

A Truly Magical Moment



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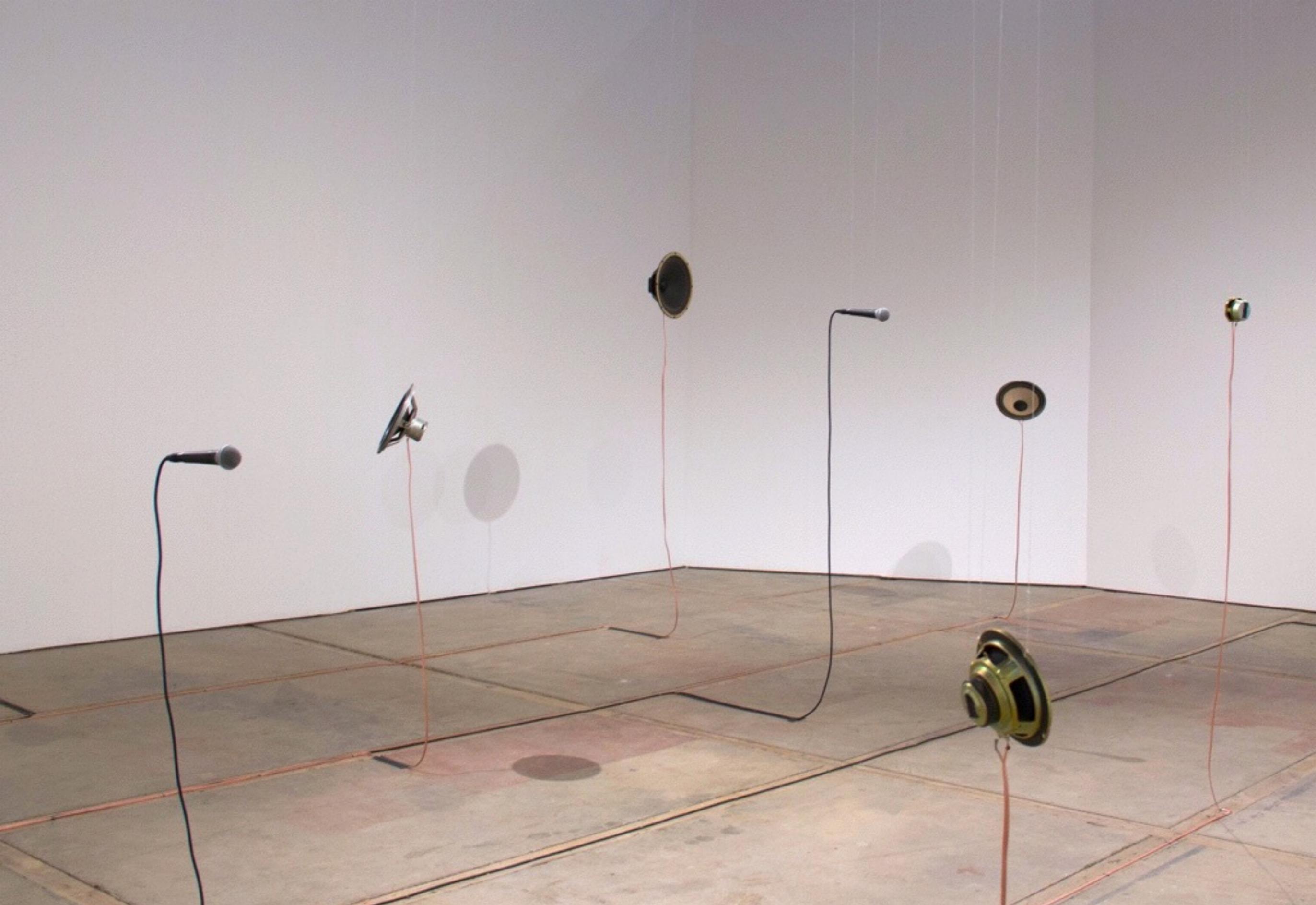
I'd like to start by showing a quick video of this piece, A Truly Magical Moment, so we all know what we're talking about, and after watching I'll talk a bit about some of the ideas behind it.

A
Truly
Magical
Moment

Interactive kinetic sculpture. 2016.

iPhones, selfie sticks, aluminum, electronics.

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A Truly Magical Moment was in some ways a very different piece for me to make, both in terms of the process and result. Generally, my work often doesn't use *new* technology, and I don't particularly think of myself as a *new media* artist. For instance, I often use materials such as used speakers: a technology that is not new historically or in terms of use value.



And these discarded technological materials are recycled or re-used in a form of artistic misinterpretation of their original function and value.



