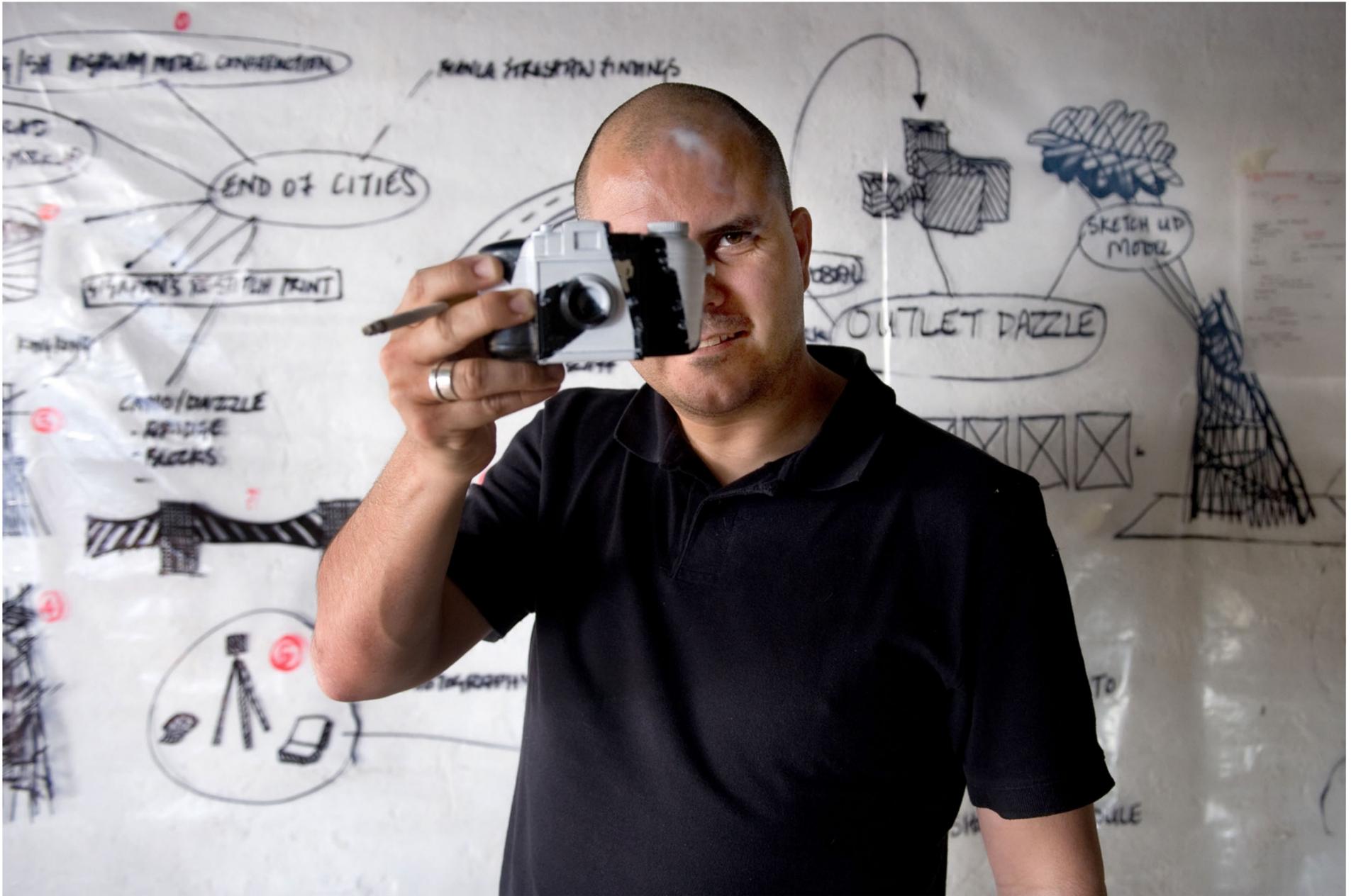




SUNDAY LIFE

YOUR WEEKEND GUIDE TO CULTURE, ENTERTAINMENT AND LEISURE



Conceptual artist Stephen Hobbs in his studio. 'I have been interested in looking at how I could go from a pure photographic source of the reflection or bounced light and really make it function,' he says of his latest project, *Dazzle*.

