

# Human Inertia and Cell Phone Conversations

*Inertia* Stichting Grensgevallen, i.s.m. W139

6 September 2008

Rob van Gerwen  
Departement Philosophy  
Utrecht University  
[www.phil.uu.nl/~rob](http://www.phil.uu.nl/~rob)

September 18, 2008

## Preface

Cellular, or mobile phones are great: they allow people to communicate over long distances whenever and wherever they are, and instantaneously at that when the one called is wearing one too. Having said that, though, it must immediately be added that they, also, have a complex disadvantage, and it is one we are hard pushed to understand. In fact, due to its complexity people simply tend to neglect it, even though everyone in his right mind has had experience with it.

Now Walter Benjamin defined aura as “a distance however close it may be”.<sup>1)</sup> This has standardly been interpreted as a characterisation of an experience of presence, also by Benjamin. This aura supposedly suffered from the rise of photography. Aura can, also, be understood as inertia, the absence of something present. And whether aura is gone or widespread I gladly leave to more speculative-minded thinkers.

I submit that we experience a person’s “aura”—her distance however close she may be—when perception tells us the person is present yet our mind realises that she isn’t. I am referring here to the observation had of another person engaged in a cell phone conversation. The inertia of the cell phone caller consists in her incapacity to address those who observe her. I think there is an immoral streak to her self-appointed moral autonomy.

In a previous edition of this Dutch-Russian exchange on inertia I argued that our trafficking with facial expressions forms the model with which we’d best understand the workings of art—facial expression is the anthropological foundation of art. My discussion, today, of the cell phone conversation is meant to add to that previous suggestion.

## 1 What preceded my argument

Two years ago in St. Petersburg, I made a point of comparing art with faces, or more precise: the significance of a work of art with the meaning of facial expression. I did this with an eye on explaining the nature of inertia in art. The title of my presentation at that opportunity, was: “Inertia belongs to art like death belongs to life.” Overall, I argued that a face is never just something you can observe objectively: seeing a face always immediately involves looking at a person, and most importantly: the person looking back at you. Getting to grips with someone’s facial expression is always a reciprocal process, a process of reciprocating gazes. If you are sceptical about my thesis, you might want to test it by observing someone in this room. You’ll probably find that this is not really possible . . . unless, perhaps, the other is already very familiar with you: your son might tolerate your gaze, your partner might, but an acquaintance? A stranger?

In St. Petersburg, I then argued two things: one is that the moment a person dies, her face instantly becomes observable—one can intently watch a deceased person’s face. However, there is a downside to this freshly acquired capability, because what one gets from a dead face is in no way as informing about the person deceased as looking at her face was while she was still alive. A dead face is inert.<sup>2)</sup> Yet a dead face is not absolutely inert, as it will still carry some memories for us. A living face though never is inert—though an animal might look upon it as inert, as mere edible matter. When you look at someone they’ll look back, or, at best avert their gaze—which, of course, is a response too.<sup>3)</sup>

The second point consisted in the actual comparison with art. Works of art start from material which in itself is inert, such as objects, or paint, stone, sand, and this inert material is then made meaningful through the interventions of the artist. The morale of the comparison of works with faces is this, that faces are a natural kind: people cannot *not* express themselves in their faces, whereas works of art are artefacts: indeed, some works of art fail to be expressive because they lack artistic merit, while others explicitly refuse to express, or to convey a meaning.

The fact that works are made, means that their makers will always be aware of their challenge: to bring inert material to live, or to fail to do that, or, most interestingly: to downright refuse it. But the challenge is as ancient as mankind. Performance art, far from disproving my point—which it might seem to be doing in as far as its material consists of a real person, who is by nature expressive—in fact supports it. A performance artist will be puzzled about where her person stops and her art begins. And that is the exact same challenge.

Hence my thesis in St. Petersburg that inertia belongs to art *as its negative*, like death belongs to life.

Now Marcel Duchamp would take artefacts home and observe them in an effort to find no meaning in them: he would look for inert objects, and those he would

exhibit as his readymades. We know how hard it is to pick meaningless objects, and we easily understand why, as well: animals perceive only what they succeed in attributing meaning to. Duchamp's effort was interesting exactly because of its paradox nature: try to exhibit a work of art that is totally devoid of meaning, that does not address its ever beholder, one that is fully inert. The effort was dead-born. Yet it was essential for art as a whole, as it points to the very basic challenge of art and artists: how do things and stuff generally acquire meaning?

My interest in inertia is in the possibility for it to occur and not be destroyed *by mere observation*. Today, I want to take my comparison of art with facial expression, a little further by looking at another moment of inertia in human lives, occurring while the observed is still alive—and I don't mean a sleeping person, though he too can be observed, but someone engaged in a cell-phone conversation.

