

## ALL THE WORLD'S A SCREEN

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### Abstract

Charlotte Gould and Paul Sermon developed and presented this collaborative new artwork entitled *All the World's a Screen*, a live interactive telecommunications performance, to link public audiences in Manchester and Barcelona. On the evening of Saturday 28th May 2011 participants at MadLab in Manchester's Northern Quarter and Hangar Artist Studios in Poblenou, Barcelona were joined together on screen for the first time to create their very own interactive generative cinema experience, complete with sets, costumes and props. Employing the scenography techniques of Alfred Hitchcock the artists created a miniature film set in which the remote audiences acted and directed their own movie, transporting participants into animated environments and sets where they created unique personalised narratives.

**Keywords:** Ludics, community, embodiment, telematics, open-systems, telepresence, intervention.

### Introduction

Hinting at Shakespeare's assertion that all the world's a stage in his play "As You Like It", this telematic installation entitled *All the World's a Screen* linked audience members at Hangar Artist Studios, a creative arts and media exhibition space in Poblenou, Barcelona with participants at MadLab, a community arts and science lab in Manchester's Northern Quarter; attracting the broadest possible audience to encounter an interactive art project occurring in a wider cultural and public context.

The installation connection was set up as follows. Both the Manchester and Barcelona venues had a chroma-key blue back drop screen and floor installed in their respective exhibition spaces, together with two video monitors, one facing the Blue screen from the front and another from the side (stage-left in Barcelona and stage-right in Manchester). Above the monitor facing the screen was a camera, approximately 2.5 meters from the ground. The two geographically remote installations looked identical. However, much of the technical system was located in Barcelona, where the camera image of a person standing in front of the blue backdrop was fed to a video chroma-key mixer, which replaced the blue area with an image from a MacBook Pro that contained a choice of seven video backgrounds. This part of the installation was referred to as "The

seven stages of man" and will be explained in further detail later. The output from the mixer was then passed to a second video chroma-key mixer together with the live incoming videoconference image of a person in front of the other blue screen in Manchester. The final combined image of the participants in Manchester and Barcelona, positioned on the background scene from the MacBook Pro, was then sent directly to the two video monitors around the blue screen in Barcelona and back via the HD Videoconference system to the monitors in Manchester.

Between 4pm and 6pm on the 28th May 2011 the MadLab audience in Manchester joined participants at Hangar in Poblenou, bringing together a mix of eccentric players, creative interventions and surreal improvised performances in spontaneous interactive moments of hilarity, emotional exchanges and thought provoking dialogues. Whilst audience

members in Barcelona had the opportunity to construct sets and edit scenes, participants at MadLab in Manchester replied with improvised props and costumes to provoke a juxtaposed montage of impromptu performances and dialogues.

### The seven stages of man

Members of the audience in Barcelona were able to decide on the context of this interactive telematic performance by using an iPhone app to select between seven different background sets, which consisted of live webcams scenes and animated environments. The participants in Barcelona could then stand in front of the chroma-key blue screen and position themselves within these stage sets to join the 'players' in Manchester within the dramaturgy of the model set as they journeyed through "The seven stages of man".

This specific part of *All the World's a*

**Fig. 1.** "All the World's a Screen" at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona MACBA Study Centre, May 2011 (© P. Sermon and C. Gould)



*Screen* offered audiences the opportunity to create the narrative and dramaturgy of the complete installation. “The seven stages of man” consisted of a one-metre square table top 1:25 scale model of a house that included seven ground floor rooms connected by doorways and corridors. Audience members were invited to place a hand directly into any of the rooms in the model to arrange the sets and interact with participants. Four of the rooms contained web cams that were connected to a MacBook Pro via a USB hub. Using custom made software built with Quartz Composer, the MacBook Pro could display a full screen output from up to seven different video sources, which included the four web cams as well as three QuickTime movie animation files. When a participant pressed a key (1 to 7) on an iPhone keyboard App the video output displayed the selected video stream until another key was pressed. The selected video scene then provided the backdrop to the *All the World's a Screen* telematic performance.

