

# ARTFORUM

OCTOBER 2005

I N T E R N A T I O N A L



**RONI HORN**

**MIKE KELLEY**  
EXTRACURRICULAR  
ACTIVITIES

**Michael  
Krebber**

\$8.00

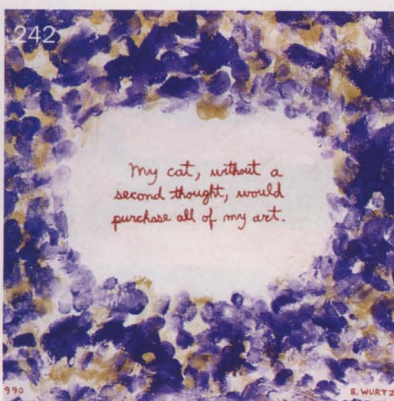
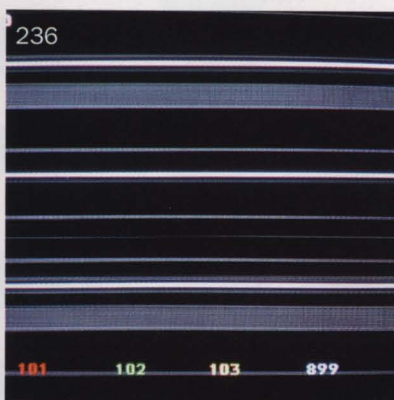




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Cover: **Michael Krebber, *Because of the Architect, the Building Fell Down* (detail), 2000**, paint on Masonite, 48 x 96½". (See page 220.)

Inset: **Roni Horn, *Portrait of an Image—Erika, Lena, Claire, Charlotte, Dominique, Jeanne, Mika, Isabelle, Marie, Emma, Beatrice, and Others* (with Isabelle Huppert) (detail), 2005**, 1 of 110 color photographs, 15 x 12½" each. (See page 255.)

This page, from top: **Mike Kelley, *Extracurricular Activity Projective Reconstruction #20* (*Lonely Vampire*) (detail), 2004–2005**, two parts, one found black-and-white and one color photograph, 30 x 25½" each. **Carsten Nicolai, *Telefunken*, 2000**, still from a color video installation, dimensions variable. **B. Wurtz, *Untitled*, 1990**, acrylic paint and modeling paste, 12 x 12½". **Hou Hsiao-hsien, *Three Times*, 2005**, still from a color film in 35 mm, 120 minutes. Jing (Shu Qi) in "A Time for Youth."



# FAULTY TRANSMISSION

MICHELLE KUO ON ROBERT WHITMAN

**HARDLY ANYONE** was in the tent when we arrived. The white marquee housed only a projection screen, chairs, and a bewildering array of cubed focaccia—resembling a car dealership promotion gone awry. But next door, an energetic crew radiating youthful hacktivism and elderly bohemia (and clearly not on their way to the Burlington Coat Factory across the parking lot) was taking over an abandoned Midas Muffler storefront, temporarily upgrading the building with an arsenal of video cell phones, titanium PowerBooks, a wireless router, and an audio mixer. Amidst this cinder-block terrain in Kingston, New York, the group was to restage the two most emblematic sites of modernity's public sphere—the shopping arcade and fairground—as unlikely cynosures of a renegade communications network.

The intervention belonged to Robert Whitman's *Local Report*, a series of five weekend performances that took place this past summer in small-town shopping centers across the Northeast, and which will be reprised in December at the Guggenheim Museum. If Whitman is best known for confounding physical presence and projected image, spectators and spectra—a Dia:Chelsea retrospective in 2003 focused on precisely this aspect of his production—*Local Report* continued the artist's attendant inquiry into telecommunications and social space. For his 1973 piece *News*, for example, Whitman asked listeners of New York radio station WBAI to call in from pay phones across the city and describe what they saw. In return their accounts were broadcast live. *Local Report* promised to update the project with video phones.

