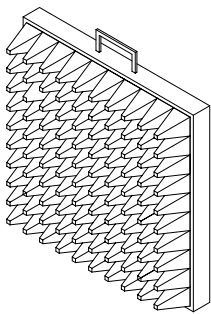


Anthony Dunne
and Fiona Raby



The Placebo Project



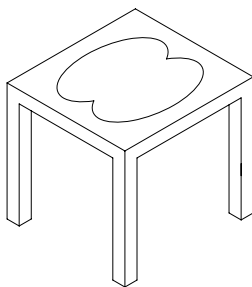
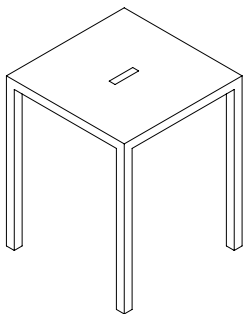
The Placebo project is an experiment in taking design research beyond an academic setting into everyday life. We devised eight prototype objects to investigate people's attitudes to and experiences of electromagnetic fields in the home, and placed them with volunteers. Made from medium density fibreboard (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.

Once electronic objects enter people's homes, they develop private lives, or at least ones that are hidden from human vision. Occasionally we catch a glimpse of this life when objects interfere with each other, or malfunction. Many people believe that mobile phones heat up their ears, or feel their skin tingle when they sit near a TV, and almost everyone has heard stories of people picking up radio broadcasts in their fillings. We are not interested in whether these stories are true or scientific, but we are interested in the narratives people develop to explain and relate to electronic technologies, particularly the invisible electromagnetic waves their electronic objects emit.

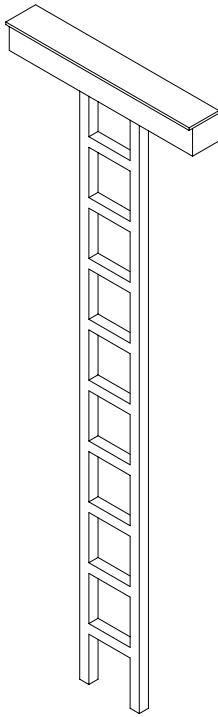
The Placebo objects are designed to elicit stories about the secret life of electronic objects – both factual and imagined. Homes for the objects were found through a variety of means, including adverts in a London listings magazine, workshops at the Victoria & Albert museum, a window display in Selfridges department store on Oxford Street and an article in a national newspaper. Potential adopters filled out application forms detailing any unusual experiences with electronic products, their attitude to electromagnetic waves and their reasons for choosing a particular object. Once their allotted time with the adopted object was up, we interviewed the people taking part in the project and collaborated with photographer Jason Evans to create images that pick up on and amplify ideas and details revealed during the interviews.

Designers cannot always solve problems, we cannot switch off the vast electromagnetic networks surrounding us all. Although we cannot change reality, we can change people's perception of it. Like a medical placebo, the objects in this project do not actually remove or counteract the cause for concern, but they can provide psychological comfort. The Placebo project is definitely not scientific: although aware of ethnographic and

1. Electro-draught excluder: Deflects stray electromagnetic fields
2. GPS table: A globally positioned table displays its exact position in the world. It needs a constant visual connection to orbiting satellites.
3. Electricity drain: Sitting naked on the stool allows electricity to drain from the body through a special plug which has an earth pin.



Tony Dunne and Fiona Raby lead the Critical Design Unit of the CRD Research Studio, the Royal College of Art, London



anthropological methodologies, we chose to adopt a more informal process in this case. We wanted to find out if people are more receptive to radical ideas than industry acknowledges, and to test our ideas about aesthetic meaning and electronic technology. We accept that the group of adopters was self-selecting. We also accept that they are probably exceptional people. But they are real people, and anything we discovered would be grounded in reality rather than fiction.

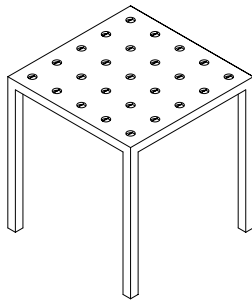
NIPPLE CHAIR

An electric field sensor and antenna are mounted beneath the seat of the chair. When the chair is placed in an electromagnetic field, two nipples set into the back start to vibrate, and the sitter is made aware of the radio waves penetrating their torso. It is up to them whether they stay and enjoy the gentle buzz, or move to a 'quieter' spot. As fields can also flow up through the sitter's body from electric wiring running underneath the floor, the chair has footrests so that you can isolate your feet from the ground. We like that it is slightly anthropomorphic; it's as though you are sitting on its lap.

INTERVIEW WITH NEIL, ADOPTER OF THE NIPPLE CHAIR, JUNE 2001

When you talk to your friends, how do you describe the object?

It's really difficult to get the concept across – you tell them it's a nipple chair and they think of something really kinky. Then you try and explain that it's a bit of furniture which detects electromagnetic fields. Most people just say 'Why would you do that?'. I just say it's interesting, it's like having a sort of living thing in your house. We haven't got any cats or anything, so this is the next best thing. You really get quite attached to it after a while, it definitely responds to things that are going on. It's sort of aware, in a sense.