### Urban Interventions

*All the World's a Screen* was developed as a practice-based research project to pose the following questions: Can playful environments and ludic interfaces offer opportunities to learn and resolve issues? Can we develop an interactive environment that offers opportunities for the audience to be creative and make real choices? Can the audience use technology as a release, to daydream, or to play, raising awareness and informing us about everyday life? Edward Shanken and Kristine Stiles [1] argue that interactivity per se does not automatically produce works that offer a creative voice, a dynamic role or ‘agency’. They suggest that these possibilities can be limited/foreclosed when the artwork is driven by a technical development or commercial requirements, and when artworks do not offer real choice or opportunity for creativity. First and foremost *All the World's a Screen* strove to address these questions whilst remaining mindful of the position posed by Shanken and Stiles et al. This open-system approach to interactivity is a fundamental underpinning of the concept and development of the project.

The locations and associated communities within which the installation took place were also a key focus of the research, and we were able to investigate how the communities responded and interacted with each other. *All the World's a Screen* took place in two simi-

lar environments, with a comparable history. “Hangar” is a converted textile mill in Barcelona, and “MadLab” is housed in a building that was previously a retail space in Manchester. This change of use from industrial to creative spaces is a common feature of Manchester and Pobleu. This textiles heritage connection is also why Pobleu is referred to locally as Barcelona’s Manchester.

The project linked two unique environments with similar attributes; both were media lab spaces that attract a local artistic community and maintain open access to the public. It was interesting to see these artistic and technical communities as well as their associated audiences engaging with each other, and the way that external influences affected the dynamic of the group. This live telematic performance was presented at Hangar as part of their open studio season, which involved inviting local residents to explore and experience artworks and installations from both local and visiting artists. The event also involved live music and coincidentally a screening of the European Championship football final between Barcelona FC and Manchester United, which attracted a unexpected audience and provided further interesting material, both for us as artists to present as part of the set and for the audience as a subject for engagement. *All the world's a Screen* was designed specifically for a studio environment, with its blue screen and model set. The audience members in Barcelona were encouraged to put their hands inside the model and play, move objects and furniture around, and thus have a direct impact on the set itself. Through their playful engagement they were able to develop a filmic montage, edited through the choice of cameras, scenes and action in order to create their own cinematic narrative experience.

An important part of the development process of the piece was our engagement with the environment in Barcelona in order to find inspiration for the development of the set. In this way we provided a framework from which the two communities could engage and develop a dialogue. Grant H. Kester [2] questions the value of the artist as “expert” who imposes their views on communities, seeing this approach as patronizing. He argues that communities should be involved in the art works themselves in a proactive way. *All the World's a Screen* offered a framework from which the audience could literally use their voice, participate in role-play, and proactively create this narrative. Lucy Lippard [3]

talks about the importance of the role of the artist in raising awareness around issues, to dissipate preconceptions, question conventions and foster dialogue. The Manchester and Barcelona audiences were representative of a broad cross-section of the local community and they responded not only to the environment but also to each other and were encouraged to improvise with props and costumes that were provided. There were numerous visitors for whom this was not a planned activity, who stumbled upon the work while just passing through. Consequently, those who engaged with the work were not always the traditional art gallery audience, which added to the mix of participants and to the richness of the responses.

### Ludics: The Importance Play

During the initial concept development phase we decided that it was very important to recognize that while the installation took place outside a traditional gallery setting, the signifiers were clear that this was not a reality but a fictitious space in which it was ‘permitted’ and safe to play. We wanted therefore to use references to the stage or set. Pioneering performance artist Allan Kaprow aimed to make “the line between art and life as fluid and perhaps as indistinct as possible” through “Happening” events. Shanken and Stiles [4] warn of the risks that this can trigger, citing an event where one of the performers who suffered an injury was ignored by the audience who thought the accident was part of the act. They argue that Kaprow himself rejected the “Happenings” movement after ten years as he said that audiences were not ready for the creative act of co-creating artworks.

The suggestion might be made that it is important for audiences to distinguish between art and life in order to give them a license to play, not as themselves but in a role. With this in mind, the set or the stage reference in *All the World's a Screen* worked as a trigger for the audience that they could engage in dialogues from the bizarre to the insightful and be uninhibited in the knowledge that they were on screen in a role rather than as themselves. The project’s reference to the theatre was also intended to encourage an audience to play. Many of the early modernist art movements were interested in the connection between art and the theatre and opportunities this provided to engage with a proactive audience. For example Filippo Tommaso

Marinetti in the manifesto “Variety Theatre” commented:

“The Variety Theatre is alone in seeking audience’s collaboration. It doesn’t remain static like a stupid voyeur, but joins noisily in the action, in the singing, accompanying the orchestra, communicating with the actors in bizarre dialogues.” [5].

