleeper can pull the sheet out again and reclaim it for himself. In another piece, a cut-out female silhouette is placed in front of a light to throw a shadow. The lamp even has a small drawer to store the silhouette in. Other objects are devised with more intimate moments in mind: once placed on the user's body, the steel finger of the Chest-Hair Curler starts to rotate gently, playing with his chest hair, while Shared Cigarette comes into its own after a solitary sex act. This device has two holes, one for the cigarette, and the other for exhaling smoke. The rapid-fire Plate Thrower, on the other hand, is to be used in moments of high passion. The collection also includes a pair of cold feet-like objects to place at the bottom end of the bed, an alarm clock that wakes you up by flicking a strand of hair across your face, and a device that expels breath-like bursts of warm air, to be placed on the pillow while you drift off to sleep.

These objects are clearly not intended for production, but are designed to provide mental pleasure and stimulate reflection. They are products for the mind. Their generic form raises issues about the use of form in conceptual design. If they are too realistic – that is, if they look as if they really should be used – objects like these can quickly become ridiculous. Their abstract form signals that they are intended to be used in the imagination.

Rather than designing objects that mimic people's actions, James Auger explores the psychological aspects of technologically augmenting our bodies, and uses value fictions to draw attention to values that could well emerge in the future, even though they are very different from anything we have now.

He is interested in how new technological possibilities will affect the way we treat other people in our search for new pleasures, and asks us to think about the desirability of his scenarios becoming reality.

Auger's device allows someone to be somewhere they are not. Wearing a head-mounted display, the user receives information from a second person whose own headset is equipped with a video camera and binaural microphones. So for example, a person might be hired to spend time in a peep show, attend a meeting, go on a blind date or even shopping on somebody else's behalf – verbal instructions would be relayed from the user to the host via a speaker in their helmet. Should the host be able to enjoy the experience too, or are they just renting out their body? One version of the device masks the host's ears and eyes, dehumanising them and clearly reminding them that they are just a rented body. In another scenario, a dog is used as a host, transmitting images and sounds of the countryside back to the customer. A more advanced service might allow the customer to tune into a range of different hosts as though they were TV channels. Of course, this device could have socially beneficial uses too, providing the housebound with a means of connection to their environment, for instance.

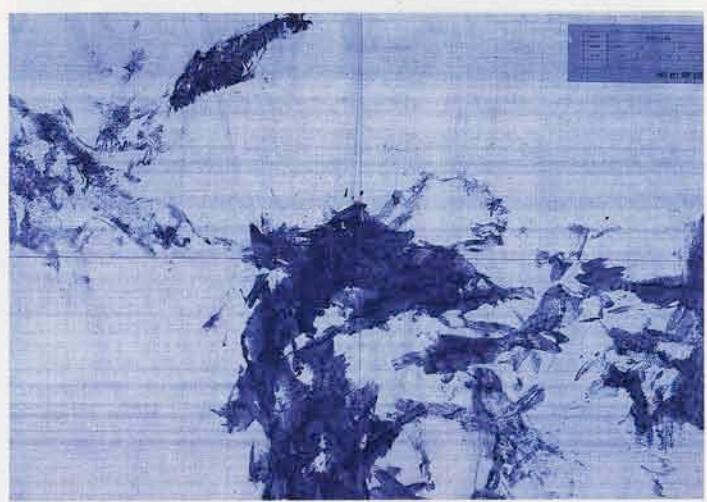
Design proposals like these can really only exist outside the marketplace, as a form of 'conceptual design' – meaning not the conceptual stage of a design project, but a design proposal intended to challenge preconceptions about how electronics shape our lives. These ideas might even be expressed in the form of films and books rather than products. Designers need to explore how such design thinking might re-enter everyday life in ways that maintain the design proposal's critical integrity and effectiveness, while facing accusations of escapism, utopianism or fantasy.

One way this could happen is if the design profession took on more social responsibility and developed its own independent vision, working with the public to demand more from industry than is currently on offer. This would require not only a shift in the way designers view their own position, but also how professional design organisations and associations see their role. Perhaps they could follow the lead of some architecture institutions, and focus on the need to encourage diverse visions through competitions and workshops for practising designers, as well as trying to engage the public through more challenging exhibitions and publications.

Or is this a role for 'academic' designers? Rather than writing papers and seeking conventional academic approval, they could exploit their privileged position to explore a subversive role for design as social critique. Free from commercial restrictions and based in an educational environment, they could develop provocative design proposals to challenge the simplistic Hollywood vision of the consumer electronics industry. Design proposals could be used as a medium to stimulate debate and discussion amongst the public, designers, and industry. The challenge is to blur the boundaries between the real and the fictional, so that the conceptual becomes more real and the real is seen as just one limited possibility among many.



