5

Real Fiction

Considered as an operator acting in relation to the daily environment, the designer's ultimate responsibility can only be to contribute to the production of a habitable world, a world in which human beings do not merely survive but also express and expand their cultural and spiritual possibilities. The term habitable, referring to the environment, indicates a complex existential condition that cannot be reduced to its functional component. It is a condition arising from the intersection of a multiplicity of questions rooted in the anthropological and social nature of the human race.

—E. Manzini, "Prometheus of the Everyday: The Ecology of the Artificial and the Designer's Responsibility"

To "contribute to the production of a habitable world," design needs to be transformed, expanding its scope to include speculation on how best to provide the conditions for inhabitation. It must not just visualize a "better world" but arouse in the public the desire for one. Design approaches are needed that focus on the interaction between the portrayed reality of alternative scenarios, which so often appear didactic or utopian, and the everyday reality in which they are encountered.

Many issues touched on here, such as art's relation to everyday life, and the need for art to resist easy assimilation, overlap with those already addressed by the Frankfurt School and others in relation to disciplines such as music (Adorno), painting (Marcuse), art (Benjamin), and drama (Brecht). The similarities between these issues and those addressed by Marxist approaches to aesthetics do not imply an identification with Marxism but are the result of seeing design as having value outside the marketplace—an alternative to fine art.

This kind of design can only exist outside a commercial context and indeed operates as a critique of it. It is a form of "conceptual design"—meaning not the conceptual stage of a design project, but a product intended to challenge preconceptions about how electronic products shape our lives. This chapter discusses how such design thinking might reenter everyday life in ways that maintain the design proposal's critical integrity and effectiveness while facing criticism of escapism, utopianism, or fantasy. The challenge is to blur the boundaries between the real and the fictional, so that the visionary becomes more real and the real is seen as just one limited possibility, a product of ideology maintained through the uncritical design of a surfeit of consumer goods.

The fact that this form of conceptual design need not conform to the conventions that shape the design process in relation to the marketplace does not mean it has to be utopian. It can use its independent position to provide conditions that encourage more reflective and challenging design ideas than are possible in commercial design. But if it is to avoid accusations of escapism this design thinking must also develop strategies for linking itself to everyday life that complement those of the marketplace. This chapter focuses on the problem of "crossing over" and discusses how conceptual design intentions and formats of work, differ from those of commercial design, and require different contexts in which the design thinking can be encountered by the public. It is concerned with representation and contexts of presentation for ideas about everyday life in the form of conceptual design objects.

The Design Object as Prototype

There is a danger that if design is not oriented to the marketplace it is seen as invalid, irrelevant, or self-indulgent, especially if displayed in a gallery. But what if the gallery were viewed as a test-site for designs unlikely to enter everyday life? What would be the most effective format for a design object designed to be shown in a gallery?

The most obvious would be fully working prototypes that can be "tested out" on the public in the gallery and, if the reaction is good, later mass-produced. But fully working prototypes displayed in galleries rarely challenge viewer's assumptions about the role of products in their lives. For example, many visitors to my contribution to the Monitor as Material exhibition at the RCA in 1996 (figure 5.1) said they found the work interesting as spectacle, but had missed concerns with the more fictive, social, and aesthetic aspects that linked it to everyday life, even if only conceptual. Its strangeness and apparent interactivity

Figure 5.1 In my contribution to the Monitor as Material exhibition at the RCA in 1996, many visitors to the space found the work itself interesting as spectacle, but concerns with the more fictive, social, and aesthetic aspects that linked the work to everyday life, even if only through the imaginary, were lost.

emphasized the here and now. The gallery became a "bracketed space," an abstract setting, disconnecting the experience of engaging with the work from everyday life. Displaying a fully working prototype in a gallery context invites people to marvel at the ingenuity of the designer, and the fact it works, but overlook the challenge to the status quo its insertion into everyday life might bring about.[1] Following this route, the gallery becomes a "freak show" of objects of wonder and amusement. The electronic objects of Weil, reinterpretations of existing products such as radios, digital clocks, and calculators, focus on the conceptual relationship between the person and the electronic object. Displayed in the gallery as one-offs, as objets d'art, they achieve little. But if the prototypes are batch-produced (which Weil's objects were), the gallery becomes a "showroom," allowing them to enter everyday life through the marketplace: a specialist shop selling state-of-the art material culture, trading in shock-of-the-new reinterpretations of familiar objects.

