

**STRANGELY FAMILIAR:
DESIGN AND EVERYDAY LIFE**

**ANDREW BLAUVELT
WALKER ART CENTER, MINNEAPOLIS**

Published on the occasion of the exhibition *Strangely Familiar: Design and Everyday Life*, curated by Andrew Blauvelt for the Walker Art Center.

Walker Art Center
Minneapolis, Minnesota
June 8–September 7, 2003

Carnegie Museum of Art
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
November 8, 2003–February 15, 2004

Lille 2004 Capitale Européenne
de la Culture
Musée de l'Hospice Comtesse
Lille, France
September 4–November 28, 2004

The North American tour of *Strangely Familiar: Design and Everyday Life* is made possible by generous support from Target Stores.

Additional funding for this exhibition is provided by the Mondriaan Foundation, with support from the Netherlands Culture Fund of the Dutch Ministries for Foreign Affairs and Education, Culture, and Science; and The Prince Bernhard Cultural Foundation. In-kind assistance provided by Bouwbedrijf De Nijs and Kirin Brewery Company, Ltd.

The exhibition catalogue is made possible in part by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in support of Walker Art Center publications.

Major support for Walker Art Center programs is provided by the Minnesota State Arts Board through an appropriation by the Minnesota State Legislature, the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, The Bush Foundation, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation through the Doris Duke Fund for Jazz and Dance and the Doris Duke Performing Arts Endowment Fund, Target Stores, Marshall Field's, and Mervyn's with support from the Target Foundation, The McKnight Foundation, General Mills Foundation, Coldwell Banker Burnet, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the National Endowment for the Arts, American Express Philanthropic Program, The Regis Foundation, The Cargill Foundation, U.S. Bank, Star Tribune Foundation, 3M, and the members of the Walker Art Center.

CONTENTS

- 8 Foreword
- 11 Acknowledgments
- 14 Andrew Blauvelt
Strangely Familiar: Design and Everyday Life
- 38 Aaron Betsky
The Strangeness of the Familiar in Design
- 56 Jamer Hunt
Just Re-Do It: Tactical Formlessness and Everyday Consumption
- 72 Jonathan Bell
Ruins, Recycling, Smart Buildings, and the Endlessly Transformable Environment
- 89 Rituals of Use
Placebo Project, Anti-Social Light, Dialog, Free Play, Felt 12x12, do break, do hit, do swing, Greediness Meter, Insipid Collection
- 145 Portable Structures
Habitat Furtif, Kesä-Kontti (Summer Container), Mobile Dwelling Unit, Etana (Snail), Portable House, Prefabricated Wooden House, Gyo-an Paper Tea House, Gardening Sukkah, Paper Lighthouse, Basic House
- 203 Multifunctional Objects
Transformables Collection, Rugelah Chair, Cabriolet/Occasional Table, Tumble House, Composite Housing
- 233 Transforming the Everyday
Moth House, Kokon Chair, Markow Residence, Daybed, Terra: The Grass Armchair, Airborne Snotty Vases, Buildings of Disaster, Upstate, RE-, Dutch Pavilion, Pig City, Scrambled Flat
- 313 Biographies
- 331 Exhibition Checklist

JAMER HUNT
JUST RE-DO IT: TACTICAL FORMLESSNESS AND
EVERYDAY CONSUMPTION

A MUNDANE ITINERARY ON THE EVE OF TERROR

SOUTH PORTLAND, Me., Oct. 4 – For their last night on Earth, the pair of terrorists stayed at a Comfort Inn on a sterile strip of gas stations and fast-food joints here.

Driving a silver-blue rented Nissan Altima, Mohamed Atta and Abdulaziz Alomari spent at least part of the evening in the most pedestrian of pursuits, mostly along a broad suburban stretch of asphalt called Maine Mall Road: 15 minutes at a Pizza Hut, a quick stop at a gas station and about 20 minutes at a Wal-Mart. . . . They also stopped at two automated teller machines.

