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Malentangled: Function Redacting Tape

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Image credit: Theo Humphries.

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Malentangled: Function Redacting Tape

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Abstract: The neologism *entanglement* proposes that all things are connected through super-complex meshworks of mutable *interdependencies*. This entanglement of interdependencies is often obscured through *forgetness*, a radically reductive process by which things are taken to be isolated and interdependencies are forgotten.

In some instances – for example when objects break – people are again reminded of the interdependentness of things. *Malentanglement* theory proposes that forgetness may also encounter a *remindness* through humour, and not only through catastrophe (depunctualisation).

The 'Function Redacting Tape' project takes *redaction* as a method for doctoring documents, but it deploys this method in the material context of design. Project Participants are provided with black PVC adhesive tape and invited to consider the functions of designed objects. They are then asked to redact these functions (using the tape) and in doing so to make documented interventions that draw back the metaphorical veil of forgetness for reasons of design enquiry. The project functions as a sort of rudimentary cultural probe that might shed some light on entanglement, humour, and design, whilst simultaneously testing the employment of humour to aid participation in design research.

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Introduction

This project sits inside a broader long-term research project entitled 'Malentanglement: Entanglement Meets Humour Through Design.' As the name suggests, the main aim of the Malentanglement project is to explore ideas of entanglement and humour in the same moment. This exploration is conducted through a design practice that both creates and analyses design artefacts. Several other 'Malentangled' projects sit alongside 'Function Redacting Tape', each addressing slightly different aspects of the debates concerning entanglement, humour, and design (please see malentanglement.com for more information). In order to remain focussed, this paper does not detail these other projects, rather it begins by outlining the wider interests of the Malentanglement project and then concentrates upon the Function Redacting Tape project in detail.

Entanglement

The entanglement discussed here is not to be confused with the entanglement of quantum physics that is significantly different and will not be accounted for in this text. Entanglement theory, emerging from anthropology, archaeology, and material studies (e.g Hodder 2011, 2012, Der & Fernanadini 2016) has proposed that 'things' (Miller & Miller 2009) – be they animate or inanimate, material or immaterial (Brown 2004) – are connected by a meshwork of continually evolving relationships. Entanglement theory proposes that these relationships are so innumerable, variable, and mutable, as to be extremely difficult – or even impossible – to effectively describe and account. To reflect this, all things are described as being *entangled*. These entangled relationships
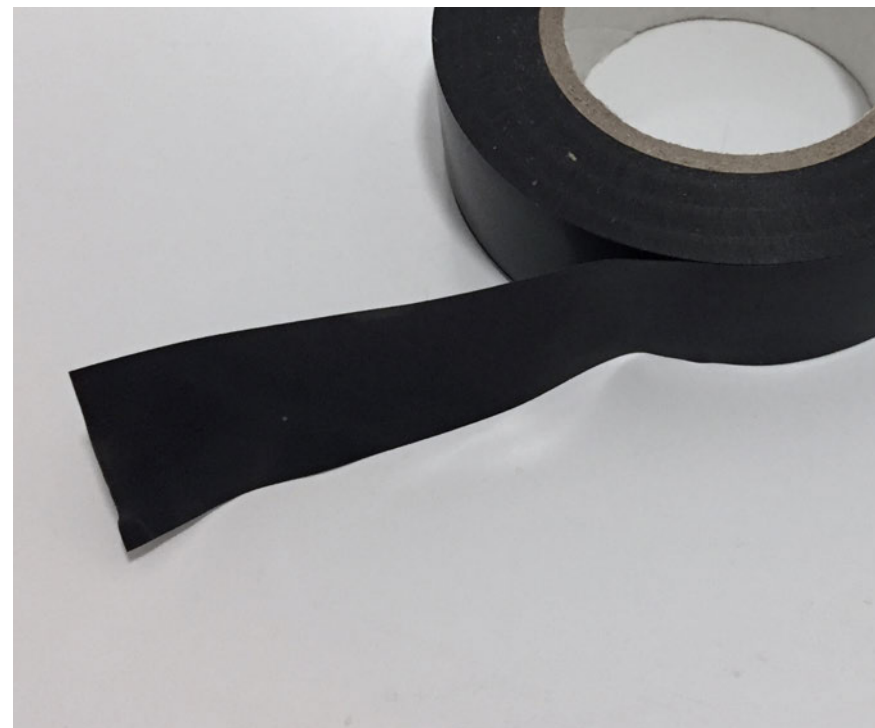

