

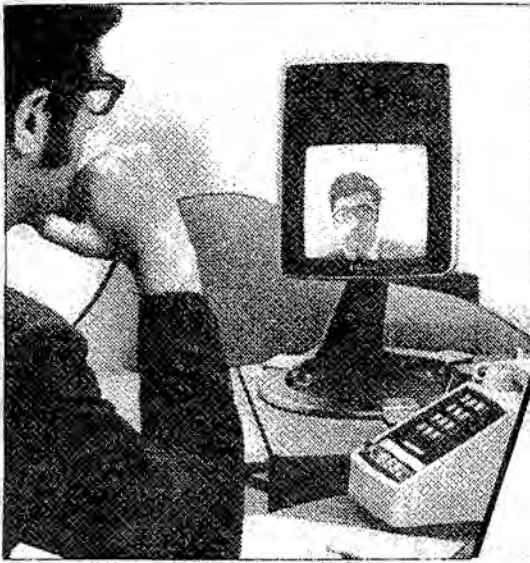
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Today, all humans function like multi-directional, interactive transceivers. Human transceivers operate from one basic need—*survival*. Survival is proportional to the amount of useful information we can receive, process, store, and retransmit . . . Human existence (and its extensions) will be determined by our ability to telecommute effectually—now and in the near future . . .



For A Video/Phone

Peter D'Agostino

Part I

Have you ever wondered what happened to the Video/Phone?

Telephones that would transmit both sound and image were popularized in the 1950's by science fiction and Dick Tracy comics. Considered to be an up and coming technology, Picturephone was first introduced at the 1964-65 World's Fair and, in 1970, sets were installed in the White House. With some experts predicting that Picturephones would be in wide public use by the 1980's, AT&T started test marketing the service in some cities. When this market failed to materialize, mainly because of high cost, the Bell system initiated the Picturephone Meeting Service (PMS) in 1974. PMS consists of a conference room with audio and video hookup at special Bell offices and now provides services between 11 cities, including New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Washington. It is primarily designed for corporate meetings, but is also available, at present, for limited public use. In June 1981, PMS will be re-evaluated in terms of design and rate structure. Whether it will become more widely available to the public or even more specialized in its use are questions that should be raised.¹ (The writer has designed a workshop for students at UCLA to research possible uses of a video/phone in a telecommunications and art context².)

The invention of the telephone was the result of humanistic concerns as

much as an interest in technological innovation. From his study of human speech, Melville Bell developed a written code, 'Visible Speech,' which was an analysis of spoken language used to teach the deaf to speak intelligibly. Alexander Graham Bell, continuing his father's studies, and in the course of research on a hearing aid, is credited with the invention of the telephone in 1876. The invention met with considerable rejection at first, ranging from public indignation for tampering with the 'supernatural' to criticism of the 'phoney' sound quality of the device and the apparent impracticality of its use beyond a short distance. But, the telephone has not only become an integral part of daily life, it is also a model of a truly interactive two-way communication system; that is, a system open to use by an individual—where the purpose, time frame, and content of the interaction are generally unspecified and, for the most part, unregulated.³

The technological aspects of telecommunications usually take precedence over the social considerations, with the result that their essential use as human links, as vehicles of communication between people, are generally ignored.

"I have the impression that some communication theorists regard the human link in communications systems in much the



Picturephone Meeting Service conference room in Los Angeles.



Conference room closeup

same way they regard random noise...unfortunate disturbances in an otherwise well behaved system...whereby both should be reduced until they do as little harm as possible."⁴

Broadcast television, a system which excludes audience input and active response, is an obvious example of this attitude. Think of commercial television programming as filler, the 'entertainment' as an attempt to hold the viewer long enough so that the real content of TV, the advertising messages, can have their effect: delivering people to the products. Even two-way cable TV systems, with their broad potential for communication, are being marketed fundamentally to preserve and perhaps expand television's consumer oriented function. With some systems you can now respond to surveys, shops, and even charge-it directly from your home computer terminal. There is no need to leave your TV set. In fact, the cable company can keep records of your buying habits, and provide this information to corporations interested in improving the marketing of their products. (Other information including your schedule of TV viewing, banking, medical records, etc. can also be recorded when these are available as cable-TV services.)⁵