Three products by Maywa Denki: Sei-Gyo, Uke-TEL and Grafish, p.62

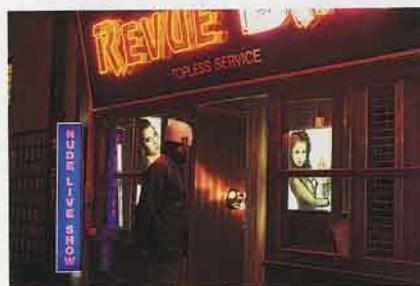




After-Life, by Jimmy Loizeau, p. 64



Life Counter, by Ippei Matsumoto, p.63



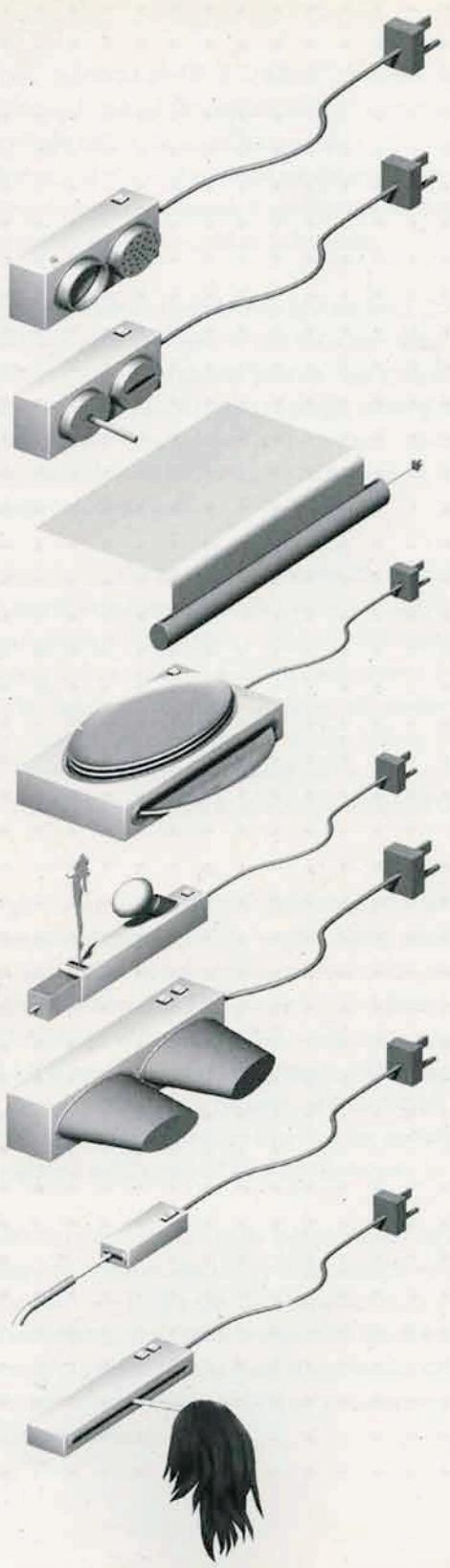
Social Tele-Presence, by James Auger, p.65



Object for Lonely Men, by Noam Toran, p.64



Accessories for Lonely Men, by Noam Toran, p.65



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• • Section 05: The Secret Life of Electronic Objects • •

