

Para-functionality: The Aesthetics of Use

This chapter reviews projects from art, architecture, and design that exemplify the functional estrangement I call “para-functionality.” The term means here a form of design where function is used to encourage reflection on how electronic products condition our behavior. The prefix “para-” suggests that such design is within the realms of utility but attempts to go beyond conventional definitions of functionalism to include the poetic.

Eccentric Objects: Para-functionality and Non-design

Some naive, curious, or eccentric objects, outside the world of conventional design, unintentionally embody provocative or poetic qualities that most product designs, even those intended to provoke, seldom achieve. Although industrial designers play a part in designing instruments of death (weapons) and pleasure (sex aids) these extreme areas of material culture rarely enter design discourse. Yet Jack Kevorkian’s *Suicide Machine*, a powerful “unofficial” design that materializes complex issues of law, ethics, and self-determination, shows how an industrial invention can be a form of criticism (figure 3.1). Critical of a legal system that outlaws euthanasia, Kevorkian has his machine to overcome this. Its ambiguous status between prototype and product makes it more disturbing than pure artworks by blurring boundaries between the everydayness of industrial production and the fictional world of ideas. It suggests a role for design objects as discourse where functionality can be used to criticize the limits that products impose on our actions.

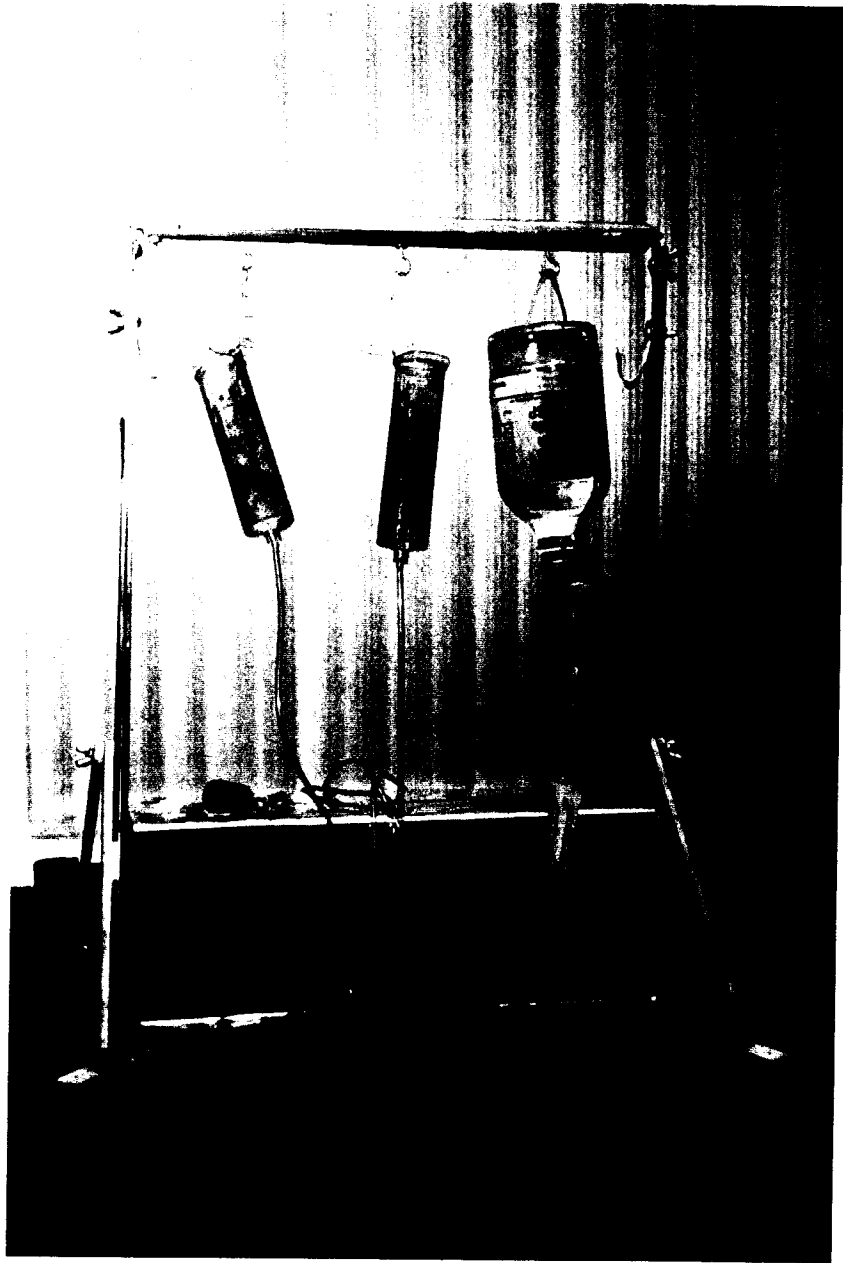


Figure 3.1 Jack Kevorkian's *Suicide Machine* is a powerful piece of "unofficial" design and shows how an industrial object can embody complex ideas through invention as a form of social criticism.