The Design Object as Installation

For the designer who regards the electronic object as an embodiment of potential patterns of behavior and ideology, careful consideration of the relationship between the gallery and the conceptual design object is essential if the object is to connect with everyday life.

Electronic objects that use the gallery to demonstrate their interactive aesthetic or experiential aspects can be subsumed by kinetic art culture whose focus is on the here and now and providing an escape from everyday life. An installation by Fiona Raby for Electra 96 highlights this problem. The installation was intended to be a test-site for a design proposal linking two locations by open telephone lines. Ultrasonic sensors registered approaching people and allowed sounds from the other location to filter through, distorted at first they cleared as the person moved closer to the installation so that spoken communication could take place. As a design proposal it would be experienced by a building's inhabitants over several years, and the aesthetic experience would have to be very subtle. As an exhibit in an electronic event the installation was expected to provide immediate feedback in an entertaining way. It might have been better to exhibit a film that used nonworking props to explore how the proposal might impact over time on the day-to-day experiences of fictional users.

One of James Turrell's projects, *Perceptual Cells,* offers an interesting solution to this problem. Once inside a booth-like structure, a bit like a telephone box in a gallery, visitors are presented with controls to vary the color of light in a hemisphere surrounding their heads. Humorous and quirky, it invites comparison with street furniture and public utilities, and their association with mass consumption, state ownership, and industrial production. The visitor imagines, perhaps, using one of these machines on the street, so a strong link with the world outside is established. It successfully combines the best qualities of prototypes and installations: it can be used in the gallery rather than just contemplated, and at the same time establishes links with life beyond the gallery.

The Alien Staff by Wodiczko demonstrates another approach—intervention. Wodiczko's project shows how industrial design, by imagining new functions and configuring them as usable prototypes, can function critically outside the gallery. Wodiczko has deployed teams of "aliens" in various cities armed with his *Alien Staff* and studied the resulting interactions between them and the public (figure 5.2).

Such objects, using simple electronic technologies and emphasizing invention and social and cultural content, are rare examples of how product design and the electronic object can fuse into design as criticism. The prototype draws attention to the boundaries of normal behavior and thought by intervening in everyday social situations outside the gallery. That they are deemed problematic by the design world draws attention to other boundaries of categories of practice and ideas:

> Asked how the design world has responded to his various Homeless Vehicle [sic] Wodiczko throws back his head and laughs at the pretensions of the so-called "designer decade." . . . "The minute you present a proposal, people think you must be offering a grand vision for a better future." They can't see a thing like the Homeless Vehicle or the Poliscar as the "concretisation" of a present problem, a makeshift transitional device, or an aesthetic experiment. Instead, "they think it must be designed for mass production, and instantly imagine 100,000 Poliscars taking over the cities." (Wright 1992, 272–273)

The Design Object as Model

What is the potential of nonworking design models as opposed to prototypes? The preoccupation with product semantics, that dominated design in relation to electronic objects for most of the 1980s, focused attention on the object itself, particularly its visual meaning. The concept model functioned as a didactic design object; it was not something to challenge the way we lived our lives, but a meta-design challenging only design itself.

Figure 5.2 Krzysztof Wodickzko's *Alien Staff* (1992) houses a small LCD television. The small size of the display, its position at eye level, and its proximity to the alien's face are all important.

