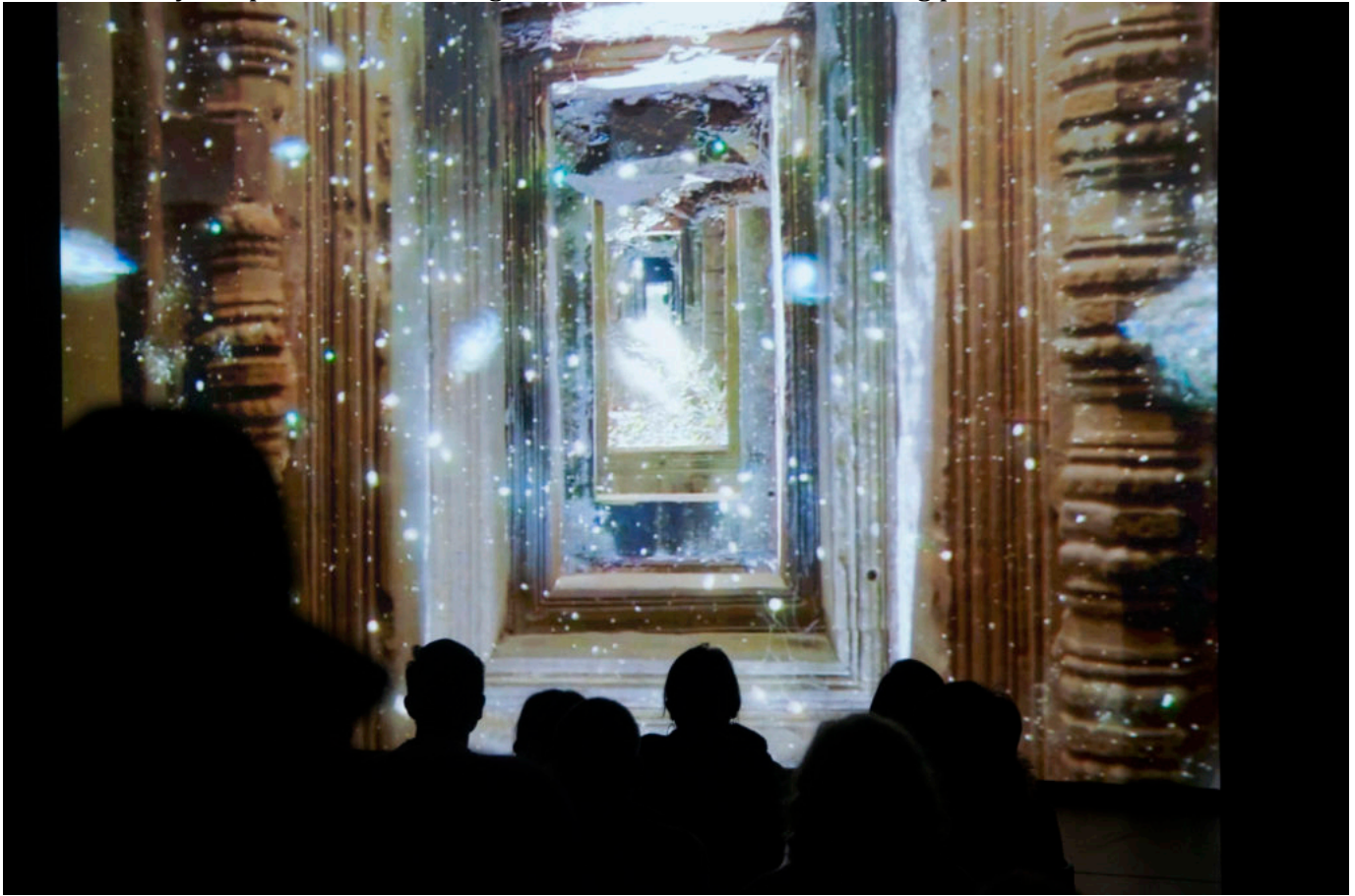


The Mirror by People Like Us – background information and teaching pack



The Mirror is a large-scale audiovisual collage project created by first navigating hundreds of preexisting feature length movies, searching for conceptual/actual subject matter pertaining to reflection and projection. The initial idea was to depict the camera as a torch that shines light down dark corridors and as an eye that watches people when they are alone, and then through navigating all the footage to see what new stories emerge. The piece organically developed further to also focus on multiple views and depictions of the self, the masks that we wear, representation of gender through the lens, using parallel narratives across screen(s), depicting an ever changing stream of conditioned processes rather than "objective" or singular, fixed being. The camera gaze is indeed a torch, spotlighting the recipient's vulnerability. When making a large or immersive work, especially a collage work, it's important to make a rich enough "umbrella" subject because once one delves into the subject all sorts of corridors and doors open up, presenting all sorts of possibilities about the subject matter. The Mirror is a perfect subject because it literally reflects the process.