PICTURE: TJ LEMON

Creating the ephemeral

Artist Stephen Hobbs's fascination with the intangible has kept him at the fringes of the commercial art market, but he has reached a turning point in his career, writes **Mary Corrigan**

IN 1996 Stephen Hobbs offered a rainbow up for sale. Not a photographic, sculptural or two-dimensional representation of a rainbow but the genuine multi-coloured arc that sometimes spreads across the sky after a heavy downpour. Surprisingly, he had quite a few takers.

But this was hardly astonishing for an artist who launched his career with an ice block (presented on a stand), attracting the attention of art dealers such as Warren Siebrits and South Africa's one-time enfant terrible, Kendall Geers. Hobbs wasn't just an art prankster poking fun at the art world. Well, not completely – he was fascinated with the notion of the ephemeral and how it manifested in architecture.

His ice block may have found a buyer in the Belgian collector, Pierre Lombard, but ultimately it was a transient object that could never be claimed. But it wasn't altogether motivated by his rejection of the commodification of art. "The idea was that by the time my lecturers came round to assess my artwork, it would have melted," recalls Hobbs.

He sees a kind of poetry in the transient or that which remains physically beyond one's grasp. For him there is nothing more beguiling than that which leaves no trace. His fascination with this phenomenon ties in neatly with the conceptualist ethos that drives his practice. For the conceptual artist, ideas take precedence over the art object. Its full existence resides in the ideas that informed it.

"For the artist, the power of a

statement is as good as the artwork. For me, the significance of what I do resides in the texts and essays I write about my work because I think that is where the integrity of one's work lies – not in making the art object per se, but in questioning it," observes Hobbs.

It's an ethos that has given life to a number of cerebrally and sometimes visually startling artworks such as *54 Storeys* (1999), video footage of a trip down the inside of the Ponte Towers, once a popular site for suicides, and consequently the ideal manner in which to visually explore the darkest depths of Joburg's inner city.

Hobbs's obsession with ephemeral phenomena has also been influenced by living in Joburg, a city in a constant state of flux, and the role he has played in the regeneration of the city through managing most of its high-profile public art projects as co-director and co-founder of Trinity Sessions. Hobbs has come to resent the time and energy that the Trinity Sessions steals from his own artistic practice and how it has overshadowed his persona as an artist –

he calls it "the beast" – but it has further cemented his obsession with the fleeting quality in architecture and the urban landscape.

Involved in the regeneration of the city of Joburg, he has been able to closely observe the ebb and flow of this dynamic conurbation, concerns of which most recently featured in works such as *State* (2008), a work that captured its fluctuating nature.

Architecture is not exactly associated with the ephemeral but Hobbs has managed, through his photography, to best unearth this abstract quality, particularly in the *Mirage City* (1997) and *Auto Camouflage* (2002) series of works.

The former featured the mirrored facades of office buildings in Joburg's inner city, which reflected distorted images of adjacent buildings, reducing them to abstract motifs that appeared to defy their solidity, thus challenging their seeming permanence.

Hobbs's latest project, entitled *Dazzle*, continues this trajectory. Here he has painted the exterior walls of the Outlet Gallery in Pretoria with the *Dazzle* camouflage pat-

tern, a monochromatic one made of geometric forms that used to be painted on to warships during the two world wars. Just as was the case back then, Hobbs also intends to trick the viewer, but for him it is about challenging the gallery's architectural dimensions, obscuring its hard edges and its materiality.

"I have also been interested in looking at how I could go from a pure photographic source of the reflection or bounced light and really make it function, which for me is always there in the image that is a deconstruction or dematerialisation of architecture and a rematerialisation of it."

But as usual, there are layers of concepts belying these zebra-like buildings – concepts that relate to ephemera of a different kind: it is the unrealised visions embodied in drawings and models of buildings by pseudo architects that hold a grip on Hobbs's imagination. Instead of perceiving them as failed projects, Hobbs celebrates the grand visions that they once encapsulated. Of course, they also summon the intangible: they are buildings that only

truly exist in the imagination.

"I have always been interested in architecture that is architecture that is never realised, that remains within the realm of the visionary, and my major frame of reference is Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*, a constructivist tower built around 1919. Tatlin only ever made a 15m model.

"It was supposed to house scientists and revolutionists who would develop propaganda for the socialist movement. Tatlin always imagined that there would be a projector mounted on the top of the tower that would project propaganda films on to the underside of the clouds. Isn't that beautiful?"