The nonworking model is the conventional physical representation of conceptual design proposals: naturalistic, nonworking mock-ups simulating the appearance of a mass-produced object. Yet this freedom from technical functionality could be better used. If the design model was viewed as a medium in its own right, it could exploit its nonworking status to address issues beyond the scope of the technically functional prototype. But to achieve this it needs to be considered as a model in the same sense as a mathematical or cognitive model. This enlarged view of the model is already accepted in architecture and fine art:

> The space of the model lies on the border between representation and actuality. Like the frame of a painting, it demarcates a limit between the work and what lies beyond. And like the frame, the model is neither wholly inside nor wholly outside, neither pure representation nor transcendent object. It claims a certain autonomous objecthood, yet this condition is always incomplete. The model is always a model of. The desire of the model is to act as a simulacrum of another object, as a surrogate which allows for imaginative occupation. (Hubert 1981, 17)

In the art world, a huge range of conceptual roles for the model has been explored. Particularly relevant, because it comes close to that of product designers, is the work of Gregory Green who builds models of bombs (figure 5.3), technological objects that look as though they work but do not. Although they could be made to work, their interest stems from the fact that the knowledge embodied in them is widely available and very destructive. The integration of the "bombs" as booby traps into familiar objects like suitcases links them to the world outside the gallery. Their technical uselessness becomes part of their value, shifting attention to their role as conceptual machines that engage the imagination and draw the viewer into a reflective and critical space.

These devices look similar to K/K Research and Development's analogs assembled from found machine parts. But these only work in relation to a narrative, usually social and political, in an accompanying text. They engage the viewer but are not powerful in themselves.

Crib-batic, another project by K/K Research and Development, in collaboration with Scholz, is a model for a push-chair, an existing object type. We know these objects exist in everyday life, how they are used, and by whom. So we can imagine what it would mean for their proposal to enter everyday life. It is not necessary to see the *Crib-batic* "working" for it to be effective, but rather to sense how it might cross over into everyday life. An imaginative alternative, it is

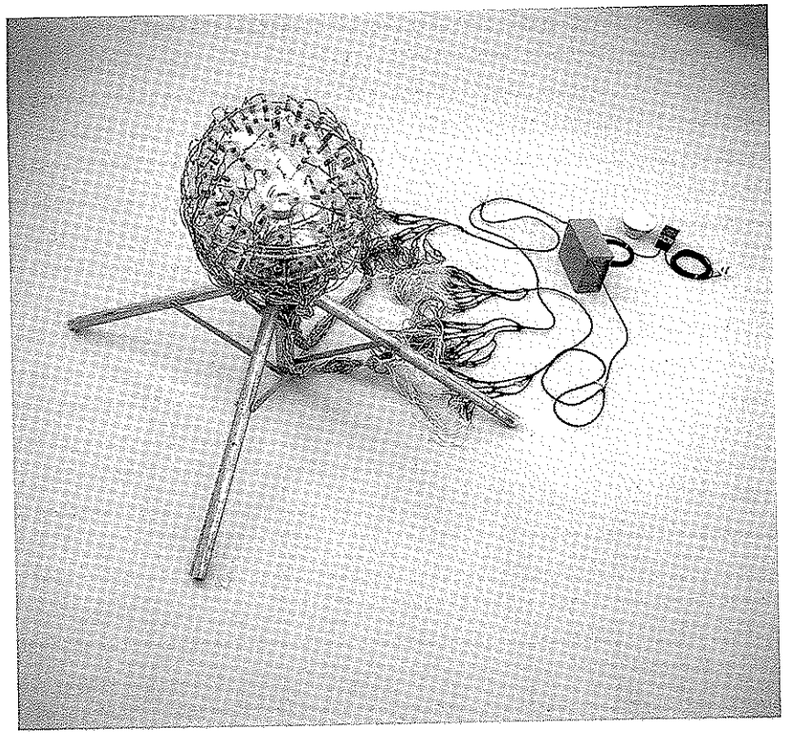


Figure 5.3 *Nuclear Device #2. 15 kilotons, plutonium 239* (1995) is a model, a technological object that looks as though it works but does not. Although it could be made to work, its interest stems from the fact that the knowledge embodied in these objects is widely available and very destructive.

"fact" in that it could be built, but fiction in that it is unlikely to be built. This fictiveness enables it to function critically, by highlighting the boundaries that limit everyday experience. It celebrates the complex ambiguity of the object, as both part and not part of the society from which it emerged. It has not acceded to the demands of "miserable reality" but remains defiantly conceptual.

