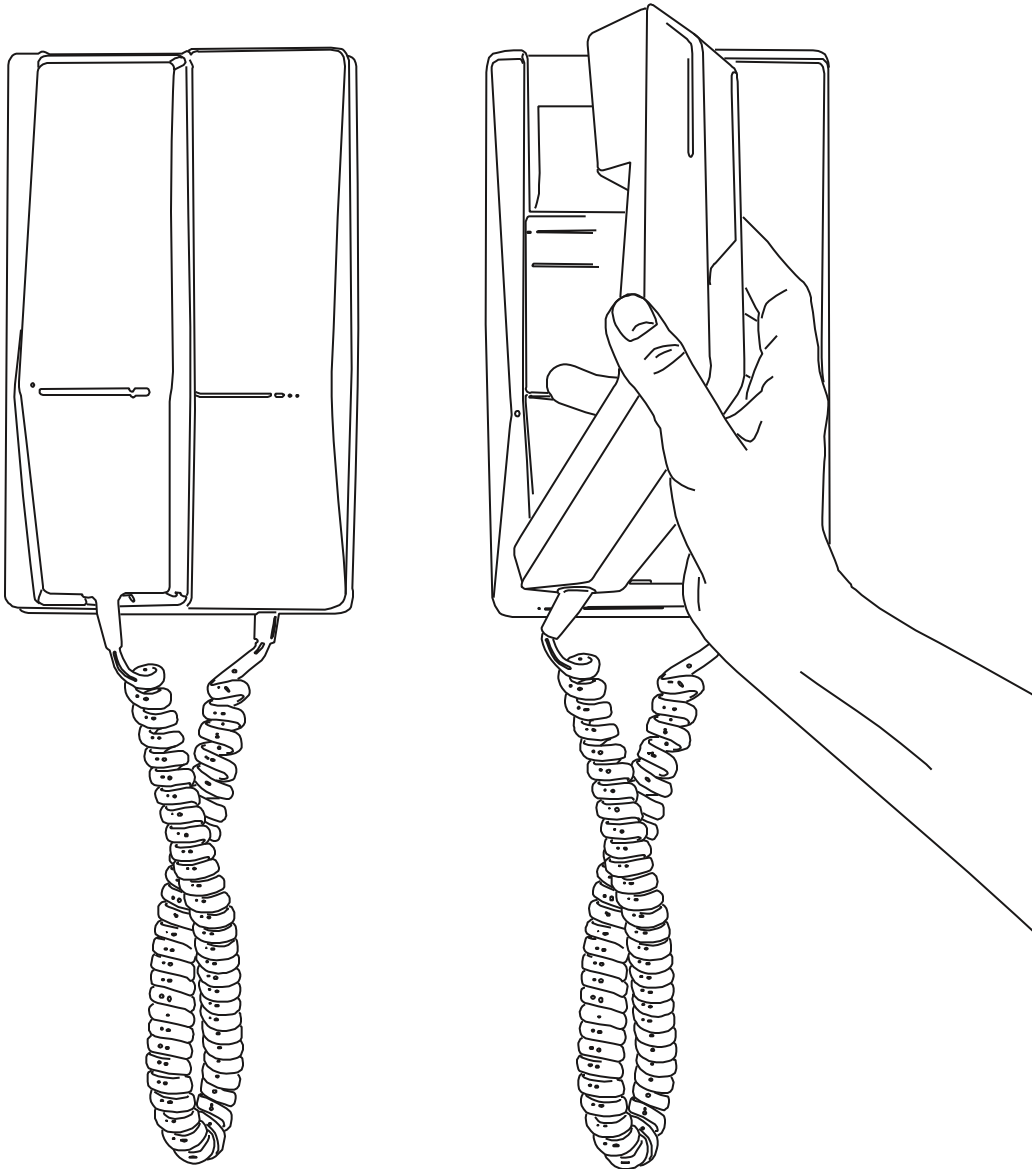


Pick Up!

Susan Schuppli



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Public art is no longer the domain of the bronze memorial sculpture of decades ago nor the monumental abstract sculptures that are situated in front of corporate buildings. In the 1980s an explosion of new forms of public art appeared in North America. Sometimes labelled as “street art” these forms included guerrilla theatre, video projections, page art, billboards, protest actions, oral histories, murals, paintings and various forms of installation, all of which radically changed the face of contemporary art. In the 1990s, public artworks were activist oriented, laden with political and social messages. Today many public-spirited art critiques explore the “subject” of the “public” within the public domain. These new genres of public work offer more collaborative experiences between communities; they incorporate in their rubric human concerns that the public can identify with. It is within this arena that Susan Schuppli’s artwork lays.

The Art Gallery of Hamilton is very pleased to present Susan Schuppli: *Pick Up!* as part of our Contemporary Art Project Series, a programme conceived in 1999 as a means to feature works by artists who are making a significant impact on contemporary art practice in Canada and abroad.

This interactive and interventionist installation uses various public areas of the Art Gallery of Hamilton including the elevator, stairwells, corridors, cloakroom and women’s washroom. Schuppli’s public works have consistently focused on electronic communication, in particular, the telephone, as a means to understand how, despite current advances in technology, new media relies upon older forms of communication. In *Pick Up!* Schuppli poses further questions about the mediation of subjective experience through technology.

Schuppli has collected hundreds of discarded answering machine tapes from second-hand stores which she has reprocessed and used as content for the installation. Visitors to the gallery can listen in on some of these conversations by picking up telephones dispersed throughout its spaces. The public can also participate in the project at a distance by calling the voicemail number for *Pick Up!* and leaving messages. This number was advertised in two bus shelters situated strategically in the downtown area of Hamilton.

On behalf of the Art Gallery of Hamilton, I would like to commend Tess Takahashi and Craig Buckley for their insightful analysis of Schuppli’s work in addition to the artist for her commitment to this project and the extraordinary work involved in making it such a success. We also would like to gratefully acknowledge the financial assistance of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the City of Hamilton.