Such precedent made me wary. Would the work merely recast Happening as flash mob, blithely transpose Cagean participatory ideals via Cingular? In truth, there was no shortage of ecological-leather Tevas or thinning ponytails that day in Kingston. But as invited participants and interested locals (some of whom were perhaps on their way to the Coat Factory) migrated into the tent, I was surprised by the canny way in which Whitman and his collaborators instigated a kind of collective action with mobile communication, one fundamentally different from the taut coordination of flash-mob pranks or WTO protests. Instead our assignment effected diffusion: We were to meander through specific locations in the city for thirty minutes while using cell phones (donated by Nokia and customized by Shawn Van Every and Hans-Christoph Steiner, both of NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Program) to transmit audio and video reports back to Whitman's command central in the Midas store.

The reporting turned each audience member into a latter-day psychogeographer. We visited war

memorials; playgrounds; "an office park with no offices," as one witty caller intoned. Our *dérive*, however, mapped not only psychosocial space but also the commercial wireless network that overlays it. We pushed against this network's boundaries and limitations, often overflowing its circuits of exchange. Sending the twenty-second video clips alone took several minutes and occasionally failed altogether. As Whitman explained, "In the first sessions we were unfamiliar with the technical limitations of cell-phone towers. . . . The video kept cutting out, getting disconnected. There was too much data. It overloaded."

These fits and starts in transmission echoed the schizoid reports themselves. "You don't have

another's incoming video footage. While he toggled between video clips, Whitman could truncate audio calls at any time ("maybe because they say something wonderful and I want to let it hang there for awhile"), switching to the next caller in the queue. Aural and visual fragments collided, their respective descriptions and temporalities never corresponding. Stretches of silence or blackness were periodically interrupted. Composition was reduced to a choice between signal and noise.

Whitman's live remix was streamed as a real-time webcast ([www.whitmanlocalreport.net](http://www.whitmanlocalreport.net)) and simultaneously projected in the tent where other passersby watched. When the reporters returned to the tent to eat sandwiches and pick up a free



**LOCAL REPORT MAPS NOT ONLY PSYCHOSOCIAL SPACE BUT ALSO THE COMMERCIAL WIRELESS NETWORK THAT OVERLAYS IT. PARTICIPANTS PUSH AGAINST THIS NETWORK'S BOUNDARIES AND LIMITATIONS.**

to describe verbally in the call what you've just shot on video," Whitman told us. The result was a clear rift between modes of oral and pictorial narration. We rambled on about dogs, signs, the weather; we shot sweeping panoramas of the riverfront. Narrative itself splintered. Nearly everyone dictated in first person, so that various voices—"I'm in front of a store," "I'm trespassing," "I'm looking at a chicken bone on Williams Street"—vacated any specific body from the pronoun "I," a literal illustration of Roman Jakobson's linguistic "shifter." Few took footage of themselves. Such anonymity was mirrored in the parodic answering system. Each time I called, the automated politesse of tech support replied: "You are caller number three . . . The estimated wait time is . . . less than . . . two minutes." The on-hold Muzak was playing Terry Riley, of course.

Whitman could respond to the calls in two ways: the cut and the sample. The artist and his team juxtaposed one reporter's verbal dispatch with

T-shirt, the work replayed, its audio and video loops shifting slightly out of sync. We confronted the degradation of information: The projected image was brutally and beautifully low-resolution. The extremely pixelated video rendered movement halting and jumpy. Parallax between the viewfinder space and exposure space of the camera phone (what one saw in the phone's screen didn't quite match what was recorded) resulted in displaced shots of people's chests instead of their faces, the bottoms of signs. Against any nostalgic myth of perfectly transparent communication, then, *Local Report* unexpectedly cast the dispersed and disjunctive character of public connectivity into relief. The work's bleeding of shared physical space into virtual space—"The 'residue' is on the Internet; as far as the malls go, what's going to linger there is potential," Whitman said—formed a possible counter public sphere, one whose collective discourse thrived on noise and interference. Not immediacy, but misprision. □

Michelle Kuo is an art historian based in Cambridge, MA.

Left, top and bottom: Robert Whitman, *Local Report*, 2005, stills from a color video, 30 minutes. Right: *Local Report*'s base tent in mall parking lot, Kingston, NY, 2005. Photo: Martin Palacios.