

Screening Social co-presence – both ‘here’ and ‘there’

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Abstract: In this paper I describe a project that proposes to place relatively simple communications technologies in public places, to create an 'always-on', real-time visual and aural connection through which individuals and the publics of each place may communicate, play, and perform, with one another, and for one another, in whatever ways emerge, for indeterminate purposes.

Rather than carrying art, entertainment product, news, advertising or private communications as such, and rather than working from a foundation of networked mobility and individuation, the project seeks to enliven public space, draw attention to place in a global context, and provide spectacle to create publics in public places, through communicating the improvised social interactions of people in the same place, to another place.

After describing the concept and its three suggested modes of operation, the paper discusses the project's underlying concerns with forms of spontaneous sociality; the construction of a public present to itself; the significance of public space and of play and performance in the public sphere; of the interest in seeing ‘my place’ and ‘your place’ in the same context.

The discussion concludes with a comparison of the proposed system to three others that in different ways share similar concerns – Lozano-Hemmer's Body Movies, i3's Satellite, and the Telectroscope – and the paper concludes with a discussion of the role of public screens in mediating a public sociality.

Keywords: Public screens, Public sphere, Communications Technology.

Introduction

The project discussed in this paper proposes to place large-format communications portals in public places, linking the people and the life of one place to the people and life of another.

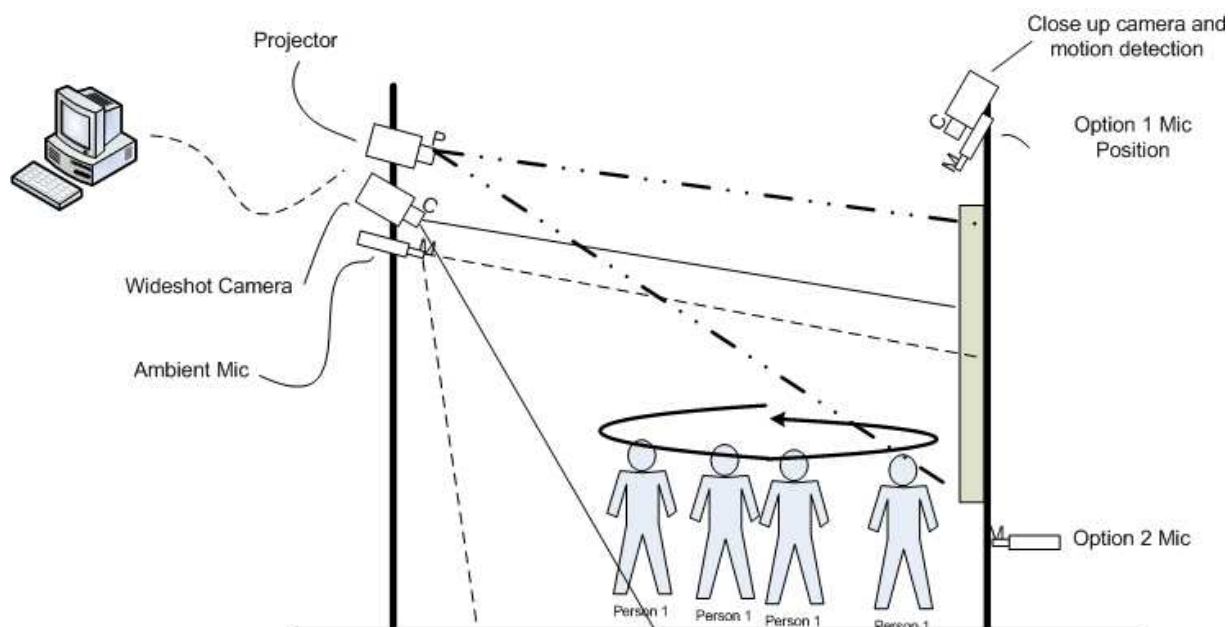


Figure 1: A Portal. (Illustration by Peter Benda)

Described in a sentence, the portal displays on the walls of laneways, an “always on”, real-time, one-to-one scale, visual and aural connection between one place and another, through which individuals and the publics of each place may observe, communicate, play, and perform, with one another, and for one another.

