

# Telephonic Presence: Marta Minujín's Early Works\*

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## Abstract

This chapter analyzes the works at the intersection of telematic art and expanded cinema by Argentine artist Marta Minujín (1943–), who between 1966 and 1968 created specific tele-visual installations that shed light on the role of individual media in the production of forms of remote presence. Marta Minujín achieved celebrity status very early on in her homeland but only in recent years has her significant and broad contribution to contemporary art been fully recognized at international level. Her evident affiliation with the hippie scene of the 1970s long seemed sufficient to frame her work, yet her practice in fact engages in sophisticated experimentation with media technologies, from radio to computers, which places her in dialogue with the major media artists of her time. In particular, the installation *Minuphone* (1967) grasps the archaeological centrality of the telephone in the journey towards the technologies of telepresence, recognizing the booth as a *dispositif* for translating real presence into virtual presence. Due to its ability to bridge past and future, reinterpreting an old medium and prefiguring the scenarios of the future, Minujín's work constitutes a valuable tool for media archaeology.

*Keywords:* Marta Minujín; Telephone; Telephone Booth; Live Streaming

## Abstract

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Questo capitolo analizza le opere all'incrocio tra arte telematica e cinema espanso dell'artista argentina Marta Minujín (1943–), che tra il 1966 e il 1968 crea una serie di installazioni tele-visuali che illuminano il ruolo dei singoli media nella produzione di forme di presenza a distanza. Marta Minujín ha raggiunto molto presto la fama in patria, ma il suo ampio e significativo contributo all'arte contemporanea è stato riconosciuto pienamente a livello internazionale soltanto negli ultimi anni. La sua evidente appartenenza alla scena hippie degli anni Settanta è sembrata a lungo una chiave di lettura sufficiente a inquadrare la sua opera, che in realtà contiene anche una sofisticata sperimentazione sulle tecnologie mediatiche, dalla radio al computer, tale da metterla in dialogo con i più celebrati media artist del suo tempo. Grazie alla sua capacità di congiungere passato e futuro, reinterprestando vecchi media e preconizzando scenari futuri, l'opera di Minujín rappresenta un prezioso strumento per la mediarcheologia.

*Parole chiave:* Marta Minujín; Telefono; Cabina telefonica; Trasmissione Live.

## 1. Discovering the Media Circuit

Marta Minujín, born in 1941 in Buenos Aires, grew up in a wealthy and well-educated family—her father was a physician, while her mother was a housewife, poet, pianist, and traveler, according to one of the artist's principal biographers (Villa 2010). Her artistic vocation likely stemmed from her paternal grandfather, who worked in garment manufacturing—textiles later becoming one of her most recurrent artistic materials, alongside mattresses. She studied at several art schools in Argentina and was already recognized as a painter at the age of sixteen, holding her first solo exhibition in 1959. In the early 1960s she received a fellowship to travel to Paris, where she began working with galleries and came into contact with major contemporary artists and artistic currents, from Andy Warhol to Fluxus. She returned to Buenos Aires in 1964, winning the National Prize at the Di Tella Institute. Using half of the prize money, she created her first large-scale work, *El Batacazo* (1965), while the remaining funds supported her first trip to the United States. There she entered the core phase of her career, gaining significant recognition and starting to travel regularly between the United States and Argentina. Her artistic trajectory was rich and diverse, always accompanied by a strong presence in the national media landscape. Minujín was, in effect, a television star, a factor that likely undermined her credibility in the eyes of critics, already skeptical of the more spectacular and flamboyant aspects of her work—judged, by Claire Bishop for instance, as overly sensationalist (Spencer 2020, 83).

This article focuses on the onset of her media experimentation, which took place primarily at the Howard Wise Gallery in New York, the ideal platform for her early projects in telecommunication.

Experimentation with media marked a turning point in Marta Minujín's artistic trajectory. Toward the end of the decade, a media art scene also emerged