The selected source material was then edited into thousands of snippets which were labelled and the descriptions subsequently examined to find similarities and crossovers that might be emerging in descriptions/storylines.

A conceptually related soundtrack is composed in parallel to finding these ur-subjects and threads, also created by appropriating and recombining from sections of hundreds of preexisting songs, as well as using sounds from the original films. Sound sometimes works a little differently, in that it might be more instantly recalled from memory, whereas when taking notes of movie footage it is impossible to remember all the references and important to write them down, or even better type them out, and then print out the notes and put them on the floor. The floor serves as the canvas for ideas and you put the work together on the floor like a jigsaw, and it will ease your mind from trying to recall everything. This is an exercise in editing and juxtaposition, also an investigation, an "operation" working with the premise that if you cut into something and isolate it from its "finished" guise you discover new stories and information relevant to the present and future.

Published material is often seen as "finished", the end of the story, not available for comment, a sealed up museum-like product, isolated on an island, away from ideas and reflections. By use of collage, one can unthread, rewind and redirect content to discover what other stories may be hidden, allowing an active dialogue both with the external content, and also

The Mirror by People Like Us – background information and teaching pack
challenge the routine ways in which we may be limiting our own creativity by our own fixed (isolated) ways of thinking. Recombining these hundreds of movie storylines into new combinations can create results that are more than the sum of the parts and beyond our usual pattern of creating stories alone.



The Mirror has a number of offshoot projects. This includes three artist commissions, where Dina Kelberman, Hearty White and Mark Gergis were invited to “reflect” upon The Mirror. It was left up to them how they do that, the only condition being that it must be published at the end for free on the internet.

The first work is an a/v piece by **Dina Kelberman**. The title is “Reflects”. Dina says:

When I thought about the word “reflections” this is what my brain showed me. Something about reflects, reflex, reflection symmetry, shapes, walls, and now that I think about it it’s probably a lot to do with sitting in a tiny room full of corners all day every day. Also laptop symmetry. These might all just be portraits of my laptop.

Media link: <https://dinakelberman.com/reflects> *(enable pop ups to experience!)*

The second of the commissions is this 50-minute new audio piece by POREST (Mark Gergis) called “Abject Mirror”. Mark says:

Porest is dragged through an inconvenient network of paranormal subterfuge after exposing something significant that may have happened 33 days from now. Audio-drama with advertisements and musical accompaniment. Listen here:

<https://porest.bandcamp.com/album/abject-mirror-2>

The third is a brand new 50-minute audio work by **HEARTY WHITE**. You can listen at:

<https://peoplelikeus-vickibennett.bandcamp.com/track/the-mirror-2>

The Mirror by People Like Us – background information and teaching pack



We commissioned **Graham Duff** to watch *The Mirror* and write a reflection upon it:

The mirror is an object of near alchemical potency. A tool of transformation. The mirror has the power to show us our reverse twin. The mirror allows us to look ourselves in the eye. The mirror shows us the world as it almost is.

The modern mirror as we know it was first produced in Germany in 1835 by the chemist Justus von Liebig who developed a process whereby a thin layer of metallic silver was affixed to a pane of clear glass. We might assume that before then, anyone wishing to gaze upon their own reflection would have had to look into the calm surface of water or highly polished silver or gold.

However, the very first mirrors are believed to have been created in Anatolia (modern day Turkey) around 8,000 years ago. They were fashioned from the black volcanic glass known as obsidian, which would be ground and then polished. An image which perhaps suggests the dark monolith of Stanley Kubrick's *'2001: A Space Odyssey'* (1968).

