Exhibiting and engaging

After the field trial, the Babbles changed their role from being devices that lived, however awkwardly, in the communities, to being devices for communicating our research to a variety of new publics. They were shown in exhibitions organised by Karen Henwood’s group from Cardiff University and ourselves, which displayed various outputs from projects in the overarching Energy Programme that funded them. This reached an audience including hipsters from Shoreditch, schoolchildren, and members of the Welsh National Assembly. Over the subsequent years, Energy Babbles have also appeared in several Australian exhibitions and are scheduled to appear in the US. In these settings, they are presented as representing cutting-edge interaction design as well as new approaches to designing for environmental engagement.

We joined Karen Henwood’s group from Cardiff University to stage ‘A Sense of Energy’, an exhibition of visual data produced by the projects funded by the RCUK Energy programme. The first showing was held at the White Building in Shoreditch, in the midst of many of London’s creative industries.
politicians encountered the Babble alongside other energy-related research. Other curators

‘A Sense of Energy’ was staged a second time at the Senedd in Cardiff, home to the National Assembly of Wales, accompanied by onsite workshops and lectures. This exposed the work to a very different set of publics from those at the White Building, including assembly members and schoolchildren.
Three years of living with an Energy Babble

Katherine Moline

When I contacted the Interaction Research Studio with an invitation to exhibit Energy Co-Designing Communities (ECDC) in Sydney, I was drawn to it as an exemplar of the impactful research in art and design that was developing in university research centres (UNSW Galleries, 2014). With a very short lead time, my curatorial aim for the exhibition 'Feral Experimental: New Design Thinking' was to test the limits of possibility in an exploration of the boundaries and intersections of experimental practice in design thinking, speculative design, participatory design, and co-design. Thankfully, Bill Gaver, Tobie Kerridge, and the Interaction Research Studio said yes. The project's initial attraction was its upscaling of cultural probes across the UK to address the depletion of energy resources with lay experts in low-energy communities. During hours of hunting through the project material I came to appreciate the depth of engagement, the open-source nature of ECDC's process, and the collected data that the studio made freely available online. It provoked me to think carefully about how the nuanced debates about and between design methodologies as new specialisations opened up or ghettoised design. In bringing together real-world applications, my hope was that 'Feral Experimental' would make public how contemporary art and design addressed significant challenges with new hybrid approaches that were not possible without an interdisciplinary agenda.

We opened the package that arrived from the UK. I was shocked because the Babble had expanded in my imagination to two or three times the size of the device in front of me. Once extracted from its custom package, the gallery preparators, technicians, and I searched the Babble's surface for clues as to how to make it work. After a long discussion on gallery concerns that a custom electronic might burn down the newly built gallery, I nudged it down to the resident tech wizard in the university's computer services. He delicately unscrewed the moulded plastic casing so that we could see what was inside. Not easily impressed, his first comment was on the elegance of the object's internal layout and how well thought out the design was. In a volley of rapid-fire emails, the Babble became increasingly opaque to me as its innards were described in detailed technical language. It slowly dawned on me that we couldn't play it live in the exhibition because of gallery regulations and the fact that Australia was asleep and the gallery was closed when the users of Babbles in the UK were broadcasting live. More than once I wondered if the Babble was designed to confound us, not only practically but also conceptually.

Was the Energy Babble a Surrealist inversion about autonomy and the emotional viability of living ethically? In that conversation, we contemplated whether its function as a CB radio was to avoid the Orwellian connotations of Big Brother surveillance on the internet. During an early gallery tour of the exhibition, further conversations focused on the Babble's functional resemblance to a CB radio. Once discussion turned to its purpose to connect special interest groups in the UK, questions were raised about whether it was engaged with the Internet of Things, or an experimental device that quite literally demonstrated the importance of small details in its conceptual framework, and whether its elaborate processes that engaged end-users as participants, and its elegantly retro execution, were important for designing interaction in a Human-Computer Interface for low-energy communities.

The Energy Babble's plain, domesticated appearance that juxtaposes a conical funnel with a coiled phone cord (phased out in the 1990s) sitting atop a phone charger box prompted one student to write about the design as an innocuous kitchen appliance that was 'disruptive' because if 'left in a public space, the microphone may pick up some irrelevant and absurd input'. The Surrealist ambiguity and Orwellian undertones about what it was doing in the exhibition prompted colleagues to debate its intentions (a surprisingly frequent art school concern about the ethics of design). Another student pointed out that people just get annoyed with devices, citing mobile
phones as an example, but she saw it as ‘a great tool for rethinking energy issues that were raised by government policies, local commercial activities, individual efforts, and small communities’.

