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**TALK
TO ME**

**Design and the Communication
between People and Objects**

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MoMA

Talk to Me
Design and the Communication
between People and Objects



The exhibition is made possible by Hyundai Card Company.

Additional support is provided by Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis, Lily Auchincloss Foundation, Inc., and The Junior Associates of The Museum of Modern Art.

MoMA EXHIBITION INVESTIGATES THE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PEOPLE AND OBJECTS THROUGH DESIGN

Installation Provides Visitors with Greater Access to Information by Incorporating the Use of Technology, Including QR Codes and Twitter Hashtags for Each Object

Talk to Me: Design and the Communication between People and Objects

July 24–November 7, 2011

Special Exhibitions Gallery, third floor

NEW YORK, July 19, 2011—The Museum of Modern Art presents ***Talk to Me: Design and the Communication between People and Objects*** from July 24 to November 7, 2011. With nearly 200 projects ranging from the microscopic to the cosmic and all designed in the past few years or currently under development, the exhibition explores design’s new terrain: enhancing communicative possibilities, embodying a new balance between technology and people, and bringing technological breakthroughs to an approachable, human scale. These projects include interfaces, websites, video games, tools, charts, and information systems on topics global and local, public and personal. The exhibition is organized by Paola Antonelli, Senior Curator, and Kate Carmody, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Architecture and Design, The Museum of Modern Art.

Whether openly and actively or in subtle, emotional, or subliminal ways, objects talk to people. As the purpose of design has, in past decades, shifted away from mere utility toward meaning and communication, objects that were once charged only with being elegant and functional now need to have personalities. Thanks to digital technology, these objects even have the tools to communicate through their interfaces, adding a new interactive dimension. Contemporary designers, in addition to giving objects form, function, and meaning, now write the initial scripts that are the foundations for these useful and satisfying conversations.

Talk to Me highlights the groundbreaking ways in which objects help users interact with complex systems and networks. It focuses on objects and concepts that involve direct interaction, such as interfaces for ATMs, check-in kiosks, and emergency dispatch centers; visualization designs that render visible complex data about people, cities, and nations; communication devices and other products that translate and deliver information; expressive and talkative objects; and projects that establish a practical, emotional, or even sensual connection between their users and entities such as cities, companies, governmental institutions—as well as other people. The exhibition is loosely divided into six sections, according to who or what is doing the talking, from objects to other people, the city, and even life.

Greeting visitors at the entrance to the exhibition is Yann Le Coroller’s Talking Carl (2010), an iPhone and iPad app in which a box-shaped creature responds to sound and touch, gets ticklish and jumpy, and repeats what visitors say in a high-pitched voice. Other interactive

features in the exhibition include a working NYC MetroCard Vending Machine (1999), designed by Masamichi Udagawa and Sigi Moeslinger of Antenna Design, and David Reinfurt, Kathleen Holman, and MTA New York City Transit, and manufactured for MTA New York City by Cubic Transportation Systems, with special *Talk to Me* MetroCards available for purchase; Kacie Kinzer's Tweenbots (2009), little robots that roam the Museum asking visitors for help crossing galleries; and Tentacles (2009), a multiplayer video game created by Michael Longford (Mobile Media Lab, York University, Canada), Geoffrey Shea (Mobile Experience Lab, Ontario College of Art and Design), and Rob King (Canadian Film Centre Media Lab) that visitors can engage with on a giant screen.

A device called a BakerTweet (2009) by the design firm Poke is installed in the Museum's Cafe 2, and staff will use it to announce by Twitter the moment when something delicious pops out of the oven, or the lunch specials of the day. The feed is displayed on a screen in the exhibition and also seen by followers of @MoMABakerTweet on Twitter on their own devices.

Each object in the exhibition has its own hashtag and a QR code, which allows visitors to bookmark it and access more information about each object on the exhibition's website, www.moma.org/talktome, in the galleries, or at home.