The mirror has been a constantly recurring theme within the history of art. It is often used to invoke vanity or narcissism, although sometimes it may be suggestive of verity. It is also frequently used to reflect an alternate or altered world. In Jan van Eyck's *'The Arnolfini Marriage'* (1434) a convex mirror on the back wall reflects the reverse of the scene before us. In René Magritte's *'Portrait of Edward James'* (1937) a man stares into a mirror and sees not his face but a reflection of the back of his own head. From the early 1960s Michelangelo Pistoletto printed full length portraits on large mirrors of polished steel, so the figures depicted appeared to be standing within the rooms they reflected. Also since the early 1960s, Yayoi Kusama has been creating installations filled with strange gourd like objects in a space whose mirrored walls and ceiling give the illusion that the room stretches into infinity.

In cinema, the mirror is no less a potent tool and it features in some of the most memorable moments in motion picture history. From the poet passing through the mirror into the Underworld in Cocteau's *'Orphée'* (1950) to Robert de Niro's Travis Bickle talking to his own reflection in *'Taxi Driver'* (1976). From the shoot out in the hall of mirrors in *'The Lady From Shanghai'* (1947) to the imagined mirror in *'Duck Soup'* (1933) where Harpo Marx pretends to be his brother Groucho's reflection.

And when a mirror appears in a scene within a motion picture, surely the majority of us have looked to see if we can catch a glimpse of the camera operator or crew in that reflective surface.

The Mirror by People Like Us – background information and teaching pack

Images of mirrors – large or small, truthful or deceptive, cracked or haunted – occur again and again throughout Vicki Bennett's *'The Mirror'*. But there are also other recurring visual themes; tracking shots moving through corridors, arrivals and departures through doorways, doors opening of their own accord, characters leaning into walls as if to test the limits of the reality they find themselves in, disasters both natural and supernatural, and extreme close ups on the human eye (something else which is often referred to as a mirror).

In amongst the harder to identify footage, we can see images extracted from the work of some of cinema's true geniuses: Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles, Jean Cocteau, Stanley Kubrick, Fritz Lang and André Tarkovsky.

It takes a brave artist to use the work of geniuses as their source material, but Bennett is nothing if not democratic in her process. As equal time is devoted to work which is generally deemed more low brow; horror and sci-fi. Also well represented are the stark and moody compositions of film noir – a low brow genre which has been allowed, via the passage of time, to be considered a worthy art. A consideration which remains perpetually just out of reach for horror and sci-fi.

The horror films of the Hammer studio are especially well represented here, with moments from *'Dracula'* (1958), *'The Devil Rides Out'* (1968) *'Taste The Blood of Dracula'* (1970) and *'To The Devil A Daughter'* (1976). But Bennett has extracted elements from other more idiosyncratic horror films, such as *'The City of the Dead'* (1960), the John Wyndham inspired *'Children of the Damned'* (1964) and perhaps the definitive portmanteau horror *'Dead of Night'* (1945) featuring a story of a haunted mirror which projects a quite different room to the one in which it resides.

Bennett also elects to include some of the most familiar material in cinema. There are extracts from *'Mary Poppins'* (1964), *'Close Encounters of the Third Kind'* (1977) and *'The Matrix'* (1999). There are sequences culled from some of cinema's lodestones: *'Metropolis'* (1927) *'Citizen Kane'* (1941), *'The Birds'* (1963) and *'2001:A Space Odyssey'*(1968).

But here, as in all of Bennett's work, she achieves a transformation. She takes material we feel perhaps over familiar with and, through its placement within a broader narrative, she allows us to see it from a fresh perspective. Musically too she often takes compositions which have become almost transparent through over familiarity, *'I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas'* being a prime example. But here too her editing process finds new portals within these soundworlds.

Bennett's film work frequently exhibits an obsession with the lining up of cinematic motifs which she observes reoccurring across a range of genre. Sometimes the effect of this repetition can feel ludicrous and comical. A good example being a sequence from Bennett's *'Dreaming'* (2011) in which a series of individuals, in a variety of films, wake from a bad dream, sit bolt upright and stare wide eyed down the barrel of the lens. At other times, the effect of these segues of identical motifs can create a dream like lucidity. A prime example can be found in the sequence in *'The Mirror'* where we see a series of doors opening one after the other. An image ripe with both potential and foreboding.