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## Placebo project

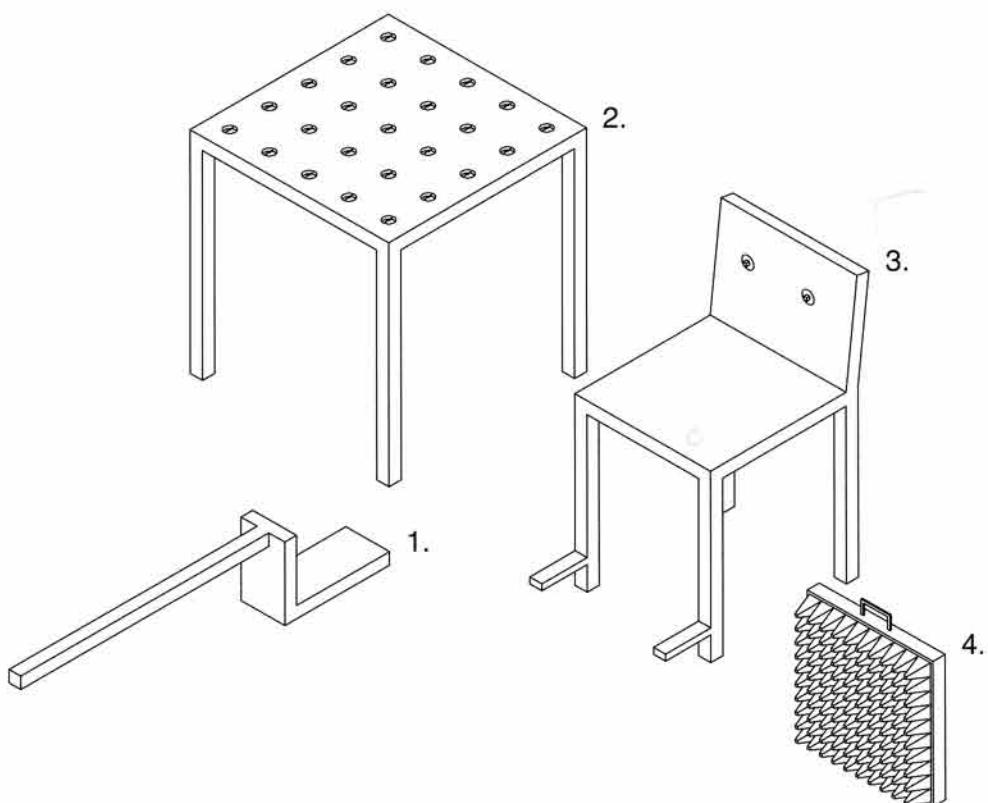
The Placebo project is an experiment in taking conceptual design beyond the gallery into everyday life. We devised and made eight prototype objects to investigate peoples' attitudes to and experiences of electromagnetic fields in the home, and placed them with volunteers. Made from MDF and usually one other specialist material, the objects are purposely diagrammatic and vaguely familiar. They are open-ended enough to prompt stories but not so open as to bewilder.

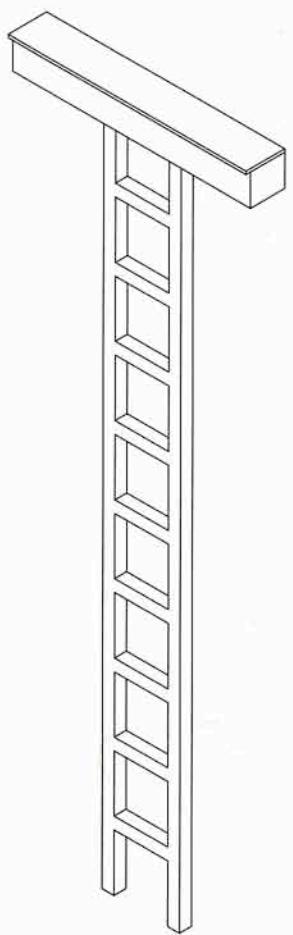
Once electronic objects enter people's homes, they develop private lives, or at least ones that are hidden from human vision. Occasionally we catch a glimpse of this life when objects interfere with each other, or malfunction. Many people believe that mobile phones heat up their ears, or feel their skin tingle when they sit near a TV, and almost everyone has heard stories of people picking up radio broadcasts in their fillings. We are not interested in whether these stories are true or scientific, but we are interested in the narratives people develop to explain and relate to electronic technologies, especially the invisible electromagnetic waves their electronic objects emit.

The Placebo objects are designed to elicit stories about the secret life of electronic objects – both factual and imagined. Homes for the objects were found through a variety of means, including adverts in a London listings magazine, workshops at the Victoria & Albert museum, a window display in Selfridges department store on Oxford Street and an article in a national newspaper. Potential adopters filled out application forms detailing any unusual experiences with electronic products, their attitude to electromagnetic waves and their reasons for choosing a particular object. Once their allotted time with the adopted object was up, we interviewed the people taking part in the project and collaborated with photographer Jason Evans to create images that pick up on and amplify details revealed during the interviews.