TV broadcasters do not seem to be totally unaware of their need to affect and provoke a positive response from their audiences. Current TV catch phrases such as, "We're in Touch, So You Be in Touch," or "Touch Now" (associated with QUBE, two way cable TV⁶) seem to echo the sentiments proclaimed by the Bell system ads, "Reach Out and Touch Someone," which promotes long distance calling on their Touch-Tone telephones. Since we're all susceptible to the effects of ad campaigns—even the 'selling of the president is a well known fact of life'—we should look next at some of the facts and fictions of new media and discuss what may occur as we combine technologies such as television and the telephone.

**"TELEVISION KILLS TELEPHONY IN BROTHERS BROIL.
OUR EYES DEMAND THEIR TURN.
LET THEM BE SEEN"**

reads a newspaper headline from James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. But each new medium does not necessarily replace those that preceded it. A battle between television and telephone has obviously not occurred, nor has TV replaced radio, its more immediate rival. In fact, all three media have had enormous parallel growth in the past three decades. Historically speaking, television can be viewed as a 'picture-radio' since most of its broadcast technology and even the early programming itself was derived directly from radio formats. It is, of course, ironic that as an intended medium of communication, television has done more to limit dialogue between people than to promote conversation and discourse. (Think of the non-conversant family seated in front of the TV set, or in more affluent households, each family member alone with his own TV set.) The well worn cliché that television is still in its infancy may be true of its communication potential which has never been fully explored, much less realized. The combination of television with the two-way capability of the telephone has the possibility of becoming a vital new communication tool.

In considering how well AT&T's Picturephone Meeting Service fulfills the promise of telephone-television communication possibilities, it is necessary to consider some of the limitations of the design. A significant problem is that the Picturephone, and the videophone in general, is still widely perceived as merely duplicating existing telephone service at greatly added expense, in spite of the added visual dimension. Telephone company promotional material suggests that teleconferences not only save time and money, but, "A Picturephone meeting is as good or better than a regular out-of-town meeting." Since the service would save money on travel expenses to distant cities, it is possible that conferences could be held more frequently, more people could be involved, and that the conferences themselves would be better organized and concise because of time limitations. However, none of these characteristics necessarily indicate an improvement over face-to-face communication. The system is not necessarily the solution. The ability to see someone at the other end of a telephone conversation might as easily inhibit, as well as facilitate a dialogue.

The Picturephone cameras, for example, are voice-actuated. The person speaking can be seen and heard on a television monitor, but new skills are obviously needed to develop a proper protocol for speaking and listening. The technology cannot make the subtle adjustments in communication that people can in detecting differences in voice intonation or body language expressed in face-to-face meetings. So let's not take the "touch someone" message too literally.

In an article titled, "Electronic Meeting: Utopian Dreams and Complex Realities" the authors point to some of the technological, social and political problems of the teleconference. "The utopian temptation is to expect widespread societal benefits to emerge because of the introduction of new technology."⁷ Politically speaking, the burgeoning 'global village' would not only be controlled primarily by the usual corporate interests such as practicality and profits, but potential for such abuses as surveillance and dictatorial control would be greatly increased. And socially, as the possibilities for communication expand so do possibilities for miscommunication and information overload. If, as anthropologist Edward T. Hall points out, "culture is communication and communication is culture,"⁸ then any new communication system needs much flexibility to develop through experimentation and practical usage within a particular culture and to provide for new ways to bridge and promote cross-cultural understanding.

