

FOREWORD

When Akiko Busch first proposed writing *The Uncommon Life of Common Objects*, I went into a mode of anticipation. Even as she worked in her quiet, gentle, but deliberate way on the manuscript in her home office in rural upstate New York, I was imagining hours spent on weekend afternoons in my tiny Manhattan loft, curled up in my favorite chair, reading her views on life and design. That's what Aki does really well: she's able to bring human behavior and aspiration together with design activities and outcomes. And when she introduces her twin boys into the discussion, she also brings the next generation into the dialogue.

When you consider that everything around us is designed, more or less successfully, you understand the importance of designers to a world made of parks, streets, buildings, rooms, objects, and signs – myriad things that can ease or frustrate our activities, that can delight or madden us. Aki gets to the heart of our world of design when she essays the objects we use every day. As she introduces us to their complex stories, we understand, or even redefine, our relationship with our own possessions.

For designers, Aki's narrative is essential information. Knowing people's intimate and storied relationships with the things they own and use is something I wish all designers took seriously. If they did, the fit between ourselves and our objects would be much more comfortable. For the rest of us, Aki's words are an encouragement to value our possessions, not for their high prices or relative coolness, but for what they mean to us.

You are about to enter a very personal world with an acute observer of people and design as your guide. Read on and find yourself there.

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the REFRIGERATOR

Design, we are often told, is about communication. The statement is so general that at times it cannot help but be true, but its generality can also cause it to be wrong. Besides, who ever said communication was always something to aspire to?

The question is raised by the current advent of “smart” machines, the result of hooking up wireless communications technology to domestic appliances. With the help of a modem, such hook-ups allow refrigerators, laundry machines, ovens, and even toasters to communicate with the owner, manufacturer, and, of course, one another. Such appliances, falling into a new category of kitchenware known now as “infpliance,” include curiosities like “smart” dishwashers capable of timing the use of hot water with water utilized elsewhere in the house, a washing machine that can be operated by a cell phone, a microwave oven that can go online for cooking instructions, and a toaster that delivers personal greetings.

But it is the refrigerator, it seems, that has the loftiest aspirations, that has set out to be the smartest of all domestic appliances. And that comes as no surprise. While it is commonplace to think of the television as the electronic hearth, it is surely the refrigerator that serves as the family’s comfort and control center. It only makes sense that the designers of Refrigerator Freezer Rack (RFR), designed collaboratively by NASA and its European counterpart, ESA, and planned for the International Space Station in 2006, took into consideration the comfort factors of refrigerators; there is probably no place where comfort is more important than outer space. One of its designers, Margarita Bergfeldt, specifically addressed the emotional language of the multi-compartment unit – handles, food trays, and digital interface were all designed for comfort foremost – and she told *I.D.* magazine in 2004, “I wanted to make it a system that’s not technical but homey. People shouldn’t feel like they’re eating an experiment.” That one solution for such hominess was a food tray embossed with a Gubbe – a cartoonish, anthropomorphic figure – is another matter.



Ordinary, earthbound refrigerators offer comfort more improvisationally. Though not necessarily designed to serve as such, the vast, white, magnetic surface of the traditional refrigerator has become a blank screen across which the minutiae of family life play. With its haphazard arrangement of children's drawings, invitations, postcards, appointment reminders, the place where we keep our food cold has also managed over the years to become a sort of spontaneous domestic communications center. The refrigerator *needs* to be the smartest.

For better or for worse, then, manufacturers and designers have set out to improve upon improvisation. Consider the LG refrigerator, said by its manufacturers to “connect this hub of the household to a vast matrix of information and entertainment available through advanced multimedia-computer technology,... a residential gateway to the home.” Aside from keeping food cool, such a refrigerator enables one to go online, shop, check e-mail, download music, watch TV, monitor grocery inventory. The Screenfridge is billed by its manufacturer as “a refrigerator that thinks.” Further advancing the idea that the refrigerator is the family command center, it comes equipped with a computer, keyboard, touch screen, speakers, microphone, and even a small video camera, enabling family members to leave video or e-mail messages for one another. When connected to the Internet, the refrigerator can scan bar codes and order groceries, while its electronic tagging system enables it to keep track of when the milk sours or the cheese goes rancid. And in the spirit of hybridization that seems to be essential to so many contemporary objects, there is Whirlpool's Polara Refrigerated Range, which takes its cues from a thermos bottle and makes the most of insulating properties. The unit has a baseline temperature of forty degrees to cool food, but the temperature can be adjusted upward to cook food as well.

