



Mobile Feelings

Mobile telecommunication set-up between
Ars Electronica Linz and Palais de Tokyo, Paris

Christa Sommerer / Laurent Mignonneau

Background

Mobile phones have intruded into our daily lives like hardly any other technology since television and the desktop computer. While mobile phone users are generally glad to embrace the enormous advantages of being reachable anytime and anywhere, a reduced sense of privacy combined with the involuntary witnessing of anonymous people's private businesses has created a strange and sometimes awkward form of self-awareness and attention towards others. Mobile phones have transformed ordinary people into actors who narrate their most private details on the theatrical stages of train stations, restaurants, public spaces, streets, meeting areas, and any other social gathering places.

Concept

Mobile Feelings is an artistic project that explores the ambivalence of sharing personal information with an anonymous audience. Instead of communication via voice or images to people we know, *Mobile Feelings* lets people communicate with strangers through virtual touch and body sensations which include smell and sweat.

As opposed to application-based systems in the area of "affective computing"¹, "wearable computing"², "robotic user interfaces"³ and tactile interfaces for handheld devices⁴, *Mobile Feelings* aims to create the unusual and unsettling sensations of sharing private body sensations with complete strangers over a mobile phone network.

Description

The first project presentation is set up at linked locations, one at the Ars Electronica 2003 in Linz, Austria and the other at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris.

Users on these locations are provided with specially equipped *Mobile Feelings* phone devices that resemble organic or bodily shapes. These devices host miniature bio-sensors and actuators that capture the users' heartbeat, blood pressure and pulse, skin conductivity, sweat and smell. All data can be sent to anonymous users who can perceive and feel these most private sensations of others through actuators, vibrators, ventilators, micro-electromechanical and micro-bio-electrochemical systems which are embedded in each *Mobile Feelings* device.

All *Mobile Feelings* devices communicate with each other through a standard mobile phone network and *Mobile Feelings* users can move around freely and use their devices anywhere and anytime just like normal mobile phones.

Besides capturing and transmitting the various body data, the *Mobile Feelings* devices also display images of the other connected users. When a user in Linz for example touches her device and selects a remote user's from Paris, she can receive subtle body sensations, such as a tickle, a vibration, a push, a light touch, a breath of air and some humidity, which all feels like a "virtual embrace" from the user in Paris. And users in Linz or Paris can also choose to "feel" other users nearer their locations.

Mobile Art for Daily Life

Mobile Feelings works anywhere and anytime and the actual location of people (whether in Linz or Paris or anywhere else) becomes completely irrelevant.

Mobile Feelings art is no longer location—or context based but instead becomes integrated into people's daily lives.

Mobile Feelings is an artistic project that investigates how technology has transformed our social and individual lives⁵ and how we have accepted a reduced sense of privacy in exchange for connectivity and mobility. The project also explores how the sense of "touch" still remains one of our most private sensations, which we often avoid sharing with strangers⁶ and still lack a concise language to describe.⁷ Finally, *Mobile Feelings* explores novel forms of mobile communications that might include smell and sweat as well as more private ways of "feeling and communicating with each other over a distance." In our aim to get media art off the walls and out into people's lives, *Mobile Feelings* presents another step towards the merging of art, life and society.

1 Picard, R. W. and Klein, J. "Computers that Recognise and Respond to User Emotion: Theoretical and Practical Implications," In: *Interacting with Computers*. 14, 2. 2002

2 Mann, S. "Wearable Computing: A First Step Toward Personal Imaging," In: *Computer*. Vol. 30, No. 2. February 1997

3 Sekiguchi, D., Inami, M., Kawakami, N., Maeda, T., Yanagida, Y. and Tachi S. "RobotPHONE: RUI for Interpersonal Communication," In: *Siggraph'01 Conference Abstracts and Applications, ACM Siggraph*. p134. 2001

4 Poupyrev, I., Maruyama, S. and Rekimoto, J. "Ambient Touch: Designing tactile interfaces for handheld devices," In: *UIST'2002. ACM*. pp 51–60. 2002

5 Plant, S. *On the Mobile: the Effects of Mobile Telephones on Social and Individual Life*, Study report for Motorola Inc. 2001

6 Stenslie, S. "Wiring the Flesh: Towards the Limits and Possibilities of the Virtual Body," In: *Ars Electronica '96. Memesis. The Future of Evolution*. Vienna/New York, Springer Verlag, Vienna/New York, 1996

7 Heller, M. A. and Schiff, W. (Eds.) *The Psychology of Touch*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, NJ., 1991