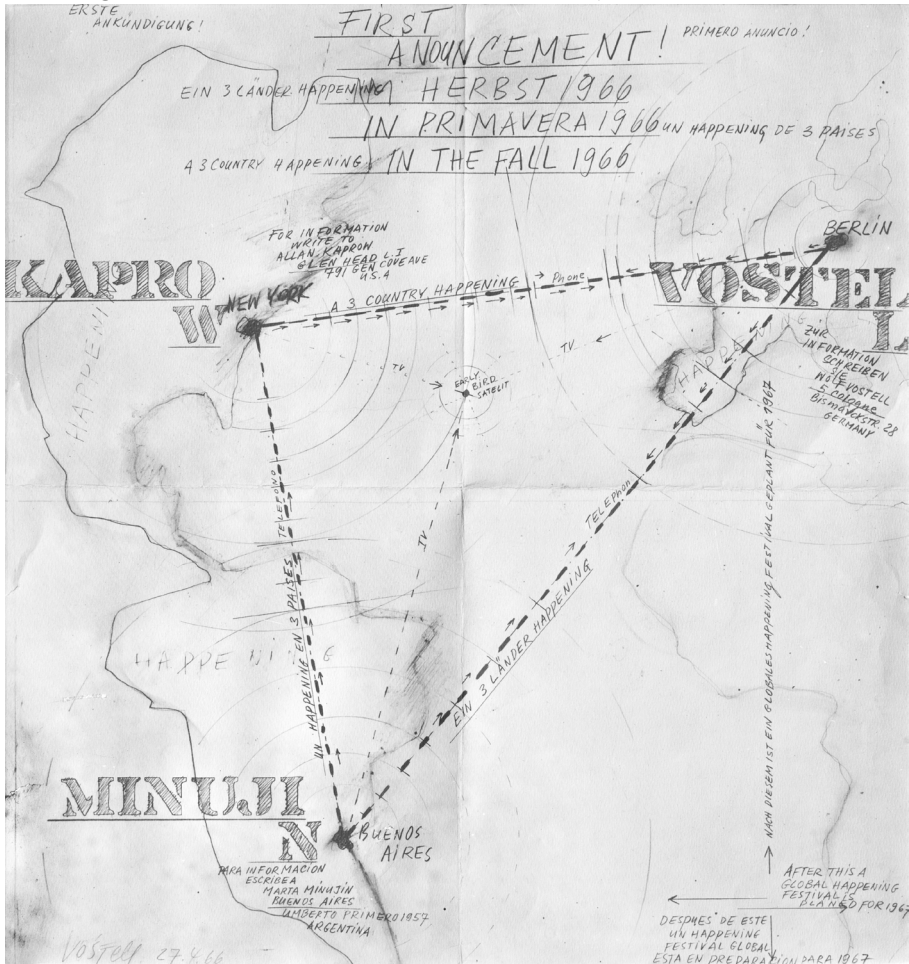
in Latin America—with artists such as Roberto Jacoby, Eduardo Costa, Raúl Escari, and Juan Risuleo, influenced by the thinking of Oscar Masotta and revolving around the Torcuato Di Tella Institute in Buenos Aires (Giunta [2001] 2007; Mazadiego 2021); it was in this context that Minujín was encouraged to work with media technologies, particularly radio, television, and the telephone, and to join the “Grupo Arte de los Medios.”

Between 1966 and 1968, she produced a cycle of three works focused on live transmission, aimed at “opening up” television broadcasts by involving different types of audiences and, in one case, to simulate the interconnection of studios across Europe and the Americas. These works are *Simultaneidad en simultaneidad* (Buenos Aires, 1966), *Circuit – Super-Heterodyne* (Montreal, 1967), and *Minuicode* (New York, 1968). The most complex challenge was naturally the engagement of spectators, who needed to be reached, selected and integrated into the artistic process itself. To this end, the artist experimented with social research methodologies, employing questionnaires, as well as with computational procedures, exploiting the capacity of early computers to process data rapidly. Moreover, this series of works introduced forms of theatricalization of television images that generated some of the earliest media environments, achieved through large-scale film projections on walls, from floor to ceiling—pioneering for the time. Some of these telematic works were deliberately conceived without fully realizing the promised technological outcomes, thereby functioning as *dramaturgies of simultaneity and connection*, questioning the ground of tele-mediated culture and significantly shaping its imaginary—now understood as an integral component of a medium, to the point of influencing what can be considered its very moment of emergence (Kluitenberg 2006).

This is the case of her most famous work, *Simultaneidad en simultaneidad*, conceived as part of the *Three Country Happening* project, which sought to exploit the newly launched communications satellite, Intelsat I (whose nickname was Early Bird, in orbit since 1965—see Parks 2005). *Simultaneidad* was intended to take part in an intercontinental media event, linking simultaneously the media happenings taking place in three different locations: New York, where Allan Kaprow was active; Berlin, at Wolf Vostell's TV station; and Buenos Aires, at Minujín's, as illustrated in the map drawn by Vostell in April 1966 to serve as the Happening's flyer (Fig. 1). However, the Argentine happening was the only one that was carried through to the end, and the cross-transmission of the three events was ultimately realized through simulation.

Included in the spaces of this installation were the homes of selected Argentine spectators, which were transformed into media environments, receiving and intertwining multiple signals. In Buenos Aires, around a thousand people agreed to tune in to Canals 11 and 13 and to switch on the Municipal and Libertad radio stations at midnight on 24 October 1966, in order to be “invaded” (as Minujín herself declared) by a multimedia flow of communication

reaching them through their television screens, as well as via phone calls, letters, and telegrams delivered to their doors. On air, Minujín announced that she was



**Figure 1.** Wolf Vostell, Poster for *Three Country Happening*, 1966. © Marta Minujín. Courtesy of Marta Minujín's Archive and kurimanzutto, Mexico City / New York.

communicating with Vostell and Kaprow via radio and telex: a male voice could be heard speaking in German, while Kaprow was “present” in the form of a telegram that Minujín read aloud.