Over three subsequent exhibitions that developed from ‘Feral Experimental’, I led curatorial teams who also saw the relevance of ECDC to the communities in which the exhibitions took place. Whereas in Sydney ‘Feral Experimental’ focused on leading-edge examples of art and design that addressed contemporary challenges, in Melbourne with co-curators Laurene Vaughan and Brad Haylock the exhibition ‘Experimental Practice: Provocations In and Out of Design’ brought together works that raised important questions about design, data and impurity (RMIT Design Hub, 2015). In the catalogue essay, I described the ‘exhibition program to which ‘Experimental Practice’ contributed’ as aiming ‘to modify the exhibition and symposium/workshop agenda in each site according to local knowledge, and according to the ongoing development of selected works over time’, and cited the Energy Babble and ECDC as a demonstration of ‘how large-scale projects evolve’ when design is exhibited as works in progress rather than fixed or finished in a gallery context. I contended that, unlike the everyday understanding of design as a form of expertise based on control, the exhibition, workshops, and panel discussion extended the debate beyond the stated intentions of the practitioners (Moline 2015b: 8). In the case of the Babble, however, the studio’s intentions were ambiguous in that they aimed to engage playfully with irrational aspects of domestic energy reduction (Gaver, Michael, Kerridge et al. 2015: 1118). As I discuss shortly, this ambiguity meant that gallery visitors suggested wide-ranging interpretations of the design. Within the remit of the Studio’s intentions, these interpretations negotiated contradictions between multiple factors, including consumption practices and environmental aims, that must be rethought for design, and indeed art, to make a difference to the contemporary challenge of climate change.

In Brisbane, ‘Experimental Thinking/Design Practices’ aimed to emphasise embodied knowledge and further complicate questions about design in terms of curatorial and research practice, as well as making (Griffith University Art Gallery, 2015). Co-curated with Peter Hall and Beck Davis, this exhibition explored how lived experience informed and inspired design. The catalogue essay described the unifying aim of the exhibition series that was generated from ‘Feral Experimental’ as drawing together a number of approaches to the challenges of global warming, big data, and embodied experience in the digital context. I explained that the exhibitions aimed to search for the holes in the fence that dingoes, a species of dog unique to Australia, are expert at sniffing out. ‘Through these openings’, I proposed that ‘connections between categories are made and disciplines communicate with each other to develop new approaches for addressing contemporary concerns’ (Moline 2015c) In the catalogue essay I spelt out that ‘crossovers between co-design and speculative design suggest that such categories are not clear-cut. Recent co-design has engaged imaginatively with alternatives to the status quo via the cultural probes of speculative design, while speculative design that engages communities in reimagining the future has been developed with co-design’s focus on lived experiences. In other words, in practice, both approaches combine strategies to imagine possible futures with a greater number of stakeholders, and recombine technologies, to address wide-ranging issues’ (Moline 2015a) In greater depth, here I explained the competing definitions of speculative design, and that one of the contributors to ECDC, Mike Michael, defined it as a framework for engaging the public in science and technology studies, which explains what he sees as ‘overspills’ and public responses that exceed the parameters established by researchers. Rather than ignore or ‘sanitise’ unexpected events, Michael sees them as a source for insights that generate new approaches to design (Michael 2012) Showing ECDC in Brisbane demonstrated how co-design and speculative design structure new design approaches that authorise tacit knowledge and the redesign of design by lay experts.

Online debate among students on the Experimental Design blog while the ECDC cultural probe and Energy Babble were on exhibition in Brisbane raised several frameworks in which the designs could be rethought. One student mentioned Georg Simmel and pointed to what he had to say about the factors determining the value of a commodity: factors aren’t separate from one another, but depend on the person’s perspective formed by what they see as their purpose in engaging with a design, the context in which they do so, and their cultural and educational background. She contended that these factors interweave with each other and can’t be isolated in an experiment. In her view, cultural probes countered the mass surveillance of the internet. Cultural probes were described by one student as ‘researching through design’, where the open nature of the ‘process did not aim to benefit or produce a specific outcome’. Another student ventured that the value of cultural probes is the autonomy they provide; in other words, the ‘freedom they give to the participants’ who in turn ‘respond unpredictably’. Another claimed that the probes were inclusive, or in her words ‘not excluding individuals’, which prompted the response that cultural probes are ‘an alternative to purely objective analysis’. As another pointed out, ‘critically’, the cultural probes ‘gathered data which supplemented the end-product [the Babble] instead of directly leading to it’. This facet of cultural probes was deemed important...
given the context of the class discussion in which motivation and the crisis of agency was referred to as a cultural phenomenon that is closely connected to climate change.

