

Interaction design & art

How does art influence interaction design? The relationship between art and design has always been blurry and topic for heated discussion. Let's take a closer look at this relationship and what art and interaction design can do to change one another.

Speculative Design

To summarize speculative design, it's designed which incorporates a cultural element: the role of fashion, trends and human choice next to scientific laws and principles to predict what the future of design and interaction could be like. One of the key advantages of speculative design is that there is no intention to bring the product to market. In many ways, art has the same advantage in the sense that it doesn't have to produce anything for the market. Art can take leaps and be experimental. It's a good way to find out how far consumers are willing to change and adapt to new technologies, uses or products. We've arrived at a state where new technologies don't clearly provide advantages like they used to. For example, the telephone provided clear advantages to communication whereas today we find ourselves in a much more uncertain technological future. This is where a clear link between art and design exists.

Role of art in interaction design

Presently, we're walking down a dangerous path in design. We've grown scared to make real changes to the way we live our lives and have, to a certain degree, given in to the market and profit. This market-oriented thinking is understandable in the short span. If you keep putting out products which nobody wants to buy and use you won't survive long as a designer. But it also makes us stagnate and satisfied with just „faster“ and „prettier“ designed tech devices instead of finding means to make a real contribution to the world. Art can help out design in this since it's free from the obligation of making money. So it can be a wonderful playground for experimentation, research, and beauty.

I've chosen a few examples where interaction design and art closely collide. They are all very different works of interactive and social art and all tackle different aspects of our daily life.

Design Noir: The secret life of everyday objects

Introduction Placebo Project

This is a project by London-based designers Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby. In their book about the project they describe it like this:

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

All of the objects created for this project, don't work. They were given to the volunteers obviously without them being made aware of this fact. The placebo objects made for this project were all intended to make people more aware of electromagnetic fields in their living space and to make the borrower think about their environment in a different way.

The objects

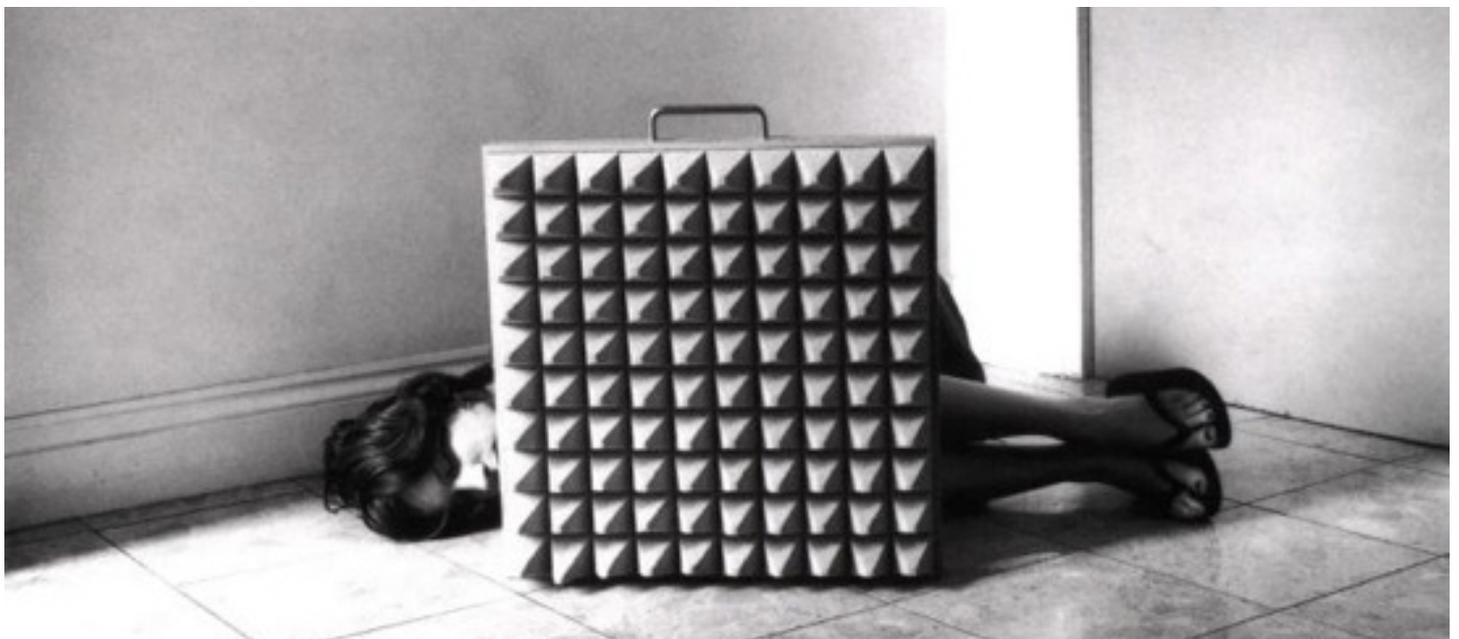
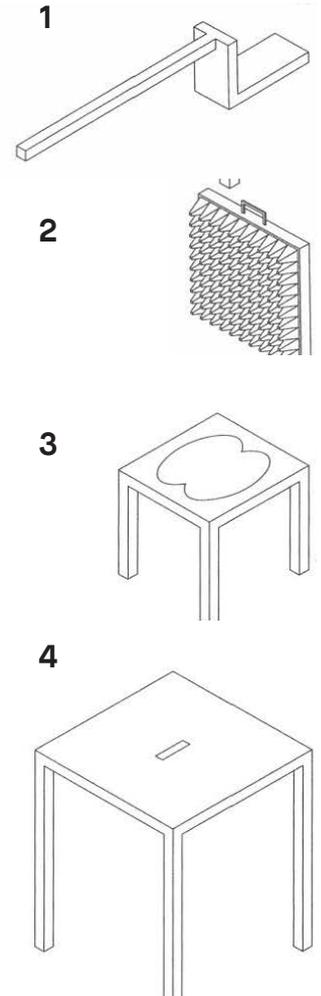
Most of the objects made for this project are furniture or furniture like. Some of the objects included were (1) Parasite light, (2) Electro-draught excluder, (3) electricity drain and (4) GPS Table.