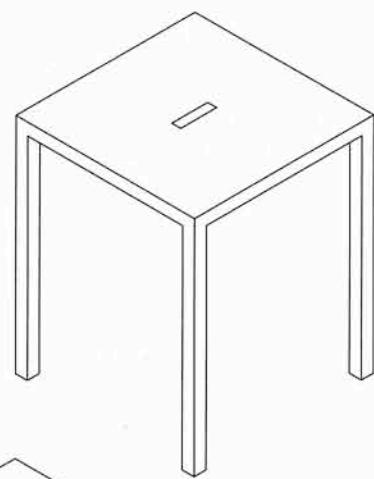
Designers cannot always solve problems, we cannot switch off the vast electromagnetic networks surrounding us all. Although we cannot change reality, we can change people's perception of it. Like a medical placebo, the objects in this project do not actually remove or counteract the cause for concern, but they can provide psychological comfort. The Placebo project is definitely not scientific: although aware of ethnographic and anthropological methodologies, we chose to adopt a more informal process in this case. We wanted to find out if people are more receptive to radical ideas than industry acknowledges, and to test our ideas about aesthetic meaning and electronic technology. We accept that the group of adopters was self-selecting. We also accept that they are probably exceptional people. But they are real people, and anything we discovered would be grounded in reality rather than fiction.

It is unlikely that any of the Placebo prototypes will make it into 'reality', at least not through the commercial marketplace. As one-offs, these products would be prohibitively expensive, and even if they were affordable, or mass-producible, their highly specific aesthetic function would mean they might only be useful for a limited period of time, like a book or video. We like the idea that these products would be available for rent, providing a service in the form of a reflective experience. Living with them for a while might encourage the borrower to think about their environment in a different way, especially in relation to electromagnetic fields.

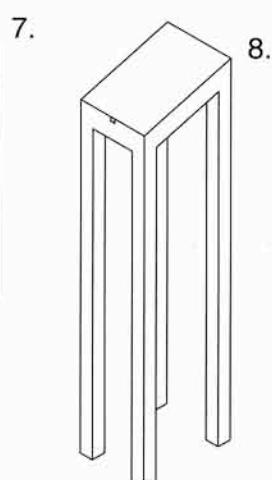




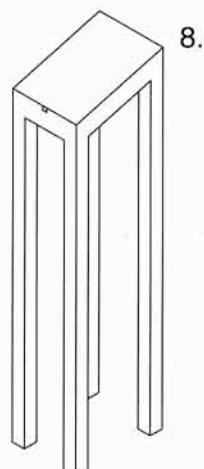
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#### ----- 1. Parasite light

This light is a ‘needy object’ - it only works when it is placed near an electronic product. Its shape provides a place to put an electronic product like a radio, and allows the lamp to be integrated into a stack of books to achieve the right height. The parasite light does not feed off EM fields and is in fact battery powered. Like the nipple chair, it uses an electric field sensor to relate the intensity of its function - in this case the amount of light emitted from 20 LEDs - to the strength of the field it senses.

#### ----- 2. Compass table

This table reminds you that electronic objects extend beyond their visible limits. The 25 compasses set into its surface twitch and spin when objects like mobile phones or laptop computers are placed on it. The twitching needles can be interpreted as being either sinister or charming, depending on the viewer’s state of mind. When we designed the compass table, we wondered if a neat-freak might try to make all the needles line up, ignoring the architectural space of the room in favour of the Earth’s magnetic field.

#### ----- 3. Nipple chair

An electric field sensor and antenna are mounted beneath the seat of the chair. When the chair is placed in an electromagnetic field, two nipples set into the back start to vibrate, and the sitter is made aware of the radio waves penetrating their torso. It is up to them whether they stay and enjoy the gentle buzz, or move to a ‘quieter’ spot. As fields can also flow up through the sitter’s body from electric wiring running underneath the floor, the chair has footrests so that you can isolate your feet from the ground. We like that it is slightly anthropomorphic; it’s as though you are sitting on its lap.

#### ----- 4. Electro-draught excluder

This object is a classic placebo. Though the draught excluder is made from conductive foam, it is not grounded, and therefore does not really absorb radiation. We were interested in whether or not it would make the owner feel more comfortable. If you are working near a TV, for example, you might place the object between you and the TV to create a sort of shadow - a comfort zone where you simply feel better.

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5. Loft

This lead-clad box on top of a ladder is a place to store precious magnetic mementoes such as answerphone messages, audio cassettes or floppy discs away from potentially harmful electromagnetic fields. It is a loft for people who live in flats. This object signals to visitors that you have a special place for special items, but that it is out of bounds. Accessing the loft might become part of a ritual.