A student’s essay titled ‘Consumerism, the Shift and Mass Customization’ (2015), which was written while the work was on display in Brisbane framed experimental designs such as ECDC within critical theory, consumerism, and its imbrication in climate change. The author contended that the theme of control in consumerism is designed to create fantasies ‘about fulfilling addictive desires’. Drawing on the writings of Arturo Escobar, she contrasted propositions that design has become open source and is therefore a positive force in globalisation with counter-arguments that framing design as an open process omits assumptions that are implicit in the concept of openness and neglects to account for the majority of the global population who have only limited access to digital technologies.

As co-curators Ahmed Ansari and Deepa Butoliya and I prepare the work for exhibition at Carnegie Mellon University in ‘Climactic: Post Normal Design’ at Miller Gallery, I’m conscious that the ECDC cultural probes and Energy Babble will be reinterpreted in entirely new ways in the North American context (Carnegie Mellon University, 2016). Based on my experiences of discussing disparate interpretations of ECDC with co-curators, gallery visitors, and students in Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane, I return repeatedly to questions about cultural probes and autonomy, and the Energy Babble and surveillance. Most often, the Babble speaks to me as a Surrealist interruption to expectations about design. It is a non sequitur for Human-Computer-Interface debate because it refuses cognitive behaviour as a realistic reflection of how people engage with technology. Instead, the Energy Babble prioritises human irrationality and the unconscious as a data manifestor that distorts inputs and outputs. It baffles intentionality. Rather than see this as offensive, the real value of making the design’s development open to the public in ECDC is that the data are available for all to interpret and reinterpret freely.

One question I continue to ask of the Energy Babble is whether its function is to mirror and intensify the ordinary, everyday behaviours that must change to reduce energy consumption, despite the difficulty and the crisis of agency when challenged by the immensity of the scale of change ahead. As a design, it suggests that the future will depend on the capacity of humans – rather than of things – to adjust behaviours. In the ongoing conversations I’ve had with the Energy Babble over the past three years, as I’ve tried to make it work, and at times failed to do so, I think I’ve found its function in the era of fast fixes and instant gratification: things aren’t prepared for the imminent climate change ahead. However, the open-source workbooks and images that the Interaction Research Studio have published about ECDC are a Surrealist Wunderkammer of affective design that tests its own efficacy in every city in which it has been exhibited in the southern hemisphere. As Herbert Read observed ninety years ago, the UK is the natural home of Surrealism, and it has much to tell us still about the affective dimension of reimagining the future (Herbert, cited in Hauser 2007: 15). ‘Climactic: Post Normal Design’.

Katherine Moline invited us to show the Energy Babble at an exhibition she curated at the National Institute for Experimental Arts in Sydney. There, the Babble was framed as ‘exploring the boundaries and intersections of experimental practice in design thinking, speculative design, participatory and co-design’.
Another exhibition in Brisbane was curated by Katherine with Peter Hall and Beck Davis. This time, the intention was to ‘emphasise embodied knowledge and further complicate questions about design in terms of curatorial and research practice, as well as making’.

References


of interpretations as, variously, a new approach to environmental issues, an example of how
An updated version of the Feral Experimental show was curated in Melbourne. This time the Babble was shown alongside other design work as an example of 'new hybrid practices and collaborations are negotiating complex social and environmental challenges'.

design can operate to open new perspectives and engagements, and as both an outcome of and
The stuff of method: Open things and closed objects

Mike Michael

Introduction
This essay considers the role of objects in social scientific methodology. Of course, objects are necessarily part of conducting social scientific research. In methods such as interviews and focus groups, objects that make up recording equipment, the furniture and environment, utility and transportation systems render social science do-able (as well as on occasion subvert its feasibility – see Michael 2004). On top of this, objects can play a part in the crafting of data – as stimulus materials, they serve to prompt responses from participants, to trigger memories or focalise arguments, for instance. In ethnography, people’s use of objects is key to understanding their cultural and social dynamics. Less common in social scientific research is the use of artefacts that are introduced by researchers into a particular setting familiar to participants who then live with the artefact for an extended period in the hope that it is ‘open’ enough to prompt reflection about some relevant issue or other. Of course, this is what the Energy Babble was designed to do, along with the other designs produced within the ‘speculative design’ tradition (see ‘Design and science and technology studies’ essay).

