

LACMA Art + Tech LAB Conversations

Robert Whitman:

Telecommunications Projects, 1972–present

May 19, 2015



Robert Whitman, photo courtesy of the artist

051915

The world is kind of a local place.

- Robert Whitman

Peggy Weil: It is a special honor to have Robert Whitman here tonight in the LACMA Art +Technology Lab, especially as he was a participant in the original LACMA Art and Technology Program in the late '60s, early '70s. This evening's visit completes a full circle spanning almost five decades. By way of introduction I'd like to read from

Michael Govan's introduction to the DIA Art Foundation 2003 catalogue, *robert whitman playback*.

“Robert Whitman’s seminal performances and multimedia installations in the 1960’s and 1970’s opened a world of new thinking about time-based art. The influence of this work is being felt especially now as young artists begin to exploit fully the enormous potential of combining performance, video, and sculptural installations. Whitman’s founding with artist Robert Rauschenberg and scientists Billy Kluver and Fred Waldhauer of the Experiments in Art and Technology initiative in the mid-1960s could be considered especially prescient in our present technological age.”

We’ll touch on the history, but we’re not looking backwards tonight as much as looking forward. We’re interested tonight in the setting of the Art + Tech Lab to present Robert Whitman’s Telecommunications Projects in the context of the current interest and developments in mobile art and media. Whitman’s Telecommunications Projects, which span almost five decades, involved the use of telex, microphones, sound, and the early integration of media and technology into his art. His performances incorporated live projections of imagery from lasers, slides, film and video. His work included broadcasts of live mixes from local radio stations, close-circuit television and telephony from pay telephone booths in the early 70’s updated in recent works using mobile video phones. It’s not hyperbole to say that your work in that time and in these performances anticipated almost everything we might now term mobile and locative media, integrating aspects of crowdsourcing, even what might now be called reality programming. One online review termed the reporting aspects of *Local Report* and *NEWS* in the early 70’s an “early oral Twitter stream.”

Robert Whitman: I don’t know what that means.

Peggy Weil: That's just as well.

Robert Whitman: It sounds obscene.

Peggy Weil: And just one more quote: The critic Bettina Funcke writes of your Telecommunications Projects that "...they can be seen as an unconscious prehistory of much of today's art." So the plan tonight is to talk about these projects. We have few things to show and then very quickly open it up to questions, because I think you said you'd prefer hearing what people here have to say and finding out what they'd like to know.

While these descriptions of your work in hindsight have emphasized this sense of your work as having been prescient and predictive of current trends in art and technology, it's my understanding that actually you never entered into this with any intention of being predictive, of 'inventing the Internet' or 'oral Twitter streams.' Instead, you ended up directing people to pay phones or to make reports via mobile phones as an extension of work or ideas central to all your performances. I thought we could start with a description of *NEWS* in the 60's and its trajectory into *Local Report* and how those works fit into your other works.

Robert Whitman: I'll come at it a little more obliquely. Whatever it is that you do, you - in the beginning when I was a kid, I tried to rationalize stuff. People ask me these questions, and I try to think of an answer, explain stuff. And a number of years go by and you realize, Jesus, that was really stupid, what you said then. There's a tendency to do too much thinking, and I just don't want to be in that part of thinking. I like being in the part of thinking that is not thinking, that's completely intuitive.

So all of these things come about because you want to do something or make something, just stuff, from some other compulsion. You were asking about the piece in

1972. There are a couple things about that piece, those pieces that I like. And since I've always been concerned with having - audience is such an antique word, and participant is such another kind of word that I don't really like. There has to be another word for people who experience art. I'm not quite sure what that word might be.

But in any case I like the idea of having a variety of different cultures and inputs be part of the piece. So with the early phone piece, this was in Manhattan, I think in 1972. (I know that because I read it somewhere.) I made a map of the city and sent people around to make reports from pay phones. In Los Angeles right now there's absolutely no possibility whatsoever of finding a pay phone anywhere. But in those days Manhattan was full of them. So I did that piece. And the place I can remember where I did it in particular, I did it in many other places as well, in Houston and Minneapolis.

And my quid pro quo, among other things, was in those days they just wanted me to have a piece in a show. And so I said, "that's really not what I want to do. I want to do something that to me is more fun and interesting." So I did this piece having people go around. And I also got the experience of getting a tour of the city by somebody who loves the city and might even have a quirky view of aspects of the city that a tourist isn't going to get.

For example, in Houston I got the tour of the city from a fabulous woman named Helen Winkler, who some people may know of. So you get to go to the Turning Basin at night. You get to go to the railroad yards, the switching yards, at night when nobody's around, and mysterious, big noises are happening, and it's very dangerous, and a bunch of other interesting things like that. I got the tour of Minneapolis from a guy named Joe Bedell who is an American Indian artist.

