

## Open Interactivity: A Model for Audience Agency

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### Abstract:

Artists have increasingly acknowledged the role of the audience as collaborators both in the construction of meaning (Bathes, 1977), through subjective experience (Dewey, 1934) and in contributing to the creative act by externalising the work. (Duchamp) Lucy Lippard identifies 1966–72 as a period where artists turned increasingly towards the audience, representing a “dematerialization of the art object” (Lippard, 1997) through “Happenings” and “Fluxus” movements. Digital media has facilitated this trajectory, implicit in the interactive computer interface (Manovich, 2005), but interactivity per se may offer no more than a series of choices put forward by the artist (Daniels, 2011). Interactivity represents interplay between artist and audience (Dinka, 1996) and is potentially a process of audience empowerment to offer agency, defined as real and creative choice (Browning, 1964).

Public screen installation “Peoples Screen” Guangzhou, linking China to Perth Australia (Sermon & Gould, 2015) offered a partnership between artist and audience to co-create content through playful narratives and active engagement in a drama that unfolds using improvisation and play. Initially visitors enjoy observing the self on the screen but audiences quickly start to interact with the environment and other participants. Immersed in play they lose a sense of the self (Callois, 2011) and enter a virtual third space where possibilities for creativity and direction of play are limitless. The self becomes an avatar where the audience can inhabit “the other” thereby exploring alternative realities through ludic play, promoting tolerance and empathy and developing collective memory.

**Keywords:** interactivity, participation, agency, play

## Introduction

The Internet has transformed the way that we communicate, offering a global network that has transformed our lives from work to leisure. Roy Ascott proposes that the internet brings a new age of collective consciousness which has impacted significantly on the way that we see ourselves and our position in the world. From this perspective we are no longer a fixed self, set in time in a single location, but we inhabit transient and multiple identities across borders, time and space, reaching mass audiences at a touch and operating as part of a global community. Through the twenty-first century Ascott has identified

. . . a gradual rejection of the dialectic of being, and it's mystification [Nietzsche], in favour of a yea saying, life affirmative recognition of the primacy of becoming. (Ascott, 1999, p. 70)

In this way Ascott heralds a new age in terms of our sense of self, which is no longer fixed. Digital culture offers a temporal, nonlinear experience, with an expectation of individual navigation and personal choice. Interactivity is implicit in the interface of the computer or tablet (Manovich, 2005) and so invites action. We can publish our own content and post our own image on Facebook and the cultural phenomenon of the “selfie” has impacted language and culture. The image that we create of ourselves may blur fact and fiction; we are projecting an ideal self, a constantly reinvented, best self. We post images of our avatar self in all sorts of scenarios, from the banal to the dangerous and to the exotic. The potential for fakery is documented in Amalia Elman's series of Instagram “selfies” entitled “Excellences and Perfections” exhibited at the Tate (Elman, 2016). Elma wanted to highlight that “femininity is a construction . . . that the joke was admitting how much work goes into being a woman and how being a woman is not a natural thing” (Bates, 2015). From this perspective the blurring of fact and fiction happens in real as well as in our social media. Thus, research from beauty haven found that 57% of women edited their photos before uploading to social media (Nobel, 2015). The appetite for retouching our self-image is also implicit in the proposals by the Chinese manufacturer Huawei of a new smart phone with facial beauty support software (Day, 2013).

It is now more socially acceptable to demonstrate our status through where we have been than through what we own. This element of choice alongside the development of social media has led to the growth of an experience economy, illustrated by our spending habits. According to the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS) the average household weekly spending on clothes and food has fallen since 2010 while spending on recreation and culture has risen (Usborne, 2017). In February 2017 Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook published a manifesto to counter charges of “fake news” against the company, arising from the American Presidential election, in which he portrayed his brand as a global community, promoting positivity and a new globalization, a community which is supportive, safe, informed, civically engaged and inclusive (Zuckerberg, 2017). This was in response to accusations that Facebook created an echo chamber effect where people seek like-minded others and socially similar groups, sharing information and rhetoric, which may or may not be based on true events but rely on the actions of consumers to pass on. This viral form of publishing arguably relies on a chain of consumers to proactively work for free to elicit content. Co-creation is being harnessed by big business and taps into the creative resource and fresh insights of users through social networking with content provided by millions of users (Petavy, 2013). Yochai Benkler (2006) proposes that co-production offers huge potential for the next stage of human development. However, it could be argued that this represents exploitation of the public where companies are making money from the creativity of an army of unpaid workers. This highlights the importance of intention

and reception of the artist or designer and the potential for impact, as well as the potential advantage for the audience.

