

...when I hear the telephone ring...it is not enough to declare that my reaction is one of refusal, of flight from this aggressive and threatening summons, as it is also a feeling of urgency, intolerableness, coercion that impels me to obey the injunction of that sound, rushing to answer even though I am certain that nothing will come of it save suffering and discomfort.

Italo Calvino, 'In a network of lines that enlace',
from *If on a winter's night a traveller*, 1981

Yes, well, now we don't answer the phone.

Christian Marclay, *Brooklyn Rail*, 2023

Let's say that for this exhibition the telephone serves as a synecdoche. It belongs to another time, one I lived in and remember. Now we have cell phones and how we use them makes us different. Raymond Williams has a term for the difference between 'my' time and 'yours'. He calls it a 'structure of feeling', invoking both the larger systems in which we are all enmeshed and the smaller more personal intuitions that together produce and determine social and cultural shifts. A new structure of feeling comes into being through the cultural work of a new generation – Williams is quite precise, 'a group which would have a median age of around thirty' – who supersede those who grew up in earlier decades. My thesis is that these documents, made in the late 1970s and the 1990s before and on the cusp of cell phones and the Internet, show us the structure of feeling of those times; through them we can glimpse what *contemporary art was* and what it felt like to be engaged in its production and presentation. Landlines, letters, postcards, and faxes were our means of communication; analogue photographs, videotapes and films were vehicles for our image making. These were not just tools or 'media', they actually determined what we could say, they structured our relationships, and conditioned our sense of time (how long things took) and space (where we were and weren't). These technologies enabled and limited us and the best art of that time made us aware of this.

I've called this show *The Odour of Smoke*. This is a phrase used by Italo Calvino in his 1981 novel *If on a winter's night a traveller*, describing the sensation he has that 'the odor of smoke' clings to railway stations long after the trains have been electrified. He goes on to say that 'a novel that talks about trains and stations cannot help conveying this'. I take this to mean that technologies change, we modernise, innovate, move on, and what we say, how we think, our modes of representation are entangled with them. But the past travels with us, and this is guaranteed by deeper continuities: our need to communicate, our desire to conquer distance, the conflicts we have to flee from, the economic pressures that drive us. This is what Nika Autor is saying in her *Newsreel 63 – The Train of Shadows*, which is presented here as an analogical mirror for the ideas I'm raising. I'm not nostalgic for my past but I recognise its otherness. If I can articulate the conditions for thinking and representing back then, it must therefore be possible to do the same for our present situation.

Julian Dashper, *Future Call*, 1994

black and white photograph

courtesy of Michael Lett and the Julian Dashper Estate, Auckland

Dear Moreno

How are things with you? I am very much looking forward to making my work with the telephone on Saturday 2nd July and Sunday 3rd July from 17 to 17.20. I will also try to ring on the other Saturdays and Sundays at 17 to 17.20 till the 15th August (exhibition finishes on the 15th).

So begins Julian Dashper's fax (21 June 1994) to Moreno Miorelli, poet and instigator of Stazione di Topolò-Postaja Topolove, a temporary art event in a tiny, near-abandoned village (with only fifty-two elderly residents) in the Grimacco-Grmek district of north-eastern Italy. *Future Call*, the title of the piece he devised for this inaugural occasion, consisted of Dashper phoning a local number at a certain time twice weekly for the duration of the forty-five day event. This was his way of taking part from his home in Auckland. The telephone was placed on a window-sill outside the home of its owner, facing a small public courtyard, so everyone could hear it ringing, but the instructions were that no-one was to answer. The project was premised on the fact that New Zealand was ten hours ahead of Italy, so if Dashper called at 3am on 3 July (NZT) the villagers would be hearing the call at 5pm the previous evening.

The idea of calling from the future to the past, from one distant location to another, beautifully embodies Dashper's desire to connect remotely. His clever utilisation of the then-current means of communication – the telephone and fax machine – enabled him to operate internationally without having to base himself in one of the world's better networked metropolises. Introduced to Miorelli by New Zealand artist Barbara Strathdee, who

lived half the year in nearby Trieste, Topolò was a stepping stone to Europe, and Dashper's correspondence records excitement at the event's coverage in *Flash Art*, Italy's leading contemporary art magazine, as well as hopes for future opportunities in bigger centres like Milan.