So these are terrific. In those days you really did have a much more profound regional difference. You could collect people who were from Houston. You could collect people

who were from Minneapolis, and they had those accents. These days it's really hard to find that kind of difference.

Peggy Weil: Maybe you could explain how the piece (*Local Report*) worked. You sent people, the "*audience / participants / or "new word for people who experience art"* out to experience the city on a route that you'd determined, based on these individual tours of the city. They were to stop at specific phone booths and call in...

Robert Whitman: Okay. What happens is that I sent them out and I said, "Tell me what you see or report back." And I found 30 people to make 3 reports each, which is 90 reports, each 20 seconds long, so you could fill a half an hour. And I learned a bunch of other things. You can't imagine the tension in those days in the radio station when there's silence for more than 15 seconds. They go crazy. They want to interrupt. They want to have some report come in.

Anyway, so these people go around. They make a report. And if they're normal people, what they see in an unself-conscious way gravitates towards an image, the visualization of something. "I'm at the corner of Broome and Broadway, and there's a lady across the street carrying a brown paper bag, and she's walking a dog." Now, tell me if you can't imagine what that is and how beautiful that is, and that's a simple, normal, wonderful, ordinary poetry." So you get this stream going from there.

"I'm on 125th Street and Lexington," and you get this guy. And in a couple of cases you get other descriptions, maps, a cultural map of the city. Like, a fire truck goes by one phone booth, and a minute or so later another guy makes a report, and you hear the same fire truck going by. This stuff goes on. In Houston one guy called up, who just got hip to what was going on, and started making his report. He wasn't part of the group. So it's fun. And then later on the piece evolved to sending people out with cell phones to take pictures.

Peggy Weil: At this point it was called *Local Report*.

Robert Whitman: Yeah.

Peggy Weil: So we should say that you were in the local public radio station live mixing the reports for broadcast as they came in.

Robert Whitman: Yeah, doing mixes. Yeah. You're also there to monitor - you guys might not understand what I'm going to talk about now is a possible Anthony Weiner moment. Do you know what I'm talking about? Some of you do. You feel obliged to - but I never had the need to edit anybody. Lucky for me. I wouldn't know how to do that. Because people are generally kind and discreet when they're acting in these kinds of places.

So you get to do these things. I've always been interested in a variety of points of view, variety of cultures, doing live performances. No God said everybody has to see everything. That's not part of the law from up high. So you can make sections of the piece available to sections of the audience. And so remember that the audience may have the idea that, "Whoa, my experience is special to me and different from this other person's." And all of these pieces, it seemed to me, have some sort of coherence together. I can't rationalize it in exactly that way. And the final incarnation of the piece we're talking about -

Peggy Weil: Where it became called *Local Report*.

Robert Whitman: Yeah, It was *News Report* to start with. When video came in, it got to be the *Local Report*. A friend of mine gave it that title. In the last incarnation we found 90 places around the world to call in within that amount of time. And we called

that *Local*, too, because I like the idea that it's only politicians and what you call 'important people' who don't understand that the world is kind of a local place if that means anything to anybody.

Peggy Weil: We can show a little bit of the video documentation of one of the *Local Reports* performances. ([Link to Local Report 2012 on Creative Time.org](#)) Do you want to say something about how this came out of your earlier directed walks? You had done a whole series of pieces. This was from 2012.

Robert Whitman: It's very important to know who it was as far as becoming an aesthetic if the vertical images don't match the visual ones, and they act as sort of a glue in the same way that one line of poetry may not be directly related to another, but you can feel that it's part of the same vocabulary, the same piece.

Peggy Weil: One of the things that's fun about this particular link, which is on *Creative Time*, is that it's streaming. You can't really download it. The stream is refreshed every time I go to look at it. So each time you watch it, you end up getting a different set of stories from these 90 cities. How many people per city?

Robert Whitman: I don't know. One of the things about these pieces, is that it is a conviction of mine that any kind of political or social stuff is always going to be implicit in any work of art. You don't have to be bombastic and announce that. So when I first met the IT guy who had been helping me on all these pieces, I talked to him about what I wanted to do. His name, by the way, is Sean Van Every, and he's an IT guy at NYU. And he looked me right in the eye and he said, you come to the right guy. He understood completely what the social-political implications were in work like this, because he's been making apps like this for phones.

For example, he's got one that blurs out the faces of people in demonstrations, so the bad guys can't hunt them down and find them. Of course, he's not really announcing this stuff to the world. But what the hell? They know he's doing it.

So, anyway, that was just another point that I wanted to make that all of these things are - I think they're implicit in any work of art. Now, I can only aspire to making a work of art. But I know the other guys when I see them.