### **The Every-Day**

This shift towards the audience as participant is reflected in art and the advances of technology from the 20th Century have been the catalyst for a transition, in identified areas of practice, from an individualist elitist art establishment which promoted the concept of artist as genius, to an inclusive, collective culture of participation. Through the industrial to post-industrial cities and the corresponding shifts in the political landscape, the onset of two world wars and revolution, shifts in approaches to society and the public are reflected in art practice and are visible through the dynamic interplay between artist and audience. Clare Bishop identifies a synergy between the move towards participation and the wide-ranging social and political views over the Twentieth Century from the nationalist ideology promoted by Fascism, supported by the Futurists, to the Dada rejection of the establishment and opposition to war and to communist ideals of collectivism and organised action (Bishop, 2012). Artists increasingly turned towards the audience as participant, taking divergent positions on audience participation. The Futurists aimed to shock audiences into mass action with a nationalist pro-military ethos and Dada as a rejection of the establishment, but both explored the idea of cause and effect through their audiences.

From the beginning of the 20th century, the turn towards the street as venue for art in part could be seen as a response to the fast development of the metropolis, extending the experience of the crowd as part of the every-day as well as the notion of the stranger. George Simmel identified that for the first time it had become socially acceptable for people in public to sit in close proximity, without speaking and avoiding eye contact (Simmel, 1903). Art events such as the Dada visit to the Churchyard of Saint Julien-le-Pauvre may have had a socialising effect, drawing people together as well as representing a provocation. The aim was to subvert the form of the guide; Dadaists saw this event as a nonsensical visit to a meaningless place. Breton read a manifesto out loud, and Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes read randomly from a dictionary. At the end of the event the audience were given envelopes with images, objects, photos, phrases and risqué images to take away. The focus on the every-day, and the idea of participation and environment are interlinked and represented a rejection of the elitist establishment and art institutions. In the 1960s there was a rejection of consumerism and this is reflected in the embrace of the every-day through art movements such as Happenings defined by Allan Kaprow as: “[. . .] environment-like, non theatrical exhibitions that turned to the public in an increased degree” (Shanken & Stiles, 2011). The Situationists engaged the interested public with actions such as the “Dérive” (Debord, 1956), which was a series of prolonged actions taking place in the cityscape, such as an unplanned walk, and aimed to develop extended focus and mindfulness, a rejection of the homogenizing effect of modernism and an embracing of collective action.



Figure 1. Tristan Tzara reading to the crowd at St. Julien le Pauvre church, Paris, 1921.

### Cause and Effect

Public participation has been aligned to more sinister interventions of collective action. A slogan of the Nuremberg Rally was “no spectators, only actors” evoking the importance of the activation of the audience to populist ideology, stirring up the passions and prejudices of the public. Leon Trotsky argued that the Futurist use of rhetoric to empower the crowd and influencing nationalist thought was very much in line with the fascist uprising in the early twentieth century:

[. . .] did not Italian Fascism come into power by ‘revolutionary’ methods, by bringing into action the masses, the mobs and the millions, and by tempering and arming them? It is not an accident, it is not a misunderstanding, that Italian Futurism has merged into the torrent of Fascism; it is entirely in accord with the law of cause and effect. (Trotsky, L. 1924)

The Futurists explored cause and effect in order to shock and disgust their audiences, captured in their manifesto “Slap in the Face of Public Taste”, they abhorred “the filthy stigmas of your “common sense” and “good taste” (Burlinuk, Kruchenykh, Mayakovsky, & Khlebnikov, 1913).