Bennett's eye seeks out these instances of cinematic storytelling and links them across different eras and across different genres. But in the final analysis, her work would seem to celebrate those recurring modes of storytelling just as much as it delights in derailing and rerouting them. -- *Graham Duff May 2018.*

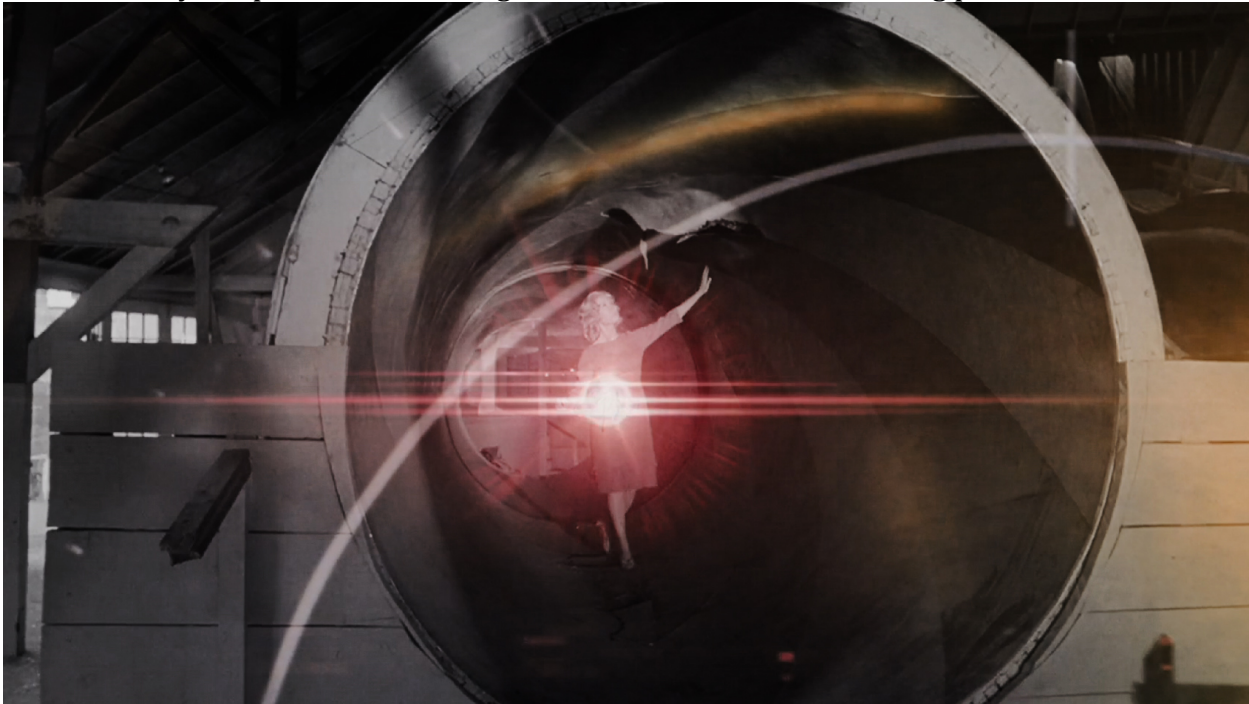
The Mirror by People Like Us – background information and teaching pack



We really recommend collage as a tool for creativity. It allows you to layer elements not previously associated with one another, which can trigger ideas through those juxtapositions. The following conversation excerpt was conducted between Vicki Bennett and WFMU DJ, artist and The Mirror commissionee Hearty White in September 2017. Here I am talking about some of the qualities of working with collage, layers and going beyond the frame:

VB: ... I had to go back to what it is that I'm trying to do: through collage to invite someone else to experience a world consisting of fragments and layers that we can enter into and take and make meaning from. Not just one meaning, but as many different meanings as there is people. Making moving collage I gradually realised that this medium breaks beyond the rectangle, beyond the screen – and that collage is all about that... what cubism was partly about. We use materials on a surface, in a frame, whether that be the TV or something you place on the wall. But really we want to go through and into that surface to engage with it. I want the surface not to exist. In fact the surface does NOT exist. There is no actual point between us and something else, whether that be the reflection in a mirror or the air outside with our own breath. The idea that we are experiencing someone else, whether that be art or actions, at what point is that our experience or our concept? There is no determined point, it does not exist.

