



Michael Anastassiades, Anthony Dunne  
and Fiona Raby

WEEDS, ALIENS  
&  
OTHER  
STORIES.

### One of the other stories...

I first saw *Rustling Branch* a year ago in an ICA exhibition called *Stealing Beauty*, where several young designers sought to reveal through their work the hidden delight in what we normally disown, discard or simply take for granted.

The installation by designers Michael Anastassiades, Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby contained objects, among them *Rustling Branch*, related to our care and enjoyment of plant and insect life, particularly in the domestic environment. Originally created for a 1998 British Council exhibition in Prague, it was the trio's first collaboration and grew out of their frustration at the constraints of consumerism and a shared conviction that the best design has the capacity to change our behaviour and attitudes. In this case, the objects are meant to provide us with a new enjoyment of the natural world that we normally treat as background. They named their collection *Weeds* – for the upstart nature of their objects among the hothouse roses that constitute most contemporary

design – *Aliens* – because it is the term used in old gardening books for non-indigenous plants – and *Other Stories* to signal the open-ended narrative possibilities of the objects' hybrid forms. The designers cite as predecessors Daniel Weil whose early work allowed the object's owner an individual relationship with it; artist Alan Wexler; whose *Structures for Reflection* reflect his training as an architect; artist Andrea Zittel who showed her *Comfort Units* at a London gallery a few years ago; and anonymous Victorians who devised ingenious machines with curious functions.

In connection with one of his earlier projects, Anthony Dunne wrote that '*the designer...no longer knows anything for certain; all he or she can offer are the contents of his or her own head.*' He and Raby and Anastassiades discuss what is in their heads by e-mail and around a table, sketching together not to create or conform to a 'house-style' but to better communicate an idea.

The resulting objects have nothing to do with style. They are products of the psyche where, as in dreams, imagination meets reason, and they derive not from market-

Photography — Salvatore Vinci  
Design — Graphic Thought Facility  
Printing — Xtraprint, London

Michael Anastassiades  
mike@dialm.demon.co.uk; Telephone 020 7928 7527  
Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby  
a.dunne@rca.ac.uk, f.raby@rca.ac.uk, Telephone 020 7590 4298

## WEEDS, ALIENS AND OTHER STORIES.

Thanks to Andrée Cooke, The British Council Window Gallery Prague, Jan and Mieke Teunen, Garpa, Gillian Crampton Smith, Mark Daniels, Northern Architecture, The Josephine and John Bowes Museum, Northern Arts, Marco Susani, Doris Lockhart Saatchi, Tatiana Karapanagioti, Salvatore Vinci, Stella Pantazopoulou, Sophie Smallhorn, Robin Blackledge, Claire Catterall, Ben Legg, Rick Thomas, Mark Bullimore, Jon Rogers and Jayne Roderick.

© 2000 Michael Anastassiades, Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby.

driven pressure to constantly devise new forms for established functions but from an impulse informed by idealism to discover new functions that implicitly criticise existing systems and assumptions. These objects are optimism materialised. Because we normally drink hot liquids from a cup, the fur-covered cup created by Surrealist artist Meret Oppenheim is, on the face of it, absurd. But consider the logic of an object that has the warming effect and all the welcome connotations of a hot drink yet won't scald or lose its heat.

Made from trees with trees as its subject, *Rustling Branch* possesses the same kind of irrefutable logic as Oppenheim's cup. It is a tree for indoors, its trunk a shelf, its sap or juice a motor and leaves that are perpetually renewable. As important to me as the power of the idea that produced it is the fact that, like its companion objects, it is well-made and beautiful. *Rustling Branch* consists of the bough of a tree – any tree you choose – extending from a hole in a small oak box attached to the underside of a 1m-long oak shelf which is hung on the wall with invisible fixings. Every 40 seconds the small, silent motor in the box vibrates the bough and

the leaves shake. The first time I laid eyes on the piece, the branch shivered as I started to turn away and I wasn't sure what I'd seen. I turned back and – oh joy – the branch shivered again.

The choice of oak relates to the Englishness of the project, encompassing as it does gardening, cucumber sandwiches, crickets and all that. But one of the trio's important concerns when it came to making what it is tempting to call these obscure objects of design was whether wood would seem too 'crafty' a material for their manufacture. Neither Anastassiades, Dunne nor Raby has any training in joinery so they questioned whether they should be respectful of that tradition or make the pieces by investigating and experimenting as they put them together. In the end, art overruled their concerns, and the gestation of the idea of each object took precedence over the process by which it was made. One consequence of this decision is that occasionally the process becomes perverse, such as when, instead of steam bending timber for a curved section, they turned it on a lathe or hollowed it out.



By refusing the role of makers and engaging in 'retrograde' activity, Anastassiades, Dunne and Raby have challenged assumptions about technological progress. In fact, their work 'accomplishes' a great deal else. It is environmentally sensitive: *Cricket Box* captures the sound made by one of nature's most sympathetic creatures in its natural habitat rather than the creature itself. It is efficacious: the simple glass bell of *Cucumber Sandwiches* presents the humble cucumber as a precious object of beauty while at the same time producing a straight cucumber that will make more uniform slices for human consumption. It is cunningly beneficial: talking to plants that might otherwise feel neglected through *Garden Horn* will make the talker feel good, whatever effect it does or doesn't have on the plants.

