

Me and boundary objects



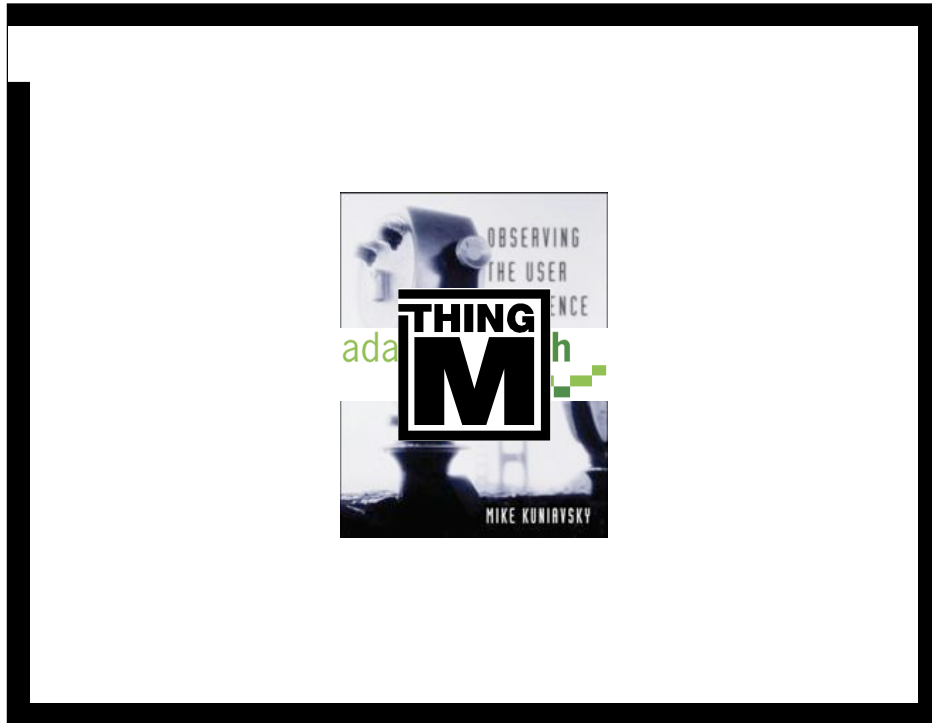
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Headlands Center for Arts
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I'd like to start by telling you a bit about who I am.

I am a user experience designer researcher. What that means is that I spend a lot of my time thinking about the relationship between technology and people. My core philosophy is that making technology is easy compared to figuring out what technology to make, and that's driven by understanding people.

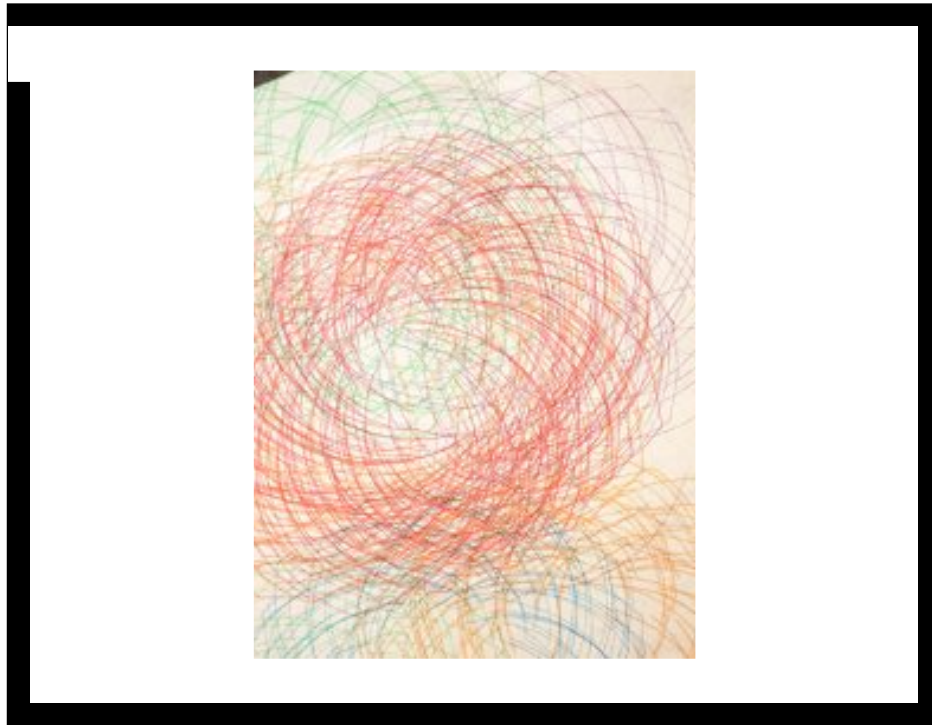
Over the years, I've worked with many different organizations to help them develop technology with people in mind.