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6. Electricity drain

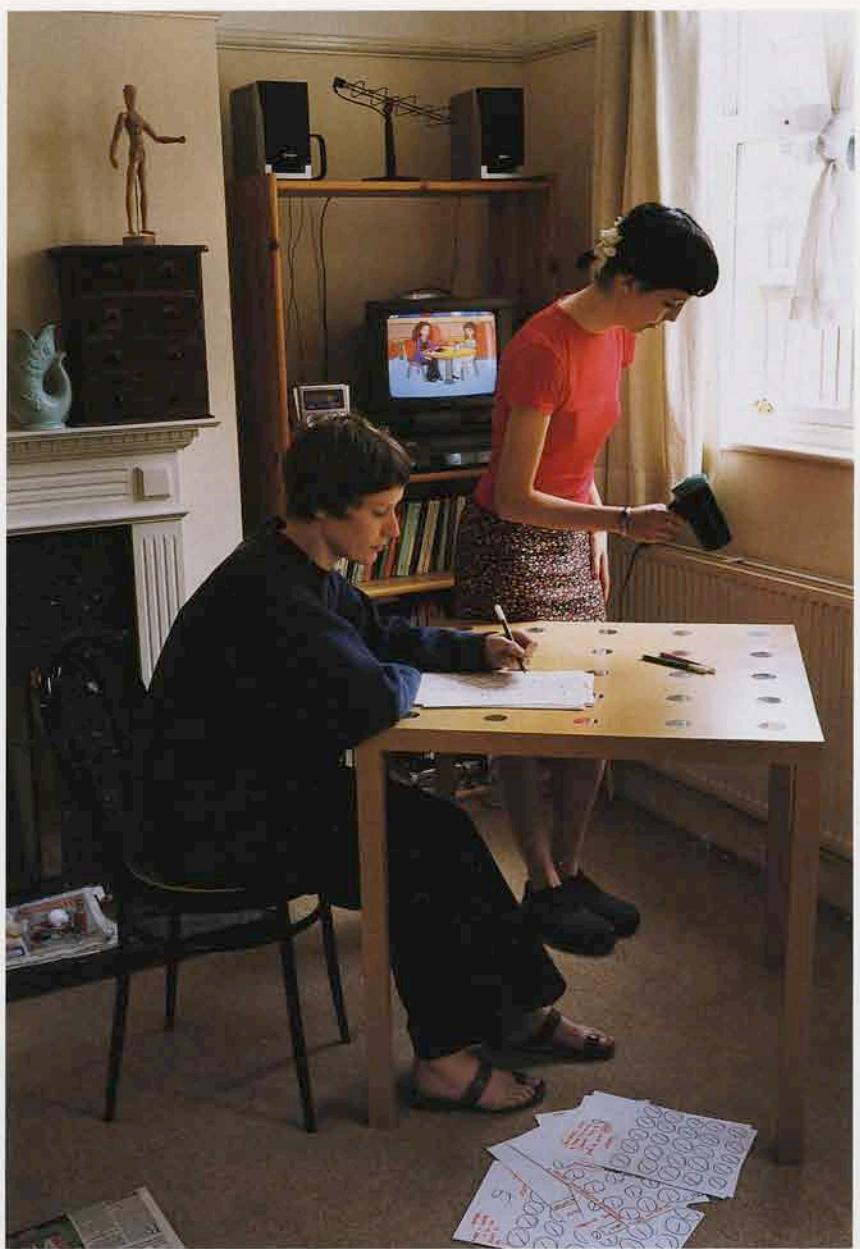
Some people who are hyper-sensitive to electricity drain excess electricity from their bodies to alleviate their symptoms. They wrap a piece of wire around their fingers which is connected to a plug that only has an earth pin. This literally grounds the person, by enabling electricity to flow from the body out into the system. This stool works in the same way: you plug it in and sit naked on a stainless steel plate in the seat. We are particularly interested where people will keep this object: in the bathroom? Bedroom? Sitting room? Is it a hygiene product, meditative piece or functional chair?

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7. GPS table

This table has a global positioning sensor inside it. It can only display its position in the world when it has a clear view of the satellites, the rest of the time it is lost and indicates this fact. The ideal owner will need a conservatory or large window, or a garden so that they can at least bring the table outdoors from time to time so it can connect with a satellite and fulfil its potential. We like the idea that people might feel a little cruel keeping it indoors.

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8. Phone table

This table is an attempt to domesticate the mobile telephone, whose synthetic and urgent squawk can be difficult to resist. On returning home, the phone is placed inside the table with its ringer switched off. Whenever the phone is called, the top of the table glows gently. The table suggests how electronic objects can use a more gentle language to capture our attention or mediate human contact. When it does glow, it is much easier to resist than a ringing phone. The phone table can be positioned behind the TV if a call is expected, or out of sight if you would prefer not to be disturbed.