Their descriptions of the American and German happenings simultaneously became (prerecorded) images: five girls stuck pins into a slaughtered cow, supposedly in New York, while people on the streets of the “wannabe” Berlin licked cream off a car. These actions were visible both on domestic television screens and on a row of monitors set up in the Di Tella Institute theatre, where a group of spectators, selected by the artist for their “mediatic value,” followed

the program. It was at once a collective and an individual viewing experience, a highly forward-looking hybrid model: each participant was in front of their own screen while holding a radio in hand. This special audience was made up of sixty prominent figures from the media world—journalists, critics, film stars, psychoanalysts, politicians, and athletes (Pella 2010, 74)—who, a week earlier, had been filmed in the same location wearing the same outfits (Fig. 2), becoming part of the images transmitted and creating the impression of a two-way live broadcast. On the day of the event, the VIP spectators, returning to the same site, found themselves immersed in footage and slides that included them—a multiple projection setup using nine devices to fill the four walls of the auditorium. In what constitutes one of the earliest live media environments, the guests were simultaneously viewers and performers of a telecast of images simulating simultaneity. Finally, the last segment of the program showed three personalities, chosen from the Di Tella auditorium group, in their own homes as they received telegrams and phone calls, or were contacted via radio. At this point, Minujín's voice was muted, and her discourse could be followed in written form in the day's newspaper—which spectators who had followed the artist's instructions were expected to have at hand.



**Figure 2.** Documentation of *Simultaneidad en simultaneidad*, Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, Buenos Aires, 1966 © Marta Minujín. Courtesy of Marta Minujín's Archive and kurimanzutto Mexico City / New York.

Viewed in light of later telematic happenings, such as *Hole in Space* by Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz (1980)—a media event that genuinely connected New York’s Lincoln Center and Los Angeles’ Broadway Store via a satellite link, transforming a large screen into a “hole” where space and time collapsed—*Simultaneidad en simultaneidad* might appear as a failure, or at least as an experiment in “juxtaposing truth and falsity,” as critics observed (Kirby 1968, 148). On the contrary, recent re-readings have shown how this failure can be seen as the very end of the experiment, programmatically arranged as pre-recorded communication to play on the myth of the global village. Nina Wexelblatt (2025) crucially interprets *Simultaneidad* as a critical counter-narrative, or as an experiment in counter-information and resistance to the political pressures that the three artists faced in their respective countries—pressures for which the media themselves often served as instruments.

In this veiled but ultimately subversive approach to telecommunication systems, *Simultaneidad en simultaneidad* constructs telepresence as a dimension arising from the synergy of all media: radio, photography, cinema, television, and print. And simultaneity is presented as a striking blend of reality and simulation, live and recorded, presence and representation. Minujín’s specific approach to the intercontinental happening consisted in coordinating the media apparatus as a whole and shaping telepresence as a dimension collectively produced through countless operations linking multiple media signals—switching radio or TV stations, reading the newspaper, opening a telegram, answering a phone call, and, for those seeing themselves on the small screen, observing the behaviors and gestures of their mediated self.

This final aspect is crucial: in *Simultaneidad en simultaneidad*, the practice of staging oneself while monitoring one’s video feedback on a screen connected to the filming camera—a topos of 1970s closed-circuit video art (Krauss 1976), reinterpreted by women artists (De Rosa’s and Galimi’s essays, *infra*), and a foundational configuration of today’s tele-media (Dalmasso and Grespi, *infra*)—is essentially imagined and simulated through film footage, in a nested “Russian doll” structure that encapsulates a cinematic installation within a television broadcast. Cinema, video art, and telematic art thus enter into dialogue, to question a dimension that was becoming increasingly central in the media culture of the time—and remains so today: mediated presence.

*Minucode*, a video installation presented from 27 May to 8 July 1968 at the Americas Society in New York (then the Center for Inter-American Relations), also included Super 8 film projections later installed within a media environment. In this case, participants were selected through a questionnaire that asked them to self-classify according to profession and leadership ability. The questionnaire was published on 7 May in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Women’s Wear Daily*, *The New Republic*, *The Village Voice*, and *East Village Other*. The collected data were subsequently processed using a computer to arrive at a

final selection—a highly unusual procedure at a time when computer use in art was practically unheard of.

Between 20 and 23 May 1968, the selected participants attended four cocktail parties, each dedicated to members of a specific profession (economists, fashion professionals, artists, politicians), during which they were asked simply to interact under the gaze of six cameras, capturing them from multiple angles. On the day of the event, the previously filmed subjects were called to revisit the same spaces, now transformed by their giant-scale images projected on the walls, making their expressive and gestural capacities fully visible. Footage from the four gatherings was edited into ten-minute sequences, aimed at comparing social codes of behavior and at revealing the common denominator that constructs fame and success—the focus of Minujín's research at the time.

Cinema here functioned as the medium capable of bringing out Maussian techniques of the body, which Mauss himself had already recognized in the 1930s as being conditioned by the media (Mauss [1936] 1979). Yet it was the televisual principle of the closed-circuit setup, which the installation mimicked, that enabled forms of self-analysis.

