

MY PROFILE Member Login USERNAME PASSWORD LOGIN >> Remember me ? Become a member! Register and have access to these features: Business Card Create your own business card to share with other members. Network on TheFeature! Bookmarks & Notes Bookmark interesting articles and keep your own notes on them. Discussion Forum Create, join or follow a discussion. It's up to you! BECOME A MEMBER >> SEARCH THEFEATURE ::Entire site:: SEARCH >> FEATURED MEMBER Sonny Lim Designer  "A creative mind is like a parachute - it only works when it is open!" VIEW BUSINESS CARD >> HELP >>About Us >>Partners >>FAQ >>Contact Us >>Privacy Policy >>Legal Notice >>Community Standards Copyright Nokia 2001	IN-DEPTH  THEFEATURE :: The Art of the Mobile Phone By Jeff Goldman, Jan 03 2002 You thought your phone was just for calls and messages? Take another look. (5 recommendations) BOOKMARK >> SEND TO A FRIEND >> RECOMMEND >> PRINT >>  Jeff Goldman Last September, the New York-based artist Golan Levin premiered his "telesymphony," <i>Dialtones</i>, at the 2001 Ars Electronica Festival in Linz, Austria. Onstage, Levin and his assistants placed simultaneous calls to audience members' mobile phones — and the audience watched themselves in a huge mirror placed above the stage, while a spotlight lit each phone as it rang. Levin's work is only one example of how mobile phones have turned into far more than just tools for communication. As they become increasingly central to modern society, these tools are also being used for creative expression in a variety of ways: as musical instruments, as displays for visual art, as objects of art themselves — and they're facilitating everything from giant love letters to interactive painting. Artists have long been fascinated by technology, both as an instrument for creativity and as a threat to tradition. But now that photography hasn't caused the end of painting, and film hasn't eliminated live theatre, the threat to tradition doesn't seem as relevant any more — and a number of enterprising artists worldwide have taken the opportunity to make mobile phones a central part of their work. Music to his ears Levin's <i>Dialtones</i> takes just about the straightest path possible from technology to art. Ringtones already give us their own musical performances every day — Levin simply makes the leap from the solo to the symphony. "The fact that these things make music, but always until now in a monophonic way, inherently suggested the possibility of a polyphonic, chorus situation," he said.  There are a number of precedents for Levin's work, all the way back to Laurie Anderson's 1972 concert for car horns—but the best inspiration for <i>Dialtones</i> came from Levin's own experience. "I was at a European music festival and the emcee, whose English was not so good, asked everyone in the audience if they could 'please turn your cell phones on,'" he said. Levin says he's learned that, as musical instruments, not all phones are created equal. "I like Siemens and Nokia the best," Levin said. "Siemens phones have a larger range — four octaves instead of Nokia's three — and they also have a cleaner, less distorted sound. On the other hand, Nokia's have the advantage that we can send them new ringtones via SMS." The trickiest aspect of the concert lay in placing more than 8,000 calls in 30 minutes. "The layman's intuition is that, since it costs 25 cents to make one phone call, placing a hundred simultaneous calls should cost about \$25," Levin said. "But the degree of technological infrastructure required to do this is nearly three orders of magnitude greater." Mobilkom Austria gave Levin direct access to their mobile switching center, bringing dialing delay down to about five seconds per call. Still, the nature of the arrangement meant that Levin only had a limited amount of control at best. "Given all the elements of chance—including the cracker who deliberately left the theme to Dallas on his phone — I think we did pretty well," he said. You can judge for yourself online, thanks to a video that can be downloaded from Ars Electronica's web site. Despite all the challenges, Levin is happy with the result. "There were	WE RECOMMEND Mobile Vision Competition The winner is Vision 3, Mobile Gaia by Sonny Lim. Read the winning vision and the rest of the top 5 mobile vision competition entries. Vision Week Vision Business Technology Lifestyle THEFEATURE ON YOUR MOBILE  Browse TheFeature on your WAP phone, Nokia Communicator, or download it to your Palm using AvantGo READ MORE >>
--	--	--

sections of it that, in my opinion, were really genuinely beautiful, and that's an artistic goal I still continue to have faith in," Levin said.

Short Message Art

Just as Levin worked with the ringtones that are already part of our daily lives, the British online gallery [Britart](#) was the first to make art out of the screen logos installed on every mobile phone. Check out [Vodafone's Fone Fun page](#), and you can view hundreds of images for your phone, from sports cars to leaping dolphins. In those icons, Britart saw an opportunity.

Last July, the gallery announced a partnership with Vodafone to offer downloadable logos created by artists ranging from George Barber to Katherine Lubar. They don't look all that different from the other logos Vodafone offers — but they give you the distinction of knowing that your logo was created by a bona fide modern artist. At £1.18 per download, the result is part fun, part art, and part commercialism.

Tom David, Britart's Managing Director, says mobile phones provide an opportunity to display modern art in new and interesting ways. "Art shouldn't be jealously guarded by the few," he said. "It should inspire the many. That's what this idea is about. It's a wholly democratic approach to exhibiting art that breaks with the conventions of traditional representation."

And SMS art aside, mobile phones themselves have also been seen as art by a number of museums worldwide. Nokia phones have been put on display at New York's Guggenheim Museum and the Museum of Modern Art, and last August, the Smithsonian National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. added a Motorola PageWriter 2000 to its permanent collection.

Still, it's hard to turn heads at a museum just by putting a phone behind glass. A few years ago, an artist in New York took the next step — by using a mobile phone to create an entirely new object, one which commented on the ways in which wireless technology was quickly transforming modern society.