The Dadaists wanted to provoke their audiences. Tzara recollected an experience at the Salle Gaveau in May 1920, by which he was delighted:

For the first time in our lives we were assaulted, not only with eggs cabbages and pennies but even with beef steaks. It was a great success, the public were

extremely Dadaist. We had already said that true Dadaists were against Dada.  
(Tzara, 1920)

For the Dada artist, a true Dadaist would reject the confrontational actions of Dada, but audiences came to enjoy the action, wanting repeat performances. Breton rejected this, noting that the public had “acquired a taste for our performances.” “A successful man or one who is simply no longer attacked is a dead man” (Breton, 1921). Dada artists were conflicted by the collusion of the audience and by definition had a perception of an ideal reaction from participants, which did not necessarily conform to reality. This dynamic between audience and artist is significant in participatory art and Claire Bishop identifies the contradictions of participatory art as between intention and reception, agency and manipulation. A continuum can be identified of the intended role of the audience and artist and the opportunities for levels of engagement, authorship and freedom, passivity and empowerment (Bishop, 2012).

### **Audience Interaction**

Sonka Dinkla identifies a dynamic relationship between artist and participant, the levels of prescribed action expected by the artist and the opportunities for free public contribution.

Participation is located along a fragile border between emancipatory art and manipulation. The decisive act in judging the situation is how active the unprepared viewer becomes within a certain framework of action and without specific instructions. (Dinkla, 1996, p. 283)

All art could be seen as participatory in terms of the existence of a relationship between artist and viewer. John Dewey in his lectures at Harvard (1932) proposed that the work of art is an experience, not passively observed but experienced subjectively. Duchamp emphasised the interplay between viewer and artist: “The creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world...and thus his contribution to the creative act.” (Duchamp in Kepes, G. 1960) And finally, Roland Barthes declared that our construction of meaning is dependent on a duality between reader and writer.

We know that to restore writing to its future, we must reverse its myth: the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the author. (Barthes, 1967)

In this way texts are constructed through a network work of knowledge and understanding. Into this discussion emerges a discourse around the role of the audience and expectation of artist as to their role, either as passive spectators or engaged and active participants and the continuum that this creates. These ideas hang on the concept of action and inaction, spectatorship and the spectacle the passive and producer as well as in consumerism and this is inherent in Debord's concept of the “spectacle” where the mode of cultural production of images renders the audience as passive observers rather than active participants. Walter Benjamin made a distinction between passivity and action promoting the opportunity to turn consumers into producers, and spectators into collaborators.

What matters, therefore, is the exemplary character of production, which is able first to induce other producers to produce, and second to put an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers – that is readers or spectators into collaborators . . . .  
(Benjamin, 1978)

Before the digital revolution, Brecht identified similar concerns with the radio industry suggesting “Let the listener speak as well as hear...bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him” (Brecht, B. 1986). When Nam June Paik presented his “Good Morning Mr. Orwell” for New Year in 1984, shown on large screens beamed by satellite across four cities from America to France, he proposed that the liberating quality of video lay in interactivity and in the potential to bridge enormous cultural gaps, “so that it can represent the spirit of democracy not dictatorship” (Paik, 1984).

Many forms of interactivity, however, offer nothing more than a series of options provided by the artist “disguised by the physical function of the interface” (Daniel, 2011, p. 74). This computer interface offers nothing more than “strictly controlled routes through a closed set of prescribed material” (Kelly, 1997). Media theorist have provided different definitions of interactivity; Margot Lovejoy, identifies the “monologic” (point and click) and the “dialogic” approach which is an “open” interactive system” (Lovejoy, 2011, p. 14). Roy Ascott identifies a focus in interactive art on “whole systems, that is systems in which a viewer plays an active part in an artwork’s definition and evolution” (Ascott, 1999, p. 67). Ascott proposes that the removal of the “second observer” or “phantom audience” is a necessary precursor to the truly “whole system”, so all participants are fully active in the outcomes and the potential for spectacle is removed, in order to achieve “an open ended evolution of meanings and the closure of an autonomous frame of consciousness”. (Ascott, 1999, p. 70) This aligns with the International Situationist approach in the 1960s where the Amsterdam IS Derive (1960) was not advertised and included only a tight circle of invited IS participants.