**Shirley Madill** is the Chief Curator of the Art Gallery of Hamilton.

My ongoing research has focused upon electronic communication, in particular the telephone, in order to understand how “new media relies upon older cultural forms for its organization and comprehension” (Lev Manovich). Part of this investigation resulted in a series of interactive audio installations for the Art Gallery of Hamilton in 2003.

From the onset, the telephone relinquished its status as an object of scientific inquiry because of its “mystic associations to the world of the occult with its traditions of the séance and remote-controlled speech including those of the ancient oracles” (Jeffrey Sconce). Moreover, any radical potential that the invention of the telephone may have had was further dissipated through years of patent dispute and corporate wrangling. As a result the telephone continues to occupy a position of relative inconsequence within many of the critical discussions around information technology, with few notable exceptions such as Avital Ronell’s *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech*, 1989.

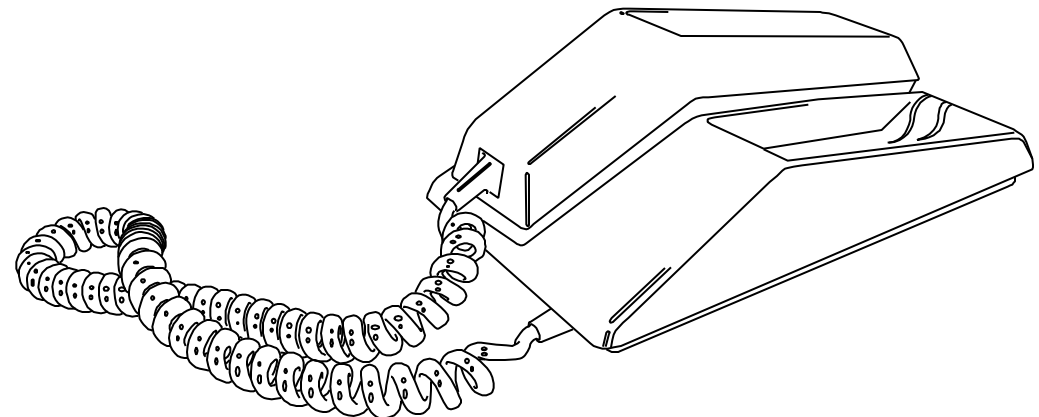
An earlier telephone-based project titled *Phony*, which I produced for the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, borrowed the metaphor of the web for its spatial organization by moving viewers through a series of physically distinct but electronically linked spaces. The project dealt with communication technologies by looking at the culture and history of the telephone. Using a familiar, but now old technology – the rotary dial telephone – I questioned what is new and different about new technologies and what the value of that difference might be.

In working with the telephone, I am dealing with a technology that has no object; that is, no artifact to mark its productivity or passing. Unlike the film projector, camera, typewriter or gramophone, all of which are 19th century inventions, the only object that is “proper” to the telephone, that can resuscitate its acoustic debris, is the answering machine tape. It is on these reel-to-reel spools that the electronic inscription of undulating current is magnetically recorded and preserved.

For several years, I have been rummaging through thrift stores and yard sales collecting discarded answering machines in the hopes of reclaiming conversational fragments from tapes left inside machines. Using these “found sounds”, which have now been digitized, archived and re-assembled, I produced a series of audio interventions for the Art Gallery of Hamilton. Upon entry to the gallery, visitors could “pick up” one of the many phones that were dispersed throughout its more transitory spaces and eavesdrop on hundreds of conversations and messages. An automated voicemail system was also used to gather and process audio material so that remote users could participate in the project at a distance.

The act of listening-in on a telephone conversation is a generative process of imaginary speculation as the viewer begins to develop both an intimacy and a portrait of the subject [stranger] to whom these calls were originally directed. At the same time the viewer or listener also becomes a potential subject of the artwork given that most of the recorded messages use the form of direct address. In picking up one of the telephones in the gallery, the viewer automatically slips into the subject position of the intended receiver: “you’re not at home right now but... why haven’t you called me back... you don’t know what I’ve been going through... you can’t just ignore me... what are you doing later.”

The telephone suggests a symmetry between caller and respondent at the level of its technical organization, however the social relations it mediates – phone calls – are never symmetrical. One makes a call and another reacts to that call. Its insistent ringing summons us to action and if perchance we are “not at home”, the messages left behind on magnetic tape, remind us of our obligation to this other, this object, this event. Even now, as I listen to the voices of strangers on discarded tapes, I am drawn into a complex relationship that demands a certain accountability in exchange for the information revealed. In other words, the acoustic chain of events that the originary telephone call set in motion continues to make demands on all who “pick up and retrieve” its messages; a responsibility that the gallery viewer or listener is not immune from.





Gallery lobby display featuring a range of answering machines from reel-to-reel to micro cassette players all of which contained messages used in the exhibition. Wall phone: messages about telephones and answering machines.



Accumulation of outgoing telephone messages.

Seven million. This is the approximate number of Contempra phones produced between their invention in 1967 and their quiet discontinuation two decades later. Built mainly in Ottawa and London, the design will be vaguely familiar for most visitors to the Art Gallery of Hamilton. Departing from the iconic dumbbell curve the receiver became a rectangular slab. Turned onto the same axis as the main body of the phone, it appears to be a minimalist extrusion of the bent angle body that was its base. Sleek, business-like, unobtrusive: something that could be equally comfortable in an office or at home. I seem to remember a brown one with a rotary dial, but when I picture it, it is in no place in particular: a vague site, an amalgam of houses, friend's, strangers', places where I can almost remember growing up. Such is the peculiar familiarity of design, recognizable immediately, but almost always without a trace of knowledge about the circuit of history in which the object is inscribed.<sup>1</sup>

In Susan Schuppli's audio installation *Pick Up!*, the Contempra phone plays a key role. Installed throughout the Art Gallery of Hamilton they become a tactile and visual link to the audio material that the artist has compiled. As a means of transmission they bring a historical subtext to the work. Between the phones and the building there is a strange confluence of the institutional and the domestic that Schuppli's installation begins to explore: by their placement and design the phones become a point of entry to some of the overlooked qualities of the gallery's architecture and site.

