LOCAL REPORT

A MEDIA WORK BY
ROBERT WHITMAN

Hawley Lane Plaza | Trumbull, CT
Friday @ 5:00 pm:
Saturday - Sunday:

July 29 - 31
live generation + webcast
continuous showings

Kohl's Plaza | Holmdel, NJ
Friday @ 5:00 pm:
Saturday - Sunday:

August 5 - 7
live generation + webcast
continuous showings

Liberty Square Center | Burlington, NJ
Friday @ 5:00 pm:
Saturday - Sunday:

August 12 - 14
live generation + webcast
continuous showings

Kingston Center | Kingston, NY
Friday @ 5:00 pm:
Saturday - Sunday:

August 19 - 21
live generation + webcast
continuous showings

Northampton Crossings | Easton, PA
Friday @ 5:00 pm:
Saturday - Sunday:

August 26 - 28
live generation + webcast
continuous showings

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Robert Whitman's Telecommunication Projects

The little-known work of Robert Whitman, dating mostly from the 1960s and 70s, deserves serious reconsideration, partly because it can be seen as an unconscious prehistory to much of today's art. His reputation, such as it is, rests on his contributions to the field of performance art, and surely the ephemeral character of this work has aided its under-appreciation. But history has also largely overlooked the work of a group he co-founded in 1966, together with Robert Rauschenberg and the scientists Billy Klüver and Fred Waldhauer: Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.), an informal collective dedicated to initiating and supporting collaborations between artists and scientists. While Dia Center for the Arts in New York recently initiated a travelling Whitman retrospective, accompanied by the first extensive monograph on the artist (for which the author of this text was an editor),[1] there is a facet of his work, which grows out of his E.A.T. activities and which I'll call the telecommunications projects, that remains relatively unexamined. This work can be seen as an unusual attempt, rare within the art world of the time, to grapple with the ways that nascent telecommunications technology was hinting at future modes of social relations.

Tele-Communication: A Mythical and a Technological Approach

Whitman's theatre pieces, together with a series of intriguing 8mm film installations, constituted his entire body of work through 1967. His milieu was an underground one, made up of small, dark, make-shift, downtown Manhattan art spaces, which were often run by the artists themselves. His performances from this time are described in mythical, romantic terms, as "poetic, fugitive phantasmagoria,"[2] that seek "correspondence between nature and technology, connecting ritual and the rational, seeing computers that look like stars"[3]; dream-like accumulations of objects and images "alchemically combined and transmuted into improbably fantastic events [imbued with] a magical, mythic aura."[4] He had gazed into the sky in his 1960 theatre work, *American Moon*, as well as in the 1965 performance *Night Time Sky*, and, considering his later projects with telecommunications, his work can be understood in terms of these two opposed figures: looking up into the heavens, and looking down from heaven to earth, metaphorically, technologically, and mythically.

In 1969, after a decade spent producing some fifteen different theatre works, Whitman participated in E.A.T.'s Anand Project, conducted at the invitation of India's Atomic Energy Commission. Later, he would create two more large-scale works: *Children and Communication* (1970) and *Questions and Answers* (1981), both of which can in some ways be seen as predecessors of communications methods like email and Internet chat-rooms. Part of Pontus Hulten's exhibition *Utopia and Visions 1871–1981*, at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, *Questions and Answers* aimed at surveying what people worldwide were thinking about the future. Replies to questions concerning what the world would be like ten years hence, i.e., in 1991, were gathered from fax work stations set up in New York, Tokyo,

Ahmedabad, and Stockholm. Unfortunately, while hundreds of responses were collected, the answers have never been evaluated.

