

THE INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY

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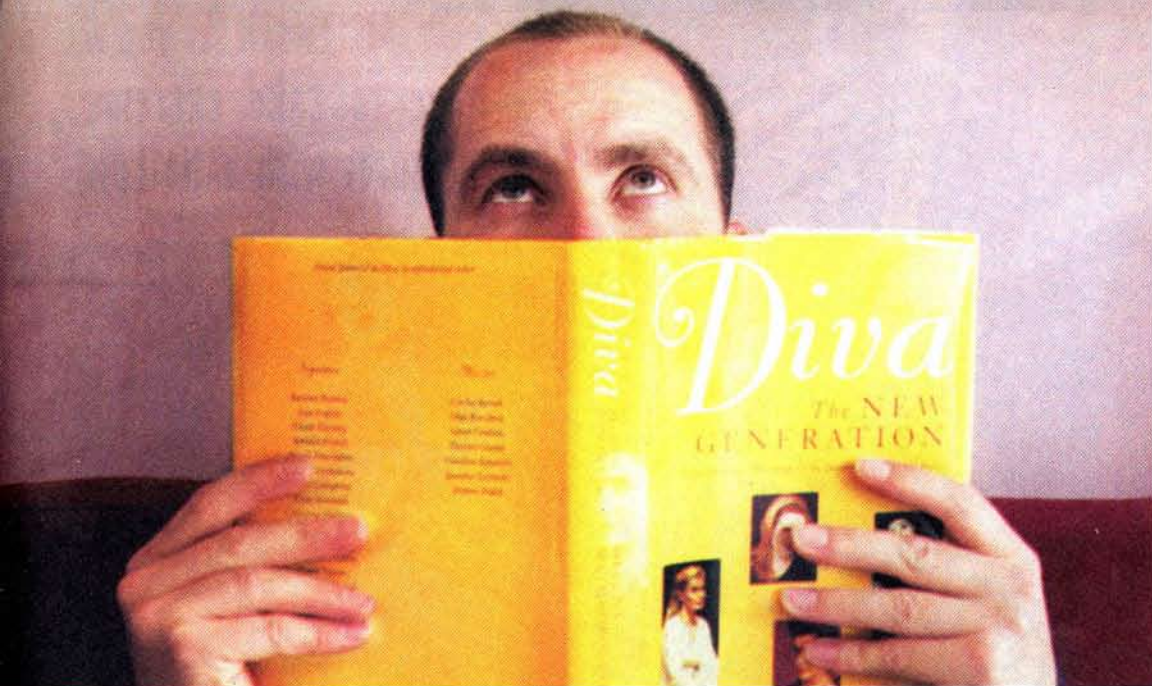


PLEASE RE-RELEASE ME

The return of Engelbert Humperdinck

Off the garden wall

Labels that recite poems to stimulate plant growth? Leaves that are electronically rustled? *Hester Lacey* meets a threesome with some revolutionary ideas about gardens. Photographs by Salvatore Vinci



Clockwise from above: a branch that is rustled every 30 to 40 seconds; a seat upholstered in grass; and a horn for communicating with distant plants. (All items demonstrated by models)

The British are known for talking to their plants. But suppose there's a little weedy one at the back that's hard to reach? A long wooden horn to communicate through, for plants that might otherwise be neglected, would be a useful tool. Alternatively, shouting through the horn could intimidate a neighbour's rival plants. A coffee-table is a bore: everyone has one. A cucumber-table is something quite different. It has a drawer filled with soil to plant the cucumber in, and a glass tube for it to grow through to keep it straight (these things are important to gardeners, even surreal ones). And once every ounce of conversational value has been wrung from the unfortunate vegetable, it can be used to make sandwiches.

These are a couple of examples of a range of "psychological furniture" developed by industrial

designers Michael Anastassiades and Anthony Dunne and architect Fiona Raby. The three have been working on their "Weeds, Aliens and Other Stories" project since 1994, and exhibiting various items around the world; next month, however, Salvatore Vinci's photographs of their collected pieces will be shown at Habitat in Paris, the first stop in an international tour. A limited edition book on the project will then be published.

