

DESIGN

# MoMA Exhibit Shows How Technology Is Getting the Point Across



By Alice Rawsthorn

July 17, 2011

LONDON — When Tony Quan, an American graffiti artist known by the tag name TEMPT1, contracted amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, an often fatal form of motor neurone disease, his condition deteriorated rapidly until he was paralyzed except for his eyes. A group of friends from the Free Art & Technology laboratory, Graffiti Research Lab and other art and technology organizations joined forces to try to find ways of enabling him to continue his work.

The result was EyeWriter. The team fitted eye-tracking technology to a cheap pair of eyeglasses together with specially developed

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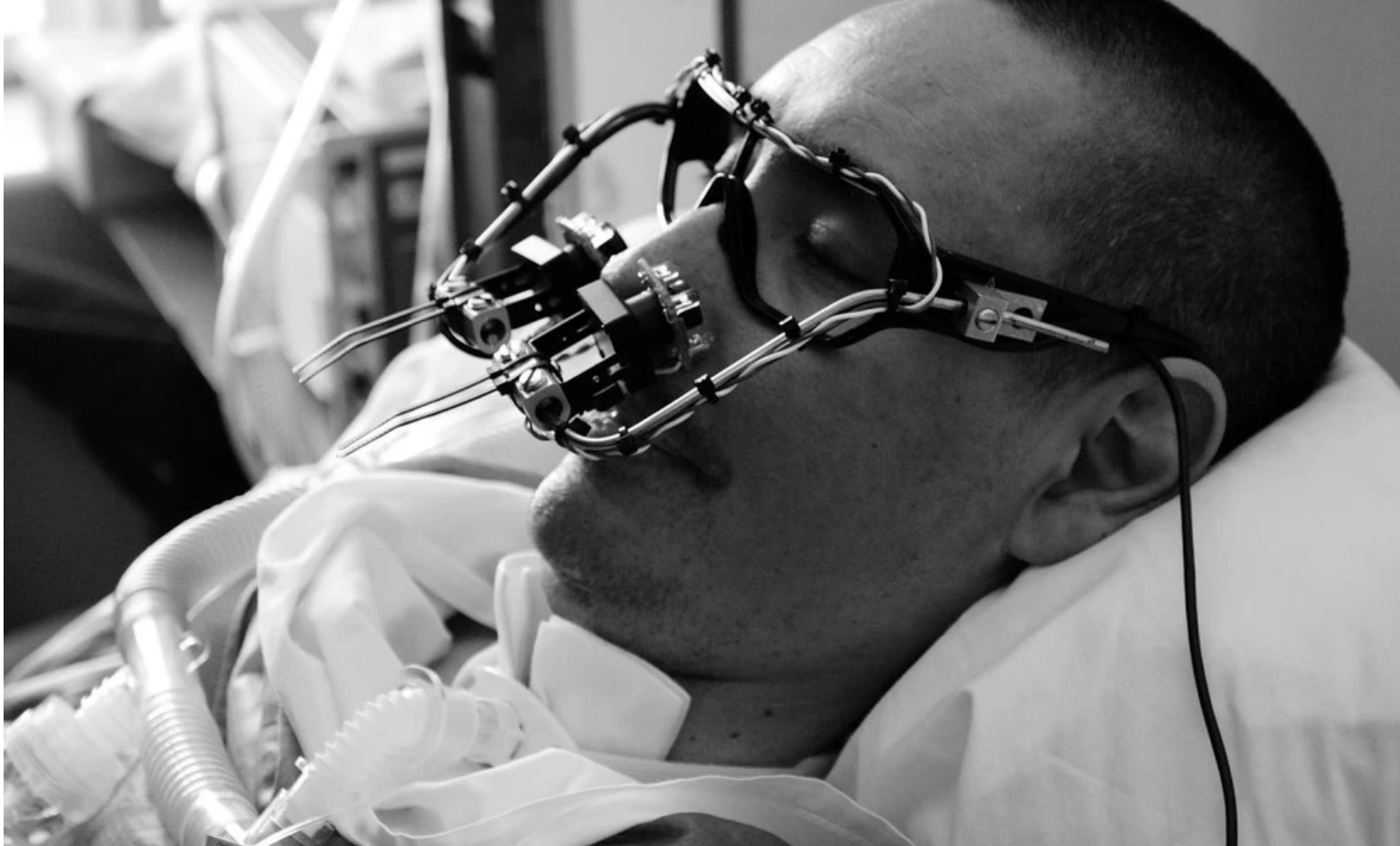
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York to explore how innovations in communication design are transforming our lives. The premise of the show is simple: that communication is now the dominant force in design.




EyeWriter records eye movements and relays them wirelessly to a laptop computer. EyeWriter Team/The Museum of Modern Art, New York


“We went through so many changes in the definition of design in the 20th century with all the clichés about form following function, and the addition of meaning in the 1960s with post-structuralism, but what is really important right now is communication,” Paola Antonelli, senior curator of architecture and design at MoMA, said by telephone. She co-curated the exhibition with a colleague, Kate Carmody. “Because of that designers can’t just think in terms of form, function and meaning when they develop new objects, they have to learn a bit of script writing too.”