The Mirror by People Like Us – background information and teaching pack



We also made a new film for improvising musicians and artists titled **Objects In The Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear**. This film is available to anyone with a solid proposal of performing to it in a public venue, or purely to use as a student or teacher. You can get this film direct from People Like Us by way of our [Contact Page](#).

This is not the first film we have made of this type. Previous to this was [Notations](#) (which included a [national tour](#) in the UK (followed by further dates internationally) with a fantastic roster of improvisers, supported by [Sound and Music](#)), as well as some collaborations where we have made the film then made sections available to other artists and musicians to respond ([Gesture Piece](#) and [CCitations](#)).



The Mirror by People Like Us – background information and teaching pack

In relation to this project we also conducted a number of radio and magazine interviews.

Listen to

BBC Radio 3's Late Junction, where we talk with Anne Hilde Neset about The Mirror:

<http://peoplelikeus.org/Late-Junction-Interview-People-Like-Us-8-January-2019.mp3>

BBC Radio 3's Hear and Now, where we talk with Robert Worby about collage and they broadcast The Mirror performance

in its entirety: <http://peoplelikeus.org/Hear-and-Now-interview-People-Like-Us-interview-19-January-2019.mp3>

We also did an interview with Emily Bick from The Wire magazine:

"I believe that something does not diminish by doubling it and duplicating it, and I don't believe in the art gallery ethic of the less there is of something, the more value it has," declares the UK collagist

People Like Us aka Vicki Bennett has been sampling, editing and mashing up bits of films and music into increasingly complex psychedelic collages since 1991. Her films are an audiovisual overload, full of startling juxtapositions and wry humour, and rich in details that emerge with repeated viewing. She will perform her new work *The Mirror* at Rich Mix, as part of at London's Splice Festival, on 12 May. Dedicated to audiovisual performing arts, Splice runs from 10–13 May and a full programme can be found on the Splice website. On 11 July, Bennett will also perform *The Mirror* as part of a double bill with Carl Stone at Cafe Oto in East London. She discusses her new work with *The Wire* Deputy Editor Emily Bick.

Emily Bick: You're presenting *The Mirror* at Splice festival – how long did it take you to put it together?

Vicki Bennett: The thing about working in the way I do, collaging lots and lots of footage, I collect things along the way – so I collect hard drives with lots and lots of snippets of labelled edits. For instance, I'll have *Gold Diggers Of 1933*, synchronised dancers, Busby Berkeley, so things like that will already be there. But that project I started last summer.

Which part of it did you work on first, the audio or the images? Or did it all happen in parallel?

They work quite hand in hand, because I start by looking for related material. In this case it would be to the mirror – I'd start searching the internet for things to do with the mirror, but also for surfaces, for things going through things, the image of something, the reflection. But I do this with audio and with moving image at the same time, through forums and Facebook friends and all kinds of things.

There are three or four big themes in *The Mirror*. You have a whole sequence of doors, or portals and windows; you have one of aliens and biblical shepherds; you have a sort of chapel/horror sequence, and then you have a whole thing about eyes and zooming in close on people's faces. What made you come to that progression? How did you associate all of those images?

Well, I don't want to be crudely obvious and stick to the immediate subject, I love to go on wild tangents. Because that's where you get to be creative with things. So technically the way I make these things is I'll search 300+ movies based on an inkling that there might be content in there, and then I'll make tiny edits from those movies, with a description and the title of the movie, and then once I've either run out of time or think I've got enough to start editing, putting stuff together, I'll print out the file list on paper. All the descriptions, both of the music content and the movie content things, and then I'll look at it all as text, I'll cut it up as text and start looking at it on the floor. And then I'll start making stories out of it, new stories, new themes, things that are more fluid than banging a drum that 'this is a mirror, this is a mirror': you kind of make tangential stories out of it. I like what I do to be very fluid and psychedelic in the true sense of things forever changing and moving, and there are no hard edits in my movie. It's all dissolves. Because I try and make it like the brain, where you're constantly moving subjects – one minute you'll be thinking about one thing, and five minutes later you'll be thinking about something completely somewhere else. I like to treat my movies the same way, to make any subject much more playful and fluid.

I watched Carl Abrahamsson's 2015 documentary about your work, *Nothing Can Turn Into A Void*, and you pull up this intricate geometric structure you've made, out of the cutouts you've printed of all your descriptions – and it looks like an Escher drawing turned into a sculpture. Do you make those while you're piecing these edits together? Is that how your brain sort of collages the ideas?