At the other extreme is the world of antique walking sticks. A drinking cane, designed for an alcohol merchant who must spend much of his time visiting the bars of his customers, discretely siphons off his drink while his host is not looking; a trigger later releases the drink into a gutter (figure 3.2). It satisfies etiquette and exploits the walking stick's inherent potential for connection to other objects and contexts: hand, bar, glass, and gutter.

Walking sticks that become a card table or seat (figures 3.3–3.4) show how simple portable props can transform architectural spaces. They conceptually colonize the functional possibilities of preexisting spaces. The user becomes a protagonist in a new narrative where a lobby or park becomes a casino.¹

A third device, used by detectives in the 1940s for protecting fingerprints on a steering wheel, is beautifully absurd and surreal (figure 3.5). Sigmund Freud (1996, 13) cites G. Heymans's explanation that a joke works through bewilderment succeeded by illumination. The word that is the vehicle of a joke often appears at first to be wrongly constructed, unintelligible, incomprehensible, or puzzling. In this double steering wheel a similar unintelligibility is evident: its comic effect is produced by solving this bewilderment by understanding its function. This is also the case with "Chindogu" (figure 3.6). Their individual elements are recognizable, but the reason for combining them is at first bewildering. The meaning behind the object is derived from "sense-fiction": the objects make functional sense, but are still useless.²

Forbidden Emotions: Para-functionality and Design

In a review of an exhibition of work by Intermediate Unit 3, *Objects in the Landscape*, at London's Architectural Association, Irie (1993) contrasts the "electronic devices essential to contemporary urban existence," the means whereby "information, entertainment and fantasy are promoted—and controlled," with the unit's "virus-like prototypes" that "invade and disrupt such networks, and propel minds and bodies into a hectically deregulated world of fragments—fragments of ideals, of illusions, of sensory impressions." The use of strange inventions by architects is not uncommon and, although they have lost much of their potency through overuse, their deployment in this instance as "bizarre monsters," designed to challenge the banal reality supported by consumer durables, emphasizes the need to identify how electronic products can offer alternative expressions of their own functional logic. In a field where "product design is thoroughly integrated in capitalist production, [and] bereft



Figure 3.2 This drinking cane from the Saint-Etienne mail-order catalogue of 1910 operates in a context where etiquette assumes such importance that the object must be made to maintain it in a "socially dangerous" situation.



Figures 3.3–3.4 The table cane, patented in England in 1891, and the “low seat cane” are examples of how simple portable props can transform an architectural space.

of an independent critical tradition on which to base an alternative,” only a few designers use the function of products as criticism.

For example, Penny Sparke (1982) cites Gaetano Pesce: his “use of distortion and exaggeration [are] ‘absurd’ devices for commenting upon his observations. Rather than turning to alternative media, Pesce uses the language of design to make its own self-commentary” (52), but his objects do not incorporate functionality as a primary component (figure 3.7). When functionality does enter, it is often jokey and closer to the playful one-off multiples created by Fluxus. During the 1980s Denis Santachiara and Philip Garner developed approaches that merit a closer look. Santachiara, who developed a distinctive approach over many years, aims to raise the aesthetic quality of mass-produced everyday objects such

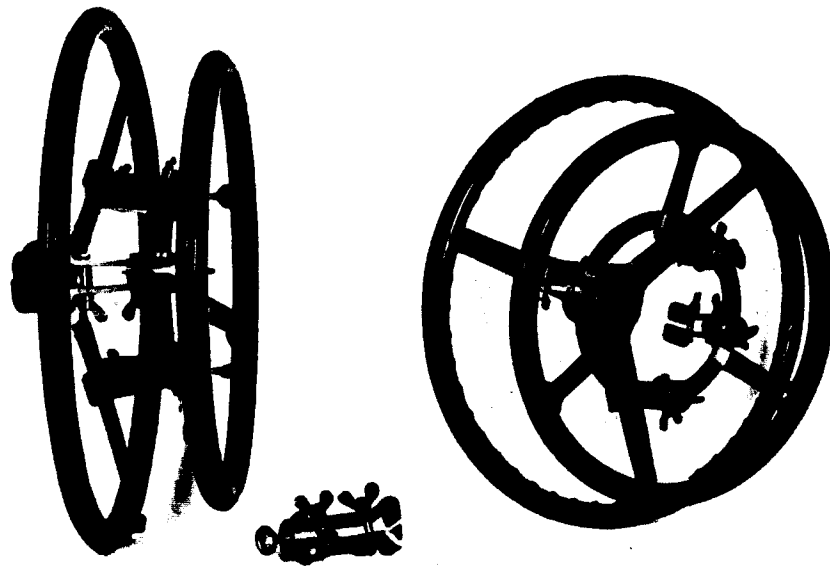


Figure 3.5 A steering wheel, used by detectives during the 1940s to drive recovered vehicles back to the police station without smudging the thief's fingerprints.

as domestic appliances by developing their possibilities of animation. This could be seen as little more than a desire to use technology to give objects a personality by making them more expressive and quirky (figure 3.8). But his concern is with an aesthetics of use which give objects a distinctive identity from the linguistics of construction and manufacture. Santachiara subverts technical knowledge, redirects it towards provocative ends, provides more than enriched interactivity, and raises the complex issues of what Baudrillard has called the "crisis of functionalism."

