

THE 9TH ANNUAL YEAR IN IDEAS


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- [NATURAL SCIENCE](#)
- [POLITICS & POLICY](#)
- [SOCIAL SCIENCE](#)
- [SPORTS](#)
- [TECHNOLOGY](#)

Once again, The Times Magazine looks back on the past year from our favored perch: ideas. Like a magpie building its nest, we have hunted eclectically, though not without discrimination, for noteworthy notions of 2009 — the twigs and sticks and shiny paper scraps of human ingenuity, which, when collected and woven together, form a sort of cognitive shelter, in which the curious mind can incubate, hatch and feather. Unlike birds, we can also alphabetize. And so we hereby present, from A to Z, the most clever, important, silly and just plain weird innovations we carried back from all corners of the thinking world. To offer a nonalphabetical option for navigating the entries, this year we have attached tags to each item indicating subject matter. We hope you enjoy.

Advertisement That Watches You, The

 "It happens when nobody is watching." As the tagline on a poster raising awareness about domestic violence, that's not bad. But it was the poster itself that was truly attention-grabbing — for it brought the issue of being watched (or not) to life.

The poster, placed in a bus shelter in Berlin, was a one-time installation sponsored by Amnesty International. When a person in the shelter was looking at the poster, he saw, along with the words, a photograph of an amiable couple: a stocky, professional-looking man in a blue oxford-cloth shirt, his arm around the shoulders of his girlfriend or wife. If no one in the shelter was paying attention to the poster, though, the image switched: now the man was raising his fist against the woman as she leaned away and protected her face. (There was a slight lag in the switch, so viewers could notice that the poster was changing its image.)

Designed by the Hamburg-based firm Jung von Matt (which bills itself as being in the business of "attention warfare"), the ad worked via a camera attached to a

ADVERTISEMENT PHOTOGRAPHY BY JUNG VON MATT
Using a camera and face-tracking software, a poster in a Berlin bus shelter demonstrates what may be happening only when nobody is looking.

computer outfitted with face-tracking software with a working range of about 16 feet. A Potsdam company called Vis-à-pix created the technology. Jung von Matt described the ad as the first of its kind, and it won a silver prize at the 2009 Cannes Lions International Advertising Festival and a gold prize at the New York Festivals International Advertising Awards.

The technology has since improved, according to Vis-à-pix. New posters can even identify the sex of onlookers. Consider a poster created for the service counters of the rental-car company Sixt: when a man gets close, he is tempted with an image of a limousine; if the customer is a woman, she sees, instead, a spunky Cabriolet.
CHRISTOPHER SHEA

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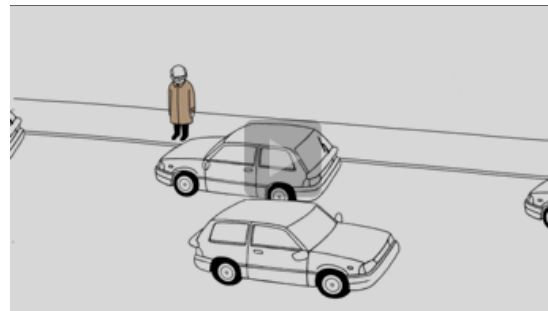
Artificial Car Noise

Nothing seemed to herald the end of the internal combustion engine more than the ability of hybrid cars to leap suddenly to life without the slightest sound. Unfortunately, it turns out that the sweet silence of 21st-century technology has a serious downside: pedestrians and bicyclists are less likely to hear hybrids and electric cars coming their way and are more likely to be clipped or run over. That has prompted a back-to-the-future solution: fake car noise that will alert the unwary.

The evidence that hybrids might be hard to hear coming has been accumulating for years, though it wasn't until the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration recently released a study that the full extent of the problem was revealed. Data derived from thousands of accidents revealed that there was no difference between hybrids and conventional vehicles on straightaways. But at intersections, interchanges, parking lots and other places where cars traveled at slow speeds, hybrids proved far more hazardous, with pedestrians and bicyclists getting hit at up to twice the normal rate.



ILLUSTRATION BY MARC JOHNS



ANIMATION BY PEEPSHOW COLLECTIVE

Having spent years trying to make cars quieter, manufacturers of hybrids and electric cars now find themselves in the curious position of figuring out the best means of warning people that 3,000 pounds of metal is rolling their way. A melodious trill? The muted roar of a muscle car? A hook from some annoying song? So far there's no consensus, and absent any standard there's a risk that the roads of tomorrow will play host to a cacophony of hoots, whistles and whirs.

As the debate continues, manufacturers of hybrid and electric cars, like Nissan and Fisker, are rolling out models equipped with high-tech noises that broadcast both their car's presence and their futuristic status. Others, like the high-end manufacturer Tesla, are holding out and sticking with the sound of silence. STEPHEN MIHM

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