



# Design Noir

## The Secret Life of Electronic Objects

Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby

B L O O M S B U R Y



# Design Noir

## RADICAL THINKERS IN DESIGN

Series Editors: Clive Dilnot and Eduardo Staszowski

Expansion in practice and the global increase in the numbers of those with design education has not brought with it increased understanding. On the contrary, despite the intelligence of many of those entering the field, reduced to the crudest understanding of vocation, depth of thought disappears; crises remain untouched; genuinely new practices and conceptions struggle to be comprehended in their implications.

*Radical Thinkers in Design*, a moment of the larger project *Designing in Dark Times*, seeks in a small way to try to address this situation by translating or bringing back into circulation, as aids to thinking and praxis, some key provocative texts in contemporary thinking on designing.

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**John Chris Jones, *designing designing***

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**Judy Attfield, *Wild Things***

**Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Design Noir***

**Gui Bonsiepe, *The Disobedience of Design* (edited by Lara Penin)**

As acting in the world descends ever deeper towards negation, these books offer counter-perspectives. In what they open towards, what they explore and present, and above all in what they *anticipate*, they point to the concrete possibilities, as well as to the necessity, of paradigm shifts in design thinking and in our conceptions of what designing today can and should be.

Offering approaches, concepts, modes of thinking and models of practice that show how designing can not only can be re-thought and re-positioned in its internal momentum but also that it offers, at least potentially, an integral mode and capacity of acting in the world. By showing how, at base, designing contains irreplaceable critical, constitutive and critically affirmative moments, they point us towards ways of reversing some of the negative and destructive tendencies threatening to engulf the world.

# Design Noir

The Secret Life of Electronic Objects

Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION

Alice Twemlow

First published in 2001, *Design Noir: The Secret Life of Electronic Objects* mapped out a space in which a darker, more awkward alternative to mainstream product design might be terraformed. Populated with props to provoke debate, prototypes to embody unfamiliar ethical values, and fictive scenarios to surface the complexities and strangeness of human behavior, this territory has since expanded and been occupied by many others also frustrated by the limitations of market-driven design and the affirmative narrative of digital technology. In the two decades since its first publication, as the anxieties of living in an era of geopolitical upheaval, environmental crisis, and data surveillance have intensified, the urgency and salience of *Design Noir*, as an exemplar of sociopolitical critique through design, not only endure, they also gain new dimension with hindsight. The timely republishing this year as part of the *Designing in Dark Times* project allows a return to this essential primary source to better understand the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings not only of the work of Dunne and Raby, but also of a whole new genre that has become known generally as Critical Speculative Design but which might be better named as speculating *through* design—or in the case of *Design Noir* itself, simply as critical design.

## ON THE CUSP OF COMPREHENSION

Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby began to practice together in London in the early 1990s. Combining their expertise in industrial design and architecture, respectively, and fueled by the experience of three years spent living in Tokyo—“a live laboratory for investigating the impact of information technology on material culture”—their practice sat at the intersection of architecture, design and technology, and in a liminal space between academia and the marketplace.<sup>1</sup> From this interdisciplinary vantage point, they explored the generative possibilities of a three-way interactive relationship between electronic products, their consumers’ fantasies and fears, and the intangible and invisible environments of information and electromagnetic radiation that surround them. Throughout the 1990s, Dunne and Raby’s work began to attract critical attention, through its appearance in increasing numbers of exhibitions (notably the ICA’s “Stealing Beauty” and the British Council’s “Lost and Found” in 1999), their presentations at design schools and conferences like “Doors of Perception” in the Netherlands, and their contribution as tutors and research fellows in the Computer Related Design department at the Royal College of Art (RCA). But it was only later in the 2000s, and specifically when Dunne took over from Gillian Crampton Smith and then Irene McAra-McWilliam as Professor of Design Interactions at the RCA in 2005, that, like the electromagnetic fields they were so absorbed by, their ideas began to leak out from this avant-garde circle into the broader design discourse. In 2019, known for groundbreaking projects such as *No 1: Robots* (2007), *Designs For An Over Populated Planet: Foragers* (2010), and *The United Micro Kingdoms* (2013) exhibited at biennales worldwide, collected by major museums, rewarded with the inaugural MIT Media Lab Award, and with their

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Dunne, “Form Follows the Software,” *Blueprint*, January 1992, 44.

work, and the work of a “school” of related designers published in the monograph, *Speculative Everything*, Dunne and Raby’s is one of the most highly regarded design-research-education partnerships of our era.

