# Inside Out

Special Report

In response to our world of dwindling greenery and densely-packed metropolises, Dutch visual artist Simon Heijdens turns technology to aesthetic ends, creating subtle ornamental works existing and evolving in response to their natural surroundings. **Jonathan Bell** met him in London to talk ambient design and technological ennui...

Simon Heijdens's small East London studio is spotless, located in a small mews close to Brick Lone, with worn but clean floorboards and two desks and two computers. An abstract soundtrack of ambient clicks and beeps plays in the background. The only evidence of work in progress are three pieces of prototype ceramics on a sideboard, part of Heijdens's Broken White project. created in 2004 for Droog Design, Broken White encapsulates the designer's approach, an intriguing mix of analogue and digital explorations into the relationship we have with objects and our surroundings, By combining work that uses simple, apparently immutable materials like ceramics with the unpredictable aesthetics of computer-generated graphics, Heijdens reveals a fascination with the role objects play in our society, and the ways in which our perception of them can be changed.

Having studied experimental film and product and media design at Design Academy Eindhoven in the Netherlands, Heijdens now finds himself one of the leading exponents of what might loosely be called 'ambient design' (Heijdens doesn't like the term 'interactive'), Choosing to implement technology in a more subtle way than his contemporaries he produces high-profile works like 3, Rising Slowly, a chandelier designed for the Austrian company Swarovski that are quietly integrated with their surroundings. In the case of the chandelier, strands of threaded crystals are linked to an external wind sensor, triggering a ripple through the threads that mimics exactly the external conditions (which might not be immediately apparent to the viewer) It becomes a living object, one that is constantly changing.

Rising Slowly—chandelier for Swarovski Crystal Palace, 2006
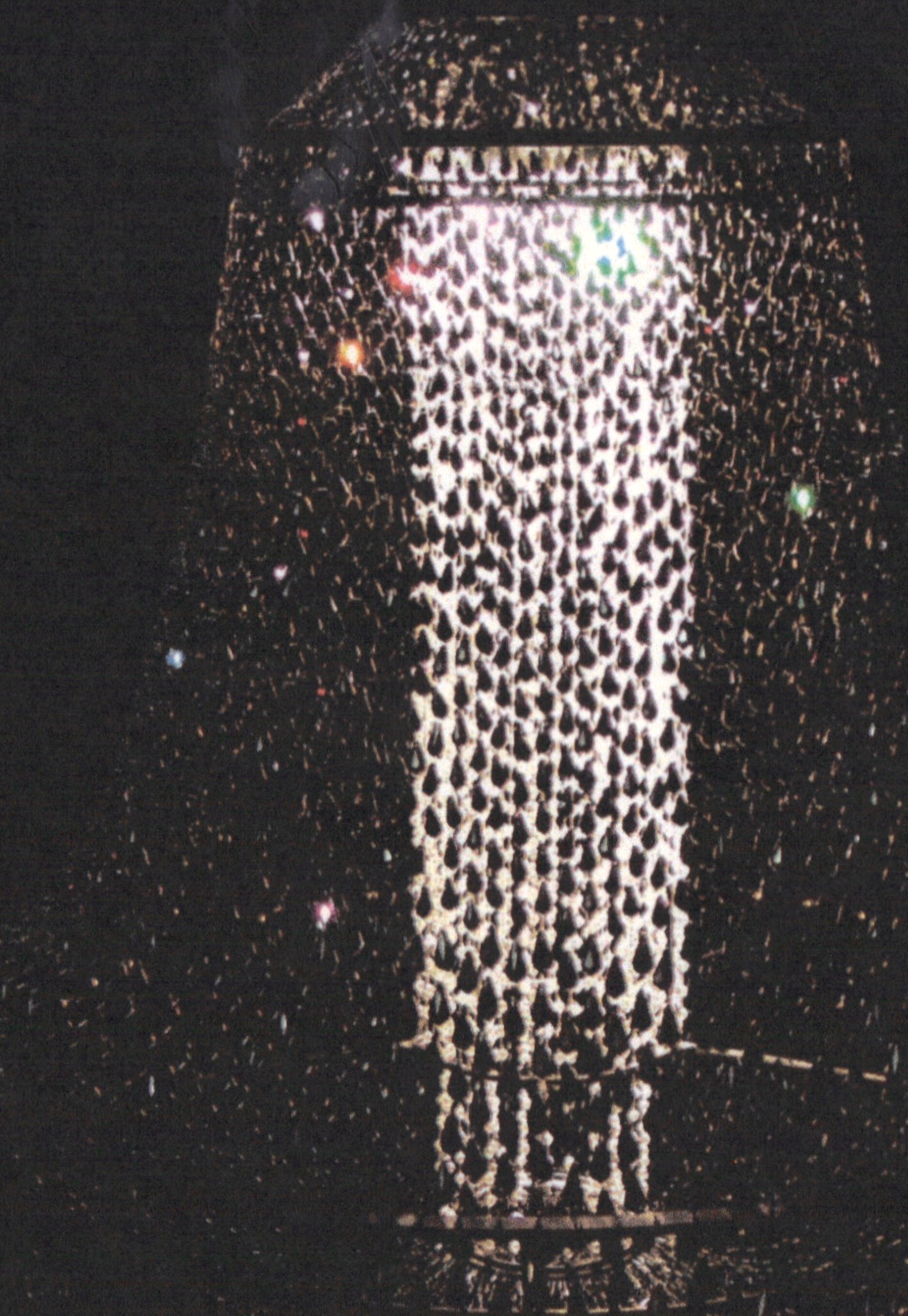
Technology is not everything to Heijdens. "Sometimes it´s very analogue, like the ceramics, other times it´s very technical, like the Swarovski chandelier," he says, describing how the Broken White project attempts to undermine the fixed nature of the thing. "Why are objects designed in such a static way?" he asks. By doctoring the glaze on the objects, Heijdens introduces a flaw that grows with time, introducing decoration in a subtle and unconventional way through the small, non-structural lines—the craquelure—that appear in the glaze, making them appear more charracterful and more delicate, mirroring the intense and complex patterns on upscale ceramics. In this way, the user creates a dialogue with the object. "I create a tension in the ceramics," says Heijdens, and it is tension that is the crucial element in his work; be it a sudden movement or unexpected gradual metamorphosis.