Baudrillard (1981) argues that the acceptance of functionalism as an arbitrary but dominant rationality gave rise to an irrational counter-discourse that moves between the two poles of kitsch and surrealism:

The surrealist object emerges at the same epoch as the functional object, as its derision and transgression. Although they are overtly dys- or para-functional, these phantasmic objects nevertheless presuppose—albeit in a contradictory sense—the advent of functionality as the universal moral law of the object, and the advent of this object itself, separated, autonomous and dedicated to the transparency of its function. When one ponders



Figure 3.6 The individual elements of a “chindogu” are recognizable—in this case, a clothes dryer and golf club, but the reason for their combination is at first bewildering.

it, there is something unreal and almost surreal in the fact of reducing an object to its function; and it suffices to push this principle of functionality to the limit to make its absurdity emerge. This is evident in the case of the toaster, iron or “undiscoverable objects” of Carelman. (192–193)

Santachiara’s work is often closer to kitsch than that of Garner, whose is closer to surrealism and the absurd. Garner’s proposals for products are a form of industrial design that taps into the strange psychological and social narratives arising from the objects themselves and interaction with and through them in a consumer-oriented society. Although their overtly satirical and whimsical



Figure 3.7 Gaetano Pesce's furniture for Cassina during the early 1960s uses the language of design to communicate his observation that people will always be alienated from objects as long as consumption is the primary reason for an object's existence.

character, often simply visual puns or jokes, undermines the viewer's suspension of disbelief (figure 3.9), they demonstrate the power of mock-ups, scenarios, and fictitious narrative over working prototypes as a way of presenting this kind of fiction. The success of both his books confirms that people understand and relate to the narrative behind the work without having to use the objects.

Santachiara and Garner operate within the realm of the gadget, the opposite of the well-designed object. The term "gadget" here denotes a curious, original and witty accessory of no real use, as opposed to the "gimmick," which is too transparent in its effort to impress and attract attention. Giulio Ceppi remarks that "probably the gadget has never been considered, by official design culture, as the result of a design effort, an industrial product capable of revealing interesting technical features or of influencing peoples behaviour" and that "the most important phenomenon caused by the gadget is, however, a psycho-behavioural factor: wonder. . . . The fact that wonder and surprise are two variables that rarely enter into the design of industrial objects has induced the development of a clandestine niche in which such forbidden emotions can be found" (Ceppi 1991, 15).

Heterotopian Gadgets: Para-functionality and Art Objects

For examples that explore the aesthetics of this "clandestine niche" of forbidden emotions it is necessary again to move away from industrial design, and begin



Figure 3.8 Denis Santachiara's *Portale* (1989), which sparks when it is passed through, is an example of his concern with an aesthetics of use where invention is used to give objects a distinctive identity that moves away from the linguistics of construction and manufacture.



Figure 3.9 Philip Garner's *Alienature* (1985) demonstrates the power of mock-ups, scenarios, and fictitious narrative over working prototypes as a way of presenting this kind of fiction.

with literature: not the gadget-ridden world of science fiction but a world where writing itself is a gadget in that it celebrates the workings of language. The heterotopia described by Michel Foucault (1970) illustrates what a literary gadget might be like:

Utopias afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold; they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical. Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they destroy "syntax" in advance, and not only the syntax which causes words and things (next to and also one another) to "hold together." This is why utopias permit fables and discourse: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental dimension of the fabulous; heterotopias (such as those found so often in Borges) desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilise the lyricism of our sentences. (xv–xvii)

David Porush (1985) uses terminology that invites comparison between the poetics of real machines and strange inventions, and literary gadgets: “[Samuel Beckett’s] *Lost Ones* is a palpable fiction which, even as its inventor attempts to complete the blueprint, collapses into impossible meaninglessness, self-contradiction, and absurdity. The fallibility of the cylinder machine lies in the fact it is constructed in words; the author’s attempt to describe it precisely becomes an exercise in the futility of trying to describe anything using language” (161).

Beckett uses two kinds of language, a precise technical/mathematical one, and a language of “failure, probability and doubt.” These two rhetorics are at odds with each other and their weaving together provides the qualities of this text, “an allegorical world of pure fiction” about the “perception of the mute resistance of worldly objects to our vain and inappropriate attempts to attach names to them.” Paul Klee seems to have incorporated this sensibility into his drawings: for example, *The Twittering Machine* (figure 3.10), where a strange device hovers in the imaginary space of the drawing, suggests a realm where machines do not simply mirror rationality through nonsensical functions but embody alternative physical laws to ours, like Marcel Duchamp’s “Large Glass” and the “Pataphysics” of Alfred Jarry.

What happens when this sensibility moves from the page and canvas to become part of everyday space? The sculptor Panamarenko is interesting in this respect as his machines embody the same ambiguity as the literary and painterly gadgets of Beckett and Klee. Whereas artists like Jean Tinguely have constructed useless machines that comically mirror rationality, Panamarenko’s objects rarely work (figure 3.11), provoking the viewer to think about the nature of invention and the desires that motivate it. They are about flight, desire, the limits of knowledge, and the transition from wondering and dreaming to the dull reality of realization. By denying that last step and conventional practice, they hover successfully between the imaginary and the real. His scientific theories on flight also highlight the fictional nature of scientific knowledge and blur the boundaries between words and things.

