

**INTIMACY, CONCEPT, INTERACTION:
ARTISTIC POTENTIAL OF VOICE MAIL AND
THE TELEPHONE.**

Summary: This article examines the use of the telephone as a medium for artistic practice; from its early development to a case for alternative application. The theme of democratic communication is introduced as it relates to the potential audience for telephone art. The proliferation of telephone technology and use of voice mail systems are identified as infrastructure that is already in place. The listener is challenged to participate in an exciting, intimate, yet public exchange. Included in this article are descriptions of some of the telephone based installations by Ian Pollock/Janet Silk.

Concept: Take the Call

The flame dances inside the machine. The flame is controlled by the vibration of your voice, interpreted by a membrane separating two worlds: the world of the speaker and the world of the listener. You hear it ring, cracking the silence with its demand for attention. A revelation, the telephone is a bridge between fiction, dreams and everyday reality. That furtive voice on the other end of the line, sweaty, sweet and seductive, it can take you anywhere. You can talk with anyone. Like visionaries with ringing in their ears, you take the higher calling. Inspired, all you have to do is answer. Pick up the phone.

We were given a sound residency which allowed us to create our first telephone piece. The white box gallery seemed less than an ideal space for site specific sound work and the time constraints for radio distribution did not work for us, so we looked for other venues. The telephone seemed perfect for point to point narrow casting. Often art ends up made by artists for an art audience. Galleries and museums are institutions of the margin. Art in the public sphere tries to escape this marginalization, the telephone touches us all. Telephone art extends beyond the common boundaries so that we may reach out and touch someone. It augments the master narrative by introducing imperfections, chance and viruses. Feedback from various non-art audiences including the visually impaired, physically challenged and youth groups, encouraged us to look at the telephone as a way to engage with a wider audience. We became intrigued by the possibilities of a familiar technology.

Area Code (1994)

Area Code is a self-guided, self-paced walking tour through San Francisco using the public telephone. Participants pick up maps indicating locations of specific phone booths, and then call from these booths to hear stories, in the form of fictional letters.

Area Code explores the relationship of the body to its environment, its presence and absence, the body through time and in history. It shows the "residue" humans leave behind and the awareness of it in the present. Area Code makes the history (and in some cases future) of the site visible. By remembering history we are able to locate ourselves in time and in the

landscape.

Intimacy: Familiar Sounds

Successful but short-lived early experiments in telephone broadcast included neighborhood concerts. On November 1877, in St. Louis, Missouri, it is reported that all the local newspapers were connected with each other for one week by using the Bell Telephone. A regional manufacturer in St. Louis and the Bell Telephone Company joined forces to connect 41 telephones covering 6 miles in an exhibition circuit, over which entertainment was transmitted. They agreed to this, in order to report on the magical results obtained by the conveyance of sound over distance.

"For this event, the entertainment director is John Birge, a local resident. The signal is given, and moments later the silvery notes of a coronet reach the 12 sets of earphones connected to the Semple's residence phone. Everyone in the room smiles. Following this, it is announced that they have just heard the rousing "Hattie Polka" played by James Stevens 18 blocks away. Then Peter Schick plays several light airs on the clarinet. Next "Home Sweet Home" by Mrs. McPheeters, Miss Grace Russell, Mr. Russell and Mr. Hayes, followed by "Old Log Cabin" by Mr. Mueller of 910 Washington Street. The highlight, however, is Miss Fitch's "Sweetheart" whose every trill and roulade is heard throughout the circuit. The neighborhood concert concludes..."

...And with it the idea of community control of electric communication.

At the Gate (1995)

Across from San Francisco city hall a refugee camp is visible through a fence. Like in an anthropological exhibit, maps are mounted on the two fences separating the lot from the street access. The text on the maps cites the number of refugees world wide to date, as well as the number specifically displaced in Bosnia. Other texts comment on ethnic propaganda, humanitarian aid, cultural survival and other issues about war.

A voice mail system accompanies the exhibit and features interviews with refugees from Bosnia in the United States. This connects the abstract concepts of the map to individual identities on the phone. In addition to the interviews the voice mail system lists resources for direct aid for those displaced by the war.