But back in 2001, when *Design Noir* was published in a modest edition of 4,000, it was met with a reception that, according to its publisher Nick Barley, ranged from mild amusement to utter bemusement. Barley recalls that initial sales were “steady, but not stellar.” The mainstream design media, where “journalists were more interested in ‘lifestyle’ and ‘get the look’ than in ideas,” didn’t know what to make of it.<sup>2</sup> For one thing, it was a design book that didn’t *look* like a design book; it was laid out by Alex Rich in a restrained and almost willfully anti-design aesthetic register with default computer printout typography, and punctuated with simple ASCII illustrations, line drawings and black and white images. Even the color plates, of Jason Evans’s stylized portraits of the people who had adopted the Placebo objects, were odd, in that they depicted people in their homes surrounded by the clutter of their everyday lives and, as such, seemed to derive more from the world of participant-observation anthropology than from design, which at that millennial moment was more commonly portrayed in idealized white cube states of nonuse. Rich recalls his excitement about “this wild landscape” of new thoughts and objects that “sat on the cusp of comprehension” which it was his responsibility, in collaboration with the editor Alex Stetter, to translate into a printed document, with a sense of purpose.<sup>3</sup>

### A PRINTED TROJAN CONDUIT

The resulting book didn’t fit any of the existing genre niches of the time. It was neither a survey, nor a monograph, nor a how-to book; it was instead a printed Trojan conduit for an unfamiliar tribrid of a provocative manifesto, coordinates for an embryonic network of critical designers, and above all, and most distinctively, the documentation and case study of a methodological prototype for a new design poetics.

The manifesto element of the book, which critiqued the current state of electronic product design and argued for a more imaginative, psychosocial mode of engagement, was presented in the form of definitions and explications of key concepts that Dunne and Raby had to coin in order to provide language capable of framing their work—concepts such as “immaterial sensuality,” “(un)popular design,” and “complicated pleasure.” These personal statements were interwoven with apocryphal anecdotes and reports drawn from newspapers about hackers, inventors, electro-sensitives—“beta testers tweaking and adjusting reality iteratively”—and the obsessive behaviors of consumers in relation to their televisions, mobile phones and computers. Dunne and Raby also included examples of work that they saw as already operating in design-noir space, by architects, filmmakers, artists, and designers, such as Natalie Jeremijenko, e-toy, Liam Gillick, and Maywa Denki, as well as their students from the Royal College of Art, such as James Auger, Jimmy Loizeau, and Noam Toran.

<sup>2</sup> Nick Barley, email interview with author, March 1, 2019

<sup>3</sup> Alex Rich, email interview with author, March 3, 2019

## PSYCHOLOGICAL (DIS)COMFORT AND THE WILLING SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF

The largest portion of the book is devoted to an extended presentation of one of Dunne and Raby's own projects. In response to a commission from the V&A in 2000, they made a collection of eight furniture-electronic appliance hybrids—objects that were partially familiar as design typologies, like tables, chairs, and boxes, but which were subtly reconfigured to render them awkward and fictionalized and as if derived not exactly from the future, but perhaps from a time frame that was slightly out of register with the contemporary. To preemptively redirect conversation away from how they were made—and toward how they might be used, as props for individual acts of imaginative consumption and to elicit unpredictable questions and complex emotions from their participant-users—they were made from MDF, with mitred joints and in as pared down a way as possible. They were, as Dunne puts it, “purposefully diagrammatic.”