In this essay, then, attention is paid to how objects and things might be theorised as research tools. Drawing on various approaches, not least from science and technology studies (STS), objects and things are discussed in terms of their complex and heterogeneous constitution. Constitution in this case is understood in terms of ‘eventuation’: objects and things emerge in specific events that incorporate not only the design and content of the objects, but also what might otherwise be called its ‘context’. Key here is the view that its precise constitution or composition arguably renders an artefact more or less closed (object-like) or open (thing-like) in the sense that it is more or less likely or able to specify how it can be used. Using this general framework, the essay addresses how the Energy Babble was eventuated in a number of ways that combined open-ness and closed-ness in varying proportions. That is to say, we trace the ways in which what the energy babble ‘is’, and what it could yield as a methodological technology emerged out of a nexus of elements that were only recoverable in retrospect. As we shall see, this ‘unknowability’ of the Energy Babble was a reflection of our own affective relation to it and its prospective users.

In what follows, there is an initial introduction to some of the formulations of the object and the thing in STS. The particular approach adopted here is further developed through a discussion of the process philosophy of Stengers and Whitehead. Here, we see that object/things are admixtures of openness and closed-ness: we argue that things/objects are constitutively ambiguous. Nevertheless, the researcher, as a part of the eventuation of an object/thing, can serve to delimit the balance of openness and closed-ness, though here too we find ambiguity (and ambivalence).

Objects and things
In social science, objects have taken on an increasingly prominent position. Clearly, as novel artefacts and products of innovation, they have been studied in terms of their impact on society. Iconically, information and communication technologies are seen to shape society in a whole range of ways; globally, there is the putative emergence of virtual society or network society (e.g. Woolgar 2002); at the ‘meso’ level there are renewed forms of surveillance and audit that structure how organisations work (e.g. Bowker and Star1999; Power 1999); and at the microsocial level there is a reconfiguration of interpersonal relations and identities (exemplified in such figures as the ‘calculated self’ – e.g. Lupton 2015). However, mundane objects – clothes,
paperclips, chairs – have also been subject to analysis. By virtue of the scripts they embody (Akich 1992; Latour 1991, 1992), or the propensities they encompass (Miller 2005), everyday artefacts are variously seen to afford and delimit, prescribe and proscribe particular practices. On this score, they are constitutive of social relations, just as they are themselves constituted through social processes. Thus, objects are quasi-subjects, part of the fabric of society, and, conversely, human subjects are quasi-objects (e.g. Serres 1982). And as Latour once put it: ‘We are never faced with objects or social relations [...] No-one has ever seen a social relation by itself [...] nor a technical relation’ (1991: 110).

The ways in which objects affect people is particularly important here. To the extent that they incorporate particular scripts – sequences of actions that must be followed if the object is to ‘work’ – they impose a sort of morality, or a politics, even. There is a ‘proper’ way to do things, in other words. Yet, this is clearly discriminatory against people whose bodies might not operate in the ways presupposed by the scripts, or whose circumstances require different sorts of functions (Latour 1992). Thus, people can and do resist – or de-script – objects. What were seemingly ‘closed’ artefacts that function in specified ways and with specific requirements can be ‘opened’. This opening can happen in numerous ways: through major political interventions such as the disability movement (Galis 2011); through local collective subversions (as in community re-purposing of technologies – De Laet 1982). And as Latour once put it: ‘We are never faced with objects or social relations [...] No-one has ever seen a social relation by itself [...] nor a technical relation’ (1991: 110).