Beginning in the late 1960s, Trevor P. Garwood-Jones was invited to create a new building for the Art Gallery of Hamilton, one that was to be not only warm and inviting but also self-evident: a building that the visitor could feel at home in and navigate without a map.<sup>2</sup> Realized on a limited budget, it was constructed chiefly from poured concrete, steel, and glass. In its interior detailing however, it moves away from the coldness of such Brutalist materials. The architect used warm-toned paint, plush carpeting, and cedar panelling to create what was called for "...a particularly agreeable atmosphere, where warmth and intimacy prevail."<sup>3</sup> Unlike galleries designed with multiple wings, the Art Gallery of Hamilton uses an open central volume spanning both floors to serve as a cognitive and physical centre that one can always return to.<sup>4</sup>

Schuppli's installation pushes subtly against this warmth and clarity. Within this plan, the Contempra phones occupy liminal spaces: near entrances and exits, on stairways and elevators, in bathrooms and cloakrooms. Their presence traces out a network of stoppages and points of delay in contrast to the centrality of the exhibition plan. Along this other route one encounters the non-places of transit and storage, the temporary spaces of hosting and service. Within this network picking up the receiver is more than

simply listening in, it is becoming tethered to a particular place. This tethering is not insignificant, since the act of listening is inevitably layered onto seeing; as one listens to the banal or intimate details of another life, there is nothing to do but observe the obstinate bulk of a stored piano, the bright, grim folk of a William Kurelek painting (*Kazuly Funeral Procession*), or the random passage of traffic on King Street. One is tempted, out of some associative reflex, to search for significance in the collision of the messages and the places. But in each case, the relation escapes this kind of simple correlation. The gallery settings provide no clues to the meaning of that which we hear on the line, only a disjunctive layering that reinforces the chasm of disconnection separating the original sender from the present receiver. A disconnection that becomes tangible, inseparable, even from the things one sees.

While Schuppli's installation does not overtly comment on any of this, the delays that she sets up reveal the latent tensions of the building. The Art Gallery of Hamilton was but one part of a larger urban project. The entire complex, including the city hall, Hamilton Place theatre, and the farmer's market was to be linked – using a system of elevated pedestrian bridges and walkways – into a megastructure whose ultimate aim was to revitalize the city's downtown core. While this elevated plan never materialized, the building remains oriented towards the gravitational pull of its aborted program: the original entrance axis can be discerned on the gallery's second level, the high windows in the gift shop were designed to be viewed from the elevated network, the gallery's signage stands on a buttress whose original function was to support a pedestrian bridge.<sup>5</sup> Within the building, Schuppli's installation occupies oddly symptomatic points: adjacent the large plate-glass window overlooking King Street's walled in streetscape (with a view of the only realized pedestrian footbridge and the traffic below it), near the building's hidden entrance (created as a compromise after the original elevated plans fell through), and in a cloakroom holding a model detailing the building's planned renovations (currently underway as part of second generation architectural and urban renewal). It is a focus that becomes particularly evident with the Contempra phones installed in the main staircase.

In this space, where the light carpeting and cedar panelling are most dominant, the phones draw out the ways in which signs of domesticity act as cladding for a Brutalist institutional structure. In so doing, Schuppli's work points to a subtle dialectical relationship between the making of public space and the production of domesticity. First, the re-invention of a public institution is, in this case, intimately connected with a program of urban renewal: an attempt to grapple with the effects of post-war suburban flight. Second, it opens up the surfaces of such a public program (the creation of an



Telephone messages about personal relationships.



Telephone messages about health and the body.

inviting and accessible environment) to show how this vision of hospitality symptomatically replicates the plush carpet and wood panelling associated with a 1970s suburban rec-room. In this sense, the Contempra phones are entirely out of place: a fiction, an intrusion, an installation and yet strangely at home. The Contempra's blocky, angular geometry – softened only by the slightly bevelled corners – seems perfectly congruous with the angular brutalism of the poured concrete structure.<sup>6</sup>

These surfaces and the histories they elicit are a material undercurrent that runs up against the voices that Schuppli's work stages. It becomes apparent that despite the presence of the Contempra phones, *Pick Up!* is as much if not more, about the answering machine. Significantly the material for *Pick Up!* comes out of a process of collection: tapes were literally picked out of answering machines found amongst the appliances and knick-knacks at Salvation Army stores, Value Villages, and garage sales. Here I want to argue that the voices on the line are not the work's content, but rather another "material." In this sense they are not so different from the phones themselves or the gallery architecture. They belong to an economic cycle where the material acquisitions of one period are subsequently shed as styles come to be outmoded and technology succumbs to the horizon of its planned obsolescence. This planned and promoted cycle of obsolescence is nothing new, it is one of the crucial features by which industrial design began to impact the 20th century, accelerating the cycle of production and consumption from the 1930s onwards.<sup>7</sup> And the massive proliferation of such a cycle would not be thinkable without new patterns of suburban dwelling and the associated vision of domesticity: the trading in of automobiles each year along with the continual updating of refrigerators, lawn mowers, blenders, electric irons and television dinners.<sup>8</sup> The second-hand store is a spectral product of this cycle of production-consumption-disposal, a historical texture subsisting like the hiss of tape running beneath the voices that one hears on the line.