Each piece of furniture gave material form to an aspect of the unease surrounding the presence of electromagnetic fields in the home. They were tools that could be used either to loosely measure the presence (or absence) of the EMF or to give users a sense of “protection” from it. *Compass Table* was inlaid with twenty-five magnetic compasses that twitched or spun when an electronic product such as a cell phone or laptop computer was set upon it. *Nipple Chair* incorporated a sensor that caused two nipple-like protrusions in the chair's back to vibrate in the presence of electromagnetic fields, making the sitter feel as if the radio waves were entering his or her torso. *Loft* comprised a ladder topped with a box that was lined in lead to allow for the storage of sensitive magnetic recordings. *Electro-Draught Excluder* was a foam-lined shield that users could place between themselves and a television or computer to create a “sort of a shadow—a comfort zone where you simply feel better.”<sup>4</sup> None of these objects actually removed or counteracted electromagnetic radiation, but they could, as placebo devices, the designers hypothesized, “provide psychological comfort.”<sup>5</sup>

Instead of putting them straight on display at the V&A, Dunne and Raby first put them up for “adoption” so that they could find out what might happen when people lived and interacted with them for a month in a domestic environment. Using notices in the windows of Selfridges, where the collection was on display in the spring of 2001, advertisements in a London listings magazine, and a special adoption event at the V&A, Dunne and Raby solicited applications to adopt one of the objects for several weeks during the summer of 2001. Once their allotted time with the object was up, Raby and the photographer Jason Evans visited their homes to interview them about their experience of living with the object and to photograph them interacting with it.

A placebo, like fiction, requires a leap of faith on the part of the user; a willing suspension of disbelief. Most of the adopters, judging from the Q&As which were published in the book, seemed more than ready to meet the designers half way in this enterprise. They shared details of their experience of living with one of the furniture-appliances, how it assuaged, compounded, or made no difference to their anxieties about electromagnetic fields, and in so doing divulged intimate details about their worldviews, relationships, and values. Lauren Parker and her boyfriend Jan were given the Electro-Draught Excluder, and the image of Lauren, lying curled up on the floor behind it, has become totemic for the

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Design Noir* (London: August Birkhäuser, 2001), 76.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

project as a whole (she still uses the image as her Twitter profile picture, perhaps to shield herself from the penetrating glare of social media). Lauren was a curator at the time of the adoption and Jan was a musician. The dialogue between the two of them in response to the questions reads like the script for a stage play or a transcript of a couples' therapy session that reveals the tensions between them:

Jan: Did you show the object to other people? What was their reaction?

Lauren: People thought it looked great, people said "Wow." I think the pink coloring attracted people.

Jan: I have to say everyone was naturally quite skeptical about its abilities.

Lauren: What, your friends?

Jan: Yeah, my friends.

Lauren: My friends weren't, but my friends are all museum curators ...<sup>6</sup>

Jan is the steadfast cynic, while Lauren openly reflects on how the object has made her more sensitive to her environment and more anxious about the health risks of electronics in the home. She reports that the adoption experience has been "emotionally and conceptually tiring and wearing" for her. Even though the object was ostensibly supposed to give her a sense of protection, and she certainly used it as such, to shield herself from Jan's music equipment and to create a separate space for herself in the bedroom, ultimately, and perhaps because of her job as a curator, she felt a responsibility to protect it, and she became increasingly worried and even had dreams about it being damaged. Indeed, during its month in their flat, it did start to shed pieces of its pink foam.<sup>7</sup>

After the project, the Placebo objects, finger-printed, dented, and shedding foam, as they were, were not collected by the V&A, but even as their aura as objects faded, their role as the vehicles for critical questions continued to resonate in ways that are still as pertinent today as they were at the turn of the millennium.

