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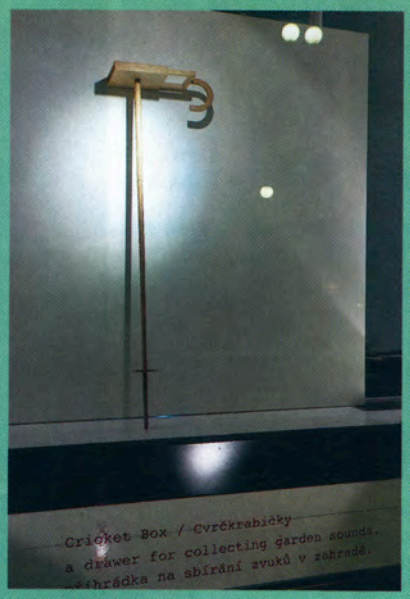


AN EXHIBITION OF CONCEPTUAL PRODUCTS ON SHOW IN PRAGUE IS THE WORK OF THREE DESIGNERS WHO WANT TO UNSETTLE US. **MARCUS FIELD** INVESTIGATES

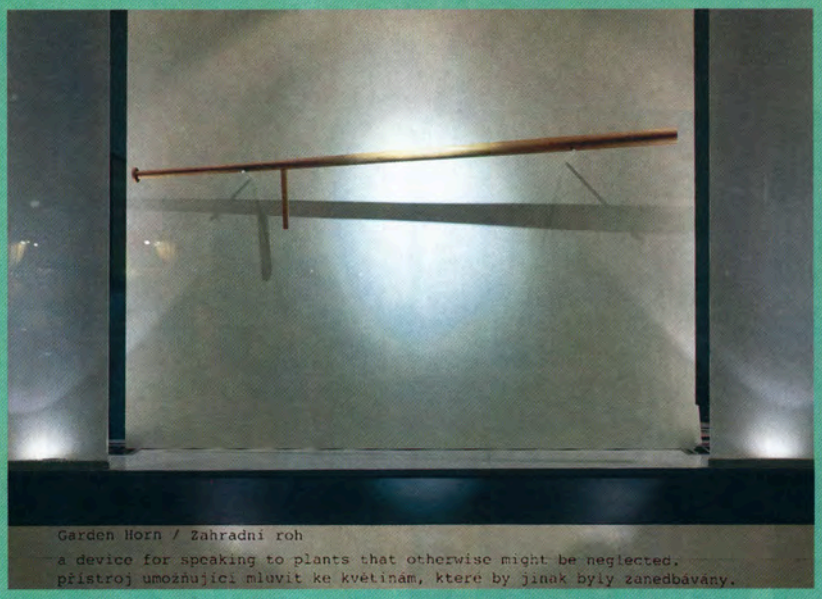
PHOTOGRAPHS ***MARTIN POLAK***

GARDEN GUERRILLAS

Czechs must be used to seeing strange things in their shop windows, as over the past ten years the products of eastern bloc austerity have gradually given way to an influx of consumer confectionery from the West. But not even this could have prepared passing shoppers for the recent exhibition in the new Window Gallery of the British Council offices in Prague.

Called *Weeds, Aliens and Other Stories*, the series of weird furniture-cum-products installed there is the work of RCA research fellows Tony Dunne and Fiona Raby and industrial designer Michael Anastassiades. The project began as a

From left to right: *Cucumber Sandwiches*, a device for growing cucumbers; *Rustling Branch*, a sonic alternative to the vase; *Talking Tabs*, labels that recite poems to plants; *Moth Light*, a game that only moths can play



Left to right: *Cricket Box*, for collecting garden sounds; *Meeting*, a place to make up; *Reserved*, a seat to be shared with flowers; *Garden Horn*, a device for speaking to plants