The Contempra's rotary dials, the building slated for renovation, the shrillness of the beep: while not old enough to be antiquated, all these things nonetheless carry the aura – as it has been called – of things that have been improved upon.<sup>9</sup> Touching upon the present but no longer fully of it, this time marked by obsolescence is also one of delay. In this case not only the stopping points Schuppli sets up in the gallery, but the indeterminable delay separating the instance of recording and playback. The delayed time of the recordings, the fact that they were left and forgotten and found again, is part of what makes them unexpectedly affecting. At points they are incredibly intimate (to the extent that one feels like an eavesdropper even while knowing full well that there is no one actually on the line). At the same time, they are distant, generic, even boring.

This could be anybody, anywhere: rote reminders for dentist's appointments, calls from bill collectors, recorded greetings from politicians seeking re-election. In other places there are different inflections, a series of long conversations that seem to be recorded accidentally (again we will never know) the machine having clicked on and been forgotten during conversation: the guilty relief after the drawn out death of a mother-in-law, the tentative jubilation at the first negative results following radiation therapy, the politeness and tension between two parents negotiating the kids' bike-ride on the weekend. With Schuppli's work we are not only listening to machines, we become listening machines: susceptible to projecting a narrative, a motivation, or a personality at the slightest cues, from the timbre of a voice to the length of a pause. These are habits practiced as much from our interactions with others as they are from the conventions of recorded media, the telephone being one of the most subtle and effaceable of such mediations. The indeterminate delay that accompanies these messages is a reminder that any message, even the most seemingly simple face-to-face conversation, implies a relationship to a consciousness separated by the distance of signs. A relationship that remains inextricably bound up with processes of delay: coding, sending, anticipation and response.

The delay that has made these segments remarkable is also the accidental travel in which they are inscribed. Picking up the phone each person becomes an unintended receiver; each transmission remains fortuitous, dependent upon a combination of the machine and the accident.<sup>10</sup> The contradictory impression that the work provides – simultaneously empathetic and neutral, intimate and distant, human and automatic – owes much to this relationship. If the preservation and transmission of these fragments is accidental, the accident is also what empties them, rendering them utterly typical. These are not actors but singular instances of one person calling another, one person speaking to another. At the same time, one can't help but imagine that if it were not these messages then it surely would have been others. As it becomes junk, the answering machine is nothing if not a reminder of how accustomed we have become to manipulating and storing time, stocking and deferring our encounters, holding them in reserve or erasing them. The accident in this understanding is not just about the unwitting capture of a conversation or the finding of a tape. More profoundly, it is about the ability to hold and repeat time, in this case the generation of an unforeseen and public afterlife that the process of storage itself makes possible.

This accidental afterlife is compounded by the contingency of the installation: staring at the bulk of the stored piano, the oatmeal-coloured carpet, or the pedestrians on King Street, the experience is one of sensory and temporal intersection. Sound becomes the content of vision.<sup>11</sup> Like a voiceover in film or the narration of an audio guide, sound monopolizes





Locations where answering machine tapes were found.

and remakes the seen. Unlike these experiences however, *Pick Up!* creates a relationship between the seen and the heard that remains prone to contingency. For each and every viewer the experience will be different (depending on what one sees through the window or on the staircase, depending at what point one enters the conversation). The listener is the point where the accidental travel of the recording meets the contingency of place.

It is a strange meeting, a point where one feels as if, through the coincidence, one has touched upon something quite real. But the sense of reality (not unrelated to the feeling of eavesdropping) is inextricably suffused with psychic and narrative projection, a subjective back-story that seeps up to fill the gaps in these fragmentary messages. As disembodied recordings, the voices seem to become inhabitants of an imagined city, a city of voices incompatible with the city of brick and concrete, a spectre that nonetheless inhabits it. What Schuppli orchestrates is a collision between the material residuum of a technological moment, a specific site, and some closely held habits of perception. Despite the solidity of the building, the familiarity of the phones, and the unchangeable course of the messages, the collision happens as if by accident – a point of temporary alignment. An alignment and appointment that the listener is left to rewind.

**Craig Buckley** is a writer and curator currently based in New York City. He holds an MA from the University of Western Ontario and was a Helena Rubinstein Curatorial Fellow at the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program 2003. His writing has recently appeared in *PARACHUTE*, *Fuse Magazine* and *Untitled*, amongst others.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Designed by John Tyson in 1966-7, the Contempra was the first phone designed and produced in Canada. It marked the independence of Northern Electric, until then a subsidiary firm manufacturing other people's patents. Soon after the invention of the Contempra, the company restructured itself towards the production of digital telephone switches. The company eventually became NorTel, whose digital networks are what have made answering machines largely obsolete. The outline of a submerged history connects the Contempra phone to the tapes the artist collected in order to make the project. For a brief description of the phone's design history see Rachel Gottlieb, *Design in Canada since 1945: Fifty Years from Tea-Kettles to Task Chairs* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 197.

<sup>2</sup> In their description of the gallery's history, more attention is focused upon creating an inviting atmosphere than on how the gallery actually functions as a space for exhibitions. Ross Fox and Grace Inglis. *The Art Gallery of Hamilton: Seventy-Five Years (1914-1989)* (Hamilton: Art Gallery of Hamilton, 1989), 29.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Telephone conversation with Garwood-Jones, April 22, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Telephone conversation with Garwood-Jones, April 22, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, the gallery's designs date to the same period as the phone's. Begun in 1969, only a year after the Contempra line was launched, the gallery was completed almost a decade later in 1977 (Fox and Inglis), 29-30.

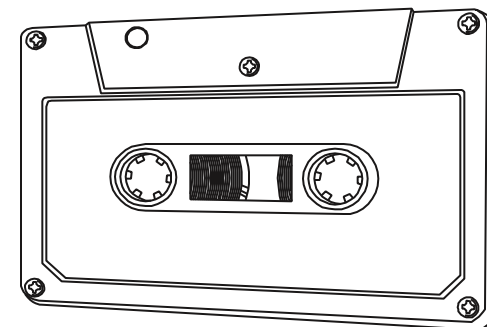
<sup>7</sup> See for instance Roy Sheldon and Egmont Arens, *Consumer Engineering: A New Technique for Prosperity* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1932).

