

## DEVICES FOR PROGRESS

David Penny



David Penny, *Sustainer*, 2009

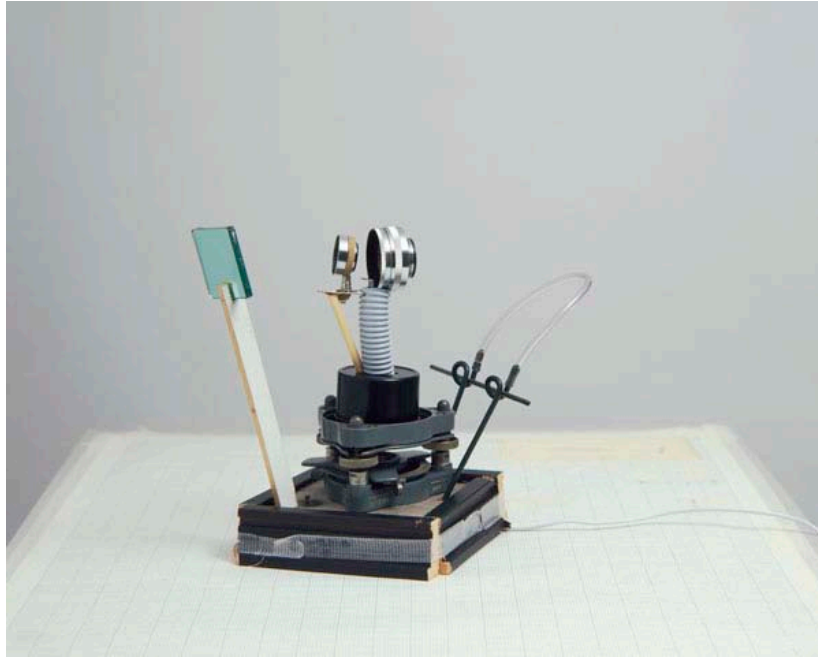
*Devices for Progress* is a series of photographic images of what appear to be makeshift machines, situated within a workshop or design laboratory environment. The machines have been photographed in order to show off their appearance, design aesthetic and individual component make-up in the best possible way. The photographs offer the viewer ideas of actual potential objects that are visually anything but cutting edge: instead, they are clumsy and awkward. Their mechanical form indexes the body that has produced them. This kind of referentiality is absent from the streamlined tablet-like forms of contemporary mobile phones, laptops, iPods and car navigation systems. In the majority of contemporary technological and media devices the mechanical and the analogue have been displaced by the virtual interface of the LCD display, which has

become central in our commodified world of personal entertainment and multiple labour- and time-saving devices.

This project was inspired by a number of visits I made to various science and engineering museums in order to investigate the design of small electronic consumer devices. The research trips were unsuccessful, but only in the sense that my original expectations had not been met. I found that the objects on display in most cases looked exactly like the final product that would then be presented to the market. I had expected to see unfinished hotchpotches of machines, exposed working components and a cacophony of tangled cables. I was also hoping for a look beyond, or behind, the scenes of the design process and into a space manufacturers might ordinarily keep from public view. Instead, the objects that I came across were merely empty shells, made only to demonstrate the aesthetic of the product's design.

As a result of my disappointment I decided to create my own inventions in order to recreate some of the imagery that existed in my imagination. The quasi-sculptural photographic work that has come out of this project has produced some fascinating responses. When looking at the images, viewers have always asked whether the machines work or not, or where the 'on' switch is located. Many have voiced their suspicion that my fabricated machines might not 'work'. In most of the responses, a general assumption of functionality has been made. It is precisely the relationship between this particular aesthetic and the suggestion of, or desire for, such an image of an unknown object to be 'useful', that has interested me in this project.

Yet the external form of the smooth, opaque, white or black, plastic or metallic surfaces of the modern domestic appliances we are surrounded by today does not allow for such an easy understanding of an object's functionality. Even if we *could* see beyond their surfaces, to the majority of everyday users the myriad of electronic components would be similarly impenetrable. In their archaic construction, the devices represented in my photographs contrast against these objects' forms. The seemingly logical positioning of the familiar fragments in each composition contributes to establishing a trust in the validity of the image: it promises that the device has integrity as a functional 'thing'. Even though its overall form is unfamiliar and strange, the object can be read quickly as *potentially* useful, since one component relates to another in a reassuringly mechanically and systematic way.