The project thus places a relatively simple communications system in public places, as an ambient aspect of the streetscape, and simply leaves it in public hands for whatever performance that might arise. Rather than carrying entertainment product, advertising, sporting events or news, (as does the BBC’s ‘Public Space Broadcasting’ initiative for example), and rather than carrying dispersed and personal media content, (as do mobile media in public places), the portals project seeks to redeploy what are now ubiquitous technologies to the public sphere, for whatever indeterminate purposes emerge, through use.

Funding has been unsuccessfully sought from three sources to install portals in various public laneways, several streets, and on a wharf in Melbourne, linked to public places that have a resonance with Melbourne – Tianjin, Milan, Thessaloniki and Southampton – each a sister city with well established and understood historical, cultural and community ties. At the time of writing an application for funding is being considered by the Knight Foundation, though not yet secured, so the project remains a mind-experiment rather than a real-world system, and its functions and implications are imagined rather than empirically determined.

The Portal

The most significant potential of the portal is, in a sense, potentiality itself. That is, the portal is pretty much a *tabula rasa*, or contentless infrastructure, and its uses and its point of being are not entirely clear (which may be why it hasn’t attracted funding!). However, its three modes of operation and the performances mediated by those modes are easy to describe – personal co-presence, public co-presence, and place in local and global terms – and from there it is not a great leap to a discussion of its implication for public space, the public sphere, and the construction of publics.

The three modes of the proposed sociotechnology are as follows.

1. Personal Co-presence

Spontaneous and playful use of the portal at an individual level is triggered when a person happens to occupy a ‘hot-spot’ in say, Melbourne, and a person also occupies a hot-spot in say, Tianjin. *Me*, a person who just happens to be standing in the hot-spot in Melbourne, will see the image of *You*, a stranger from another Place, on the screen (in fact, a prepared wall). The situation is of course mirrored in Tianjin. The portal uses motion sensitive cameras and recognizes that the hot-spots are occupied, and focuses a camera and microphone on the occupants. Hot-spots may be marked, by say a one-meter diameter brass-ring inlaid into the surface of the footpath (reminiscent of Victorian era time machines), or may be unmarked, to be stumbled upon.

You and *Me* may well wave to each other, blow a kiss, mirror-dance, make a rude gesture, or try to strike up a conversation. The sensation of communicating in real-time with a complete stranger from another land, due only to happenstance, using body-language, gesture and voice, is a potentially powerful experience for the participants, and at the same time makes for engaging street-theatre for local observers in the lanes and streets of each place.

Half-whacked people may well emerge from city clubs, pubs and bars and make their way to a portal for a bit of crude banter. Some people will go out of their way to be racially abusive, and “flashers” may well be attracted to the potential of an international audience. The Fallon Gong in Melbourne will no doubt pose a challenge to authorities in Tianjin. Australian Soccerroos supporters will no doubt challenge their counterparts in Milan and Thessaloniki. But such is the nature of a public sphere, and such is the nature of the public, and it is in our

interests that risks be taken and these spheres exist and are accessible, and whilst the ordinary law of the land constrains people's behaviour on the street in the usual way, the portal itself offers no further constraint. In this sense the Portal is simply communications infrastructure, to be populated as the public sees fit.

The 'blank screen' described thus far in the paper, populated or not only by passers by, may or may not constitute a vacuum powerful enough to seduce and hold our *flâneurs*, and convert them into personal communicants and public interlocutors. That is to say, it may not be enough to provide a camera, a microphone and a screen to communicate *with*, without also providing something immediate and to hand to communicate *about*. To further stimulate communication it may thus be fun to augment the system. For example, *You* and *Me* might be provided with a 'virtual balloon' sitting in the corner of the projected image. We might use an arm-motion to hit the virtual balloon into the air, and might set about cooperating to keep it in the air. We have something between us to play with and to communicate about. Although the portals are not intended to present the works of interactive media artists, the portals are consistent with the artistic project, which is to transfer subjective and inter-subjective lifeworlds to the public domain. Inventive interactive game designers will no doubt come up with all sorts of hijinks if given large format live images, motion sense cameras, internet connections, computers, and 50 or more participants on each side of the world.