Figure 1. Black PVC Adhesive Electrical Tape. Photo: Humphries, T., Pepperell, R., Punt, M. & Thompson, S., 2016.

are often described as more than mere associations and instead as *interdependencies*. For example, to paraphrase Hodder (2012): Humans depend on things, things depend on other things, things depend on humans. Hodder proposes such interdependencies as so fundamentally important to understanding the natures of humans and things that he asserts that 'humans and things co-create each other' (2012 pp.16). Entanglement theory appears to readily acknowledge, synthesise, and adapt numerous other ideas that deal with things, and the interconnectedness and interdependency of things (e.g. Heidegger 1962,

Latour 2007, Brown 2004, Olsen 2013, Malafouris 2013) and can be readily connected to contemporary concepts such as Speculative Realism (Harman 2010) and by extension Object Oriented Ontology (Harman 2011, Wolfendale 2014), and to relatively older ideas such as Uexküll's early 20th Century descriptions of 'Umwelt' (Deely 2001).

Forgetness

Given the supposed importance of the interdependencies described above, Hodder draws attention to a rather paradoxical idea: namely the 'forgetness of things' (2012 pp.101). Referencing the idea of 'punctualisation' draw from Actor Network Theory (Law 1999) Hodder suggests that the vast majority of entangled interdependencies are forgotten by people as they go about their lives (or, we might infer, are never even known to them in detail – thereby rendering the forgetness distributed across a culture of individuals). Let us take for example a hammer, a popular choice in similar discussions. A person might know, or guess at: the geographical origin of the ore's that might have yielded the metals that constitute the head; the biological origin of the wood for the shaft; the industrial processes that might transform such things from mineral ore to cast alloy, or tree trunk to polished handle; the commercial distribution of the finished product; the governmental safety standards that the hammer satisfies; the marketing infrastructure that inspired its purchase; that it was lent by a friend, that it has been previously damaged and has a small (but slowly growing) split in the heel; that the head becomes loose in the summer, but tightens again in the winter; and so on, and so on, and so on. We might continue for a great deal longer listing every process, person, and thing that contributes to the 'co-creation' of the specific hammer in question. According to Hodder, and others, this wealth of entanglement is forgotten – the designed object is succinctly reduced to 'a hammer' in the minds of those who encounter it.

Incongruity

In the field of humour studies, well established (e.g. Kant 1911 [1790], Schopenhauer 1907 [1844], or Koestler 1970) and more recently emerging (e.g. Hurley, Dennett, & Adams 2011, or Boyd 2004) ideas of 'incongruity' interrogate moments when humour emerges from a realisation of the contextual contingency of the interconnectedness of things. Whereas theories of entanglement merely draw attention to the aforementioned forgetness, incongruity humour fundamentally relies upon a 'forgetness' of one meaning or interpretation in precedence of another. The following well trodden joke is offered as a simple example:

'A man walks into a bar......Ouch!' (anon).

It is axiomatic of most incongruity theories that at least two meanings of 'bar' must be known to the audience of this joke in order for humour to emerge. This emergence occurs at the moment where one understanding 'collapses' into another (in this case from 'bar' as building to 'bar' as metal object – inferred by the exclamation 'Ouch!').

This paper suggests then, that there might be a resonance between the forgetness of entanglement theory and the forgetness that is purportedly vital for incongruity humour theories (e.g. Boyd, 2004). In order to explore this idea further, the Malentanglement project employs design practices as a way to experiment in these seemingly overlapping territories.