As in the case of all new technologies, the foremost question for the development of the video/phone remains: Will we find a use for it, or—like TV, will it use us? A distinct problem arises when the manner of interaction through any media, new or old, is narrowly prescribed and limited expectations develop concerning its use—the medium itself tends to become its own content. These limitations can be ideological impositions (such as the commercialization of television) or exist as limitations of the creative process. Both are obviously interrelated aspects of the same problems: limited access to the system limits growth and the prospects for its varied use. Nevertheless, a video/phone can be a remarkable instrument. Its two-way capabilities could provide real advancements for breaking down cultural barriers, allow for new educational possibilities, and even increase opportunities for participation in government. It can be a tool for creativity and social change. If you think of the seemingly infinite possibilities of language as basic communication and as an art form, you have a basis for the broad applications of media. Developing from the oral tradition, for example, poetry is alive not because of the pencil or the typewriter, but rather, it is perpetuated and disseminated by these tools. Poetry exists not because of media, but through it and the mind's ability to aspire to, create, and comprehend the poetic:

"What does not change / is the will to change." —Charles Olson

The UCLA workshop will attempt to use the Picturephone as a creative communications tool. It will not engage solely in 'experiments with new technology,' but rather, explore the content of this experience in an interdisciplinary context: how the artist or anthro-socio-psychologist can utilize the video/phone.

*"We are constantly taking information given in one form and translating it into alternative forms, searching for ways to map a strange new phenomenon into simpler and more familiar ones. The search is something we call 'thinking': if we are successful, we call it 'understanding'."*⁹

(Project descriptions and results of the first stage of this research will appear in *For A Video/Phone, Part II*, Fall, 1981.)

NOTES

- 1 Video Teleconferencing is available as a specialized telephone service within the U.S., Great Britain, Japan and Australia. World-wide services are also available via satellite transmission from a number of different companies.
- 2 This workshop is part of an on-going visiting artist program sponsored by the International Network for the Arts and hosted by the UCLA Dickson Video Lab headed by Mits Kataoka.
- 3 For a critical look at the telephone company see *I'm Sorry, The Monopoly You Have Reached Is Not In Service* by K. Aubrey Stone, 1973.
- 4 George A. Miller, *The Psychology of Communication*, 1967.
- 5 See "Privacy and 2-way Cable TV" by Lee Margulies, *LA Times*, March 3, 1981.
- 6 For more on QUBE see Pater D'Agostino, *Teleguide, Including Proposal For Qube*, 1980, or the excerpt appearing in VIDEO 80, Vol. 1 No. 1, October, 1980.
- 7 "Electronic Meetings: Utopian Dreams and Complex Realities" by Robert Johansen, Jacques Vallee and Kathleen Spangler, *The Futurist*, October, 1978.
- 8 Edward T. Hall, *The Silent Language*, 1959, and *The Hidden Dimension*, 1966.
- 9 *The Psychology of Communication*.



Deirdre Dowdakin and Peter D'Agostino researching the Picturephone in New York.

FOR A VIDEO/PHONE

On May 29, 1981, a Video/Phone transmission took place between two groups: my video workshop at UCLA, and students and fellows from the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT -- coordinated by Antonio Muntadas.

The event was conceived as a research project to explore a video/phone system and to develop and evaluate its use in a communication and Arts context. We used AT&T's Teleconferencing system, the Picturephone (Part I of this essay originally appeared in VIDEO 80, Spring 1981.

The project was not a public performance but an interactive participation event between two groups with common concerns. (A limited number of invited observers were present during the transmission.) Preparation for the project included seminar discussions and readings concerning the interactive potential of telecommunication systems, my visit to MIT to discuss the event with fellows at CAVS, as well as telephone conversations between individual project participants.