From a product design point of view these models lack industrial realism; they look like craft objects, hand-made and probably one-off. But an expanded view of the conceptual design model might regard it as embodying the essence of a design idea, a "genotype"[2] rather than prototype, constructed from the materials at hand. If taken up for mass manufacture its construction and structure would undoubtedly change. The object's "content" or "genes" are important, not its appearance. In the context of design, the conceptual model as genotype rather than prototype could allow it to function more abstractly by deflecting attention from an aesthetics of construction to an aesthetics of use. The genotype depends on the view that a design idea can transcend its material and structural reality and function critically, in relation to social systems for example, rather than visual culture. Andrea Branzi (1984, 141) suggests this as a possible role for craft in late-twentieth-century industrialized production. Experimental furniture such as Studio Alchymia's 1980 *Bauhaus 2* range (figure 5.4) do not simulate how they would be if mass-produced, but take a form appropriate for exhibition and consumption as one- or two-offs. Rather than an

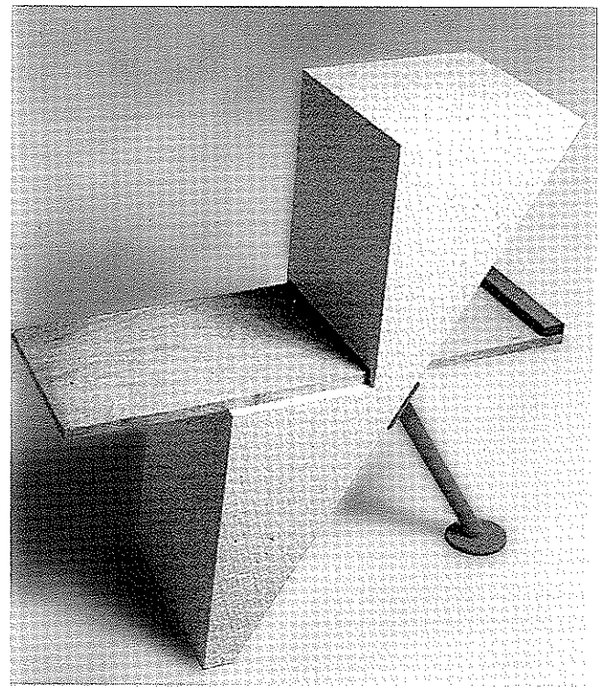


Figure 5.4 Andrea Branzi's *Ginger* (1980) for Studio Alchymia does not simulate how it would be if mass-produced, but takes a form appropriate for exhibition and consumption as one- or two-offs. The craft object is seen as a stage in the development of an idea that might eventually be mass-produced.

autonomous form of design, the craft object is seen as one stage in developing a design idea that might eventually be mass-produced.

Michele De Lucchi presented design studies for small domestic electric appliances (figure 5.5) at the 1979 Milan Triennale. They echoed a contemporary concern to challenge prevailing images of domestic technology. They are interesting because they do not mimic reality; they are clearly representations, "models" comfortable with their unreality. They are things in themselves rather than shadows of yet to be realized products. They offer real experiences of ideas rather than unreal experiences of unrealized products, and accept that these ideas will be consumed through books and exhibitions not in the marketplace.

The Design Object as Prop

By abandoning the technical realism of the prototype and the visual realism of the traditional industrial design model, conceptual models in combination with other media, can refer to broader contexts of use and inhabitation. For instance, by using conceptual models as film props the viewer can be drawn into the conceptual space of the object in use rather than an appreciation of the thing in itself.

Branzi suggests the age of the "Historical Avant-Garde" is ending. Large corporations work with small experimental design centers to develop new scenarios within which the corporations develop new products. He calls this a period of "Permanent Avant-Garde," the aim of which is "to restructure the market, to develop a new ecology of the natural and artificial environment, and to create islands of meaning that define consumption not as a category of the emphemeral and provisional, but as a solid culture for a democratic and reformed society, one in which a new generation of tools will be able to liberate people from uninspiring work, encouraging mass creativity and individual freedom" (Branzi 1995, 152).

