Elecam 'Artefact in Residence'

Elecam — Reconnecting a Circus community with an 'Artefact in Residence'

In this project creative technologist Phil Heslop worked with circus groups based in Newcastle. He used a video capture-enabled 'Artefact in Residence' to help bring together a circus performer community. While ubiquitous video surveillance tracks people in public spaces, and data surveillance tracks people online, for this project Phil sought to collect data in ways that did not threaten privacy and would, we hoped, unite a diverse group of circus practitioners.

This circus community had lost its collective umbrella organisation and had suffered through the consequences of COVID. They were interested in how digital technology could help them reconnect outside of the standard social media platforms. As a collaborative collective, all parties were keen to connect their practices and share their rich, expressive expertise in some way.

Phil held initial meetings with five representatives of the circus performance groups with skills across aerial, acrobatics, juggling, magic and unicycling to discuss their challenges and how the hiCraft team might respond. Through discussions between performer groups we landed on an idea to capture and share data (in this case video) of their practice using a simple non-internet connected artefact.

"it gave us an opportunity to kind of compliment each other and be like, oh, that was really great what you did there... It was great. I really loved when you did that... I want to add to that"

'*Elecam*', as it became known, was crafted in the form of an elephant, and played the role of 'Artefact in Residence' — alluding to an 'artist in residence' whose role is not to simply make a record of an event, but to interpret it. The elephant was both a significant symbol for the circus and a playful reference to the 'elephant in the room', a reminder of the challenges within the community in the preceding months.

Putting the hiCraft ethos to work

Our Craft Ethos (see separate poster for details) was woven into the project in a number of ways. Pictured here are images of each stage of the *Elecam* project, along with comments from the circus performers.

Personalising IoT

The *Elecam* incorporated a camera and raspberry pi that the performers positioned in their studios themselves to record video of their practice. As a sensor-enabled device, *Elecam* contrasts with the default use of sensors in commercial Internet of Things (IoT) devices that are highly synchronised and 'always on', and some would argue, prioritise business interests over interpersonal connection. In comparison with unobtrusive, hidden video surveillance in public (CCTV), and increasingly in private spaces (home security and monitoring systems), the *Elecam* and the simple technology it uses was clearly visible to users. Unlike 'smart' speakers and other IoT technologies that often obscure or downplay aspects of their functionality, the function of the Elecam is explicit within its design — it's there to watch you.

Materiality and care

As the participants became more comfortable with the *Elecams* and their use, they applied their own creativity to the crafting of various costumes that lent the *Elecams* character and expression, and embodied a sense of care. This also further cemented an experience of active ownership and agency for the individuals involved, which included both the principle participants and the people that attended the classes they ran. Performing to their personalised *Elecam* became a theme within many of the classes, especially those with younger children.

Bespoking and active creating

The circus performers were able to switch their *Elecam* on and off and point the camera where they chose. Ultimately they were in control of the what they recorded. The resulting footage was then shared with Phil.

Enacting participatory ways of working, we consulted with the performers and presented the recorded videos back to them along with a range of video filter options to abstract the imagery. The filters both emphasised aspects of their practices, and helped anonymise anyone featured.

Beyond the physical personalisation of the *Elecams*, bespokeness was also present in the process of filtering through curating the content that was shot by the various performers, separating out some parts and amplifying others. Unlike the ubiquitous use of filters in social media that lead to unrealistic and unhealthy aspirations of beauty and perfection, the *Elecam* filters were designed to anonymise individuals and subjectively emphasise and celebrate movement and form.

Responsive performance

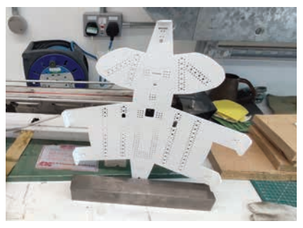
The final, edited videos were shared amongst the groups. Each group chose a clip of another group's performance, and a filter to apply to that clip, as the basis and inspiration for a newly devised piece of work.

The collaborative process of using footage of other performers in the group suited the inclusive caring nature of circus, where there is support and space for diverse learners and practitioners across age groups, socioeconomic status, and neurodiversity.

The new performance pieces came together in a highly entertaining, skillful and celebratory two-hour circus performance. Each of the circus groups chose to project their selected filtered video onto the performance stage, creating an asynchronous interaction with the clips of their circus colleagues. All performers delivered an entertaining and reparative expression of community and care that was very positively received by the audience.