With *Children and Communication*, Whitman constructed low-ceilinged, tent-like environments, meant primarily for children, in three boroughs of New York City. They were interconnected via facsimile machines, telexes, and telephones. Telex turned out to be the most popular medium for chats between children who didn't know one another, proving less abrupt than the phone and more intuitive than the facsimile machine. Perhaps telex also appealed in a way akin to email: one is given time to consider a question before replying. In any case, all three technologies were framed in an intimate way, positioning the audience as a willing and active participant. Alexander Kluge has commented on the power of this kind of work: "One of the most effective ways of exposing the true nature of any public sphere is when it is interrupted, in a kind of alienation effect, by children… In every case the reified character of each context, its rigidity, and the fact that the public sphere is always that of adults, immediately become apparent."[5]

While these were the largest projects Whitman would undertake, they were not his only activities in this area. In the early seventies, he assisted artists in presenting television works on New York public access television. In 1972, he produced a radio work called *News*, hosted by WBAI in New York, in which people called the station from public phones and described what they were looking at.[6] The cacophony of banal and occasionally poetic descriptions composed the entire radio program. In 2002, someone at the International Film Festival in Leeds understood the implications, restaging the project with thirty cell phones and calling it *21st Century Happening*. This can be seen as further evidence that Whitman's telecommunications projects foresaw, in various ways, the cultural shift that would take place in the mid 1990s, as the growing popularity of Internet, mobile phones, and even reality TV shows, began shaping our culture.

Technology: The Marriage of Spectacle and Avant-garde

You might have to give up your ego sometimes because the result might not be art.
                                                                    –Robert Whitman

In order to understand the scope of Whitman's interests and activities in communications, it may be helpful to outline his work with E.A.T., particularly with Billy Klüver, a figure to whom he'd been increasingly drawn since the group's founding. Their highly productive partnership effectively constituted Whitman's social and creative community for the remainder of the decade, as Lynne Cooke suggests.[7] Klüver, a Swedish-born scientist who'd worked at Bell Labs for ten years, was once described by a museum official as "the Edison-Tesla-Steinmetz-Marconi-Leonardo da Vinci of the American avant-garde."[8] E.A.T.'s collaborative structure came out of his own proclivities: "I was interested in the mind of the artist. So I was wondering what I could bring to the art world: I could only offer technology to the artists."[9] The first of these offerings resulted in Jean Tinguely's 1960 *Homage à New York*, an auto-destructive machine which enacted its suicide in the sculpture garden of the Museum of Modern Art, in New York. This was followed by numerous other projects, including designing a two-way sound transmission system for Rauschenberg, as well as supplying the material for Andy Warhol's *Silver Clouds* (1966). As Klüver points out, E.A.T. "opened doors for artists and engineers which otherwise would have been closed."

The public climax of E.A.T.'s working career was the Pepsi Pavilion at Expo '70 in Osaka, Japan. Never before had a corporation put its image in the hands of the artistic avant-garde. Although the context was a world's fair—more precisely, a vast, public, corporate-underwritten spectacle—E.A.T. attempted to appeal not to the mass, but to each individual, counteracting the authoritarian experience of the fair by encouraging participation. Entering the Pepsi Pavilion, visitors were confronted with a wondrous spherical Mylar mirror, some ninety feet in diameter, and thus encouraged to negotiate their own experience within a multimedia environment that art critic Barbara Rose called "a secular temple of the self."[10]
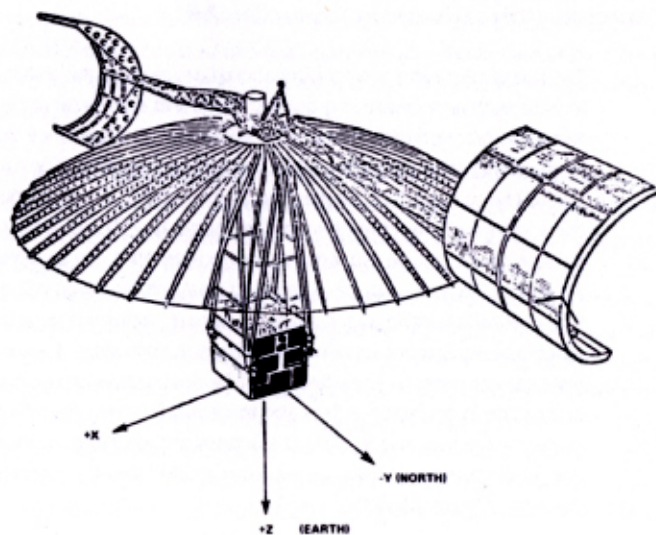
Drawing of satellite
E.A.T. archival image c.1970

One Global Village and 600,000 Indian Villages

It is in the Anand Project, however, that we can most clearly trace Whitman's concerns. In the late 1960s, media was not commonplace in Asia, and most of the continent's rural population remained virtually excluded from mass communication. The United States' decision to place a telecommunications satellite over India was thus freighted with immense potential, as the unit could theoretically reach hundreds of thousands of villages. This move was what facilitated E.A.T.'s unusual experiment.

