Conventions in Contemporary Art

Lectures and Debates
Witte de With 2001

Foreword

Design is viewed as one of the hot new niches of the visual arts. Modern art museums launch big shows about contemporary design, and designer products are increasingly perceived as art. In the wake of these developments, the art world is becoming aware of areas in which designers and artists work on projects that cannot be defined as either art or design. Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, both on the research and teaching staff of the Royal College of Art in London, work in one of those areas.

In 1999 they published *Hertzian Tales*, a refreshing look at the new possibilities and problems of "intelligent" design for an electronically sophisticated but otherwise conventional society.[1] Modern life is dominated by intelligent machines and advanced technology. Designers are usually the guardians of this development: they operate electronic amenities with smart gadgets and protect the consumer from the dilemmas they cause. Dunne and Raby counteract this role by advocating critical design that actually creates new dilemmas and addresses the dark side of modern existence. In their new publication *Design Noir*, they call on designers to create a world of electronic objects in which standardization is shunned and where there is room for "danger, adventure and transgression."[2] Artist Alan Murray of the industrial design department at the Eindhoven Institute of Technology responds critically to their call. In his opinion, Dunne and Raby's project is less a case of radical design than of "light entertainment."

The debate, titled *Design Noir*, took place on November 27, 2001, and was prompted by the appearance of the eponymous publication. Earlier that year Dunne and Raby had presented their work *Placebo: Compass Room* in the exhibition *Breeze of AIR/Hortus Conclusus* at Witte de With.

1. Anthony Dunne, *Hertzian Tales: Electronic Products, Aesthetic Experience and Critical Design* (London: RCA CRD Research Publications, 1999).
2. Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Design Noir: The Secret Life of Electronic Objects* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2002).

IV. Art and Design

Anthony Dunne

Fiona Raby

Alan Murray

Alan Murray

Reply

I taught at the Design Academy, Eindhoven, for two years before moving to the Technical University in the same city to start a department of "Entertainment" within the new faculty of Industrial Design. As an artist, I have been predominantly rewriting and designing instruction manuals and user guides.

I started rewriting instruction manuals when I was still at art school. My typical studio activity was to test products such as a Krupps espresso coffee machine. Part of my enjoyment at the time was to confound some of my teachers. A typical "discovery" for the week might be that in the coffee machine instruction manual it says to pour one liter of water into the coffee machine. In fact its glass carafe would only hold 0.75 liters of coffee (so 0.25 liters would always spill out). I liked the idea of confrontation through a very applied approach. Although this was initially a thrill-seeking foray into another discipline, it has developed into an artists practice in which it is wholly reasonable to work for three years on a guide to the game of squash and exhibit it as art. Those using the guide-to-squash do not know it is an artwork, nor do they need to know. It functions on the one hand as an excellent model of sport communication and on the other as an investigation into the possible role and approach of an artist. I feel it has superseded the initial typical "flavor" of a user-guide into actually being one.

In juxtaposition, I can imagine that designers such as Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby might find the traditional approach of an artist very attractive. When a designer's norm has been to design with a "happy ever after" approach, the seeming freedom with which an artist indulgently confronts an audience with objects that cannot be explained immediately must be extremely intriguing. This dilemma is what Dunne and Raby find so interesting.

Unlike design, that focuses on questions including, what is it, how does it function, and what should I do with it, art allows for the exploration of more ambiguous questions. Indeed, great dilemmas have helped revolutionize and re-position art, constantly urging people to rethink what art is, and

where and why it should exist. Duchamp's work exemplifies this process. And so does Mathew Barney's; it weaves a narrative of dilemmas, spell-binding an audience.

With their work and writings, Dunne and Raby call for a Design Revolution. But they already walk a tightrope of compromises. On the one hand they are calling for an "embedded wickedness that will truly make the user a protagonist and co-producer of narrative experience, rather than a passive consumer of a product's meaning." On the other hand, they propose a scheme that treads a very reasonable path through the middle ground of confrontation. In their design, they emphasize "slight strangeness;" when objects are "too weird," they are "instantly dismissed," when they are "not strange enough, they are absorbed into everyday reality." In light of their statement to develop "alternative and often gently provocative artifacts which set out to engage people through humor, insight, surprise and wonder," their level of confrontation must be characterized as mild.

This is not the confrontational "recipe" of an artist. An artist's confrontation might veer towards the uncomfortable, painful, unexplainable or monumental. I feel Dunne and Raby are instead proposing a "mildly entertaining" design platform from which a designer can amuse and titillate, evoke a giggle rather than a cry, create a comfortable zone of elegant game-playing where a user can engage with the design object and never fear what ultimate consequences that engagement might have.