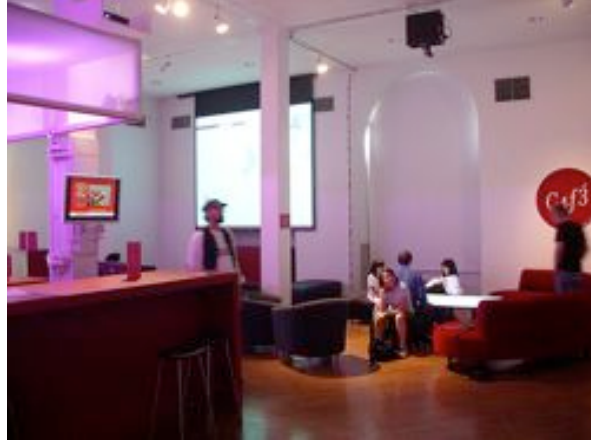
I wrote a book on that topic. It took techniques from experimental psychology, sociology, anthropology and marketing research and applied them to understanding the experience of designed objects.

I also co-founded a design company called Adaptive Path.

Last year I started a company called ThingM. We focus on the relationship between information systems and everyday objects, so we're both a technology development company and a design studio. Our first product should be out by the end of this year.



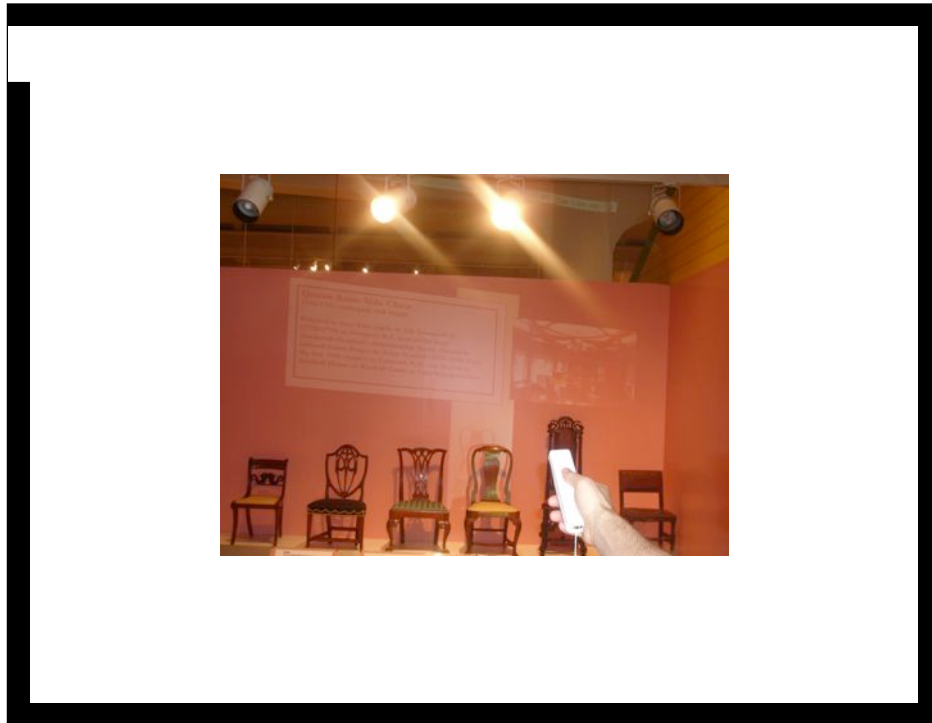
I am also interested in the expressive aspects of technology. Here (Stock Puppets) is a large robotics project I did with Jim Mason some years ago, this (Three Dreams) is part of an installation I did with Elizabeth Goodman, this (Bass Ghost) is a generative subsonic bass project, this was made by a hacked and reprogrammed Roomba vacuum cleaner. It was made with Tod Kurt.