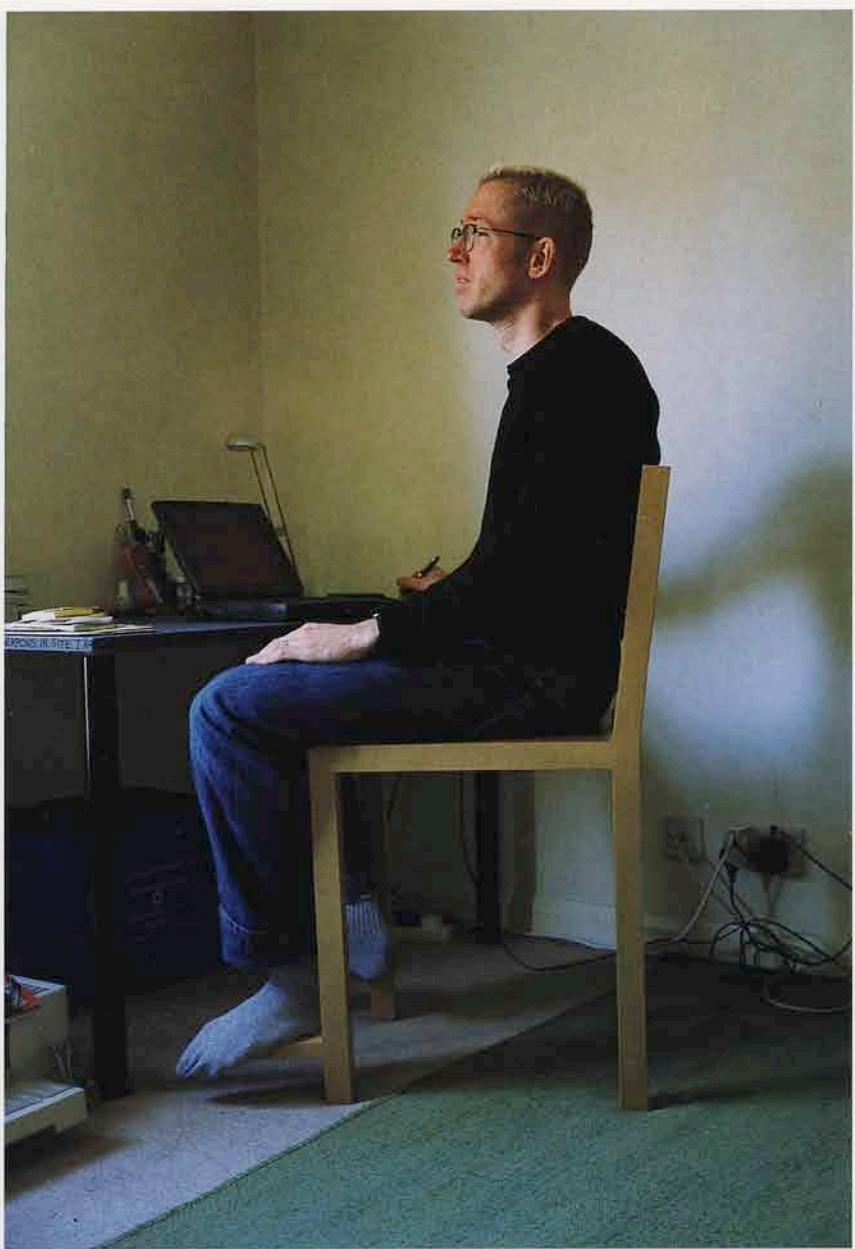
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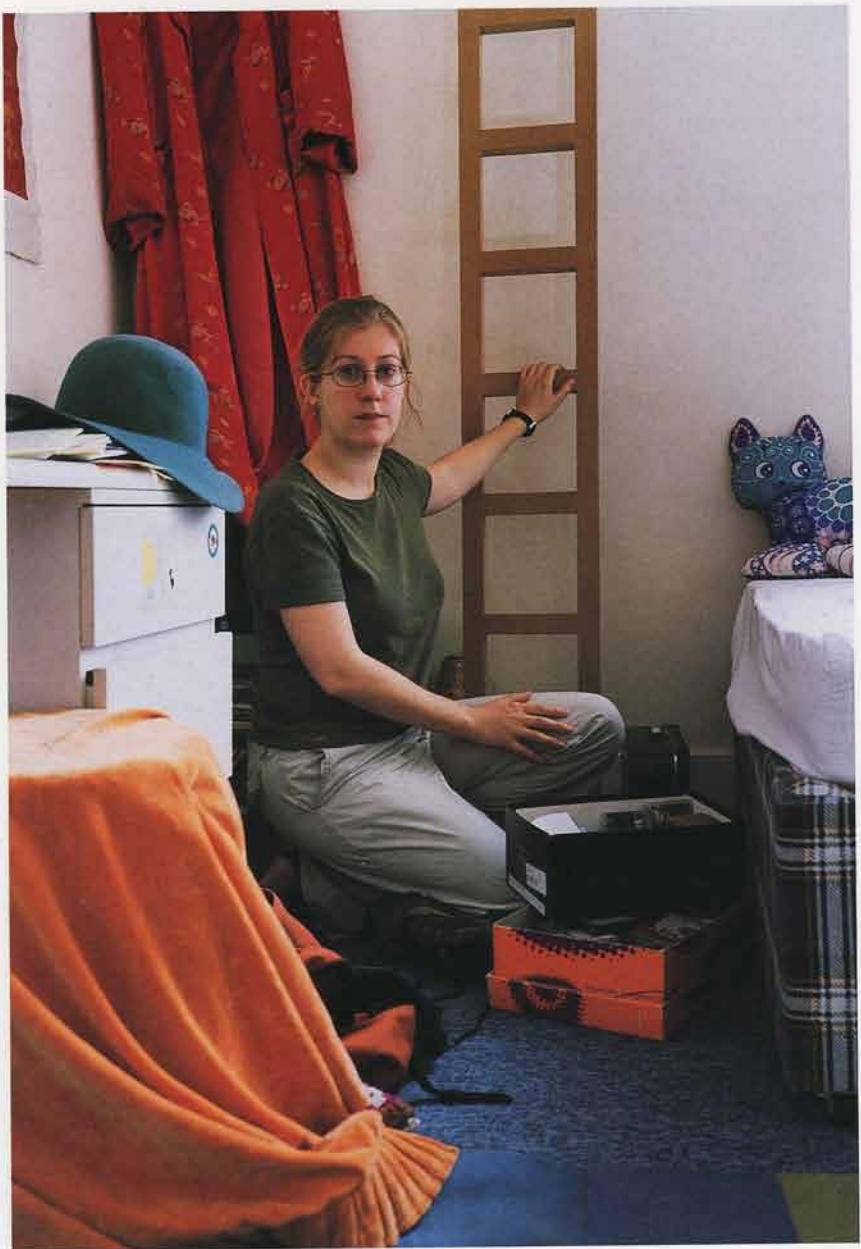
