

“Cable Tangle: Energy Consumption in the Household”

[German title: Kabelsalat – Energiekonsum im Haushalt]

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Figure 1
General view of the exhibition Cable Tangle in the library foyer of the Deutsches Museum, Munich. Photo by author.

Technological products used for household purposes constitute the focus of the exhibition “Cable Tangle,” presented in the library foyer of the Deutsches Museum, Munich—the leading German museum of science and technology. The exhibition was curated by Nina Möllers, Sophie Gerber, and Nina Lorkowski; its opening was on January 12, 2012, and it is expected to remain on display until July 15, 2012. The title of the exhibition, “Kabelsalat”—literally meaning “cable salad”—is a term used to describe an unwanted clutter of cables that is difficult to untangle; it is an allusion to the proliferation of electrical appliances and gadgets in the domestic context. The subject of the exhibition is the study of such appliances from the perspective of energy consumption.

The exhibition offers a timely and refreshing look into the domestic landscape, covering the spectrum of attitudes toward energy consumption since the end of the nineteenth century. On entering the exhibition space, incandescent and energy-efficient bulbs, positioned on the opposite sides of a glass display case,

exemplify the two extremes of this spectrum. On the one hand, the fascination and wonder in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries engendered by the new, liberating force of electricity as expressed by the words from the engineer, Oskar von Miller, the museum's founder and enduring father-figure but also a pioneer of the energy industry. On the other hand, the fact that, in the second half of the twentieth century and in the beginning of the twenty-first, the environmental crisis has shaken people's beliefs in progress, as suggested by sociologist's Ulrich Beck's view included in the exhibition catalogue; there is now deep concern over energy consumption and an urgent need to preserve resources through the use of efficient technologies.

The three main parts of the exhibition correspond to the chronological periods 1900–1945, 1945–1972, and 1973–present. For each period, four display cases are presented, for a total of 12. Captions are in German, and an English translation is provided of the main texts for each period.

The first period (1900–1945), titled “The household—Between Tradition and Modernity,” consists of exhibit cases on electricity as luxury, standardization of electrical equipment, the simplification of household tasks, and different uses of electricity in war and peace.

The second period (1945–1972), “The Household in the Affluent Society,” has sections on the household as a battlefield during the Cold War, on cosmetic uses of technology at home, on the design and symbolic forms of home appliances, and on the influence of technology on the division of labor and on gendering and role-building.

The third period (1973–present), “The Household After the Oil Crises,” comprises exhibits on comfort and hygiene, on new developments during the 1980s and 1990s, on the necessity of change in the global energy regime, and finally on the problems and contradictions of energy consumption in the twenty-first century.

As this description indicates, the exhibition follows an elaborate structure, unfolding both chronologically (through the three periods) and thematically (through the 12 display cases)—a structure that allows the curators to cover the complexity of the subject in a very satisfactory and thought-provoking manner. The display cases present a range of household electrical appliances from the Museum's collections and from various company archives: electric frying pans, irons, lamps, tanning devices, shavers, coffee machines, game consoles, and mobile phones. These items are accompanied by relevant documentation, including photographs, posters, books, magazines, and other archival items. The emphasis is not placed on the objects themselves as items of consumption, but on the consumption of energy resulting from their use. Thus,

design for household technical objects is situated in a discourse of energy resources and sustainability, rather than on the well-trodden path of taste, personal gratification, and identity-building through consumption. The latter aspects are not absent from the analysis presented by the exhibition and the accompanying catalogue, but they are treated under the umbrella of energy issues. This perspective is, I believe, the major contribution of “Cable Tangle,” which, without compromising aesthetic and other considerations of products, foregrounds the issues of energy availability, use, and abuse in domestic settings.

The layout and design of the exhibition is rather conventional and partly undermines the depth and quality of its content. The exhibits are arranged in the wood and glass cases that constitute the standard equipment of this room (the museum’s library entrance hall) and are regularly used for different exhibitions. The outdated presentation style of the main exhibits is counterbalanced to some extent by a number of other devices that the curators have used to infuse variety and interactivity: Near the entrance, a whiteboard stands as invitation for visitors to write down their thoughts; these texts are then recorded as polaroid images and exhibited on a panel, next to a table where visitors can browse the exhibition catalogue and write further comments in a notebook. Presumably, this process of interactivity might eventually result in a collection of user feedback that could serve as the basis for another exhibit or publication. In addition, two screens have been hung to show TV advertisements and documentary films from past decades. The curators clearly tried to make the best use of their available space and time resources and to minimize costs. Furthermore, “Cable Tangle” was not meant to be a major exhibition nor an end in itself; instead, it is the partial outcome of much broader research activities run jointly by the Deutsches Museum and the Technical University of Munich. The event is complemented by a richly illustrated catalogue (in German), including introductory texts and all the exhibition captions, as well as an extended essay by Möllers.

In conclusion, although “Cable Tangle” might be perceived as a missed opportunity in terms of exhibition design, it nevertheless is very informative and presents a rigorous, in-depth treatment of its subject matter. Visitors can leave the exhibition with the satisfactory feeling of having learned a lot and with the impression of having encountered a serious approach to the significance and centrality of energy consumption in the household. Possible repercussions of this approach to design practice and scholarship remain to be seen. A possible next step would be to examine the consumption of energy throughout the production, distribution, and recycling of the electrical appliances and gadgets that flood the modern home and occupy such a central role in contemporary lifestyles.