At the other end of the spectrum was Audrey, billed as the “first digital home assistant.” An online family organizer available in five colors, it set out to document and store the random information that collects on the refrigerator surface with its date-book, address book, and calendar, while its Internet hook-up could access everything from the local weather to the stock market. The small countertop appliance set out to eliminate the visual clutter that accumulates on the refrigerator, cleaning it up, sanitizing its spontaneous chaos and reordering it into a seemingly more accessible format. Still, that it was simply another countertop appliance didn’t help its cause; the beauty of the refrigerator as bulletin board has a certain double-duty, improvisational efficiency that appeals to most people far more than the addition of yet another machine requiring its own space. Not surprisingly, Audrey was discontinued soon after its introduction, and its short life probably offers us a lesson about recognizing the value of unplanned secondary uses; there is something in the human imagination that thrills to these renegade functions of an object meant for one thing being utilized for something else altogether.

Still, Audrey points out that we have come a long way since Mr. Coffee set out to anthropomorphize kitchenware. But for all its presumed efficiency, the kitchen as a chat room for appliances can conjure up more disturbing scenarios. Writing in *I.D.* magazine in 2000 about the needs that smart appliances fill in our lives, Peter Hall cited a British entrepreneur who has been marketing an audiotape of background household sounds such as those of a shower, a vacuum cleaner, and a hair dryer. “The intention aims to fill the vacuum of bachelor life,” he observes. “Hit the play button and your home hums with the sounds of human company. Smart appliances perform the same function, only for more people and with more tangible results. With the coffeemaker gurgling away in the kitchen as we wake up, we won’t wake up feeling so alone.” Or

will we? It seems more likely that a congregation of these appliances might not evoke the cheerful communality of relaxed family life so much as a sentiment once voiced by Lillian Hellman that “lonely people talking to each other can make each other lonelier.”

Because what catches our attention, of course, is the assumption that speech is necessarily an indication of intelligence. You might think we had gotten over this conceit by now. Elsewhere on the cultural landscape, there seems to be some acknowledgment that talk is cheap; political campaigns offer us ample opportunity to recognize the vacuity of both stump speeches and the commentary surrounding them, and in the realm of psychotherapy the value of the talking cure has been largely replaced by pharmaceutical treatments. That compulsive chatter may reflect anxiety, insecurity, or any host of personality disorders more than it does intelligence has not yet been accepted by the manufacturers of domestic appliances, who persist in believing that talk is something to aspire to, that something that speaks is something smart.

Maybe design *is* about communication. But if so, it is probably about the sort of communication that is a more elusive enterprise, one that recognizes that silence and knowing when to keep silent are essential to human exchange. Frigo Design has done this by manufacturing a chalkboard surface that can be affixed to a refrigerator. In some kind of effort to be a smart appliance in the more primitive meaning of the word, the green or black panels attach to the front of the refrigerator to suggest the kitchen is a classroom, though clearly it is a pre-Internet place of learning. Encouraging a more traditional means of exchange, the board can be filled with chalked messages, notes, and reminders. Just as easily, it can be wiped clean, become blank.

Surely that quiet is essential to anything that considers itself smart. And if the refrigerator is the center of family communication, it probably serves most efficiently when it acknowl-

edges dialogue is not simply a series of brisk, efficient commands passed between one appliance and another, but rather a more subtle exchange that recognizes not only silence, but more tentative utterances as well. Anyone who has ever been a member of a family knows this, and any appliance that sets out to help people communicate should probably recognize it, too.

Like our emotional relationships with human beings, those with objects tend to be unpredictable and elusive, and I suspect that research labs working on developing robots with emotional intelligence have a long way to go. While we can hardly deny that some kind of humanity is at work in a refrigerator that anticipates nutritional needs or orders food directly from the grocery store, Banana Yoshimoto's book *Kitchen* offers a view of a more genuinely emotionally responsive refrigerator, one that is a gentle witness to grief. After the death of her grandmother, the character Mikage Sakurai finds that the only place she is able to sleep is curled up next to the huge, stainless steel refrigerator "stocked with enough food to get through a winter" and whose hum "kept me from thinking of my loneliness." And I wonder if it is possible for such an image and such words to figure into the conversation when researchers and designers speak about the emotional appeal of design.

If our refrigerators are bound to be equipped with intelligence, there is another means of expression, though more primitive than modem-enabled dialogue, that is also particular to the refrigerator and that does just that. I am thinking of the subtle, more nuanced exchanges enabled by refrigerator magnets. A literary phenomenon of the nineties, these small, white magnetic tiles each printed with a single word in black were an admittedly unassuming collection that nonetheless had the grander ambition of taking "poetry out of the academy and into the homes and neighborhoods of America."

I don't know that you would necessarily call it poetry, but there is something genuinely expressive, often even lyrical, about the way these words get strung together, sometimes with meaning, sometimes with a more random, absurdist narrative. Words drift together, then vanish in that improvisational flight that is so often the genesis of real thought and exchange. Nor does the alliance of words occur in any particularly linear progression; rather, the words float and hover around, above, and below one another until some connection between them is made. Or not. Things are half stated, then retracted. And while most of us are surely capable of making assured statements and confident commands, I remain certain that human communication, for the most part, is closer to this kind of fugitive, tentative endeavor.

