After the beep

Ring up an art exhibition that has fun with the phone

By KEVIN CONCANNON
For The Item

You have reached a professional answering machine. Its sole purpose in life is to take messages when I am indisposed to do so. Please, give this machine the gift of life and leave a message. Your words count. Wait for the tone. Thank You.

BEEP!

There's a new art exhibition open in New York's fashionable Lower East Side at the Public Image Gallery, and you can be there in the time it takes to make a phone call. The show's called "After the Beep," and it offers an unusual assortment of telephone answering machine tapes by artists and other creative contributors.

So, would you leave a message? Popular opinion seems equally divided as to whether answering machine message tapes provide a valid form of artistic expression.

Rocky Pincioti's mother has a particularly difficult time with the devices — especially those in the service of her son, who's a computer paintbox operator for video artists Mary Perillo and John Sanborn. Rocky has a habit of recycling his incoming message tapes into new cut-up answering tapes.

Mother: "Where is everybody? Somebody should be there. Where is everybody? Somebody should be there. This is your mother and I'm just calling to tell you..."

Young Woman: "Hi. It's time to play guess that sound."

Man: "Oh, I'm sorry. I must have dozed off."

Foreign man: "How about that. Pretty amazing, I think so. Don't you?"

Mother: "Where is everybody?"

Man: "If you get this message, give me a call."

Mother: "So call me. But not after midnight. OK honey?"

BEEP!

In several answer tapes by Pincioti, mother can be heard popping up repeatedly between clips from movies and other places from incoming message tapes. At one point we hear her exasperated voice: "Guess that means I can talk now. I don't know what to say now. I've just listened to myself say three things. I suppose the next time I call you I'll hear myself say four things."

Many of the messages are musical.

Chris Butler, of the rock group The Waitresses, entertains uniquely callers with his Bob Dylan impersonation.

"Well you might be Eddy Haskell or you might be Frankenstein, but you'd better leave a message so I know who's on the line. Cause me, I'm in the shower or at the grocery or out at one of those places a singing poet's s'posed to be. So if you wanna talk with me leave a message after the beep."

BEEP!

After the Beep: The Audio Art Hotline is part of Soundwave NYC, an audio art series of performances, telephone messages and "audio artifacts." The series is organized by G. Lindahl and Bill and Mary Buchen. The Buchens have enlisted the help of several friends to collect the "audio artifacts" on exhibition in New York's Public Image Gallery. The Gallery also houses the After the Beep Hotline.

Chris Butler, creator of the Dylan answer tape, has contributed a number of artifacts from his peculiar personal collection. "Jimi Hendrix's Guitar Sound" caught my attention in the program notes.

Butler explains: "I found this kit advertised in a guitar magazine circa. 1971. The ad copy said "The secret of Jimi Hendrix's guitar sound...$19.95. I figured that was a pretty good deal, so I sent in a check. It does absolutely nothing."

Other curators in the exhibition include the "Bee Gees Organ," which offers portamento, octave shift, and an internal rhythm machine with four pre-sets. The Buchens have known it to go out of tune if someone looked at it, but, for $5, figured it wasn't such a bad deal.

Artist-musician Ed Tomney has contributed his prized "Lawrence Welk Spoons of 1963" tape. "Manufactured in Santa Monica, Califonia in the sixties, these spoons were advertised as 'The International Pastime,'" brags Tomney.

The exhibition of artifacts also includes a variety of obsolete tape recorders of several types. Butler took his portable 8-track player out of mothballs for the show. He suggests that the 8-track is doubly obsolete because cassette have virtually replaced them and, as a portable player, it's been replaced by the "boom box."

If you can't make it to the Lower East Side however, you'll have the pleasure of knowing that the answering machine you're calling is the only state-of-the-art piece in the entire art exhibition. The Buchens maintain that telephone answering messages are a uniquely democratic artform. "Art is about communication, and in the 20th century electronic media is the easiest and most effective means of reaching vast audiences. The phone message medium has placed the tools for making audio art in the hands of phone machine owners."

The After the Beep Hotline entertains callers with two and a half minutes of answer tapes, changed periodically over the course of the exhibition, which runs through June 30.

You can dial up the exhibition at (212) 475-3033.