Iron your face



The Ironphone

Back in 1998, Jed Ela, who now lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, found the mobile phone phenomenon pretty disconcerting. "Cell phones were still something less than ubiquitous, and people would still get annoyed at their being used in public," he said. "I just thought it was weird that people were starting to walk around in the street doing something that had until then mostly been confined to their houses."

To comment on the absurdity of the telephone's new mobility, Ela embedded a fully functional mobile phone in a domestic object that was equally common but nowhere near as mobile—a clothes iron. As a tribute to Man Ray's Dadaist work *Cadeau*, an iron with a row of tacks implanted in it, Ela called his [Ironphone](#) the *Cadeau2000*.

Like Levin, Ela found he had to struggle to find creative ways of working with a new medium. "I wanted this to be a totally refined, seamlessly produced object, something that looks and feels like a real product, even though it is actually handmade in very small numbers," he said. "The hardest part was relocating the smart buttons and menu interfaces into the controls on top of the iron."

The Ironphone works just fine as a mobile phone—so is it just a gimmick, or is it art? "I guess the art lies in the fact that I actually did it, and did it so seamlessly, and all the marketing materials too—so it looks and works like a real product, even though the 'company' was really just me at home in my apartment," Ela said. "I guess not anyone could have done that. Or, at least, not anyone did."

Ela says his intention wasn't just to create surrealist art in the vein of Man Ray, but to use surrealism to talk about something else — "like our conflicted views toward communication, privacy, technology, prosthetics," he said. "Or the power differentials in object production between the individual artist, the high-profile 'corporate' artist who has a big team of assistants, and the true multinational corporation."

And there's one more aspect of art that made it into *Cadeau2000* — catharsis. "It sounds silly, but to some extent, Ironphone was just about me getting used to this idea of the ~~mobile phone~~ *mobile phone*," Ela said. "I only had to do it once, because now I'm used to it: I use one every day."

We'll leave the lights on

Embedding a phone inside an iron is creative enough—but what about using mobile technology from the other side? What if a work of art is so large and so unique that you need a mobile phone to interact with it?

The [Chaos Computer Club](#), a group of German hackers, recently installed lights in 144 windows of the [Haus des Lehrers building](#) in Berlin's Alexanderplatz, forming an 18-by-8 grid of window-sized "pixels." Call a designated number on your mobile phone, and you can create a pattern of your own.

Project leader Tim Pritlove says it was surprisingly easy to get permission to use the building, thanks to the mutually beneficial nature of the work: the Chaos Computer Club got the building, and the building's owners got great publicity. "The owners have been behind the project from day one," Pritlove said. "They're pretty proud of the whole thing, because it brings their building into a new light."

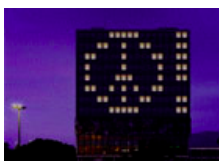
The installation is named [Blinkenlights](#), after the captivating patterns of lights on the front panels of older computers. Pritlove notes that while similar installations have been done in the past, Blinkenlights is the first to add the element of interactivity — making it the world's largest interactive computer display.

An online application called Blinkenpaint allows you to submit your own designs to the club for display on the building, depicting anything from love letters to political slogans—peace signs have been particularly popular for the past few months.

But the coolest form of interactivity is Blinkenlights' version of the classic computer game, Pong. For 2.42 marks per minute, you can call in on your mobile phone and bounce a 'ball' back and forth across the building. It's simple enough: just stand in the Alexanderplatz, look up at the building towering above you, and move your paddle up and down by pressing 5 and 8 on your phone.

Rotten tomatoes

"Come on," you might say. "How can giant Pong be art?" At the [Ars Electronica Center](#) last September, where Levin's Telesymphony premiered, the organizers gave a tongue-in-cheek nod to anyone who finds all of this ridiculous.



Blinkenlights

A large white sign was placed over the entrance to the Linz University of Art. On the otherwise blank billboard was printed in large black letters, "If you don't think this is art, call 0664/232-2001." Each call placed to the number listed would cause a catapult to fire a brightly-colored paintball at the billboard.

The phone number became popular very fast.

Within minutes of the festival's opening on September 1st, the billboard was dotted with paint — and over the next few days, it became increasingly saturated, until, on the 5th, the canvas was completely covered with a pattern of multi-colored dots.

From Levin's telesymphony to Ars Electronic's paintball billboard, these experiments are more than clever gimmicks. They're the harbingers of a new merger between technology and art — and as bandwidth, image quality, and other factors improve over the next decade, artists will continue to find creative ways to make use of the new developments.

You see, mobile phones aren't just phones any more — they're tools, they're toys, they're art, and they're everywhere.

Jeff Goldman is a freelance writer covering a wide range of topics for a number of online journals. He currently writes regular articles for Internet.com's [ISP-Planet](#). Brought up in Belgium, Jeff spent the last decade in New York, Chicago and London; he now lives in Los Angeles.

Did you enjoy this article? If so, register for our customized weekly newsletter by signing up [here!](#)

 [BOOKMARK >>](#) [SEND TO A FRIEND >>](#) [RECOMMEND >>](#) [PRINT >>](#)

Other Articles:

[Sex on the Run](#)

[The Wireless Living Room](#)

[Red Hot and Wireless](#)

[A Quieter Place](#)

[Got Brand?](#)

[Boingo's Wireless ISP Strategy](#)

Send us your articles and/or article ideas to editors@thefeature.com