Peggy Weil: Such as this being accessible to anybody and anybody's view being accepted as a part of it.

Robert Whitman: Well, that and also I consider myself one of the few guys who's really democratic and a real anarchist. But if I went around saying stuff like that and had pieces that were obvious, it would just be stupid. And what you do is always put a ceiling on your work. People assume that that's what the work is about, and you hope that that's included in what the work is about. That's the literary part.

Peggy Weil: Does this relate also to the tension between not telling the audience what to do and directing them to make sure they follow this directed walk or this intention of yours?

Robert Whitman: Yeah, well, that's sort of a sticky wicket for me personally. I really hate giving directions even in the regular performances. I wait and hope that the person is going to find the same thing to admire in this ordinary activity that I do. I'm going to hope that they can find it and provide them the opportunity to look and find it. As I say, it just goes against me to tell anybody. But I do. Or maybe I said, do you want to do this?

Peggy Weil: So an example of this that I found interesting was an earlier piece where you took people on these directed walks through a series of spaces that you

altered in advance, in the piers of Manhattan. Maybe you could describe this piece, *Architecture*.

Robert Whitman: Well, one of the things that I've also done is I either use a natural space that I find or make a specific space for the piece that fits with the image of the piece. And in this case I had been walking around these piers in Lower Manhattan for a long time just for my own edification. One of the things about using space as part of your vocabulary is that each shape of space and the stuff in it evokes another kind of part of your psychic world.

I'll just give a brief description of this particular piece. I made this piece - I had been walking around for a long time, and I always consider these things important. But I had come back from participating in a piece that cost a lot of money. And that's what the young people wanted to hear about. And I thought, that's really not what I do. It's not what I think is important.

So I made this piece, and I budgeted myself \$25, but I forgot - because it was so cold, I had to buy a bottle of whiskey to warm the troops because they were really cold - one guy actually got blue. I had to take him home and give him a warm bath after.

But, anyway, this was a piece on the piers that existed in those days in Lower Manhattan. And it started out walking along one pier at night. And there was a pile about six-feet high in the center of the pier of rubble. And the pile was so big and profound, there was even a car embedded in this pile of rubble. And the roof was scattered broken. So you could see the sky through it. The sky in Manhattan on a clear night is pretty brilliant, and you could see stuff through the roof.

And at the very end of the pier there was New Jersey and the lights of New Jersey. It was on the Hudson. As people got to the end, there were these remnants, and you don't

know how this stuff got there, but you can imagine it's so beautiful, of a whole marble interior. There were mantelpieces. There were window frame lintels and all this marble stuff like white bones in this light and then the lights of New Jersey beyond that.

We walked around, come back to the other end of the pier, and there was a stairway going up. And it goes up, and it opens into an absolutely square room, a cube room. And you can only think and imagine what kind of a different space that is from this long extended pier with all this stuff in it, and then you come to a clean cubical room. You walk out of that into another room that was full of cubbyholes. There were maybe 1,000 cubbyholes in this room. And then out of that into another room which is very long, and at the end of that room two safes, big giant safes.

And I made some stairs, so we could step up, go out a window, across a roof, into the old abandoned Hoboken Ferry Terminal. And you end up on a kind of a mezzanine floor and walk around where these beautiful stairways were. And we had some stuff rigged. The sound in this case (\$25 bucks remember?) was a Walkman that was suspended from the ceiling in the middle of the space. And then I had some shadows projected on some windows that were at the opposite end from where the audience was looking. So there were shadows of different objects that I had somehow - I can't quite remember what they were. I probably still have them.

And then at some point we lit the covering of the window that the things were being projected on, the shadows, on fire. So it kind of burnt up. And then people exited down the stairs and out into the street. Anyway, that's an example of what? Walking around the town.

Peggy Weil: But this was a space that you discovered ahead of time, correct?
The safes were there, and the marble was there.

Robert Whitman: Yeah.

Peggy Weil: But you facilitated a tour through this area that really sounds very modern, akin to the more recent City Games and ARGs.

Robert Whitman: I had a really great one in Leeds. Walter's the kind of guy who gets it because you have a rhythm of spaces that you take people through and what you see in the shape of it and different things.

Peggy Weil: So is this a performance that can be repeated or a one-time event? It's often noted that most of the performance artists in the 60's intended their works to be ephemeral, one time only events: "Happenings" that only happened once. In contrast, your works were documented so that they could be repeated. *Architecture* sounds like it would be difficult to repeat because it was very site and event specific. But certainly the *NEWS* and *Local Reports* performances are documented with a sort of notation; in fact you make a point on the website, providing a section with instructions on "How to conduct your own local report." That was really very unusual at that time.