The Mirror by People Like Us – background information and teaching pack

When you work on a computer, it takes up a lot of your creative energy, and also you can't fit all your ideas onto a screen. The thing about this is you kind of want to see the whole picture, everything you've been thinking about, and the only way to do that is to get out of the computer and into physical form. So I make all these paper things to guide me through this mass amount of information that I'm putting together. And a lot of artists do this, not just working with film, but I've met a lot of people who do the same thing, you can come up with clusters, or mind maps. It's a really nice way of working, you can just get out of the computer and into physical forms where you can see right in front of you everything that you've thought about, rather than relying on your poor old memory.

You were talking about things forever changing, and [when we talked briefly at Cafe Oto] after watching *The Mirror*, you said that every time you watch it you're going to find something you didn't notice in it, you're going to make new connections. It seems like a lot of your pieces work like that because they're so rich, connections just arise out of your experience changing as a viewer, and the things you look for and respond to.

Yeah, the thing about making collage, I kind of call myself a collage artist, is because it's beyond the actual medium. It's more about bringing together different things in a transformative way, but previously existed, that work in that way. You're bringing about associations that forever do change, because you're making a kind of puppet show, but with many layers of things to see or hear, and whoever's experiencing it, they're never going to see it all at once – particularly with *Gone Gone Beyond*, which is a 360... you kind of have to experience it a few times. I try and do it in a way that it's not irritating, so that they don't feel like they're missing something, I like there to be a continuity and a glow to it so that whatever people do experience at that time, that's it for them. But the thing is, that's like real life as well, both for this and the 360, we're forever experiencing all sorts of things that we're missing out on because we've only got two eyes and two ears; but our nervous system makes that necessary that we have to limit our appreciation through that. I try and make my art to be like the experience we get with our senses, but you know, collage is a very deep thing in that it's many, many layers of things, and I like it that people bring their own experience to it, but obviously I'm in there too, because I'm obviously manipulating and affecting their experience as well, but hopefully in a – I want it to be in an elevating, positive way.

A lot of your early work used archive footage – this might have been down to what was easier to get hold of. You had the Prelinger archives and a lot of UK 70s and 80s educational or informational films. Some of the imagery could have been seen as nostalgic to a particular time and place. I was wondering if there was a need for people to have a kind of kinship, or awareness of a particular set of images to draw certain associations. How important is it to be from the same culture that the images come from? Or do the juxtapositions have a language of their own, because you are so transparent about where the edits are and what you're doing? Do you need to have the cultural background to fit this stuff into for it to work?

No, I don't think you do need that. I mean, to start with I was working with Rick [Prelinger]'s footage in the early 2000s, because – it was partly to do with availability. That was the advent of broadband, and Rick was one of the first people to be putting great moving image footage online, to high speed download for free. It was a bit of an issue back then, the availability of good quality footage online. Things have changed massively in the last 18 years, and obviously I am good friends with Rick. So [using his archive material] was partly circumstantial, and partly because it was great footage. I moved away from that when I felt like I'd used everything I could find in the archive at that time. And it was also the time when you could start getting things from Pirate Bay, and likewise, you could also hire DVDs and rip them. I wanted to use well known feature films, because I've always used well known music in my music sampling, and I wanted to couple the visual effects in the same way.

Regarding nostalgia, I'm not keen on that word, because I don't like the cosy connotation to that. I don't avert from that, but I'm very much into being hyperreal, not the idea that you shut down and you sit surrounded by cotton wool, you know. But one thing about archives, people seem to think that that's different to any other way of working, but it isn't because we're all reliant on the past for the way that we work. It's like the beginning of this conversation is already the past; we're not working with the future. We're lucky if we're working with the present a lot of the time. So I don't see working with archives as any different from working with any other palette. It's just relatively new in art, like in the last hundred years. So I see what I do as folk art in the age of digital reproduction: I'm working with the palette of the time. But I see it as the palette of now, not the palette of the past.