Fluxus, which often took place in stage-like venues and staged “Happenings”, took art events out of the traditional gallery and onto the streets, generating a sense of theatre and interplay between audience and performer. Many of the Fluxus Happenings prepared their audiences with scripts or instructions and in this way they asserted the artists’ authority over the piece. Sonka Dinkla argues that “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.” [6].

Sonka Dinkla suggests there is a fine line in the relationship of control and freedom between user and artist. Cassells argues that this power imbalance should be redressed, highlighting the importance of empowering the audience, and the need to “focus on the experiential, everyday lived experiences of individuals, emphasise collaboration, and attempt to promote the distribution of authority” [7]. Sharon Daniel argues that artworks should offer the opportunity for “self articulation and self-representation” to bring the disenfranchised back to “its particularity, identity, subjectivity, political agency, and power of choice” [8]. This aligns with Slavoj Žižek’s ideas that we should not impose our world-view or preconceptions on others, but instead offer a framework whereby the audience can represent themselves [9]. This idea of self representation is explored by Grant Kestler who argues that artistic practice can be used to promote change, offering a voice to the ‘other’ in a socially inclusive way irrespective of alternative world-views [10].

This installation is an open system where the audience can take the narrative in any direction they choose, but as artists we offer a framework from which to respond. The title *All the World’s a Screen* is a direct reference to Shakespeare’s “As You Like It”, which suggests we are all merely actors playing roles as if on a stage, and the “seven ages of man” refer to different life stages

which we all recognise and will experience throughout our lives. In “The seven stages of man” each room represents the different life stages of ‘infancy’, ‘schoolboy/childhood’, ‘lover’, ‘soldier/worker’, ‘justice’, ‘pantaloon’ and ‘second childishness’. Our environments were inspired by representing each life stage as a symbolic metaphor through the specific rooms and environments

the authentic self and the rise of the charismatic leader and performer. He argues that the twentieth century citizen has become polarized and isolated. From this perspective the constant search for self results in a narcissistic view of the world. Our search for the authentic self, alongside social mores around remaining silent in public, has resulted in a fear of revealing this private self in public.



Fig. 2. “All the World’s a Screen” Audience participants at MadLab Manchester, May 2011. (© P. Sermon and C. Gould)

within the house, drawing on the metaphysical and psychological work of artist such as Louise Bourgeois as well as Ilya and Emilia Kapakov.

This is an opportunity for reflection on the themes and stages of life, but also provides a narrative for different ages to interact. At one point a couple in Manchester sat on the bluescreen set with their newborn baby and a participant in Barcelona responded by immediately selecting the infancy room to place the performers in context. Each individual brought their own ideas and experience to the project and were encouraged to improvise with their own props. One participant wearing a hat in the shape of a cat’s head used this as part of his interaction, making it into a mask so that he became half cat half human. In this way the narrative is created through shared stories.

Richard Sennett [11] talks about the importance of role-play in society and he argues that the modern being’s search for “true” or “authentic” character as a result of capitalism and secularization has led to a “crisis of public life” in the quest for

While social mores around silence in the company of strangers in the urban environment remain, in the twenty-first century we have seen the emergence of digital personas in culture through pervasive media. Scott McQuire argues that contrary to the Orwellian fear of a surveillance society, the global success of Big Brother evidences that we have embraced the webcam, projecting a public persona through social networking and reality television [12]. The focus of this television show was on the personality traits of the participants and personal interactions between them, and the dynamics that resulted under stressful conditions. These interest points demonstrate the continued focus in post-industrial society on the ‘authentic character’ and charismatic leader. Walter Benjamin writes of the shocking character of the industrial city of the nineteenth century, where strangers expect to pass and look into the faces of hundreds of people each day without speaking a word to each other [13]. Installations such as *All the World’s a Screen* offer a platform for social interaction, referencing the

idea of a stage or television set, to encourage role-play and to give license to adults to play. Sennett talks about the changes that took place in the nineteenth century around the parameters of play for adults and children, and a division that started to emerge between acceptable adult and child play with delineated social space and the expectation that adults would not play with toys, for example. *All the world's a Screen* offered the opportunity to break with this convention, with children's toys making up part of the set.