Robert Whitman: I got Sean to write that and the sound guy to write that because I thought it was important, I don't know, for people to read stuff and then realize it's not special. They can do it. Nobody's going to do it, but they can. I remember very early on - this woman was kind of excited about the work and wanted the information. "How could I get this piece?" And it was a complicated piece. And I said, "Oh, okay, you can have it. I'll get you the plans."

I didn't realize it at the time, but I do now, that I couldn't have done anything more to throw cold water on her idea of getting this piece than tell her she could have the plans and have it made, and it wouldn't cost her a penny except manufacturing the piece.

Peggy Weil: It puts your work in this interesting space between performance and stage work; something that is notated, like a play.

Robert Whitman: Well, I'm comfortable doing any of those things if I feel the need. But one of the things that thread what we're talking about is that at the very least, people can see what they want to, and people will not be able to see everything. So it's important to make relationships that are different from one another. But the overall image will end up usually having the same tone or essence for everybody. They have the same kind of psychic properties.

So now we could show - can we show the piece that was at Montclair, *SWIM*? I just got to get more current.

Peggy Weil: Yes, I promised we wouldn't be nostalgic.

Robert Whitman: I don't even know what that word means anymore.

Michael Govan: No, I don't either. But perhaps you could talk about the ghost.

Robert Whitman: Which ghost?

Michael Govan: In Osaka the ghost that was going to be at the piers and the parable of the mirrors.

Robert Whitman: Oh, yeah.

Peggy Weil: The *Ghost Interval*.

Robert Whitman: Well, I have a piece called that. What was I thinking about? It was possible for us to make a large spherical dome. And the property of the sphere, one of

the properties that's mirrored is it will make what's called a real image. Now, a real image is what ends up on a piece of film through a lens. It's not a virtual image. It's what you see in a mirror.

So if you have a spherical mirror, depending on the shape of it, the actual image will hang in space in front like a ghost. Now, you can see this sometimes, like in something simple thing that you're not used to looking at in this exact way. Like a soup spoon, you'll notice the image is not resting or being reflected in the back of the surface of the spoon. It's hanging there in the space of the spoon. You can touch it, put your finger through it. That was what happened in this dome.

But the other interesting thing was that no two people could see the same thing. So what you see is a whole bunch of other people if you're just there alone or with people and nothing going on like in the way of a piece. What you see is everybody hanging upside down in a space, and if you get high enough, you could reach up and touch them. You could touch yourself. But the other guy isn't going to see that. He's going to see something completely different, which I think is the kind of cool stuff that you can do with this stuff.

Peggy Weil: I believe there was an array associated with the ghost?

Robert Whitman: Oh, you're talking about those things. Yeah. That was in the piece that was also in Osaka. That was the LACMA piece. And that was even more interesting because that came about because we couldn't do something way more interesting. I had been working with a guy who did optics. And if you do enough messing with looking at stuff with your eyes in odd optical situations, you realize that a lot of the functions of your eyes are psychological. I asked John (Forkner) for example, to make me something I tried to describe - I said, "I think I saw something, but I know I didn't because I don't think it's possible. But just in case make me one."

I want to see the position of objects in space reversed, so that even though these things are - this is actually closer to me than that. I want to see this be further away from me than that. So he went home, and he reinvented something called the Wheatstone pseudoscope, which was originally invented by this physicist Wheatstone, the Wheatstone Bridge guy. And what that did was reverse the parallax of your eyes because that's one of the ways we see space, perceive it. And so you do that, and it actually worked. But that was a psychological event.

If you wore this device for, let's say, a couple weeks, your brain would fix it so you would see things normally again. So John was such a genius, a great guy. He said, "I know you can do it for real. Physically you can make this happen because it's like what the other side of a laser does." So he invented an array of tiny corner reflectors. Well, he didn't invent them. But the property of a corner reflector is that all the light that goes into it comes back from it and hits the surface from where it came.

So let's say your face, if you have an array of corner reflectors, all the light that went into it off your face would come back and rest on your face like a mask. And the only way you could see this if you could move backward faster than the speed of light. It's such an interesting thing that happened. The question is, how do you get to see this?

Well, so you have your array of corner reflectors, and you put a beam splitter, which is like a half-mirror, at a 45-degree angle. So only half of the light is going to come back to your face if you're using a face as an image. Psychologically, that's both the most interesting and the most difficult to perceive for the viewer.

But, anyway, half of it is going to come back to your face. The other half is going to go out at a 45-degree angle and hang there in space and be visible in space at the same distance as your face was, but it will be out here. So another guy over there can look

and see your face hanging there. If you think about your face and all the spaces being reversed, it means your eyeglasses are going to be sunken into your head. Your eyes are going to be in front of your eyeglasses. And all of these things are movable because you're moving. So you have a movable void, and your nose is going in. It's really weird.