"They did nothing different than almost any other person who visits Maine from out of state," said Stephen McCausland, a spokesman for the Maine Department of Public Safety. "It is eerie to know that these two central figures in this horrific event were here doing those things the night before."

– *The New York Times* (October 5, 2001)

"They circulate without being seen, discernible only through the objects that they move about and erode. The practices of consumption are the ghosts of the society that carries their name."

– Michel de Certeau¹

The space between the utter banality of the everyday and the cataclysmic eruption of September 11 is immeasurable. They exist on incommensurate scales. Comfort Inn, Wal-Mart, Pizza Hut, the ATM. Though we might cringe to admit it, these landmarks *are* the everyday for most people in twenty-first-century North American life. They are embarrassingly familiar. Their styles derive from lowest-common-denominator planning. Sav-Mart, Loaf 'n Jug, Pep Boys: they are strange, too; polymorphous, nonsense syllables clumped together and seared into our unconscious by enormous roadside signs, abrasive advertisements, and cloying jingles. They may not represent the apotheosis of Western civilization and yet they are—through their numbing ubiquity—the essence of our consumer society.

Between the Comfort Inn and the World Trade Center towers there stands an abyss, too, that illustrates the rupture between the monumental and the mundane. "To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city's grasp. . . . The World Trade Center is only the most monumental figure of Western urban development," wrote philosopher Michel de Certeau.² The towers emerged against the ground of the ordinary. They are vertical; Wal-Mart is horizontal. The twin towers were colossal symbols; the Comfort Inn thwarts memory. The World Trade Center was unique (even if twinned); Wal-Mart is everywhere. Between thrust and sprawl, we see the warp and weft of a consumerist *everyday*. This dialectic helps explain in some ways the hold that the Boym's *Buildings of Disaster*, a series of miniatures depicting scenes of famous calamities, has for us. Its power comes from the compression of the extraordinary—monuments and disaster—into the ordinary—tchotchkes. It is the depths of the unbridgeable chasm between these registers that their work illuminates. Like figure and ground, the ordinary and the monumental are imperceptible without the other.

The common and the extraordinary intersect to form the matrix out of which the practices of design create the built environment. Design, unlike art, must locate itself within the ordinary. We engage design with all of our senses. The things we see and read, the objects we use, and the places we inhabit are covered by the fingerprints of graphic, product, and architectural designers. While these products do not comprise the world,

1. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 35.

2. *Ibid.*, 92.

they do constitute increasingly large swathes of it. The built environment (a term I use to designate the combination of all the above design work) is the physical infrastructure that enables behavior, activity, routines, habits, and rituals. To evoke philosopher-social critic Michel Foucault, this is design as a disciplinary practice. The irony, however, is that while design generally furnishes this material support of the everyday in our culture, designers are incapable of designing the everyday. What I mean by that is not that designers lack the ability or the talent, but that the everyday is, as a phenomenon, inaccessible to the design process. Design can approach it, asymptotically, but it will never reach it.

The reasons for this are manifold. Designers cannot claim the everyday because as soon as they pull near to it, it evaporates. It is, as its name indicates, a temporal category. Everyday practices are aleatory and fugitive. They resist codification because their heterogeneity is both meaningless in its particularity and distorted when we abstract or generalize it. Art historian Deborah Fausch sums up the paradox this way: "The very act of labeling a part of experience as 'everyday' alters its fluid character and its immersion in an ongoing stream of events, substituting a hypostasized mental object formed according to the rules governing theoretical operations."³ The everyday is what the act of analysis cannot comprehend. It is, to use philosopher Henri Lefebvre's term, the residuum, or what gets left over in the act of sociological scrutiny. One person's everyday is irrelevant, and everybody's everyday is unimaginable.

The temporality of everyday practices has elicited a range of recent design work that challenges the hegemony of a static, permanent design "product." These works embrace ideas of formlessness, decay, impermanence, abuse, misuse, and confusion.⁴ They beg for connection and modification. They also refuse reduction to the typical categories of the beautiful or the useful. Rather than fetishizing the final product, these works engage design as process. While not pointedly political, they do raise questions about consumption and its politics—a rare gesture in product design, particularly. These works do not represent a sea change in the design disciplines, but they do intersect with the practice of everyday life in surprisingly novel ways.