MoMA has a proud history of staging manifesto shows that have identified emerging issues in design. During the 1930s, the architect Philip Johnson set a new standard of design curation in exhibitions, which analyzed industrial objects with a level of criticality that art museums like MoMA had traditionally reserved for painting and sculpture. A more populist approach was adopted in the 1940s and 1950s, when another MoMA curator, Edgar Kaufmann Jr., embarked on a crusade to educate post-war American consumers about the virtues of “good design.”

More recently, Ms. Antonelli has perpetuated the tradition by organizing a series of shows that have addressed design’s role in the digital age, culminating in “Design and the Elastic Mind” (2008), which examined the rapidly changing relationship of design, science and technology. A passionate champion of design, she produces exhibitions that are provocative, ambitious, and inherently optimistic about design’s ability to enhance our lives, without ignoring the problems posed by its expeditions into new terrain. Her shows are as likely to include esoteric student experiments and seemingly nutty concepts as the polished products of corporate research programs.

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The prosthetic "smile" that is intended to empower anyone who feels awkward socially. Sascha Nordmeyer

“Talk to Me” is no exception. The starting point is that digital technology is enabling objects to become so complex and powerful that we now expect to interact with them. If you hand an unfamiliar object to a small child, he or she will instinctively search for buttons or sensors to operate it.

Though the same same microchips that enable things as small as smart phones to fulfill hundreds of different functions also make them more opaque. In the industrial era when form generally followed function, you could guess how to use an electronic product from its appearance. You can’t do that with a tiny digital device, which is why designers face the new challenge that Ms. Antonelli calls “script writing,” in other words, ensuring that the object can tell us how to use it.

The exhibits in “Talk to Me” range from cash and ticket machines that are used by millions of people every day at banks, airports, railway and bus stations, to inspired guerilla projects like the prosthetic “smiles” intended to empower anyone who feels awkward socially and a version of the Rubik’s Cube inscribed with Braille symbols so people with poor sight can play with it.



A version of the Rubik's Cube inscribed with Braille symbols so people with poor eyesight can play with it. Konstantin Datz

Another exhibit is a proposal to improve the efficiency of a 911 emergency command center by redesigning the way the information appears on its employees’ computer screens to make it easier for them to understand what is happening, how to respond and to check whether the chosen solution is working properly.

Other exhibits explore new forms of communication. There are dazzling examples of new technologies including data visualizations, the digital imagery that not only makes sense of huge quantities of complex information, but instantly reflects any changes. The show also features more idiosyncratic media, such as “Pig 05049,” a book that tracks what happened to the components of a single pig after its death as they were used to make beer, bullets, anti-freeze, heart valves and chocolate as well as bacon, sausages and the book’s own cover.

In the spirit of practicing what they are preaching, Ms. Antonelli and Ms. Carmody have experimented with new communication techniques in the planning and presentation of “Talk to Me.” The curatorial process of researching and selecting exhibits was recorded on an open source Web site, which is still live at [wp.moma.org/talk\\_to\\_me](http://wp.moma.org/talk_to_me). They have also added Quick Response tags, containing barcodes, to the labels of exhibits inside the show and to the relevant pages of the catalog. To learn more about an exhibit, you swipe the tag with a QR-reading application on a smart phone or computer, which leads you to a special section of MoMA’s Web site.

Exhilarating though “Talk to Me” promises to be, it has a familiar subtext in some of the problems it anticipates for the new wave of communication designers. “There is still an imbalance between the aesthetic value of some projects and their functional value, and designers need to make much more effort to explain what they are doing,” Ms. Antonelli said. “This field is moving so fast, but we are still dealing with the old clichés and still adding new ones.”

A version of this article appears in print on July 18, 2011 in The International Herald Tribune. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)



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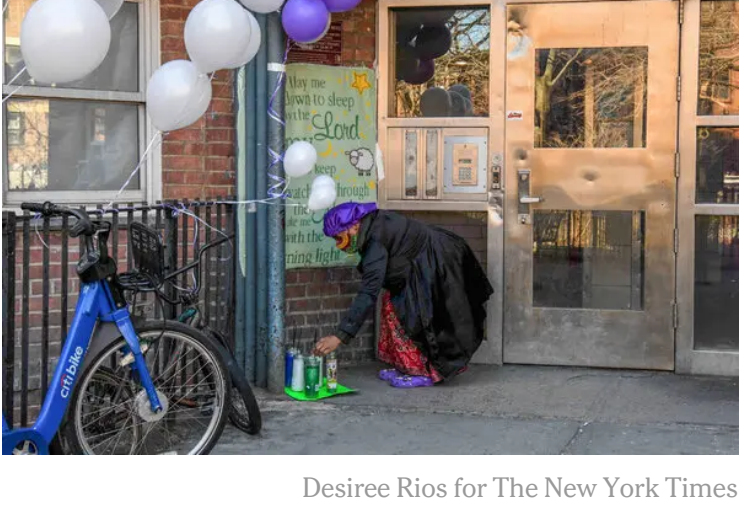
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