<sup>8</sup> The words of J. Gordon Lippincott, sum up this shift: "Any method that can motivate the flow of merchandise to new buyers will create jobs and work for industry, and hence national prosperity... Our custom of trading in our automobiles every year, of having a new refrigerator, vacuum cleaner or electric iron every three or four years is economically sound." *Design for Business* (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1947), 14.

<sup>9</sup> This is how Tacita Dean characterizes obsolescence: "I like the time you can hear passing: the prickled silence of mute magnetic tape or the static on a record. So obsolescence has an aura; the aura of redundancy and failure; the aura around what has been improved upon. In "Artist Questionnaire: 21 Responses, October 100: Spring 2002, 26.

<sup>10</sup> The reader will notice that the motifs of my reading follow Hal Foster's notion of traumatic realism, in particular his discussion about how the machine and the accident generate the affectless and affective qualities in Andy Warhol's work. While Foster follows Lacan's notion of the screen, the qualities of Schuppli's work (and of other contemporary work that engages questions of the Real through both the location and the auditory experience) does not readily fit this visual model. Instead these works seem to require a notion of how vision and hearing interpenetrate each other. "The Return of the Real" in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 130-136.

<sup>11</sup> Slavoj Žižek outlines one approach to such interpenetration in "I hear with my eyes" Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (editors) *Gaze and Voice As Love Objects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996). I am grateful to Walter Johnston for pointing this out.



## Telephone Transcripts

Hello Liz. If you're there will you please pick up, hello?

It was four weeks of bliss let me tell you, we had lots of fun, I just can't believe it Ginelle, he's the perfect man, well he's not the perfect man, but he was, he was fun. We had lots of fun together and none of it was sex which was excellent you know. None of it was sex. We had fun and it wasn't sexual fun. We had so much fun together. He's like a male version of you actually. So call me when you get back just so I know you're home. Okay? Hope you had a good time, bye.

This is the New York Times calling, and we love the shot, we want your shot, we want you, Mary, for our staff. Please contact Tom, we have three Minolta cameras waiting for you.

Hello Ed, this Tom McCann returning your call. About your damage deposit, I never got any damage deposit from you people. I don't know if Tony paid you one or not. And if I did, I mean or even if you had, which you didn't, give to me at least. To get a damage deposit back you have to follow a lease and with a month lease you have to have written notice and you have to give thirty days that's just the way it is. Anyway I've talked to my lawyer about it, maybe you could talk to yours or whatever or give me a call. But anyway that's as far as its going to. Thanks.

Hi this message is for Marion, I'm calling from Vancouver and I would like you to call me back regarding your green-card. My name is Chris, as in Christopher, and your account number with us is 138508. Thank-you.

Well, I hope you get this message, this is your favourite stalker. Judging by the length of the beep you're not around, haven't been around for a long time.

Yo, hello pick up the phone, please, please, please, please, please pick it up right now. Pick up the phone please. Turn up the volume of my answering machine and pick up the phone. Pick it up now, okay bye.

I hope you're having a good time, I know maybe you can't be really happy, but I hope you don't get depressed cause you are doing something good and you're not really missing that much here. Just do what you want to do and decide what you want to do. And like, I can understand you having to be with the kids and that all day but just keep going, its worth it at the end you'll see.

Hi Kim, it's Shelley. Nice to know that you guys think that I made Lisa disown you. For your information, she disowned you long before anything else happened. Okay? And you're the one who asked for my help. If you didn't want my help, you shouldn't have fuckin' come to me in the first place. Bitch!

Hi Amanda. I guess you don't really want to hear my voice right now.

Its Eric. I've locked myself out of the house and I think in fact I've even locked the doors that are down in the closet. But if its possible, if you could be home, if you will be home bout 5/5:30 I'm going to try and break

down the door or something. I'm in a bit of a bind. So hopefully I'll see you later. Thanks bye-bye.

I was phoning you to see if you could phone me and leave a message or two, preferably two, on this answering machine because its my brother's and I picked it up and he says it wasn't working and I think I fixed it, well not really. He's just such a bonehead, I don't think it was broken in the first place. Please leave a message, phone back, leave one more just to make sure it's working and I'll talk to you before you hang up the second time. Thanks very much, see you, bye.

Starting to fucking think man, maybe you're fucking ignoring me, I don't know, but fuck I need a date. Anyways call me, we left Honey's and now we're at Wendy's, anyways call me.

He's your judge and that's why you have to meet with him. Otherwise I did get through and so I say just leave it alone now, he has it in writing from another priest and I also told him that Father Davignon and Father Hamilton were willing to stand up for you, so he was impressed with that. Alrighty. . . that Walter Miller is a sweetheart of a priest, I think you'll really like him. Alrighty, I'll talk to you tonight maybe, bye.

Kimmy are you there, can I talk to you please? I know you're there, can you please answer the phone? I know you're there, you don't have to try and pull one on me.

Big deal, you ain't home, I ain't there, talk to you later when you get there, if you want to listen to this, okay bye.

Good morning, this is Bjorn calling from Queensway Volkswagen Audi. I'm the service manger here and I just wanted to introduce myself but more so congratulate you on the purchase of your new Beetle, you're one of the first. I'm sure you're quite excited about the car, probably feel like a celebrity by now. I know people that have driven the car have come back saying they could never imagine having so much attention. Thanks again and have lots of fun.

There is no message really, I just don't like to hang up when your recorder has answered.

Don't sweat the small stuff because it's all small stuff, anyway ciao, bye-bye.