Anthony Dunne, Fiona Raby and Alan Murray

Debate

Valentijn Byvanck

Tony Dunne and Fiona Raby, perhaps you wish to respond to Alan Murray's comments.

Anthony Dunne

I think the point of the relative extremism of art is well taken. Most designers are told to create for themselves a demographic picture for each product: what is the median age of the consumer, what is his lifestyle, what kind of market is it? This is a very abstract model of normality. Instead, we're suggesting that designers look to more extreme people, not as models to be employed, or to be transformed into ordinary people, but as a source of inspiration to look at and to be excited by. In addition, I agree our form of subversion is mild. That is intentional: we do not want to alienate, or project ourselves into a space which is much better occupied by artists, but to participate – maybe on the edges – to have some kind of dialogue, to extend the situation. Concerning Murray's comment about entertainment: we believe that humor is very important. We are not utopian: we don't believe you can dramatically change reality. But we don't drop out either. People expect critical things to be serious, but we believe that things can be critical and optimistic. It is not about preaching, it is about offering something in an interesting and engaging way. We never rallied for a revolution, but it is certainly our aim to encourage designers to rethink the ways in which they work, to question their models of reference. We aim at opening things up and then seeing what comes out.

Audience

Weren't you afraid that by using the word adoption, you would predetermine the effect that the GPS table would have on people?

Anthony Dunne

That is a good point. It is a loaded word. Yet, it made it easier to place these objects. Our nightmare was that we show up with these objects and people don't see the point of it. Some had applied on the basis of descriptions they

had read, others had seen them, but none had actually touched or experienced the objects. We feared a situation in which the applicants would ring us up two days later and say: please take these boring objects away.

Alan Murray

When you use the world "lost" in a table, you load the bet towards you. The worst thing for you is that people say: this is boring, we don't want it. From my point of view, if people would find it boring, I would find that quite interesting. I wonder if this loading of the chances won't effect negatively the level of response. When I look at your objects, they don't seem abstract at all, instead they look like design objects that people would immediately talk about as art objects. If the compass would have been in a table that would have been more invisible, maybe the reaction would have been different, but these objects stuck out like sore thumbs in people's interiors.

Audience

Speaking about adoption: did you ever take it away?

Anthony Dunne

We miscalculated taking things away. That was a part of the design process we completely neglected. Everyone knew we were going to collect these objects, but when it happened half of the people were very disappointed.

Valentijn Byvanck

In your presentation, the objects seem to serve predominantly one function, they offer an outlet for affective behavior. Is that not a disappointing outcome when you set out to open up a field to all kinds of new design functions?

Anthony Dunne

With each object, you can see extra functionalities. One of the things we were concerned about in our previous work: we had built completely new kinds of objects, with a complex functionality, and people found it hard to connect with them. We had to explain again and again how the object worked. So we decided to strip them down, simplify the range of functions. And from here on, we can start to diversify again, because I agree that other layers of functionality would make things more interesting.

Audience

The GPS table seems more a story than a function.

Anthony Dunne

Yes, in that particular one the information counts, not the technology. That is in itself already an interesting observation. One of the reasons that you don't often see technology and furniture combined is that the furniture becomes redundant the moment its technology has become obsolete. What's interesting with the GPS is that its information doesn't ever really become obsolete; one cannot replace the object with one that has an upgraded technology, or a better sensor. We wanted to be able to look at these issues in a kind of abstract way and purposefully strip down the objects to help us figure out what's going on.

Fiona Raby

In our presentation tonight we only discussed electronic objects which had some kind of autonomous behavior. There were six other objects which had no kind of electronic function. People got attached to these objects for different reasons. For instance, we had a square with pink foam attached to it and we told people that it absorbs electromagnetic radiation, and if you put it between you and an electronic object, it would protect them from the radiation. We explained to them that the protection is conceptual rather than technical, that is, it was a placebo. The adopter Lauren wanted the object because her boyfriend Jan was a musician who had a recording studio in their spare bedroom. The room was filled with equipment – speakers, computer, modem – which he refused to switch of. She was terrified of all the electronic radiation and wanted to protect herself from it. Jan told her that the pink foam was a ridiculous object that would never protect her. But for her, it became a symbolic kind of protection. Yet, it also made her aware of all the electronic things in her bedroom – the hairdryer, the mobile phone charger – and she became paranoid. This was a totally unexpected response. We never thought that anyone would revaluate their home because of the object. Nor did we foresee the various uses people would put the objects to. Lauren not only used the foam against Jan's equipment, she also put it in between her and the television. In addition, they were talking about hanging it on the wall like a work of art. This is an example of the territory we're operating in. We want to see if little changes in our every day materiality

can create profound ideas. Lorna felt that the GPS table connected her to satellites. It pulled her out of her everyday experience of being a housewife and looking after her child. And for us that tiny bit of subversion was a big success. You don't have to go to a gallery to be entertained, you can have something at home that touches you. That is not necessarily poetic, it can also be profound.

