

Revitalizing design: Revital Cohen

Anthony Dunne

I first met Revital Cohen when she was a student of mine at the Royal College of Art, and I was immediately struck by the maturity of her work. Cohen manages to achieve the delicate balance between the believable and complete fantasy—a talent that usually takes years to master.

As observers, we're used to design solving problems or providing answers. But what makes Cohen's designs interesting is that they pose questions—in this case, about limits to the medical use of animals to prolong human life. "Life Support" uses the seductive language of design and everyday settings to draw us into a space of reflection on the role of biomedicine in our daily lives. The photographs force us to rethink our relationship with assistance animals like guide dogs and ask whether the animals could be transformed from separate helpers into unified medical devices. It's not meant to suggest how things should be, but to encourage debate about the kind of technologically mediated world we wish to live in.

Over the last few years, Cohen, 29, has built up an impressive portfolio of projects applying this design approach to a range of issues, from new ways of producing energy using artificial electricity-producing organs that could be implanted into the body to artificial biological clocks for busy career women that prompt them at the optimum time to become pregnant.

Just as engineering can be seen as applied science, this kind of design can be thought of as applied art; it makes use of aesthetics and ambiguity to get people thinking about the social, cultural and ethical implications of new developments in biomedical science and technology.

Anthony Dunne is the head of Design Interactions at the Royal College of Art in London.



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