From 1893, until after World War I, an organization in Budapest used the telephone to transmit daily programming to more than six thousand subscribers. In operation the service, named Telefon Hirmondo, offered political and economic news, concerts, sports, recitations and lectures. It was the only example of sustained and systematic programming in the nineteenth century that prefigured twentieth-century broadcasting systems. Its roots were in the theatrophone, a device presented at the Paris Exposition Internationale d'Electricite in 1881. The theatrophone was used primarily to broadcast theatrical plays and operas. Beginning about 1896, nationally known authors read serial installments of their novels. By 1908, semipublic installations of the Telefon Hirmondo attracted many listeners, and in 1911, a version of it was presented to subscribers in Newark, New Jersey. While the Telephone Herald was very popular, both it and the Hirmondo would eventually lose ground to the advent of wireless communication.

It takes 50 years for technology to become popular, 100 years to saturate the culture. The killer application for the phone is its potential for democratic communication. We can all talk to each other. In the early history of its development, there was

much concern that the telephone would usurp the social order. The phone did challenge cultural and class assumptions about what communication ought to be like between various groups of people. Suddenly members of different classes could move into and out of one another's territory with the help of electricity. The same is true today. While the internet is still inaccessible by the computer illiterate and the poor, the telephone is everywhere. There is a worldwide audience because of the proliferation of telephone technology and its relative affordability. When compared to the limitations of gallery-dependent work, the possibility for real contact is evident. The history of communications technology is closely linked to a desire for two-way interaction. Television and radio did not succeed this way, but the telephone did.

The telephone creates an intimate space for the listener. We whisper our stories into your ear. It's just between you and us. Like cinema, we project our scenario in the landscape by asking the listener to engage with us from public phones. As a memorial, we retell personal narratives through the phone to simulate friendly conversation. As these tales move over the wire, we transport the listener through time and space to reflect on histories and political questions.

0 seconds, 12 minutes, 2 hours, 20 days (1995)

For the 50th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, participants are invited to listen to a series of stories in a voice mail system, illustrating the long term effects of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Narratives describe the city of Hiroshima and its inhabitants from the time of the detonation of the bomb in 1945, to two fictional events sometime in the future.

The stories in this installation chronicle the many faces of trauma throughout the legacy of the bombing. Listeners travel through the entire catalog of human emotion: from horror to grief to denial and shame; from solemn remembrance to social action and finally to utopian euphoria or doomsday pessimism. 0 seconds, 12 minutes, 2 hours, 20 days shows the reverberation of shock waves from the explosion as it travels through time and history.

Interaction: We are connected

The voice is transmitted into an electric signal. Stretched over a membrane it explodes into a pleasurable experience of communication. I can feel your voice tickling. What are you wearing? I want to see you as we talk. In the 1960's AT&T spent over \$500 million dollars developing a Picturephone that allowed people to view each other as they spoke on the phone. It turned out that they only sold a few hundred of the devices, mainly because no one really wanted to see the person they were talking to. They didn't want to pay attention to the person on the other end of the line, or to be seen. As one person said, "I don't want people to see me when I'm on the phone. I want you to think that I'm all ears as I cook, go to the bathroom, watch the game, doodle. I'm all ears, but my eyes, my thoughts, my life is mine."

Most commonly strangers on the phone meet at the night exchange. As personal ads move from print to voice mail, which offers discreet screening capabilities, phone sex, party- and private lines present libertines with safe opportunities to explore sexual terrain. Drawing on the power of the human voice to seduce, these cultural phenomena encourage anonymous encounters that are highly charged. For many people it satisfies the desire for human contact.

Museum of the Future (1996)

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Museum of the Future, into the twenty-first century and beyond

What is this perpetually unknown, elusive territory called The Future? How does its long-range shadow of cultural anxiety impact on us. Listeners are asked to explore these concepts of the future by means of a voice-mail system entitled Museum of the Future. Narratives, theories and satire deconstruct the fantasies that drive utopian, futurist ideology. Listeners are asked to participate and contribute their own visions of a future, which are subsequently integrated into the piece.

We feel that there remains much territory to explore in telephone based art. The possibilities continue to grow as more services come on-line. We look forward to work involving live interactions, three-way calling and party lines, caller ID, call forwarding, fax on demand, and more. Telephones make up a geometry of fibers and networks, they offer an infrastructure that circumvents traditional distribution systems and permeates existing social structures, inviting new relationships between people.

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