The inventor-artist Steven Pippin meditates on photography. He coats with photographic chemicals the interior surfaces of everyday objects like washing machines, toilets, and bath tubs, turning them into cameras. His ingenious experiments interweave the host object’s original functionality with that of a camera, resulting in objects that occupy a difficult conceptual space outside the usual polarization of functionalism and surrealism. They do produce sense, and we understand them, but it is hard to say what exactly we understand about them.



Figure 3.10 Paul Klee's *The Twittering Machine* (1922) shows a strange device hovering in the imaginary space of the drawing, suggesting a realm where machines do not simply mirror rationality through nonsensical functions. Paul Klee, *The Twittering Machine* (1922). Copyright DACS 1999.

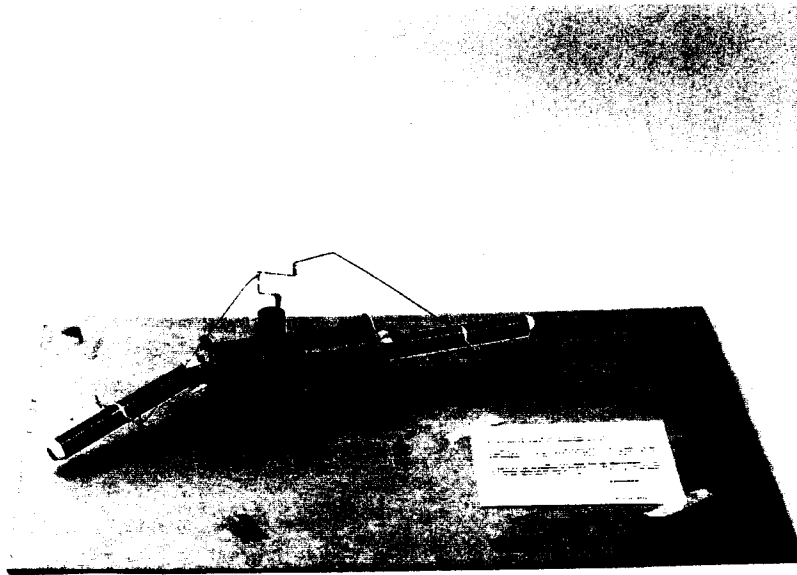


Figure 3.11 Panamarenko's *Voyage to the Stars* (1979), like many of his other pieces, does not actually work. This provokes the viewer to think about the nature of invention and the desires that motivate it.

They differ from the symbolic machines and devices of Rebecca Horn, where things do what we expect but the company they keep surprises. Pippin creates conceptual gadgets that render useless our expectation of what things ought to do; they turn knowledge itself into a gadget and allow us to catch glimpses of how knowledge works and wonder at its beautiful but useless mechanisms.

The objects produced by the inventor-artist Philippe Ramette occupy a different part of the space between ideas and things. They resemble in atmosphere the design proposals of Philip Garner but are less ironical in their straightforward presentation of function through the nostalgic language of antique scientific instruments. Meyer Rubinstein (1993) describes them as "prostheses of the spirit" (100), aids to thought and contemplation. As with many of the objects described in this chapter, the emphasis on functionality focuses the viewer's attention on the space between the experience of looking at the work and the prospect of using it. Here the emphasis is on the body and its relationship through the senses to the space that contains it. Although fully working, many of Ramette's objects cannot be used because they can hurt or worse: for example,



Figure 3.12 The emphasis placed on functionality in Philippe Ramette's *Object with Which to See the World in Detail* (1990) focuses the viewer's attention on the space between the experience of looking at the work and the prospect of using it.

Object to Make Yourself Be Struck by Lightning, or *Intolerable Object* whose lens focuses sunlight onto the top of the head. But not all his objects are threatening. In a world of artificial objects shaped almost entirely by functionalism, devices like an *Object with Which to See the World in Detail* do not attempt to escape the dictates of functionalism but instead work from within, extending it to include the poetic and playfully subversive (figure 3.12).

Social Fictions: Para-functionality and Criticism

Although often threatening, Ramette's objects do not shock. Their critical content is hidden beneath the poetry of construction and the humorous appreciation of their function. But the work of the artist Andrea Zittel shocks by using the familiar contexts of the home, and of the system of production and consumption, to concretize alternative values that are outside notions of the future or past but sit uncomfortably alongside "now." They suggest that the way things are may not be the only possibility. They initiate a questioning and awareness that helps unravel the "one-dimensionality" that characterizes present times and maintains "the impossibility of the possible."¹ Zittel's *Comfort Units* suggests an



Figure 3.13 Andrea Zittel's *Comfort Units* (1994) suggests an unusual way of thinking about the role of furniture. Her emphasis shifts from issues of style and image to their psychological use as tools for inhabitation.

unusual way of thinking about the role of furniture (figure 3.13). Her emphasis shifts from style and image to their psychological use as tools for inhabitation. By clearly favoring the manifestation and fusion of particular functional possibilities over others they remind us, through an extreme but credible form of functional reductionism, of our dependence on objects for developing new behaviors. In her work it is never quite clear whether her positive-reinforcement prototypes reflect a genuine belief that this is what we need, or are an ironical play on modernism.

