

From Edwardian Selfie to Telepresent Comic

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Abstract

Drawing on the media archaeology accounts of “Illusions in Motion” by Erkki Huhtamo (2013), this paper will compare and discuss audience participation in three specific self-view artworks involving interacting public audiences captured and presented in live telepresent film and video performances since 1900. This comparative study will draw out an underlying cultural fixation and amusement with the self-image, analogous to Henri Bergson’s understanding of laughter in meaning of the comic (1900). These case studies will include my own artistic practice that focuses on telematic encounters and shared visual dialogues between public audiences linked via Internet videoconferencing in “Peoples Screen”, in collaboration with Charlotte Gould for the Guangzhou Light Festival in 2015. The seminal live satellite public performance “Hole-in-Space” by Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz in 1980, providing the passing public in New York and Los Angeles with opportunity to converse, co-create and play in the first live public connection of its kind. Lastly, they include Mitchell and Kenyon’s historic films of Edwardian public crowds in the 1900s, allowing audiences the opportunity to play and perform in front of the film camera in the knowledge they could watch their spectacle in its screening at the local traveling fairground. In all these cultural events the audiences become both performers and viewers by creating an improvised response to the camera and screen. The striking similarity with the way audiences react and perform comical narratives from these early self-view film screenings to telematic performances possess all the unique traits of telepresent interaction and the selfie phenomenon.

Keywords: telepresence, performance, embodiment, laughter

Media (Art) Histories: Analogies and Cycles

This article aims to go back and forth over one hundred years of telepresent phenomena through self-view representations in media forms, from the invention of film to the instant global distribution of personal reflective images. In doing so we consistently discover similarities in technical endeavours, but most strikingly and more poignantly, as this article attempts to prove, the parallels can also be seen in human behaviour and social norms. Media (art) archaeology has already charted this timeline, predominately through the identification of analogies of technology that continue to spiral and cycle, as one invention at the beginning of the last century appears to be in the same pursuit as another, at the other end of it. Since the early 1990s, media art historian and curator Erkki Huhtamo, has continually pointed out the very same endeavour to recreate and re-experience reality. From the 360° surrounding diorama paintings of the 17 and 18 hundreds to stereoscopic photographic viewfinders, such as Das Kaiserpanorama (Crary, 2001), found in the later 19th to early 20th centuries; a viewing system that provided audience groups with sequential 3D photographic depictions of the wonders of the world. This phenomenon repeats and resurfaces again and again, most recently in the Google Cardboard head mounted virtual reality display released in 2014. This repetitive discourse recurs almost periodically throughout history, as Huhtamo precisely identifies, in his most recent in-depth historical analysis *ILLUSIONS IN MOTION, Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles* (Huhtamo, 2013).

For the purposes of this article, the repetition in pursuit of re-experienced reality provides a historical technological underpinning upon which we can evaluate and compare audience reaction and behaviour with equivalent similarities and levels of repetition, regardless of historical context. The intension here, however, is to identify particular artistic events and technological developments that directly involve and confront the participants taking part. These public artworks, happenings and screenings extend the paradigm of a “virtual reality” to the mediated experience of group presence and the “self” within them. This has become perhaps more commonly known as “telepresence” or the phenomena of the “digital other” and its reoccurring role throughout the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries.