Stiles and Shanken emphasise the importance of real engagement of the audience and identify “agency” as an important factor in interactive systems. Meaning and intention as well as effective communication to an audience are important. They argue that artworks “must activate semiotic signification that is literally full of meaning” (Stiles & Shanken, 2011, p. 35), so that meaning and the terms of engagement are implicitly understood and audiences can interact without instruction to contribute in a meaningful and creative way, with “agency”. Douglas Browning defines agency as, “The concept of the agent is required in order to allow for the possibility of freedom, communication, comprehension and mystery. “Culture in general . . . rests upon . . . agency” (Browning, 1964). Agency is the underlying principal in open interactive artworks as well as participatory art in terms of enabling meaningful engagement and to achieve co-production by audiences and artists. It is a symbiotic relationship where the artist provides the stage and environment from which audiences can co-create:

Agency involves the freedom to create, change, and influence institutions and events, or act as a proxy on behalf of someone else. In both cases agency is measured by the ability and the responsibility to have a meaningful effect in a real-world, inter-subjective social conscience. (Stiles, K., Shanken, 2011, p36)

The relationship of audience and artist and resulting ethical responsibility attached to that relationship is particularly important if through the digital we “interactively make use of global network connectivity”. (Lovejoy, M. 2011, p14) Roy Ascott proposes that this global connectivity transforms our relationship to the world and to ourselves. Roy Ascott proposes that the Internet offers a network to facilitate a distributed consciousness and potential collective consciousness.

The new telematics adventure in art, currently played out in the Net but swiftly migrating to the ‘smart’ environments of ubiquitous computing, has brought

questions of distributed mind and shared consciousness to the definition of a new aesthetic. This Technoetic Aesthetic recognises that technology plus mind, technoetics, not only enables us to explore consciousness in new ways but may lead to distinctly new forms of art, new qualities of mind and new constructions of reality. (Ascott, 1999, p. 66)

Ascott promotes technology as providing opportunity to redefine the self, to escape the confines of our bodies to explore alternative ways of being, a migration towards a distributed body, transforming the human experience and our very sense of self, identifying the potential for technology to promote and enhance a shared experience unbound by time and borders. Ascott highlights the importance of interactivity and active engagement with the public co-creating artworks through a “shared consciousness” rather than a focus on the passive engagement of the spectacle. He warns against focus on process over content through special effects and impressive programming but instead asks us to concentrate on whole systems where viewers take an active role, offering the individual an opportunity to engage in a “larger field of consciousness” (Ascott, 1999, pp. 66–67).

Ascott highlights the potential of technology to transform the human experience, to explore the potential for “a non-linear identity” (Ascott, 1999, p. 69). His text identifies consciousness as a key focus in the future development of tech-noetic art and identifies a “double gaze”, a duality in existence between the real and the virtual, through which we are able to interact with artworks, which explore how we engage with each other and our sense of being. He proposes that this virtual existence offers opportunities for multiplicity of being, physically as well as in time and space. This could be transformative as individuals but also as public audiences, operating on a global market stage, potentially impact on the way that humans engage. Ascott’s presentation of the Internet as a manifestation of group consciousness suggests that net-art works offer the opportunity to tap into a worldwide group consciousness, potentially to explore the collective unconscious. Lovejoy also identifies opportunity for digital media to make use of the global network to engage the public, across boundaries, offering empowerment and democratisation, emphasising the potential for digital media and the Internet to connect people for a more egalitarian future.