Malentanglement

Entanglement theory suggests that an awareness of entanglement might arise in a moment when an expected orderliness of things is disrupted, or 'depunctualised' as Actor Network Theory would have it (Law 1999). Referencing Heidegger's 'Conspicuous Unreadiness-To-Hand' (Heidegger 1962) which concerns malfunctioning objects, Hodder presents the example of a car (Hodder 2012 pp.102). The car is understood cohesively as 'a car' rather than as an entangled meshwork of interdependent components. At the moment when a vital component fails (a tyre bursts, a headlight bulb blows, a brake locks) the interdependancy of the car components becomes dramatically apparent: forgetness falls away and the entangled interdependency of things is revealed. Importantly, this awareness always seems to arise from the problematic in the examples presented by Heidegger, Hodder, and others. In other instances, as yet seemingly unaccounted for, entanglement appears to be revealed not as a result of the problematic, but of the humorous. Malentanglement theory therefore attempts to account for and analyse moments when humour, rather than catastrophe, draws attention to entanglement, with the view that understanding such moments may be of value to design, and may in turn also bring new light to existing entanglement theory and humour theory.

The prefix *mal* is adopted to reflect the fact that some form of incongruous unsettlement is present in the inception of humour: something is unexpectedly interpreted as 'not right' with the entangled world. The use of 'mal' is not intended to engender understandings of malice (as in malware, or malpractice), however this is a risk. Instead it is intended to make reference to an unsettlement of expected norms in certain contexts (Fry, Dilnot & Stewart, 2015). As accounted for in the aforementioned incongruity theories this unsettlement dissipates into nothing because it is unaccompanied by threat in the form of the problematic. Any personal violation is benign (McGraw & Warren 2010) and humour is then a possible and anticipated outcome. Degrees of malentanglement are, of course, highly subjective, and any one person's account of the extent to which any given situation is malentangled, or not, is relative to them, as are any experiences of forgetness and/or humour phenomena for that matter.

The Function Redacting Tape project, and its outcomes, are an attempt to momentarily lift the vail of forgetness and in doing so to draw attention to entanglement. This *reminding* is achieved by materialising concerns regarding the functionality of designed objects through the application of adhesive PVC tape.

Project Purpose

As previously stated, the general aim of the wider Malentanglement project is to explore ideas of entanglement and humour – through a design practice – with the ultimate objective being to establish of a Theory of Malentanglement. The contribution to this aim that the Function Redacting Tape project makes is to experiment with the employment – or occurrence of – humour as a metaphorical 'lubricant' (Provine 2000) in a design enquiry: in this case the provision of a mechanism for people to express their opinions regarding the entangled functions of designed artefacts, not textually, but by visual/material means (sticking tape).

Project Development

In order to realise the aims of the malentanglement project, in the context of RTD2017, an initial brief was created (by the authors) that might begin to generate worthwhile discoveries for design.

'Brief: Design experimental artefacts that embody moments when a deviation from an expected orderliness of things is disrupted. In doing so, design artefacts should illustrate and embody ideas of malentanglement and may also provoke humorous responses. Outcomes should be open-source and free to distribute/engage with if possible and appropriate.' (notes from an author's sketchbook, Humphries, 2016.)

An early response to this brief shifted focus from the creation of artefacts by the author(s), instead proposing the idea of conducting an experiment whereby people would create malentangled objects themselves – thereby exponentially increasing the number of artefacts to be created for the project. This was the inception of the Function Redacting Tape project. Essentially, this project takes the act of data redaction – the 'blocking-out' of information in documents that is typically employed in legal and governmental contexts – and transposes this method into the material realm of designed objects. To address the initial brief, a new Function Redacting Tape brief was written that would be presented to others. This new brief contained contextualising info regarding the aims and methods of the project and invited participants to do the following:

'1). Take a roll of black tape.