This point was, in fact, at the core of *Circuit Super-Heterodyne*, created the previous year but theoretically more complex than the preceding works. In 1967, at Fordham University, Minujín met the media theorist of the moment, Marshall McLuhan, and showed him documentation of *Simultaneidad*, intending to continue her research along the lines of his theories. She effectively did so by participating in the Pavillon de la Jeunesse at Expo 67 in Montreal, where she created *Circuit Super-Heterodyne* in April of that year, in collaboration with Howard Swarcer.

Even in this installation, the artist relied on local media for participant selection: invitations were issued through newspapers and selections were already made using computational tools. The thirty chosen participants, divided into groups of ten according to physical characteristics such as sex, hair color, and height, were then massively mediated through photographs, film, and voice recordings, which were ultimately broadcast on television. In parallel, a second action took place in a TV studio, under the title of the *Concierto de famosos*, which represents the most advanced segment of her work on media and social behavior. In this segment, eight celebrities performed in a television studio, where an interplay was established between their mirror image and the image broadcast live on the screen. Anticipating the central concept of Peter Campus' *Interface* (1972) (see *infra*)—that is the comparison between an electronically transmitted CCTV image and the specular reflection—Minujín worked on the transformation of the real self into a virtual self, laying the groundwork for an experience of the world in telepresence.

## 2. A Media Ar(t)chaeological Work: The *Minuphone* (1967)

After the series of installations reinterpreting television circuits, Minujín shifted her attention to the telephone—more precisely, to the public yet intimate space in which calls made outside the home typically occurred: the telephone booth. *Minuphone*, a work created in 1967 and first exhibited the same year at the Howard Wise Gallery in New York, is devoted to this capsule of telepresence, carefully customized to incorporate photography, video, and sound playback. For this reason, it stands among Minujín's most technologically complex works, being developed in collaboration with the Danish engineer Per Biorn of Bell Labs (today Nokia Bell Labs)—the historic research laboratory which originated from the workshop of the telephone's inventor, Alexander Graham Bell, and which later became a leading center for electronic innovation and telecommunications, credited with major discoveries such as radio astronomy, the transistor, the laser, the photovoltaic cell, the charge-coupled device (CCD).<sup>1</sup>

The construction of *Minuphone* took place under the aegis of Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.), founded by Bell Labs developers Billy Klüver and Fred Waldhauer together with the artists Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Whitman with the aim of fostering dialogue between art and engineering and enabling works that would have been unthinkable outside such an alliance. Minujín was one of the few women in E.A.T. to take an active role in this legendary phase of intense techno-artistic experimentation.

The *Minuphone* looked like an ordinary 1960s telephone booth, complete with a metal frame and transparent acrylic wall panels, yet the user entering it experienced far more than a simple phone call (Fig. 3). About two meters high, it was accessed through a folding door and positioned thirty centimeters above the floor on a wooden platform, which featured a rectangular opening directly beneath the base of the booth. A television monitor was installed in this cavity and covered with a transparent panel.

The work appeared as a simple, playful object but was in fact a hypermedium of considerable technological and conceptual complexity. Its functioning can be reconstructed: through contemporary reports by users and journalists preserved in the archives of Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI) in New York; through analyses contained in the major catalogues of Minujín's exhibitions; through the observation of the iconographic documentation; and through interviews with the artist published in the catalogue *Minuphone 1967–2010* (Longoni and Carvajal 2010). Finally, reference can be made to its recent reinstallation as part of the exhibition *Sensing the Future* (LUMA, Arles, May 2025–January 2026), where, however, only the architectural structure was displayed, not its operational system.

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1 I would like to thank Maria Teresa Soldani for her essential suggestions on this part of the research and for her overall scholarly support to the project. This article has also benefited from ongoing dialogue with Giancarlo Grossi and from the scientific contribution of Rossana Galimi, which likewise extended to the project as a whole.



**Figure 3.** Sketch for *Miniphone*, 1967. © Marta Minujín. Courtesy of Marta Minujín's Archive and kurimanzutto, Mexico City / New York.

In summary, the experience it offered unfolded as follows: upon stepping inside, the user encountered a series of instructions conveyed through illuminated texts inside the booth, requiring specific interactive gestures capable of triggering technologies for the production and transmission of sounds, images, and environmental stimuli. A push-button telephone was mounted on one of the walls, housed in a wooden box at the height of a standing visitor's hands. Once the door had fully closed, a light indicator prompted the user to dial numbers; depending on the combination entered—and also on the tone of the user's voice—different effects were produced, ranging from gusts of air emitted from vents in the sides or the base, to flashing lights of varying intensity and color, to a shower of confetti released from above the user's head, and finally to the activation of a mechanism that filled the booth with green smoke. Additional visual effects animated the walls, composed of two acrylic sheets whose inter-space was infused with colored liquid—bright green or dark violet—that spread across their entire surface. At the climactic moment of the experience, the illuminated instruction “look down” appeared, corresponding to the activation of a camera and the live transmission of its input to the monitor installed on the floor. Finally, a light signal instructed the user to “stand still” at two different moments: first, when a spotlight embedded in the floor illuminated by the



**Figure 4.** Postcard depicting *Minu-Phone*, 1967. © Marta Minujín. Courtesy of Marta Minujín's Archive and kurimanzutto, Mexico City / New York.

participant's body, projecting its shadow for about ten seconds onto a sheet of white paper released through a narrow slot; and second, when a bright light was projected from the ceiling onto the user's face, allowing the Polaroid camera installed inside the booth to take a photograph of the visitor while on the phone.