The exhibition is divided into six sections:

Objects

This section includes physical objects and interfaces that are not just communicative and reactive, but are also interactive. Some are explorations of things' and humans' behaviors—such as Kinzer's Tweenbots, small, constantly moving cardboard robots armed only with flags that ask passersby to point them toward a particular destination. These Tweenbots will roam the Museum at specially announced times during the run of the exhibition. Other featured objects are functional, such as the interface for the MetroCard Vending Machine. The machine in the exhibition dispenses specially designed MetroCards, which will also be available at subway stations throughout New York. The MTA's Vending Machine was selected because of its outstanding interface, which leads customers through the process of buying MetroCards in a manner that is efficient, no-nonsense, and visually memorable, in true New York spirit.

At home, in the office, or on the road, people are increasingly surrounded by specialized companions and expressive digital pets. Some live in multifunctional devices, like Le Coroller's Talking Carl, while others are autonomous, demanding to be seen and heard from their own bodies. Michiko Nitta's Mr. Smilit (2003), for instance, is a toy that reacts to the noise of a child's cry with a cry of its own, which may cause the child to stop crying and care for the doll. By integrating old-fashioned objects such as books and cuckoo-clocks with mobile applications, designers have created a hybrid of old and new, physical and digital. Mike Thompson's Wifi Dowsing Rod (2007) provides comfort to people who may be overwhelmed by current technologies. Thompson has adapted the familiar form of a divining rod—believed in the past to be

able to locate underground sources of water—into a tool that seeks out and indicates the strength of the unseen wireless signals that are all around us.

I'm Talking to You

This section explores the communication between people—and within individuals—by means of objects. The human body and mind—and how they express themselves in ways previously unthinkable thanks to digital technology— are the central agents and subjects of study in this section,. Some of the featured concepts are quintessential products of the time, mixing irony and malaise about interpersonal communication with curiosity and an eagerness to overcome these obstacles creatively. Alarmists fear that people's reliance on digital communication has turned them into restless souls that, despite exchanging information and thoughts around the clock on blogs and social networks, can no longer articulate ideas and emotions; several of the design hypotheses in this section were generated to compensate for this, either psychologically or physically.

From Sascha Nordmeyer's *Communication Prosthesis* (2009), a plastic smile that covers the lips and exposes the gums, making communication more explicit by forcing automatic facial expressions to help the socially awkward, to Gerard Ralló's series *Devices for Mindless Communication* (2010), a range of communication interfaces that help the socially inept, designers have been quick in pointing out the absurdity and poetry of our present condition, as well as some possible remedies. Critical design is at its brightest on this human scale, with highly conceptual—albeit also highly descriptive—scenarios that explore the possible benefits and probable impacts of new technologies, often using dystopian narratives to heighten the urgency.

Not all the projects are speculative; some are pragmatic, and the one prompted by the most urgent conditions is also the most lyrical: *EyeWriter* (2009), created by Zach Lieberman, James Powderly, Evan Roth, Chris Sugrue, TEMPT1, and Theo Watson, is an interface that enables a paralyzed graffiti artist to tag buildings with his eyes using a remote control laser. It demonstrates that necessity and emergency can give rise not simply to particular solutions for extreme individual cases but also to breakthroughs for society at large.

Located adjacent to The Agnes Gund Garden Lobby on the ground floor of the Museum will be the video game *Tentacles*. Players begin the game in the dark at the bottom of the ocean, each controlling a squidlike form evolving out of the primordial ooze and hunting for life-sustaining microorganisms called tentacles. As each creature eats, it grows and is confronted with other players' growing creatures, which can steal its tentacles and deprive it of nutrients. Players must decide, the designers say, if they are out for themselves or willing to be part of the larger whole, making for a dynamic and philosophical public game.