Technology offers myriad ways of generating this feeling. "I did a group of projects about trying to introduce nature into artificial space," says Heijdens. "It grew from my interest into how our daily surroundings become more and more static—our lives are more and more in artificial spaces with no movement." The project entitled Tree is the best manifestation of the response to this observation, a computer-generated tree projected at roughly life-size onto the side of a building ("a fake forest revealing real nature"). The piece is not site-specific, and has been shown at numerous locations around the world (multiple versions in New York are being presented in early 2007). The 'tree' itself is a computer graphic, 'evolved' rather than drawn, and responding with subtlety to passing foot traffic by shedding a leaf, for example, eventually forming a pattern of discarded vegetation that swirls and cascades realistically as pedestrians approach.

These objects are "open to their environment", according to Heijdens. The Lightweeds installation is his current concern, in the process of being installed in the Erasmus MC Hospital in Rotterdam. A follow-up to Tree, it uses a similar projection-system set-up but with far more sophisticated software. At Erasmus, walls are adorned with computer-generated 'plants', a 2D representation of slowly growing stalks and leaves that respond to data taken directly from the hospital building itself—rainfall, wind speed, etc. "My hope is that it will improve patients' lives," says Heijdens, adding that hospital is "a strange place to be, so we are trying to introduce natural elements". The Lightweeds are far more immersive; installed around the large campus, they can be 'pollinated' by sensing movement from one building to another, almost covertly tracing patterns of usage. Heijdens likens this to the contrast between a "sand path and a paved road; one shows a lot of information, the other none".

At its core, Lightweeds is about "softening the skin of public space". Despite his background in film studies, Heijdens eschews the term animator, stressing how the digital vegetation with its hypnotic, waving movements is generated purely from data, providing a theoretically infinite universe of possible forms, just as the 'wind' tugs at the branches of the Tree. "I don´t want to animate, I want to make a project that responds to its surroundings and is animated," he says, describing the sterile architectural landscape of the Erasmus buildings, symptomatic of the ever-more hermetic nature of modern life. Can the technology that shrink-wraps us somehow be turned in on itself to provide natural, evocative cues and imagery? These projects are also perfect for the public realm. "It's just light, it's very hard to break," he says simply.

01
Reed, 2006

02
Lightweeds,
Erasmus Hospital,
Rotterdam,
2006

03
Moving Wallpaper,
2002

For now, these tense objects occupy galleries rather than stores. Does Heijdens make a distinction between products and objects? "Everything can become a product. The Mona Lisa is a highly exploited product," he begins, explaining that in contrast "any rock you find on the street can become a highly personal object." Heijdens is right to give the user the ultimate responsibility as to how they respond to objects and their surroundings. "I'm absolutely not interested in instant reaction and press-button interaction," he says. The irony is that we live in an age saturated with technological objects that profess to synch with our lifestyles—and hence desires—the minute we get them out of the box. But with this highly charged emotional investment comes a new era of planned obsolescence: the iPod whose battery fatally expires or the relentless feature creep of mobile phones.

Tackling the ennui caused by this technological overload has been Heijdens's concern since his student days. Moving Wallpaper (2002), his graduation project at Eindhoven, was both the first salvo in his war on the flat, unresponsive surface, and also a way of "hooking into flows and frictions that are already there", a surface treated with a Polaroid-style pigment that allows for constant variation of pattern and image.

Moving Wallpaper paved the way for a viability study with Rem Koolhaas's Office for Metropolitan Architecture then working on a series of stores for Prada; this is a Pandora's Box of innovation. "People start to realise the possibility of making static objects like building façades into things with a character," Heijdens enthuses, although he isn't keen on the idea of the shimmering, animated cityscapes of science fiction poised to burst into life; imagine a world made up entirely of Piccadilly Circuses. There is an irony in the way in which such considered, subtle work that addresses the crassness of consumerism might ultimately end up becoming a prime commercial tool.

For now, these considerations are not foremost in Heijdens's mind. Aware that a technological revolution is always just around the corner, especially in terms of the affordability of projection and computing equipment, he is content with being a forerunner and not a progenitor of a new visual culture. It is up to us to shape what comes next.

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01
Clean Carpets, 2002

02
Tree, Checkpoint
Charlie, Berlin, 2004