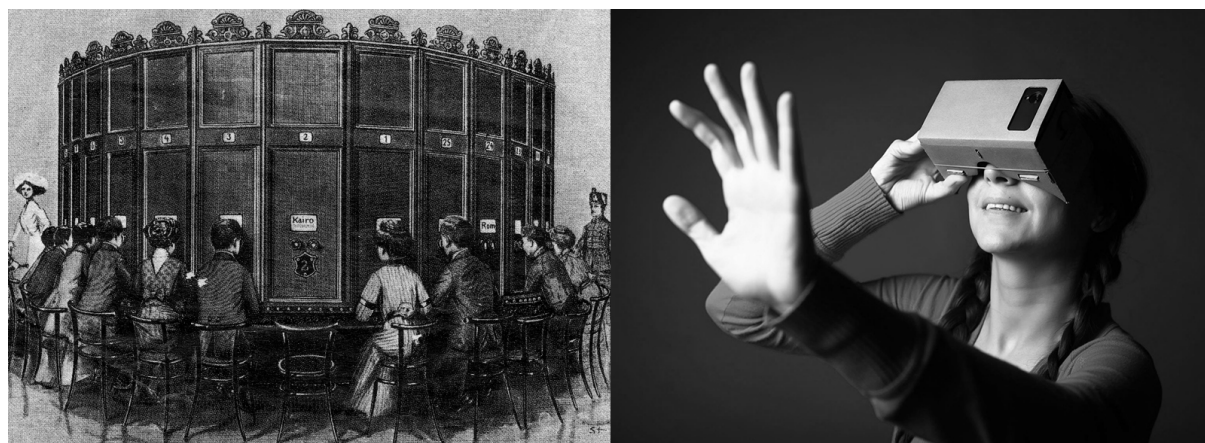


Figure 1: Das Kaiserpanorama with 25 stereoscopic viewing stations from circa 1890 (left). The release of Google Cardboard’s virtual reality head mounted display in 2014 (right).

Comparative Study from 1900 to 2017: Repetition of Presence and the Self View Comic

Here we will consider and compare three unique practices/artworks/happenings, from circa 1900 to the present day through the unique self-view footage of the events themselves: Mitchell and Kenyon, *Local Films for Local People*, circa 1900; *Hole-in-Space*, by Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz, 1980 and *Peoples Screen (Occupy the Screen)*, by Paul Sermon and Charlotte Gould, 2017. Through the extensive documentation of these three artwork occurrences we have the unique opportunity to view and review recordings of participants' behaviours, reactions and conscious experiences. Throughout the following comparative case studies of these works, it is essential to remember that we will be looking directly at the image that caused the very human response we are looking at. These documentary recordings represent a rich layered depth of complexities and subtleties. We will need to observe, discuss and compare the slightest and most exaggerated human response to their telepresent other who quickly adopts the external comic performer for the pleasure and amusement of themselves as well as the others taking part. We shall return to this crucial point, which is recurrent throughout the three works discussed, towards the latter stages of this paper, at which point it will be necessary to introduce Henri Bergson's understanding of laughter to fully interpret and deconstruct the phenomena we are being faced with. But first we need to recount the works in question and identify the comparative characteristics that are being presented.

Mitchell and Kenyon, Local Films for Local People, Circa 1900

The pioneering films from the start of the 20th century by Sagar Mitchell and James Kenyon were largely unknown until 1994 when two workmen discovered three metal drums containing the largest surviving collection of early non-fiction film in the world, in the basement beneath Sagar Mitchell's original business premises in Blackburn, Lancashire in the north-west of England. In 2000 the Mitchell and Kenyon films were painstakingly restored using techniques to produce remarkably clean and scratch-free positives and archived with adjusted speed to smooth out the variations in these hand-cranked films (Toulmin, 2006). The Mitchell and Kenyon restoration and archive was a major partnership research project between the National Fairground Archive (NFA) the British Film Institute (BFI) and the BBC, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The research in particular examined and contextualised the films from these pioneer film makers, who used the fairground Cinematograph and Bioscopes shows through commissions from fairground showmen to expand the exciting new medium of projected film, (Toulmin, 2006) a significant point we shall return to momentarily. The vast majority of the films were shot in and around the north-west of England between circa 1897 to 1909, capturing Edwardian street scenes and industrial urban life that has provided significant new insights of Edwardian Britain. The Mitchell & Kenyon Project has been responsible for the most comprehensive account of their work in *The Lost World of Mitchell & Kenyon* (Toulmin *et al.* 2004) published by the bfi as well as the three-part BBC/bfi Television documentary, *The Lost World of Mitchell & Kenyon*, screened in 2005.

