

February 17 - 24, 2011

“February 17 - 24, 2011” refers to the dates during which I wrote this text, and is a direct reference to a historic exhibition of Conceptual art that was curated by art dealer Seth Siegelaub and titled “January 5 – 31, 1969.” The language of the title also mimics the straightforward concepts, dating, mapping and emphasis on real time found in the works of first generation Conceptual artists. For most Conceptual artists the idea behind a work of art was paramount, while the forms were often simple and involved ordinary materials. Artist Sol Lewitt explains in *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art* (*ArtForum*, June, 1967), “The idea becomes a machine that makes art,” he continues, “The ideas need not be complex. Most ideas that are successful are ludicrously simple. Successful ideas generally have the appearance of simplicity because they seem inevitable. In terms of idea the artist is free to even surprise himself. Ideas are discovered through intuition.”

“It’s for you,” Conceptual Art and the Telephone just might fit into the category of ludicrously simple ideas -- but one that allows itself to be complicated and expanded through a myriad of formal and intellectual approaches over a period of more than forty years. The idea is essentially to bring together artworks that use the telephone as medium or as a mediator between artist and audience. The catalyst for this exhibition, however, was not so much intuitive as observational. Working at the Housatonic Museum of Art (HMA) for more than a year, I have been in the company of a remarkably diverse student body. One activity they share, however, is their pervasive use of the telephone. Students who traverse or relax in the interstitial spaces of the campus are usually texting, talking, surfing the Internet or listening to music on their phones. With approximately 6,000 students on site, the built-in audience that inspired the HMA’s inception in 1969 continues to influence Museum’s gallery exhibitions. With *“It’s for you,”* the phone becomes a familiar point of entry that invites students to explore the often challenging histories, processes, and thinking that surround Conceptual art practices.

Starting with knowledge of some historic artworks that incorporated the telephone, I investigated ways the phone could be an effective conduit for learning about Conceptual art practices – and how those practices influence art today. Conceptual art often includes one or more of the following: language-as-media; ephemeral forms, which critic Lucy R Lippard described as “dematerialized;” democratic impulses that include audience participation and broader distribution methods (such as art dealer Seth Siegelaub’s catalogs of Conceptual artworks); and real-time projects using time-based media or performance. After some research, it seemed that there was room for an exhibition that solely focused on Conceptual art and the telephone. There are, of course, exhibitions that have included the telephone and two of the works in “*It’s for you*” were in those shows. Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art’s exhibition *Art by Telephone* was based on artists calling in instructions on how to make their works and the *Information* show at the Museum of Modern Art, New York included John Giorno’s *Dial-a-Poem*.

The works in *It’s for you* use sound, video, installation, film, and text as media. Some pieces are designed for the gallery – Maurizio Bolognini, Jonn Herschend, Chrisitan Marclay, Adam McEwen, Pietro Pellini, Adrian Piper, Rachel Perry Welty. Others consist of archival elements from pieces that were originally interactive, broadcasted, screened or performed – *Art by Telephone*, Chris Burden, John Cage, John Giorno, Peter Greenaway, Max Neuhaus, Robert Peters, and Hannah Wilke. A handful were designed specifically for this exhibition, including Jeremy LeClair’s *Precise Tone Plan*, Bethany Fancher’s *Mother/Daughter Skype Painting*, and Gary Wiseman’s *Cell Phone Novel: New Objects*. With T Foley’s *Locally Toned*, Lukas Geronimas’s *Nickname Game 2*, and Yoko Ono’s *Telephone Piece (Bridgeport)* audience participation completes the works. Many of the formats and media in “*It’s for you*,” *Conceptual Art and the Telephone* discourage passive viewing. Instead, they encourage watching, listening, reading, touching, and talking.

Including works that are largely ephemeral, interactive and/or archival is challenging (and perhaps problematic). For works originally intended to be activated from home phones or to be experienced in non-art environments, a gallery setting creates a need for

mutually agreed upon adaptations. During the decade that many of these pieces were produced, Conceptual artist Robert Smithson wrote in his essay *Cultural Confinement* (Artforum, 1972):

Cultural confinement takes place when a curator imposes his own limits on an art exhibition, rather than asking the artist to set his limits. Artists are expected to fit into fraudulent categories.... Artists themselves are not confined but their output is. Museums, like asylums and jails, have wards and cells – in other words, neutral rooms called “galleries.” A work of art when placed in a gallery loses its charge, and becomes a portable object or surface disengaged from the outside world. A vacant white room with lights is still a submission to the neutral.

Smithson makes good points in his essay. Yet, the gallery is one of the Housatonic Museum of Art’s primary platforms, making it difficult to avoid the neutral ground of that space. Group exhibitions (and audiences) often benefit from a thematic structure when considering diverse bodies of works over time, but themes can often lead to an artist’s body of work being narrowed in presentation and/or interpretation. By working directly with most of these artists, their studios or estates, I hoped to counterbalance pitfalls like those posited by Smithson. In addition to the exhibition’s theme and the artists’ materials/instructions, the installation is also influenced by this site and is constructed primarily from materials at hand. The aesthetic of an institution/educational facility (with its classrooms, offices, and labyrinthine halls) felt like a natural fit with the functions and environments of the telephone. Cubicles, dividers, boxes, tables consequently become mundane sculptural elements that are intended, in part, to provide unique spaces for artworks and to alter the architecture of the “vacant white room.”

Ultimately, I wish this exhibition could include a time and space machine that would take gallery visitors to a living room in the late 1960s. While there they could call Giorno’s *Dial-a-Poem* on a rotary phone. Then a trip to Chicago in 1993 to interact from a push button phone with Robert Peters’ programmed script for *Naming Other: Manufacturing Yourself*. With one visit to 1977, audiences could listen to Chris Burden’s *Wiretap*

broadcast on KPFK-FM in Los Angeles, hear Max Neuhaus's *Radio Net* on WABE-FM in Atlanta, or see Hannah Wilke perform "*Intercourse with...*" in Ontario. The newer contemporary works, of course, are meant to be viewed now (some in the gallery and some in other locations – Geronimas, LeClair, Wiseman). Similar to the exhibition's first generation Conceptual artists, several of the newest works (and various programming) in "*It's for you*" are intended to be experiential and ephemeral. Once completed, only documentation of these pieces will exist: between the dates of February 24 and March 25 Lukas Geronimas will give students nicknames; students will perform John Cage's *Telephones and Birds* in the HCC atrium; and T. Foley will work with students to create original ringtones as part of *Locally Toned*. Of course, exhibitions by their very nature are fleeting as well. After "*It's for you*" is no longer on view in the gallery, only archival photos, documents, videos, and the blog (which digitally stores these materials) will remain. Perhaps in 40 years someone will be in a gallery listening to, or looking at, archival materials from the works or programming we will experience first hand from February 24 – March 25, 2011.

-- Terri C Smith, Curator