David Penny, *Viewer*, 2009

In the three images presented here, one of the objects resembles some kind of horticultural growing device, something that is signified by the presence of a small potted Aloe. The plant appears to be maintained by feeding tubes, as well as through the provision or extraction of essential gaseous particles and an arrangement of wires, which are internally monitoring the ongoing activity and exchanges. The second object appears to be some kind of optical machine, the semblance of an arrangement of lenses indicating either a projection or a recording of visual information, possibly being sent or received through a white cable, and thus making a connection between the object and an unknown place outside of the frame. The third rectangular device is constructed from numerous wooden components, combined with plastic and glass parts. Hinting at some kind of sound receiver, this object looks as though it is wired into a data chip. The white cable, leading to somewhere - either sending or receiving information - is again present. The connectivity that the cable suggests assists the viewer in believing in the object and in placing it firmly within the current information age. In each image the constructed, neutral grey environment and the graph paper work surface aim to remove the objects from the domestic space they are built within, providing a context for the object in the fiction of the photographic frame.

As is the case with all photographs, the fact that what we see is *an image of an object* and not that object itself supports the fabrication of truth and the projection of fantasy in and by the image. Through these different signs the viewer might be led to believe that they are looking at an authentic working object, or a prototype of sorts. The images of these objects thus hint at and simultaneously cover up the fact that the actual objects may be completely useless, something that, arguably, takes place in all advertising photography. With product shot photography, as long as the 'thing' in the photograph *looks* as though it is useful, it does not particularly matter what it actually does. The purpose of this sort of image is to create a desire for the object through the agency of its representation.

It may be unclear to the viewer whether the objects presented in the images are old machines which have recently been discovered and photographed, or whether they were purposefully made for the project. The project's title, however, anchors the work by revealing that these are indeed some kinds of prototypes or recent inventions. *Devices for Progress* positions these objects as icons for change and betterment. Although the objects themselves are imperfect and somewhat crudely constructed, some of them held together by tape and abstractly placed screws, the work connotes the future by making a connection between technology and progress. The bricolage of the different technological elements, the combination of the latest digital media, the reference to an ephemeral exchange of information, the post-industrial minimalism which entails clunky mechanical and industrial elements, as well as the subtly comical undertone of the work all determine its perceived aesthetic. While its title boldly speaks of progress to be achieved by means of these uncertain technologies, the aesthetic of the images promises the satisfaction of a desire to comprehend, be closer to and ultimately control the impact of technology on us and the world around us.

Yet these machines are constructed from old and unwanted objects which can be found in and around the domestic space. Such objects might include broken kitchen appliances, parts from various obsolete machines, old corrupted computer components, rarely used household utensils and general items of discarded waste. From these elements of detritus, the work seeks to make new imaginary devices which offer possible new solutions, thus playing with the concept of progress through an assumed link between technology, connectivity and purpose. Even though these objects do not function 'as such', their image protects and covers up their lack of functionality. The failure of the devices to 'do' anything - their

practical uselessness as anything but an element in the creative and creative/critical process - is perhaps allegorical of the intrinsic, ensuing failure of all technology. As the photographs keep this hidden, thus protecting the vulnerable truth of the objects, it is hoped that the viewer will keep asking: 'what does that do?' and 'does that really work?'. The hope for the object to be useful, productive and also desirable is something that is embedded in all images of products used for advertising. The pack shot aims to construct a photographic space where the object becomes a utopian version of itself. Perfect in every way, it is destined not to live up to the standard set by its image, and thus to fail in more than one way.

The work can perhaps be read as a satirical critique of the phenomenon of planned obsolescence, the constant manufacturing of new products that will inevitably become rapidly outdated. In devising 'new' technological objects, a change in design rather than in functional or technical development frequently creates no more than a new 'look'. The public as mass consumers of the latest devices are being fed a perpetual desire for 'the new' – a desire that can never be satisfied. *Devices for Progress* also embodies a critique of this idea of perpetual development and innovation, an ideology of progress through consumption which is driven by a routine cycle of imagination and production that is inevitably followed by failure.



David Penny, *Communicator*, 2009