I read your essay about the liberation of broadband, and when Ubuweb went up... this is the one you wrote for *The Wire*, the Collateral Damage essay in 2012 [subscribers can read it online], about the cloud, and how exciting it was to have access to all this stuff. You had a really good point that I liked, about people listening to more less often? So people would have lots more music that they would be listening to, but they wouldn't be listening to it as intently as they would have been when they only had access to a few things. If we're going towards a future where there's so much stuff online, and hopefully everyone can explore their interests in cinema, and music, into really specific and obscure specialties, is one of

The Mirror by People Like Us – background information and teaching pack

the things about Hollywood that makes those images so powerful that they are one of the last shared sources of culture?

It is, it is. Oh yeah, you were saying before, do you have to identify with a culture, in order to enjoy the movies? Well, I can't speak for someone working in a similar way with a different culture. I haven't been to the Far East, say, with what I do. But what I can say is once you edit something, to start with, it's like a thesaurus, or a film buff fest, where everyone's going, oh, there's that film, there's that film. But after about five to ten minutes that starts to fall away, and it starts to become the experience of just the content, dislocated. And that's what I want to do.

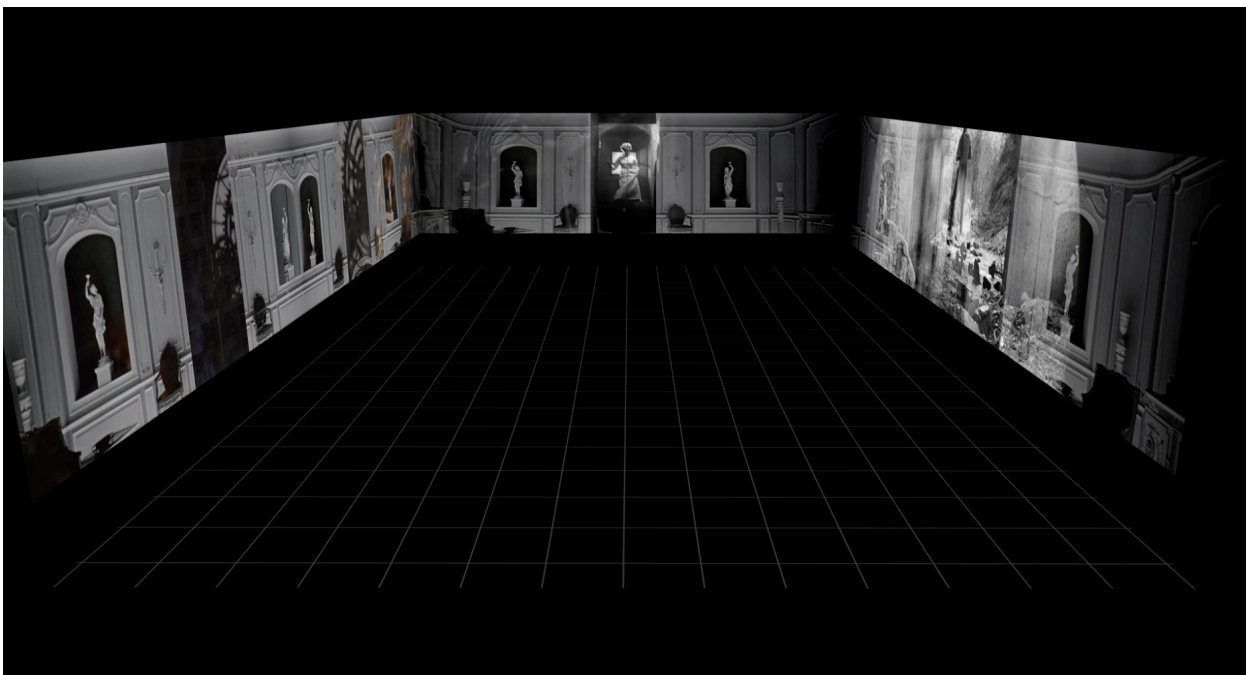
The nostalgia element, that could be just your memory of when you first experienced, or first heard a piece of music, or first saw it – and that's great, but what I like about that is that your memory is only creating something instantaneously, apparently. Apparently every time we have a memory, we're making it anew. And they're pretty unreliable anyway, memories. Also, your experience of something changes, like for instance, if you're listening to a piece of music and something really extreme happens, your new association with that piece of music will be different to what you had before that happened. So your experience of these archives will change with your experience of life. That's great. If I'm working with this stuff, originally your experience might be the Hollywood movie, or seeing it in the cinema, or remembering something from the 70s or growing up or something. But if I dislocate it and associate it with something else, it's just as likely that a future association will be with what I put with it, as in the same way as when people make mash-up music, which is a simple version of what I do. I changed the original association, but also, if you hadn't heard the original, if you'd only heard the mash up, and then you heard the original – then that goes to show that the flow of time isn't always forwards. Because my association with mash-ups is discovering the originals for the first time through the mash-ups. So time doesn't go forward, it's all over the place.