## RHIZOMATIC CRITIQUE

As it became increasingly taken up and reinterpreted by others, even as a cliché of practice, Dunne and Raby have since dropped the label "critical design" (first coined by Dunne for their use in *Hertzian Tales* in 1999), but in 2001 they were still exploring the potential of designed objects to contain and embody criticism. What Placebo Project, and *Design Noir* more generally, demonstrates is that even though people may be hard pushed to discern a pointed and nuanced critique in an ambiguous object, being confronted with it over time and especially in a lived and intimate situation may well trigger important questions about the social, political, psychological, and physical

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 90

<sup>7</sup> Lauren Parker, phone interview with author, March 1, 2019. Lauren Parker is now senior commissioning curator at the London Museum and considers that her involvement in the Placebo Project helped to galvanize her then-nascent interest in the speculative qualities of design, and has since influenced several of her curatorial projects that required active participation (and even adoption of objects) on the part of the public and that extended beyond museum walls. She and Jan were married but are now divorced.

implications of design and technology. It's simply that that triggering process might be on a time-delay. The critique contained in Placebo was *significantly distributed spatially and temporally*. To put this slightly differently, Dunne and Raby's ambiguous furniture appliances *deliberately* entered the world in an *incomplete form*. They *needed* the adopters to use them, to think about them, and to dream about them in order for them to take their full shape as provocations. The adopters then needed to be debriefed in order to extract the experiences, insights, and questions that had been provoked. The work required—it provoked, necessitated, demanded—a reflexive conversation. So, the critical design, far from being condensed in one object, was in fact spread out rhizomatically across a myriad nodes. These included: the commission and its funding; the initial sketches; the material forms of the furniture pieces; their invisible electronic affordances; the adoption process; the actual experience of living with the objects; the staged and stylized photographs of the adopters with their objects; the Q&A transcripts; the resulting installation at the V&A in early 2002 and in numerous other exhibitions since; the narrative and graphic framing of the project in *Design Noir*, and later in lectures, on websites, through teaching, and the many and various responses and interpretations of it in articles, books, and PhD theses ever since. And of course, with this reprinting, yet another node with its own set of new questions is about to emerge.

#### DEVIANT IMPULSES, ANXIETIES, AND CONTRADICTORY EMOTIONS

These concepts of the “incomplete object” and of “critique across time” (of a rhizomatically distributed critical event) help to explain the peculiar force of the Placebo Project. In the early 2000s design was still (by and large) differentiated from art by the fact that it “solved a problem,” had a perceivable utility, and was manufactured in multiples that could be purchased in the market place. The objects or works in the Placebo Project problematized more than they sought solutions; did not seem to fulfil any recognizable function; and were produced as one-offs accessible only in galleries and museums rather than retail outlets. Yet, despite the question repeated most frequently in interviews, “But isn't it art?,” Dunne and Raby were then, and today remain, firm in their resolve that even if their work is usually only encountered by a viewing public in white cube conditions, it was made *for* a using public with *reference to* everyday domestic environment, and as such, as design and not art, had the potential to be more “disturbing.” If you accepted the fact that these objects were design, however, as the authors insisted you should, you then had to contend with the way in which the Placebo Project shape-shifted between design disciplines, especially the previously very separate ones of furniture and electronic appliances.

On top of all this genre defiance within design was the authors' interest in both ends of the high-low spectrum. On the one hand, they were keen to embrace technological inventions, spyware, and DIY hacks, and thus to erode any distinction between professional and amateur design. On the other hand, what also became apparent in their work as a whole, and embryonically in *Design Noir*, was their ambition for design to aspire to the cultural and intellectual status of high art products like avant-garde film or literature. They wanted to see if design could perform less as a product and more like a book or a film, in the sense of providing the viewer-user with the potential for epiphany, transcendence, or at least new ideas, and inducing atmospheres of menace or foreboding where the status quo could be unsettled and destabilized.