Life

Designers search for the meaning of life in their own empirical and suggestive ways. Some narrate life from birth to death—as Jason Rohrer does in his video game *Passage* (2008)—and others zero in on the most minute and mundane moments, such as tooth brushing or procrastinating:

Benjamin Dannel's poster *Brushing Teeth* (2009) shows kids and adults how to brush their teeth, while David McCandless's poster *Hierarchy of Digital Distractions* (2009) is a pyramid diagram of the interferences constantly gnawing at attention spans in this socially networked, data-consuming world.

The question of the meaning of life is so enormous and profound—and life itself so difficult to perceive in its entire trajectory—that society must rely on synthesis and description, two characteristics of visualization design, in order to capture its range. Scientists and statisticians have long used visualization design to make sense of complex behaviors gathered in large data sets; in this exhibition, designers employ it to help society understand the ultimate mystery. In some cases this daunting task is approached through narrative, such as Christien Meindertsma and Julie Joliat's gripping book *PIG 05049* (2006), a deadpan investigation of the deconstruction and afterlife of a slaughtered pig. Frank Warren's *PostSecret* (2004) offers a peek into the darkest corners of the human soul. In this mail-based project, people anonymously send him postcards with their deepest secrets written on them, expecting neither judgment nor absolution. The haiku-like confessions have the power to haunt readers much as they have haunted the individuals who contributed them.

Thoughtful projects in the exhibition connect religious practices and rituals with contemporary technology. Examples include Soner Ozenc's *El Sajjadah* (2005), a Muslim prayer rug that lights up when correctly positioned facing Mecca, and *The Prayer Companion* (2010), by the Interaction Research Studio at Goldsmiths University London. The T-shaped device scrolls global information across its ticker-tape interface, informing an order of cloistered nuns based in Northern England of world issues that could benefit from their prayers.

City

Because of its density and complex infrastructures and systems, the city relies on communication for its own sheer survival. It is an environment of continuous negotiation and navigation, based on codes of behavior that are timeless—the basic laws of human cohabitation—but often unwritten. These codes demand relentless adaptation and renewal.

With their ideas and products, designers can enhance clarity, civility, and engagement by involving citizens in the maintenance of the codes that keep the city alive. Designers can also stimulate the flow of communication that is the vital lymph of the urban organism. This section shows the changed role of designers—from creators of form and function to enablers, inspirers, and facilitators—in particular detail.

Using technology, designers can enhance a sense of neighborhood, like with the BakerTweet, all the while helping us to communicate effectively, feel pride in our cities, and find inventive ways to get along, as with Chromaroma (2010) by Toby Barnes and Matt Watkins of Mudlark. Chromaroma uses an existing infrastructure—London’s transportation systems—as a platform for a real-time game in which commuters sign up to play using their Oyster cards, a form of electronic ticketing used in Greater London, and then are grouped into one of four teams, where they rack up points with each journey and strategically complete specific tasks and missions. Technology can also enable authorities to coordinate routine and emergency responses, as with Electronic Ink, Inc.’s 911 Command Center Radio Control Application (2006), an emergency-response interface that helps dispatch critical resources more efficiently and with fewer errors.

Worlds

Over the course of the twentieth century, people’s perception of the world has been transformed by momentous technological breakthroughs, among them air travel, telephones, television, satellites, and the Internet. Faraway people and places have come within reach, if not physically, then via video or audio. The world seems to have shrunk, but in reality these innovations have added layers of understanding and communication, making that same world deeper and richer with new metaphysical and expressive dimensions. Newly conceived virtual worlds, such as the myriad sites and artificial environments supported by the Internet, have further diversified the choices for inhabitation, with interesting social and cultural consequences.

What most of these technologies have in common is the fact that they are based on systems and rely on network connections, just like the natural world. Understanding their designs should be and often is a requirement for those building these physical and virtual environments, such as designers, architects, and engineers. For those who are not willing or able to understand the systems but still need access to them, there are interfaces that function as zones of engagement and exchange.

