



# CALL OF THE WIRED: WI-FI ART IS ALL THE BUZZ

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In the "can you hear me now?" era, art is playing a big part in answering important social questions about how effectively we communicate and the roles of communication devices in our daily lives. Wi-fi art is an open forum in that it evolves and upgrades itself alongside the technology. At the same time, our dependence on mobile phones is now so hard-wired in us that the artwork depicting this relationship tends to veer towards the experiential. Italian futurist artist Umberto Boccioni once told the story of industrialization by portraying the dynamism and energy of motion through the figurative, whereas many inter-media artists of this century are creating interactive art that engages the spectator/caller in a live and direct relationship with the subject: mobile phones.

One of the more grand-scale art installations of 2003, involving mobile phone technology was Mexican-Canadian electronic artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's "Amodal Suspension." The project, took place both on-site at the then newly inaugurated Yamaguchi Center for Art and Media in Japan (YCAM), as well as remotely via audience interaction through mobile phones and the Internet. A visitor could connect to [www.amodal.net](http://www.amodal.net) using his/her cell phone or Web browser and type in a message for another visitor that would then be "translated" into light flashes based on individual letters (think Morse Code).



Meanwhile, back at the YCAM, 20 robot-controlled searchlights received the encoded messages and beamed them out into the Yamaguchi night air in the form of the flashes. Recipients would receive an e-mail notifying them that a message was waiting for them in Yamaguchi. One could "capture" a message telephonically or online. At that point, the text message was momentarily displayed on a wall at the YCAM and the searchlight corresponding to that missive disappeared from the sky. Despite the fact that the project officially ended on November 24, visitors can continue to send and receive messages through the Web site. However, the searchlights at the YCAM no longer display the live "interactions," but rather pre-configured sequences. There is talk of setting up "Amodal Suspension" in different cities in the near future.

The messages – which crossed beams when translated into light flashes and retrieved – were inspired by the patterns of Buckminster Fuller's notion of "tensegrity" (simply put: the compressed balance between push and pull). The three-week project seems to show how messages and language can be completely altered through communication technology. The original meaning is not always the ultimate understanding – like some large-scale game of Telephone. An automatic Japanese/English translation engine was also part of the system, demonstrating quite literally the fallibility of translation and technology. The piece also delved into the realm of space definition – in this case meshing cyberspace, physical space and the "relational space" of mobile phones.

Another artist, Vancouver, Canada-based Kate Armstrong, is also employing the concept of space in her mobile phone art project. In "Ping," geography and emotional response co-exist in the interaction between cell phone technology, architecture and human behavior. It is yet another example of how psycho-geography is once again the rage. Armstrong's work informs this arcane retro zeitgeist. "It's about mixing the physical world into the experience of computing," says the artist. Each time "Ping" is featured in an exhibit, a toll-free number is set up. Mobile-phone toting visitors are given the number and invited to call on the spot or at a later date. When they do, a voice guides them through layers of linked menus based on the choices they make by punching in numbers on their keypads. Throughout the process they amble around the city, inputting information on their whereabouts, as well as being navigated into different mental and physical spaces by the talking "guide" on the other end of their phone. The experience continues for as long (or little) as the caller desires, with the calls generally averaging 30 minutes. Armstrong has programmed "Ping" through a proprietary software system designed for businesses wishing to create voicemail networks.

Despite the fact that all visitor data is logged, the project is concerned with individual callers' experiences rather than an algorithmic database of experiences. "It's existential," says Armstrong, "You're constantly giving feedback to the system as to whether or not you exist." Armstrong debuted "Ping" in May of 2003 at Glowlab's Psy-Geo-Conflux in New York. It then went on to be presented in Lithuania. The artist has neither a background in architecture nor psychology (philosophy is her discipline of choice). But like many inspired inter-media artists today, she hopes to blend disciplines and ideas. "It's not strictly geographical or emotional. It's trying to create a third experience of *both*." The response by callers has been split. According to Armstrong, many people "react against the authoritarian telephone menu because they hate it so much in daily life." Apparently "banking-by-phone" has imbued them with the Pavlovian response of irritability. Others however appreciate being able to use their mobile phones in a street context, exploring physicality. Let's not forget why they were dubbed *mobile* phones in the first place.



CAN YOU SEE ME NOW? RAFAEL LOZANO-HEMMER'S "AMODAL SUSPENSION" AT THE YAMAGUCHI CENTER FOR ART AND MEDIA IN JAPAN (YCAM). PHOTOS: ARCHI BIMING