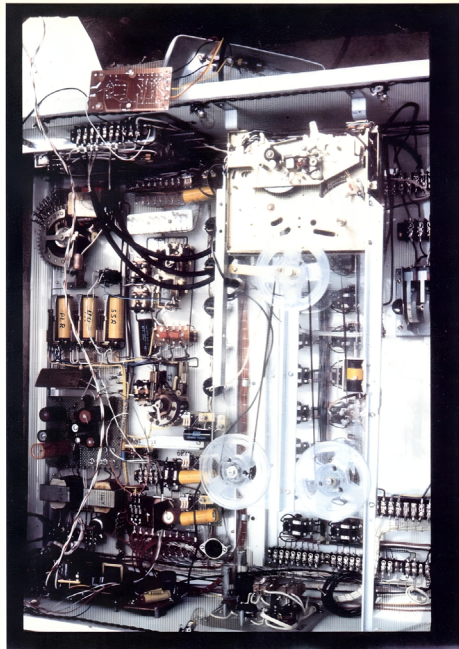
Within this sequence, the actual telephone call also played a crucial role, as it was a real call lasting up to three minutes and modulated by two sound effects: the echo of the conversation produced by a reverberator, and an effect consisting in recording and replaying a fragment of the dialogue a few seconds later. Upon exiting the booth, the user received the Polaroid picture to take home as a souvenir of the experience (Fig. 4).

The *Minu-Phone* was fitted with an electronic black box—not yet a digital electronic memory like those used in computers and no longer a purely mechanical mechanism—which, however, was not entirely “black,” since it was exposed to the public. Visitors could observe the device in operation while watching others undergo the experience, thanks to a transparent acrylic panel that revealed the circuits positioned directly in front of the booth (Fig. 5). The analogue electronic control circuit was built with amplifiers and power sources and required a touch-tone telephone (with a keypad) rather than a pulse-dial phone (with a rotary dial) – this according to Longoni and Carvajal's analysis of Biorn's project (2010, 20).

Contemporary criticism framed the work mostly as a psychedelic utopia, pre-figuring the artist's forthcoming hippie turn and thereby significantly delaying recognition of Minujín's sustained and sophisticated engagement with media technologies. In *Minu-Phone*, the user is transformed into an audiovisual signal and prompted to confront their teletransmitted image from a highly unusual

perspective—from below (Fig. 4). The closed-circuit system embedded in the booth relies on an alignment between camera and monitor, both positioned at the visitor's feet. This configuration associates video with the shadow, a quasi-natural image marked by the estrangement of perceiving oneself in a projection that adheres to the body yet does not fully coincide with it. During the experience, a shadow is deliberately produced on a sheet of white paper, and the original outline of the work also envisioned a play of reflections through the use of mercury: the metal would rise between the acrylic walls of the booth, producing a silvered surface that turned the walls into mirrors in which users could see their reflected image. This idea was ultimately abandoned because mercury proved too dangerous, yet it remains significant for understanding the imaginary component of the machine. Minujín was clearly experimenting with the video image in ways closely aligned with those of the pioneers of video art, who would be largely concerned with the difference between the screen and the mirror (see Dalmasso and Grespi, *infra*).

By extending closed-circuit video toward multisensory and immersive experiences, *Minuphone* interprets telepresence as a conversion between domains: from the real to the virtual, from the self to its mediation, from a concrete place to all possible places, and from communication to presence.



**Figure 5.** Switchboard in the Minuphone pedestal, New Jersey, 1967 © Marta Minujín.  
 Courtesy of Marta Minujín's Archive and kurimanzutto Mexico City / New York.

### 3. The Telephonic Presence

Marta Minujín's *Minuphone* prefigures the most technologically advanced forms of contemporary telepresence, linking them to the experiences of closed-circuit video art. While the earliest experiments in media art exploring telematic presence were characterized by the search for a shared, multidirectional space of tele-perception (as highlighted in Dotto, Soldani, *infra*), contemporary extended-reality technologies have placed greater emphasis on simulating the bodily presence of the subject in the “elsewhere” reached through tele-media. Much of this experimentation has focused on producing an illusory self—intangible yet visible—that maximizes possibilities for embodiment and can interact with virtual environments. In this regard, the historical experiments of early video art represent a crucial laboratory for techniques of self-mediation, with sustained reflections on the user's face and body transmitted via CCTV and contrasted with their mirrored images.