Parasite light is a ‚needy object‘ - it only works when it is placed near an electronic product.

Electro-draught excluder is a classic placebo made to make the user feel more comfortable in their home. It might be placed between TV and the user to create a sort of safety barrier.

Electricity drain is a stool which you can plug into the wall and it gets rid of static for whatever is on it. The placement of this object in the room is rather interesting to see as it could be perceived as a hygiene product, meditative piece or functional chair.

GPS Table has a global positioning sensor inside it. It can only display its position in the world if it has a clear view of the satellites, the rest of the time it's lost and indicates this fact. This piece of furniture behaves more like a pet. It might even be considered cruel to keep the table inside.



United Micro Kingdoms: A Design Fiction

Introduction UMK

„The United Micro Kingdoms (UmK) is divided into four super-shires inhabited by Digitarians, Bioliberals, Anarcho-evolutionists and Communo-nuclearists. Each county is an experimental zone, free to develop its own form of governance, economy and lifestyle. These include neoliberalism and digital technology, social democracy and biotechnology, anarchy and self-experimentation and communism and nuclear energy. The UmK is a deregulated laboratory for competing social, ideological, technological and economic models.“

This fictional scenario has been illustrated by texts, films, visual representations and objects that characterise the designers' interdisciplinary and multimedia approach. Each of the four countries uses a different transport system, for example, the communo-nuclearist use a constantly moving train, which is not only their way off getting but they also inhabit the train. On the other hand, the bioliberals use biocars to get around. Biocars are organically grown, each customised to its owner's dimensions and needs.

The four countries

Digitarians depend on digital technology and all its implicit totalitarianism: tagging, metrics, total surveillance, tracking, data logging and 100% transparency. Their society is organised entirely by market forces; citizen and consumer are the same.

The Communo-nuclearist society is a no-growth, limited population experiment. Using nuclear power to deliver near limitless energy, the state provides everything needed for their continued survival. Although they are energy rich it comes at a price — no one wants to live near them. Under constant threat of attack or accident, they live on a continually moving, 3 kilometre, nuclear-powered mobile landscape.

The Anarcho-evolutionists abandon most technologies, or at least stop developing them, and concentrate on using science to maximise their own physical capabilities through training, DIY biohacking and self-experimentation. They believe that humans should modify themselves to exist within the limits of the planet rather than modifying the planet to meet their ever growing needs.

Bioliberals fully embrace biotechnology and the new values that this entails. Biology is at the centre of their worldview, leading to a radically different technological landscape to our own. Each person produces their own energy according to their needs. Bioliberals are essentially farmers, cooks and gardeners. Not just of plants and food, but of products too. Gardens, kitchens and farms replace factories and workshop.



Conclusion - Design Noir: The secret life of everyday objects

This project is structured very clearly. Make an object, give it a function, find volunteers and observe their use of the object. It shows very how quickly we change the way we behave around them. In the example of Emma and Constance with the electricity drain, it was described that she'd stay on the phone longer when around the table because her fillings didn't hurt. Now it's obviously not the goal that the electricity drain just stays there and „fixes“ the problem but rather that we become more aware of what's around us. Do we really want to surround ourselves with this much technology that it, in some cases, even physically hurts us?

Conclusion - United Micro Kingdoms: A Design Fiction

Design fiction is a very good way of exploring alternative social structures, products, energy usage, food production and living conditions. More focused on theoretical work and model building this project took a very different direction to the Placebo Project. Seeing different factions emerge which have very different values, where for some speed isn't important anymore, other take new extremes in robotics and consumerism makes pointing out advantages and disadvantages to the different ways of living possible. On top of that making models and artwork brings it very close to something graspable. Online discussions, research papers and heavy community involvement give the projects it's credibility and lives.

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