*All the World's a Screen* further offers the opportunity to explore our digital persona and culture as a platform for role play, using social networking technologies such as the web cam and video conferencing to enable new ways of performing role play. The focus is on play, rather than on projecting a 'true' personality, which means the project potentially provides an alternative approach to social networking. Sennett argues that in pre-industrial society, this opportunity was offered by the theatre, where interaction between audiences and players was encouraged. Players and audience members were able to intermingle because seats could be brought on stage. He also points out that the audience responded in a way that would be considered embarrassing to a modern audience with emotional outbursts and raconteur.

Sennett also states "...in a period like the 18th Century, actor and stranger would be judged on the same terms, and what one could learn from the one in the domain of art, one could learn or apply to the other in the special domain of impersonal life. And therefore in a very real sense, art could be a teacher about life; the imaginative limits of a person's consciousness were expanded, just as in an age in which putting other on, posing, and the like seem morally inauthentic, these limits are contracted" [14].

*All the World a Screen* in this way aims to inform us about how we might find ways of engaging communities. It is an open system aimed at promoting interaction between communities using play. This open system offers participants the opportunity to undertake multiple roles and open dialogue, often relying on body language when language is not shared.

Conventions of play were being reassessed from the eighteenth century and in 1793, Friedrich Schiller, in a letter to his sponsor defined a new meaning for "play". He said that it could express the

simplest to most complicated of ideas from "...the aesthetic state", "a state of the highest reality so far as the absence of all limits is concerned" where we can experience a "unity of human nature." [15]

Claus Pias [16] describes this as "...not about games (Spiele) but rather about play (Spiele), about a playful attitude." Jean Jacques Rousseau referred to play as an essential learning tool in *Émile, or On Education* [17] and Richards Sennett [18] reaffirms the importance of play for all ages for the maintenance of a functional and healthy society. It is notable that the German word for 'play' and 'game' is the same, 'spiele'. Hans Scheuerl [19] defines games as having five attributes; (i) "freedom", no goal outside it's self. (ii) "Infinitude" with no preconceived ending, (iii) "closeness of the game" the rules or defined area of play, (iv) "ambivalence", movement between rule and chance, serious and fun, impulse and cognition, immersion and reflection, (v) "virtuality", separate from "real life" and the self.

*All the World's a Screen* encompasses these attributes as defined by Scheuerl: it offers freedom, with no goal outside it self, it is an open system with no defined finish, there are rules in so far as a defined camera area, and the narrative can move between different states. It aims to encourage interaction through play, encouraging people who would otherwise never have met to interact, talk and role-play. Visitors have the opportunity to engage with both local communities and others globally and engage in "ludic" play. Through our practice based research we gathered data on the audience's response to the environment, and how the different representations of rooms and objects were used to develop stories. The data was gathered through filming the audience on the set. The way that the audience participates with interactive installations can be dependent on various factors and this is reaffirmed by various studies that found that audience interactivity depends on the emotional state of the user [20], and that levels of interaction are dependent on the personality of the user [21].

*All the World's a Screen* embraces this philosophy and aims to inform us about how we might find ways of engaging communities. It is an open system aimed at promoting interaction between communities using play. This open system offers participants the opportunity to undertake multiple roles and open dia-

logue, often relying on body language when language is not shared. Opportunities for open interactivity are key to *All the World's a Screen* and there were alternative ways for interacting with the piece at different levels of engagement. The participants in Barcelona had the option of either controlling the camera views and environments in the model set or being on the blue screen, interacting with the set or characters on screen. The audience could place their hand into to the set and on screen it would appear as if the "Hand of God" had intervened in the interaction [22].

## Conclusion

Identifiable signifiers, such as the use of a stylized or unreal looking aesthetic or an obvious set, can indicate to the audience that this is something other than reality and potentially could give them a license to role play. They are not playing themselves and therefore they can feel uninhibited to engage. Through this project we were able to research alternative ways of using social media and networked culture, which avoid focusing on the self and instead look to role-play as a way of enhancing interaction between communities. In the large urban cityscape, interactive installations can offer opportunities for people to experience their environment in different ways: talking to strangers, responding creatively, and finding opportunities for autonomous decision making and self-representation. Such installations license people of all ages to play and explore communication in order to cross the boundaries that exist between people on the basis of culture and language. Through *All the Worlds a Screen* we explored the potential for triggering ideas for narrative through this open interactive system in order to identify new forms of engagement and interaction within a globally networked society.

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**Fig. 3. Hangar Studios in Poblenou, Barcelona May 2011 (© P. Sermon and C. Gould)**



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#### Project Web Sites

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