But perhaps such fun and games will be a distraction from the simple presence of the Other.

As knowledge of the Portal becomes available, *You* and *Me* may also like to use it in strategic ways, by making pre-planned arrangements to catch up with friends or family. By meeting through the Portal, tourists, back-packers, conference delegates and business people can "video-conference" with one another, transmitting both voice and image in real-time.

And so the Portal is private, but it is also public. Whilst the communication between *You* and *Me* may be one-to-one and interpersonal, the denizens of the laneways in each city will witness their fellow citizens in their successful or less successful attempts at communicating. We are watching people communicating, watching people watching people, and watching people watching people communicating. Personal co-presence simultaneously creates co-present publics who are drawn to witnessing the live action and at the same time the screen action. The Portal's work in the simultaneous construction of multiple parallel publics, some here, some there, some watching the screen and others watching the communicants, provides a potentially rich field for the exploration of the construction of a public, and the nature of public spectacle.

I am present to you through the portal, but I am also present to those who witness my presence to you, both here and there. So individuals become community ambassadors of a sort, speaking for themselves, but also in a sense also speaking for those observing, who may of course intervene in the speaker's efforts at any time. Observers will bear witness to personal interaction, and may join in personal interaction, and this public witnessing of intimacy may well be in part heart-warming, in part amusing, but always interesting.

2. Public Co-presence

If the hotspots are not occupied, or perhaps after a set period of time, the portal may cut to a second mode of operation. In this second mode, the camera and microphones focus on a broader area of the street – say 10m-15m in length. In this mode the portal takes in whole numbers of people as they go about their daily business, and displays this 10-15m streetscape on a prepared wall in another city on a one-to-one scale. The sights and sounds of daily life in the laneway, in this place, in this community, are captured and communicated as life occurs within the focal area.

Our architecture and theirs, our streetscape and theirs, our time of day and theirs, our fashion and theirs, our faces and theirs, our pace of life and theirs, our sounds and colours and theirs, are each available to the other as it happens, where it happens, *in situ*. The citizens of the streets and laneways in these different communities thus see themselves in numbers, in the context of city life, and in the context provided by their counterparts from across the world.

Global and local comparisons and contrasts become evident by glancing from the street to the wall. There is also here. All the sights and sounds of street life generated by the numbers of people who just happened to be passing through the portal at that time, are captured and made available in real-time, across the world.

Used more strategically, groups of locals may choose to use the Portal in planned ways. Organised groups of people may gather at the portal to celebrate sporting, cultural, or other performances; planned events by musicians, artists, interest groups, school groups and what have you, may be narrowcast from one city's public places to another. The potential for organized political or religious interaction and intervention is also evident.

3. Place

The communications portals are 'glocal' – an ugly but useful term in this context. The portals use internet protocols to transmit video and sound from place to place around the globe, and are in that sense global. But importantly they are also clearly local. Video and sound is not transmitted from anywhere to anywhere, but from one carefully chosen point to another. As envisaged, the portals link a particular Place to another particular Place to operationalise the performance of historical, cultural and community links between those places. Global links between this Place and that Place may thus reinforce that which is local about a Place.

To further reinforce a notion of place, the portal may pull back from close-ups and mid-range shots of the here-and-now, and take a wider, more distanced, "bird's eye" perspective of the city, its communities, and its urban and historical surroundings. The portal may intermittently cut from the default mode where co-presence at the personal and streetscape level is mediated, to an 'Archive' mode, in which the life of this Place is recontextualised in space and time.

In 'Archive' mode, prepared file-images and sounds of the cities and its people are presented. These comprise combinations of panoramic images of the cities' urban landscapes, cartographic images of the cities, historical images of the cities, and prepared sound-scapes and montages of the cities and their peoples. The *flâneur* and the interlocutor are distanced from the immediate experience of life in the city by exposure to its history and geographic context, and by cross-cutting from one city to the other, comparison and contrast between the cities, the communities that inhabit the cities, and between past and present is invited.

By shifting the focus in this way to a different scale in space, and to a different point in time, the life of the street becomes part of a larger phenomenon, and is seen in the context of all of the city's streets, in the context of other cities, and in the context of history.