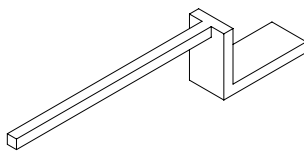


Where is the object now? Why is it there?

It's where it is now because I'm working at the desk – we used it as a proper chair rather than a curiosity. If you're sick of thinking, you can change your awareness to listening to what the chair's doing... when I'm not typing, I try and see if I can use my brain to change the rate it's vibrating at. Of course I can't, but I do try.

Did you try it in other rooms?

We've tried it in the kitchen. We put it in the bathroom for a bit, then we thought it would get damp so we took it out. The bedroom doesn't have any fields, it's much quieter. If you put the chair up against the window there, it takes a little while to settle down, but it settles down to almost nothing. We've tried it everywhere, but the living room is where it always comes back to, different positions in this room. This is a pretty hot corner, not just because of the computer but because there's more activity even if the computer's off.



4. Loft: A lead box on a ladder keeps magnetic mementoes safe from electromagnetic fields

5. Compass table: Electronic devices placed on the table's surface cause compass needles set into the table top to twitch and spin

6. Parasite light: A reading light that feeds off the leaky radiation of household electronic products. It only works when placed in electromagnetic fields. The stronger the field the brighter the light.

So you started to interpret its behaviour ?

Yes, I think so. When Sophie phones up she always wants to hear the chair, to see if it's OK. I suppose it has the same thing as those interactive pets, like a Furby or something like that. They respond in a really rudimentary way, but it can be interpreted. This has that same thing because it does

actually respond. When you come home at night, it speeds up and you think 'Oh, it's pleased to see me.' Poor deluded person that I am.

Some people will say things like Furby and the Tamagotchi are gadgets and slightly gimmicky.

The charm of this chair is that it's disqualified from being in the Furby category because it's not presented as a gadget. It's completely concealed. When we first got it, it didn't even have a switch. It's not gadget-like at all. It wouldn't be nearly as attractive if you could change the sensitivity, or programme it to come on at different times or if it had an alarm clock built into it. It would just be another gadget. But presented as it is, it's something completely different.

Has the experience of looking after the object had an effect on the way you think about electromagnetic waves?

Yes. I know about electromagnetic waves – there's this whole network, all these interfering signals which come from different things, becoming much more complex. So many things are using electromagnetic energy, not just gadgets but things that transmit, like mobile phones. I don't know whether I think of it as a kind of pollution, but just this whole complex of interchange of energy that's going on and we don't really know anything about it.

If you had to give the object to somebody else, who would you give it to and why?

I would give it to somebody who I think would appreciate it. It's that cat thing again: you wouldn't give your cat to just anybody to look after. Perhaps it would be different if it was a chair that you just had to plug in to the mains, but because it's a chair that you have to feed, you have to plug it in every couple of days, I'd want to give it to somebody who I could trust to do that.

What kinds of people might want to own an object like this?

I like the chair, but I wouldn't give the chair to a person like me because I like gadgets too much, and I definitely wouldn't give the chair to people who like gadgets.

Why?

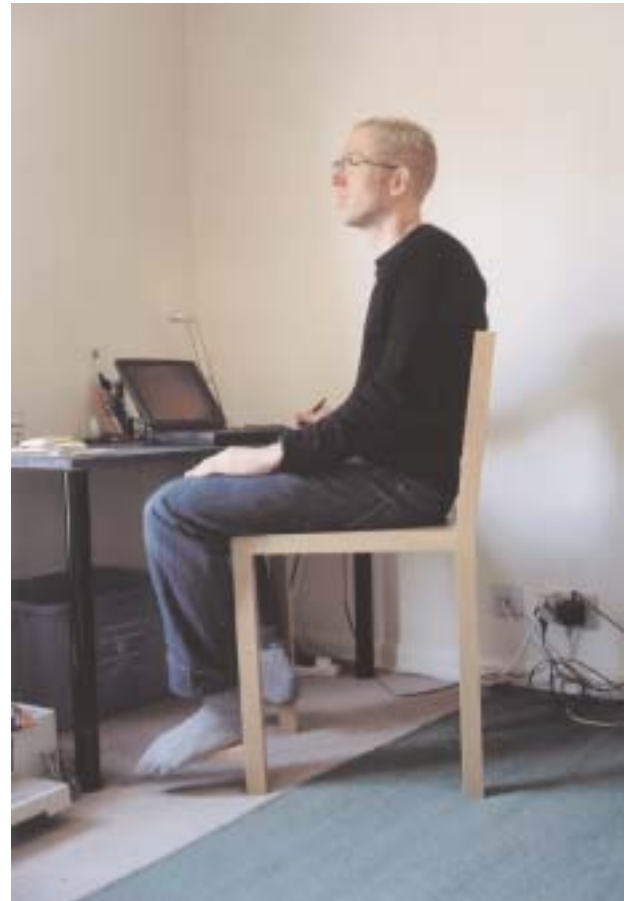
I don't think it is a gadget.