2). Consider the functions of designed objects that surround you.
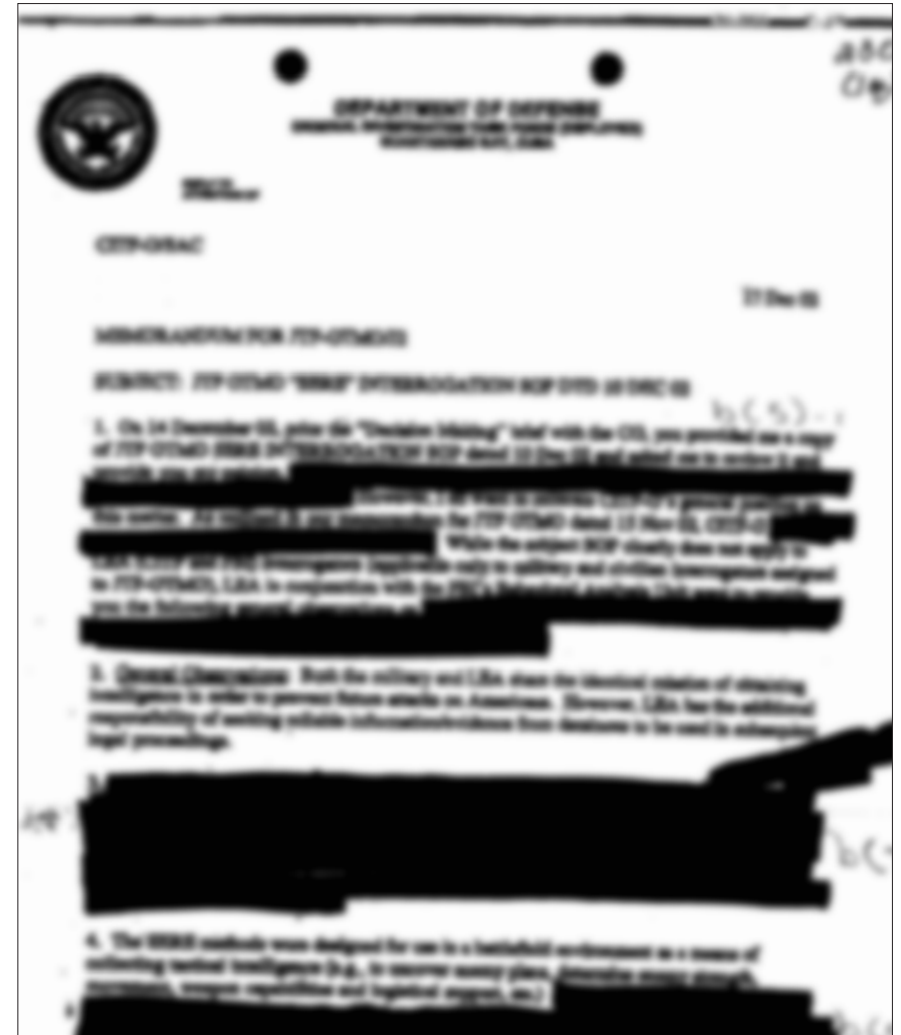
3). Redact as you see fit.

Figure 2. Exemplar Redacted Document (this images has been blurred to ensure the anonimity of the original text. It is intended only to provide a visual illustration of black redacted 'blocks' in a document context). Image composite: Humphries, 2016.

4). Return photos of your redactions (with explanations if you wish) to tapephotos@malentanglement.com'

Project participants were invited to consider the following: 'Here the act of redaction is a public act. Ask yourself what statement you make through your actions. Are you redacting for reasons of frustration, empathy, efficiency, obsolescence, or something else? There are no correct answers here: whatever you do, it will reveal something of the way that you understand 'the designed world' (Buchanan, Doordan & Margolin 2010)' (Humphries, T., Pepperell, R., Punt, M. & Thompson, S., 2016). Participants were also informed that any images submitted to the project would be anonymised and then publicly displayed.
This project was successfully tested with a comparatively captive audience of undergraduate and masters design students before being presented to a wider public.