So what happened, we showed this to people like Maurice (Tuchman), and they said, "Well, I don't get it. It's weird. It looks different, but I don't understand what's going on." They refused to accept this impossible idea that they were seeing things inside out and reversed like that. It's psychologically really hard to accept something that you have never seen before. You want to justify it in terms of what your assumptions are about what's real.

So, anyway, that was curious. This is going back to what you were talking about. So the end of it was, because that was such an expensive, ambitious project to make, because the optics of corner reflectors are so expensive, and we couldn't get enough of them.

They were being made at the time for the military. Let's say the helicopter is shining a light down looking for guys they're trying to rescue. Well, if a guy's got one of these things, it doesn't matter how he puts it in the light, it will go back at the helicopter. He doesn't have to aim it or be precise. It'll go back by itself. So that was the reason for these things.

So we made a much clumsier and bigger array that was part of this installation, so that when you're in there, even though there might be other people, four or five other people in the same room, the only face you saw was yours. Very good for people who are like ego-involved people. Anyway, that was that piece.

Peggy Weil We'll segue just briefly before questions to your most recent work. You were commissioned by Jed Wheeler at Montclair University to create a piece that would be accessible to the blind.

Robert Whitman: Right.

Peggy Weil Can you comment on how that appealed to you - given that most of your previous work privileges the visual sense?

Robert Whitman: Well, my feeling was I thought it was kind of interesting. I said, "Jed, I think I'm the only guy in the world you'd ask to do this and probably the only guy that thinks, what a great idea." And for me it was especially difficult because you would have to do a lot of thinking of the ordinary kind. You don't want to patronize anybody who's blind. You don't want to not do what you do anyway.

So we ended up figuring out - I did a bunch of stuff that I would ordinarily do and just included the stuff that I would ordinarily do that would be accessible for blind people. I have done pieces with smells before, so we had a lot of smell stuff in this piece. We moved sound around the space. And in the course of this, it was for me very interesting. I did meet somebody who was blind who consulted. And basically their consultation consisted of stuff that I didn't have to do for the sighted people.

In other words, one of the images that I had was a subway pulling into a station on one side of the space and pulling out on the other side of the space. Now, everybody who's ridden a subway - in where we are, I don't know about in L.A. - but everybody knows what a subway sounds like. And, of course, I had planned on shooting video of the subway. And that's when she said, "Well, you don't have to do that. The sighted people are going to know that train's coming into the station and going out." Of course I didn't have to do it. So we had a few events like that.

There's a sound in this piece. Just play it. Play the sound so we hear the sound. So she just said, "I don't know what that is." That's the sound. You can hear the tinkle of the ice going into the glass. She could recognize that sound. And slowly - you can see the film is being shot in slow motion. That's what happens to the sound when you shoot it in slow motion. So it lowers the pitch and has a completely different quality. That's what she couldn't understand. But with the lead-in with the normal tinkles, she figured that out. So that transition made sense to her as a way we could have that image be accessible to somebody who couldn't see.

Peggy Weil: Some of the other sound, as I recall, in the piece - includes a washing machine.

Robert Whitman: Well, I did do something that I don't do. Somebody interviewed me about this piece, and he said, "What would your younger self think of this piece?" And I said, "Oh, boy, I think my younger self would've thought the piece might be a little too linear." And I decided to go with that anyway, partly because very early on I took an image out of a piece because I was horrified by what it was, and I didn't want people to be weirded out. And I said, "No, it's part of the piece. I can't not do it. I'm stuck, and I don't care what people think - it's just going to be a problem, and it was a problem. And I did lose friends, and it did cost me something. But I couldn't not put that in."

Peggy Weil: What piece? What part?

Robert Whitman: I'm not going to talk about it. It's distracting, and it's a minor part of the piece. Any of you have questions?

Audience: I just wanted to say, it's interesting. As you were narrating some of the early pieces again, and we're sitting here in this Art and Technology lab. I don't

know what art and technology means either. It's such a red herring. It's completely ridiculous. So I'm interested in, one, you saying you don't know what it means, meaning there's something behind that. You don't know what it means. Like it pretends it's seamless that there's something there and isn't, so I'm curious about that.

Robert Whitman: Well, the name of Art and Technology, the Experiments in Art and Technology, E.A.T., didn't come about from any of us. It came about from the lawyers who were suddenly confronted with it. They had to come up with a name for a foundation, and they didn't have anything to fall back on, and they didn't have the ability to call anybody else. So they came up with the Experiments in Art and Technology. And it's a little bit like how these ideas acquire a life of their own, and there's no stopping it. You can't get your finger out of the dam even though it's cracking and exploding in front of you.