Time of the Everyday

What is the everyday? This simple question does not yield a simple answer. Sociological inquiry has struggled to come to terms with something so familiar and at the same time so elusive. In her overview of Lefebvre's work, Mary McLeod points out that:

While it [everyday life] is the object of philosophy, it is inherently nonphilosophical; while conveying an image of stability and immutability, it is transitory and uncertain; while governed by the repetitive march of linear time, it is redeemed by the renewal of nature's cyclical time; while unbearable in its monotony and routine, it is festive and playful; and while controlled by technocratic rationalism and capitalism, it stands outside of them.⁵

Sociological methods are, by their very nature, pattern-seeking. Except for case studies, where a part stands in for the whole, it is never enough to recount the particular daily events of one individual's life. It would make no sense without the broader context of a culture's belief system, its rituals, its institutions, and its social structure. Instead, abstractions are made from a deep understanding of many different individuals' experiences, routines, and beliefs, all of which are boiled down and generalized in order to make a pattern of greater sense. To capture the everyday is ultimately—like Charles and Ray Eames' film *Powers of Ten*—a paradox of optical resolution: too close and you can't see the forest for the humdrum and parochial trees (think Andy Warhol movies); too far away and you miss the trees for the large, undifferentiated mass of forest.

It was Lefebvre who made it clear that that conundrum was unresolvable: the dialectic of the everyday could not be synthesized into a higher truth. As he argues, "Modernity and the everyday constitute a deep structure that a critical analysis can work to uncover."⁶ Lefebvre does put the everyday, however, into a historical context. It emerges concurrently with modernity. Or, to put it more accurately, the everyday as a *concept* emerges with modernity. We are able to discern its outlines only with the advent of industrial production, planned obsolescence, and the surpluses they generated. As Lefebvre writes, "The everyday is therefore a concept. In order for it to have ever been engaged as a concept, the reality it designated had to have become dominant, and the old obsessions about shortages . . . had

3. Deborah Fausch, "Ugly and Ordinary: The Representation of Everyday Life," in *Architecture of the Everyday*, eds. Steven Harris and Deborah Berke (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 78.

4. This idea of the "formless," borrowed from Georges Bataille, has a robust intellectual history. See Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997) and Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).

5. Mary McLeod, "Henri Lefebvre: Critique of Everyday Life: An Introduction," in *Architecture of the Everyday*.

6. Henri Lefebvre, "The Everyday," in *Architecture of the Everyday*.

to disappear.⁷ Those shortages were rendered meaningless in the economies of abundance and plenty that mass production created. A modern sense of time—as progress, unidirectional and linear—has pushed aside the preindustrial, cyclical experience of time (that of solstices, seasons, harvests, birth, and death). News, fashion, and design all bombard us with the message that time is moving ferociously forward. Two modalities of time commingle now, swirling in competing and confusing ways. We crave the new, we delight in change, and we bemoan the good old days. Part of our modern condition, as many have pointed out, is to learn to survive as the powerful current of time tows everything forward with it. We look for branches to grasp, things to hold on to, so that we can resist time's passing, even if just for a moment. We crave the illusion of stasis, yet we buy the latest in fashion (or at least feel the pressure to do so). The everyday, then, is an anxious oscillation between the gravitational poles of stasis and change.