The architects Kenneth Kaplan and Ted Krueger (K/K Research and Development) leave no doubt about the status of their assemblages of found machine parts (figure 3.14) as ironic "analogues" for architectural ideas. Although their writing is polemical their use of objects to attract the attention of the audience,

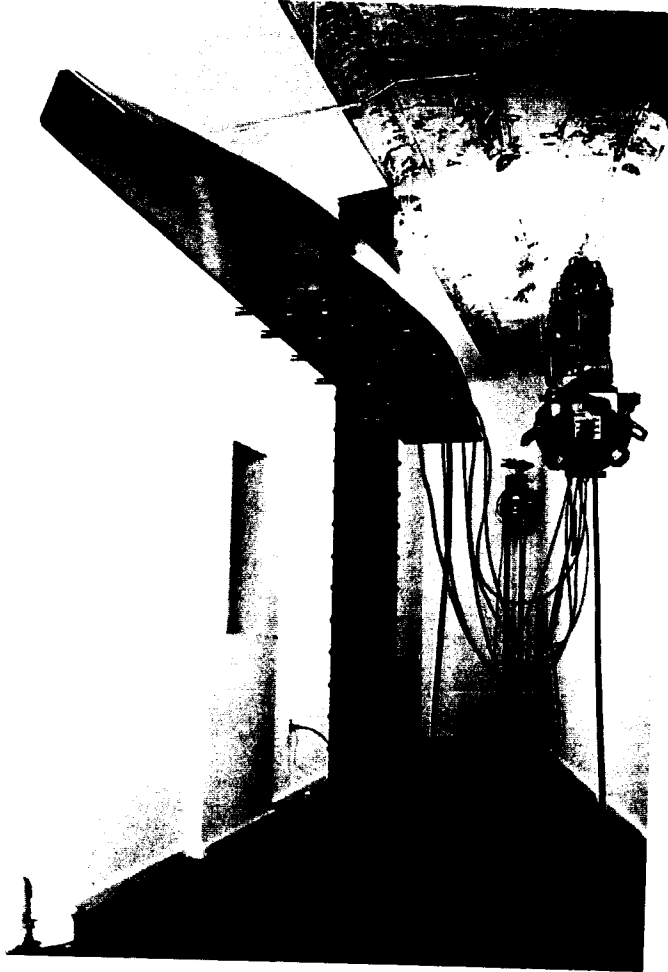


Figure 3.14 K/K Research and Development's *Bureau-dicto* (1989) is an ironic "analogue" for architectural ideas consisting of an assemblage of found machine parts.



Figure 3.15 K/K Research and Development's *Crib-batic* (1986) is a prototype for a push-chair made from steel (they felt children needed to be exposed to hard materials from an early age). It was equipped with measuring equipment so that the child might interact with the environment on the go.

before it is seduced by their usually written political narrative, reduces the objects to dumb props. Their *Crib-batic* project (with Christopher Scholz), however, is an exception (figure 3.15). A prototype for a child's push-chair made from steel (they felt children needed to be exposed to hard materials from an early age), it was equipped with measuring equipment so that the child might interact with the environment on the go. This piece is more powerful than their more obtuse architectural analogues, because it is possible to imagine what it would mean for such thinking to enter everyday life through similar objects. It moves beyond implied functionality and appearances to use function to draw attention to the role objects play in conditioning our responses to the environment.

Another architectural practice, Diller + Scofidio, designs and builds architectural gadgets that work on a critical level. *Para-Site*, an architectural exploration of the impact of electronic media on architectural space, is relevant here because of the equal importance it gives to electronic and conventional media. Electronic objects such as televisions and video cameras are not repackaged or redesigned but integrated into new hybrid objects (figure 3.16), transforming these boring and familiar devices into an architectural intervention. Diller + Scofidio deploy technology intelligently, using it to reveal, enable, and criticize, intervening in not only the abstract space of the building but also its social and practical use.

Para-Site is one of many critical interventions in public spaces by architects and artists. One of the best known is Krzysztof Wodiczko's large-scale projections onto public buildings. He has written: "My socio-aesthetic research and experiences deal with 'strategies' for making public art critical, non-official art." He studied in the graduate program of industrial design at the Akademia Sztuk Pięknych in Warsaw under a former collaborator of Le Corbusier, Jerzy Soltan, who advocated a "(post)-avant-garde" strategy of critical engagement with and infiltration of, the institutional structures of industry and culture. After graduating he worked in Warsaw as an industrial designer for UNITRA, a manufacturer of electronic products. One of his first pieces of art was done in 1969 while still an industrial designer there: *Personal Instrument*⁵ (figure 3.17). He was assisted in this by technicians from the Experimental Music Studio in Warsaw:

The instrument transforms the sounds of the environment.

The instrument functions in response to hand movements.

The instrument reacts to sunlight.

The instrument is portable.

The instrument can be used any place and any time.

The instrument is for the exclusive use of the artist who created it.