But you like gadgets.

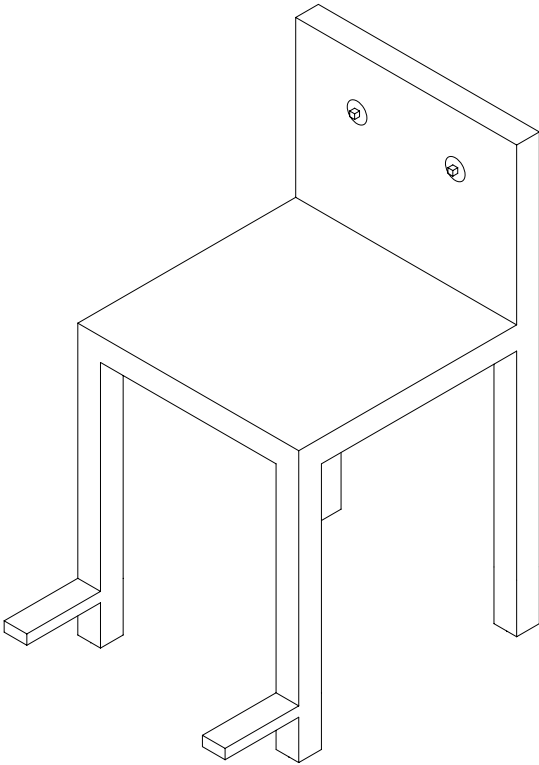
Yes, but none of the reasons that I like this chair has anything to do with any of the reasons I like gadgets.

Why do you like gadgets?

I don't know what it is. With most gadgets, a microsecond after you've bought them you regret it, because you know it's not going to give you what you want. Quite what it is I want when I buy a gadget, I don't know. I suppose it's that element of control over something. If you buy an electronic organiser you think it's going to transform your life, but all it does is remind you how disorganised your life really is. This seems to be different.



7. Nipple chair Nodules embedded in the back of the chair vibrate when radiation passes through the sitter's upper body.



Maybe that's why it's a good thing to give to people who like gadgets?

I don't think gadgety people would like it. Well, maybe they would. But I would have thought one of the big things about electronic gadgets is the interface, and this doesn't have one. I think gadget people would want to be able to programme the megacycles and stuff.

Is there a place for objects like this in people's lives?

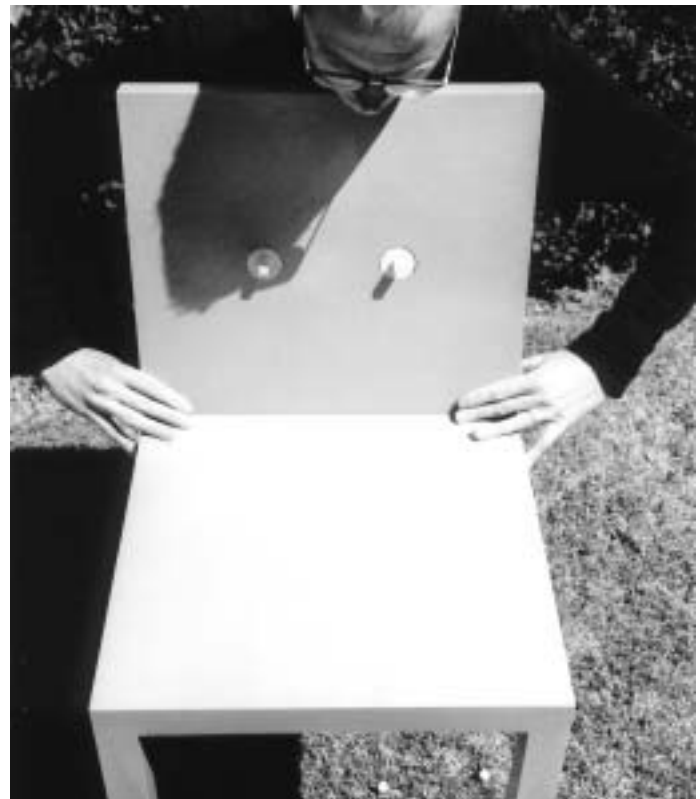
I really think so. What's attractive about it is that it gives you information about our environment, living conditions, about the noise that we're generating of various kinds. I suppose it puts us in touch with these invisible changes which are happening.

Does anything really annoy you about the object?

I don't find it annoying at all. It's nice to have. I just wish I understood a bit more... Sometimes, it's almost as if you're trying to speak to it in a different language, when you hold a shaver up to it like you're going to communicate with this thing, and you switch the shaver on and it doesn't do anything.

Did you and Sophie ever disagree about the object's meaning?

She thought I would think of it as a gadget, and I didn't. I guess it's that divide between a gadget and something which is aesthetic... Can something be a gadget and aesthetic as well? Or can the gadgety thing that it does be more aesthetic than the object itself?



Design Dunne and Raby

Electronics Jon Rogers

Photography Jason Evans

*This extract is taken from **Design Noir: The Secret Life of Electronic Objects**, Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby (August/Birkhäuser, 2001)*