Strangely Familiar.

Unusual Objects for Everyday Life.

Applied Dreams Workshop | 10/22 January 2005

Context:

Nearly all domestic devices contain digital circuits:
We find them in our washing machines, radio's, toasters, microwaves, alarm clock's, VCR's, toothbrushes and telephones. If we begin to trace the history of these devices we soon see how we have accepted a shift from a comprehensive world of simple analogue control to a world of digital control - manifested through buttons, screens, repetitive GUI's and instruction manuals. in addition, nowadays manufacturers often exploit the potential of digital circuits by loading superfluous features into a single device – purely because the capacity is available. As a result devices often converge, and in the process any inherent physical characteristics, or personality, of each object becomes blurred. For example, our mobile phone is now a calculator, an address book, an alarm clock, a stopwatch, a to-do list, a games platform, a web browser, a camera, and finally a phone. Yet our interaction with these 'virtual devices' remains the same:

Through a single device, a numerical keypad and a small LCD screen. This convergence usually means that we loose any recognizable affordances, or clues, that were inherent to the original device. The virtual nature of these devices means that we often struggle with our conceptual model of their use, resulting in feature redundancy and steep learning curves.

Vehicle for Investigation:

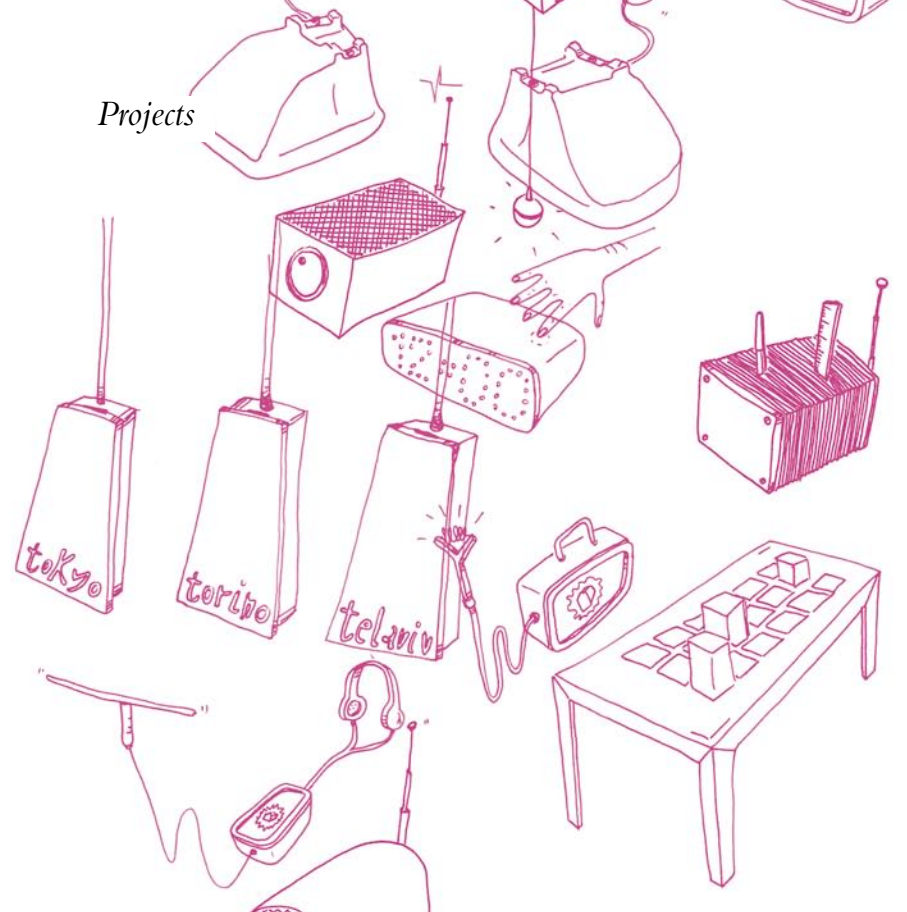
Our aim was to rethink existing devices and harness their existing functionality to try to make them more understandable, meaningful and delightful to use. Our vehicle for investigation was everyday digital devices found in the domestic environment. Our starting point was to analyze these devices and propose alternative solutions, by recognizing the lost qualities of the physical and tangible world.
Our aim was to produce solutions that provide more meaningful interactions which are more poetic, simple, understandable and intuitive to use.