The instrument permits him to attain virtuosity. (Wodiczko 1992, 76)

Wodiczko has said that "the instrument's magic silence is its socio-political message." Although private, it depends on a public space as a source of sound, and so that others can gaze at it and imagine how it works. According to Wodiczko, "It was a way to shape a metaphor for the limits to the freedom of the individual Pole, to the ways he could exercise this freedom, and to his power in

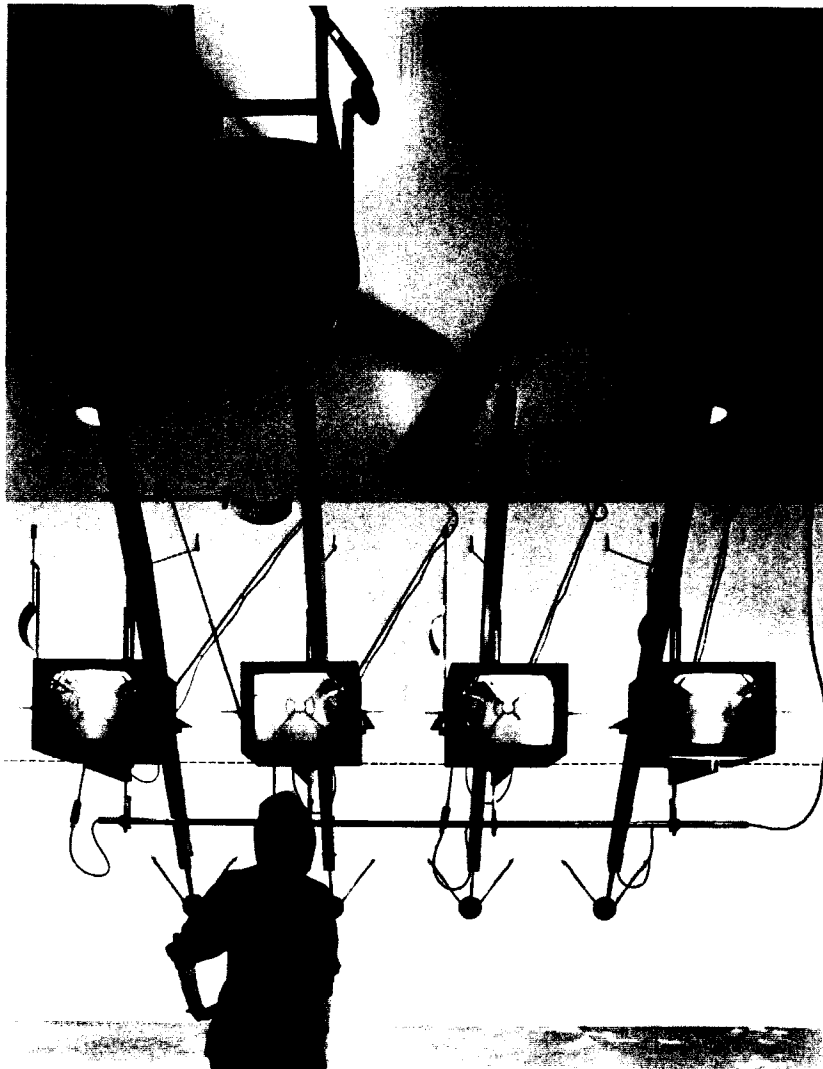


Figure 3.16 Diller + Scofidio's *Para-Site* (1989), an architectural exploration of the impact of electronic media on architectural space, gives equal importance to electronic and conventional media. Electronic objects such as TVs and video cameras are not repackaged or redesigned, but are integrated into new hybrid objects.

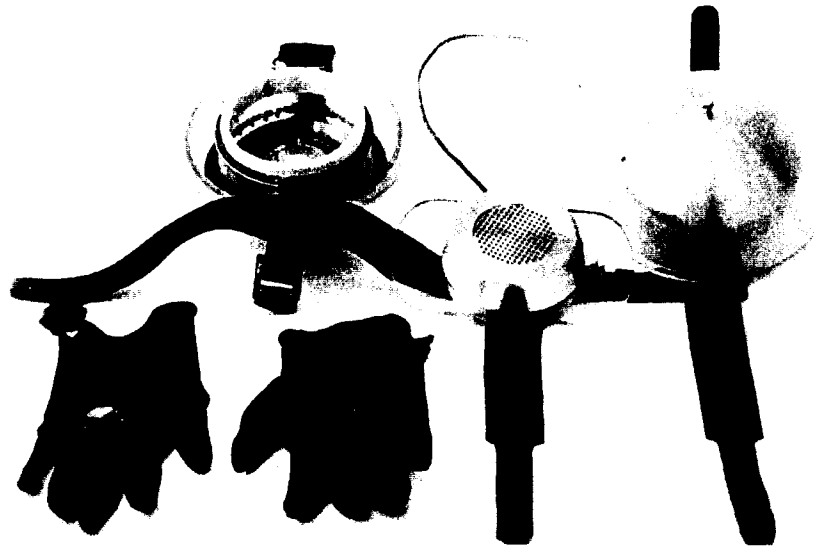


Figure 3.17 Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Personal Instrument* (1969), although private, depends on a public space as a source of sound, and so that others can gaze at it and imagine how it works.

relation to public spaces." It was not designed for mass production nor even for a limited edition "and yet it was intended for the whole world as a metaphor for community life and the nature of public spaces in Poland":