What these publications and resources capture, in particular the BBC/bfi documentary, is the enthusiasm with which the passing public plays and performs in front of the film camera. The activity of filming public crowds and in particular people (men, women and children) streaming out of the factory gates at the end of the working day always provided an opportunity for improvised comical acts and gestures to the camera. But all this was done in the knowledge that what was being filmed there today was going to be projected on screen at the traveling fairground for all to see tomorrow. Although the Lumière brothers attempted similar factory-

gate films a few of years earlier, Mitchell and Kenyon found the northern heartland of industrial England the perfect location to capture audiences and their appetite to see these self view productions. They founded the firm of *Mitchell & Kenyon* in 1897 and under the trade name of *Norden*, the company became one of the largest film producers in the United Kingdom in the 1900s, using the appropriate slogans of "Local Films For Local People" and "We take them and make them" to attract ever more eager and playful audiences. If these slogans were not enough they are also seen on some occasions in the films handing out leaflets to the public explaining where to see the film that is being shot, and in some cases they are seen trying to keep the crowd moving on past the camera in order to capture as many people as possible.



Figure 2: Still from "Electric Edwardians: The Films of Mitchell & Kenyon", employees leaving Storey's Moor Lane Mill, Lancaster in 1902.

The only documentation we do not have is that of the screenings themselves. But we do know the public films were the most popular item on the bill at the traveling fairgrounds of the time. Photographic evidence of large elaborately decorated attractions/show-booths provides further evidence of large crowds of people queuing up to enter these shows. Referred to as Bioscope shows, Cinematographs and Picturedromes, their prominent Showmen owners exploited the invention of the electric dynamo to provide lavish illuminations for these highly decorated Bioscope show entrance facades. Mitchell & Kenyon developed a reciprocal working relationship with the travelling Bioscope shows, commissioned by a variety of fairground showmen to make individual films for showing at local venues. (NFCA Mitchell & Kenyon and the Showmen, 25/10/17). What we can tell from the films of Mitchell and Kenyon, the Bioscope records and their popularity was that their screenings provided hugely comical

entertainment for the hoards of visitors who wanted to see them, and most importantly themselves. In the context of the “local” traveling fairground this provided a community engagement, whose audience could join in the collective experience brought together through the laughter (most likely hysteria) of the group upon the individual’s comical act caught on camera, who are most likely present themselves in sharing their disembodied “telepresent” experience with their families, friends and colleagues around them.



Figure 3: The Wonderland Bioscope Show, a travelling Cinematograph owned by fairground showman Pat Collins, presented in Nottingham, England, circa 1900.

Hole-in-Space, Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz, 1980

In November 1980 the California based artists Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz presented one of the most ground breaking and celebrated telecommunication artworks of their career, “Hole-in-Space”. Having negotiated and obtained access to United States satellite television communications they were provided with a live video link between Los Angeles and New York for three consecutive evenings. But rather than linking east coast and west coast television studios, as is normally the case, Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz located their live video cameras and large format screens in the shop window of the Broadway department store at Century City Shopping Centre in Los Angeles and the window at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts at Avery Fisher Hall in New York City, providing the passing pedestrian public with a surprising encounter with each other, via a live two way video link between these two locations. The geographically remote public audiences were instantly transformed into performers in the first networked narrative performance in a social context of its kind. What initially appears to be a random choice of locations for this public intervention – from the point

of view of the user/actor, becomes increasingly apparent that the artists chose these cities and locations for very specific social and political reasons, creating a networked narrative within an extremely dynamic context. Hole-in-Space was, what Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz referred to as an “Interactive Communication Sculpture”, in what was the first videoconference meeting or public “Skype” call of its kind.

“Suddenly head-to-toe, life-sized, television images of the people on the opposite coast appeared. They could now see, hear, and speak with each other as if encountering each other on the same sidewalk. No signs, sponsor logos, or credits were posted – no explanation at all was offered.”

(Galloway, Rabinowitz, 1980)



Figure 4: Hole-in-Space by Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz in 1980. The Broadway department store, Century City Shopping Center in Los Angeles (left). Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, Avery Fisher Hall in New York City (right).