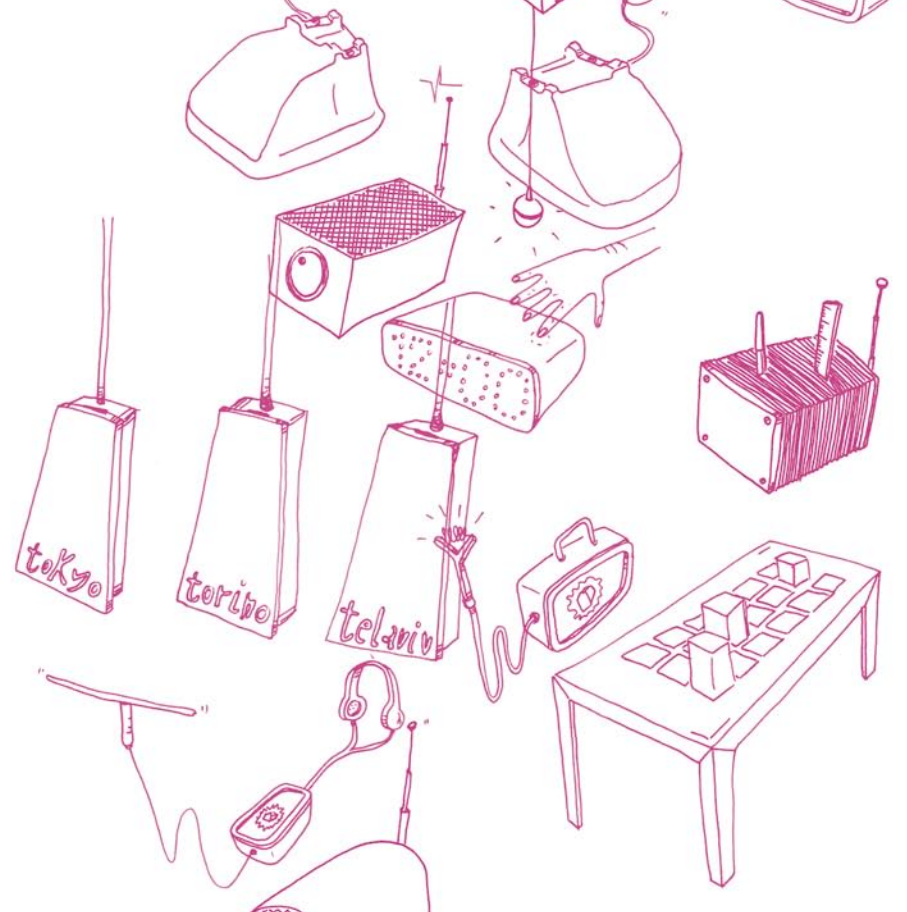
Project Descriptions:

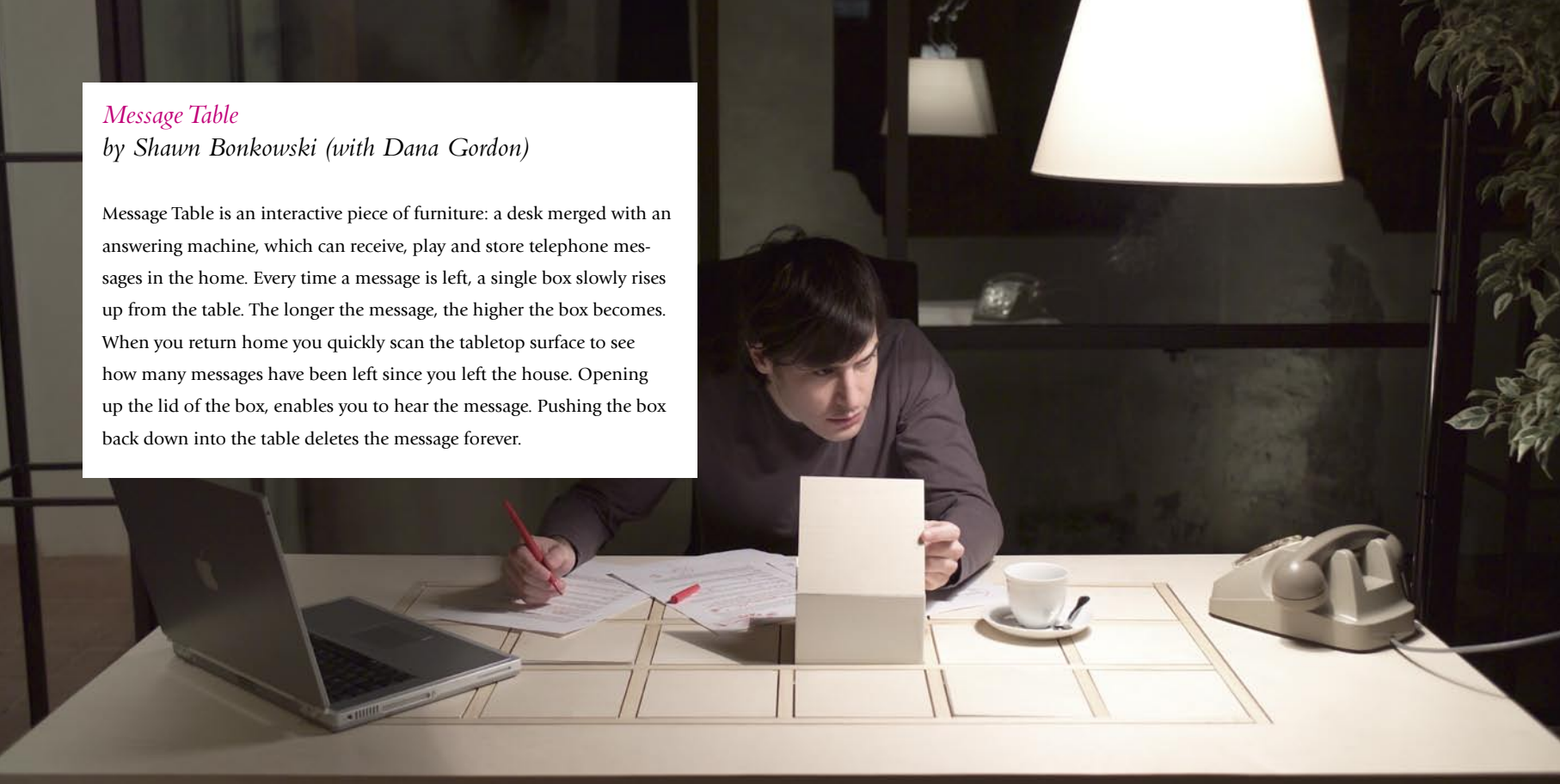
Each project described below is an derivative of a domestic device: either a telephone answering machine, or a radio alarm clock. All projects are real, working, stand-alone electronic devices.

The ideas on show were generated during a four week class 'Strangely Familiar: Repurposing Everyday Devices' led by Heather Martin, Reto Wettach, Massimo Banzi and Yaniv Steiner. The work was then developed for a further two weeks during an Applied Dreams Workshop, led by Heather Martin, Massimo Banzi and Dario Buzzini. Special thanks go to Edoardo Brambilla for the modelmaking throughout the project.