My personal instrument proved to be the point of departure for all my public works. It was my first attempt to provide a metaphorical definition of man's position as a "citizen" of a dominated public space. It was also the first time I attempted to hint at the "strategy" of taking words and using space as medium in which to speak them, even though the right to use a private voice in space that was totally "socialized" (politicized) by the government was utterly nonexistent. I proposed the technique of speaking silently, reticently or by grotesquely exhaling silence." (Wodiczko 1992, 71)

Wodiczko's public projections and homeless vehicles continue this research (figure 3.18). A lesser-known object, *Alien Staff*, shows how industrial design, through conceiving new functions and their configuration as "accessible" products, can function critically. The staff houses a small LCD television, while a small video player, a CB radio or walkie-talkie, and batteries are in a shoulder

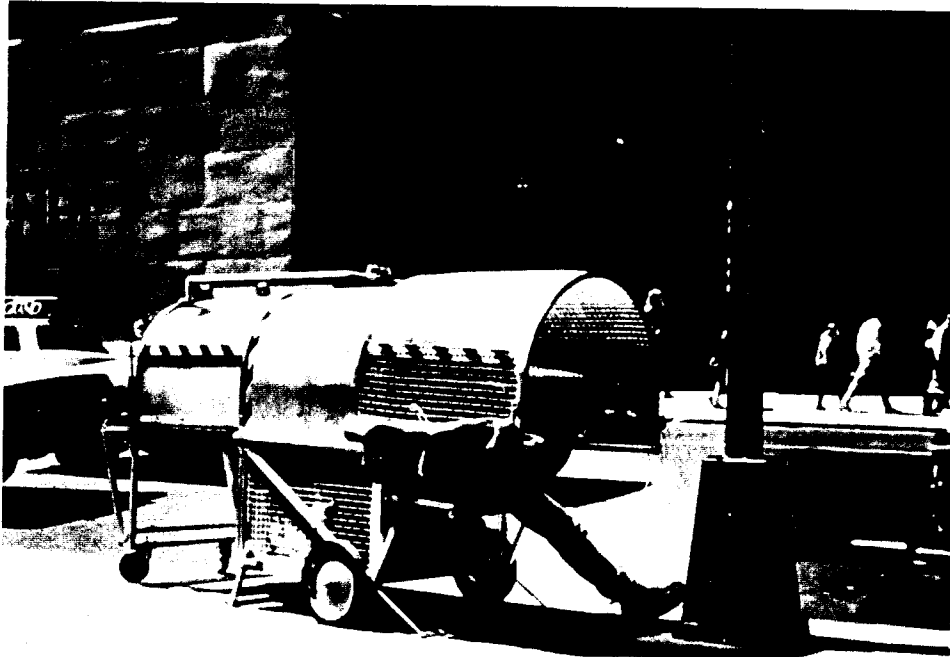


Figure 3.18 One of Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Homeless Vehicles* (1988–1989).

bag. The small size of the display, its position at eye level, and its proximity to the alien's face are all important. Once somebody has been attracted, a relationship is perceived between the face within the screen and the actual face of the alien, conceptual barriers are destabilized, and real communication may begin: "It is an instrument that gives the individual immigrant a chance to 'address' directly anyone in the city who may be attracted by the symbolic form of the equipment and the character of the 'broadcast' program" (Wodiczko 1992, 303).

Wodiczko's designs show how simple electronic technologies can challenge preconceptions, but are at the margins of design. Although I see them as design proposals not artworks it seems that, to hold a design view where electronic objects function as criticism, one must move closer to the world of fine art because the design profession finds it difficult to accommodate such research. Objects such as *Personal Instrument* and *Alien Staff*, with their use of simple electronics and their emphasis on invention and social and cultural content, are rare examples of how product design and the electronic object can fuse into critical design.

Hertzian Pathologies: Para-functionality and Electronic Objects

People like to play lotto and people like to use the ATM. Why don't you make it an option in the ATM to say put your money in and say, I'll bet a little bit and see if I can get a little more out, so you ask for twenty dollars, and you push the button, and you could get twenty-five or you could get fifteen.

—JEFF KIPNIS, "ATM COMPETITION"

Another zone of activity outside that of even the exiled designer is "anonymous design," where alternative conceptual models already find expression through electronic artifacts. "Pathological" gadgets are examples of life outside the normal conception of reality; they are design fictions, deviations, and failures and help to maintain the "impossibility of the possible."

Many of these devices concern communication. Most communication technology is oriented toward the individual; it cannot yet support or even encourage more complex social situations. It is point-to-point, one-to-one, not place-to-place. Yet most of this narrow form of communication takes place within that vast field of telematic possibility, the electromagnetic spectrum. The tools and devices limit the possibilities, not the medium. Ironically, many of the more interesting possibilities can be found in "pathological" products based on paranoia and suspicion. Many are designed to "open up" one-to-one channels, transforming private situations into public ones. Scanners, bugs, and detectors illegally "socialize" the world of private telematics. For example, scanners have tuned into wireless baby intercoms enabling "recreational voyeurs" to listen into intimate bedroom conversation.

