

## Dead to the World: The future of hand-held art

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### Mobile mania

Just look around you. You can't miss it. It's everywhere. It seems everyone is doing it. You don't have to listen too hard to hear it. It invades you like a bodysnatcher, taking without asking. Magi or maniacs, it's hard to know. They seem to be channelling the airwaves, invoking, with increasingly grand gestures, spectral others whose voices no-one else can hear. Silence now, as they conjure invisible vodou on their infernal machines with a new found prehensile dexterity.

This is the weird audio-haptic phenomenon of mobile telephony. It has become so familiar that we no longer notice its strangeness. Media theorists use other metaphors to defamiliarize its otherness. Caught in the ambient nowhere of telesthesia, the mobile user is a monad, lost in the solitude of their fixation on their interface to elsewhere. But to me this is not a telematic utopia. It is a retreat from the world.

This retreat from the here and now started with a need for speed. It quickly metamorphosed into a mania for mobility. Mobile mania is excessive and involuntary behaviour that attests to something more profound and primal than the 'uptake' and 'penetration' of portable telephony (coital motifs abound in such discourses). On the heels of the literacy that underpins telesthesia in the first place, mobility is the latest manifestation of what Eric Havelock termed "the silent revolution": the mute fixation of individuals on a hand-held planar surface (Havelock 1963: 41).

Euripides' Medea, as I have argued elsewhere, is the figure for a general condition of writing as network, as the decentred dissemination of bits across space (Tofts 2004). The heraldic symbol of mobility is a far more dark and macabre deity, Mania, the Roman goddess of the dead. The immersive psychopathology of mobile mania is an ambivalent form of being in the world and removal from it at the same time. It is a form of excess, in that it extends beyond the transitive form of being as a passage somewhere. It is intransitive, always elsewhere. But it is also a recess, a rupture within a consistent, or homogenous space. It represents a sensibility that is dead to the world, entombed in the solipsism of ubiquitous distraction.

To be dead to the world used to be a benign idiomatic figure for sleep, temporarily removed from consciousness, cradled in the arms of Morpheus. Now it can be identified as a motif for mobile mania, the fixation on the micro-screen as an indispensable accoutrement of daily life. In this Stelarc's prototype images for the extra ear project are a prescient correlative of this grafting of hand-held devices on to flesh: the posthuman subject as a tele-somatic assemblage.

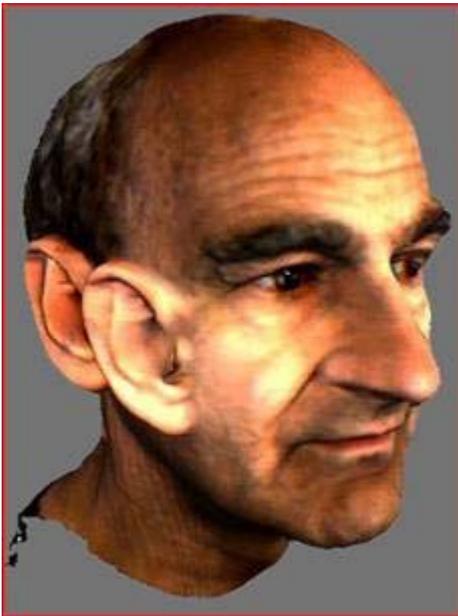


Figure 1: Stelarc: The Extra-Ear (1997)

But is this all there is? Is this all that the distributed space of mobility can offer us? Communications at a distance with a difference? Might not art offer us some hope for reclaiming mobility? Can we think of hand-held media as a foreshortened screen, complementing the intuitive and familiar screenery of television, cinema and the computer? And beyond the question of art itself, can we redeem the telephonic network as an alternative exhibition and distribution model for new modes of reception and new formations of audience engagement with art?

The mobility of art is of course nothing new. It has a long history that spans the performance of 15th century mystery plays on the backs of horse-drawn carts, the travelling minstrels of the Renaissance, Duchamp's *Boîte-en-valise*, touring blockbuster exhibitions, the 'dial-a-poem poets' and mail art of the 1960s, the urban programming of hip hop into the 80's sensibility with Ghetto blasters and, most recently, the iPod's *ricorso* of the not-so-silent revolution of personal, customised sound. While the goal of art is to move us, it has also been on the move for some time. The emerging practices of art made for mobile media represent not only the latest manifestation of the mobility of art, but also an intimate and personalised form of popular culture that is as immediate and vernacular as take away food — something to be consumed while on the move.

The personal portability of the medium, the non-site-specific nature of where the art is, combined with the discretionary nature of when the art can be encountered, amounts to a dramatic new vector of aesthetic experience. It is art of and for distributed, networked conditions. But contrary to the nominal social and communitarian associations usually suggested by such terms, mobile art is experienced by individuals, not collective audiences.

### The aesthetics of commitment

When art was still fixed and locational you made a commitment to it, a kind of minor pilgrimage; a deliberate act of temporary departure from the everyday to encounter an auratic, framed moment in time. The conditions of ubiquity and mobility obliterate this distinctive out-of-time. There is no need for a specified aesthetic out-of-time under mobile conditions, since the very nature of mobility, as described previously, is to be always already out-of-time.

With mobility art comes to you. The contexts in which art comes to you are not fixed around schedules defined in terms of specified or designated time/event co-ordinates (such as working, pedestrian or commuter time). Ubiquity is intermedial time between work and leisure. It is, after William Burroughs, "undifferentiated" time, dead time to be filled, a neutral or negative space-time that can be redefined in terms of the possibilities of mobility. The time-space of mobility is truly virtual: it is (after Deleuze) undefined potentiality.