Unlike the telegraph, the telephone was the first modern form of long-distance communication not based on the transmission of a signal to be interpreted according to a shared code, but rather on the direct mediation of the communicator. The transmission of the interlocutor's voice produces a phantasmic sense of presence and underscores the sharing of a common temporality—a *now* that is simultaneously a mental state and a physical parameter. For this reason, the telephone represents a genealogically pivotal device, as Minujín intuited in consolidating all media experiences within the space of the booth. Even today, the mobile phone remains the locus in which the entire history of media collapses.

In his article “Heard over the Phone” (1991), Tom Gunning analyzes the ways in which early cinema staged telephone conversations, often depicting situations in which a father or husband listens over the phone to an attack on his family, feeling present despite being at the other end of the line, yet unable to intervene—a scenario dramatized countless times in thrillers up to the present day. In the films and Grand-Guignol plays Gunning examines, the effectiveness of the dramatic climax relies precisely on the tension between an unbridgeable real-time distance and the sense of presence generated by the then-new technology, as highlighted in dialogues such as: “*You are close to me—I bear the slightest inflection of your voice—almost every movement—I can very nearly see you—yes, I see you...*” (Gunning 1991, 195). The leap from the satisfaction of hearing a voice so clearly that it feels as if the speaker can be seen, to the need to create conditions for concretely seeing them on some kind of screen and to overcome the so-called “telephonic uncanny” (Durham Peters 1999), occurs as early as the late nineteenth century, as Doron Galili demonstrates in his *Seeing by Electricity* (2020). Both men of learning and ordinary people immediately imagined that such a possibility could become real, giving it shape within popular

visual culture—through illustrations of imaginary machines and through tales of an “electric distance-seeing machine” being experimented on simultaneously by Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, and by Nikola Tesla (Galili 2020, 18). Ultimately, these speculations apply the following logic: just as the telegraph’s secondary effect—the transmission of sound—gave rise to a new medium, the telephone, so experimentation with the telephone could lead to a new technology exploiting the electrical circuit for the transmission of images.

Placing television within the same lineage as the telephone was obvious at the end of the nineteenth century, whereas today this connection seems more counterintuitive, given that the history of the television medium has been dominated for roughly ninety percent by broadcasting—the one-to-many transmission model, more akin to cinema—rather than the reciprocal exchange of transmission and reception, of speech and listening, which is characteristic of the telephone. Drawing on the research of Siegfried Zielinski (1999) and William Uricchio (2004), Galili illuminates the link between telephone and television by reordering the landscape of late nineteenth-century technological creativity, demonstrating that the development of electronically generated moving images proceeded entirely independently, though in parallel, to that of photographic-based moving images.

[...] out of the social, cultural, and intermedial context of modernity, two distinct forms of moving image media emerged: one for the photographic inscription and reanimation of pictures, and one for the electric transmission of images at a distance. Such a history, in turn, ought to establish television’s place in a number of alternative lineages, including ones that fall outside the realms of visual media—namely, those of the history of electrification, of signal communication systems like the telegraph and the telephone, and of networked technological configurations. (Galili 2020, 4)

Tele-transmitted images along electrical wires were already a concrete technological possibility in the Bell Laboratories as early as the 1930s. However, their use was experimented with for more than forty years and concluded in 1974 without any specific prototype gaining market dominance. Lori Emerson’s seminal work on network archaeology also examines the case of the videophone, which enjoyed relative popularity in the 1960s and most likely derived from the Bell Laboratories’ *ikonophone* project. The latter was a system in which both speakers were able to hear each other and see images of each other; it was already tested by AT&T in the 1930s. Of particular interest for the purposes of this article is that this videotelephonic modality was conceived as an extension of telephony into public spaces, and thus implied the construction of booths “about the same size as an ordinary telephone booth,” according to *The New York Times* (Emerson 2025, 111). In reality, these systems proposed a different

mode of use—not standing but seated on a swivel chair before a screen illuminated by a bluish glow, thus anticipating the later domestic model of broadcast television consumption. The visual telephone—effectively a form of two-way television and a precursor to contemporary videoconferencing platforms—was also introduced in Germany and relaunched after the Second World War in various contexts under the name *Picturephone*. Lori Emerson describes the seven booths installed at the 1964 New York World’s Fair, perhaps the moment of their greatest public visibility: inside each booth stood an oval tube housing a small video camera and a screen, both connected to the telephone keypad.

Seeing and speaking at a distance thus emerges as a core nucleus of telepresence—an experience that developed around the telephone and, crucially, around the structure that housed it, creating a bubble which separated the speakers from their surroundings and allowed them to travel down through the wires.

#### 4. The Whole World (and the Other World) Through a Wire: The Telephone Booth

The 1960s represent the period of greatest popularity for the telephone booth, which nevertheless has a much longer history, spanning approximately a century and a half. This final section aims to clarify its nature as a *device*, while at the same time demonstrating the potential of this object for media-archaeological research, and laying the groundwork for future excavation.