## 2 Cell-phone Autonomy

What to think of the following incident which occurred a couple of months ago:

*“Dutch student, Bart Veth (19), disappeared under the eyes of a friend having a cell phone conversation. January 7, 2008, 4.30 AM, Rotterdam student Bart Veth (19) walks home with a roommate after a party at student company Sanctus Laurentius. The roommate answers his cell phone and embarks in an animated conversation, after the ending of which he looks around to find Bart gone. He shrugs his shoulders, assuming that Bart simply took off home, probably through another route, and walks on. To date, at the moment of this writing, January 24 2008, [two weeks after the event] Bart has not resurfaced.”<sup>4)</sup>*

Imagine the events that led to Bart Veth's disappearance. His roommate is standing next to him but fails to notice what happens to Bart . . . because he is having a cell phone conversation.

If there is a situation that might count as a typical moral situation, it is this: two friends strolling together after a night out, when one of them gets hurt, say because a group of youngsters attacks him, and this happens in the other's physical presence. Such a situation would count as typical because on any moral theory—any that I know of, at least—the witness ought to assist his molested friend and his help is indeed possible.<sup>5)</sup> What would we say if in this typical situation our witness willingly were to avert his eyes, preventing his conscience or sense of duty from surfacing?

What then, are we to think of the caller's behaviour—his failure to notice, let alone assist his friend—in the cell-phone situation quoted above?<sup>6)</sup> Any viable moral theory should be troubled by this acute failure to comply to an obligation, and, hence, the witness's implication in the aggression. Moral theory might also be

troubled by the way cell phones change the way people are present to one another, and the immoral effects thereof. Why wouldn't they be troubled by such moral indifference? To understand why the cell phone removes the moral agent from the paradigm moral situation, art practice may show the way.

Perhaps at this point one wants to object that this situation is not typical for mobile phones but pertains to fixed phones as well. Some of it does, indeed, but fixed phones are always in a particular place, and normally, when not necessarily, someone who embarks on a fixed phone conversation, either by calling someone, or by picking up the phone when it rings, will have to walk some distance to another place then where he is having a conversation with other people. More naturally, in such cases, one will excuse oneself for walking away. The location of the fixed phone is often at a distance from where it might disturb any real interactions.

### 3 Cell-phones and art

Cell-phone disturbances have the stature typical of an art form. As with actors on a stage, if one observes another person's cell-phone conversation one is not primarily interested in the person of the caller, but in the characters implied in the conversation. Through the satellite, the real person of the caller has travelled to a far away reality—which might, for that matter, be just around the corner. His body is there to be perceived by you, yet he does not communicate with you, but with someone absent. One perceives his body, but this body does not move meaningfully, expressively, but, rather aimlessly, and allows the other to shamelessly observe it intently—if “allowing” is the right word for the caller's indifference. The body of the caller becomes the medium of meanings which the observer is invited to conjecture about. But the caller did not invite the other to embark in this interpretation, it is the phenomenology of the cell-phone conversation which both removes the caller from the moral situation he is in, and invites others to listen in on the conversation as if it were art.

Listeners are curious to get to grips with these meanings, and are capable to, because, typically, the cell-phone conversation makes ample use of suggestive mechanisms. Not only does it leave out the other half of the conversation, the one that is spoken at the other end of the line, also, what we do hear is responsive to the absent part, thus adding intimations of it. Cell-phone conversations are as exciting as the average Hitchcock film, for the stuff they suggest but don't show. Representation by modal ellipsis, intimation. On top, this “art form” is accompanied by a theatrical speech, a calling for the attention of the audience. It produces its own audience. The cell-phone escapes its everyday context by disguising as art.

The powers of a person to do something to the other persons present are reduced to what is allowed by cell phones, consisting exclusively in the sounds one makes by

talking in one. Yet these sounds are not directed at anyone in one's near vicinity. All the rest of one's presence is removed from one. Cell phones remove a person from the everyday typical moral situation he is in. Cell phone conversations tamper with people's sense of mutual presence, but not by conscious design, but accidentally, as a side-effect of this technology. Due to it, cell callers simply forget the proper moral recognition of the other.<sup>7)</sup>

Just like art, cell phone conversations place themselves outside morality. And so do the people who are engaged in them. Yet, unlike art practice, cell phone conversations do not straightforwardly legitimate the moral autonomy they claim (technologically). Unlike in art, here this claim is not compensated for socially, but individually: the individual caller gains a social (distal) network through his cell phone behaviour, at the expense of interacting with the real (i.e. perceptually real) people who surround him. Thus, a vulnerable social network is replaced by a socially secondary one at the expense of embodied human interaction. It is like pornography replacing sexuality. Art, in contrast, merits its autonomy—as follows: within art practice, much more is allowed than in everyday life. What this, art's autonomy, means is that art holds an exceptional position within morality. This we sometimes describe by saying that art stands outside of morality. We are frequently troubled by art's moral exemption though, and this is a good thing. There would be something wrong if we weren't troubled by art's autonomy. And much contemporary art that expresses an apparently immoral streak, too, can be seen to concern art's autonomy—in an effort to inspect the borders between art and morality. (Such immoral art stirs the moral intuitions that people appear to have forgotten about.)