Practices of Everyday Life

How do these forces affect individuals and the choices they have and make? In his reflections on everyday practices, de Certeau explores these dynamics through a conceptual framework of *tactics* and *strategies*. That he develops these two terms within the context of mass production and consumption makes them particularly salient to design. He is trying to uncover the ways in which individual members of society create certain freedoms within the inescapable net of late capitalist, consumer culture: "The thousands of people who buy a health magazine, the customers in a supermarket, the practitioners of urban space, the consumers of newspaper stories and legends—what do they make of what they 'absorb,' receive, and pay for? What do they do with it?"⁸ These practices are not inherently liberatory in the way that some theorists might suggest. These *tactics* are simply ways of constructing alternatives. They are, as de Certeau writes, "victories of the 'weak' over the 'strong,'" or "opportunities that must be seized 'on the wing.'" They manifest themselves in such everyday acts as cooking, dwelling, wandering, and speaking. To cite just one example, he describes what the French call *la perruque*, or "the wig": "*La perruque* is the

worker's own work disguised as work for his employer. *La perruque* may be as simple a matter as a secretary's writing a love letter on 'company time' or as complex as a cabinetmaker's 'borrowing' a lathe to make a piece of furniture for his living room."⁹ These benign appropriations invisibly redirect productivity; they are stolen moments of creativity and freedom, clipped from the cycles of the routine.

In contrast, *strategies* are the techniques of the empowered: "I call a 'strategy' the calculus of force-relationships, which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an 'environment.' A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as *proper (propre)*"—a word that has many more relevant nuances in French. De Certeau elaborates on this proposition: "The 'proper' is a *triumph of place over time*. . . . It is also a mastery of places through sight. . . . It would be legitimate to define the *power of knowledge* by this ability to transform the uncertainties of history into readable spaces."¹⁰

It is easy to ignore the breadth and sophistication of these assertions if we don't adequately grasp what de Certeau means by "spaces." It is easiest to understand if we start from the premise that space is not something that exists "out there," waiting to be seized, purchased, stolen, or fought over. It is not territory or volume. It does not preexist strategies and practices. Instead, I take de Certeau to mean that we establish all sociospatial entities in a web of force-relationships (this is what Foucault means by *power*) that aspire to appear permanent. Space is becoming, not being. People, institutions, laws, media, and even knowledge identify, claim, define, and circumscribe space to create (the illusion of) being. Space takes on the appearance of an immutable truth through strategies, or the acts of establishing it, shoring it up, naming it, identifying its borders, and maintaining it. Simply put, space does not exist. And we create "place" only through continual acts of seizure. It is the triumph of space over time: "Strategies pin their hopes on the resistance that the *establishment of a place* offers to the erosion of time; tactics on a clever *utilization of time*, of the opportunities it presents and also of the play that it introduces into the foundations of power."¹¹

7. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

8–11. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 31, 25, 36, 38–39.

Generally speaking, then, culture is a dialectical process: it is a continual process of freezing and fixing fluid relations (call these strategies); it is also the reconfiguration or dismantling of those relations through tactics that tunnel into the bedrock of that power. The objects of design freeze time. To design is to fix fluid relations. Design seizes space and creates place. The practice of design, then, exists in the register of strategies. It is the accumulation of sufficient capital, resources, ingenuity, bandwidth, media-space, and real estate to claim a certain share of our life. Design is the process of institutions and corporations imposing places, objects, visual messages, and ideas into our lives.

While this might sound bleakly critical, it is essential to remember that science as well as education survive by means of strategies. Moreover, de Certeau is not shallow; he does not attach venal political and moral values to his concepts (in other words, it is not the simple case that strategies are bad and tactics are good). In this way, he is much more the anthropologist of strategies and tactics, observing and documenting the contested fields of their deployment. Cultural artifacts—and by association, design artifacts—are always a buttress against time. They are meaningful ways of perpetuating a set of relations with the goal of sustaining those relations in fixed positions. But users then adopt those objects, translate those ideas, and inhabit those spaces in unpredictable, improvisatory ways.