A key tool in this process is the scenario, both to generate design ideas and communicate the results. Large corporations employ scenarios of use to anticipate how people will interact with the complex environments of which technological products are a part. Usually scenarios have a conservative role, predicting patterns of behavior in relation to technological developments. They draw from what we already know about people, and so weave new ideas into existing realities. These scenarios extend preexistent reality into the future and so reinforce the status quo rather than challenging it. For example, "Workshop" by Philips in collaboration with Olivetti explores the new office landscape to formulate a new vision of the workplace and propose new tools to support it. But the way it

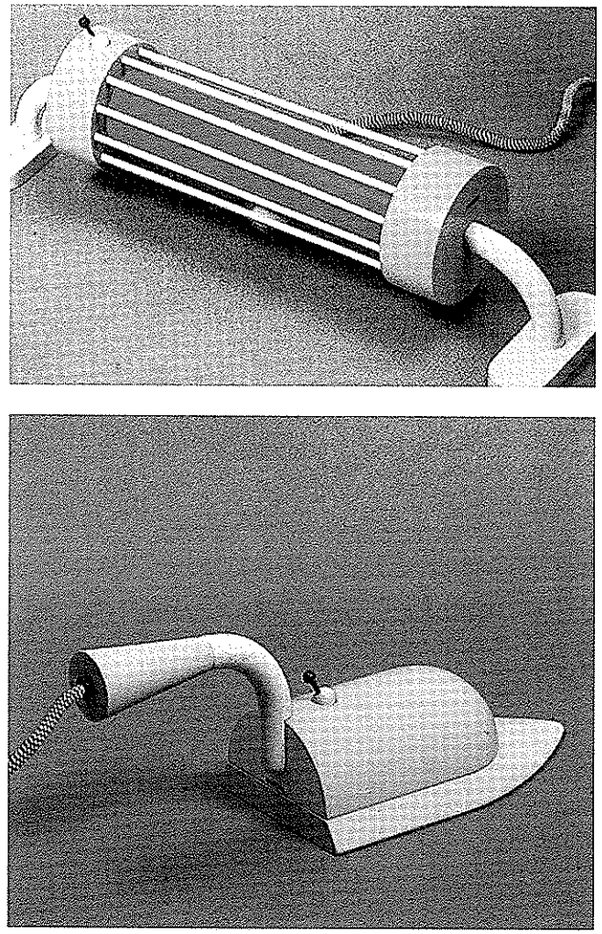


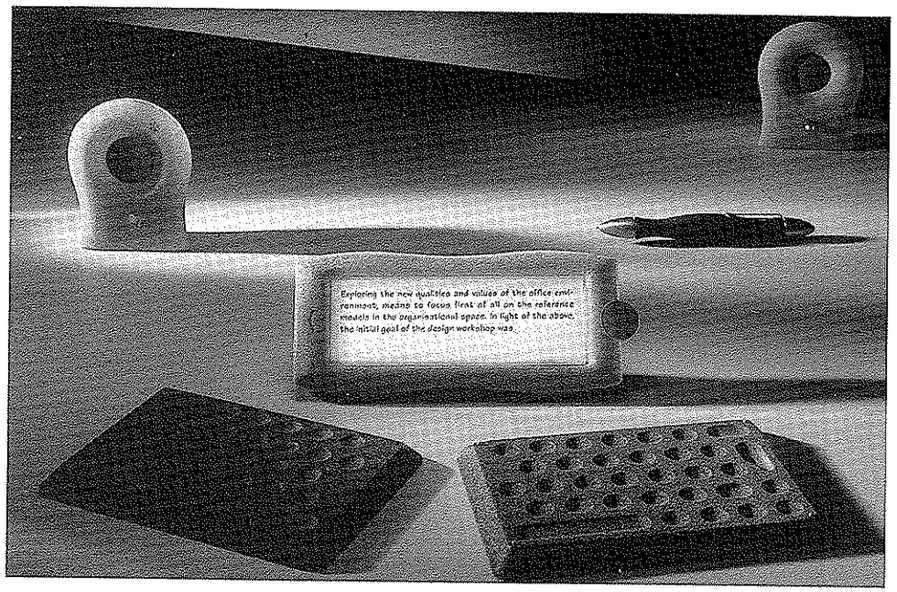
Figure 5.5 Michele De Lucchi's *Appliances* for the 1979 Milan Triennale do not mimic reality; they are clearly representations, "models" comfortable with their unreality.