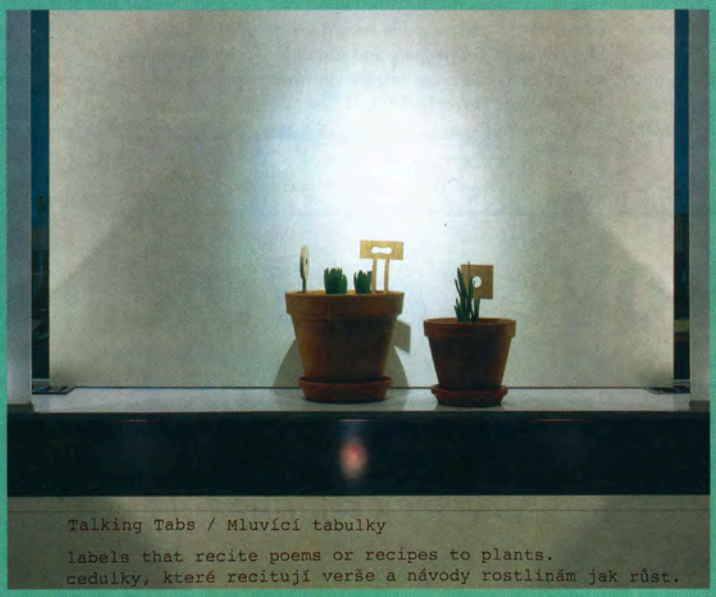
series of sketchbook proposals exploring the eccentric ways in which people interact with their gardens.

The "diagrammatic" objects made up for Prague are a brilliant realisation of the designers' refreshingly unorthodox approach. Each piece is evocatively titled, with names like *Cucumber Sandwiches* for a table in which a cucumber is set to grow, *Reserved* – a seat to be shared with flowers – for a bench through which flowers grow (you either sit on them and kill them or use it only in winter) and *Cricket Box* for a drawer in which insect sounds are collected in the garden and then played back indoors. Blunt descriptions accompany each exhibit leaving further wild imaginings to the viewer.

Dunne and Raby, who trained as an industrial designer and architect respectively, are making their names as two of the few voices in Britain to speak out against the prevalent and uncritical celebration of objects in purely aesthetic or functional terms. Rather than join in this glorification of all things gorgeous, they are fascinated by the more sinister possibilities of products and the ways in which they might be misused (they have worked to subvert baby listening devices and their current installation in Grenoble features a lie detector phone). Using the RCA as a base, they are able to develop and disseminate their work both as written and 3D proposals.

Each piece in *Weeds* is made in English oak and several are accompanied by sound relayed to the street (*Cricket Box* has the sound of a single cricket, while *Talking Tabs* is accompanied by the sound of recipes and poems being read out to torment plants). These CD-quality tracks created by the experimental musician Jayne Roderick make the experience of looking at the objects in an urban setting all the more unsettling.

Some credit for this show must go to Andree Cooke, curator of the British Council gallery in Prague. She invited the designers to make the installation after seeing their original sketchbook of ideas. This sketchbook has now been turned into a limited edition volume available at Zwemmer's bookshop and the ICA in London.

Marco Susani, director of the Domus Academy Research Centre in Milan, summed up the compelling effect of this project when he was asked to write a response. "*Weeds, Aliens and Other Stories* is about objects, about their role in our life and about the relations they stimulate," he wrote. "There are no gadgets among them. But after seeing the collection you cannot imagine surviving without a *Garden Horn* to speak to your plants or a *Cricket Box* to bring the sound of distant crickets into your home. Compared to the many visions of the future that we have seen, the objects from *Weeds* are really dealing with life – the life of the objects themselves, the life that they collect and the life that we can imagine around them." But most of all, says Susani, we will finally prefer these products to glossy, fin-de-siècle industrial objects because they also embrace decay, "an essential element of life". B

Dunne and Raby's new project Tomorrow's Homes Today *will be at the Manchester Museum of Science and Industry from 23 May to 13 September*