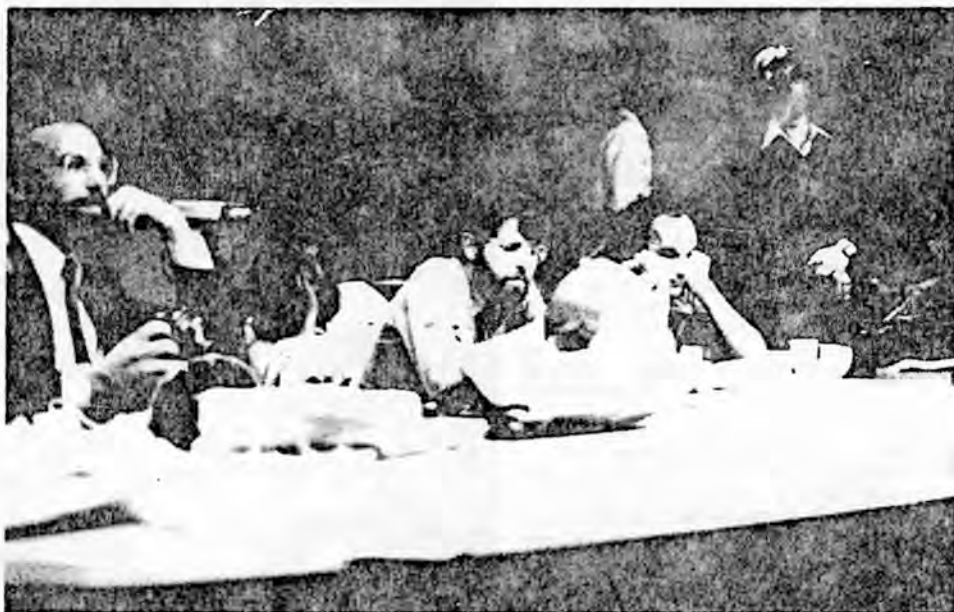
Rather than attempt a critical evaluation of the project from any single viewpoint, the outline and collage that follows is a first step to collect information concerning this work. The general consensus of the group was that this event should be thought of as a beginning to this kind of exchange with hopes that more interaction would take place, rather than to consider it a finished piece or draw any definitive conclusions from it.

Date: May 29, 1981
Place: 3470 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles
185 Franklin St., Boston
Time: 1 - 2 PM (Los Angeles)
3 - 4 PM (Boston)

As a result of our preliminary discussions, the following time structure was set up to serve as a guideline for the transmission:

PARTICIPANTS

LOS ANGELES	BOSTON
Robert Oberhand	Gregorio Rivera
Atefeh Sarafi	Peter Codella
Marcy Muray	John Correa
Alfredo Grieco	Gloria Brown-Simmons
Kuni Tokoyama	Ann Bray
Julie Slater	Martin Koeppl
Bruce Yonemoto	Keiko Prince
Norman Yonemoto	Antonio Muntadas
Peter D'Agostino	



Peter D'Agostino with the video workshop at UCLA during the Video/Phone transmission, Boston/Los Angeles, May 29, 1981.

QUESTION AND ANSWER PERIOD 10 min.
SHORT SEQUENCES 40 min.
EVALUATION 10 min.

The transmission began from Boston with an image of six masked people with a clock and cards identifying different countries in front of them, asking the following QUESTIONS:

"Is there any business to be transacted?"
"How many of your transactions are made in a car?"
"Are the people there adjusted to the transition to a desert?"
"Why do you live in LA?"
"Do you have any problems?"
"Can we help you with any of them?"

"What's on the front page of your newspaper today? Do you want to see the front page of the Boston paper? How sensitive is LA to violent mass media images?"

"How much time do artists have on broadcast T.V.?"

(Except for the exchange of front page news items from the respective cities that led to other forms of dialogue, there was little response except to ask them to take off their masks.)

"There seemed to be little desire by the LA group to discuss questions we prepared for the transmission. There seemed to be resistance to dialogue from the begin-

ning. This could possibly be explained by our opening the transmission wearing masks and asking for responses to our questions. This may have been very confrontive and aggressive, causing problems for the LA group.

SHORT SEQUENCES

--A videotape was shown composed of street scenes intercut with Picturephone promotional material. The Boston group was asked to call out one-word associations to the images that repeated slowly and at progressively faster rates. As the images sped up, the responses were short circuited by the Picturephone's voice activated system which switches three closeup cameras at a fixed rate and is incapable of adjusting to natural conversation such as quick or simultaneous response.

--"Is language still one of the main barriers for communication?"
--question posed from Boston in four different languages: Japanese, Bavarian, Catalan, and English.

--To symbolically bridge the distance between LA - Boston a map of LA was drawn on the screen and Boston was asked to follow along to complete the drawing.