Projects







Message Table

by Shawn Bonkowski (with Dana Gordon)

Message Table is an interactive piece of furniture: a desk merged with an answering machine, which can receive, play and store telephone messages in the home. Every time a message is left, a single box slowly rises up from the table. The longer the message, the higher the box becomes. When you return home you quickly scan the tabletop surface to see how many messages have been left since you left the house. Opening up the lid of the box, enables you to hear the message. Pushing the box back down into the table deletes the message forever.

Box of Sound

by James Tichenor (with David A Mellis)

Box of Sound is a single radio station.
The exterior surface of the radio is made with thousands of rubber bands. When the user wedges an opening in the box the volume increases, but to the user the box appears to be in fact empty.
To play the radio louder, larger and wider objects have to be inserted.

Feel the Music I

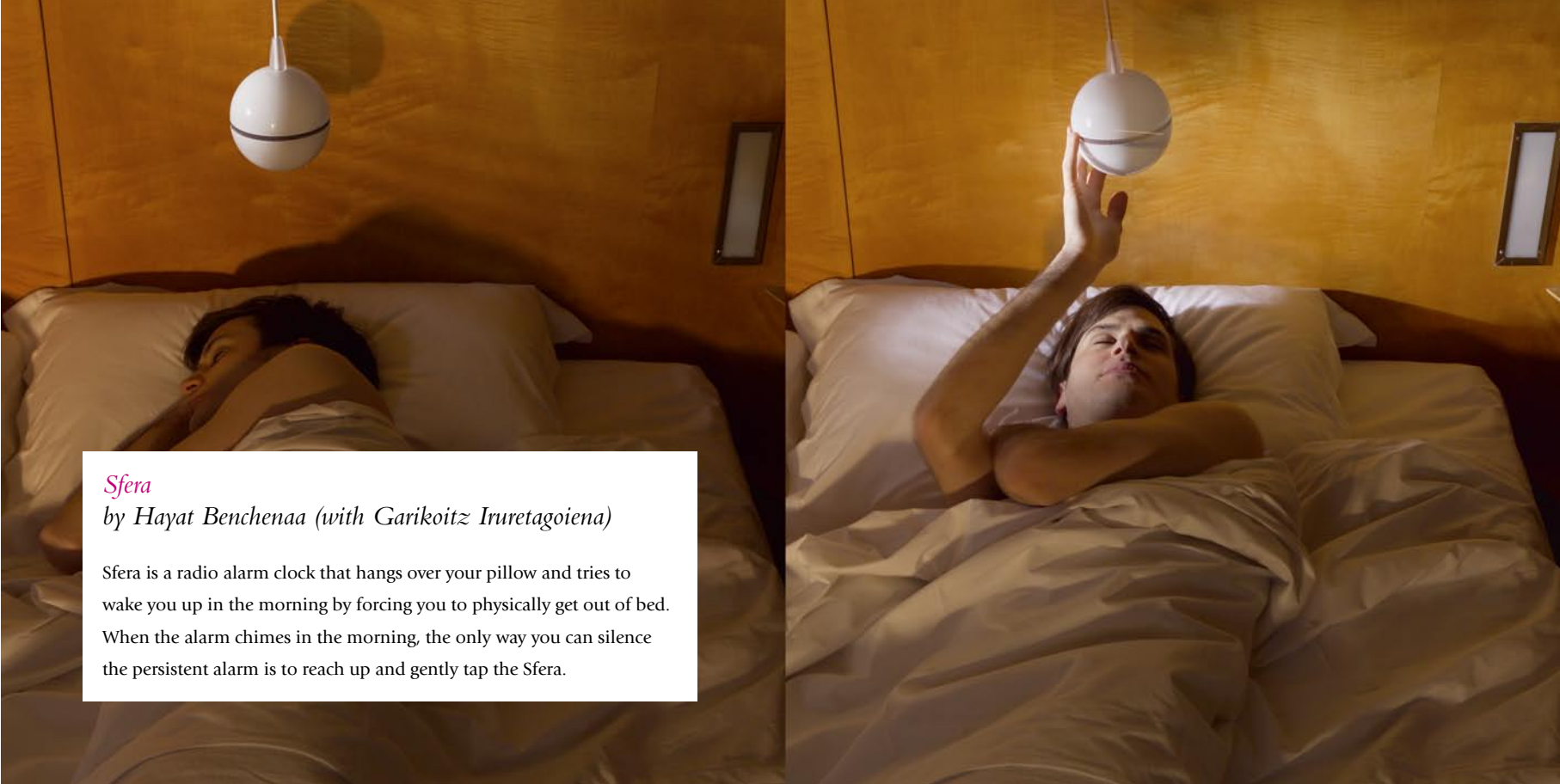
by James Tichenor and David A Mellis

Feel the Music I is a radio with only a tuning knob. As the user spins the knob the sound of the station disappears, so only the knob itself indicates potential stations through tactile feedback. Phantom 'peaks and troughs' are physically felt through a force feedback mechanism placed in the radio. When the signal feels satisfying, the user lets go, causing the sound of the station to be heard.

Quattro

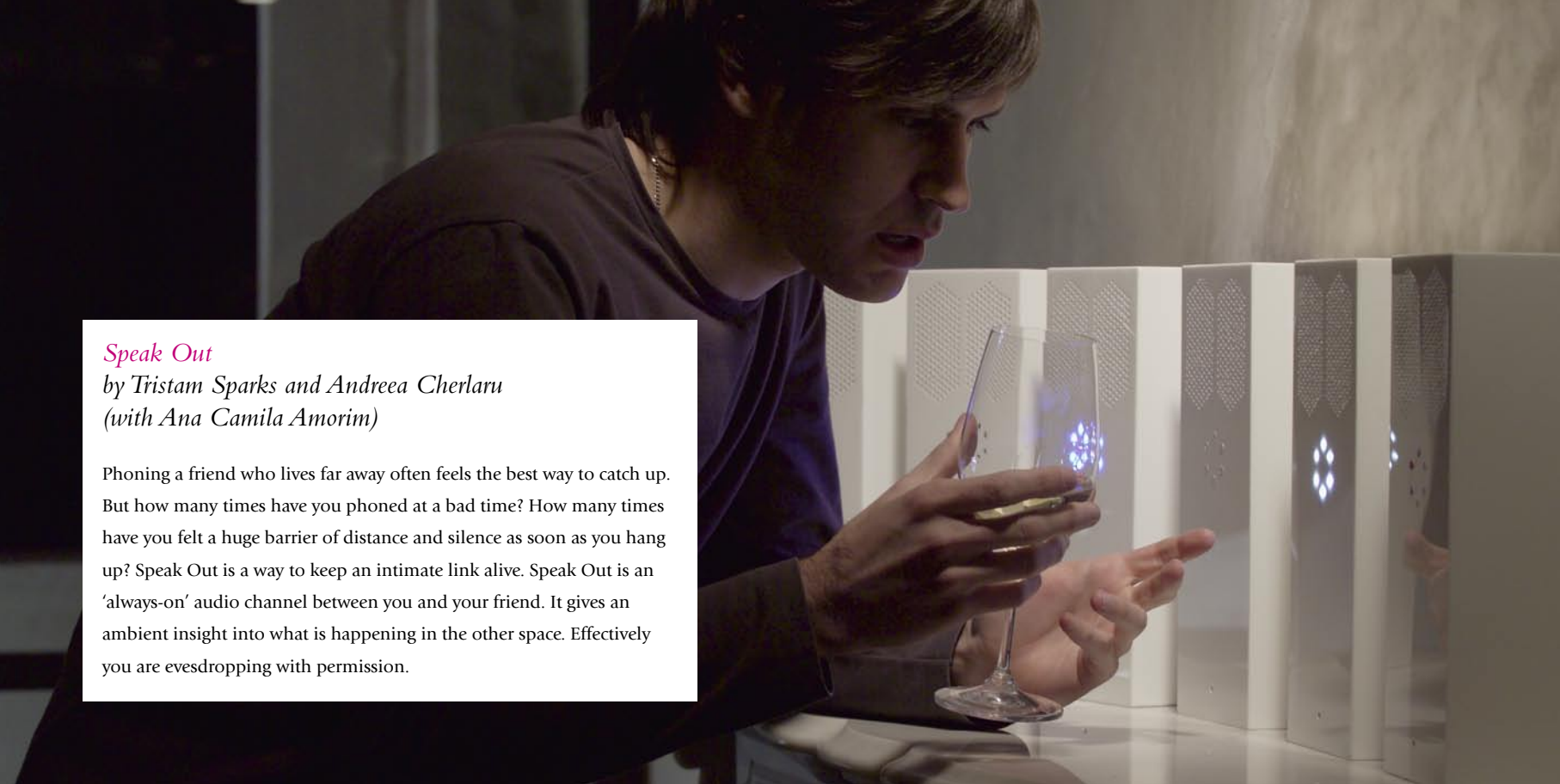
by Didier Hilhorst and Nicholas Zambetti