The Hole-in-Space “happening” began on the evening of the 11th November 1980, with a series of chance encounters in what Galloway and Rabinowitz dubbed “Unannounced”. As passers-by in Los Angeles and New York simultaneously stopped and realized the image on the large screen in the window was not a local camera image reflecting themselves, but a live image from the other side of the continent – but what’s more, a live image and audio link of people looking inquisitively at the same phenomena. From here on the communications portal was open, and conversations, jokes and performances unfolded. The second evening, labelled “Word-of-Mouth” brought more acquaintances and friends together as word spread of this opportunity to meet and converse across time and space. The evening ended with local TV news reports spreading the word even further in preparation for the final evening event on the 14th November, “Mass Media Announcement”. Hole-in-Space culminated in huge crowds of people in the two cities, eager to see and be seen, described by Galloway and Rabinowitz:

If you have ever had the opportunity to see what the award winning video documentation captured then you would have laughed and cried at the amazing human drama and events that were played out over the evolution of the three evenings. Hole-in-Space suddenly severed the distance between both cities and created an outrageous pedestrian intersection. There was the evening of discovery, followed by the evening of intentional word-of-mouth rendezvous, followed by a mass migration of families and trans-continental loved ones, some of which had not seen each other for over twenty years. (Galloway, Rabinowitz, 1980)

In many ways the success of Hole-in-Space relied on the locations of the public interfaces and the cultural and geographic differences, clichés and comparisons the audiences could play with. Public participants were instantly transformed into performers in an “east coast meets west coast variety show”, confronting the pedestrian passes-by in New York and Los Angeles and bringing them up on a telematic stage to play charades, dance, sing songs, such the “New York, New York” classic and tell jokes – of a particular east coast/west coast nature . . . “Question: how many New Yorkers does it take to change a light-bulb? Answer: None of your fucking business!” (Hole-in-Space documentary video, 25/10/2017).



Figure 5: An audience in Los Angeles watch participants in New York on screen. Hole-in-Space, an “Interactive Communication Sculpture” by Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz, 1980.

Through the video documentary, it is possible to see that what began as isolated moments of encounter and discovery on the first evening of Hole-in-Space escalated to hordes of people screaming and shouting to each other by the end of the last evening. But within this build-up of participants we also witness the communication between the local groups taking part, sharing in each other’s acts and encouraging comical moments of discovery, not only between the two cities but also locally. This is exemplified by a recorded moment, when a participant in Los Angeles asks Pricilla in New York if she has met Howard yet? Pricilla looks to the screen and camera and replies . . . “hello Howard” assuming he is in Los Angeles, only for Howard to chirp-up from behind her to say “hello Pricilla”, much to everyone’s amusement (Hole-in-Space documentary video, 25/10/2017). This moment highlights the participant’s eagerness to embrace the objective opportunity to perform and interact in this disembodied space. The joke in this instance is the embodied reminder that “Howard” is just behind you. As

with the work of Mitchell and Kenyon, the participants perform comical acts to each other and themselves through this process of disembodiment and re-embodiment with the group, but in the case of Hole-in-Space this is not a self-view screen, but a view of the self in other people's responses on screen, three thousand miles away.

Peoples Screen (Occupy the Screen), Paul Sermon and Charlotte Gould, 2017

Occupy the Screen was a site-specific artwork by the author of this paper, Paul Sermon, in collaboration with Charlotte Gould, commissioned by Public Art Lab Berlin for the Connecting Cities Festival event, Urban Reflections, from 11–13 September 2014, linking the passing public outside the Supermarkt Gallery in Berlin with pedestrians on Riga's Esplanade square for the European Capital of Culture, Riga2014. This installation builds on our practice-based research and development of previous interactive works for large format urban screens such as Picnic on the Screen, originally developed for the BBC Public Video Screen at the Glastonbury Festival in 2009. In November 2015 Public Art Lab commissioned a new version of Occupy the Screen for the Guangzhou International Light Festival in China. Sharing the same time zone, the installation was connected for 12 evenings with the Northbridge Piazza public video screen in Perth, Australia from 14 to 29 November 2015. The project was extensively reworked to converge scenes from the cities of Guangzhou and Perth. Renamed Peoples Screen, which the Guangzhou City Government was slightly more comfortable with, the installation was hugely popular, involving over 25,000 participants in Guangzhou alone.



Figure 6: Participants in Guangzhou, China greet telepresent visitors from Perth, Australia in “Peoples Screen” by Paul Sermon and Charlotte Gould for the Guangzhou International Light Festival in 2015.