In the time- and culture-bound objects we seek to master in our daily lives, we see ourselves reflected, a narcissistic, cul-de-sac image. *Weeds, Aliens and Other Stories* prompts us to look outward in an open-ended reflection upon, in this case, the natural world and our place in it. Are these objects 'art' then? Anastassiades, Dunne

and Raby insist they are design. For one thing, unlike art reproductions, each copy of one of their originals has inherent value as a reinforcement of the idea it represents. On the other hand, you can argue that with these objects, as with art, it is the fact of their existence that counts, rather than the result of their use. In the end, of course, it is their hybrid nature that makes them so appealing.

In *Playing with Technology*, cultural observer Giulio Ceppi notes that '*The most important phenomenon caused by the gadget... is wonder... The fact that wonder and surprise are two variables that rarely enter into the design of industrial objects has induced the development of a clandestine niche in which such forbidden emotions can be found.*'

It is that 'clandestine niche' that *Rustling Branch* and all its companion objects fill. It is the wonder and surprise that they produce that transforms mere users and consumers into beholders and conservators.

**Doris Lockhart Saatchi**

April 2000



1

## I can hear conversations

### **Imagine relaxed conversations.**

Imagine long afternoons spent in slow dialogue and conversation in, or about, a garden. Imagine *'how straight is your cucumber growing?'* or, *'my sofa is perfectly grown after two seasons, but I'll have to cut it, before it grows too wild'*.

Looking at the projects from *Weeds, Aliens and Other Stories* one can imagine several conversations about the objects and the spaces proposed.

First comes the conversation with the objects themselves: a conversation that starts with trying to understand the role of bizarre objects, and continues with the surprise of discovering that they are also active and usable.

Then there's the conversation with nature that happens through the tools proposed by the project, and leads to the discovery of a new and different way of interacting with natural growth.

Finally, there's the conversation around the objects as social elements, able to stimulate a dialogue between

humans surprised by the new delicate dimension they have discovered. Conversations about hiding behind a hedge, or about the nice view offered by *A Seat with a View*.

### **Nature seen with other eyes (and heard with other ears)**

I don't know how much *Weeds, Aliens and Other Stories* could be considered a project about nature, or even a project showing a love of nature. Certainly, first impressions can be wrong: the project may seem to be about caring for nature, but I would say it is more about caring for *bare*. Nature seems to be, in *Weeds, Aliens and Other Stories*, just an occasion, a pretext, to reflect on a series of issues regarding interaction and relationships, care being just one of these reflections.

Nature is not idealized, no moral about nature is proposed, no opposition between nature and the artificial can be seen, nature is not romanticised at all. Simply, many of the projects in *Weeds, Aliens and Other Stories* revolve around nature and its life.

Nature is sometimes used as a raw material, like in the piece *The Well Tempered Garden*, where growing your own piece of furniture from the seeds of a tree seems to be an extremely rational way to shortcut all the passages of the super-rationalized globalized production of furniture: instead of growing the tree, then cutting it, then shaping the wood, then assembling the pieces, then building the furniture, then storing it in a shop, then bringing it home, one simple process allows it to be grown directly at home. And it is this care for growth that is the main element of the project: shaping your piece of furniture according to the instructions of the designer is a way of caring for it. Cut here and there, follow the plans and you'll have grown a real piece of design.

At other times nature is observed, like in *Understanding the Garden*, through a set of tools that enhance the senses in a poetic way that bares little comparison with the high technology tools we can imagine. But also in this case, hearing the sounds of nature does not seem to be the goal. The interesting issue is the ability to explore the sensorial

world at another scale, being able to reach the more hidden plants and to speak to those that 'would otherwise be neglected'.

#### **An alternative domestic environment**

Compared to the many visions of the future that we have seen in recent years, and the ones that we'll see even more frequently now that the year 2000 is approaching, the objects from *Weeds, Aliens and Other Stories* are really dealing with life.

The life of the objects themselves, the life that they collect (sounds, smells, growth), and the life that we can easily imagine around them. People dealing with interaction design can probably learn a lot more from the forms of relations revolving around *Weeds, Aliens and Other Stories* than about nature. *Weeds, Aliens and Other Stories* is about objects, about their role in our life, and about the relations they stimulate. There are no gadgets among these projects. After seeing the collection proposed in *Weeds, Aliens and Other Stories*, one cannot imagine surviving without a *Garden*



Horn to speak to your plants, or without a *Cricket Box* to bring the sound of distant crickets into the home. Once we discover the new, deeper dimension they can bring into the domestic environment, we'll miss them, we'll wait for them to be available.

In fact, *Weeds, Aliens and Other Stories* is about absolutely necessary objects, even when they are unusable: we will accept them even when it is not cricket season, or when in winter there will not be any plants to speak to. We will accept them even when they grow old; we will be happy to sacrifice in a sandwich the cucumber we grew with such care; and we will not cry when, after its cycle, our chair will lose its leaves and die.

Finally, we will even accept something that seems absolutely distant from the glossy fin-de-siècle industrial objects that surround us: decay, an essential element of life.

**Marco Susani**

Architect and designer

1998