But *Future Call* was not just about advancing Dashper's art career. In 1994, the world was changing and the axes of global power were shifting. Only a few hundred metres from the border with Slovenia and home to ethnic Slovenians, Topolò was far from immune to contemporary geopolitics. Its few remaining residents would have been psychologically, if not physically, embroiled in the Balkan Wars that were tearing apart the neighbouring Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, one of the many dominoes to fall in the breakup of the Soviet Union. It is thought-provoking to imagine why a festival that brought together artists, performers and poets to make temporary works *in situ* might have been attractive to an artist from New Zealand. For Dashper, Topolò was a perfect place to establish new networks, bypass nationalist agendas and ignore the powerplays of centre-periphery politics. His call from the future could be thought of as prophetic.

Faxes, 1994–96

courtesy of the Julian Dashper Estate, Auckland

(senders from left to right: Jim Barr, Denise Kum, George Hubbard (calling from *Planet Magazine*), George Hubbard, Cyril Wright, Ali Duffey, [et al.], Giovanni Intra, Vicente Butron, Stephen Bambury, Terry Maitland)

Julian Dashper's partner, Marie Shannon recalls that he spent a great deal of time on the telephone. For a period in the 1990s they added a fax machine to their phoneline, utilising its capacity to send documents quickly, in contrast to the time it took for a letter to arrive. These faxes are from frustrated callers keen to talk to Julian, who could not get through because the line was always busy.

Letter, 6 December 1979*

typescript

courtesy of Billy Apple® Archive, Auckland

* No photography please

This letter from Hocken Librarian Tim Garrity to Wystan Curnow, principal organiser of Billy Apple's second tour of New Zealand, is part of a folder of correspondence generated by Curnow in the lead up to and execution of Apple's nine gallery interventions undertaken from Auckland to Dunedin between September and February, 1979–1980. This lives in the Billy Apple® Archive and is the tip of an iceberg of documentation relating to Apple's series of alterations and subtractions subtitled *The Given as an Art-Political Statement*. Reading through the file, I was forcefully struck by how slow and laborious it must have been to organise Apple's lecture and exhibition schedule using the postal service and the telephone as the only means of communication. How different it seems from our own time of instant and ubiquitous connectivity. The letter – from a frustrated 'helper' angrily complaining about Billy's persistent need to access a phone to make a toll call to Wellington – is funny, excoriating, over the top. It is the spark for the show, signalling almost everything you need to know about the nature of the art scene in 1979 – its characters, spaces and networks, but also its alliances, antipathies and emotional registers. Who writes letters like this now? What did it feel like to type, furiously, fold into an envelope, lick a stamp, put in a letterbox, send and wait for a response? How much did it cost to make a long-distance call? What did calling 'collect' even mean? You are seeing the structure of feeling that belongs to the age of the telephone on the cusp of New Zealand opening itself to the world.

David Clegg

Eight Postcards, 1996

two boxed sets of printed cards

Collection (Telephones), 9 June 1996

bound copy of photocopied responses to Clegg's telephone postcards

from *To Collect or Exchange*, 1996, commissioned project

Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth

courtesy of the artist

In 1996, for the exhibition guide accompanying David Clegg's *To Collect or Exchange*, a project he conceived for the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, I wrote:

Most of us have telephones somewhere in our lives. Most of us don't think too much about their appearance or, more importantly, their placement in the spaces of private and public life. We tend to use not see telephones. They are vehicles for communication, a function which is entirely dematerialised. Photographed, however, telephones become things, and framed within the context of an artist's project

they demand a particular kind of attention. Now under this more focused scrutiny these objects become categories of form, symbols of human contact, signifiers of the drives of technological innovation and commodification.

How strange that statement reads in 2025. Anyone born digital will look at these telephones as unknowable artefacts, distant relics of a bygone age. Revisiting Clegg's postcards now I notice two things. First, the cords that lead to what we can't see: the jack that plugged the phone into the local exchange, which linked each household to a national network. Back then, making a call was immobilising, we were coordinates in a fixed grid. Second, the fancy doilies or linen runners on which four of the phones sit now seem oddly gendered, 'feminine' accoutrements cushioning the masculine apparatus, a fact picked up by Judy Darragh, who sent Clegg some decorative lacework in response to his invitation. Her response was one of several, from friends and artist contacts solicited in exchange for the package of postcards Clegg sent them, which formed the basis of a project designed to redefine relations between artist and audience and usurp the logic of collecting in a museum setting.

At the time Clegg was reading Avital Ronell (*The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech*, 1989) and Jacques Derrida (*The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, 1980), so it is not too farfetched to suggest these postcards of telephones speak analogically to the deeper conundrum of communication in general. Exploiting the fact that a postcard has two sides that cannot be seen simultaneously, Clegg was working the 'potent between space' (his words) that separates image and message, recognising yet endeavouring to bridge the chiasmic disconnect between sender and receiver.