Vikram Sarabhai, a scientist who worked on cosmic ray research and headed up India's Atomic Space Program, had become interested in E.A.T. well before the Expo '70. A cultural visionary, Sarabhai had in 1969 invited the group to come to Ahmedabad and develop educational programming for the U.S. satellite. E.A.T.'s program was put into effect some years later, in August of 1975, when the satellite began transmitting to "some 2400 villages in six states [and rebroadcast] to another set of approximately the same number of villages."[11] An estimated five million people viewed 1,200 hours of programming in one year, and the satellite had the potential to reach all of the country's approximately 600,000 villages. India was the first country in the world to use satellites to transmit educational television programming directly to its citizens. According to science fiction author Arthur C. Clarke, who in 1945 was the first to propose the concept of a geostationary communications satellite, this "generated new capabilities, demystified space technology, and helped to nucleate a large island of self-confidence."[12]

Video Transcends Literacy

My story is about how unfamiliar the idea is to take notes, that you should make notes, locally.
–Billy Klüver

The project got under way in December of 1969, when Klüver, Whitman, selected education and technology specialists, and their Indian counterparts, commenced a series of discussions and expeditions in and around Ahmedabad. E.A.T. had printed a detailed project description in their newspaper *Techne*, excerpted below:

> The use of television as a tool in national development is assuming high priority in India, with an increase in ground stations and a one year experiment in satellite television planned with NASA in 1974. Virtually no experience exists in producing instructional software on the scale that will be needed… The instructional objective will be to teach the care, feeding, and breeding of milk-producing buffaloes to the villagers who are members of the cooperative. The objective of the project is to develop prototype procedures and facilities that can be used on a wide scale for producing television-based instructional software that will be effective in the Indian rural environment. A team of people, including an artist, with 1/2 inch videotape equipment will work in a village to compile first approximations to the instructional material. The villagers will be encouraged to use the equipment and participate in generating ideas and materials. By using the video equipment as a stenographic tool, and feeding in reactions of the villagers immediately, the visual and aural idioms of the village are incorporated into the instructional material at the earliest "script phase."[13]

Visitors at E.A.T.'s mirror dome in the Pepsi Pavilion
Expo '70, Osaka
photo: Harry Shunk

An agricultural cooperative comprised of 610 rural villages and some 1,500,000 people was selected as the experiment's target group. Each village was taught how to fashion a parabolic antenna from chicken mesh, and electricity could be generated by bicycle power. One television was distributed to each village by the Indian government, and a later study estimated that there were 80 to 100 viewers for each television.

The project challenged the traditional understanding of public art and culture, especially with respect to the role of the artist. It can be assumed, for example, that Whitman, a non scientist with a background in performance art, was fundamentally involved in defining some of the project's groundbreaking procedures and working methods. In some ways, the breakthrough was to teach people to take and pass "notes" on their practices, a kind of self-education through the sharing of local knowledges. While instructional television in India had heretofore typically consisted of a man standing at a chalkboard writing, new models were needed in the largely illiterate rural areas of the cooperative, which is where the videotape was crucial.

The material for the Anand Project was generated with the involvement of the local people, who made videotapes of women milking, of artificial insemination, of the treatment of sick buffaloes, and so on. This video chain letter was distributed from village to village by the dairy delivery-boy, and people from different areas added their own videotaped comments on what they saw; the finished tapes were brought back to a studio in Delhi and used as both the visual and structural basis for a professional TV program. There was a dual function, then: far before their role as viewers of the broadcast, many of the villagers were already direct participants in the making of the program material. According to Klüver, that way the studio culture wasn't imposed on the local people, "because you start from their situation."[14] This active involvement echoes the notion of transforming all spectators into participants, an idea present in many sixties performances, notably in the work of artist Allan Kaprow, with whom Whitman had studied, and a notion that played a central role in the Pepsi Pavilion.