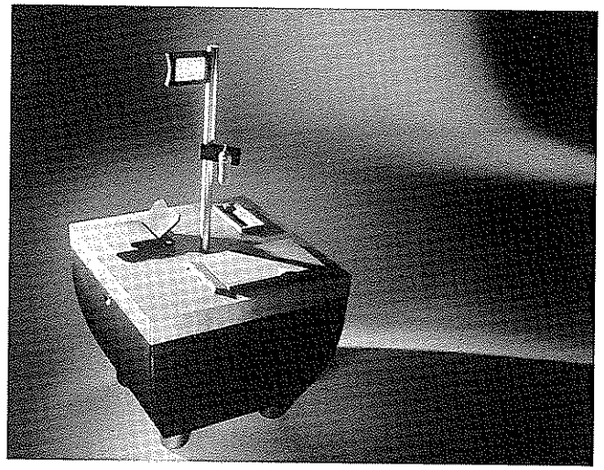
was conceived only reinforced stereotypes of the future office. *Communicator* (figure 5.6) for "anywhere anytime" multi-media computing, the group tool (figure 5.7) that encourages office workers to mix fundamental tasks such as photocopying and faxing with socializing, and the fetishistic arrangement of tools that can be interconnected to meet specific functional requirements propose no innovative vision of changing patterns of work. Corporations need to ensure a continued need for physical products in a world where many products are being replaced by software (e.g., phone and fax software for computers). But as a tool for presenting design ideas, the scenario is very powerful. It can draw the viewer into a narrative that goes beyond the object to reveal more complex issues.

Manzini (1994) argues that, although design can neither change the world nor create lifestyles that enforce patterns of behavior onto society, the designer is not simply a problem solver but an intellectual able to link "the possible with the hoped-for in visible form." Manzini's emphasis is less on interaction with discrete objects than on systems of objects. He suggests designers as independent agents use their imaginative skills to propagandize socially and politically desirable situations. In Manzini's view, part of the designer's role is democratically to discover what is "desirable" rather than imposing their own or another minority vision onto society. But Manzini's approach, although critical in that it rejects prevailing conditions and proposes an alternative, runs the risk of being either too didactic or utopian.

The sci-fi genre offers a third possibility. Susani, noting how what was once called "concept design" has now become the design of entire scenarios of objects, refers to Apple's 1987 "Knowledge Navigator" project as probably the first use of video narration to present a "cultural project" (Apple Computer, 1992). Susani claims it was neither a promotional tool, nor simply a projection of technological evolution, but a study of how we could coexist with new technological artifacts. He suggests that Wim Wenders' film *Until the End of the World* is a more stimulating and useful project for a "telephone scenario" than many mainstream design projects for telephones of the future. The use of scenarios in *Until the End of the World* comes close to being critical because it achieves a degree of estrangement through the behavior of fictional characters who do not have to conform to existing personality types, occupations, or motivations.

But this approach falls foul of a central contradiction of radical work, as Adorno demonstrated in his contrasting of modern classical music and popular jazz. Because a mainstream film has to be immediately graspable by a broad audience, the fact of achieving this diminishes its critical potential. Transformations of





Figures 5.6–5.7 Philips and Olivetti's *Communicator* (1994) and *Group Tool* (1994) set out to explore the new office landscape, to formulate a new vision of the workplace, and propose new tools to support it.

consciousness are more likely through struggling to understand ideas: simplification dilutes the power to challenge established values:

> According to Marcuse, the strength of art lies in its Otherness, its incapacity for ready assimilation. If art comes too close to reality, if it strives too hard to be comprehensible, accessible across all boundaries, it then runs the risk of becoming mundane. And if this occurs, its function as negation to the existing world is abandoned. To be effective art must exert the capacity for estrangement . . . it must dislocate the viewer, reader, audience, by its refusal and inability to become part of the reality principle. (Becker 1994, 119)

If the conceptual design object is to be used as a prop in a scenario that works in a critical, transformative way, other possibilities must be developed. Although a critical approach might alienate some, it might also more effectively transform the consciousness of those whom it does engage. The task is to embody content in an aesthetically challenging form that would "push the viewer towards a more complex, emotional, or revolutionary understanding of the problems posed by the work" (Becker 1994, 122).

