

LEGIBLE TO HAND THIRD OBJECT

DOES IT FIT YOUR BODY SIZE OR COULD IT BE BETTER? CAN YOU SEE AND HEAR ALL YOU NEED TO SEE AND HEAR? IS IT HARD TO MAKE IT GO WRONG? IS IT COMFORTABLE TO USE ALL THE TIME? IS IT EASY AND CONVENIENT TO USE? IS IT EASY TO LEARN TO USE? IS IT EASY TO CLEAN AND MAINTAIN? DO YOU FEEL RELAXED AFTER A PERIOD OF USE? *

- 1 In their ongoing collaborative project *Tropical Depression*, Laura Hart Newlon and Kate O'Neill take an expansive lens to the links between furniture, body posture and global imperial power. They examine the once-popular papasan chair as a floating signifier of orientalist leisure. Constructed of fluorescent rubber, their version of the chair sags and slumps, relaxing into itself, and is surrounded by an installation of tropical houseplants, a personal mister and a mail order-style catalogue. Process photographs accompany the installation, depicting a black gloved hand creating the polyurethane chair. By constructing this kind of immersive space, Newlon and O'Neill show how global expressions of power play out in consumer fantasies and domestic spaces as much as in war zones and board rooms.
- 2 The objects that populate Alex Chitty's three handmade display units play on this idea that good design makes itself visually legible. Various interconnected visual motifs, such as difference in repetition and reference to hands and handwork, drives an interpretive search across the cases. Certain objects we typically encounter in their mass-produced forms, such as a Rubik's Cube or an egg cup, appear as clearly hand-fashioned unique objects. Other typically prefabricated objects show up here only partially made, like the half-lathed drumsticks or the unsewn leather gloves. Through these improbable groupings and duplications, the familiar forms and materials on each shelf are made weird, frustrating their use-potential in a way that teases us for demanding pragmatic legibility.
- 3 Take, for instance, Jeff Prokash's concrete sculptures whose slouched postures are immediately anthropomorphic. These bricks emulate rather than protect the human body, demonstrating improper working posture and putting themselves at risk of workplace injury. As if worn out from a repetitive strain injury, they lean against walls, and slump over one another searching for solutions to their own daily wear. The challenge these sculptures pose is in this slippery anthropomorphism. On the one hand, it's easy to project pathos onto the bricks as human stand-ins, slouched in pathetic dejection, fatigue, or submission. On the other, we consider them as dead tools of human construction, but ones that are useless given their limpness.
- 4 Committed to paper in handwritten ink, David Bodhi Boylan's *Obsolete in My Lifetime* projects the date of the artist's death and takes inventory of the obsolescence that has, does and will surround him as he moves through life. Boylan's contribution underscores a continuity of mortality between humans and objects. While one might suppose the human body's needs (and thus the form of ergonomic design) remain constant through time, the list of obsolete products, technologies and ideas suggests a deep mutability in human need and form.

These guiding questions proposed by the Ergonomics Society tip us off to some of the critical questions within human-centered design. The field developed, like so many twentieth-century technologies¹, during global war in a search for more optimized military systems, and dispersed after World War II into the broader workplace and consumer goods spheres. Unlike the machinic efficiency sought out by early twentieth-century Taylorist optimization, the push towards ergonomic design saw the tool object as a translator between the hard, injurious world and the soft, kinetic human body.

As the above questions illustrate, this moment of translation had to do more than just "fit" the body; it had to be legible and available² to the eye and mind. As a prominent design critic has put it, "the correct parts must be visible, and they must convey the correct message."[†] For the tool to be ready for the hand, it must first and foremost be ready for the eye.

Drawing loosely from the concept of human-centered design, the artists in *Almost Ergonomic* expand in a variety of ways on the point of transcription between the human body and the designed world. A well-designed object derives its legibility from its correspondence with human proportions—when one is able to visually assess clues about handiness or posture,³ a smooth engagement through the tool becomes more probable. However, as theorist Graham Harman has noted, "it is my body rather than my mind which judges the relative size of things," as when one feels that a car will or will not fit in a parking space.[§] The nearly ergonomic artwork taps into this linkage between visual cue, potential utility and subjective extension of the human form through the tool.

Ultimately, ergonomics is utopian. It promises solutions to the daily repetitive motions that wear on our bodies and produce both physiological and psychological discomfort. It tries to soothe what Harman identifies as "a powerful psychic trauma that cannot be overcome," that is, the problem of being forever trapped⁴ within one singularly constituted body.[‡] While ergonomics can help us extend and enfold into the world, it nevertheless, despite our best efforts, always remains almost.

* *Ergonomics: Fit for Human Use*, pamphlet published by Ergonomics Society, cited in Stephen Pheasant *BodySpace: Anthropometry, Ergonomics and the Design of Work*. Philadelphia: Taylor & Francis, 2003 [1986]. 9.

† Norman, Donald A. *The Design of Everyday Things*. New York: Basic Books, 1988. 4.

§ Harman, Graham. *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*. Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 2005. 48.

‡ *Ibid.* 49.