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The idea of ‘opening’ the artefact, of bringing out possibilities that have otherwise been ‘obscured’ echoes a distinction made by Hans-Georg Rheinberger between technical object and epistemic thing. In his study of experimental practice, Rheinberger (1997) provides an account of scientists who, in building an experimental system, deploy stabilised elements – technical objects – such as various bits of equipment and types of materials. It is the juxtaposition and interaction of these elements that yields the uncertainty that scientists aim for in their pursuit of experimental knowledge. Out of this uncertainty emerge what Rheinberger calls ‘epistemic things’, which might be chemical reactions, physical structures, or biological functions that ‘present themselves in a characteristic irreducible vagueness [...] because they] embody what one does not yet know’ (ibid.: 28). In other words, these ‘things’ are open, not yet fully disclosed, emergent through the uncertainties of the experimental system.

In light of this, we might want to disaggregate stuff into two categories – those that are ‘closed’ (objects), and those that are ‘open’ (things). However, as we shall see, things are rather more complex than this dichotomy suggests. To explore this in more detail, we need to turn to the processual works of Whitehead and Stengers (also see ‘Design and science & technology studies’ essay).
the two. Here, other affordances kick in – the affordances of poles, soles, and people: what we are usually witness to are cascades of affordance (Michael 2000). Further, what an object can do is affected by the person’s unfolding ‘plans’ as they take shape and adapt in the flow of action: a table affords working on, or when one detects an earthquake, shelter.

To speak of the eventuation of an entity, in this context, is also to address the emergence of affordance. An entity is partly constituted by the relations entailed in the uses to which it can be put. Therefore, to reiterate, primary and secondary qualities are fused insofar as what an entity ‘is’ emerges out of its nexus of relations – a nexus that takes in bodies and their capacities, other entities and persons, plans and intentions, environmental and social occurrences and conditions. Any and all of these can conspire to ‘fix’ an entity, to occasion something’s closed-ness – albeit just for that event. However (as seen in the ‘Design and science & technology studies’ essay), eventuation can also be understood as processual, as unfolding towards the not-as-yet. To clarify, while the elements of events concresce and mutually shape one another, what an event ‘is’ might become open, even though the stuff that eventuates through that event might nevertheless emerge ‘closed’: the point is that this closed-ness will vary depending on how the elements of an event concresce. As we shall detail below, even artefacts designed to be open – intended, as it were, to lure their users into a sense of ambivalence, playfulness, reflection and speculation – can end up occasioning users’ closing-down of the artefact (as in, for instance, an instrumental failure – see Gaver et al. 2007, 2009; Michael 2016).

In the next sections, we take up the issues discussed above and explore them in relation to speculative design. In particular, we look at the work that goes into attempting to render an artefact open – not only through the process of design, but also through the overt and tacit procedures entailed in that artefact’s implementation. As we shall see, a number of ironies are in operation: for instance, in order to make an entity open, it must also, in various ways, be closed.

Open/closed: Bodies/plans/stuff
As detailed elsewhere in this volume, the Energy Babble essentially comprises a combination of devices (individual Babbles) that are networked through a server-based system. By generating and distributing more or less comprehensible, energy-related statements derived from user input and various online sources, the Energy Babble was a research device that was designed to ‘open up’ the ways in which local energy communities understand, draw on, problematise, and undermine the issues that surround energy use and energy-demand reduction. The Energy Babble aimed to explore how community users dealt with energy matters as they were manifested in the news and in policy, in everyday practice within and across communities, and in individual and collective projects and aspirations. Informing the Babble research was the view that such engagements with energy (and energy-demand reduction) are emergent, unfolding, immanent. The Babble, in all its idiosyncrasy, playfulness, and opaqueness, was designed to enable users to access to the potentialities of energy-demand reduction. By ‘distorting’ or ‘ambiguating’ energy-related information and its flow, and by broadcasting its semi-sensical statements in unpredictable ways, the Babble ideally should have provoked, prompted, and invited an openness to energy-demand reduction and its associated issues. What counts as a community? What comprises energy? What constitutes information? These are some of the sorts of questions that might have been inspired by the Babble’s interjections (though ideally we would have preferred questions that we did not foresee).