Place is important in our global networks, even though space may not be. The global mobilization of communications systems, corporations, individuals, armies, communities, products, religions, diseases, foods, cultural commodities, pollutants, technologies and values, is an experience that is materialised and performed in daily life here, and there, and this other place, and over there as well. That is to say, globalism is an unevenly distributed network of relations that is local at every point. And it is the localization of the global (everything is potentially in every place as a local resource) and the globalization of the local (everything in every place is potentially a global resource) that energises globalisation's promises and threats – the promise of mutually supportive synergies operationalised through interaction on a global scale, and the threats posed by the contemporary imperial conquistadors bent on maximising the exploitation of people and places under frictionless conditions.

Of course the portals are on the side of the natives, not the conquistadors, and the battle is not over.

Discussion

Public space has been granted a position at the centre of civil society – literally so, in the case of the Agora (Arendt), the Pynx (Sennett), the coffee house (Habermas), or the town hall (Tocqueville), and figuratively so, in the case of the provision of communicative space for public information exchange, discourse and contestation. Through most of human history these public spaces have been more or less clearly marked in the built environment. Architectural forms such as stone-paved town squares, market squares, meeting halls, the intersections of roads, village greens, amphitheatres, porticos, the forecourts of churches, village wells, shaded benches and snugs defined a space as a public place, and mediated the activities that transpired in that place. In the context of this discussion, the most important activity mediated by the use of these places is the construction of publics present to one another, and the exchange of information, conversation and debate among those publics. It provided a social and geographic space where such discourse might occur, and importantly, it provided a space in which a public might be known to itself as a public – as a collective that recognized itself as sharing a present and possible future. The use of public space for these purposes has thus been important in the history of democratic action and in the development of the notion of a community and a civil society.

The decline of public space and the public sphere is a phenomenon that is often remarked, and important (negative) characteristics of our current social condition are argued to be attributable to its fall (Sennett 1974; Putman 1995; Bauman 2000). Whilst in the 20thC the rising power of the state posed a threat to the notion of the Individual, in the 21stC the rising power of individualism and privatization posed a threat to the Public (Sheller and Urry 2003). Certainly, in the last 50 years and more, public space (and public service, public duty, the public sector, public interest, public opinion etc.) have come under sustained attack from both the left and the right on grounds of legitimacy, relevance, and efficiency. The Habermasian notion of the public sphere continues to be assaulted not only on these grounds, but by new technologies, by the erasure of clear boundaries between public and private domains, and by the interbreeding of the private and the public, evident in the ambiguous position of the mobile phone, shopping mall, web-cam, or talk show. The public invasion of private space (TV, radio and Internet in the lounge room), and the private colonization of public space (privatization in all its forms), now frames activity that is at once commercial, and social, and private, and public, and personal, and political, such is the ambiguous, shifting field upon which we play out our relations with the current lifeworld.

Is Facebook a public or private space? When I am alone in my car, am I in private? Is our water or electricity a public or private asset? When I use my mobile to make a call on the street, is that a private act or a public act? When I watch TV in my lounge room, am I alone? When I listen to my ipod on the train, am I in a private place?

Contemporary spaces that allow for the promiscuous intermingling of that which was public and that which was private has an effect not just on public space and the public sphere, but also on the notion of the public. That is, it also has also had the effect of dispersing the crowd. In these new hybrid spaces, people are often present together in large numbers – at the shopping mall, on the streets, on the Internet, on the phone, in front of the TV – but we are co-present individuals, not present to ourselves and to others as a collective – as was ‘the polis’, revered by historians of democracy, or as was ‘the mob’ – first present to itself, and then to its enemies.

The current lack of clarity about what is in the public domain, as a public interest (in the political domain), or a public asset (in the economic domain), or a public act (in the social domain), or a public duty (in the ideological domain), and what is in the private domain, as individual interests, private property, private acts, or individual subjectivities, has a centrifugal effect on publics like communities, who might now be better regarded as an aggregate of individuals with coinciding subjectivities, rather a collective with a distinct ontology and ongoing solidarity.