Christian Marclay, *Telephones*, 2024
artist book
Ivory Press, Madrid

London-based, US artist Christian Marclay's 2024 flipbook reconceives his 1995 film *Telephones*, the first of the film collages for which he has become known. *Telephones* sampled scenes from films where a phone conversation takes place, exploiting the convention of the jump cut to shift not from caller to receiver but from film to film. Seven minutes long, the film constructs a collaged conversation from first dialling a number, through picking up, greeting and responding and then, finally, hanging up. Composed entirely from films Marclay rented from VHS stores, the resulting work not only tracks how communication worked in the era of the landline, but also catalogues a history of cinema prior to the streaming era. In the day, this was no easy exercise. The artist had to manually fast-forward through each film to find suitable scenes, then transfer excerpts onto a different format to improve the quality, before submitting the rough cuts to an editing process to achieve the final result. According to Marclay this laborious process allowed him time for his ideas to mature.

Reflecting back on making this work in a 2020 interview with Yuval Etgar included in the flipbook, Marclay draws several distinctions between then and now. He speaks of the anxiety associated with making and receiving phone calls when it was not possible to know who was on the line, and the awkwardness of having to answer in a fixed location, meaning receivers (and callers) were 'held captive' by the device. Marclay recognised that *Telephones* was made on the brink of technological transformation, as cell phones were just beginning to become available. He describes this as a moment of transition from one cultural reality to another. Now, in 2025, his little flipbook takes us through the same sequence of images showing actors interacting with phones, but the physical form of the book – with its two stacks of images that can form a grid of four juxtaposed stills, which a reader can flip backwards or forwards – is even more disorienting. Turning these pages is a manual exercise starkly at odds with the slippery scroll of images on our mobile phones.

Nika Autor, *Newsreel 63 – The Train of Shadows*, 2017
HD video, 38 minutes
courtesy of the artist

Slovenian artist Nika Autor is associated with the informal collective Newsreel Front and her film *Newsreel 63 – The Train of Shadows* was presented in the Slovenian pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale. In her words, her film 'tries to position and understand a particular image – a shred of video taken with a mobile phone on the once famous Belgrade–Ljubljana rail-line, where refugees now travel not in couchettes but between the train's wheels'. Made at the height of the refugee crisis in 2017 it re-conceives the newsreel as a tool to counter mainstream narratives and, in the words of Kieron Corless, to 'capture history made from below'.

In the first half of the twentieth century, newsreels were a popular form of visual journalism presented in cinemas as 'curtain-raisers' to the main feature, consisting of short items documenting political, social, cultural and sporting events narrated with upbeat voiceovers designed to celebrate a nation's achievements. Eventually superseded by the arrival of television, they have since been co-opted and re-imagined by activist filmmakers and collectives, especially at moments of social and political crisis. Based in Slovenia, Newsreel Front revives this format to delve into the troubled past and precarious present of a state that was part of the former socialist Yugoslavia and more recently has been a staging post on the Balkan route for refugees entering Europe from Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq. Compiling and juxtaposing archival and contemporary footage, Newsreel Front draws attention to the lived realities of workers, migrants and asylum seekers, offering meditations on the

fraught consequences of ethno-nationalism and neoliberal capitalism and, in Pavle Levi's words, their 'vulgar negation of Yugoslav socialism's emancipatory legacy'.

Newsreel 63 is a mirror at one remove from the other objects in this exhibition. It too posits the idea that technologies shape us. In this case Autor connects mobile-phone footage to the history of the railway and its representation in cinema, in the process showing how the experience of train travel anticipated and enacts filmic vision and exploring class dynamics through the play of inclusion and exclusion that mass transportation has proscribed and enabled. As Calvino so eloquently noted, trains, like telephones (and their descendants, our mobile phones) demonstrate a continuity of function that allows us to move between past, present and future. In the closing moments of her film Autor states: 'It is possible that photography [in her case the moving images shot from the underside of a train on a mobile phone] is the prophecy of a human memory yet to be socially and politically achieved.'

Further reading

Italo Calvino, *If on a winter's night a traveller*, trans. William Weaver, Picador, 1981.

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'Julian Dashper, 1960–2009, A Tribute', eds. Wystan Curnow & Simon Ingram, *Reading Room: A Journal of Art and Culture*, 4, 2010, pp. 6–41.

Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln & London, 1989

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The News Belongs to Us, eds. Nika Autor, Andreja Hribenik, Ciril Oberstar, Andrej Šprah, Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana & Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Kosovo, 2017.

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<https://treadler-gal.net>
treadler.gal@gmail.com

+64 27 870 0001
+64 22 318 0722

Level 1
40 Anzac Avenue
Auckland CBD