Occupy the Screen and Peoples Screen linked two geographically distant audiences using a telematics technique; the installation took live oblique camera shots from above the screen of each of these two audience groups, located on a large 50 square metre blue ground sheet and combined them on screen via an Internet based high-definition videoconference connection in

a single composited chroma-keyed image. As the merged audiences started to explore this collaborative, shared ludic interface they discovered the ground beneath them, as it appeared on screen, to be a digital backdrop that located them in a variety of surprising and intriguing environments. By providing a range of anamorphic playful ludic scenes, drawn from urban environments in Riga and Berlin, and Guangzhou and Perth, the audiences immediately started playing within these virtual locations, where from a particular angle and position the characters appear to be in a landscape of precarious situations. The appearance of walking across a bridge, standing on a plinth, stepping over buildings or falling into a hole intuitively inspired the audience to engage in comical and playful improvised narratives in this public theatre space.

Occupy the Screen and Peoples Screen aimed to include the widest range of participation possible in public urban spaces, akin to a “telematic fluxus happening” in a move away from the art object towards the street environment and the “every day” experience as the artwork (Sermon, Gould, 2016). The position of the urban screen as street furniture is ideally suited to engage with people going about their everyday life, and often the most interesting outcomes are discovered through ways that the public interprets and re-appropriates the content of the screen in the work. The interaction is an open system aiming to offer the audience a means of agency to be creative and make individual decisions (Sermon, Gould, 2016). This intuitive public response is at the core of this project. Where a particular psychological sense of disembodiment and telepresent re-embodiment occurs and where the activating body becomes less sensorial aware than the effective interacting one on screen. Through this research project, we have developed a framework for open participatory artworks for urban screens to maximise audience agency through play, engaging the public in new ways in the urban environment that creates community memories and legacy (Sermon, Gould, 2016).



Figure 7: Visitors in Riga's Esplanade square balance on an anamorphic bridge with participants on screen from Berlin in “Occupy the Screen” by Paul Sermon and Charlotte Gould, 2014.

This installation pushed the playful, comical, social and public engagement aspects of the work into new cultural and political realms in an attempt to “reclaim the urban screens” through

developments in ludic interaction and Internet based videoconferencing. By using visual references to site-specific landmarks in Berlin and Riga for Occupy the Screen, and Guangzhou and Perth for Peoples Screen, audiences were invited to occupy the screen by climbing the (telepresent) statues and sites in both cities, with scenes reminiscent of the crowds claiming the Brandenburg Gate after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The concept development of this work was inspired in part by the anamorphic technique of 3D street art and its comical illusionary outcomes. But it also clearly borrows from the work of Mitchell and Kenyon, capturing large crowds from an oblique camera angle, where audiences were equally transported to alternative realities through both the large format urban video screen and the early film screenings of public audiences presented at the traveling fairs. The digital interface was derived from the ludic landscapes of computer games as a means to navigate the urban space; once within the frame the audience participants become characters immersed within the digital environment.

Through this research we found that the environment and timing have a large impact on the way that an audience responds. The inspiration was drawn directly from the cities involved, with input from the different communities, cultures and environments. The installation ran at night time for three to four hours each evening, adding further to a sense of playfulness, as audiences unexpectedly encountered the installation differently in each city; whilst walking through the park in Riga, on their way out or back from bars and clubs in Berlin, as part of the spectacle for the Guangzhou Light Festival and summer evenings sitting on the lawn at Northbridge Piazza in Perth. We therefore introduced ludic or nonsensical elements at times such as an inflatable boat in Berlin, which people immediately responded to by jumping into. The area of interaction was clearly demarked as a space via a blue box groundsheet in all the cities, identifying a theatre of play, once in the space the participant engages as they wish. In many ways Occupy the Screen and Peoples Screen broke down cultural and social barriers, both in the local communities, but also between the cities of Berlin and Riga, and Guangzhou and Perth, where new collocated spaces and creative encounters could be founded and occupied.