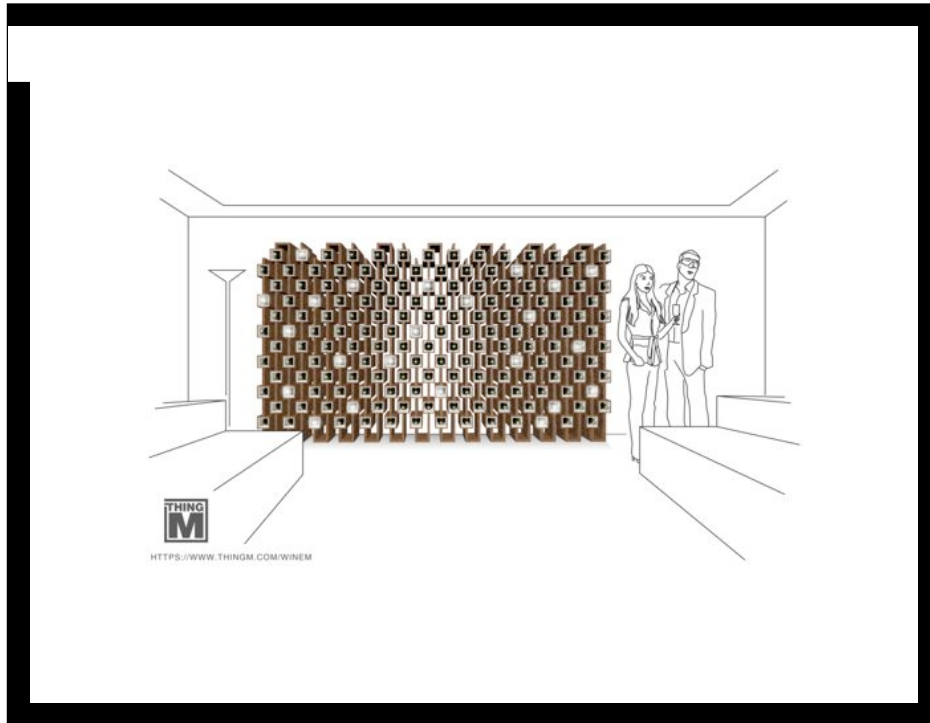
Last year, I organized a cafe of augmented objects at the San Jose Museum of Art as part of the ZeroOne festival. This was a working cafe where every object, or as many of them as we could get, had somehow been changed by technology. Every tabletop, many of the chairs, the walls, the ceiling, all had been somehow changed through technology.

I initially pitched ZeroOne on this project because I believe that there is a continuum between art and design. I intentionally organized this as a working space and not a white box and invited people from the worlds of fine art, industrial design and technology research because I believe we can get a much better understanding of what it means to live with new technology by combining those facets than by looking at just the products of one of those disciplines alone.

If the purpose of art is to ask questions and the purpose of design is to answer questions, I figured that putting them side by side could create some interesting interaction, which it did.



Now ThingM is taking what I observed from the cafe show and creating new kinds of experiences. This is a project for the Henry Ford Museum in Michigan where we augmented a space with projectors and we're using Nintendo Wiimotes as magic wands.



This is another project that we're doing right now. This is a rendering of an RFID-enabled wine rack that let's people explore wine's dual role as an informational object and a physical one.

If x is a boundary object, people from different communities of practice can use it as a COMMON POINT OF REFERENCE for conversations. They can all agree they're talking about x.

But the different people are not actually talking about the same thing. They attach DIFFERENT MEANINGS to x.

Susan Leigh Star coined the term “boundary object” in the late 80s to describe how different kinds of understanding can arise in relationship to the same object. This is a paraphrasing of her original definition. Her original focus was information and the paper where she coined the term was an analysis of the interpretation of exhibition goals between administrators and curators at Berkeley’s Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, but I think the concept is a powerful one and it applies to today’s discussion.

I’d like show some physical objects that I feel are interesting boundary objects that lie between the communities of art, design and commerce.

Definition by Brian Marick from his 2003 essay.



This is Chris Burden's 1979 piece called Honest Labor. As I understand the story, he was invited to be a visiting artist at an art school in Vancouver. When he asked what they wanted him to do, they said something like "Oh, anything." So for the duration of his residency he arrived at 9AM with a pick, shovel and wheelbarrow and worked until 5PM, digging a ditch around the school, taking a half-hour lunch break at noon. I don't know how long he was there, but you can see that he's made pretty good progress.



These are four of Noam Toran's Objects for Lonely Men. The series is actually a fair bit larger. Noam is a designer and these are appliance concepts he did at the Royal College of Art.

1. Chest Curler: imitates the rotating action of a finger swirling chest hair in concentric circles with an aluminum finger.
2. Cold Feet: placed under sheets at night, it simulates a lover's cold feet beside yours.
3. Hair Alarm Clock: attached to the head board, alarm works by shaking hair on the user's face.
7. Sheet Thief: set on a five hour timer, device steals the sheets. Is reset when user pulls the sheets back out.



These are Boym Design Studio's Buildings of Disaster commemorative paperweights. You've probably seen them before. That's the Unibomber's cabin, the OJ car chase, 3 Mile Island, etc.. You can buy these at design stores.



This is Hullabaloo by Eric Paulos a research scientist at Intel's Berkeley research lab. It's part of their Objects of Wonderment series. It senses phones over bluetooth and then assigns each phone a unique birdcall. Whenever you pass by one of the Hullabaloo units, it emits your unique birdcall.



So what's the point of showing those? For me, it's that the boundaries between fine art, design, high concept, low concept, commercial and noncommercial are really permeable. It's a question of markets, how value is produced in those markets and how that value is transmitted. What does that mean for fine artists and designers? I leave that for the discussion.

This, by the way, is another Noam Toran product for lonely men: it's a TV dinner tray that lets its user recreate Jean Luc Godard's *Breathless*.



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Thank you.