Tactics are, therefore, performative. They are enactments of a given situation or configuration to produce a different end. Performative acts are, by their very nature, transitory and fleeting. Adopt, adapt, and move on. By remaking the given, the practices of everyday life rewrite the script and offer, if only for a moment, novel endings. Writing of urban planning and design, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues, “Performance is also central to the production of the urban vernacular, for performance produces spatial form. By performance I mean everything from hanging the laundry out to hopscotch or lion dancing during the Chinese New Year holiday. Activities produce distinctive spatial forms, some of which acquire independent architectural manifestations.” To borrow a phrase from de Certeau, this is cultural poaching. Or as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett puts it, “This mutation makes the text habitable, like a rented apartment. It

transforms another person’s property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient.”¹²

This, in slightly different terms, is the same argument that structuralists like Ferdinand de Saussure and Jacques Lacan made about subjectivity. For these linguistic-based theorists, subjectivity was an aftereffect of the linguistic utterance. Drawing upon that linguistic foundation, de Certeau fashions a similar approach: “In linguistics, ‘performance’ and ‘competence’ are different: the act of speaking (with all the enunciative strategies that implies) is not reducible to a knowledge of the language. By adopting the point of view of enunciation—which is the subject of our study—we privilege the act of speaking; according to that point of view, speaking operates within the field of a linguistic system; it effects an appropriation, or reappropriation, of language by its speakers; it establishes a *present* relative to a time and place.”¹³ If we substitute into de Certeau’s formulation terms that are more specific to the design process, we might say that *by adopting the point of view of everyday practices—which is the subject of our study—we privilege the act of consuming; according to that point of view, consuming operates within the field of a design system; it effects an appropriation, or reappropriation, of design by its users; it establishes a present relative to a time and a place.* Frank-Bertholt Raith distills this approach perfectly when he states: “Architecture becomes real only in its performance.”¹⁴ That is, the built environment is in a constant state of becoming, or flux. Mitigating this is work that denies its ephemerality and imposes a frozen set of relations upon the world. Power maintains, but everyday practices undermine.

This reformulation underscores the role that time and change play in our everyday encounter with design. It delineates a performative theory of design. It also represents a sensibility that unites a small cluster of designers whose work refuses to foreclose chance, customization, and disintegration, and instead, embraces time’s trials and celebrates form’s mutability. It acknowledges that the everyday is a constant, quiet practice of appropriation, and it invites that. This work sees form as a process, not an unalterable end, and therefore subverts our expectations of the designer’s role by flaunting its formlessness, or at least its disregard of permanent form as the telos of design.

Finally, why is the ordinary so interesting to us *now*? There are a few reasons. In some cases, it results from the emergence of new technologies of inscription. Embedded sensors, transponders, and processors can now communicate to us mundane information that we had scant access to before. Multiplied by databases and crunched by laptop-sized processors, we can also make better sense of the stream of data that those technologies communicate. The ordinary simply becomes more visible. In other cases, it is amplified by the rise of user-centered design. The emergence of the user and his/her needs as a focus for the design process foregrounds the specificity of daily life, but in a way that must be generalizable. Design offices now deploy user studies and ethnographic methodologies to try to grasp the intimacies of lived experience. This has produced, in some cases, a more humanistic design and a fascination with capturing the quotidian.

Another, perhaps broader, explanation for the rise of work that engages with everyday practices, I would argue, is the suffocating commercialization of all spaces, habits, and experiences. In a brand-saturated culture, those few practices that exist outside of or in confrontation with the heavily sponsored develop a luster of the exotic or real. Where will we find alternatives to a branded life when the battles over ideology are history and the tendrils of free-market capitalism are spreading throughout the world? Are there other stories, are there other ways of designing, that don't simply perpetuate this status quo but instead offer some kind of more meaningful action in our world? We scour the surface of the everyday searching for clues.

Strategies—in de Certeau's sense—exhibit symptoms that appear as the qualities of monumentality, universality, truth, transcendence, and permanence. Ultimately, these attributes seem natural to the designed object. Publicity, awards, curation, and design press combine to perpetuate this fiction of good design as timeless, immutable, or canonical. The real terminus of design work, however, is not so glamorous (and only recently have we begun to take stock of the reality of our consumptive appetites). What distinguishes the work of the loose—mostly Dutch—initiative called do

is that it is, instead, engaging more directly with transformability. Rather than pretending that products are permanent, do embraces mutability.