But let us step back for a moment and ask: what needs to be in place for the Babble to operate in this way, as something that, in its openness, invites openness? If a central aim of ‘speculative design’ is to make such ‘open’ devices, what guarantee is there that they will work in this way? In short, there is no guarantee. As Gaver and colleagues have documented, devices can and do fail. The example of the Home Health Monitor (Gaver et al. 2009) is instructive in this regard. Designed to ‘provide an intriguing reflection on the household’s “mood”’ (n.p.), it failed, prompting instead a series of critical responses. The Health Home Monitor used a series of sensors that measured such things as whether a sofa had been sat on, or a door opened, to generate a sense of the ‘health’ of a household displayed through such genres as aphorisms, pie charts, and photographs. These were intended to be ambiguous and playful so as to lure the occupants of the home into further reflection. Instead, the occupants ‘instrumentalised’ the system, criticising in terms of the accuracy of its output, or its lack of obvious utility. Gaver et al. put this lack of engagement down to a number of factors concerning the Home Health Monitor itself (for instance, the outputs were insufficiently meaningful, the outputs were also too thin when compared against the complexity of the system design). But they also point to the users themselves: they were not, it turned out, especially interested, neglecting, for example, to set the system within household routines. Reframing the Home Health Monitor in the terms of eventuation presented above, we might say that its designed affordances did not resonate with the plans and capacities of the householders. Indeed, we might say that the householders were relatively resistant to the device – interpreting it instrumentally rather than using it exploratively – and closing it, and their engagement with it, down, rather than opening it up towards not-as-yet engagements. Yet, this resistance might have been resourced by the design itself, including the way it was presented to the users, as reflecting the designers’ interest in ‘home health’ (this stood in contrast to the deliberate reticence of the designers when they installed a previous iteration call the Home Health Horoscope – see Gaver et al. 2007).

The point here is that all these factors – these prehensions, we could say – combine or concresce in the specific
eventuation of the speculative device. How they combine in the process is what is important. In this eventuation, quandaries are in evidence. The design must be an open thing – adequately ambiguous, opaque, and playful so as to enable speculative engagement. However, if it is too open it might fail to make sense, provoking unease, suspicion, or antipathy on the part of potential users. In other words, it becomes a closed object despite its planned openness. Conversely, users must be primed in ways that link their engagement with the purpose of the device (and the designers’ broad research agenda of promoting openness). The potential threats posed by the device as an open thing – in particular, its possible lack of meaning – must be waylaid by the designers by adding meaning to it. However, to make the device too interpretable risks, ironically, shutting down its openness: it becomes a closed object. Succinctly, a fine balance must be struck between making the device too interpretable and not making it interpretable enough – too much of an open thing (and hence threatening), and too much of a closed object (and hence failing in its promise). The themes of promise and threat will be developed in the next section when we discuss how the openness and closed-ness of the Energy Babble was enacted.

The threat and promise of the Energy Babble
The ECDC team interacted with the energy communities in various ways and at various times before the Energy Babble was presented to them. At an initial presentation to representatives of the energy communities, through site visits by members of the teams to the communities, through the probe workshops, through the distribution and collection of the probe packs, through the ECDC website – all these occasioned opportunities to affect the relationship between the ECDC project and the communities themselves. Or, to put this another way, these were moments when the team could impact on the sort of reception their speculative device would receive on implementation. By the same token, the experience of the ECDC team with the various communities (which, as we have seen, was characterised by very different circumstances and divergent priorities) affected the ways in which the design process and implementation phase proceeded.

Of course, these emerging relations between ECDC and the communities operated at numerous levels. Initially, the relationship might be thought of as fairly ‘abstract’. That is to say, in early encounters, the ECDC approach would have been viewed as a novel – indeed entertaining – approach to thinking about the study of energy-demand reduction. As one of the most researched constituencies in the UK, the energy communities could contrast the prospect of engaging with ECDC against the usual forms of social scientific investigation – interviews, focus groups, ethnography (see Clark 2008). What ECDC promised at a general level was an empirical process that was intriguing, strange, exciting, even. However, this must also be placed in relation to the exigencies of working within and for an energy community.

These communities were involved in a constant struggle to find funding, to raise their profile, to develop projects, and so on. Contrasted against the limited and shrinking resources of the communities, the seemingly generously funded social science projects of the Energies and Communities initiative were regarded – and this was made plain to us on several occasions – as a mis-use, if not outright squandering, of precious funds and resources. Why resource the study of energy communities when the government could be actually financially supporting those communities? Within this perspective, the ECDC project with its outwardly vague research agenda (initially there were only general principles and approaches in place rather than discrete research tools) must also have been regarded as, at the very least, a risky project. In summary, we can say that the project itself is seen both in terms of ‘promise’ (it will be something intriguing, entertaining, revelatory) and ‘threat’ (it is something that takes resources away from us, it will waste our time).