As a many-to-many dynamic communication system, the Internet embodies a certain access to democratic exchange. Net art exists within the public sphere and is potentially available to anyone, anytime, anywhere-provided that one has access to the network. Mailing lists, blogs, and other forms of networked communication (from mobile phones to other hand-held communication devices) have become a form of agency. Activists are making use of connectivity as a form of political participation. (Lovejoy, 2011, p. 25)

Currently, huge corporations dominate social media including Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. They are reliant on images and film clips or with limited use of characters, with options to “like” and share and this does not lend it’s self to in-depth debate. Further, the tendency for people to be in like-minded networked groups has been blamed for creating echo chambers of “fake news” on social media resulting in a divisive identification of “the other”, creating a starkly contrasting effect to the utopian image as proposed by Ascott and Lovejoy.



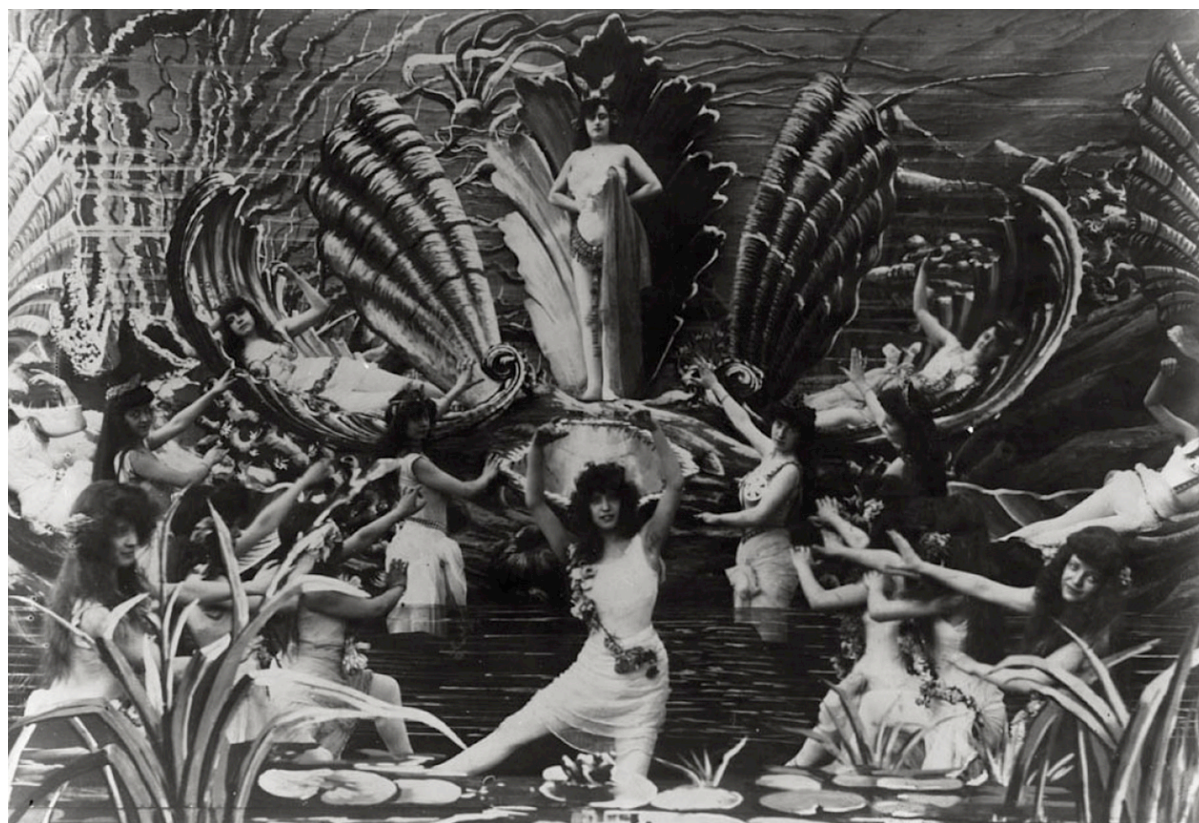


Figure 2. Georges Méliès, Neptune and Amphitrite, 1899.