The telephone booth was designed in the 1880s almost simultaneously in the United States and Germany, and was initially installed in indoor locations, typically hotels, banks, or offices. An American patent dated 1883, signed by Richard Busted, describes a “telephone cabinet” containing a desk and equipped with wheels in order to move it from place to place. Busted envisioned a movable workstation organized around the telephone as its central element (one can see a pen and inkwell on one side and a large wall-mounted apparatus on the other (Fig. 6), an idea that was undoubtedly anticipatory of developments that would only materialize much later, with the emergence of the first modems.

The model that gained diffusion toward the end of the nineteenth century, however, typically involved a standing user, as in the case of the German *Telefonzelle*,<sup>2</sup> inaugurated in Berlin as early as January 1881. The earliest attestation of such structures appears to be a woodcut from 1878 depicting a telephone booth in operation in Chicago (see Hebenstreit and Toyka-Seid 1878).

The payment method was initially similar to that of prepaid cards used before the introduction of mobile phones: users purchased a “telephone ticket” (Schörle 2019, 17) and entered the booth much as one would enter a cinema,

2 The *Telefonzelle* was distinct from the *Fernsprechkiosk*, which did not involve an architectural enclosure but only a wall-mounted station.

including the fact that they were allowed to remain inside only for a limited period of time.

The history of the telephone booth is primarily a material history marked by two major turning points: the introduction of the coin-operated system and the replacement of wood—of which early booths were initially constructed—with glass. The first change made telephone use more practical, greatly increasing the public usage of booths; the second enabled their installation in open spaces.

The coin-operated system was introduced in 1899 through a patent by the American inventor William Gray, whose payphone design relied on a deposit mechanism monitored by an operator at the other end of the receiver. The operator listened for the sound produced by the coin striking a bell housed in the payment box inside the booth, and released the line, if the sound was judged to correspond to the required amount. This more practical system, together with the twentieth-century growth in the number of telephones installed in private homes, encouraged the spread of telephone booths across Europe and the United States, particularly in locations such as railway stations, school entrances, and civic buildings.

Outdoor payphone booths became a recognizable element of the urban landscape only in the 1950s, when glass replaced wood as the preferred construction material, being less susceptible to damage and more resistant to adverse weather. In Milan, the first outdoor booth was installed in Piazza San Babila in 1952 (Mastroianni 2022). Toward the end of the decade, the first drive-up payphones also appeared—installed at strategic locations that allowed travelers to call home—and around 1966 they were equipped with dial-tone service, enabling free emergency calls.

Thus, by the late 1960s, when Marta Minujín created her *Minuphone*, telephone booths were experiencing the height of their cultural and technological prominence.

These structures emerged from the practical need to create isolated cells in which one could concentrate while being shielded from surrounding noise; in this sense, they appear to belong to the genealogy of “protective media” (Casetti 2023). The telephone booth functioned as a device, much like the cinema auditorium: it compelled users to adopt a specific posture—holding the receiver to the ear while allowing themselves to be absorbed by the conversation.

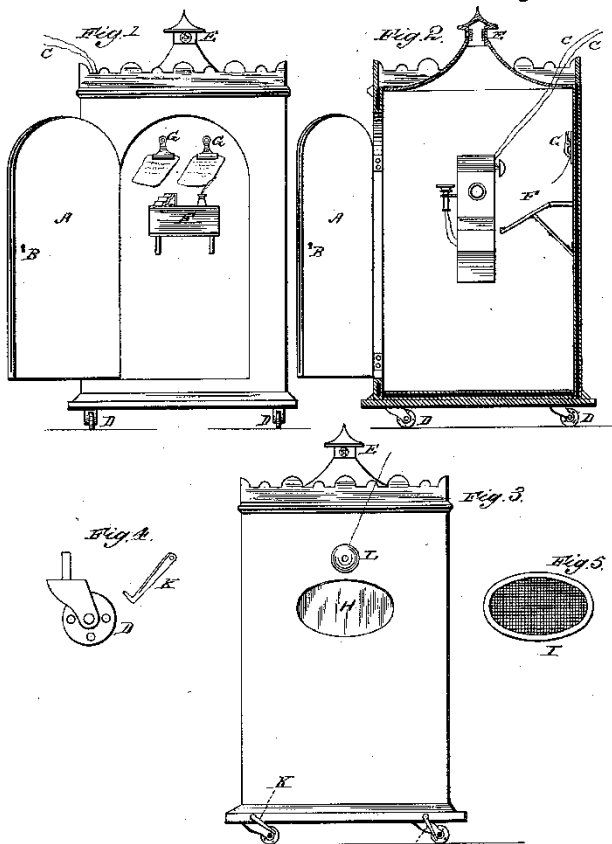
With its relocation to outdoor environments, its medial dimension became even more pronounced. The transparent walls framed the surrounding landscape, creating a mediated distance, and the city itself became a spectacle—moving images to which the audio track arriving through the receiver could be mentally synchronized. Its coin-operated activation also made it comparable to the coin-operated machines of the Penny Arcades (Huhtamo 2005), and, like these, it came to be associated with a highly specific imaginary.