The radio scanner⁶ hovers at the limits of legality (figure 3.19). In the United Kingdom it is legal to make and sell it but, like many pieces of surveillance equipment, not to use it for eavesdropping. It draws attention to what DeLanda has termed the "policing of the spectrum," not a public space but a highly policed and militarized state space. It is one thing to be prosecuted for eavesdropping but, if the information is passed on to a third party and worse, sold, it becomes a serious offense. If sensitive frequencies are found stored in the memory, the owner is likely to be prosecuted. That the radio scanner is a powerful object, entangled with the social and legal systems of society, has been recognized by the artist and musician Robin Rimbaud, alias Scanner: "To Scanner, the world of the personal phone call—an easily tapped medium, especially if you've been building your own radio sets since your teens—represents a far more honest



Figure 3.19 The scanner is an example of a “pathological product” based on suspicion and paranoia designed to open up one-to-one channels, transforming private situations into public ones.

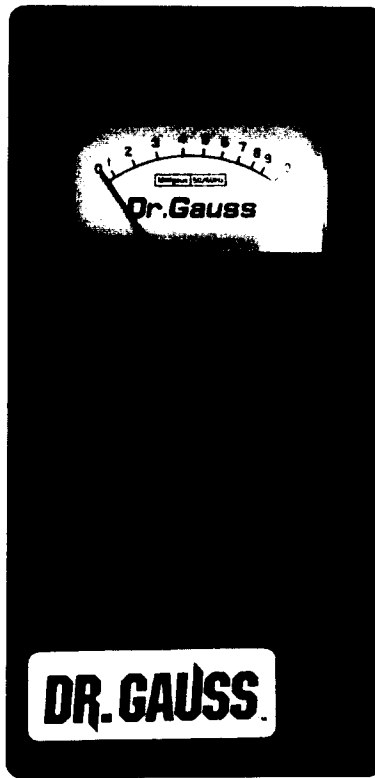


Figure 3.20 The Dr. Gauss EMF detector allows the owner to gather information about the presence of harmful electromagnetic fields so that a complaint can be made.

depiction of the world than the outpourings of television reality. And Scanner's records, packed with a huge collection of telephone 'normality,' are, in turn, far more real and disturbing than any arty fabrication of reality" (King, n.d., 136). The radio scanner enables new urban maps to be made, revealing normally hidden structures of the visible and conventional. The scanner is a meta-radio: it transcends the many categories of radio incorporated into commodities, highlighting their commonality as parts of an electromagnetic spectrum.

The Dr. Gauss EMF detector is one step further up the evolutionary ladder of gadgets (figure 3.20), a low-cost version of a usually expensive piece of equipment, used to measure the magnetic component of possibly harmful electromagnetic fields in the home. The device is simply a black box, but the act of using it reveals its conceptual power: when it picks up a field it screams, rising in pitch with the strength of the field.

Objects like this allow us to develop new conceptual models about our environment, helping us to see invisible structures and patterns. They often occupy the cultural wasteland of in-flight magazines, Sunday supplements and specialist shops, where alternative world views embodied as material reality exist as a nonserious and marginal phenomena. But in showrooms they become vital alternatives to art works and galleries. Whereas people step out of ordinary life into an art gallery, the contents of showrooms relate directly to everyday life in the mind of the window shopper.

Between Rationality and Reality

The most effective examples in this chapter function as test pieces that, through their marginalization, make visible the barriers limiting poetic experience in everyday life. The apparent unusability of many of these objects creates a heightened sense of "distance." This can be because the objects do not work technically or, because they are conceptually difficult to assimilate. To see that they are usable is to acknowledge that existing notions of functionality have been extended, a result of imagining uses for these objects. They challenge the impossibility of the possible. It is not enough to look and decode their visual iconography: they must be used. Through use, or at least by modeling a scenario of use in the mind, the observer discovers new ways of conceptualizing reality. They dismantle conceptual models that limit the way we use artifactual reality to extend our scope for action. They challenge how we think about extensions to our "selves" in ways that do not simply magnify but, rather, transform our perception and consciousness of our relation to our environment.

They share no coherent theory. They are simply stories, but stories that allow complex interactions between reality and imagination. Driven by poetry, imagination, and intuition rather than reason and logic, they have their own rationality, an alternative to our everyday scientific-industrial rationality. These are stories about the space between rationality and reality, which in an industrial society have come to be synonymous. When these props are introduced into everyday life as a "virus," subverting it, people can participate in the story, exploring the boundaries between what is and what might be. This is the role of the para-functional as criticism.

By imagining the object in use, we become lost in a space between desire and determinism. Within this space lies the bizarre world of the "infra-ordinary," the subject of the next chapter, which reviews a number of projects in relation to behavior and narrative.

Hertzian Tales

**Electronic Products, Aesthetic Experience,
and Critical Design**

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The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

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This book was set in Bell Gothic and Garamond 3 by Graphic Composition, Inc.
Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dunne, Anthony.

Hertzian tales : electronic products, aesthetic experience, and critical design / Anthony Dunne.—[Rev. ed.]

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-262-04232-0 (hc : alk. paper)

1. Electronic apparatus and appliances—Design and construction. I. Title.

TK7870 D86 2006

621.381—dc22

2005052222

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1