So, public space for action in the public sphere is difficult to identify in contemporary society, and the existence of publics (as opposed to individuals) that might inhabit such public spaces are equally difficult to identify.

Whilst public space in the towns and cities was once demarked only in bricks and mortar, the contemporary city also marks its public spaces electronically (McQuire 2006). The BBC's 'Public Space Broadcasting' initiative for example, has installed large screens in city squares across five cities, with a further fifteen planned over the next five years, with the primary aim of screening BBC news, information, and sporting events, and for screening alternative content such as experimental film and video (McQuire and Cubitt 2007). McQuire and Cubitt have also identified new public screen initiatives in Berlin, Amsterdam, Melbourne and Seoul, and the public screens of Times Square, Tokyo, Hong Kong and other cities are well known. Contemporary public spaces are thus marked as such by electronic 'monuments', on both a grand scale (Piccadilly Circus) and on a small scale (almost any bus stop). Public places grand and humble now display advertising, sporting events, performance art and news bulletins, and these electronic spectacles are integral to the definition, function and ambience of public spaces.

In addition to being marked out by these media of spectacle, display and dissemination, public spaces are also marked out by electronic media that surveille and police the publics that gather in these spaces, neatly closing the loop on the public that is both the source and the target of information flows. The London 'Ring of Steel' is the premier example of an ambiguous public-private city centre defined by a wall of electronic surveillance, an initiative since taken up by Manhattan and no doubt by other cities, and reproduced on smaller scales in 'gated communities' all over the world.

By positioning electronic displays within public spaces, and positioning surveillance cordons within and around the perimeters, electronic media have provided definition and focus to the space, and help create the publics that inhabit those spaces in large numbers for routine socio-commercial activity. Electronic media also provide a compelling reason to come to a public space on special occasions, and anyone who has watched a major international sporting event on a public screen rather than at home can attest to the vibrancy of the experience.

The portal described here gestures to these issues, albeit in small ways. The portal suggests that personal co-presence, public co-presence, the construction of a public present to itself, and of publics present to one another, the emphasis on place, and links between place, and the communication of all of this across the world, can contribute to the public sphere, and to public life in the city.

These same themes of emergent cooperative action among the publics of public spaces also run strongly through other work.

Body Moves

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's Body Movies is a performance art installation where the public are the performers and the installation consists of a) a very large prepared wall in a public place, b) very bright spot-lights, and c) a series of projected images of local people. As he originally envisaged the installation, the projected portraits would be washed out by the bright spot-lights until revealed by the shadows of passers by. The performance of the public was thus thought to be concerned with the revelation of the portraits. But the more interesting aspect of the installation in action had little to do with revealing portraits, and a lot to do with spontaneous and cooperative shadow-play that the public was moved to engage in among themselves. The shadows cast by the spot-lights varied in size from 2 to 30 meters – depending on the person's distance from the wall – and up to 50 or so people were able to play with their shadows collectively and individually.



Figure 2: Lozano-Hemmer's Body Movies. (Reproduced from Google Image Search)

Shadow puppet 'giants' play with shadow puppet 'dolls'; shadow animals chase one another, and so on. People in public places, who may well be strangers to one another, are relating to one another in ways that are both playful and considered, and people are aware of themselves as a plurality, as well as their embodied individuality.

The claim for public good that is implicit in the portal project, and I think in Lozano-Hemmer's work is in part a response to a symmetrical set of social harms associated with the parlous state of public space and public infrastructure for people to be present to one another as subjects and as a public. Playing together in public places, through infrastructure such as that described, is one way of doing this.

The Satellite

Another example is a concept that arose at the i3 Summer School 2001, which took place at the Interactive Institute in Ivrea, Italy, where designing new interactive technologies for communities was the core theme (Battarbee, Baerten et al. 2002). One such technology was the "Satellite", a concept for a communications system with 2 input-output devices that look like large soccer balls. Each is placed in a different part of the city, whereupon one communicates sound from its location to the other, which reciprocally communicates vision from that place back to the first. One node of the system can thus hear but not see, and the other can see but not hear.