(No Model.)

R. BUSTEED.  
TELEPHONE CABINET.

No. 282,841.

Patented Aug. 7, 1883.



WITNESSES  
*E. H. Bates*  
*Philip Lucas*

INVENTOR  
*Richard Busteed,*  
*by Addison Smith*  
Attorneys

A. PETER, PHOTOGRAPHER, WASHINGTON, D. C.

Figure 6. Richard Busteed's project for the Telephone Cabinet, 1883. Patent. Public domain.

This imaginary was not so much that of the interactive machine as that of the transformative environment, which emerges conspicuously in popular culture during the 1930s: the telephone booth hosts the famous metamorphosis of Clark Kent, who seeks a secluded yet rapidly accessible space within the crowded metropolis in order to remove his civilian attire and reveal the costume of Superman, seemingly worn like a second skin.

The imaginary of the telephone booth was first explored by Ariana Kelly (2015), who examined its literary and cinematic representations to reveal how this architecture shaped notions of privacy and introduced a distinct style of communication and social interaction. Kelly's volume illuminates the intertwining of historical, cultural, and political issues raised by this object, while simultaneously prompting further inquiry—particularly from a media-theoretical perspective.<sup>3</sup>

It is particularly relevant here to note that the telephone booth represented the threshold beyond which tele-mediated interaction became a device of control. Within the domestic or workplace environment, the telephone functioned as a medium that was, in a sense, exposed to monitoring by others: parents, supervisors, colleagues. Achieving privacy at home required being physically alone or stretching the cord as far as possible from the corridor, where the device was often located, to intrude into spaces considered inappropriate—such as the bathroom or bedroom—and looking for makeshift supports for the receiver. Transgressive use of the telephone was often linked to subverting its domestic arrangement, whereas making a call in public spaces was doubly protective: it provided a sonically insulated space conducive to communication and simultaneously removed the interaction from mechanisms of surveillance and tracking.

The telephone booth functioned as an oasis of freedom in the midst of the street, a space in which one could enter a sonic flow without being recognized. Public telephones were often used to conduct prohibited conversations—for instance, the pranks of children, masters of the “anonymous” call, or extramarital conversations. Their structure, democratic if not anarchic, increasingly went along with a shabby aspect: odors, dust, and traces left by homeless people who spent the night inside. This, in turn, became one of the declared reasons for their removal toward the end of the 1990s—by which time mobile phones were already in widespread use—or for their transformation into some of the most fascinating technological relics of our era.

Since they allowed connections that were not entirely traceable, emanating voices that could not be clearly located in space, their use lends itself to explorations of the elsewhere. An unlocatable voice might even be imagined as coming from the beyond or from the realm of spirits. In this sense, the telephone booth

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3 The history of the telephone booth and a part of its imaginary is also the topic of *Eine Kleine Geschichte der Telefonzelle* by Eckart Schörlé (2019).

amplifies a dimension already intrinsic to the medium itself. The presentification of an absent party, introduced by the telephone, opens up a vast supernatural imaginary (Sconce 2000), which was already alive in the mind of one of its inventors, Thomas Watson, Alexander Graham Bell's research partner. Watson, a member of the Society of Psychical Research, was fascinated by the idea of using the telephone as a channel to contact the dead, holding seances in the expectation that signs from the other side could reach him through the receiver (Ronel 1989).

According to Oliver Grau, this "occult prehistory of telecommunication" has nourished contemporary telepresence media, centered on an out-of-the-body experience derived from the amalgam of three technologies: robotics, telematics, and virtual reality (2003, 279). Although the rich, three-dimensional visuality that characterizes these media invites comparison with cinema, immersive media should instead be considered in relation to telephonic-televisual technologies: both for material and experiential reasons, and because of this convergence of esoteric imaginaries grounded in the possibility of leaving the body or contacting otherworldly entities.

Today, a monument inspired by the mediatic and mediumistic role of the telephone booth exists: the *Wind Phone* (*Kaze no Denwa*), located in the town of Ōtsuchi, Japan. Ōtsuchi's *Wind Phone* is a white telephone booth with glass panels, housing a black telephone disconnected from any line and resting on a metal shelf, alongside a notebook serving as a register for visitors' signatures and thoughts. Created in 2010 by garden designer Itaru Sasaki following the death of a cousin, it was opened to the public the following year after the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami that claimed over 15,000 lives in the Tōhoku region.

The telephone booth has represented a mediatic environment capable of encapsulating the genealogy of tele-media, constructing a sense of presence that is poised between control and freedom, political utopia and the ambiguous myth of virtuality. In the works of Marta Minujín, the telephone booth becomes an artistic object that brings this genealogy to light and invites viewers to trace it along a line that leads directly to the present.

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