Function Redaction Images

As a body of images containing 'function redactions' began to build, several broad concerns appeared to emerge. Many project images referenced more than one concern at a time so they are not overtly categorised here, but are instead presented in no particular order:

Identity redaction: 'No free advertising'.
Tape was used to redact corporate logos that were displayed on design objects. This might sometimes be interpreted as an act of Kleinesque anti-commercialism (Klein 2010) but alternatively may have been an attempt to disguise the identity of a product for more semantic reasons

such as its fashionability and/or financial value (or lack thereof). Of all the redactions, these are arguably the most political.

Obsolete function redaction: 'No one uses this anymore'.
Here tape was used to redact product functions that were no longer be executed for reasons of technological obsolescence.

Redundant function redaction: 'I never use it, so it might as well not be there'.
Tape was employed here to redact functions that were habitually ignored. This appeared to be done in the manner of an efficiency drive

Noise redaction: 'Oh, don't worry about that button'.
These redactions are intimately related the concern above, but here the impetus is to simplify a design for use by another person. A clear example being the patronisingly/patriarchally named meme: 'Granny Remote' (see figures for examples) that has been widely described online.

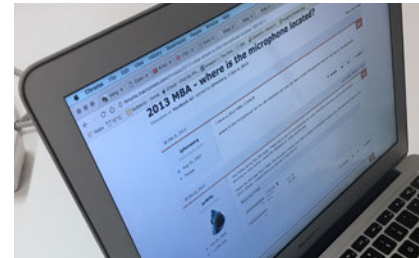**Security: 'I don't trust that thing'.**
Some images feature the redaction of built in cameras, microphones, antennas, and other communication features that could potentially gather and/or transmit data.

Other ways of living: 'You don't need X'.
Here tape was used to propose alternative 'ways of being' to those engendered by certain technologies: e.g. 'Ignore the television', 'Ignore the internet', 'Ignore that app', 'Ignore the time', and 'Ignore The Media'.

New functions.
Seemingly, some people could not ignore their own ingenuity, nor

Figures 3-27. Some Examples of Malentangled Function Redactions. Photo: various anonymised authors.
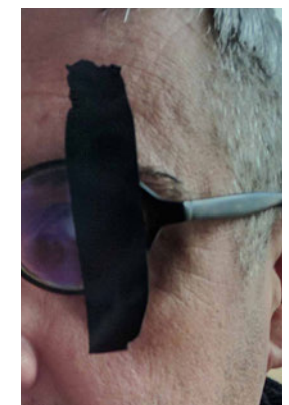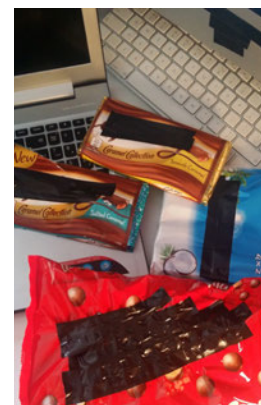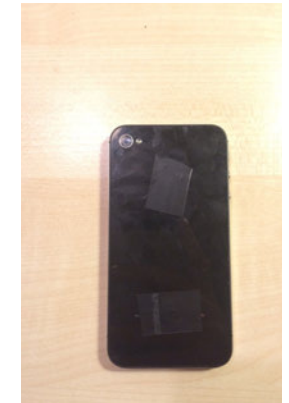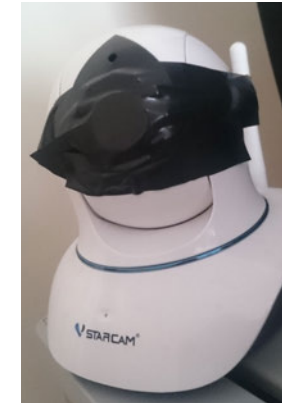
the material qualities of the tape: its stretchiness; its stickiness; its strength; its tareability. In light of this several returned images illustrated interventions whereby the PVC tape performed new functions, or enhanced the existing functions of designed objects.

Humorous Dimensions

Humour 'played out' at a number of key moments in the Function Redacting Tape project, from inception to completion. The following headings are an attempt to sketch out some and draw attention to some of the (notably variable) forms and moments that humour manifested during the project.