It's a little bit like Happenings. Because that word came about in much the same way. Allan Kaprow used it in the title of a piece. The guy who was the boyfriend of the gallery person was an advertising guy and said, "That's a great word. For the next years of performances why don't you call them Happenings?" So it's a word that only Allan used. I called my stuff performance and a bunch of other stuff. Red called his stuff plays.

Peggy Weil: Red Grooms.

Robert Whitman: Yeah. I don't know what Claes (*Oldenburg*) used. But, as I say, Allan was the only one who used the word. So there we were, blown out by this hand grenade, this jargon hand grenade.

Peggy Weil: I think you also made the point that E.A.T. was fundamentally about fostering collaboration; not necessarily only with engineers, but you and others also went out and looked at collaborations with psychologists or teachers.

Robert Whitman: Well, we had that idea, and we did some projects. We made millions of proposals out in the community that got zero response. We hardly got to do anything. We just made a lot of proposals that year. And some of them were terrific.

Peggy Weil: Where are those proposals?

Robert Whitman: I don't know. They may be in the archives at Getty.

Peggy Weil: That would be interesting.

Robert Whitman: So I don't know. We had a lot of fun but didn't get a chance to do much. I can talk about one we considered an E.A.T. project. But on the surface it's only because of the way it involved a bunch of generous people, and that's really the key. Sometimes you get a lot of people committed because it's more fun than anything else they're doing. And the *9 Evenings* thing happened that way. Thousands and thousands of donated man-hours, you couldn't buy that stuff, by really smart, gifted people. But you could see the coherence in this kind of project.

Billy (*Kluver*) and I were trying to figure out a way to get funding, which, for people who don't have any money, this is an ongoing discussion, making something. So we wanted to do a publishing project of some kind, and we wanted to get money for it. And I came across something in an article published in one of these magazines that they send out to foundations about how to get dough.

And it had to do with something called Treasury Funds, where if you were able to give the government something of value, they would give that back to the foundation in money, so the foundation could do their project with that money. So if you had a forest, and you gave it to the government, they would give you the money for that forest, and

you could do your project. Well, or any other thing. You got a bunch of old cars. You got to know what the government wants.

So we said, we don't have any of that stuff. But what we do have is the ability to talk to artists and dealers. In those days they were much more friendly and generous than I sense they are today. I don't know that for a fact. I just have that feeling. So we had Pontus Hulten, who in those days was the preeminent curator and director and champion of modern American art. He had already managed to get Bob Rauschenberg's *Monogram* and some other important pieces for the Modern Museum in Stockholm.

So Pontus picked the collection. And we got the dealers to agree that we'd give this collection to the government, our government, and they would have thirty works of art by the major American artists of 1970 or thereabouts, the '70s, I can't remember when it took place, a little later on. And so we rounded up all this stuff.

Now, you can't imagine today if you're thinking about a collection that includes a Rauschenberg, an Andy (*Warhol*), a George Segal, Claes, Jimmy Dine, Larry Rivers, Larry Poons, anybody who could handle that. So we rounded up all this stuff. Nowadays it's like you couldn't touch this for a billion dollars. And we got a big fat no. Can you imagine? It was a gift, and we got a no.

Michael Govan: Do you have a copy of that letter?

Robert Whitman: No, they never send you back anything in writing. Nobody wants their fingerprints on this. We discovered this. So our idea was, wouldn't it be wonderful if some museum - in those days museums didn't have big collections of this quality. They just didn't have it in places like Ohio or Iowa or wherever. It didn't exist. So in the great tradition of 'don't get mad at - get mad and do' the project, Pontus got the Swedes

to pony up \$100,000, which was considerable in those days. Then we spoke to the artists, and we got all these artists to agree, even Walter (*De Maria*), Saul (*LeWitt*), all of them agreed to make a one-hit silkscreen, so we could make a folio of all these guys and sell it to raise money for the project. And at this point it became the New York Collection for Stockholm. So this all came about. All these artists made these silkscreens and the folio, and I think Bob put up a lot of the money - he bought a lot of them, Bob Rauschenberg.

So the project got done. The collection ended up in Stockholm. And among other things that happened, there were two things that were interesting. There was a great reception at the foreign embassy. And Olaf Palme, the Prime Minister, spoke - a liberal prime minister in those days. There was something else that was happening, which is that prior to the Vietnam War there was a lot of anti-American feeling in Sweden. We like to think that the collection sort of opened the door for something going on.

Other people who spoke at this big reception, including Nancy Hanks, who was a good person and in those days president of the National Endowment, a Rockefeller person, and a different quality of person than what you occasionally see surface these days in foundations for the arts. And she talked and said, "We had nothing to do with this." And John Brademas, who was a congressman friendly to the arts in those days, said also, "We had nothing to do with this." So you could see the kind of support we got.

