

The Art of the Mobile Phone

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And you thought your phone was just for calls and messages—here's a look at some more creative uses, from the telesymphony to eight-story Pong.

A woman is seated in an Austrian concert hall, listening to the debut of a new symphony. Suddenly, her cell phone rings. In the blink of an eye, she's caught in the beam of a spotlight, and the entire audience turns to watch.

Revenge for interrupting the concert? Not at all: it's just part of the show.

Last September, the New York-based artist Golan Levin premiered his "telesymphony," *Dialtones* (www.telesymphony.com), at the 2001 Ars Electronica Festival in Linz, Austria. Onstage, Levin and his assistants placed simultaneous calls to audience members' mobile phones. The audience watched themselves reflected in a huge mirror suspended over the stage, while a spotlight automatically lit each phone as it rang.

Dialtones is only one example of how mobile phones have turned into far more than just tools for communication. As they become a central part of modern society, mobile phones are also being used for creative expression in a variety of ways: as musical instruments, as displays for visual art, as objects of art themselves—and they're used to facilitate everything from giant love letters to interactive painting.

First, though, back to the mobile phone symphony.

Music to His Ears

There are a number of precedents for Levin's telesymphony, going all the way back to *Automotive*, Laurie Anderson's 1972 concert for car horns—but the best inspiration for *Dialtones* came from Levin's own experience. "I was at a European music festival and the emcee, whose English was not so good, asked everyone in the audience if they could 'please turn your cell phones on,'" he said.

Levin says he's learned that, as musical instruments, not all phones are created equal. "I like Siemens and Nokia the best," Levin said. "Siemens phones have a larger range—four octaves instead of Nokia's three—and they also have a cleaner, less distorted sound. On the other hand, Nokias had the advantage that we could send them new ringtones via SMS."

However, for *Dialtones*, he didn't have a choice. "We were basically stuck with whatever phones the audience happened to stroll in with, so we had a huge number of unknowns," he said.

The trickiest aspect of the concert lay in placing more than 8,000 calls in 30 minutes. "The layman's intuition is that, since it costs 25 cents to make one phone call, placing a hundred simultaneous calls should cost about \$25," Levin said. "But the degree of technological infrastructure required to do this is nearly three orders of magnitude greater."

Mobilkom Austria gave Levin direct access to their mobile switching center, bringing dialing delay down to about five seconds per call. Still, the nature of the arrangement meant that Levin only had a limited amount of control, at best. "Given all the elements of chance—including the cracker who deliberately left the theme to *Dallas* on his phone—I think we did pretty well," he said.

You can judge for yourself online, thanks to a video (<http://dax.aec.at/ram/dialtones.ram>) that can be downloaded from Ars Electronica's web site. Despite all the challenges, Levin is happy with the result. "There were sections of it that, in my opinion, were really genuinely beautiful, and that's an artistic goal I still continue to have faith in," Levin said.

Short Message Art

What about placing more conventional forms of art on mobile phones themselves? Last July, Vodafone (www.vodafone.co.uk) announced a partnership with Britart.com (www.britart.com) to offer downloadable screen logos created by artists ranging from George Barber to Katherine Lubar. At £1.18 per download, the result is part fun, part art, and part commercialism.

The limitations are obvious, due to the phones' small, monochrome screens—but the images range from a city skyline to an onslaught of killer bees. The result, not all that different from the logos available elsewhere on Vodafone's site, is intended to combine a pleasing image with the cachet of knowing that the picture was created by a bona fide artist rather than a company programmer.

Tom David, Britart's Managing Director, suggests that it's ultimately about bringing modern art to the masses. "Art shouldn't be jealously guarded by the few," he said. "It should inspire the many. That's what this idea is about. It's a wholly democratic approach to exhibiting art that breaks with the conventions of traditional representation."