Some artists and sculptors have achieved this in films they have made about their work (e.g., Philippe Ramette, or Rebecca Horn), and filmmakers such as David Lynch have developed strategies for applying this to television (e.g., Lynch's *Twin Peaks*). But there are few examples (one being Atom Egoyan's *Family Viewing*) where electronic products play a significant role.

Cindy Sherman's photographs from her *Untitled Film Stills* series portray banal moments of apparently little significance. As the viewer tries to imagine what happened before and after, he or she is drawn into speculation on the psychology of the protagonists and their state of mind. These photos show the surprising power of stills, compared to video or film, to engage the viewer. They shift the viewer's imagination toward the fictional possibilities of the portrayed moment. The furnishings and incidental objects in these photographs encourage an allegorical reading that further engages the viewer. Most of the images look as though they were taken in the 1950s or 1960s which adds to the distance they create.

The work of Garner (1983, 1985) also uses a sense of the recent past to engage audiences. His two books consist of photographs (figure 5.8) of conceptual design objects, and of scenes reflecting the strange psychological and social narratives that arise from interaction with and through the objects portrayed. The books could be seen as a critique of consumer society, but their dependence on comic absurdity distracts attention from any serious criticisms that might be

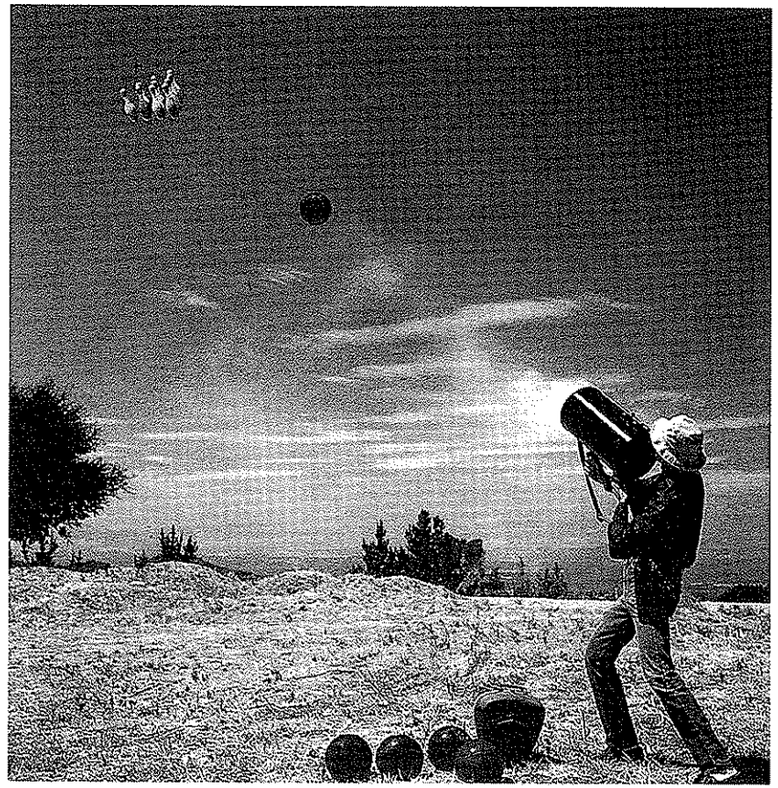


Figure 5.8 Philip Garner's *Utopia or Bust* (1985) consists of photographs of conceptual design objects and of scenes that present unusual narratives that arise from interaction with and through the objects portrayed.

read into the project. This ironic approach offers no constructive suggestions. In comparison, Ito's *Dwelling for a Tokyo Nomad Woman,* an architectural fiction conveyed through photographs, portrays a system of behavior and consumption to make familiar but exaggerated consumer values real and concrete, values that are neither futuristic nor utopian, but uncomfortably close to our own. The nomad woman's only furniture is designed to support intelligence gathering on new trends, eating snack food, and styling one's image. Ito's photographs conjure up an "elsewhere," familiar but different. Rather than offering another option, or parodying what exists, they suggest that the way things are is not the only possibility.

