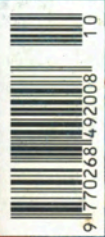


# BLUEPRINT



# TOO MUCH STUFF

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# PRODUCT OVERLOAD: DESIGNERS FIGHT BACK

BLUEPRINT ASKED A SELECTION OF PRODUCT DESIGN THEORISTS AND PRACTITIONERS ABOUT THEIR RESPONSES TO A POTENTIALLY SATURATED MARKET

INTERVIEWS NAOMI STUNGO AND MARCUS FIELD PORTRAITS SEAMUS NICHOLSON



Dunne and Raby, above right, delight in the the subversive element of what they call "design noir". Among their projects as research fellows in the RCA's Computer Related Design department is Tunable Cities, above, a car radio which has been reinvented as a device for intercepting the otherwise inaudible sounds of intercoms, mobile phones and bugs which fill the air. The Faraday Chair, above centre, shields the user from the electromagnetic fields leaked by everyday objects (television reading, above), while the Pillow, below right, translates radio waves into friendly sounds and abstract coloured forms which "enrich our relationship with the environment"

## Tony Dunne + Fiona Raby, Research Fellows at the Royal College of Art

A broad frame of references from Fiona Raby's training as an architect and Tony Dunne's experiences as an industrial designer inform this partnership's poetic and seductively titled research projects into the world of products.

Dunne and Raby's approach to working in a saturated consumer market is not a hackneyed rallying cry for a return to simple, well-made artefacts but a challenge to manufacturers and users to "question products through products" and to seek out new experiences. For them this might take the form of a provocative reworking of an existing object type such as the personal stereo or the design of a totally new product.

An early Dunne and Raby project illustrates this approach. After graduating in industrial design from the Royal College of Art, Dunne began working for Sony in Japan where his work led him to consider new possibilities for the personal stereo. "The Sony Walkman created portable space," he says. "But instead of explor-

ing its possibilities after that Sony were just interested in restyling. They were driven by the size factor, by just making it smaller."

Rejecting this attitude, Dunne and Raby proposed a Sony Noiseman. "The problem with the Walkman is that it shuts out noise," says Dunne. "You are only consuming somebody else's mass-produced sounds." Instead their machine filters environmental sounds through use of a microphone and digital sound processor, thus providing a site-specific soundtrack to life.

Under the umbrella title Hertzian Tales, Dunne and Raby have now developed a whole series of products which respond to radio waves – in particular the waves from personal communication devices such as telephones or baby listeners or the "leakages" from electrical objects such as computers, televisions and fax machines.

Tunable Cities is one of these products. Designed to look like a typical car radio the product subverts its usual function as it tunes into such devices as mobile phones, illegal bugs and intercoms. Thus as the car moves through the city it makes the invisible environment audible.

Other products which respond to radio waves are the Pillow and the Faraday Chair. The transparent inflatable Pillow responds audibly and visually – through colour changes on the flat screen it contains – to the waves around it, the intention of the designers being "to enrich our relationship with the environment". The

Faraday Chair, meanwhile, allows the user to be shielded from the electromagnetic waves which constantly bombard our bodies. "It's a sad piece of furniture really," says Dunne. "We're having to define places to shield ourselves."

Dunne and Raby delight in the subversive potential of products designed for spying or security purposes – a world of "design noir" where aesthetics are never the issue. It comes as no surprise to hear that their dream commission would be "to interfere" with the telephone system of a large corporate office.

In a world of product surfeit Dunne and Raby want to draw attention to the things we use, not just engage in a debate about semiotics or quality of manufacture. What they definitely don't want is to be marginalised as artists. "We want to steer this debate away from a purely fine art concept," says Dunne. "Having our work shown at the Saatchi Gallery would be good. But being shown at Dixon's would be much better." **B**