The form of the “selfie” where the subject smiles out at the audience is reminiscent of early film such as Georges Méliès early sci-fi fantasy films where no attempt was made at suspending disbelief as the actors smiled out at the camera, sometimes waving or shrugging. Tom Gunning identifies the era up to 1906 as a “Cinema of Attractions” (Gunning, 1986) where film represented an opportunity to show off techniques and made no attempt to immerse the audience. Similarly it may be that currently we are in the early stage of social media development and the prevalence of the “selfie” is an early “horseless carriage paradigm” (McLuhan, 1964) and that the potential of the form has not been fully realised. In this way early cinema relied on sets similar to those used on the stage, despite the opportunity for enhanced realism posed by location filming.

The first reaction of the public when entering the frame in “Peoples Screen” is to take a “selfie”, particularly the participants in Guangzhou. Comparable to the actors in the George Méliès films, they smile at themselves on camera. However, the audience soon starts to interact with the environment and other participants, moving away from the initial attraction of identification of self to the body as avatar, towards using the body as a playful interactive tool, where participants immersed in play, lost a sense of the self and immersed in a virtuality playful other space (Caillois, 1958). It is this loss of self, which offers the truly liberating opportunity for audiences as it offers potential for exploration of other identities or alter egos, exploring the potential for ludic play and phantasmagoria (Sutton-Smith, 1985) but also for nonsense as an opportunity to explore “the other”, or the opposite, in order to rationalise ethics and values (Stewart, 1989). This approach could help us realise the potential proposed by Roy Ascot for exploration of a new way of coming into being. The “selfie” on the other hand often reiterates



an idealised image of the self, potentially aligned to the notion of the spectacle (Debord, G. 1967) and presented by traditional media forms promoting the cult of celebrity.

### Peoples Screen



Figure 3. Visitors take selfies as they enter the screen in Guangzhou, in “Peoples Screen” by Paul Sermon and Charlotte Gould for the Guangzhou International Light Festival in 2015.

In the following, I am going to explore the potential for new forms of social networks in relation to an installation that I developed in collaboration with Paul Sermon for large urban screens, “Peoples Screen” (Sermon & Gould, 2015). This was a site-specific work commissioned by Public Art Lab Berlin, linking audiences in Guangzhou’s new Flower Garden Square, China and Northbridge Piazza in Perth, Australia. The site of the large urban public screen is an important factor of the work. Akin to the Situationists or Happenings who wanted to bring the every-day into their work, it is important that the installation is situated in a public square, attracting unusual participants for artworks and people as they pass through as part of their everyday life. “Peoples Screen” drew in significantly large crowds in China as it was commissioned by the “Guangzhou Light Festival”. In Perth the public screen was curated for cultural engagement, on a screen usually used for public screening rather than interactive artworks. These environmental factors had a significant impact on the way that audiences engaged. In Guangzhou the 25,000 visitors queued up to play on “Peoples Screen”, the volume of visitors limited the time within the installation to one minute only so people experienced less opportunity to interact in Guangzhou. In Perth people watched the screen on beanbags and the curators introduced them in the installation against the artist’s request, which encouraged a laidback approach.

Through previous research into interactive installations for urban screens a framework was developed to measure open interactive systems based on Hans Scheuerl's "Criteria for Games" (1964), which include "closeness of the game", "ambivalence" (movement between rule and chance) to "freedom of choice", "virtuality" (separate from life and the self), to "infinite" with no preconceived ending. Each of these criteria could be applied to open interactive systems.



Figure 4. Participants hop across cable cars in "Peoples Screen" by Paul Sermon and Charlotte Gould for the Guangzhou International Light Festival in 2015.