One of design’s foremost directives is to bring technological breakthroughs to a comfortable and understandable human scale. The projects in this section deal with both natural and artificial systems of all dimensions. There are efforts to render complex phenomena, such as the way trees work in Alex Metcalf’s Tree Listening installations (2008–09). Metcalf designed a listening device, powered by solar energy, which is placed on a tree trunk, linked to an amplifier, and connected to headphones that hang from the branches of trees in various locations in London and around the United Kingdom. Through the headphones, passersby can listen to a tree’s inner workings—a “quiet popping sound” of the water passing through its cells or a “deep rumbling sound” produced by the tree’s movement. The installation joins science and art in a multilayered interaction with the natural world. Erik Hersman, David Kobia, Ory Okolloh, and Juliana Rotich created Ushahidi (2008), a free Web-based tool for collecting, visualizing, and mapping

information. The service, whose name means “testimony” in Swahili, was launched in Kenya in 2008, when a disputed election caused riots to erupt across the country. The website enables citizens to report incidents and identify safe spaces, using their mobile phones, on the geographic platforms Google Maps, Yahoo! Maps, OpenStreetMap, and Microsoft Virtual. It was recently put to use during the 2010 earthquakes in Haiti and Chile, and the 2011 tsunami in Japan.

Double Entendre

In this world of constant communication, ignorance is not considered bliss and misunderstandings can be missed opportunities. Moreover, there is the possibility of multiple interpretations, which can be channeled to add depth to a dialogue. To fine-tune their efforts, designers have become engaged not only in the classical principles of their education and in the typical preoccupations of their trade, but also in the basic tenets of cognitive science and scriptwriting. They are tackling new issues that have become central to our daily activities, such as negotiations of privacy and anonymity in the public theater of the Internet.

Central to their research is the role of translation and interpretation. Many people have devoted their lives to helping us understand others, and this section contains design solutions for curious humans who want to experience what it feels like to be something or somebody else, whether a menstruating woman—as in Sputniko!’s Menstruation Machine–Takashi’s Take (2010), a metal belt-like device equipped with a blood-dispensing system and electrodes that stimulate the lower abdomen, replicating the pain and bleeding of the average five-day menstruation period—or an inhabitant of a parallel universe, as in 5th Dimensional Camera created by John Arden and Anab Jain of Superflux, which shows a number of parallel and different timelines as posited by the many-worlds theory.

Examples in this section also focus on the translation of experiences—color and light patterns into music, virtual links into physical ones, colors into touch, touch into text. Examples include Konstantin Datz’s Rubik’s Cube for the Blind (2010), which features embossed braille words on the squares for each color; Dan Collier’s Typographic Links (2007), which reimagines hyperlinks as physical red threads in the pages of a book about typography; Design Incubation Centre’s Touch Hear (2008), which consists of a finger implant a person uses to go over a word or phrase in a book and an ear implant where the user can listen to its related information, such as pronunciation or meaning; and Toshio Iwai’s Tenori-On (2004), a handheld device with a gridded screen of LED switches that plays synthesized sound and light patterns.

With actionable proposals and visionary clarity, designers have joined the ranks of those encouraging cross-cultural understanding. Their activist efforts work toward simple goals: acceptance, or at least tolerance; curiosity rather than rejection; and a more fulfilling, organic, and just way of living together.

SPONSORSHIP:

The exhibition is made possible by Hyundai Card Company.

Additional support is provided by Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis, Lily Auchincloss Foundation, Inc., and The Junior Associates of The Museum of Modern Art.

