# TAGGED!
## stolen things

by Kerstin von Locquenghien | 28. Juni 2005

RFID (= Radio Frequency Identification) is currently a very fast developing market. According to many studies, the future prognostics of the branch look optimistic. Whether or not these prognostics will prove true in the future remains to be seen. What can be noticed already, however, is the fact that RFID is not only implemented in industry, logistic or supply-chain-management applications, but also increasingly in the everyday environment of the public. Alerting in this context is the other fact that only a very small percentage of people know about RFID, its main characteristics and application purposes. According to a study published at the beginning of 2005 only an average of 18% of Europeans have ever heard of RFID – in Germany even only 15%.

Whereas RFID is promoted as one of the most innovative and profit bringing technologies in the field of business and industry, privacy activists try to warn the public about the dangers arising from the invasion of RFID into the everyday life and call RFID-labels “Spy Chips” or “Little Brothers”. Some even fear the destruction of democracy and the liberal constitutional state. Although the main mass media like newspapers and television has not reported much about the discussion, in recent months it has shown to become an issue in some specialized press articles. But the reports are often very biased or controversial and therefore make people insecure about how to judge the technology themselves.

However, for a public discussion as part of the democratic system it is necessary for people first of all to know about RFID as a technology and also about the applications planned for the near future and its possible impacts. What is also greatly missing these days is the conscious practical experience of people with RFID systems, since usually they remain almost “invisible” in the background and most processes are only displayed through an interface for their operators.

For all these reasons the installation’s intention is to raise the awareness for RFID in the public and to help clarify the current debate a little bit for people who do not know anything or not much about RFID, or those who have become insecure from controversial reports. The installation is based on an entertaining narrative approach, which should first of all invite the users to interact with it while gaining their own experience and getting an idea of how RFID works and what other applications might be possible, useful or even dangerous. Other questions arising are: “How does it feel, when everyday objects become ‘smart’?” or: “What would it be like, if already today every item was tagged”. While nowadays private individual applications of RFID rarely exist, the installation should also raise the awareness for the potential of private RFID use still widely lying idle.

The installation consists of a big shelf in which several everyday objects are presented. At first sight it looks like a normal shelf, which could be part of everyone’s living room. In the middle of the shelf there is one empty cubicle and a screen display. When the user places one of the RFID-tagged objects in this cubicle, the hidden antenna reads the ID-number and the linked data is displayed on the screen above.

Each object tells a little story about how, where or from whom it has been stolen by means of a short movie, a picture sequence or a sound file. After having viewed some of the objects’ information it becomes clear, that all these objects have been stolen by a young lady over a certain period of time and that she has been collecting and proudly presenting them in this present shelf for her hobby. By spending some time exploring the objects closely parts of her personality and the development of her criminal career can be revealed.

In order to contrast this personal content with commercial applications, the documentation of the stolen objects is embedded into a fictional commercial RFID Software called “HOMEiDENT”. When placing the object in the intended cubicle, the fictional “manufacturer’s information” is displayed first hinting at possible other applications before switching to the local private database.

Beyond, the theme of (mis-)using RFID for categorizing and documenting stolen things ironically plays with the fact that traditionally RFID is also used as an anti-theft device at retail.