One of the themes of their work is bringing the garden inside the house. Hence the wooden bench with a trough of soil underneath to grow plants in. There are holes in the seat to allow the plants to grow tall. When the plants start encroaching through the holes, there is a tough decision to be made: to snip or not. "If the plants take over, you can't sit on the seat – it becomes a very expensive plant pot," says Dunne, who, like

Raby, is a fellow of the Royal College of Art.

The low, curving double seat upholstered in grass is a high-maintenance piece: the various curators who have had charge of it either love it or hate it. It has to be installed a few months before an exhibition opens, so that it can become acclimatised, and it has to be sprayed with water every day and regularly fed and trimmed. The rustling branch also requires regular maintenance. It's a fresh branch attached to a device which makes it rustle every 30 or 40 seconds, to bring the sound of trees in the wind into the house – but the branch has to be replaced periodically. During exhibitions, branch-hunting is Anastassiades's job – easier in the summer. "In Prague in January I spent a whole day finding a branch," he recalls.

Noisier pieces include the talking tabs: wooden labels pushed into the soil that either encourage



Left: A bench that allows flowers to grow through it. Below: a talking tab recites vegetarian recipes to a pot of basil



the plants by reciting taped poems to them, or alarm them by reciting vegetarian recipes. The moth light is a light with flaps around it; when a moth flies too close, sensors are activated and the moth is batted away. "It's a game only moths can play," reads the exhibit caption. Then there's the intercom, tall and slender and carved out of wood. It comes in two pieces, one with a stake for pushing into the soil, the other with a three-legged stand for indoor use. The gardener can keep in touch with particularly demanding plants from indoors, along the same principles as using a baby-listener.

Anastassiades, Dunne and Raby, who all studied at the RCA, began developing their ideas simply as sketches and concepts. "All three of us were frustrated with what was available," explains Dunne. "We were interested in designing furniture that actually influences behaviour and we wanted to do a project as an example. We don't promote order and neatness. We are weeds in the world of furniture design."

They were commissioned to make nine of their designs into furniture by Andrée Cook of the Window Gallery in Prague. "When I saw

them I was first of all shocked by how cute they were," says Dunne. "I prefer challenging and difficult to cute. But people do respond to a more sinister feel underneath."

Why did they choose the garden theme? After all, Dunne and Raby, who live together, don't have a garden (they "steal the view" from their neighbour) and Anastassiades has a terrace with no plants at all ("maybe a weed or two"). "When we started, the garden was a forgotten area, it was very neglected," says Anastassiades. The English, adds Raby, are particularly idiosyncratic about

gardens. "We were influenced by a book called *Garden to Kitchen*, which was published in the Thirties," recalls Dunne. "The first part was all about helping the garden, nurturing it, then it was all about eating it – the language was very brutal. It emphasised that the garden is a strange place."

The pieces appeal on several levels, says Anastassiades. "It's not just to do with the way they look but the ideas behind them. On an intellectual level people find different meanings for each one. But on a different level they just want to have them in their living-room."

Public response, says Dunne, has been "amazingly positive". The must-haves of the collection, adds Raby, are the rustling branch and the horn, and plenty of visitors to the exhibitions have been asking where they can get hold of similar pieces. This is exactly the effect the trio have been hoping for. "I'd like people who see our work to start to wish there was a broader range of objects available to stimulate our feelings and emotions," says Dunne. "These are just prototypes – but there's no reason why similar things shouldn't be available commercially."

They would all like to see objects based on their designs sold in the shops. "We like to feel these are objects you can live with," says Raby. "If we could sell them in Homebase it'd be great." ■

A limited edition of 300 copies of "Weeds, Aliens and Other Stories" will be published this summer by Salvo Publications, RCA (0771 243 9065).