Parallels to Henri Bergson's Meaning of the Comic

In order to draw out a comparative study of these three artistic projects, I will reflect on the observations and analysis of the comic episode as identified by Henri Bergson in his 1900 paper "Laughter: an essay on the meaning of the comic", in which he asks . . . "What does laughter mean?" Without going into the contextual depth of Bergson's philosophical position as whole, his assertion here is primarily that the function of laughter is a social one of correction on human behaviour. In identifying the act of the mechanical absent-minded character as a common source of comedy, Bergson asserts that laughter has a moral role, it is a factor of uniformity of behaviours and it eliminates ludicrous and eccentric attitudes:

Beyond actions and attitudes that are automatically punished by their natural consequences, there remains a certain inflexibility of the body, of the mind and of the character that society would like to eliminate to obtain a greater elasticity and a better sociability of its members. This inflexibility is the comic, laughter is the punishment.

(Bergson, 1900)

This is clearly evident in the visual and physical comedy of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Harold Lloyd, who are of Bergson's time. But it is also evident in the artworks discussed

in this study, where we see clear parallels to the characteristic comical language of silent-cinema, particularly in Mitchell and Kenyon's films and Peoples Screen, that do not use audio communication, but also in silent moments from Hole-in-Space, the participants intuitively adopt comical melodramatic "Chaplinesque" traits and gesticulations. Through the method of editing and looping short video clips (GIF animations) from the three works discussed it is possible to identify many of Bergson's observations when viewing the three works alongside each other as follows:

Its Social Role . . . "Our Laughter is Always the Laughter of a Group"

In Chapter I, THE COMIC IN GENERAL THE COMIC ELEMENT IN FORMS AND MOVEMENTS, Bergson highlights the significance of the group, which he referred to then as "strictly human", but it should perhaps be noted that due to more recent studies of animal behaviour this should at least extend to the inclusion of other primates. In the context of the three artworks discussed here, the contagion of laughter amongst the group is communicated in and between the spectators as both comic performers and viewers, establishing and sharing in the experience of the group:

Our laughter is always the laughter of a group. . . . The first point to which attention should be called is that the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly HUMAN. . . . To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all must we determine the utility of its function, which is a social one. Such, let us say at once, will be the leading idea of all our investigations. Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a SOCIAL signification."

(Bergson, 1900)

In comparison we see large crowds of people gathering in all three artworks, whose improvised comical acts and scenes are quickly distributed and copied amongst the participants involved. Whether its waving hats and umbrellas in the air for Mitchell and Kenyon (Mitchell, Kenyon, Cruickshank, 2005), or hordes of people screaming, shouting and waving in Hole-in-Space (Hole-in-Space documentary video, 25/10/2017), or a synchronised wave and dance in Peoples Screen (Peoples Screen documentary video 25/10/2017), all the participants review and respond in very similar ways as they identify with the group through the self-view screen. This disembodied experience allows the individual the opportunity to identify themselves as a member of the group/ theatre troupe, or more specifically with the group's conscious experience and comical exchanges.



Figure 8: Comparative scenes of group behaviours seen in film and video stills from Mitchell and Kenyon in circa 1900 (left), Hole-in-Space by Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz in 1980 (centre) and Peoples Screen by Paul Sermon and Charlotte Gould in 2014 (right).

Its Mechanical Role . . . “That Side of a Person Which Reveals his Likeness to a Thing”

In Chapter II, *THE COMIC ELEMENT IN SITUATIONS AND THE COMIC ELEMENT IN WORDS*, Bergson reveals the significance of the mechanical body. The comical act as portrayed through the automatism of the performer, the ridiculous human portrayal of rigidity, mechanistic movement – that is movement without life . . . “When materiality succeeds in fixing the movement of the soul, in hindering its grace, it obtains a comic effect.” (Bergson, 1900).

The comic is that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life. Consequently it expresses an individual or collective imperfection which calls for an immediate corrective. This corrective is laughter, a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absentmindedness in men and in events.

(Bergson, 1900)

This impression of mechanised human automata is experienced and expressed time and time again in all three projects. Through the method of editing and looping of video clips, the disembodied experience appears to be played with and performed through mechanical reproductions of the self, as though a momentary suspension of self-awareness has occurred between the conscious experience of the participant manifested in their mechanically rigid representation on screen. A comparative example shows a young man walking out the factory gates in one Mitchell and Kenyon’s films (Mitchell, Kenyon, Cruickshank, 2005), as he approaches the camera his arms in unison start swinging in an exaggerated automated manner, so much so the beer from his tankard (which was a regular after-work beverage in the 1900s) spills out uncontrollably. In *Hole-in-space* a group of participants attempt a game of charades via satellite, where they proceed to walk around bent over like lifeless beings to portray the word “slouch” (*Hole-in-Space* documentary video, 25/10/2017). And in *Peoples Screen* a boy walks down some anamorphic steps as though he was operated by clockwork, clearly playing (with) his human avatar image as an automated figure in a ludic landscape. Throughout the examples the comical act is with the self, reflected in the screen (*Peoples Screen* documentary video, 25/10/2017).