In terms of the first criteria of "closeness of the game", the only rules constitute the frame of the installation, which in effect is the defined area of green. There are ethical considerations beyond this, such as behaviour of the audience while in the frame; however, there were no untoward incidents in "Peoples Screen". The artists' interface could be seen as another aspect of the rules in that it can influence behaviour however there is freedom throughout the piece to improvise and there is a very strong element of chance at play. The narrative that ensues represents interplay between artist and audience and, on another level, visitors with remote participants. One of the curators of the screen decided to add dinosaur animations, which were very unexpected and represented a step further than anticipated by the artists. In this case the curators over stepped their role as the point of interaction was on the green screen stage rather than in the operations room and operated outside the rules of engagement, particularly as the characters potentially infringed copyright. Again this brings ethical issues into play. In this way "ambivalence", movement between rule and chance, is facilitated, bringing another element of chance as the audience respond to each other's interactions. The virtuality created by the remote participants breaks down barriers of social norms, so in another way this facilitates a new set of rules of engagement. People will gesture as if to touch in a way that they would not in physical space, for example two women clapping hands together across remote space.

Orientation within the screen is mirrored, so it is a challenge to appear to touch hands, which adds to the fun of the interactions.

“Peoples Screen” is a site-specific work so it includes elements of the physical surroundings in the cities in which it takes place, Guangzhou and Perth. The aim of this is to link the audience with the physical surrounding of the site of the big screen. The image of self, as well as recognisable elements of the environment help to give the audience a sense of connection to the screen. Patrick Allen supports this through his research he found that the presence of the body on big screen works engages users with the screen and acts as a portal between the virtual and real space. (Allen, 2008)

Within the frame the participant has “freedom of choice” to improvise, visitors are free to bring props and to respond to each other as they wish. The freedom of body movement allows for the audience to move exactly as they wish within ethical boundaries. Beyond this people often explore the ludic. Children are attuned to creative and unselfconscious play. Initially, adults are a little reticent, but once within the frame they start to play with both the mirror image of self and then with the other visitors on screen. As participants watch others interacting, this builds confidence but also leads to some echoing of previous behaviours, for example formation dancing or appearing to swim in the sea. Initially often playing with a known other, friends and family with whom they are visiting; people soon start to play with strangers, very often engaging in activities which would be unlikely in an every day urban space such as playing hopscotch, dancing, or jumping across obstacles. In this way participants become analogous to a character in a computer game. This brings us to the next criteria of “Virtuality” separate from real life and the self.

In keeping with Susan Stewart’s theory of nonsense play the exploration of the other, the criteria of “Virtuality” or separateness from real life, enables the audience to explore the ludic world by defining the ridiculous and the comedic, we can identify our values and resolve issues. Investigating opposites can help us to define our values and make sense of the world. This element of ludic play means that logic does not impact on narrative, or direction of travel, the possibilities are endless and are not restricted. The audience have control over their physical contribution so while the starting point was triggered by the animations produced by the artists, the individual narratives can go in any direction.

Brian Sutton Smith reiterates the importance of ludic play through “phantasmagorical play”. He identifies potential health and problem solving benefits inherent in outlandish imaginary play. Sutton Smith defined play as having an “extrinsic” cultural value. He defined rhetoric within accounts of play: play as progress, play as fate (or chance), play as identity, play as power, play as the imaginary (creativity and innovation), the rhetoric of the self (fun, relaxation and escape) and the rhetoric of play as frivolous, the protest of the trickster or fool as intervention. (Sutton Smith, 1997) Actions within Peoples Screen could potentially fall into the majority of these categories, although I did not observe instances of asserting power, although it could be possible through play within the installation for an adult for example to engage in interaction which demonstrated their power over a child. The actions observed from the line out video were very levelling; children and adults, strangers, relatives and friends interacted on a level footing.

Sutton Smith highlighted the need for flexibility in the modern world, promoted by play, which enhances the “potential variability” of the brain. He proposed that play could enhance culture,



civilization as well as human survival, also offers opportunity for exploration of self. Winnicott supports this idea that play can help us to make sense of the self in relation to the external world though “transitional phenomena”, the interchange between the inner reality of individuals and the shared external reality (Winnicott, 1971).



Figure 5. Visitors recline on bean bags in Perth in “Peoples Screen” by Paul Sermon and Charlotte Gould for the Guangzhou International Light Festival in 2015.