--"Feeling practical, I chose to use the Picturephone to get my car radio repaired. Although it was a tangled mess of loose wires and circuits, I found the

Coordinated by

Peter D'Agostino and Antonio Muntadas.

PART II

UCLA— MIT TRANSMISSION.



Antonio Muntadas with Students at MIT during the Video/Phone transmission, Boston/Los Angeles, May 29, 1981.

MIT group to be enthusiastic troubleshooters...They diagnosed the problem and advised me to douse the broken radio in lighter fluid and further soak it in orange juice pulp. This did the trick, and as proof of their competence, the radio came on immediately with an Old Beach Boys tune."

--The Picturephone was an appropriate context for viewing a segment of videotape from MIT's Architecture Machine Group called THE TRANSMISSION OF PRESENCE. The project deals with the limitations of present teleconferencing technology and ways to extend its capabilities.

--Live responses from LA were punctuated by short intermittent scenes from Bruce and Norman Yonemoto's videotape GARAGE SALE II: THE FUTURE OF MY DESIRE, which deals with issues related to sex and violence in the mass media.

"Why are we having a Picturephone meeting?
Is this part of a series of experiments with telecommunications for you?
Do you prefer the interactive or the one way parts?
Which pieces do you like better of ours?...of yours?
Are they the same pieces that use the Picturephone most efficiently?
Are there criteria developing for Art telecommunications?
Is this an Art event?...a communications event?...or, a commercial event?
What are we learning from telecommunications events?
Can new technologies enable us to communicate better?
Do new technologies open up new

areas for artists or just distract them?"

(The 10 minutes remaining during the transmission was clearly inadequate for an evaluation. The questions that were raised, however, need to be considered as part of a continuing dialogue concerning the uses of telecommunication systems.)

COMMENTS

"Beginnings and endings are important in all time-based media, as well as in group dynamics. More attention should be paid to introductions and conclusions. They are reflected in traditional telephone formalities, serving important social functions."

"Our old Art making skills made us fairly comfortable with the visual needs of the system, but its verbal needs were unfamiliar and unmet."

"The social aspects of the medium need to be evaluated too. In a typical phone conversation, one person exchanges with another. In this Picturephone transmission, one group attempted to interchange with another. The addition of visual information further complicated the communication."

"There was a real lack of verbal exchange. There was very little dialogue concerning the content of the work or concerns about each other."

"A dream-like feeling got generated through the dependence on corporate technology: the traumatic effect of 'being on' and 'off', without immediate control over those decisions can be compared to abruptly being torn from a dream with some visual memory left, but

with only a subliminal feeling of the presence of the aftermath of meaning in them."

"The structured agenda was designed to compensate for numerous unknowns, but it resulted in limiting the experimentation and interaction. Many of the problems were left to the individual to solve and explore."

"Two general suggestions come from the experience. We feel that more interactive programs and more natural communication would directly improve future Picturephone transmissions."

POSTSCRIPT

The questions of how artists can interact with, utilize, or redesign the tools of the 'age of electronic transmission' are especially pertinent to this project.

To expect technology to solve aesthetic or social problems may be naive, but, so too is the notion of rejecting new technology outright, preferring to rely on old technology instead. Any system can be just another method or means of communication. But rather than thinking of any particular system as a solution in itself, it is the content of the information and its interpretation that is crucial for continuing these investigations. I will characterize the positions presented by the individual works developed for this project as ranging from a kind of sincere naivete (believing fully that the Picturephone could be used for our purposes) to a sort of critical cynicism. Many of these works effectively alluded to the inadequacies of the Picturephone, and, of the problems of communication in general.

If I were to attempt a summary of the experience, a thought expressed by members of the MIT group of having been caught between 'hope and skepticism' is most appropriate. This bind may serve to illustrate any new endeavor; in this case we accepted the lack of subtlety and nuance in attempting to communicate via the Picturephone -- a system that was clearly inadequate for our purposes. The experience left us with the need to restructure our events and reconsider our purposes or to become more active in redesigning these systems to suit our needs. This may be more of a socio-political issue than a technological one.

MAY 29, 1981 1-2 PM:
LA/4-5 PM: Boston