do reincarnate material: nylon thread, fitting do creator: Marti Guixé

Death doesn't exist with this "do create" product. The task of *do reincarnate* is to inject fresh life into otherwise tired or over-familiar products. Simply slip the almost invisible thread around your chosen lamp, attach via a light cable, and let it dangle from your ceiling. An old object is suddenly and magically new again as it hangs in midair. *do reincarnate* can be used for more objects: it could be a painting or a photograph. You decide.¹⁵

do has crafted a philosophy and approach to design, consumption, and branding that vaunts its simplicity and parades its trashiness (in the best sense of the word). No-tech style, smudgy graphics, goofy animations, and unflattering photography allow do to carefully shape a low threshold of entry for its audience. It invites participation into its "brand," but what makes that brand a little unusual is that it really barely exists:

do doesn't have any products or services, just a dream. To communicate this dream, do is making all kinds of communication and actions. This way, more people can find out about do. After people know what they can do with do, then products, projects, and services will be added. This is a new way to begin a brand. Usually, a brand starts with a product and then builds a mentality from there . . . *do change* is the name of an experiment from do, a new kind of ever-changing brand which, as the name suggests, depends on what you do.¹⁶

It is the open nature of do's product "line" that elevates its work beyond a simple slogan or campaign. do is out to mess with the everyday. Its plan is to infect the passive, habitual, and unreflected moments of modern life with antic creativity and polymorphous play. do's self-described goal is to break our addiction to:

soul-destroying habits—ones that slowly but surely drag us down, alter our minds, and make us do bad, bad things. We're not talking about the obvious

ones that destroy our health like smoking or drinking or taking drugs or eating mad beef. We're talking about all these comforting, repetitive, second-nature acts we commit every minute of every day: habits we would find most difficult to break if challenged to do so, like that way you always stretch in the morning when you wake up or how you always start reading a magazine from the back page to the front. do change is here to relieve you, to serve you up a big plate of cold turkey to help kick those habits. And all that is required are a few small shocks to your system.¹⁷

do's materials are conspicuously banal: a T-shirt, tape, nylon string, plywood, or plumbing chain. Delving into the hardware-store vocabulary of our built environment, do's designers insinuate Dadaist reconfigurations that oblige a user to confront the routinization of daily life. Whether it is *do break* (a ceramic vase you can toss but that does not shatter and instead creates a unique crackle pattern) or *do hit* (a cube of steel you beat into a chair with a sledgehammer), each product demands interaction and incites us into a conceptual wrestling match over creativity, originality, consumption, and the mass-production process. With its anonymous style and DIY (do-it-yourself) sensibility—Marcel Duchamp meets Martha Stewart—the do methodology affronts our own passivity. do lowers the barriers to design, and its products command attentive action. By engineering their products with a predisposition for endless reconfiguration and by making that act a traumatic one (throw it, pound it, saw it, scratch it), the designers stare down the “trivial” question of product death. They willingly make us act out the suppressed fury of our consumerist alienation by attacking the products that abet our alienation in the first place. It is as if, to paraphrase William Carlos Williams, the pure products go crazy. Don't like your chair? Smash it with a sledgehammer. Now you have a new chair. What could be more sublime?

This curiously open approach to design and to “products” also infuses the work of Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, though in a starkly different way. Their most detailed venture, the *Placebo Project*, investigates the terrain of everyday habit as it intersects technology and collides with design. The project is, ostensibly, a line of electronically augmented furnishings that

are conspicuously plain in design. Each contains, however, some material sign of its electronic connection. For *Compass Table*, they inlay an unadorned side table with dozens of compasses. Their plain, straight-backed wooden *Nipple Chair* would pass anonymously except for two small electronic protuberances on the seat back and two discrete ledges for one's feet. These objects serve a dual purpose: to insinuate themselves into the environment through their neutral looks, and to provide a platform for interaction with their electronic program. As Dunne and Raby suggest of their designs, “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.”¹⁸