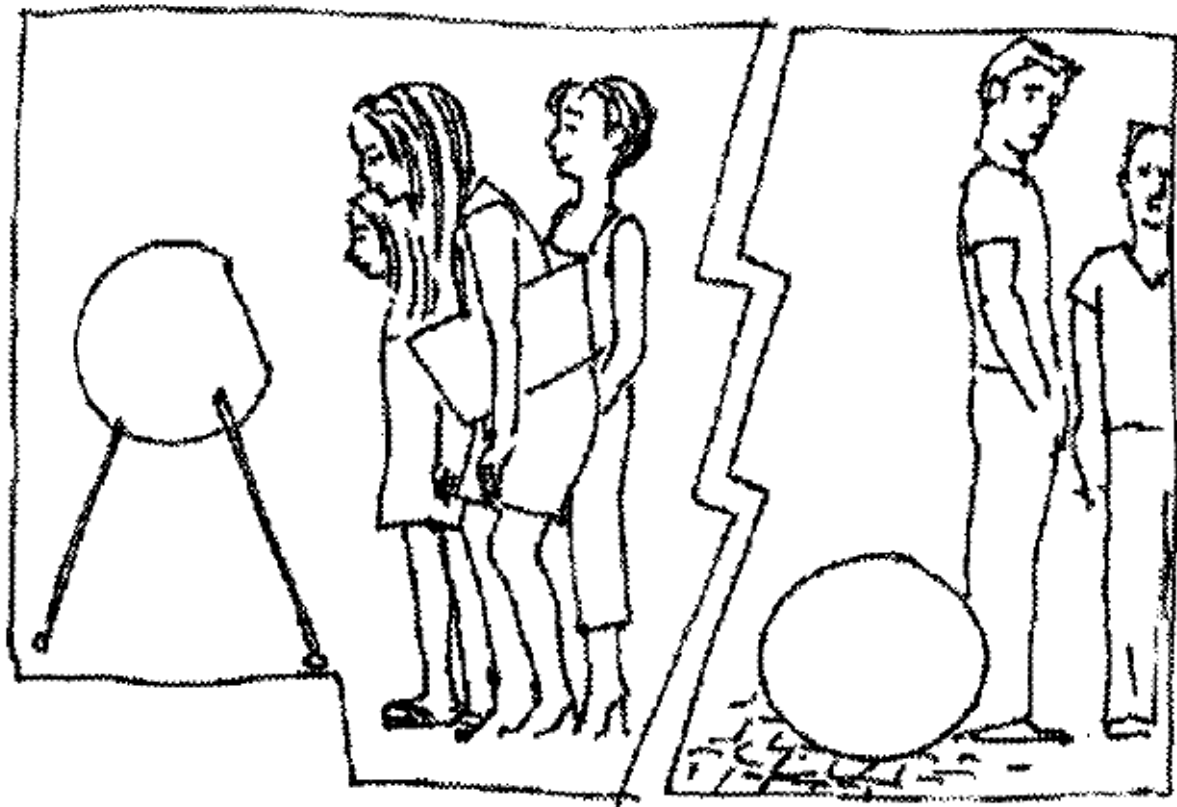


Figure 3: a sketch of the Satellite. (Reproduced from Battarbee, Baerten et al. 2002)

The Satellite concept deliberately intervenes in communications modalities to create an asymmetry, and thus awaken curiosity. Body Movies is also interventionist in its dramatic construction of shadows.

The Telectroscope

The Telectroscope is a portal that was installed between London's South Bank and Brooklyn, New York, and was in use from late May to early June 2008. The installation was designed by the artist Paul St George and was sponsored by Tiscali, a British telecommunications company. The conceptual and physical 'framing' of the Telectroscope is very appealing. The story is told of Paul St George's inheritance of a long forgotten tunnel that was dug under the Atlantic by his Great Grandfather, Alexander Stanhope St George, inventor of the Telectroscope. Through the placement of mirrors throughout the tunnel Alexander enabled the people of New York and the people of London to see and hear one another, predating teleconferencing by more than a century. The story is well reinforced by the physical framing of the portal - a well constructed Jules Vern like device that marks the tunnel mouth and frames the screens physically and as a narrative.