Its Friday the 14th of August, I believe you're going to be home soon, which is great. Last night Ben and I broke up, we cried for three hours on the phone from eleven until two and we decided it was best that we break up because its getting too stressful for him since he has no plan on leaving Guy. So, it was four weeks of bliss let me tell you, we had lots of fun and its all come to an end. Anyways if you do get home this weekend, I'm going to be around but I'm pretty depressed, listening to all the saddest songs I could find.

This is Norman at EBS. We decided we were going to give you a prize but we found that you lied about your age on the entry form that you put in the box so I'm sorry that you had to forfeit that prize. If you have any questions call me at 338-4080.

Hello Ed, this Tom McCann returning your call. About your damage deposit, I never got any damage deposit from you people. I don't know if Tony paid you one or not. And if I did, I mean or even if you had, which you didn't, give to me at least. To get a damage deposit back you have to follow a lease and with a month lease you have to have written notice and you have to give thirty days that's just the way it is. Anyway I've talked to my lawyer about it, maybe you could talk to yours or whatever or give me a call. But anyway that's as far as I'm concerned, that's as far as its going to. Thanks.

And I was also thinking of going to university in Calgary near Willy which is crazy I know. You're going to be mad at me for thinking to do something like that but I don't care, it means a lot to me and maybe if that's what I really want to do then I guess I should do it because I'll be happy and that's all I really want to do right now, is just to be happy. I'm depressed a lot here I guess and not really that happy. I feel so much but then nothing at the same time. I don't know how to explain it, so take care, bye.

Hi Susan, its Jen. I think my phone just died.

It has to be in writing too, it just can't be over the phone, it has to be in writing, you can check with them if you don't believe me.

Hello? Yes? Yes, who is this? Well ah, who am I talking to? Well you called me. Ha ha ha ha. . . you're kidding. It's Des from out West. Who? Des. Well I think you've got the wrong number. Well is your last name Thompson? No. Oh I do have the wrong number. That's okay. Bye.

There's the beep, finally, that's a long time to get a beep. Anyway you guys screen your calls? Are you home eh?

In the name of God, what is going on? I'm trying to call the Bay at Masonville, 675-0080. What is going on?

Hello, its me your date. I know you have that fibre optic thing happening so I'm calling to leave you a message saying we came to Wendy's and now we're down the road at Paddy's having big drinks, having a great time, talking about you and all your fucking dirty doggy deeds, you fucking cock-sucking councillor. Anyways thought maybe you'd want to hear from me, knew you would, ah don't even know what time it is as a matter of fact. Everyone's left the room, so anyways I don't know the number here for you to call me back, and I don't know how long this message is so I'll keep in touch good-bye!

Please give me a call if you have a chance and you would like to and if you don't call and you don't have a chance and you wouldn't like to, well then, talk to you soon. Bye, Bye.

Yeh Ken, this is Dale. Um, I should have a cheque here but I don't. Come Tuesday or tomorrow I have a few friends that work down at the courthouse. I want my money tonight or I will go down and put a lien against one of your projects. I'll guarantee you that. I'm glad you do have it on tape because I'll use it as a

submission too. Thank-you. And I'll be home here all night long. Thank-you \$168 bucks. Bye.

Hi Steven, its about quarter after four o'clock, I don't know how long I'm going to be here. I can't go anywhere until we get the proclamation approval. Right now they need to get one more signature and then the Governor General's signature. Earlier in the day when things looked good, they said they would probably be able to get the approval before late in the day but I guess at this point I'm pessimistic about whether or not I'm going to be able to make it to the party. But at least maybe, you could bring those brownies, as you and I won't want to eat those brownies, unless of course I bring some into the office on Monday.

Hi Irene, Jeff here. I dropped off your dishes and your cutlery and that heat-lamp at the back door of the agricultural hall so you can get set up today. Thank you, bye now.

Its 11:15. Please communicate with us before noon tomorrow. This is Saturday, we're leaving Sunday at noon. Please communicate with us before Sunday at noon. We need to know what the plans are. I repeat, please communicate with us before tomorrow at noon. We'll be talking to your Mum but we want to know what you know. We want to know what we're going to do for your Mum's birthday. Erase this message after you hear it so your Mum doesn't.

Call me tonight, I'm in one helluva mess with these people.

Hi, nice message Gregor. Just thought I'd call, let you know I'm off Wednesday and Thursday and I took Friday as a drop shift so if you want to try and swing something for Thursday and Friday, hey all the power to you bro.

Hi Annette, it's Samantha. You probably don't want to hear my voice right now but I don't know what happened. Last time I called you thought I was rude to you on the phone. I wasn't trying to be rude at all. I just wanted to talk to you and I don't know like, you've obviously taken the message the wrong way and I don't know what happened at Heather's. But whatever, I'd like for you to call me so that we can talk about it. I don't want any bad differences. I honestly was not being rude, I'm sorry if I came across that way.

I just called to let you know your phone bill came here so give me a call, bye.

Oh my God, there's a bazillion messages on there. Its Chris, I know you're out to dinner cause Jimmy called me and I talked to him for a little bit. I'm sure your day was better then yesterday. Love you sweetie, bye.

Nerves... well I'm going to go home and lie down. Phone me if it gets really busy and I'll come back or whatever. You see, now its even affecting my work for fuck's sake. It's just too much... oh he's here! I'll call back. Bye.

Hello Mom and Dad this is Taylor, if one of you or all is there please pick up, please, please pick up if you're there?

"Media are not fixed objects: they have no natural edges. They are constructed complexes of habits, beliefs, and procedures embedded in elaborate cultural codes of communication. The history of media is never more or less than the history of their uses, which always lead us away from them to the social practices and conflicts they illuminate."

Carolyn Marvin. *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electronic Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1988): 8.