Some of the groundwork for this approach had been laid in Dunne's research-by-project PhD published in 1999 as *Hertzian Tales*. Here he discussed historical precedents (particularly the work and thinking of Andrea Branzi from the 1960s and 1970s, Daniel Weil from the 1980s, and Ezio Manzini in the early 1990s), the work of peers in art, design, architecture, and literature (especially the instruments, projections, and vehicles of Polish-born industrial designer and director of the Interrogative Design Group at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Krzysztof Wodiczko), and the thinking of philosophers (especially Jean Baudrillard). Dunne argued that most product categories had reached a watershed in terms of technical performance. He focused instead on a product's potential to provoke what he termed "psychosocial narratives," and explored the (sometimes perverse) agency of "post-optimal" products such as the *Thief of Affections*, which could be used to surreptitiously "grope" a victim's heart—via their pacemaker. When activated, a radio scanner concealed in a flesh-colored prosthesis resembling a riding crop or police truncheon would search for pacemaker frequencies in the vicinity, lock onto a close signal, and convert the frequencies into vaguely erotic audible sounds. Strange objects figured as props through which negative values (spying, thieving, hiding, for example) could be channeled as a means for survival in an increasingly electromagnetically radiated environment.

*Design Noir* extends this ethos, but at a new level of exploration. The book's title conjures the cinematic genre that, since the 1950s, with its rain-slashed, nighttime cityscapes and interiors moody with cigarette smoke, innuendos, and moral ambiguity, has represented a riposte to the reassuring fables of conventional Hollywood blockbusters. Similarly, the new approach to design being suggested in this book sketches an alternative narrative for design, one that creates space for deviant impulses, anxieties, and contradictory emotions that they thought lurked beneath the spline-curved, shiny surfaces and upbeat, "rom-com" tropes of mainstream consumerist lifestyle culture. As Dunne and Raby have noted, "Nearly every other area of culture accepts that people are complex, contradictory and even neurotic, but not design; here we view people as obedient and predictable users and consumers."<sup>8</sup> By contrast, they wanted design to transcend the boundaries normally marked out for design by consumer demand and market diktats, and to enter a psychological dimension where emotions and behaviors like fear, loneliness, perversion, and obsession, eschewed by consumer culture, could freely manifest.

## LITERARY CONJURINGS

The immediate means for this in both *Hertzian Tales* and *Design Noir* is storytelling. And indeed, language plays a vital role in both endeavors. The notion of "designer as author" explored in both books was very quickly co-opted elsewhere by an entrepreneurial variant of design practice, but here Dunne and Raby meant it very literally. They wrote their fictional products into being, replete with "secret lives" and unexpected agency like the ability to dream or to be irrational. Such conjuring is not unusual in literature, where objects often take on sentient qualities and fight back against the uses prescribed to them, but they are—or then were—rare in design. Dunne and Raby termed the work of creating the *mise-en-scenes* (the backdrops, sets, and contexts) in

<sup>8</sup> Critical Design Q&A, <http://dunneandraby.co.uk/content/bydandr/13/0>.



which their objects might exist “value fictions,” observing that, “If in science fiction, technology is futuristic while social values are conservative, ... in value fictions ..., the technologies are realistic but the social and cultural values are often fictional or at least highly ambiguous.”<sup>9</sup> By identifying and initiating a new genre of noir objects that could explore these values—often visually recognizable as household products but recalibrated in precise ways to allow for the emittance of disturbing information and for complex and unpredictable reactions—*Design Noir* took design into imaginative territory that was more usually the preserve of works of literature: the realm, as Milan Kundera would have it, is that of the discovery of hitherto unknown segments of existence.<sup>10</sup>