Silverstone explored the relation between the real and the fantastical through the concept of “tissue boundary” and the viewer as active participant in the creation of meaning:

Play enables the exploration of that tissue boundary between fantasy and reality, between the real and the imagined between the self and the other. In play we have license to explore ourselves and our society, in play we investigate culture but we also create it. (Silverstone, 1999)

Winnicott identifies a notion of the third space which links child and adult play. He characterises play as liberating and creative, where the whole personality can be experienced offering the potential for self-discovery. (Winnicott, 1971, p. 54) For Winnicott, play is essential to psychic health, and internal and external representation is at the core of personality and culture. From this position, play enhances creativity, as well as offering opportunities for identification of the self and community, so while ludic play represents “Virtuality” as distinct from real life, it conversely offers huge opportunity to resolve very real issues potentially contributing to health and wellbeing as a diversion from stress, through creative exploration, and problem solving. This could have a wider impact on the community by creating connections, resolving issues and problem solving.



Figure 6. Participants appear to walk the plank in “Peoples Screen” by Paul Sermon and Charlotte Gould for the Guangzhou International Light Festival in 2015.

There was no restriction on where the narrative ended, and this represents the criteria of “infinite”. Very often the narratives integrated playful dance, step or jump sequences. The Guangzhou tower had rotating cable cars from which the participants could hop from one to another, or could float by on a lantern. There were many sequences where remote participants hopped past and back and forth in a repetitive dance formations with each other often ending in laughter. Each narrative was distinct and the closing sequences ended in a wide variety of ways due to the breadth of influences from other participants, the range of stimuli in the environment and the props that others would introduce. Sometimes Guangzhou audiences would interact with the beanbags jumping from one to another or with the audience in Perth, who were often recumbent on the beanbags. People at times exchanged articles of clothing such as hats and other props, using exaggerated gestures, in keeping with the silent movies, as there was no sound. This added to the humour as people signalled, in a universal language, to communicate with each other and exaggerated their movements in a comical way often acting out recognisable slapstick sequences such as appearing to slip on a banana skin or wobbling on a high beam across a ravine. The audiences often started to copy each other’s interactions, engaging with elements within the scenes in similar ways, such as walking down the steps into the bunker. The picnic scene proved to be a universally recognised space for interaction, as people appeared to share food and drink with each other. This worked well particularly because participants in Perth were often sitting on beanbags. The computer game reference with hedges from which participants could jump apparently to different platforms, prompted a more active form of engagement. This use of readable situations triggers certain types of activity and avoids the need for instruction from the artist but is instinctive as the interface relies on visual symbolism to communicate to audiences. From this initial starting point the audience would start to adlib and to explore other possibilities, including unexpected actions and unique



interventions. Stiles and Shanken identify “agency” as an important factor in interactive systems, meaning and intention as well as effective communication to an audience is important to avoid the need for instruction. They argue that artworks “. . . must activate semiotic signification that is literally full of meaning” (Stiles & Shanken, 2011, p. 35).

Through this project we researched opportunities for public engagement using networked urban screens, joining two remote locations across two continents looking at how this can change the way that we interact in public space. Kristine Stiles and Ed Shanken propose that a key factor in interactive works is that they offer “agency” which involves freedom to make choices and to be creative in order to make a difference (Stiles & Shanken, 2011, p32). Peoples Screen was successful in offering an open form of interaction and an alternative to our biggest social networking platforms. Whilst the initial instinct and drive for people entering the frame was to photograph themselves on screen, they soon immersed themselves within the action, so that they forgot themselves, lost their inhibition and played with others in a public urban space on screen. Through analysis of the lineout video and audience interactions, it appears that it is the loss of self through immersion in play that is liberating. Potentially this opportunity for play in the urban environment can offer health benefits, bringing us together and supporting an opportunity to engage and share in social space in a different way. This embodies the liberating opportunities that Roy Ascott proposes that the Internet offers, of multiple identities, unbound in borders, time and space, an opportunity to evolve from the fixed intransient “dialect of being” or self and to progress towards the flexible, utopian “primacy of becoming” multiple and transient self (Ascot, 1999, p. 70).

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