## 1. Time

More than any other technology the telephone points outwards towards its use, privileging utility and presence over its capacity to represent. The telephone, like telegraphy before it and the internet after it, is an electronic medium capable of a version of immediacy that gives the impression of simultaneity and co-presence. While in use, telephones resist narrative because they are said to be temporally structured in the now and thus give the semblance of producing no gap between speaker and receiver.

The telephone produces few artifacts, and so does not appear to create the same problems of storage and retrieval produced by the camera every time it's utilized. Telephones are generally thought of as marking a passage rather than an object. The photograph's index is tied to what Barthes describes as "there and then." The telephone's index is the "here and now." As such, the time of telephony is a time that moves, rather than a time that "is." It is a desirous time; always in a state of lack. Similarly, while the telephone call takes place in the present, it is oriented somewhere between the now and the future.

"What are you doing now?"

"When I will see you next?"

"I love you."

It is aligned towards the person sought and the future time when his or her bodily presence will be re-experienced.

It is the function of the answering machine to save messages for retrieval at a later time by a specific someone. The intention of the apparatus is that these messages be retrieved and acted upon: listened to, understood, and returned in kind. A message for a message in some cases, but always a call for a call to make a completed circuit, an equal exchange of action and affection. The recorded message is a tangible artifact – frozen solid in time, but constantly slipping away.

"It's me."

"Where are you?"

"Call me back when you get this."

It is a record left to be accessed at an undetermined future time and received as a past event. The message desires the person sought and imagines a future in which it is recognized and retrieved. Like leaving breadcrumbs in the woods.

The tapes used in Susan Schuppli's *Pick Up!* have long been forgotten and abandoned in answering machines donated to thrift stores across eastern Canada and the northeastern United States. Whether discarded due to their technical obsolescence or even the death of a former "owner," these orphaned machines (some of which are displayed in the lobby of the gallery) contained tapes holding onto the voices of once-known speakers. That they exist at all is extraordinary, for neither the phone nor the answering machine is imagined as a tool for making permanent marks. Rather, they function as a conjunction or conduit to be passed through and dustbin to be emptied regularly. The answering machine tape provides a storage space in which words and information are exchanged but do not linger long; an archive of the ephemeral.

Through this gallery installation, the answering machine tape re-enters circulation as it both recalls and recasts its temporality. The lifting of any one of the telephone receivers scattered throughout the building gives the listener the experience of receiving dead language in real time. The tapes provide indexical traces of both messages left and conversations unintentionally taped at some point in the past. It is impossible to know exactly where they originate or at what instant in time these messages were left and subsequently received. However, when we hear a conversation in progress, there arises the uncanny feeling of eavesdropping on an exchange taking place in the present. Such recordings insist that the temporality of the answering machine, like that of the cinema, is always dual – simultaneously a "now" and a "then," a "present" and a "once was."

As in cinema, the experience of listening to recorded sound cannot be retained except in memory. Although its "body" can be found in the form of the audio tape (or in this case the digital CD to which the original electric signal was transferred), there is nothing of sound that can be grasped and held onto, nothing that does not slip away before it can be examined.



One of two transit shelters used to publicize the project and distribute its voicemail number in Hamilton.  
Photo: Carole Bozzato Timm

## 2. Address

The presence of the telephone in the gallery space presents difficulty for the gallery goer. The title of Susan Schuppli's installation is *Pick Up!* – but is it a direction or a command? The very lack of grammatical context in the phrase “pick up” suggests that its signification (like that of the object of the telephone receiver) is uncertain and shifts within the context of the gallery. Galleries are not spaces in which one normally picks up the receiver on a phone unless it is clearly designated as either available for public use or clearly marked as “art.” Thus, the phone in this installation produces an uncertainty akin to that presented by the phone in the home of an acquaintance. We do not pick up phones that do not “belong” to us, that are not in our homes or attached to our bodies. If such a phone rings, we ask for the authorization to answer it – to represent (to another) the person in whose home the phone resides or to whose name the number is attached. In this way, to “pick up” another person's phone is to act as a relay point in the chain between the person calling and the one to whom the phone “belongs.” “Hello, this is so-and-so's house.”

“Who may I ask is calling?”

“Just a minute.”

“I'll get him/her.”

The awkwardness of the conversation emphasizes the close relationship between telephone “ownership” and “selfhood.” Thus, to pick up an unfamiliar phone in the space of this gallery requires the gallery goer to consciously “pick up” and take on the position of an unknown other – even if only to eavesdrop.

The home phone is linked to a particular location, to a particular identity, an individual person or distinct collection (“family”) of people. When it rings, it is likely to be “for you.” The cell phone/“self-phone,” is tied to an “I,” an individual body that circulates in the world occupying infinite “heres” and moving toward any number of “theres.” With the cell phone, the shifter marks an index of time and place of both person and instrument.

“I'll be *there* in ten minutes.”

“Where are you now?”

“I'm right *here*.”

Wherever we call from is always “here.” Thus, the possession of a cell phone gives the user the illusion of control and the sense that the self is central. More than anything, it's a way to be sure of where you are in the world.

The public telephone, meanwhile, like the linguistic shifter “I,” can be taken up by anyone, utilized for a small fee in a way similar to the motel room, the restaurant, the parking space, the theatre seat, the hospital bed, the seat on a bus. It is a place of transit, a temporarily empty space that may be occupied and utilized by anyone.

In the context of the installation *Pick Up!*, the telephone receiver has an uncertain status, for it belongs to no one in particular and is directed towards anyone and everyone who passes by. And, most often, these receivers are located in places of “passage” – stairwells, bathrooms, corridors, entryways, thresholds. Because they are not clustered together in a single room, but rather spread out through the space of the gallery building, the telephone receivers that make up the most visible component of Schuppli's installation signify in ways that depend on their various physical emplacements.