But meanwhile Stockholm ends up with this great collection of all this great stuff. So this comes back to the type of project, an E.A.T. project that involved different communities and a certain kind of collaboration and generosity. It's all part of the stuff you can garner if it's very clear what your agenda is and it's pure. And most artists are very happy to be on the side of the gods if you give them a chance.

Audience: I've been struck when you were describing some of your early work how much you would leave open to chance. It seems like you kind of didn't want to have control sort of of what people would be reporting or what they were saying. You didn't want to give people directions, which artists usually have a very specific idea of what they want it all to be. And I was wondering if that - how that worked out for you.

Robert Whitman: Well, what you do is if, I could define the format in such a way that, I'm going to call them participant for lack of a better word - is agreeing to that. It's like a little handshake agreement that their participation is going to be in this format, and you can count on the image that ultimately gets made being consistent with what you have in mind. It will be that. And it might be better than what you had in mind. It might be richer. And it might be less predictable. It might be more fun for me.

And since I've read these reports as poetry, and I'm going, "I'll be darned. These people are terrific." They didn't know it. Once in a while you get somebody who has a political idea, and they want to express that. But that's part of the stuff that happens in your world that intrudes on it.

Audience: You spoke about using phone booths back in the day, and so that was the technology at the time, but you used it in a revolutionary way in a way that was predictive of our current social networks. So I wonder what you think of what's happening in our culture now online in terms of Twitter, Facebook, and the connectivity of the Web and how you would use the existing technology today to do something innovative.

Robert Whitman: Well, those things I don't know anything about. I'm leery of this person. It's nothing to do with me, because I don't know them and I'm nervous about - actually, I'm nervous about Big Brother getting ahold of what's lurking out there. That's what I'm nervous about and using this material in a way that I can't predict or that the

people who use this stuff can't predict. Also I'm also nervous, but I shouldn't be, because it's the same kind of nervousness that that all people express when they didn't want their kids reading comic books, that it was going to corrupt their minds.

I don't know because a comic book you can only read for a little bit, but it seems to me a lot of people spend a lot of time with these things, and maybe more time than they should. You go to a restaurant sometimes, and you see people doing this instead of talking to each other. See, from my perspective, because I'm antique, and I don't understand these new things. They're coming too fast for me. Does that help?

Audience: That helps, yes. It's good to hear your perspective.

Robert Whitman: People ask me to join these things, and it's a different world than it was. I'm still nervous about certain things. My son is nervous and doesn't say things on the telephone, because after many years of being kind of an activist and a prisoners' rights guy, he's nervous about his phone being tapped, stuff like that, and I think with good reason.

Audience: You can always count on the big guy.

Robert Whitman: We sort of count on it when we talk. But once in a while if you're talking casually, you get indiscreet.

Audience: It's just interesting looking back on your projects from earlier on that now there's so many communications coming in real time, like the Arab Spring and reports have happened in real time.

Robert Whitman: Yeah, those are terrific things.

Audience: And back when you were doing the phone booth project, it seemed like you were presaging that. You had this real-time perspective on the city that you were fostering then.

Robert Whitman: Well, that's a little bit like this. Sean understood this right away, and that's why he said, "You've come to the right guy."

Audience: Is there a piece or a project that you haven't been able to realize yet that sticks with you?

Robert Whitman: Well, I like the idea of doing things that are the same piece, but you can put them in different places. So I wrote a piece where the images are created, let's say, in ten different places, and they don't even have to be in the same city. But using these media you can pretty much present each of the sites where the images are created with the images that are coming from all the other sites. And so you have this community of communities almost, different things.

So for a piece like this that I did a couple years ago: one part of it took place at this theatre at Montclair State, which is a very professional, well-equipped, professionally run theatre, and the other at a park on the Hudson and Beacon. And so the images that we used - some of the images you can't have in a theatre. We could send them over the Internet (whatever Sean does, and you probably could explain that) and likewise back from Montclair to Beacon and then the site on the park. You can't have a burning boat in a theatre in Montclair. But you can have it on the Hudson River being rode by the audience. So that would be one example. We had a horse at Beacon, and that was sent back. And other stuff happened in the theatre that we couldn't have in a park.

So the idea for me is to make a piece. I proposed this piece, and I realized that the people to whom I was proposing it, they kind of go, "yeah, yeah, yeah" but they don't

understand how much work these things take. Or, like to take place this summer, I would have had to start a month ago. But this piece had a bunch of different images, different cities in Austria, and I just thought it would've been fun. And at that time I was counting on my friend Sean being in Germany at the same time, not far away, so we had access to a brain that could think. Not just me. But I'm sure that I'll come up with something else. The best idea is to be cheap. These are expensive and time consuming. I need more help from you guys.