## HEIGHTENED CRITICAL AND IMAGINATIVE ENGAGEMENTS

If the book wasn’t an immediate hit at the dawn of the millennium, the impact of its arguments—and of Dunne and Raby’s subsequent projects across the next eighteen years—on design education, practice, theory, and research has been slow-burningly profound. While the original focus on Hertzian space—the invisible electromagnetic spectrum emitted by electronic goods—has not endured, the book was certainly prescient about many of the ways in which our tense relationship with machines would play out over the years since its first publication. The new ways of thinking about design that it pointed to has enabled the development of heightened critical engagement with the issues that have emerged since then, such as data surveillance and counter-surveillance, crypto currency, synthetic biology, blockchain, drones, smart and connected technologies, digital pollution, and AI. The book’s other significant contribution to the evolution of design is in the array of methods it catalogued and essayed and that are now widely used—tactics such as co-creation, hacking, and the use of probes and prototypes. Most visibly, perhaps, the book presaged the emergence of a set of new and interrelated anti-affirmative design categories—critical design, speculative design, discursive design, design futures, design fictions, and so on. But what can also perhaps now be appreciated is the peculiarity and force of *Design Noir* itself, as a text and as an instance of *design writing*. As is said of another work in the series *Radical Thinkers in Design*, John Chris Jones’s *designing designing*, *Design Noir* is a book “which is not simply about design but is design itself.” Radical work necessitates radical presentation: forms of declaration and documentation that can begin to grasp the “range and originality” of the projects proposed. In turn, these modes of presentation and documentation provide experiences of “the new” that change views, both of the new thing and retrospectively of the lineages and norms, the pasts, from which the new thing emerges.

In *Design Noir* this happens in two ways—in the extended interviews conducted by Fiona Raby and the photographs by Jason Evans—which are also far more than simple documentation of the work. Raby is insistent that the photographs in the book are important in their own right; as pictures that both show and extend the project, and which do so by linking the objects they created and the external and internal lives and of the people who lived with them. As she puts it, Evans:

<sup>9</sup> Dunne and Raby, *Design Noir*, 63

<sup>10</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 5–6.

managed to capture and present an imaginative dimension from each of our adopters. He did this by enacting their desires and thoughts, with them, in their homes, surrounded by their own expressions of themselves, and making them material. They were not told how to sit or pose; he made them comfortable enough to enact with him ideas and scenarios from their own imaginations.<sup>11</sup>

The human qualities that Evans uncovers through his photographs, Raby goes on to say—“the way he acknowledges people as vulnerable, idiosyncratic, intrinsically flawed, but with tenderness, the people we are, rather than those we are supposed to be”—were as much a part of the Placebo Project as the notion of creating objects as starting points or triggers for further imagining. The photographs are the point where these two ambitions meet and are in a way made real. The project therefore cannot be separated from the photographs, nor the design of the book that frames them, and translates the complex underlying ethos of the project into typographic and visual form. Again, as Raby describes it, “We asked Alex to take us somewhere we would not normally be able to go ourselves. He absorbed the project and came back with an attitude and an adventure. We had research we couldn’t illustrate or didn’t have great images for, so he asked his creative community to illustrate them how they imagined them to be.”

By designing an open-ended framework in which designed products were part of a temporo-spatially distributed questioning of social norms and the demands of industry, Dunne and Raby contributed to an ongoing destabilization of design criticism as it had been traditionally practiced and a reinvention of its future possibilities. At a time when the design press appeared to have been subsumed by lifestyle marketing and had become increasingly silent as a mode for critique, the product hybrids of the critical design genre became more vocal, literary, and poetic. One of the originalities and lasting legacies of *Design Noir* is that it dared to explore each extreme of the spectrum between silence and speaking, object and language, and to innovate a composite format that oscillated between the two. The future influence of *Design Noir* may be here: in giving design critique a new multimodal and shifting configuration that extends back and forth across intention, making, placement, use, presentation, and interpretation; inhabits objects, words, and images; and embraces the complexity of questions, desires, fears, and dreams.

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<sup>11</sup> Fiona Raby, communication to the author. Dunne and Raby have worked with Jason Evans on five of their projects. Besides *Placebo* (2001), these includes *Is This Your Future?* (2004) *Designs for Fragile Personalities in Anxious Times* (2004/5), *Designs for an Overpopulated Planet: Foragers* (2010) and *UmK* (2013).