Humour in the project inception.
The function redacting tape project is in some ways kind of a joke(!) and that was how it was initially conceived. The whole project can be loosely mapped onto the 'man walks in to a bar' joke presented above: something is presented as unexceptional – 'we are doing a project concerning redaction' (equivalent to 'a man walks into a bar'), and then an unexpected shift is made – 'but we are using objects instead of paper, and PVC tape instead of ink' (equivalent to 'ouch!'). Admittedly, the last sentence was probably not very funny to read, but an explained joke never is. However, a common response to the explanation of the project was laughter (sometimes bemused, sometimes scoffing, but far more often to express delight in the recognition of the remapping of a method from a 2d/paper context to a 3d/object one, and especially in the jocular materialisation from ink to tape).

Humour in the 'set-up'.

Whilst the brief was delivered in an intentionally dead-pan tone, participants typically appeared to intuit an underlying mischievousness to the project and interpreted this as license to be playful and have fun. Whilst by no means conclusive, this paper proposes that humour might be a valuable and underplayed tool to engender user participation in design research.

Humour in the conceiving/executing.

The 'fun-making' indicated above was apparent in the conceiving of ideas about what to do with the tape, before any tape was actually stuck. Some participants appeared to enjoy conceiving of ideas, planning possible redactions, and conducting thought experiments concerning possible outcomes as much as executing the redactions themselves. The production of such 'Silly Design Fictions' (Blythe et al, 2016) was evidently enjoyable for some.

Humour in the encountering.

Of course, after the participants completed their tasks the images remain and can be freshly encountered by others. Some of the images accrued by the project forefront incongruity: the unexpected ridiculousness of spectacle lenses covered with tape (to redact people from meetings), or a watch that someone has gone to the effort of wearing, but cannot present the time. Other images appeared to be humorous less in the representative and more in the imagining of the efforts, lives, and/or mindset of their creative authors: someone engaged in the task of taping their food packaging to just present the word 'nutrition', or wearing electrical tape on their shoes.

Some participants appeared to act out a sort of visual observational comedy (Levine 1994) that was embodied into their redactions: e.g. a remote control that has every button redacted except the 'Netflix' one.

Political Dimensions

Commercially available correction fluids such as WhiteOut and Tipp-Ex aim to restore the appearance of plain paper, to erase an error, to enable a second chance. Correction fluids embody reprieve. In contrast, redactions are bold, brutal, and inelegant. The metaphor might be of a locked safe, rather than a plastic eraser: the data exists – but the reader is denied it, rather than the data no longer exists. There is a clear assertion of power in the redaction of information, and it is often a politically motivated action.

In some ways the origins of the Function Redaction Tape project can be traced back to a sticker project that was created by Theo Humphries in 2004 (Humphries, 2004). The sticker project was entitled 'Warnings!' and involved the creation of warning stickers that people could apply to the designed objects in their lives. The sticker designs parodied widely deployed industrial warning stickers (warning of mechanical or chemical hazards for example). These stickers were an attempt to amplify consumer/user voices in response to the bombastic volume of unsubstantiated advertisement promises and pushy shop-floor sellers. By materialising the way in which consumers truly regarded designed objects as: boring, untrustworthy, unreliable, awkward to use, antisocial, addictive, and/or obsolete. These new warning stickers functioned as metaphorical grit in the commercial machine: a movie poster on a giant billboard, part of a multi-million dollar advertising campaign, could be