As we got closer to the deployment of the Energy Babble, the ambiguity of the project – its simultaneous promise and threat – became intensified, impacting on the ways in which the team went about installing (socially as well as technically) the Babble within the communities. We present details of the process of implementation and the communities’ responses to the Babble elsewhere in this volume. Suffice to say that here we draw out some of the ways in which we went about the process of ‘balancing’ the promise and threat of the Babble (see also Wilkie and Michael, in press).

As we note in the essay on ‘Design and science & technology studies’, all social science research should be understood in terms of a method assemblage (Law 2004) in which the engagement between researchers and their ‘objects of study’ takes place in multiple ways wherein there is mutual shaping. On this score, we can note that in implementing the Babble there was tacit concern on our part as the ostensible researchers that our object was so strange that it would be seen as threatening, in the sense that it did not make sense to the prospective users. There were other responses we were worried about, too – that it would be dismissed as trivial (say, in terms of its output), or condemned as wasteful (in terms of the resources that went into its design and production). In light of this background hum of anxiety about its reception (which we might say reflected the ways in which we were shaped by the communities as we came to understand them), there was a temptation to diffuse the speculative aspects of the Babble: to downplay its oddness in favour of its potential utility, its usefulness. This is especially apparent in our convoluted efforts to navigate the dual elements of the speculative and the instrumental, the playful and the utilitarian, in the way we portrayed the Babble in a feature that appeared in a newspaper local to one of the energy communities (November 2013 issue of Reepham Life – see Figure 1).

To reiterate, taken as an actual entity that eventuates out of the combination of a nexus of heterogeneous elements,
A failure? A successful failure? This book is our attempt both to share the process of coming

The Babble is enacted as an ambiguous mix of promise (it is interesting, engaging, playful, exciting) and threat (it is nonsensical, unapproachable, alienating). This, of course, resonates with the figure of the idiot discussed in the ‘Design and science and technology studies’ essay. As we note there, the idiocy of speculative design resides in the nonsensical-ness of its artefacts. Yet, at the same time, this nonsensical-ness is expected to inspire openness, rather than result in the closed-ness of incomprehension or antagonism. The argument here is that the idiocy of the Babble has to be rendered safe, unthreatening, engaging. After all, idiots can be intimidating and menacing as well as charming and intriguing. Our representations of the Babble as having ‘utility’ are, then, an attempt to reassure users, to diffuse its potential threat as incomprehensible, etc.

However, this account of the promise and threat of the Babble is perhaps overly ‘cognitive’ – it focuses on the explicitly articulable elements of the Babble and the sorts of relations it might form with its users. There are other less accessible elements that contribute to what the Babble ‘is’. As we noted in the discussion of the processes of concrescence and eventuation, the elements that comprise an object are unconscious as well conscious, affective as well as cognitive. To elaborate, an object is affective – it eventuates through its relations to the body, emotions, and the senses of the user. For some authors at least, such affective relations bypass, or sit parallel to, the conscious ideas and understandings of users (e.g. Massumi 2002; see Weatherall 2012). These affective dimensions operate in numerous ways and we highlight two in the case of the Energy Babble.

The first concerns the emotional connections built up between the ECDC team and the communities over time. To be sure, these are manifold and vary in their intensities. To start with, our initial site visits, the probe workshops, and the email updates (not least about the ECDC website) all contributed to shaping and sustaining particular affective relations between us and the energy communities. This need not be purely positive, of course: on the negative side, our work might be felt as a profligate waste of scarce resources. By contrast, energy community members might simply feel that we were ‘nice people’ showing interest in their efforts, predisposing them towards at least a tolerant or receptive, if not out and out welcoming, response. On this score, there is a degree of identification between designers and communities.
Secondly, there was the aesthetics embodied by the Babble itself. The Interaction Research Studio is well known for its design and production of highly finished artefacts that have a certain beauty to them, and which are aesthetically intriguing, not least because they reference all manner of other more or less recognisable technologies and objects. In a sense, then, these designs affectively ‘draw the user in’ because they are suggestive of familiar technologies while also disturbing that familiarity, adding novelty. As should be evident, the design of the Babble references both scientific glass equipment and old-fashioned stand-up (candlestick) telephones. But this referencing would not have the same aesthetic impact if it were not ‘beautiful’; that is to say, its elements form a well-proportioned ‘coherent whole’, and the ‘finish’ is highly crafted so that it appears ‘well made’ and ‘careful’. The aesthetic affectivity of the Babble no doubt operates on many levels – in terms of the ‘sensory affects’ of beauty and finish as we have seen, but also in terms of ‘social affects’ in that the Babble displays care and craft, and thus a ‘respect’ for its prospective users. The point is that there are various ‘aesthetic’ elements of the Babble that together serve to be ‘affective’, ‘drawing in’ relations with users that are less threatening, more promising.