Figure 4: the London end of the Telectroscope (photographed by the author)

People were charged one Pound to use “the tunnel” for a minute or so, and waited in the queue for over an hour to do so. According the attendant this is typical, and many people did not doubt the truth of the ‘tunnel under the Atlantic’ story. Their use of the tunnel was as anticipated for ‘Me and You’ interaction – people wave to each other, blow a kiss, mirror-dance, make rude gestures, and try to strike up a conversation.

My own attitude to framing the performance of the system in this elaborate way is ambivalent. The tunnel story is very appealing, and the fact that many people are prepared to believe it attests to its appeal. The physical construction is artful, and suits the story very well. On the other hand, the fact that the action is framed at all removes it from the streetscape and contextualises it as something different – in this case, a commercial, retro-sci-fi entertainment. (Many sculptors have a similarly antagonistic attitude to the plinth – a structure that frames the sculpture and thus decontextualises it and marks it as alien). Rather than allowing ‘there’ to be a part of ‘here’, the Telectroscope’s elaborate framing removes and separates the action from the street, and deliberately contextualises it as unordinary. To hear the story of this mighty Victorian-era engineering and daring do, to see the magnificent brass and iron tunnel mouth, to queue for the system, to pay to use the system, to be positioned in front of the frame for a defined period, all contextualises the experience as a self-conscious entertainment rather than a part of daily life on the street.

The Portal described at the outset of the paper is much less interventionist in so much as, for the most part, it simply transmits sound and vision in a straightforward way, projected against a wall as part of the streetscape. This minimalist approach seeks to hide the technological component of the sociotechnical, and focus on the social interaction facilitated by unadorned image and sound, whereas Bodymoves, the Satellite and the Telectroscope all draw attention to the sociotechnical machinery and associated performance as an artistic or entertainment artefact. Clearly though, all four concepts share important concerns. They are all concerned with play, spontaneity and improvisation as a means by which people might interact. They are all concerned to encourage interaction among strangers. They are all concerned to create a local spectacle and thus a local public. They are all concerned with

public interaction and performance in public places. In these ways they all propose to use contemporary technologies in novel ways.

Conclusion

Screens are proliferating in private spaces, in public spaces, both fixed and mobile. A screen experience is present in the lounge-room, the stadium, the theatre, the office, the streetscape, and in the hand. Maybe we *have* become the cursors of our screens (Holmes 1997). We experience the outdoors through car windscreens, we remember through photo screens, we amuse ourselves through gaming screens, we do our work through computer screens, we announce ourselves through social networking screens, we know the world through TV screens, and we talk to our friends through handheld screens. These screens are the public sphere (DeLuca and Peeples 2002), but common characteristics of these screens also include the individuation of the screened experience, and the commercialization of the service and the spectacle.

Our own screens enable us to be together, but also to the point, they enable us to be alone together. We are alone together watching the Sopranos and we are social on Facebook, but not together. We are not truly alone – for we alone are not alone, together we are all alone – and this is better than simply being alone. But this form of togetherness is vicarious rather than visceral, and makes for an attenuated sociality.

In contrast, the sociality mediated by the shared public-private spectacle of the cinema screen, live concert or football stadium, provides for a being-together of a different order. We are not alone, and we are not just together in not being alone, we are together to one another. We constitute a public to one another, sharing not just the spectacle that brings us together, but also sharing the gravity and momentum of common presence, and the energy of feedback and feed-forward loops that operate within that self-conscious co-presence. The portal intends to create infrastructure for such a public sociality; a shared presence present to us all, albeit on a small scale.

Where the portal differs from the cinema, the football, and most other public screens and spectacles, is that commercial or artistic content is not the catalyst for the creation of public sociality. The catalyst is the simple presence of the public *per se*, the street, the crowd, the life, and the public interest is in one another – in the personal co-presence of *You* and *Me*, and a public co-presence of Others, and not in a contrived spectacle that delivers a public.

The portal can and should take a place as common public infrastructure, and as public infrastructure the portal opens up a new aspect of the public sphere to be put to whatever purpose the public desires, as an open-access, un-moderated channel of playful, personal, social and cultural exchange between cities and their peoples.

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