Dunne and Raby accept that there is a fuzzy logic to both the human inclination toward technology but also—and this is key—technology's relation to us. As they see it, electronic objects “dream,” though they mean this less in a gauzy poetic sense and more in a sober, rational one. Appliances are not brute, dumb, perfect machines: “They leak radiation into the space and objects surrounding them, including our bodies . . . electronic objects, it might be imagined, are irrational—or at least they allow their thoughts to wander.”¹⁹ This Hertzian, or electromagnetic space, as they term it, is a third space between the user and the object. It dissolves the distinction between us (the people) and them (the machines). It also melts the hard and fast boundaries between public and private, mine and yours: “Lawyers, criminals, and the superstitious are already aware of these issues; designers and architects need to explore them, too.”²⁰ Hertzian space is, to Dunne and Raby, a real space with contours, form, and properties. We must make it “habitable,” they believe, because already it is shaping architecture, fashion, infrastructure, law, and behavior: dining rooms in tony restaurants scramble cell phone signals to reduce annoying ringing; materials that block the electromagnetic spectrum are being incorporated into hoods and garments to protect from its mutagenic effects; and people are suing electric companies for damages due to leaking power lines. Between our appliances' incontinent leakages and our own paranoid, superstitious disposition toward machines, there exists this murky, charged realm of failure, imagination, fear, and hope. The inability of

17. Ibid.

18. Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Design Noir: Secret Lives of Electronic Objects* (Basel, Birkbeck: Berlin: Birkbeck, 2001), 75.

19–21. Ibid.

22–24. Ibid., no page listed, 6, 7.

design to tap into this reservoir of emotional attachments impoverishes us, Dunne and Raby argue. Design that simply aspires to functional or aesthetic solutions to problems misses this “bizarre world of the ‘infra-ordinary,’ where stories show that truth is indeed stranger than fiction.”²¹

To solicit interaction and affect, Dunne and Raby use design. An indispensable part of their *Placebo Project* are the interviews they publish with their users (who are a hand-picked set of “adopters,” or test subjects). This is not strategic user-centered design research, but rather a tactic to explore and experiment with the emotional and psychological relationships that connect people to things. Their *GPS Table*, for example, is a simple, square table with a global positioning sensor built into it. For *GPS* to function correctly, the sensor must establish a signal with a sufficient number of orbiting satellites. When the table is unable to position itself correctly, it indicates this state by displaying the word “lost.” Dick, the adopter of the *GPS Table*, describes the uncanny effect this creates:

Dunne and Raby: What kind of theories do you have about when it's lost and when it's found? What do you think is happening?

Dick: It's silly really, but because the lights flash, because it moves between its three satellite positions and “lost,” it gives it a sense of being alive. There's no other word for it. . . . You get the sense that you have to say, “Is it all right?” It's silly to talk about treating it as a sort of person, but it is—“I'd better go and check to see if the table's there.”²²

Ultimately, they don't envision manufacturers producing their designs. Instead, their projects belong to the realm of critical design practice. They engage a darker world, one they call Design Noir, in which the relationships between products and the people who use them are not always so shiny, happy, and neat. Instead, their work taps into a messier emotional landscape of fear, pain, erotic attachment, and loneliness.

Dunne and Raby approach this realm by designing objects that really don't play the games of form, fashion, or even functionality. They engineer their projects as openings for experiences, stories, and relationships. The point of the *Placebo Project* is to explore everyday life, to “illustrate the

narrative space entered by using and misusing a simple electronic product, [and show] how interaction with everyday electronic technologies can generate rich narratives that challenge the conformity of everyday life by short-circuiting our emotions and states of mind. These stories blend the physical reality of place with electronically mediated experience and mental affect. They form part of the pathology of material culture.”²³ Their projects, then, spark conversation. Obsession over the form of the objects is practically superfluous to the goal, which is to generate narratives. The “design” is not located solely within the furnishings they produce. To insist on the primariness of the designed artifact is to miss totally their mission. Their product is instead some peculiar combination of the furniture, its physical and electronic affordances, the people they pick, the interviews, and the record of it all. As with do or Marti Guixé's work, the style of the object is minimally important at best, and sometimes barely relevant. It is sufficient to design it enough to make it suit the job—to blend in. The real action is in the cultural strings it pulls or, to put it into Dunne and Raby's terms, in how it supports us in “customizing reality.”²⁴