"Part of the poetry of the piece for me is that, of course, it couldn't be realised. So it remains forever symbolic as a constructivist gesture to the bigger socialist revolution. Tatlin's creation is ultimately a statement, a manifesto – maybe it even brought about change."

In paying homage to Tatlin, Hobbs is also recognising the value in all the unrealised projects that artists are never able to execute.

Usually, when artists are commissioned to create work for the Outlet gallery, they concentrate their efforts on creating objects to fill the interior, and while Hobbs has created a startling object that appears like an indefinable shining object (inspired by *The Aleph*, a short story by Argentinean author Jorge Luis Borges), for the interior he has concentrated his energy on redefining and disrupting the spatial characteristics of the gallery. This is partly owing to his ongoing interest in architecture, which he says "is much more interesting than art because it's the most imperialistic art form there is", but it is also determined by his slightly anarchic tendencies.

The ephemeral nature of his often site-specific interventions has meant that he has largely remained on the fringes of the commercial art market, only finding a platform for his work in museums or non-commercial venues.

It's a path he chose because he wanted "to do things my way and on my own terms. Working with a gallery means compromise. It was a

compromise I didn't want to make. I have never felt one's art practice should be predicated on economics. In the 1990s, before there were all these galleries, we were just a whole lot of guys working in isolation and that's how I thought that things should be."

His resistance to sign up to a commercial gallery also came about when the close relationships he shared with Siebrits and Geers came to a painful and abrupt end.

Hurt and disillusioned, he gravitated towards making art on the fringes and made a name for himself as a curator, too, managing the Market Theatre Gallery in the late 1990s then setting up and running the Premises Gallery in the early noughties, where he played an integral role in launching the careers of a dozens of artists.

"I never liked the politics of curators and dealers. Partly because I was always a curator and I could make things happen on my own terms."

In 1999 he was commissioned to come up with a project for *Blank: Architecture, Apartheid and After*, a book on architecture by Ivan Vladislavic and Judin Hilton.

Hobbs proposed doing a "signless city" and eventually got permission from the City of Cape Town to realise his idea, which involved blocking off an intersection and "erasing" all the street markings. The success of the intervention gave Hobbs confidence and he began to feel that "what I was doing was far

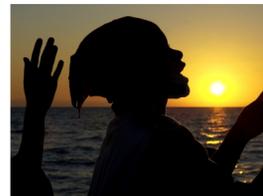
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All That Jazz



BRIAN HOUGH

Talas benefits from backing of powerful big band

ALL HAIL the big band. The new album *Stolen Moments* features crooner Harry Talas backed by the Phat Sound big band.

Big bands are a threatened species and you really have to search for a performance from one of them in South Africa.

The dearth of good big bands was worsened recently by the closure of the locally licensed Glenn Miller band in Cape Town.

Cost is a major challenge for the

big bands. A venue might be prepared to pay, say, R5 000 for a trio or quartet, but how do you fund a 16-piece or bigger band?

The bandstand has to be larger and the sound equipment and lighting can be a nightmare.

I enjoyed watching Harry Talas and the Phat Sound in action earlier this month.

They perform on the first Sunday of the month at The Radium Beer-hall (011 728 3866) in Johannesburg and have done so for 20 years.

Trombonist John Davies leads an 18-piece band of mature and young (the youngest is 15-year-old Jason Smythe on trombone) musicians in some tricky arrangements.

Davies excels in arranging and certainly challenges his musos.

Avuncular Talas is backed by the band on 12 tracks: *They Can't Take That Away From Me; That's All; Girl Talk; Sometimes I'm Happy; Moon-dance; Situation Vacant; Stolen Moments; Bye-bye Blackbird; Let There Be Love; On The Beach; Spring*

Is Here; and There Will Never Be Another You.

Talas eases his way, almost effortlessly, through the standards and obviously has fun doing so.

He is a comfortable, laidback singer with an inherent sense of humour that comes from fronting bands for years.

Today's review follows the article on Michael Bubl  last week. Both performers are in a similar genre, but that is where it ends. I am tempted to use a Babyface versus Scarface

analogy, but that would be unfair to Talas.