Although far more nostalgic and romantic, the images produced by Ramette, of himself using his inventions, work in a similar way (figure 5.9). The style of his images is deliberately straightforward, and the use of his devices, which usually resemble nineteenth-century scientific instruments, is easy to understand. The viewer wonders at the strangeness of Ramette's behavior, trying to imagine why somebody would behave like this, what pleasure they have, and what prevents such objects from being widely disseminated and the values they embody gaining general acceptance.

In Horn's films, *Der Eintanzer* (1978) and *La Ferdinanda: Sonata for a Medici Villa* (1981), her sculptures appear in the background of several scenes. They are never explained, but the viewer is drawn into a strange world that objects such as these seem to inhabit nonchalantly. The films seem set in the present, but the integration of such strange objects into everyday settings implies a completely different set of cultural and aesthetic values highlighted by their familiar settings. This technique is reminiscent of Brechtian alienation, in this case drawing our attention to the role of objects in defining and realizing everyday space and rituals. Horn's films are neither didactic nor utopian, nor are they parodies. They seem closer to heterotopias. They portray situations different from our own where enchanted objects have a place in daily life and a different "sense" prevails, a sense interwoven with our own rather than completely alternative or nonsensical. Norman Daly's *The Lost Civilisation of Llhuros* is an exhibition of artifacts from a fictional culture, each of which is accompanied by a caption explaining what is supposedly known about it. The exhibition blurs the boundaries between imaginary spaces and the here-and-now of the gallery. It is as though a film has reentered everyday life through its props. It invites the visitor to speculate, as an anthropologist of material culture might, on how values come to be embodied in artifacts.

Conceptual Consumerism

For Marcuse, art is a location—a designated imaginative space where freedom is experienced. At times, it is a physical entity, a site—a painting on the wall, an installation on the floor, an event chiselled in space and/or time, a performance, a dance, a video, a film. But it is also a psychic location—a place in the mind where one allows a recombination of experiences, a suspension of the rules that govern daily life, a denial of gravity. It "challenges the monopoly of the established reality" by creating "fictitious worlds" in which one can see mirrored that range of human emotion and experience that does not

Figure 5.9 The style of Philippe Ramette's images is deliberately straightforward, and the use of his devices, which usually resemble nineteenth-century scientific instruments, is easy to understand.

find an outlet in the present reality. In this sense the fabricated world becomes "more real than reality itself." Art presents the possibility of a fulfilment, which only a transformed society could offer."

—C. Becker, "Herbert Marcuse and the Subversive Potential of Art"

This chapter has discussed where this space might lie in relation to the electronic as conceptual design object, and how we might encounter it. As a route for developing critical electronic objects within a design context, it has rejected the prototype in favor of combining nonworking models with film, video or photography to establish scenarios that are neither didactic nor utopian but heterotopian. Were the props from a scenario physically displayed with the film, video, or photograph, more subtle interactions might develop between the space of the here and now, where the viewer is, and the fictional space portrayed in the image. The physical presence of the artifacts encourages additional interplay between reality and fiction, between what is and what might be. By themselves the artifacts would be mentally assimilated into known patterns of behavior, "explained away." But shown as part of an alien culture with different aesthetic values and a different "sense," they require viewers to accommodate the unusual role of the artifacts in an everyday life like their own.

The space in which the artifacts are shown becomes a "showroom" rather than a gallery, encouraging a form of conceptual consumerism via critical "advertisements" and "products." New ideas are tried out in the imagination of visitors, who are encouraged to draw on their already well-developed skills as window shopper and high-street showroom frequenter. The designer becomes an applied conceptual artist, socializing art practice by moving it into a larger and more accessible context while retaining its potential to provoke people to reflect on the way electronic products shape their experience of everyday life.