And SMS art aside, mobile phones themselves have also been seen as art by a number of museums worldwide. Nokia phones have been put on display at New York's Guggenheim Museum and the Museum of Modern Art, and last August, the Smithsonian National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. added a Motorola PageWriter 2000 to its permanent collection.

Still, it's hard to turn heads at a museum just by putting a phone behind glass—so a few years ago, an artist in New York decided to take the next step.

Iron Your Face

Back in 1998, Jed Ela, who now lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, found the mobile phone phenomenon pretty disconcerting. "Cell phones were still something less than ubiquitous, and people would still get annoyed at their being used in public," he said.

"I just thought it was weird that people were starting to walk around in the street doing something that had until then mostly been confined to their houses."

To comment on the absurdity of the telephone's new mobility, Ela embedded a mobile phone in an equally common domestic object—a clothes iron. As a tribute to Man Ray's Dadaist work *Cadeau*, Ela called his Ironphone (www.ironphone.com) the *Cadeau2000*.

Like Levin, Ela was greatly challenged by the process of assembling the piece to his satisfaction. "I wanted this to be a totally refined, seamlessly produced object, something that looks and feels like a real product, even though it is actually handmade in very small numbers," he said. "The hardest part was relocating the smart buttons and menu interfaces into the controls on top of the iron."

Ela says that his intention wasn't just to create surrealist art in the vein of Man Ray, but to use surrealism to talk about something else—"like our conflicted views toward communication, privacy, technology, prosthetics," he said. "Or the power differentials in object production between the individual artist, the high-profile 'corporate' artist who has a big team of assistants, and the true multinational corporation."

And there's one more aspect of art that made it into *Cadeau2000*—catharsis. "It sounds silly, but to some extent, Ironphone was just about me getting used to this idea of the mobile phone," Ela said. "I only had to do it once, because now I'm used to it: I use one every day."

We'll Leave the Lights On

What about art on a much larger scale? The Chaos Computer Club (www.ccc.de), a group of German hackers, recently installed lights in 144 windows of the Haus des Lehrers building (www.bcc-alex.de) in Berlin's Alexanderplatz, forming an 18-by-8 grid of window-sized "pixels." Call 0190/987654 on your mobile phone, and you can send a building-sized love letter, or even play Pong.

The installation, which the club says is the world's largest interactive computer display, is named Blinkenlights (www.blinkenlights.de), after the captivating patterns of lights on the front panels of older computers.

Project leader Tim Pritlove notes that while similar installations have been done in the past, Blinkenlights is the first to add the element of interactivity. An online application called Blinkenpaint allows you to submit your own designs to the club for display on the building, depicting anything from love letters to political slogans—peace signs have been particularly popular for the past few months.

But the coolest form of interactivity is Blinkenlights' version of the classic computer game, Pong. For 2.42 marks per minute, you can call in on your mobile phone and bounce a 'ball' back and forth across the building. It's simple enough: just stand in the Alexanderplatz, look up at the building towering above you, and move your paddle up and down by pressing 5 and 8 on your phone.

Rotten Tomatoes

"Come on," you scoff. "How can giant Pong be art?" Well, at the Ars Electronica Center (www.aec.at) last September, where Levin's Telesymphony premiered, the organizers gave a tongue-in-cheek nod to anyone who finds all of this ridiculous.

A large white sign was placed over the entrance to the Linz University of Art. On the otherwise blank billboard was printed in large black letters, "If you don't think this is art, call 0664/232-2001." Each mobile phone call to the number listed would cause a catapult to fire a brightly-colored paintball at the billboard.

The phone number became popular very fast.

Within minutes of the festival's opening on September 1st, the billboard was dotted with paint—and over the next few days, it became increasingly saturated, until, on the 5th, the canvas was completely covered with a pattern of multi-colored dots.

Was that art? Maybe—if nothing else, there was a certain pointillist look to the final product. Was it funny? Sure.

Regardless, all of these creations show us that mobile phones aren't just phones any more: they're tools, they're toys, they're art, and they're everywhere.