"I feel like the whole process has been quite healing. I think that there were chasms and they feel a lot narrower and more negotiable"

Design and build of *Elecam*



"I think that rather than just having a video in the room, having a little cute thing that obviously somebody had made, and referring to it... not necessarily a thing with an animistic soul, but definitely one step closer to that"

"It gives it a different weight, doesn't it? It's a fragile object. It gives it something you have to treat with a little respect, and think about it in a different way"

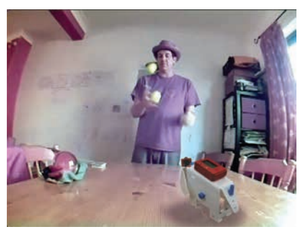
Personalising the *Elecams*

"That we could say that... it wasn't going to identify you, that changed how people responded... the fact that they knew that it was anonymous"

"It was really important. Customisable... I love that"

"I think the fact that it was a creature that has a face was really good. We could definitely be close to it and you could anthropomorphise it... I love the joke... that we could talk about the elephant in the room"

Capturing performances

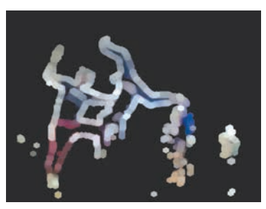


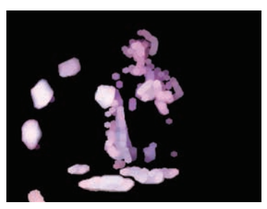
"the default with The Elephant... you knew that it wasn't going to be shared beyond our community... that definitely influenced me when I was being filmed... [rather than] try and produce something... for TikTok or for Instagram, to try and show me off as a performer... it felt more freeing"

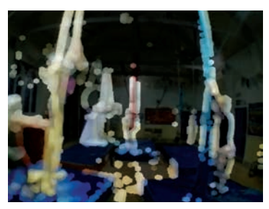
"We did a little bit of performing to it and then a little bit of ignoring it"

"I think limitations are useful when you're trying to create art... there was quite a limited scope to what would be able to be seen by the camera... That's why it ended up broken, because we had him on the floor and we were performing over the top of him, so he could get the underneath view, just to bring something different"

Phil's algorithmic filters applied to captured performance footage







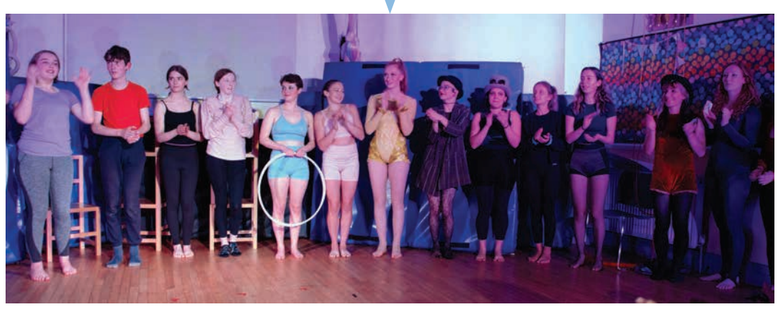
"... having the restrictions and filters, or having the filters inspire as well, was great"

"I really had this kind of lo-fi feel to it. I liked that"

"I think the filters... gave it such a different emotion. So the grainy ones had so much more gravitas and serious... they were like deep voice, and the frizzy ones were like high voice..."

Final show in which performers interacted with filtered video footage

"So I liked that whole process of coming together and we didn't know what it was going to be like and there was this whole new interaction"



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hiCraft

Investigating how we can define and foster a healthy relationship between people, the internet and things through the ethos of craft

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hiCraft is a research project, based at Northumbria and Newcastle Universities in the North East of the England, exploring healthier ways to live with IoT using craft as a methodological and practical lens. hiCraft speaks to concerns about trust, bias and the lack of transparency around the way we currently digitally connect. Our investigation seeks to define and foster a healthy relationship between people, the internet and things using craft-oriented thinking and making.

The hiCraft team are Prof Justin Marshall, Prof Jayne Wallace, Prof Jon Rogers, Dr Nick Taylor, Dr Philip Heslop, Dr Jayn Verkerk and Esther Kisby.
For more visit www.hicraftnorthumbria.org

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