Farmer with buffalo
E.A.T. archival image c.1970

The satellite program lasted only a year, and some years later the Indian government lost its television monopoly, making way for more diverse and competitive programming. As with most mass media, this meant profit-oriented commercial entertainment.[15] Nevertheless, the moment of the Anand Project was a potent window of opportunity to improve the lives of hundreds of thousands of villagers, and stands as an example even now. In his 1970 project notes, Klüver observed: "The experience gained from this experimental situation would be directly applicable to the wider context and larger audiences of ground or satellite transmission of television."[16]

In retrospect, it may seem that excitement about the utopian aspects of the new technology was uncritically optimistic, but it was typical for the 1960s. The hope that these tools would yield a truly democratic public culture were most famously expressed in the writings of Marshall McLuhan, but the era's idealism can even be detected in Henry Kissinger, who was involved in the decision to place the U.S. satellite over India: "Satellite technology offers enormous promise as an instrument for development. Remote sensing satellites can be applied to survey resources, forecast crops, and improve land use in developing countries. They can help foresee and evaluate natural disasters. Modern communication technologies, including satellites, have large untapped potential to improve education, training, health services, food production, and other activities essential for development."[17]

Seen within the context of the Cold War and the space race, these words may seem steeped in ideology, but even today we must acknowledge the dark side of communications technology, which can be used for aims of terrorism, nationalistic propaganda, and corporate exploitation and control. Osama bin Laden has repeatedly employed the video letter, and the Chechan rebels who stormed the musical theatre in Moscow were producing of a similar broadcast (with the forced cooperation of the musical's director), but were killed by police before its completion.

The Artist as Amateur and Observer

The artist carries the least cultural baggage.

–Robert Whitman

Whitman was an obvious choice to participate in the Anand Project, due not only to his close friendship with Klüver and his membership in E.A.T., but also to his self-acknowledged openness, curiosity, and anti-imperialist approach in involving local populations. His notion that "the artist carries the least cultural baggage" was possibly even more applicable outside his artist's own culture, where his outsider status allowed him to "see wonderful things in anything that others might overlook."[18] Klüver has made a more historical suggestion regarding Whitman's role in the project: "In a complicated situation, where decisions have to be made about software and hardware, the artist is the best collaborator. During the sixteenth century and earlier artists were always called for when complicated decisions had to be made in shipbuilding and cathedral building."[19]

Whitman's central role as producer was counteracted by the project's challenge to traditional authorship, in the move of farming out its content to multiple people. This was fine, since his real goal was to "push the art into the social." In this light, considering its scale and ambition, the Anand Project must be seen in the tradition of those historical avant-gardes—most famously, the Russian avant-garde—who attempted, through art, to effect social change and alter the experience of daily life. In this case, the key to this ambition was the total lack of mass media in rural India, which practically demanded the utopic challenge to initiate a program for an entire *populus*. As with the Russian avant-garde, it was a project outlined by a small elite, who saw themselves entrusted with the task of developing a culture from scratch.

Today it's not uncommon for artists to work with new technologies, and many artists engage in socially active practice, collaborative work arrangements, and an anti-imperialist view founded in social science and critical theory. (Consider for example the Delhi-based media collaborative Sarai, which was invited to last year's *Documenta*.) This can perhaps be read as the response to a global, corporate-driven culture, and also as an outgrowth of academic work on post-colonialism, and the broader dialogue on "multiculturalism." In 1969, however, the Anand Project was far ahead of its time. While Frantz Fanon had made a stir with his 1952 book *Black Skin, White Masks*, post-colonial theory didn't exist as an academic discourse in the late 1960s, and Edward Said, author of the landmark text *Orientalism* (1978), hadn't yet published at all. Furthermore, the project's technology was absolutely cutting edge: video wouldn't enter the art world, let alone the consumer marketplace, for a few years, and satellite television was itself a major innovation.

These novelties, however, enabled the project's truly radical aspects: it was not simply about new technology, but about finding a viable solution to the problem of how to introduce this technology to developing countries. With the Anand model, the assumption was that one could minimize the effect of first-world cultural biases on third-world recipient countries. E.A.T.'s general concept and infrastructure were adopted by the Indian government (even if only for a year), which turned them into what Klüver called "real life."

