

# Flirting Across a Distance

## How a screen creates intimacy with the shadow

by Joëlle Bitton



Paris

**P**assages, an interactive installation, explores mediated intimacy by linking strangers across geographic distances. Using two screens located in different cities, it merges close-proximity interaction with remote communication by superimposing dynamic shadows of two bodies and their movements.

In public installations in Paris and Strasbourg, a white screen was set up in the middle of an isolated room in each city. Spectators were initially drawn in by catching a glimpse of their projected silhouettes on the screen. Moving closer, they realized that the shapes moving within their own silhouettes really belonged to a stranger in a different place. Surprise gave way to curiosity, prompting the physically-separated strangers to explore a relationship.

### An Interface Between Two Cities

While screens are typically used to view multimedia from a distance, the remote synchronous communication for this close-proximity installation was used to build up desire and require direct, physical contact with the screen. I was inspired by the famous arcades of Paris, playgrounds for

lovers during the early 20th century. *Passages* was designed with a similar intent: to heighten the physical and emotional interaction facilitated through “media spaces”—electronic settings where groups of people communicate with one another while remaining physically apart.

The large screen in *Passages* displayed the local participant's silhouette outline, and the moving shadows of a complete stranger's in another city inside that outline. To create a greater sense of intimacy, the *Passages* team (Stefan Agamanolis, Céline Coutrix, and myself as part of the Media Lab Europe's Human Connectedness group) worked to develop a computer vision system that enables interaction at a very short distance from the screen surface. Using ISIS, a programming language developed by Stefan that uses contour tracking to detect human shadows, we were able to rapidly process movement and make the desired interaction responsive in real-time. The vision system registered participants' bodies and silhouettes no matter how close they were to the screen's surface. The result was a perception of unusually close proximity, which was surprising and perhaps unsettling at the same time.

## of a stranger

### Bodies as Interfaces for Interaction

Interaction with the *Passages* installation involved a process of continual discovery, as we learned from observation of users. Initially, people focused on their own projected silhouettes, waving their hands up and down to get their bearings. They would then notice something moving “within” them. Puzzled and surprised, they would play along, exchanging movements with their remote partner. One woman slowly stepped towards the screen, her arms extended out, waiting for the stranger on the other side to make the next move. As participants became more comfortable with one another we saw them, for example, waltz together.

Passersby became involved in a game of hide and seek: the movement was a formidable means of body awareness and communication with the other. Having overcome their own initial shyness, some participants leaned into the screen to get a better sense of proximity and greater physical connection. Many found having another person’s silhouette within their own a surprising invasion of their personal space. I experienced this myself, feeling embarrassed when I met the distant person I had inter-

acted with in-person. I didn’t quite expect this reaction when designing the installation.

### A Facilitation of Intimacy

The *Passages* installation addressed elements at stake in a sexual interaction: the encounter, the shyness, the taboo, and the hide-and-seek game of love. Its interface acted as a curtain between people, facilitating anonymous expressions of desire and sensuality. The levels of interaction varied from one person to the other and heightened over time, from an initial wave, to synchronized movements, to dancing on screen. The abstracted interface facilitated the increased comfort and sense of play between strangers. More significantly, the *Passages* installation pushed the bounds of distance. Distance itself is often considered a negative aspect—something to be reduced and alleviated by electronic media. In the case of the *Passages* installation, distance became a creative force, allowing a bonding experience and bringing people closer, even if only for a moment.



Strasbourg