PUBLICATION:

Organized thematically and featuring essays by Paola Antonelli, Jamer Hunt, Alexandra Midal, Kevin Slavin, and Khoi Vinh, *Talk to Me* introduces design practices that are increasingly crucial to our world and demonstrates how rich and deep the influence of design will be on our future. Some of the objects in the catalogue have QR codes, which allow readers to access videos that will complete the printed information on the object. Available at the MoMA stores and online at MoMAStore.org. Paperback, 10.5”h x 9”w x 1”d. 208 pages, 407 illustrations. ISBN: 978-0-87070-796-4. Price: \$35.00

WEBSITE:

The exhibition website, designed by Stamen Design, features all the objects in the exhibition and more. The site mirrors the organization of the exhibition, and objects are linked and organized dynamically based on conceptual relevance as well as artists' connections via Twitter. Each object is accompanied by pictures, texts, and video when available. The labels of the objects in the gallery include QR codes that link to the respective pages on the site for bookmarking and further exploration. Visitors will be able to comment on objects via Twitter using hashtags present on the site and on each label in the gallery. The site, www.moma.org/talktome, will be in previews beginning July 19 and will launch on July 24.

SOCIAL MEDIA:

Follow us on Twitter @MuseumModernArt or @TalktoMe2011 for updates and inside information about the exhibition. Use #talktome. Each object in the exhibition also has its own Twitter hashtag.

LIVE-STREAMED TOURS:

Live-streamed tours of the exhibition will be conducted by Paola Antonelli and educators from MoMA during the fall months. More details to be announced.

PROGRAMS:**Symposium: Talk to Me**

October 18, keynote at 6:00 p.m.

October 19, 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 1

This one-night and one-day event features talks, panels, conversations, and interviews on cognitive science, scriptwriting, speculative and science fiction, gaming, and new directions in design. More information to be announced. Tickets (\$12; \$10 members and corporate members; \$5 students, seniors, and staff of other museums) can be purchased at the information desk in the main lobby, the film desk, or online at moma.org/talks.

Modern Poets

November 2, 6:00 p.m.

The Celeste Bartos Theater

Rob Walker, contributing writer to the *New York Times Magazine* and co-organizer (with Joshua Glenn) of the writing project *Significant Objects*, which transformed objects through narratives, orchestrates an evening of responses to objects in the exhibition. Poets, writers, artists, and

cultural critics tell stories about, create instructions for, offer reviews of, and engage in conversations with select objects. Participants include Kenneth Goldsmith, poet; Ben Greenman, author and editor, *The New Yorker*; Leanne Shapton, illustrator, author and publisher; and Cintra Wilson, culture critic. Tickets (\$10; \$8 members and Corporate Members; \$5 students, seniors, and staff of other museums) can be purchased at the information desk in the main lobby, the film desk or online at moma.org/talks.

Brown Bag Lunch Lectures

Monday, September 19, and Thursday, September 22, 12:30–1:15 p.m.

The Lewis B. and Dorothy Cullman Education and Research Building, 4 West 54 Street

Kate Carmody leads a lecture about the exhibition. You may bring your own lunch.

Tickets (\$5; \$3 members, Corporate Members, students, seniors, and staff of other museums) can be purchased at the Museum at the lobby information desk, at the film desk, or in the Education and Research Building lobby.

POP RALLY EVENT:

Arcade, Hosted by Kill Screen

Wednesday, July 27, 8:30–11:30 p.m.

PopRally presents Arcade, an interactive evening of games selected by Kill Screen and inspired by the exhibition. Guests can play games in a variety of spaces throughout the Museum and Sculpture Garden, including *Bit Trip Beat*, *Canabalt*, *Limbo*, and a new motion-based Kinect project from Ryan Challinor and Matt Boch of Harmonix, creator of the hit music game *Rock Band*. Heathered Pearls (Ghostly International, ISO50) provides the soundtrack for the evening. Admission includes an exclusive exhibition viewing, a cocktail reception, a tote bag (limited supply), and an evening of gaming. Special thanks to Sud de France Wines. Beer provided by Brooklyn Brewery. Tickets (\$16 in advance, \$20 at the door) are available [online](#).

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Press Contact: Daniela Stigh, 212-708-9747 or daniela_stigh@moma.org
Margaret Doyle, 212-408-6400 or margaret_doyle@moma.org

For downloadable high-resolution images, register at MoMA.org/press.