co-opted with the addition of a diminutive 'boring' sticker; a device that boasted numerous functions could be labeled 'awkward to use' and the usability offset instead becomes apparent. These stickers were intended to enable actions at micropolitical scales – to materialise consumer opinions and award them both presence and permanence (somewhat).
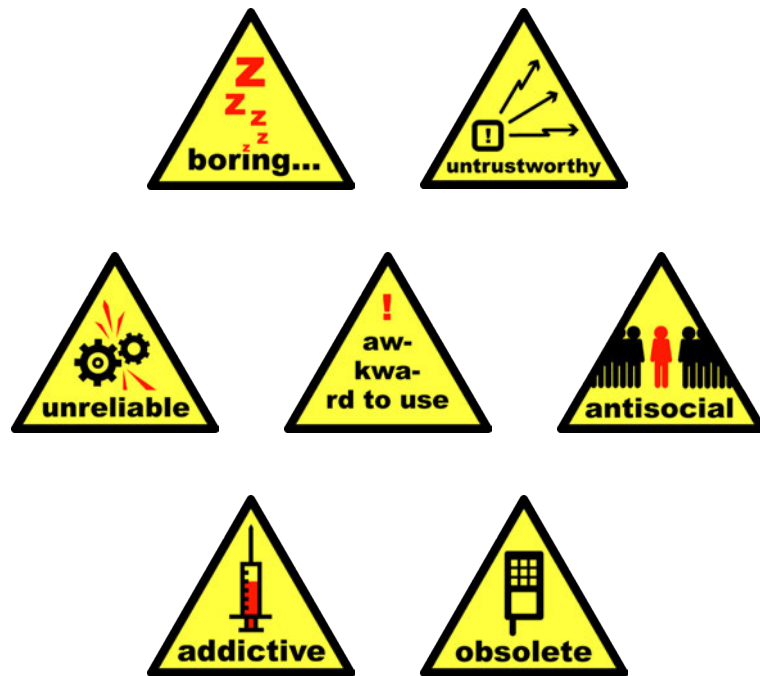

Figure 28. Warnings! Humphries, 2004.

The stickers were distributed tot he public and a gallery of 'stickerings' was gathered for public display. This format proved successful and the Warnings! project resonates through the Function Redacting Tape project.

An original intention was to create a project that might be understood as critical design. However, as the Function Redacting Tape project began to evolve it became apparent that it did not readily fit Dunne and Raby's definition of critical design. Whilst the project could be argued to uncover human ideas rather than shift product (Dunne & Raby 2001), it did not overtly propose possible futures (Dunne & Raby 20013). The project might then be more accurately categorised as adversarial design (DiSalvo 2015) in that it embodies an interrogation of – and intervention into – contemporary design, often giving rise to politicised outcomes, without necessarily or consistently promoting consideration of possible futures. Whilst the project might not be considered by some to be overtly political it is argued here that it has the potential to amplify and materialise consumer critique of designed artefacts, potentially fuelling political and commercial dissensus (DiSalvo, 2015) through the production of antisolutionist (Blythe et al, 2016) interventions.

Research Insights

A way that this project might prove to be of value to design is in the use of humour as an aid to participation. Many of the interventions made in the name of the Function Redacting Tape project have been regarded as funny, and whilst making material jokes can be a worthwhile and emotionally rewarding pastime in its own right, it also appears to attract attention to the project and engender a willingness to join in.

The danger here is that an instinct to 'making something funny' usurps the original agenda of the project. Valid and interesting redactions might be dismissed, remaining unmade, because they are anticipated as being 'not funny enough'. It is as yet unclear how to address such a problem other than to specifically forewarn participants of this possible pitfall.

As the redactions that were created by project participants were documented photographically, they afford later analysis. The Function Redacting Tape project might therefore be considered a form of rudimentary 'cultural probe' (Gaver, Boucher, Pennington & Walker 2004, Dix 2004) in that viewers of the project galleries might glean valuable insights into the ideas and opinions of the project participants, their value systems, and the views that they hold regarding the designed artefacts with which they share their interdependency meshworks. It is hoped that such insights might be useful for the Research Through Design community.

Figure 29. Function redacting tape awaiting participants. Photo: Humphries, T., 2016.

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Figure 2. Exemplar Redacted Document. Composite image: Humphries, T., (2016).

Figures 3-27. Examples of Malentangled Function Redactions. Photo: various anonymised authors (2016).

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Figure 29. Function Redacting Tape Awaiting Participants. Photo: Humphries, T. (2016).

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