Although equal in shape and size, each telephone receiver used in this exhibition inspires a different intellectual and affective response through the specifics of colour and location. The white institutional phones embedded inconspicuously in the white-painted stairway between galleries do not announce themselves as art. Rather, they provoke uncertainty in the viewer because they, more than any others, seem as if they “belong” to the gallery, intended for official business. In a different way, another kind of dilemma is provoked by the placement of a bright red phone near the main entrance, positioned startlingly close to the sharp hue of a fire alarm switch. Will picking up the receiver unintentionally put me through to some official emergency service? Or is it part of the installation? In each case, there is both too much signification and not enough. Only the unexpected contrast of a bright orange phone placed in the lime-green women's washroom announces itself straightforwardly as “art.”

But, if telephones address us more often through their ring than by their colour, what do we make of the collective silence of these telephone receivers scattered throughout the gallery? As a title, *Pick Up!* also implies the sexual “pick up” and suggests that there is something illicit about one's participation in the act of picking up a stray receiver – one whose ownership is in doubt. In this context, to pick up a mute receiver is to participate in an act that recalls the transgression of such an action in daily life.

### 3. The inhabitation of forms

The telephone receiver is the mouth to the body, the object that serves both to represent and obscure the presence of the channels of wire and wavelength that connect it to the source of the voices it accesses. The installation of multiple telephones throughout the gallery seems to mimic the dispersed status of the phone in the context of its “everyday” use. However these phones cannot be “used” in the traditional sense. They have no buttons to push; the person who picks up the receiver hears only sounds and words initially intended for other ears.

If, having picked up a receiver, the visitor to the gallery listens for any length of time, he or she finds that some telephones link the listener to an eclectic assortment of information from funerals to birthday parties, and plans for getting together. Other receivers provide access to a long loop of messages addressed to a single individual. And yet others connect the listener to a collection of messages arranged by category of content: outgoing messages, I love yous, health concerns, work-related issues and angry outbursts about money owed. As such, *Pick Up!*'s archive of recorded voices points to both the absolute specificity of the individuals whose longing they capture and the generality of human ritual and desire.

In *How to do things with Words*, John Austin allows for “infelicity” in the speech act – the possibility that the message sent is not necessarily the message received: the wrong number, the garbled message, and the misunderstanding are infelicities of direction, technology, and context. However, there is another kind of “infelicity” in the form of unhappiness, rather than accident, that is attached to many of the recordings heard in this installation.

On one loop the listener receives the increasingly plaintive messages left by a man for a woman who we guess will never (or perhaps more accurately, never did) return his calls. The same woman receives calls from her frail, elderly parents that likewise seem to go unreturned. Once it becomes clear to the listener that this group of recordings is addressed to the same person, a sense of character and narrative begins to take shape. We follow a series of happy congratulations on her prize-winning photography, the startling offer of employment from the *New York Times*, and the blow of unexpected loss when that opportunity falls through – all interspersed between the calls of an old woman begging for a call from her daughter. However the narrative that the listener weaves from these strands is always uncertain. While we may think we can identify accents, age and gender, one is also forced to wonder what can and cannot be conveyed through language and tone.

“I love you.”  
 “Where are you?”  
 “I know you’re there...”  
 “Pick up...pick up...pick up...”

In another recording, Schuppli loops innumerable repetitions of “goodbye,” “I love you,” and “see you soon,” taken from assorted answering machine tapes in which people unconnected to one another seem to answer the call of each other’s “I love you.” Rather than mere repetition, these expressions of affection and longing appear to respond to one another directly. This loop of calls also suggests that repetition can operate as a supplement for the absence of physical presence. These artifactual recordings point to the ritual function of the telephone call and what can and cannot be communicated in this form – words but not touch, intonation but not gesture. As such, the telephone inspires a general longing through its particular blend of presence and absence. “Maintaining and joining, the telephone line holds together what it separates.”<sup>1</sup>

If *Pick Up!* as an installation asks questions about the relationships between the objecthood and uses of the telephone, it also asks questions about the relationships we form and maintain through this assemblage of telephonic objects and practices. Perhaps most significantly, it points to the construction of the self in history through an almost taken-for-granted object. There is a call that animates in poetry, the address that brings the inanimate object to life: Shelley’s cry of “Oh, west wind” creates a living subject. For someone somewhere, to hear the phone ring is to be brought to life.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Avital Ronell. *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989): 44.

## Education

- 1996 Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program, New York  
1995 MFA in Visual Art: University of California, San Diego  
1990 BA in Fine & Performing Arts: Simon Fraser University, Vancouver

## Selected Exhibitions

- 2003 *Pick Up!*, Art Gallery of Hamilton, Hamilton  
*Plot*, Contemporary Art Forum, Kitchener (group show)  
2002 *Signal & Noise: Festival of Video and Sound*, Video In, Vancouver (group show)  
2001 *Phony*, Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge  
*Snapshot*, Contemporary Museum, Baltimore (group show)  
2000 *Frequent Flyers*, Artspace, Sydney, Australia  
*Feedback*, University Art Gallery, SUNY at Stonybrook, New York (group show)  
1999 *Silicon Valley of the Dolls*, Ottawa Art Gallery, Ottawa  
1998 *Civil Disturbances*, REPOhistory, New York (group show)  
*The Ideal Home*, Art Metropole, Toronto (group show)  
1997 *Slow Pressure*, Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver  
1996 *In Transit*, The Swiss Institute, New York  
*Never Walk Alone*, The Photographer's Gallery, London, England (group show)  
*Domicile*, Artspeak Gallery, Vancouver  
*Urban Fictions*, Presentation House Gallery, North Vancouver (group show)  
1995 *Danger Signs*, SF Camerawork, San Francisco  
1994 *Perambulations*, Washington State Art in Public Places Program  
1993 *Beneath the Paving Stones*, Charles H. Scott Gallery, Vancouver (group show)

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Telephone messages about emergencies.

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