

Grace, Helen, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Screens, Presence and Memory in ‘Virtual’ Public Space

We are in the AsiaWorld Arena in Hong Kong on a chilly night for a Bjork concert, promoting a new album. Around the stadium little blobs of light flash continuously, like dim stars in a firmament. In a curious response from such a highly technologized performer, Bjork pauses to ask the audience to put away their camera phones in order to be ‘in the moment’. But for the Hong Kong audience, the use of the camera phone in this context registers its presence more completely ‘in the moment’ than almost anything else, since the ‘self-imaging’ of the gesture is precisely what produces a sense of presence in the event, securing the very reality of the moment, which is otherwise unsecured. Although the small screens and little flashes of light from camera phones have no capacity to illuminate the well-lit star on the distant stage, they do locate the photographer-subject, lighting and enveloping him or her in a halo - a kind of aura – situating its subject precisely in the moment, registering presence in the event being witnessed. Additionally the small pulses of light as camera phones flash in an asynchronous rhythm across the crowd have the effect of making individual audience members visible in a random pattern of light, the flow of which is controlled by audience rather than by technicians sweeping the crowd with choreographed lighting effects – so a kind of micro-agency is established, transcending the control of such events. This paper, drawn from current research, explores the implications of micro-screen proliferation in public space in imagining new forms of diffused/distributed creativity and cognition.