Back Talk

BY CARLO RATTI
IN COLLABORATION WITH JENNI YOUNG
THANKS TO NASHD NAVIAN

Curated by Paola Antonelli and on display during the summer and fall of 2011, the exhibition showcased more than 200 pieces: toys, installations, videos, interactive websites and objects of all kinds crowded the third-floor gallery, with numerous other references in the museum’s circulation space, both inside and outside the building.

The idea behind “Talk to Me” was simple. In recent years, with the impact of the digital revolution, a large number of electronic devices have become part of our daily lives. Thanks to these ubiquitous devices, our belongings, our homes and even our cities have acquired the ability to talk to us or interact with us.

“Talk to Me” is the title of Paola Antonelli’s exhibition, “Talk to Me,” that ever-changing, ever-present human longing for the creation of artificial worlds that can take on a life of their own.

By Carlo Ratti

WITH A VAGUELY ALMODOVARIAN TITLE, “TALK TO ME” WAS A RECENT EXHIBITION AT MOMA, NEW YORK.

The Enlightenment’s ideological shift from a natural to a mechanistic world view allowed men to reconsider the origins of life since any living organism was a mechanism with identifiable rules of operation, and man could create complex mechanical systems, from the ability to create life was no longer the domain of the Almighty.

A few decades later, in 1822, Charles Babbage’s ‘machines’ would advance man’s quest to create life through the automated actuation of the physical world. Babbage's mechanical control systems could be considered the precursors of today's computers, and his difference engine could be claimed as the first cybernetic mechanism—one of today's most impressive machines—although the feedback between the system's output and input was mediated mechanically instead of electronically. Cybernetics officially emerged in the early 20th century. Wiener’s feedback principle, which centered on new technology that made the Fun Palace responsive to visitors' needs by dynamically adapting its spatial configuration, became an interface through which its inhabitants realized their desires and regulated their needs.

Today, everything is easier with digital applications. As demonstrated in “Talk to Me”, automatons haunt us when we take money from ATM's, buy smart cards for urban travel, they monitor the energy consumption of our homes in real-time and help us when we can no longer perform certain tasks, like the Eye Writer project—an interface used by American Graffiti artist Tony Quan based on the recognition of pupil movements. Quan is paralyzed but the can continue working by using the system. Automatons present human longing for the creation of artificial worlds that can take on a life of their own.