Audience: Why didn't you take that to Washington?

Robert Whitman: This is a nice transition. This is what? My linear transition. Can you move it to the next image (*of SWIM*)? You go from that washing machine - to the sound of an echocardiogram.

Peggy Weil: Which is being done live onstage as you can see, so it's a live echocardiogram onstage.

Robert Whitman: Well, I would be lying if I said it was live - it was supposed to be live. This one didn't quite work. We had to do something.

Peggy Weil: What appears to be live..

Robert Whitman: Yeah. But that's a real image of a heart. It happened that one of the participants in this piece had twenty years of medical experience, so we had all their students helping out. And she was in her 50s, and she looked at this, and she said, that's not a healthy heart.

Peggy Weil: But do you know whose heart that was?

Robert Whitman: No. This is an image of my grand daughter. I haven't seen this. I want to see this. She wrote that song when she was six. I didn't realize it took her this long to get onstage. That's her at age ten singing the same song that she wrote at six. She wasn't expecting the applause.

Michael Govan: Obviously a lot of your work is about human beings. It's about perception, how we feel, see, interact, the texture of things. It's very intuitive. It is. I know you are against that kind of analytical thinking that will -

Robert Whitman: That's your job.

Michael Govan: But you have always seized upon these tools of technology, whether it's a telephone that's meant to connect people seamlessly one-on-one, and you've used it in a disruptive way to create a more Cubist composition, if you will. You've looked at reflectors, so that they'll create a ghost image or mirror, so they see things backwards, or you're reversing things, the lasers. You do seem to seize upon these kind of technological tools, and I know they were everywhere.

There was an optimism in the late '60s and the early '70s about what would come of all this stuff. And I know that you don't have such an optimistic view in that sense of the tools themselves. And I'm wondering whether a little bit of your using these tools in a disruptive way, the way they weren't necessarily meant to be used, is a little bit a counter-reaction to the kind of maybe over-optimistic view about what all this would mean for humanity.

Robert Whitman: I think you've got to have the right guy that you're talking to who will tell you the tools that you could use that are out there that can make the image that you're interested in making. One of the things that happens is sometimes an engineer has an aesthetic of their own that's subconscious, and they won't tell you all of the

things, the stuff they're involved in or that they know you can use, because they don't think that's a proper use. They might have an authentic take. They want it to be used the way they want it to be used. They have an agenda of their own, an aesthetic.

But I like the idea of being able to say, how can we make this happen if you want to see it? And if you get the right guy he'll say, well, I think you can do it this way, or you might be able to - some people have another idea. So the laser was kind of lucky in that same thing. You want to draw a line around space. Well, you can think of mechanical ways to do that like moving something around a space or something. But the laser's much cooler, and they had that technology at the time.

The technology is changing. It's so interesting. One of the images that I tried to use with the piece in *9 Evenings* was semi-successful, but only in the crudest way if you told somebody what was happening. I wanted somebody to point at something and have the image of that something appear on the screen.

Now, at that time the way to do it was to have the performer have a TV camera that's about as big as that strapped to their back with some fiber optics that went down their sleeve with an actual lens on the end of the fiber optics with a camera lens and could point at something and get something that resembled the thing he was pointing at.

Now, let's see, any of you who have experienced modern medical science, they have these various scopes that can look in weird places.

Michael Govan: Right.

Robert Whitman: You know about that.

Michael Govan: Yeah.

Robert Whitman: Oh, Jesus. And one of my doctors said, yeah, it's terrific. Look what I can do. And he took me for a demonstration of this thing, and this little tiny camera can get the whole room and clear and doesn't have to look down your throat or other places.

Michael Govan: I have to say, I don't know if all of you have had a chance to see enough of Bob's work. We actually had the laser at Dia, and I've had a chance to see a number of works. But what's interesting is that you are an image maker in this way that is so different from the idea of some kind of iconic image that everybody recognizes the same way and sort of points to a thing. But you're an image maker, and that's why I like the ghost story, those mirrors, those kinds of images so much, because that even when you were describing everybody sees it a different way, even though it's this very ghostly, unexpected image, and you have this power to make images, and I think that's what you love about your own images, is that they become unexpected, surprising.

Robert Whitman: Yeah, if I get lucky, yeah.

Male Voice: And that the same image is seen purposefully in different ways by different people. And that's a rare approach to an artwork. Most artists make an image so that everybody will recognize what it means in a similar way. Not that there isn't something that brings everyone's experience together with your works, but it's a unique way of making images and artworks. And I've always loved it.

Robert Whitman: Well, thank you. How nice.

Michael Govan: So we'll have to bring some of your work here. We'll work on it. So, anyway, thank you, Bob

Peggy Weil: Thank you.

End of recording.