The Phat Sound, as you would imagine, is a powerful and tight band. However, it is a pity that the listener cannot see Davies in action. He is a hard taskmaster who takes no prisoners when the rare bum note is sounded.

Stolen Moments is available directly from Harry Talas and you can write to him at harry@optimax-mail.co.za or chat to him during business hours on 011 476 7054.



● Contact Brian with news, views, and venues on 083-262-2333, or e-mail at brian@hough.co.za

I want to make objects, says Hobbs

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more interesting to me than what was going on in the galleries".

But he would rethink his modus operandi after a trip to New York in 2006 in which he spent time with Jeff Koons, the world-renowned American artist. Predictably, Hobbs was overwhelmed by Koons's operation.

"I saw his studio and it is amazing... there were 18 massive canvases with two people painting and two people mixing paint for each canvas. There is a whole sculpture studio. It is a highly crafted system of delivery. It was an incredible experience to see what mass-production in art looks like at the highest end."

What followed was a whirlwind introduction to New York's art scene, which included attending gallery openings in Chelsea in the company of Koons, and rubbing shoulders with other art world celebrities and serious collectors. When it came to an end, he hit rock bottom.

"I was overcome with despair and depression. I just thought, what am I ever going to amount to?"

Hobbs felt "like crap for three days" and then it dawned on him "that as an artist, all that you have to show for yourself is the work that you make. So that's what I did - I started to make works and began to worry less about whether they were ephemeral, or whether I had (gallery) representation. I decided to find the money do what I wanted to do and just get on with it."

Determined to make tangible objects, he produced the acclaimed *High Voltage/ Low Voltage*, which showed at the Substation at Wits University in 2007. It was a hit with critics and was selected as one of the exhibitions of the year in Britain's *Frieze* magazine. It was a site-specific installation and, as such, would remain intangible to those who missed the opening night that was similarly the closing night. But it reflected a new direction for the artist.

"I was committed to making things. I want recognition for my work. I will be preoccupied with the ephemeral and the transient, but let's wake up and be more strategic," Hobbs says.

He has finally acquiesced to the commercial gallery market and will now be represented by the David Krut gallery.

"I am at a stage where I am growing up. To be successful, I need someone to lean on a little bit.

"Am I selling out on my true vision on what I think an artist should be? Of course I am. But that was all idealistic bullshit. You can still be strategic and brilliant. I just hope the integrity of the ideas stays there."

Hobbs will continue to pursue his unconventional art projects and interventions, but now the documentation and series of prints relating to his projects will be the economic end of his initiatives. "There has got to be something you can buy."

He has also become less dogmatic about his allegiance to the conceptual art movement.

"I have become less precious about whether I am a conceptual artist. If making an object is integral to the



The exterior of Stephen Hobbs's Dazzle project at the Outlet Gallery at the Tshwane University of Technology in Pretoria. With this project he pays homage to pseudo architects such as Vladimir Tatlin, whose grand architectural visions were never realised. PICTURES: STEPHEN HOBBS

expression and the practice of the expression of articulation, then that is my job as an artist - I have to make things.

"If you look at all the work of Hobbs/Neustetter such as the Dakar project, it is really a whole lot of window dressing for nothing... documentation for an experience that we had. The artwork was about walks in Dakar and in Hillbrow."

During those days, the ephemera of his interventions or pseudo-performance pieces were incidental to his practice.

"I was never so precious about the things I made. I was just inspired by the spaces I interacted with, and I eventually gravitated towards objects that could reflect on the spaces that I was interacting with; that's why I never had any representation."

Hobbs has also made peace with the visual poetics that some of his works exude. His reverence for Borges's *The Aleph*, an intangible and seductive portal into an infinite world of lived experience, which is evidenced in his

Dazzle exhibition, is proof of this shift.

"I am going to stop apologising for aesthetics and beauty. When you come from a tradition of conceptual work and people say your work is beautiful or aesthetically pleasing, it's like a slap in the face.

"But I hope that those aesthetics will prompt an intellectual enquiry. That they present a further register for thought and not a passive experience of form, line and colour. My feeling now is that line, form and colour can be compellingly arranged, and why should one apologise for that?"

Hobbs is only beginning to recognise and accept the visual beauty in his work but he suggests that it is the result of a new-found confidence and his less dogmatic allegiance to the tenets of the conceptual art ethos.