Alan Murray

Somewhere in your book you talked about science fiction, having imaginative objects in a conservative culture, and you put forward this idea of value-fiction as an alternative way of critical design, where you say: well, we use everyday objects, to heighten the cultural imagination. This everyday profundity reminded me of artists that run to a gallery with the proof that they do something in the real world. I've done it so many times myself: a project stirs up people, you receive a letter from someone and you feel that you tipped something in the real world. Subsequently, you put it on the art gallery wall to tell the world that you touched something in the real world. And in a way, it is not the profound difference that you made, but the appreciation of your value fiction that is most important. This feeling is reinforced by the way you photographed your objects in the book; the photo's are very beautiful, and very moody, in a fashion magazine style, which makes it seem as if the people were fodder for your value fiction.

Anthony Dunne

Science fiction seems to paint a picture of the future, where we would have all these sorts of technologies, but it turns out that we still live in the same way, with the same gender and social stereotypes. What we are trying to suggest is that you take the technologies around us, whether it is radios, sensors, compasses, or a conductive pink foam, and by combining those in different ways, living objects would come out that aren't futuristic, but form an alternative now. We didn't want to valuate the objects. Nor was it our intention to attract attention to the fact that we're connecting with real people, or the real world. Instead, we are genuinely interested in seeing how people, once we gave these objects away, lived with them. We would have learned a lot too, if people had rejected them. Yet at the end of the day we are designers, and there is a side to us that tries to shape things. These are artificial objects, they're kind of experimental, designed in a very abstract way.

They are design objects, that is their context. Yet, most designers condemn these projects. Their view of design is about shape, style, material, about the way objects are manufactured or marketed. None of our objects have these things associated with it. We wanted to be clear that they are not products, they are just devices to slip into peoples homes. They have an esthetic that makes them semi-there, not real, robust products. They are wrought with all sorts of contradictions and complexities, but that's what we enjoy, taking a position and trying things out.

Fiona Raby

An endless number of tables and chairs are manufactured which exemplify the fact that designing is most of the time just a process of reshaping material and form. Function is not a subject of discussion. And that's our point: we're making a relation to design beyond looking at shape and style. Instead, we think about the role objects play in everyday life. As to your comment about the photography, we did work with a fashion photographer, who sat in on the interview, the rule being that the pictures had to reflect what people said, be more than mere documentation. Fashion photographers are used to working with people, they are able to make people feel very comfortable without having to tidy up the house. That was a pragmatic choice.

Audience

Is there a certain agenda you have for the projects in everyday life, or is everything allowed?

Anthony Dunne

We work as researchers. Although we have to get external funding for our work and find people to support it, we do things you couldn't do in a company, a design consultancy, or as a freelance independent designer. We are not interested in manufacturing it. We hope companies look at our work and get interested in this softer, more modest way of presenting technology in the home. It may generate a set of products that fit a different way of thinking. People are so unbelievably carefree about this invisible environment that's taking shape, with its side-products and radiation. In England, the government allocates only a tiny amount of money, last year 300,000 pounds, for researching the effects of mobile phones; no one really knows whether this stuff is harmful or not. When you do come across literature,

it's usually highly technical. We're interested in introducing, through design, this kind of awareness into people's homes. From a public standpoint, we aim to cause more awareness and discussion about the presence of these invisible fields. Not in an alarming way, in which people panic, nor in a naive way: oh we can make everything wireless and connect everything up. In addition, we have an agenda aimed at designers, which says: look, these things are very simple, why can't we have objects that offer more interesting esthetic or psychological experiences, why not encourage a more conceptual kind of relationship? What's holding it back, marketing? Production? Design ideology? As academics, working in a university setting, we don't have to put our works into production or find a manufacturer. Instead, we see it as our task to push the limits of design, to extend the space, to experiment.

Alan Murray

In an interview I once said my work was on the verge of being a moral nightmare. Can you say the same about your work?

Fiona Raby

Yes, we work on the edges of industry and commercialization, everything we produce, can be commercialized and consumed, especially the stuff with mobile phones can be easily hijacked purely for selling purposes. And that's a problem in many of our projects; when we open up a space for people to think in a new social way, there is always the danger that it can be used to sell more things.