## 4 Inertia revisited

In regard to the cell phone “inertia” adds two properties: on *the passive side* one finds is a rise in observability with no responsive reciprocity, one might call it an objectification of persons; the effect in human activity is the lessening of the intentional structure of the resultant, extended agency: there is far less left for interpretation in a cell phone conversation than we might get from being with a person and her facial expression. “People become inert” means: they show themselves to be the object of an objectifying gaze, and willingly so; and they set off neglecting the presence of other people to their embodied perception. Where art is concerned with how material garners meaning, cell phones can be viewed to form global culture's response: a diminishing of persons' significance.

What would a phenomenological description be like of *the active aspect*, a person's awareness whilst talking in her cell phone? Well, she would register what goes on in her direct surroundings—she maybe assumes, that, when something would happen further away it would send some wave of recognition that will affect people in

one's direct surroundings, so there is no need to look or listen into the distance. One farms out the perception of the world at a bigger remove to other people; thus one farms out one's responsibility for being part of the world. One would register events, but choose to neglect, choose not to perceive consciously, or to turn what is registered into a conscious awareness. In this, a cell caller re-educates her perceptual imagination, i.e. the role one's imagination standardly plays within one's perception, of combining the data of the senses into a coherent whole<sup>1</sup> One sees, but doesn't register.

The further consequences of this re-education show themselves in a change in people's acknowledgement of other people's presence to them. Choosing to ignore how one registers other people's presence changes people's presence to each other generally. Cell phone conversations connect one to someone absent by removing others from one's presence, by removing oneself from the social interaction with humans surrounding one.

Such is the role of the human face that when it is turned inert this introduces an immoral aspect.

Thank you for your attention.

Utrecht, September 18, 2008

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>) Benjamin 1936.

<sup>2</sup>) You can see this corroborated in the death masks that were *en vogue* in late nineteenth century.

<sup>3</sup>) One can observe another person having a conversation with someone else, though, and this, indeed complicates my thesis, because I now want to object that what one then observes is not the person but his body. One observes a person frontally, when he is allowed to respond. That obviously has a ring of non-falsifiability to it, but this circularity is baked-in in the nature of facial expression as a reciprocal process from one person to another. Without addressing this I simply assume the point made. So, if I refer to people watching humans, I mean persons looking at persons.

<sup>4</sup>) My paraphrase, after *Dagblad De Pers*, Thursday 24 January 2008, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup>) "Ought implies can". In a typical everyday situation the "can" refers to adequate perception, and the power of normal physical movements. In a cell phone conversation the "can" is tampered with, but not physically, but phenomenologically, much like it is in art practice, yet differently. In art practice, the moral "ought" is limited by the artistic attitude, in cell phone conversations the limits to the "ought" (to the "can") are such that we explicitly deny them to be available. We deem a cell phone caller fully responsible, even though in practice his powers are hindered severely. Either the concept of a fully conscious, fully rational agent must be reconceived, or the cell phone

---

<sup>1</sup> this is a transcendental description, not an empirical, temporal one: it is not the case that our imagination standardly has to infer the interrelations of these data; it all happens instantly and is introduced (here, as elsewhere) only due to theoretical needs.

caller must be exempted from the normal moral rules and constraints.

<sup>6)</sup> Is his incompetence to notice the events reason enough for us to conclude that he cannot assist, and hence cannot be obliged morally to assist?

<sup>7)</sup> A troubling corollary to the spread of cell phones is the evident rise in physical negligence in its wake. Even when people are not engaged in cell phone conversations they can be seen to neglect others' presence. These are real changes and they pertain to vulnerable aspects of our social well-being; aspects neglected in politics and ethics alike. People may communicate more than ever, but more of this communication is filtered by media beyond their control which have effects they don't oversee; and more of it is directed at people who are absent, and in neglect of those who are present. Of course, there are advantages to these new technologies, such as video-conferencing which allows one to confer to people at the other side of the globe. But the disadvantages come creeping and unrecognised and while unstoppable and irreversible their effects have a great uprooting impact.

## References

- Benjamin, Walter. 1973 (1936). "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit." In *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, edited by Walter Benjamin, 7–64. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.