Figure 9: Comparative portrayals of “mechanical movement without life” in film and video stills from Mitchell and Kenyon in circa 1900 (left), *Hole-in-Space* by Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz in 1980 (centre) and *Peoples Screen* by Paul Sermon and Charlotte Gould in 2014 (right).

Its Reflective Role . . . “It Is Comic to Wander out of One's Own Self”

In the final Chapter III. THE COMIC IN CHARACTER, Bergson discusses the individual character element, which is perhaps the most relevant and poignant reminder of how individuals adopt roles and characters in each of the three artworks discussed in this paper. It is clearly comical to wander out of one's own character, and equally amusing to the participants involved by adopting the typologies of comical characters and acts of their own through a range of melodramatic behaviours and mannerisms. But it is the opportunity to imitate our selves that is most striking in these projects. We have used Bergson's framework to understand why we laugh, but what these artworks show us is the significance and compelling desire to be able to laugh at ourselves:

In one sense it might be said that all character is comic, provided we mean by character the ready-made element in our personality, that mechanical element which resembles a piece of clockwork wound up once for all and capable of working automatically. It is, if you will, that which causes us to imitate ourselves. And it is also, for that very reason, that which enables others to imitate us. . . . It is comic to wander out of one's own self. It is comic to fall into a ready-made category. And what is most comic of all is to become a category oneself into which others will fall, as into a ready-made frame; it is to crystallise into a stock character.

(Bergson, 1900)



Figure 10: Comparative comical character roles seen in film and video stills from Mitchell and Kenyon in circa 1900 (left), Hole-in-Space by Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz in 1980 (centre) and Peoples Screen by Paul Sermon and Charlotte Gould in 2014 (right).

In this final clip comparison, the individual characters speak to us (and themselves) directly. A brief moment in one of Mitchell and Kenyon's street scene films shows a crowd of people assembling to be filmed from across the street, when a distinctively upper-middle class "gentleman", complete with top hat and winged moustache, walks directly in front of the camera, slightly out of focus and therefore clearly not intended for the shot. He stops to slightly tip his hat and give a wry smile before carrying on, making a characteristic joke of his interruption of the shot (Mitchell, Kenyon, Cruickshank, 2005). On the final evening of Hole-in-Space, a woman falls to her knees when she sees a long lost friend or loved one on screen, with her arms and head waving, screaming and slapping the ground in complete euphoria she momentarily up-stages everyone else's act (Hole-in-Space documentary video, 25/10/2017). And, finally, in Peoples Screen, just when everyone is busy taking selfies, a lady in Guangzhou raises her arms to the sky, looks up at the camera and twirls around in what appears to be a show of thanks (Peoples Screen documentary video, 25/10/2017). Each of these edited clips, of which there are many others, not only illustrates the individual character performance to us,

and them, but also to the group involved who receive this “stand-up” moment by offering them centre stage.

Over 100 Years of Telepresence: From Edwardian Selfie to Telepresent Comic

The striking similarity with the way audiences react and perform comical narratives from these early self-view film screenings to live satellite happenings and telematic performances possess all the unique traits of telepresent interaction and the selfie phenomenon. They clearly are performing to themselves as well as everyone one else who is present, but in that process of telepresent disembodiment their human avatars are no more representative of themselves as they are of the entire group. In all these works the performers on screen are the focus of our attention in a continual comical dialogue with them where the conscious experience of the group has melded between them from camera to screen and back. When watching these “two-way mirror” recordings, we are taking up the position of the persons within them, looking directly at the very same image that caused the effect we are now experiencing for ourselves. By watching these clips and recordings repeatedly we can start to unpick the subtleties and intricacies of these exchanges and the multitude of experiences within this rich web of social behaviour.

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