And film is a loop anyway, it's like time passes within the loop, and then the loop also passes through time.

Exactly.

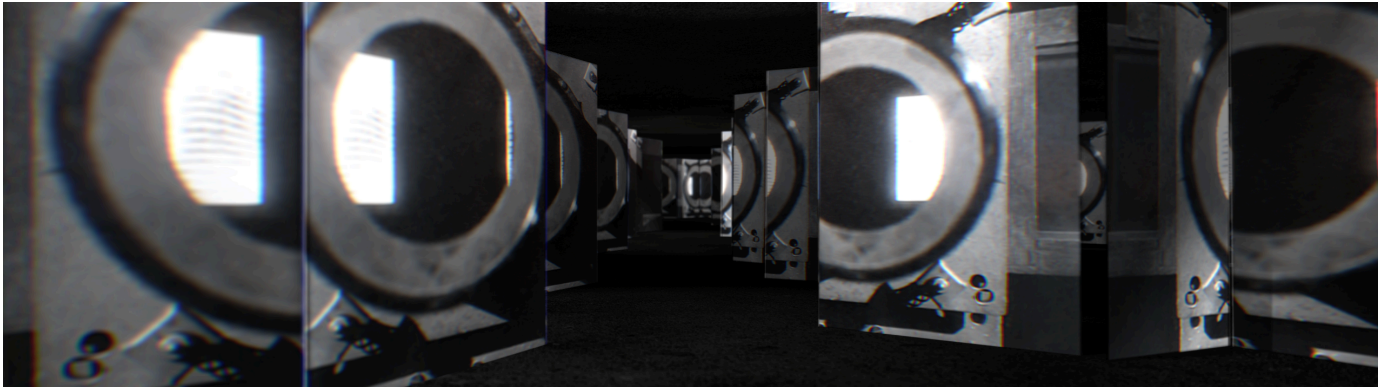
In so much of your work, you show the editing, you show what you're doing, you show the dissolves, you show what's going on with a green screen, you'll have two screens above each other – and when you're being so open about that, it's like you're being really generous to the viewer, it's like you're saying: look, this is how I put it together. You're showing how it's done, so it's not an illusion to trick the viewer; it's something you can dip into and be fascinated by.

Well, you know, I believe in abundance and sharing of this stuff, and things shouldn't be locked up, they shouldn't be locked in archives, they shouldn't be locked behind walls, behind firewalls. I believe that something does not diminish by doubling it and duplicating it, and I don't believe in the art gallery ethic of the less there is of something, the more value it has. I think that everyone should be trying to interact creatively with what's around them, and I just want to show them one way that you can do it. -- By Emily Bick



The Mirror by People Like Us – background information and teaching pack

In the past 3 years we have been thinking more and more about working beyond the screen parameters, not just with layers of collage that immerse one into the bigger picture, but also with the idea of working with multiple screens and speakers. While making *The Mirror* we have also been simmering another project in the background, and immersive 360 film called “*Gone, Gone Beyond*” a 10 screen/8 speaker space with seamless wrap around projection and surround sound, where the audience sit inside. *Gone, Gone Beyond* uses appropriated edited collage sewn together in a giant patchwork. Pull on a thread and watch whole new narratives expand and unravel all at once on a 360 palette. We were very much in this mindset while making *The Mirror*, and it is why we are using collage and layering and alluding to “Breaking through” in a lot of the musical samples and imagery of glass, doorways and spinning doors, spiraling and whirling. We first experimented with *The Mirror* as a dual screen work, and then started to make tests going into mazes within the frame of the mirror:



We decided that we would stick to the rectangular format for the performance part of the project but develop a 10 minute element from the work for a 360 surround environment. Here are some stills of it represented in a virtual environment – you can see three of the four walls. This is definitely the way we want to continue working, but from a live touring perspective we have needed to separate this out into another film for the time being. Get collaging, it's the most natural form of composition there is. Don't just watch this space for what's next, look behind it!

