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## DESIGNER DREAMS by Ben Davis

What's a contemporary artist to do, faced with the slick world of consumer gadgetry, which seems to slurp up so very much of the public's attention? Alex Dodge's show at Williamsburg's Klaus Von Nichtssagend Gallery offers a novel answer: He turns the gallery into a space to show off his own conceptual gizmo prototypes, realized with the help of his very own, very real, tech start-up, Generative, Inc.

Thus, you get Powerstep, a pair of white shoes, the heels of which house something called an "Achilles Cell." A wall text explains that the Powerstep shoes would generate energy from your footsteps through "an encapsulated piezoelectric ceramic," storing it in the detachable power-cell that can be used to charge your mobile devices. Well, why not? As an idea, it sure beats those sneakers that tone your butt!

Dodge's Haptic-Synth, a relatively unassuming undershirt, has a web-like grid of touch sensors woven into its fabric. These, we are told, can be synched with the various devices in your life, so that the act of touching regions of the garment in different combinations activates different commands. In essence, it imagines a world in which we can use our underwear as a garage door opener.

Then there's the Vantage Point (Integrated Mobile Broadcaster), consisting of a pair of bulky headphones, equipped with a tiny embedded camera. The device promises to automatically snap pictures from your vantage point, uploading them to the web, thus potentially creating a real-time log of what you are seeing, so that fans can check out life from your point of view, as it occurs.

At least one of the devices here is essentially a joke -- that being the Human Interface Device, a massage table modified to function as a computer work station, thereby picturing the day when you can do data entry and get a backrub at once. Meanwhile,

by far the most sci-fi "prototype" in this show is the Sleep Talker, a white cap adorned with wires that proposes to monitor your brain activity during sleep, "synching" your dreams with those of others via an online interface -- social networking for your dream life (as if Facebook didn't already take up enough of my life already!)

Considered overall, as one statement, what you notice is that tone of the show is too whimsical to be completely serious, but also too serious to be completely a joke. This underlying ambivalence makes some sense, given the artist's background -- Dodge, a 2001 graduate in painting from the Rhode Island School of Design, has shown twice before at Klaus Von Nichtssagend, and each time the show has featured a sculptural centerpiece exploring the theme of the mingling of technology and the human, with some uneasiness: 2006's "The Most Beautiful Dreams" offered a figure in an astronaut suit, laid out on the gallery floor, face a skull inside his helmet, a butterfly perched enigmatically on his chest; 2008's "Intelligent Design" featured the dismembered remains of some kind of android, strewn on the floor amid several torn-open bags of shredded paper, its rubber limbs and frozen face life-like enough to be slightly disturbing.

In the present exhibition's "prototypes," Dodge's techno-Surrealist sensibility is sublimated into something more inscrutable (the only piece explicitly in the old vein is hung discretely behind the gallery desk -- it resembles a Japanese erotic print, except the couple is composed of two malfunctioning androids). Indeed, the background of Dodge's new body of work represents a real uncertainty about the value of visual art itself in the face of technology: Until recently, he was director of Chelsea's CRG Gallery, leaving when he realized that commercial art dealing wasn't his game. With the NYU physicist Akira Shibata and the video game designer Yohei Ishii, Dodge decided to found a company that would merge creativity and technology, and Generative Inc. was born. The press release for the Klaus

Von Nichtssagend show says that Generative is “a conceptual project,” but it has sincere aspirations as a company. As Dodge explains in an email: “based on a stratified or staged development model, Generative is an independent R&D lab, which intends to develop concepts internally or to order. . . to various levels of completion.”

Considered as artworks, Dodge’s “prototypes” aren’t totally unprecedented: Andrea Zittel comes to mind, though Dodge is less committed to Zittel’s back-to-nature communalism, and more to his own preoccupation with the shrinking border between the human and the technological. Nevertheless, this show’s big influence is clear, and it ain’t an artist -- with its smooth white-on-white designs, and gallery tricked out with strips of spacey florescent lights, “Generative”’s esthetic influences hail straight from the Apple Store.

If you peruse Dodge’s endearing, though infrequent, blog, you will find that considerations of the Apple Corp.’s products and their effects on the mental environment recur. Fascination with the tech goliath’s ubiquitous devices butts up against a sense of rebellion against the absorptive homogeneity that they have begun to impose on creative life. Writing approvingly of the “ikee” worm, the first to attack the iPhone, Dodge admits that he experienced a slight thrill reading about it: “someone did something truly creative with the mobile platform without getting Apple’s approval first, and by this I mean: that the most creative thing you can legally do to your iPhone without getting an SDK [software development kit] and waiting for the App Store’s ‘Approval Process’ is probably to crochet a cute cover for it.”

Why is it, then, that Dodge’s personal creative rebellion against slick consumer technology takes the form of imagining his own line of slick consumer technology? On a monitor at the gallery, a short animated video clip -- seemingly a promo for both “Generative” the exhibition and Generative the company -- shows us passing through a cloud of rubber bands, push-pins and other office supplies, all floating weightlessly. Strands of paperclips coalesce into the shape of a spiraling DNA molecule. “Technology is Human,” reads a slogan, before the

“Generative” logo appears. Well, if you take that statement seriously -- if “Technology is Human” -- then the only way to be truly in command of your humanity is to be in command of technology, and that means imagining yourself as the person who conceives it, rather than as just a passive consumer. Therein lays the unusual thing about this show’s perspective: Its “critical” relation to technology gets channeled into a real attachment to it, rather than ironic distance.

Ah, but the glittering gadgets that rule the public mind are the product of giant corporations with vastly more resources than any normal human being -- a reality that, of necessity, pushes Dodge’s imaginings back into the realm of art and fantasy once more. The art/prototypes in “Generative” play out a kind of Little Brother complex; they both emulate and reject the object of their admiration, without being able to separate from it or attain to some imagined intellectual superiority. As well-executed as they are, Dodge’s prototypes are still too palpably one-offs, and handmade -- too human -- to rival the inscrutable slickness of present-day consumer toys. The very fact that they are shown in an art gallery itself illustrates the distance that separates Dodge from his subject matter; Apple, of course, is famous for being quite aggressive about keeping its own prototypes from public view.

The perfect symbol of the whole enterprise comes on the cover image for this show catalogue, featuring a woman posed in the Sleep Talker cap, eyes closed, seemingly dreaming. It is meant as a picture of someone putting Dodge’s imagined dream-catching device to work. But at the same time, it captures the sense that the whole project has the inescapable tinge of fantasy and longing. It’s the image of art caught under the spell of technology, unable to wake up -- or unsure it wants to.