"You are not allowed to be seduced by your own work, according to the rules of the avant garde or the conceptual realm. But that's a load of bullshit. If it is beautiful and conceptual let it be."

It will be interesting to see how this

new approach will further impact on Hobbs's trajectory and what sort of artworks he will produce for gallery shows. Such exhibitions might cause an initial frenzy among his long-time admirers, who have for some time hankered for a piece of his ephemeral brand of art. Hobbs may make part of his art tangible and available for consumption but it is likely that his practice will continue to not only map the untraceable but remain just beyond spectator's grasp.

"With Christo's (the Bulgarian environmental artist) work you can buy the plans and the documentation and preliminary sketches of his work, which to me is so poetic because it means you can never own the work. Either you saw it or you didn't. And the actual work itself is still not something that can be entirely owned."

● The exterior manifestation of Hobbs's Dazzle project is still on view at the Outlet Gallery in Pretoria. Hobbs will also show at *End of Cities*, at Blank Projects in Cape Town in November.



The Dar Scaffold installation for Stephen Hobbs's High Voltage/Low Voltage exhibition at the Wits Substation in Pretoria. Although it was a once-off site-specific exhibition, it was an object-based show, evincing a seismic shift for the conceptual artist.

Search for alarm clock shows I may be out of time

ACCORDING to a report in last week's *Daily Telegraph*, the alarm clock may well be going the way of the dodo. Apparently more and more people are using their cellphones as alarm clocks - that's in addition to their multi-use as cameras, access to e-mail and the internet and so on.

But I didn't need to read that article to know that alarm clocks are hitting the skids.

I searched for one for months, yes months, a seemingly ordinary thing that has become harder to find than, well, VHS video tapes. Because yes, I do still buy those. I'm one of the few people left who doesn't have a PVR, doesn't see the point of one when my ancient dual view

machine is still functioning, and yet has to record just about everything to accommodate a crazy schedule.

So yes, I can still find VHS tapes - although that does take perseverance - but alarm clocks are becoming just about impossible to buy.

My search for an alarm clock wasn't prompted by a reluctance to use my cellphone as an alarm clock. I recently acquired a new touch-screen cellphone with a 5MB camera - and my big bulky digital Nikon has barely seen the light of day since.

I'm all for small is big and I am just about umbilically attached to my technology.

In fact, I love the alarm tone on my cellphone - it's a cheery happy

party-like ring and you wake up not groaning but smiling

Then there are the 7am SMSes on a Saturday or Sunday asking if I would like to see a movie that night; 7am on a Saturday?

It's a real "come on, let's get up and party" type of ring tone. I wish more cellphones or, ahem, alarm clocks, would incorporate this fun

tone in their repertoires.

Instead, my search has been prompted by the plethora of SMSes that come to me throughout the night and pop up alarmingly early in the morning, disturbing my precious beauty sleep.

There are the usual suspects: my service provider sending me a note to tell me I have used more than half my free minutes and it's only the 5th of the month, or again, my service provider sending me a little recording with dancing characters, letting me know about the latest, greatest specials on offer.

Never mind the offers I receive to purchase discount furniture, discounted theatre tickets and to view property - all of which come cheer-

ily bleeping through at odd hours of the morning.

Add to that the messages I receive from my friends, to whom, dear as they are, SMS etiquette does not seem to exist. I have had SMSes at two in the morning - from a friend who couldn't sleep and was contemplating a job change in the dark and needed to tell me about it.

Or another who knows that I don't exactly keep normal hours and made a cartoon of a photo she had taken of me and sent it at midnight. Or the SMS I received, complete with picture, from another at 1am telling me she was just catching the midnight sun in some Arctic place.

Then there are the 7am SMSes on

a Saturday or Sunday asking if I would like to see a movie that night, 7am on a Saturday? Who could possibly be up at that time, never mind planning their evening?

So, my next solution was to turn the phone on to silent, but what do you know, the thing vibrates every-time a message comes through, and wakes me, and no amount of fiddling with buttons and controls seems to turn off that vibrate function and, believe me, I have gone through every menu and submenu on that phone.

Hence the search for a cheap, ordinary alarm clock. Finally, after weeks of searching I found a big ugly thing, rather primitive looking and without even a light you can

First Words



ARJA SALAFRANCA

touch should you be up at 3am turning on your cellphone just in case a really, really important message has come winging through the ether...