Quattro is a radio alarm clock housed in an enigmatic translucent enclosure that is devoid of all markings. As you approach Quattro it detects your presence, thereby revealing the relevant illuminated touch sensitive controls. Quattro's functions are also determined by its orientation. The functionality (is it a radio, is it an alarm clock, or is it just a clock) is determined by its orientation. This minimal object works in tandem with a cuddly, plush bear for remote 'snooze' operation.



Sfera
by Hayat Benchenaa (with Garikoitz Iruretagoiena)

Sfera is a radio alarm clock that hangs over your pillow and tries to wake you up in the morning by forcing you to physically get out of bed. When the alarm chimes in the morning, the only way you can silence the persistent alarm is to reach up and gently tap the Sfera.



Speak Out
by Tristam Sparks and Andreea Cherlaru
(with Ana Camila Amorim)

Phoning a friend who lives far away often feels the best way to catch up. But how many times have you phoned at a bad time? How many times have you felt a huge barrier of distance and silence as soon as you hang up? Speak Out is a way to keep an intimate link alive. Speak Out is an 'always-on' audio channel between you and your friend. It gives an ambient insight into what is happening in the other space. Effectively you are evesdropping with permission.

Tok Tok

by Aram Armstrong (with Haiyan Zhang)

Tok Tok is a communication system that connects you to your distant loved ones in far away cities such as Tokyo, Toronto or Tel Aviv.
Close partners each own a box. Knocking on one box transmits a sonar-like pulse – heard as a duplicate knocking sound - to the 'twinned' box in the remote location. When the box receives this pulse it responds by transmitting the same pulse - or knocking sound – back to the original box. The time it takes for the sound to travel from Torino to Tokyo and back again is based on the distance between the two cities. The further away the city is, the longer the delay.

Tug Tug
by Haiyan Zhang (with Aram Armstrong)

Tug Tug are dedicated telephones that offer an extra layer of interaction: the cord connecting the handset to the base on both phones forms a shared interactive object, allowing each person to physically affect the other object by pulling the cord.

This object starts to question what haptic nuances of communication could we gain from such physical interaction? How would you feel when your permissions are by-passed and someone just pulls your telephone straight off the hook – thereby creating a live audio link between both places.

The Amazing All Band Radio

by Oren Horev & Myriel Milicevic
(with Marcos Weskamp)

Radio signals traverse our homes in endless streams, bringing signals from far away places: from objects in our close vicinity to galaxies in distant lands. The Amazing All Band Radio is a series of objects used for 'hunting down' unheard radio waves:
The stars, the music of the earth, or the signals that our communication devices emit in our home environment.

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