The word tiles proved so popular over the years that in 1997 Workman published a collection of populist poetry, *The Magnetic Poetry Book of Poetry*, with a preface by the then U.S. poet laureate, Robert Pinsky, who wrote, "The word poet is based on the Greek word for 'maker,' which suggests that the artist in us is deeply related to the tinkerer, the gadget rigger who feels the urge to pile one stone upon another....Poetry extends that restless making-instinct into language." Even a reviewer with the rigorous intellect and commanding literary reputation of Sven Birkerts weighed in, suggesting in the *Atlantic Monthly*, "Not everyone can be a poet, but let's give out the magnetic words and cover the hard steely surfaces of the world with messages, charms, and barbaric yawps."

Certainly that has happened in my kitchen. There is a series of words on my refrigerator – "summer," "glad," "ice." But the composition does not stop with the word tiles from the little box. Recently I received refrigerator magnets illustrated with small Japanese landscapes – a branch of plum blossoms, a mountain path, a small fishing boat. Nearby, a magnet in the shape of a parrot head

hovers. To the right, below, is a magnet with the name of our electrician. And drifting somewhere below them all is a decal of Allen Iverson, who is dribbling a basketball around the magnet of a bamboo bridge in snow. One day, the word “summer” is paired with “ice.” The next day, “rain” has become “summer.” Another time, the basketball player is dodging “glad.”

There is no real connection between any of these words and images, yet their proximity of the surface of the refrigerator has forced them into an improvisational collegiality. And somehow, the way the small fragments of information and imagery drift in and out of one another’s orbit day after day seems very real, communicating something essential about the facts of our family. What stands in my kitchen, I know, is a genuine infopliance. F. Scott Fitzgerald famously said, “The test of a first rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function,” and it is impossible not to think that while our refrigerator isn’t smart in the current technological meaning, certainly it meets Fitzgerald’s standard of intellect.

Decades later, Fitzgerald’s elegant proposition has been streamlined, minimized, reduced to “multitasking,” and there is yet another improvisational function served by many refrigerators. In numerous kitchens I have been in, the refrigerator, and the freezer in particular, serves as a kind of lock box, a safe, a storage unit. Perhaps partly acknowledging this practice, the Swedish manufacturer Electrolux AB designed a prototype in the late nineties for a refrigerator called the “Lighthouse.” The appliance didn’t have screens, but windows, and functioned as a kind of illuminated table, with the outlines of the objects stored inside appearing softly in the frosted glass sides. The thirty-six-inch-high (standard counter height) unit also came equipped with softly illuminated drawers and cabinets. Robin Edman, one of the designers working on it,

says simply, “I tried to look at the object from a different point of view. Some people want to display their food. It makes them want to cook.”

One reason the Lighthouse never went from prototype to production may be that it didn't go quite far enough; after all, it is not just food that people store in their refrigerators. For years, Luc kept a small plastic container with our dog's fur in it. “It's an experiment,” he would tell me, but an experiment for what? I have known people who kept their jewelry in the freezer, the wing of a cardinal, a dead bat, the deed to the house, a will, all kinds of treasured items. That this appliance may also serve as a crypt or a tomb for treasured objects is only logical. Its temperature, its tight seal, and the pure incongruity of putting cherished items where perishable food is kept make it an ideal storage bin. That a salient characteristic of a tomb is silence underscores why such appliances should have the capacity for quiet as well as talk.

But when you think about it, it only makes sense that people want to put everything in their refrigerators, from dead bats and sapphires to anything else that matters to them. Preservation is at the heart of this appliance; it is all about *saving* things. Small wonder that in her grief at her grandmother's death, Sakurai found comfort curled up next to the refrigerator; its constant and comforting hum was the sound of small things being preserved.

And I wonder if this is why words and refrigerators are so innately connected, and why we are so compelled to give this appliance a voice of its own. Words, too, are agents of preservation; through them we preserve ourselves and the facts of our lives. We know this. It is why our words collect and gather there, whether they are the Internet-enabled commands of Screenfridge or the more tentative fragments of a magnetic word tile. It is why our notes and schedules and appointment cards and calendars all end up here. It is the reason Audrey failed, and why we want our

refrigerators to be smart. It is also why NASA, in its efforts to re-create the comforts of home in outer space, might consider equipping its RFRs not with whimsically embossed food trays, but with ordinary refrigerator magnets.

Looking at the little magnetic word tiles, I realize that what I value most in them is their constant reminder that words stick. There is something about their very materiality that commands respect. Their most resonant message that a word is a magnet has a certain irrevocable power; here is physical affirmation that words fasten themselves to things. This is a wonderful thing to think of every time you reach for the milk. And surely any appliance that points it out countless times each day is very, very smart.