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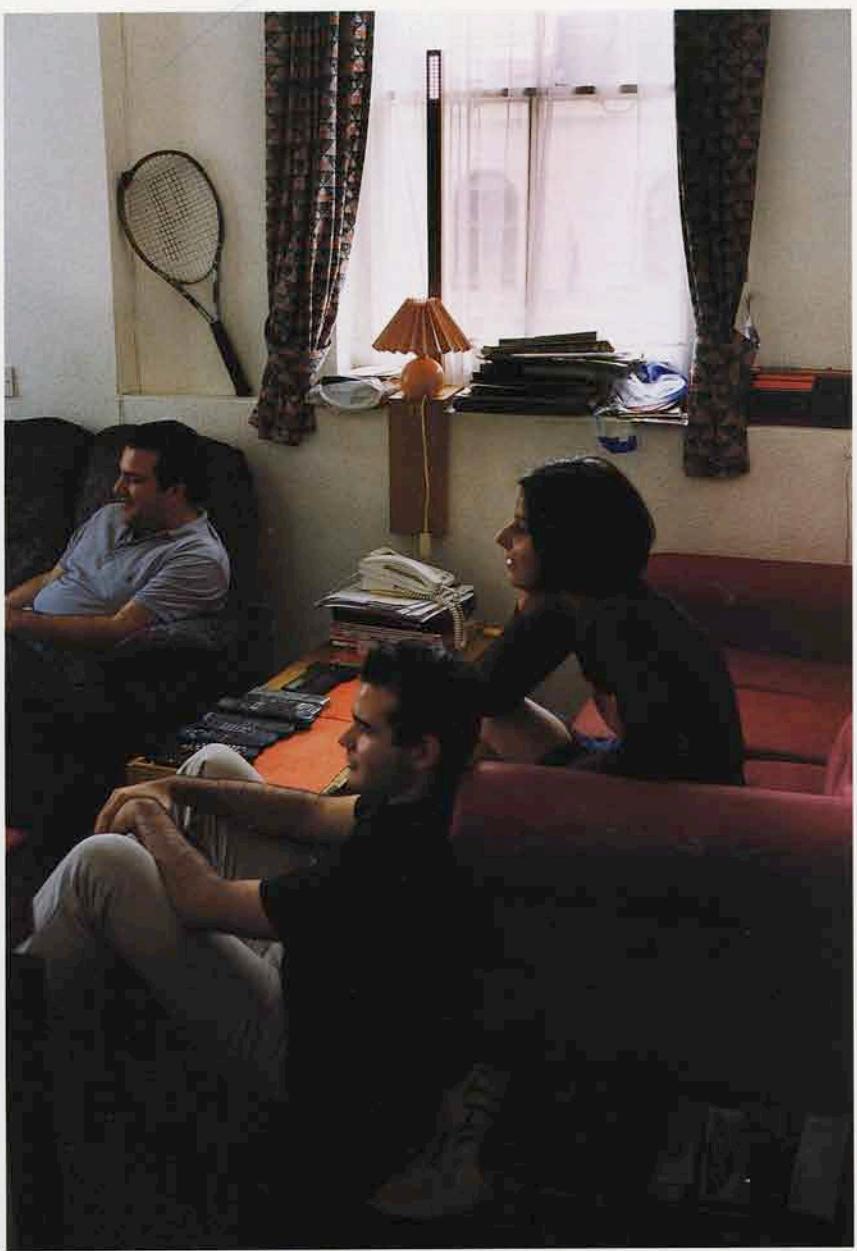
Lauren