Not Pop but Populus

In his collaboration with E.A.T., Whitman proved a stubborn participant, never quite able to leave his underground art world behind. "I haven't called the scientists, I hate to take up their time," he said, and: "I want to go back to ropes and pulleys and yelling for communication."[20] His career is marked by ambivalence, and his own work from the 1960s couldn't be more different from the project in India. In 1974, he withdrew from E.A.T.'s public mode of working, returning to the solitude of his studio, where he would work on the *Dante Drawings*, a series of 27 double-sided drawings based on Dante's *Paradiso*, a text he had studied closely in the mid-1950s. This was a time of introspection for him, and it affirmed his "trust in drawing as an activity of radical opposition."[21]

Yet from early in his career Whitman had pondered the issue of "the blurring of art and life," in the words of Kaprow, with whom he'd studied. Many others were similarly concerned with this problematic, including friends and collaborators involved in his early theatre works, such as Claes Oldenburg, Jim Dine, Rauschenberg, and George Segal. These artists would become key figures in the Pop movement, trawling the ocean of mass culture and everyday phenomena, elevating what they found to the realm of art. Their museum work reflected on and critiqued the aesthetics of a relatively young capitalist society driven by consumption, mass media, and popular culture, and in this way forever altered the syntax of art. With his telecommunications projects, however, Whitman took the opposite tack, reaching down into the *populus* from above, "escaping the isolation of the art world, into a functioning relationship to the larger community"; or, as Klüver once put it, "working realistically in a society."[22]

1. Cooke, Lynne, Karen Kelly, with Bettina Funcke, eds. *Robert Whitman: Playback* (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2003)
2. Cooke, Lynne "Robert Whitman: Playback," in *Robert Whitman*, pp. 12.
3. Baker, George "The Anti-Images of Robert Whitman: *The Dante Drawings*," in *Robert Whitman*, pp. 120.
4. Banes, Sally "Dream in a Warehouse," *Village Voice*, 23 November 1982, pp. 105.
5. Negt, Oskar and Alexander Kluge, "The Public Sphere of Children," in *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) pp. 283; originally published in Germany in 1972. More recently, but with similar aims, Dan Graham produced *Children's Day Care, CD-ROM, Cartoon and Computer Screen Library Project* (1998-2000), exhibited at Marian Goodman Gallery, in New York. Within a two-way mirror pavilion, he installed computer stations equipped with games, internet access, cartoons, and a library, all aimed exclusively at children.
6. *News* continued to be presented over a two- or three-year period in various cities in the United States, including Houston, Minnesota-St. Paul, and New Brunswick, New Jersey.
7. See Cooke, "Robert Whitman: Playback," pp. 16.
8. See Calvin Tomkins, "Onward and Upward with the Arts," in *The New Yorker*, October 3, 1970, pp. 86.
9. Billy Klüver, interview by the author, May 12, 2003.
10. Rose, Barbara "Art as Experience, Environment, Process," in *Pavilion: By Experiments in Art and Technology* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972) pp. 99.
11. Corea, Ernest "Rich Men's Toys or Development Tools," pp. 19. Klüver/E.A.T. Archive.
12. Clarke, Sir Arthur C. "Satellites and Saris: 25 Years Later," *Frontline* 18, no. 9 (April 28–May 11, 2001)
13. "The Anand Project," *Techne* 1, no. 2 (November 6, 1970), pp. 7.
14. Klüver, project notes, March 2002, Klüver/E.A.T. Archive.
15. Interestingly, according to an evaluation of the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment, the audience preferred instructional programs to pure entertainment.
16. Klüver, project notes, 1970, Klüver/E.A.T. Archive.
17. Henry Kissinger, quoted by Ernest Corea, *op. cit.* pp. 19.
18. Whitman, interview by the author, May 8, 2003.
19. Klüver, project notes, May 2003, Klüver/E.A.T. Archive.
20. Whitman, quoted in Simone [Forti] Whitman, "Theater and Engineering: An Experiment. 1. Notes form a Participant," *Artforum* 5, no. 6 (February 1966), pp. 27.
21. Baker, *op. cit.* pp. 114.
22. Cooke, quoting 1977 notes from Klüver in "Robert Whitman: Playback," pp. 28.