To explore the formlessness of design is not necessarily to forgo form altogether, which would be impossible. Everything perceptible has some form to it. What distinguishes this approach is the abandonment of form as the first principle for design success. Instead, designers are venturing into the muddier regions of design's impact on our social life. They are exploring alternative ways of using the process to address social, emotional, and political ends. Again, the transformation of the social environment—not just the built environment—emerges as the focal point of the project.

For example, in their *Fences and Doors* project for Droog Design, NEXT Architects abandons the traditional role of designers—to create something new—in favor of a simple reconfiguration of the existing. They slightly alter the standard wooden fence, for instance, creating fleeting opportunities for social encounters. In one case, they provide the outlines of gardening tools in the fence itself by perforating the material, creating slots for storing tools that are accessible to residents on both sides. In another, extensions on each side of the fence serve as surfaces for table

tennis. Folded up, the fence retains its iconic status as a brutal barrier. Folded down, it allows for a friendly match between neighbors. Their goal, as is evident through the clarity of their design, is to override the fence's tendency to separate us. Clear enough. What distinguishes their work is its goofy simplicity. They assail this icon — the symbol of social alienation and dysfunction in our privatopias — through humor, not heavy-handed social messages. That, of course, is the gamble that their project takes. It can be seen as overbearing, or forced social interaction: design as bad, centralized, friendship engineering. This risk is not unique to their work. Any project that asks its users to participate in it, collaborate with it, or innervate it risks that. It also must come to terms with venturing into a consumer landscape of social passivity and engineered complaisance. But this is a pernicious stereotype of consumption. As de Certeau points out, people are always transforming the given to their own ends. We are careless to think otherwise.

Design and the everyday are inextricably intertwined. Because it plays such a constitutive role in everyday life, it is hard to say that there is design work that truly engages, or does not engage, the everyday. When we pull out our Philippe Starck potty in the middle of the night for a wayward toddler, what could be more everyday? This is, I believe, Lefebvre's point. The ordinary is ungraspable, slippery, and constantly confounding. Nothing is easier to point to and yet nothing eludes analysis more immediately. It is conceptual quicksilver.

But this does not therefore lead to a conclusion that the everyday is irrelevant to a critical understanding of design practice. The ordinary and the extraordinary are not absolutes, but a continuum, just as tactics and strategies are bound together in a messy, sometimes indeterminate grasp. But there is work that assumes a different posture relative to design orthodoxy. And there are qualities common to these projects, even if their differences are sometimes more stark. The great irony, of course, is that few fields possess a shorter memory than product design. Its products disappear from our lives in the blink of an eye and with little ceremony. Product design is like the fast food of our built environment. It fills us up with dubi-

ous calories and then we come right back for more, with scant awareness of what we just consumed. While often aspiring to transcend the present, most design gets ingloriously dragged away by fashion's cruel undertow.

The everyday is corrosive. To consume is to absorb completely but also to waste away and destroy. Time wins out. Always. What is refreshing about work like that considered here is that it does not fight that current but flows downstream with it, affirming the passing of fads, the perversity of fashion, and the righteousness of decay. Flow, flux, fluidity — these are the most powerful qualities of everyday life. By evading fixed form, such work opens a productive dialogue with the user, prompting uncontrollable acts of creativity and disfiguration. It is wise to the tactical habits of the everyday. We may consume everyday, but eventually, the everyday consumes us.

Jamer Hunt teaches at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, where he is Director of the Master's Program in Industrial Design, a graduate laboratory for postindustrial design. He holds a doctorate in cultural anthropology, has served on the Board of Directors of the American Center for Design, and has consulted and worked at design practices such as Smart Design inc., frogdesign, and Virtual Beauty. His own work explores the poetics and politics of the built environment.