Public Information:

The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, NY 10019, (212) 708-9400, MoMA.org

Hours: Wednesday through Monday, 10:30 a.m.–5:30 p.m. Friday, 10:30 a.m.–8:00 p.m. Closed Tuesday

SUMMER HOURS JULY 1–SEPT. 3: Sunday through Wednesday, 10:30 a.m.–5:30 p.m.

Thursday through Saturday, 10:30 a.m.–8:30 p.m.

Museum Admission: \$20 adults; \$16 seniors, 65 years and over with I.D.; \$12 full-time students with current I.D. Free, members and children 16 and under. (Includes admittance to Museum galleries and film programs). Target Free Friday Nights 4:00–8:00 p.m. (JULY 1–SEPT. 2: TARGET FREE FRIDAY NIGHTS 4:00–8:30 p.m.)

Film Admission: \$10 adults; \$8 seniors, 65 years and over with I.D. \$6 full-time students with current I.D. (For admittance to film programs only)

MoMA/MoMA PS1 Blog: MoMA.org/insideout

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Paola Antonelli

Senior Curator, Department of Architecture and Design, The Museum of Modern Art

Paola Antonelli is currently Senior Curator in The Department of Architecture and Design. She joined the Museum as Associate Curator in 1994, and was Curator from 2000 to 2007.

Ms. Antonelli has organized a number of important and well-received exhibitions at MoMA, including *Mutant Materials in Contemporary Design* (1995); *Thresholds: Contemporary Design from the Netherlands* (1996); *Achille Castiglioni: Design!* (1997-98); *Projects 66: Campana/Ingo Maurer* (1998); *Open Ends and Matter* (September 2000-February 2001); *Workspheres* (2001); *Humble Masterpieces* (2004); *SAFE: Design Takes On Risk* (2006); *Digitally Mastered: Recent Acquisitions from the Museum's Collection* (2006-07); *Just In: Recent Acquisitions from the Collection* (2007-08); *Design and the Elastic Mind* (2008); *Rough Cut: Design Takes a Sharp Edge* (2008-09); *Action! Design over Time* (2010); and *Standard Deviations: Types and Families in Contemporary Design* (2011).

Ms. Antonelli has lectured worldwide in settings ranging from peer conferences to global interdisciplinary gatherings such as the World Economic Forum in Davos, and she has served on several international architecture and design juries. From 1991 to 1993, she was a Lecturer at the University of California, Los Angeles, and has in the past few years also taught design history and theory at the Harvard Graduate School of Design and at the MFA program of the School of Visual Arts in New York.

The recipient of a Master's degree in Architecture from the Polytechnic of Milan in 1990, Ms. Antonelli is a Senior Fellow of the Royal College of Art, London, and has received an Honorary Doctorate in Design from Kingston University, London. She also earned the Smithsonian Institution's National Design Award in October 2006, and in 2007, she was named one of the 25 most incisive design visionaries by *Time* magazine.

Ms. Antonelli is the author of many exhibition catalogues, including the ones for *SAFE: Design Takes On Risk* (2006) and *Design and the Elastic Mind* (2008), as well as *Objects of Design* (2003), a book dedicated to design objects in the Museum's collection, and the publication *Humble Masterpieces: Everyday Marvels of Design* (2005), which highlights how good design facilitates and enriches our daily life. She is working on *Design Bites*, a book on foods from all over the world appreciated as great examples of design.

Kate Carmody

Curatorial Assistant, Department of Architecture and Design, The Museum of Modern Art

Kate Carmody is a Curatorial Assistant in The Department of Architecture and Design at The Museum of Modern Art. She holds a Master's degree from the History of Design and Decorative Arts program at Parsons The New School for Design. For MoMA, Ms. Carmody has co-organized, with Paola Antonelli, *Action! Design over Time* (2010) and *Standard Deviations: Types and Families in Contemporary Design* (2011).