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Sophie

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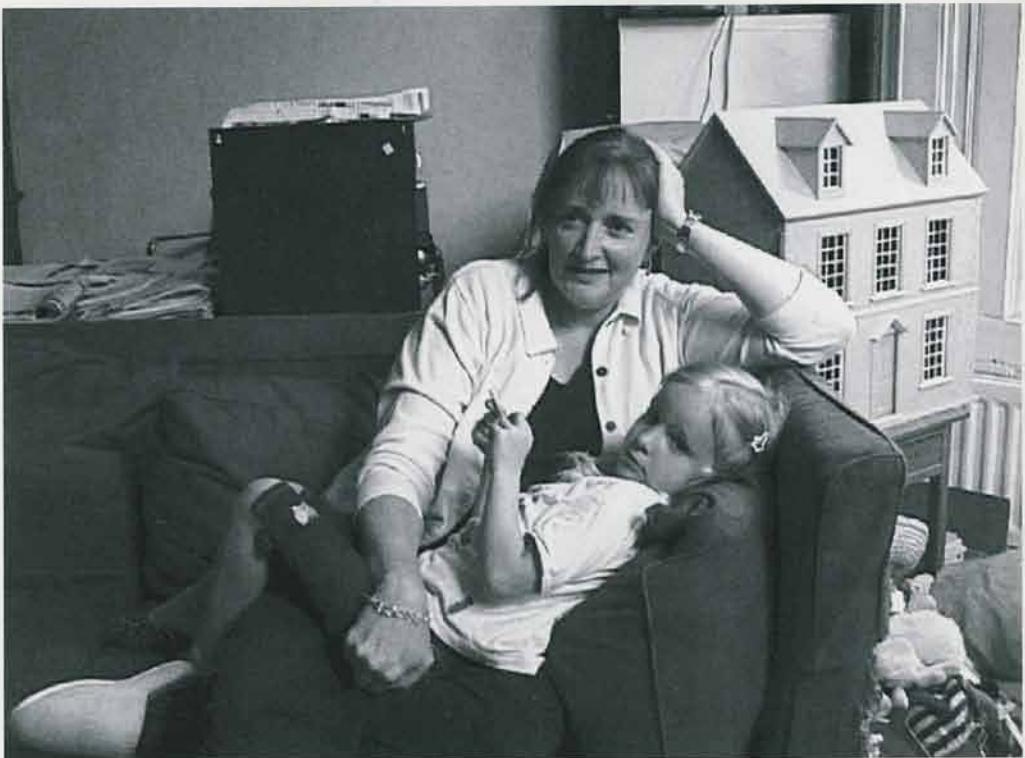
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### Section 05: The Secret Life of Electronic Objects

p.76-7: illustration by Anthony Dunne

p.81-157: photographs by Jason Evans

Re: The myth of the tv detector van

Fri, Jul 20, 2001, 4:30 pm

I've always thought that tv detector vans never really made sense. Surely, to spend all that time and money; developing the technology, equipping the vans and getting personnel to drive them about, could never be as direct and effective as simply subtracting every tv licence holder's address from every address in the country, to give you the few remaining addresses that don't have a licence? Then they could just nip round there and listen at the front door or something?

Michael

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