### Micro aesthetics

The initial forays into hand-held or mobile phone art identified mobility as a genuine form of experimentation with a new medium. UK based collective *the-phone-book Limited* was established in 2000 by Ben Jones and Fee Plumley as a tactical gesture to define what kinds of art can be made for mobile media in the name of vernacular, user-generated content. Mobile filmmaking and story-telling events were curated and aimed at young people who were eager to do the important cultural work of all artists dealing with a new technology: to pervert and creatively distort its original use-value. [the-phone-book Limited project](#) is very much in accord with the anti-corporate stance of cyberpunk's DIY ethic, as well as Burroughs' famous proto-punk dictum, 'storm the reality studio and retake the universe'. Basically, get in quick before the telcos do and make a balls of the whole thing. Focussing this cyberpunk attitude towards a demographic of mobile phone natives certainly makes sense in terms of letting the maniacs intuit what will work best in a medium that comes as naturally to them as walking and talking.

But I'm also interested in how artists trained in pre-mobile technology approach the task of making art for mobile media. The challenge facing artists used to working with bigger screens (from filmmakers to media artists) brings to the fore the 'whatness' of the medium itself, the strangeness of the interface of the micro-screen. To appropriate a term of Walter Ong's, the micro screen of the mobile phone is a nonce invention; an expedient made for and defined by a set of limitations for one off use. Clearly, you can't engage with the mobile screen with the same fluency of interaction as a computer screen. Similarly, the degree of immersive effect associated with the cinema or HDTV is equally not applicable for mobile content. A wireless feed of *2001: A Space Odyssey* direct to your phone? Enough said.

Consequently, the kinds of art made for the mobile have tended to be time-based (with the exception of wireless gaming, which I am excluding from the category of mobile art as it is being developed here). Documentary and other modes of short film have become something of a standard trope, especially since *the-phone-book Limited's* "ultra-short-fiction" event of 2000. Indeed, the nomenclature associated with *the-phone-book Limited's* various micro film festivals resonate with the expedient, highly codified abbreviation of SMS, such as "Short sharp shots" and "0872.biz" (the-phone-book Limited).

The other conspicuous genre to have emerged as a time-based form of content is the 'mobisode'. Like the podcast, the term is a neologism coined to account for the nonce element of the delivery platform and its accommodation of an established entertainment format that pre-dates it (the episodic drama). The mobile soap *Random Place* was serialised over twenty-six weeks in 2005 to Vodafone subscribers, two mobisodes a day, five days a week. Julianne Pierce's account of *Random Place* acutely captures the stylistic and aesthetic architecture required for the delivery of a quintessentially televisual form for the micro screen:

...it has no sound and is delivered as a series of still images. Mainly comprised of close ups and big facial expressions, the dialogue is delivered via text captions embedded into the image. So in an ironic twist for the expansion of high tech gadgetry, Australia's first mobile phone soap opera is experienced in the form of a comic strip (Pierce 2005).

Remediation, in other words, by any other name. Remediation seems to be the common aesthetic vocabulary for emerging artists working with mobile media, as well as the generation of established pre-mobile artists approaching the mobile with multiple screen literacies. dLux Media Art's [Mobile Journeys](#) event of 2005, for instance, brought together a mix of young, experimental artists exploring a new medium but also established media artists making the transition to the mobile screen, who had previously explored the potential of the interactive paradigm a decade before. Artists such as Ian Haig and Tina Gonsalves work across a range of media and their forays into mobile art are especially suggestive of their recognisable practices in video and animation. Ian Haig's [Liber vel reguli](#) is a loud, obnoxious paean to obsession. Evoking the artist's interest in cults, haunted media and a deliberately crude, low-fi aesthetic, this work is exactly the kind of thing that should be on everyone's mobile screens. Little more than a series of linked animated images, *Liber vel reguli* rants and raves as an audiovisual theatre of demonic possession, complete with speaking in tongues and migraine-like visual distortion.

Tina Gonsalves' [Breaking Up](#) is a tour de force of poetic concision. Exploiting the artist's distinctive cut up and paste style of animation, this work explores and exploits the polysemy of the phrase "breaking up" as an epiphenomenal drama of wireless signal and personal relationship. A couple struggle to communicate over the phone and as both telephonic and personal communication lines breakdown, their images transmogrify from recognisable human forms to splintered shapes and facets of once whole people. Both Haig and Gonsalves exploit the potential for loops and repetition within a finite time-space field of possibility. The results in both cases reveal how artists working in the space of the micro screen modify

their stylistic signatures to suit the expedient of creating something that is immediate, compelling and ultimately engaging. And very short.

The *Lycette Brothers* are particularly known for their interactive works. In recent years they have been making short animations and ring tones for mobile media. These are often conceived as whimsical, animated messages, as in *Typecast* and the *Txy* series. There is a deliciously ironic, “content made for mobile phone” sensibility at work here that resonates with other animation they have produced using similarly minimalist, alphabetic means (for example the wonderful *Not My Type* series). Then there are the gentler, Zen-inspired ephemera, such as *Birdcage*, *Green Bamboo* and *Falling Rain*. These are a timely antidote to the store-bought horrors of dancing cows, singing frogs or salivating dogs.

In the ongoing migration of media across different platforms, it is likely that the mobile phone may well be the next screen space of distribution and exhibition of media art. Thinking back to the days of CDROM, the sluggish download time of the early Web and the accelerated obsolescence of IT generally, the passage to the micro screen has been a decisive and potentially revolutionary one. Media art has come a long way; it will be fascinating to keep an eye on where it will go.

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