Concluding remarks: towards a notion of com-promise
In this essay, we have considered the ways in which entities are heterogeneously eventuated to be more or less indeterminate, as closed objects or open things. We have suggested that this is no easy dichotomy – that the seemingly closed are open, and vice versa. In the example of the Energy Babble this convolution of openness and closed-ness is particularly acute, and we traced a number of ways in which openness could precipitate closed-ness; that is, the open speculative character of the Babble might, for various reasons, prompt a reaction in which it were closed down. We tried to articulate these convolutions through the motifs of threat and promise. The Babble was simultaneously threatening (through, for instance, its specific incomprehensibility) and promising (through, for instance, the ways in which it was intriguing). Part and parcel of this were our own efforts to diffuse its potential to threaten by placing emphasis on its promise to fulfil instrumental or useful function. Ironically, this utilitarian promise threatens to derail the prospect of openness in the Babble and thus its speculative promise. In compromising on the openness of the Babble (closing it down through stressing its functionality), we compromise the Babble’s openness (its capacity to engage the user in such a way as to explore the various meanings and enactments of energy-demand reduction, information, community, etc).

However, this casts a rather negative light on com-promise. Perhaps there is something more interesting to be said about the notion of compromise as a way of coming to understand both speculative devices, but also objects/things more generally.

For our purposes, and etymologically speaking, we can think of ‘promise’ in terms of ‘putting forward’. The specific ‘putting forward’ of the Babble entails a lure – the invitation to engage with its ‘intrigue’ (its playfulness, opacity, ambiguity). However, also being ‘put forward’ is a certain riskiness – the Babble might be incomprehensible, wasteful, trivial: as much as it lures, it can repel. As we have seen, there are various ways of deflecting antipathy – discursive (articulation through the language of functionality), social (the enactment of forms of identification), aesthetic (making the Babble ‘beautiful’), and, of course, combinations of these (the ‘care’ embodied in the Babble’s aesthetic crafting that signals ‘respect’ for the energy communities). However, we might also regard the members of the energy communities as themselves holding ‘promise’ – putting themselves forward in ways that engage with the Babble speculatively, of being open to the Babble’s openness. Of course, as we have noted, promise can, from the perspective of the designers, additionally be seen as negative: participants can always ‘put forward’ resistance to a speculative device or enact reticence in their engagement with it.

The implication is that just as the Energy Babble ‘puts forward’, so too do its users. There is, one might say, a mutual promising: a ‘putting forward together’. Given that together can be etymologically translated as ‘com’, this putting forward together can be grasped as a ‘com-promise’. Accordingly, we would hope that com-promise does not possess the connotations of dilution or modulation that attach to certain versions of compromise. Instead, com-promise should evoke the complexity and convolution – indeed, involution (e.g. Ansell Pearson 1999) – of connections amongst the elements involved in eventuation. In the case of the Babble, com-promise is necessary for successful speculative research. The Babble being understood as a heterogeneously enacted entity, what it ‘is’ emerges from the multiple, varied, and shifting relations entailed in the actions of designers and users. The corollary point is that these designers and users are themselves composed of multiple, varied, and shifting relations. Out of this nexus emerges – hopefully – user engagement with the Babble that is speculative insofar as it begins to open up interesting questions about what counts as ‘community’, ‘information’, ‘energy’, ‘environmentalism’, and so on. We say ‘hopefully’ because, as we have hinted in the foregoing, what has entered into the process of com-promise only becomes apparent retrospectively. There is no way of guaranteeing that the nexus of connections that makes up a com-promise will ‘work’. Nevertheless, we would suggest that the notion of com-promise holds a broader heuristic promise – that of illuminating how any device ‘works’ by alerting us to the involutions of promise and threat, closed-ness and openness, object-ness and thing-ness entailed in its eventuation.
Like the project itself, none of this is quite settled yet. Nonetheless, we hope, dear