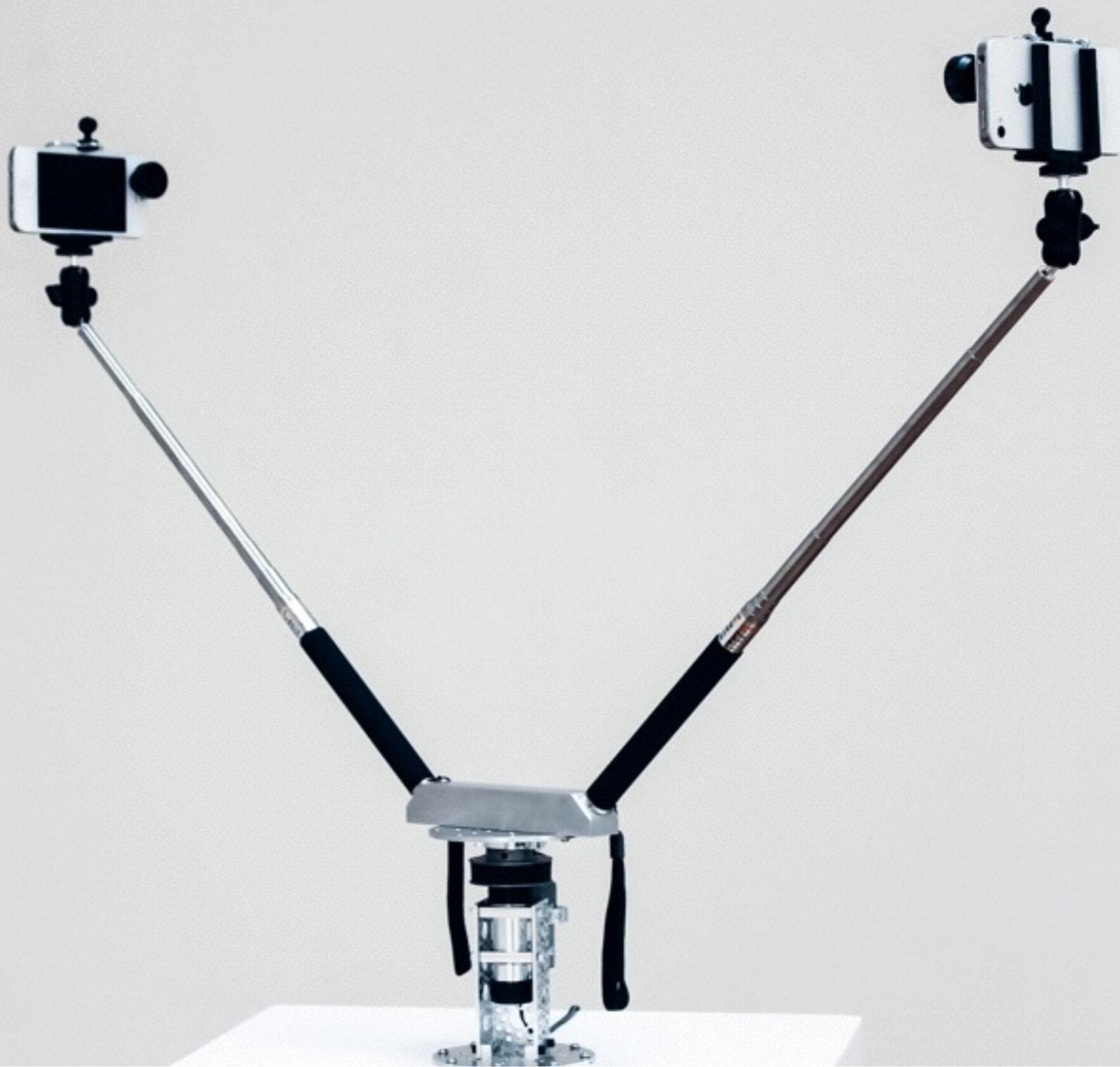
In this piece, *Curtain (white)*, I am using newly purchased earbud headphones, but I don't consider the earbud to be a new technology. In fact, as you may know, the earbud is now an endangered species, giving way to wireless headphones.



In my personal life, I generally consider myself a technological skeptic rather than a technological positivist, and I want these values to be reflected in my work. Sometimes I can even be a bit of a luddite: my computer OS is a time-capsule of the simpler times of 2010...



I sometimes use very outdated technologies in my work, technologies whose flaws embody a sense of nostalgia. In a way, this relates a bit to the use of iPhones in *A Truly Magical Moment*, because like all “new” technologies, the iPhone is also “aging.” There will probably be a time (quite soon) when these iPhones are as outdated as the cassette tape recorders (which, let us recall, were a peak technological achievement at their time ~1968).



So, with all that said... How did I end up making a work that doesn't only use current technology (iPhones), but also requires the internet and FaceTime technology as integral materials for its operation?



Just for a bit of context, this was at a time when both my partner and I were traveling a lot. As well, many of my friends were in long-distance relationships, or online dating. And I was thinking, what are the tools that enable these sort of relationships? What is the equivalent of an intimate romantic moment in this kind of lifestyle?



The answer of course is video chat platforms like Skype or FaceTime. And I was thinking about whether this is a *type* of connectivity or a *symptom* of a lack of connectivity: is this a new mode of communication or a cheap virtual copy of “the real thing”? or both? Is technology *bridging* physical distance (providing a solution), or is it *enabling* a physical distance (creating the conditions for this problem)?

This whole process occurred before any specific idea for a piece, or any sort of visual or technological design. And then, I ran into this GIF online...



Titanic (1997) vs Conan the Barbarian (1982)

[Watch Gif](#)

And it was *this GIF* that really inspired the design of the work! I thought “Oh this is just too funny, I’ll recreate the scene from *Titanic* with iPhones that are spinning, and it relates to this idea of romance and virtuality etc.”. And it’s a great GIF! It’s hypnotic!

But that is not the only reason I’m showing you this GIF. Because there’s something about GIFs that relates to the ideas of connectivity and virtual copies. Because this is not *only* a GIF: it is a GIF that comes out of a *meme*, a collective, shared action that is passed from one individual to another by imitation.



MakeAGIF.com

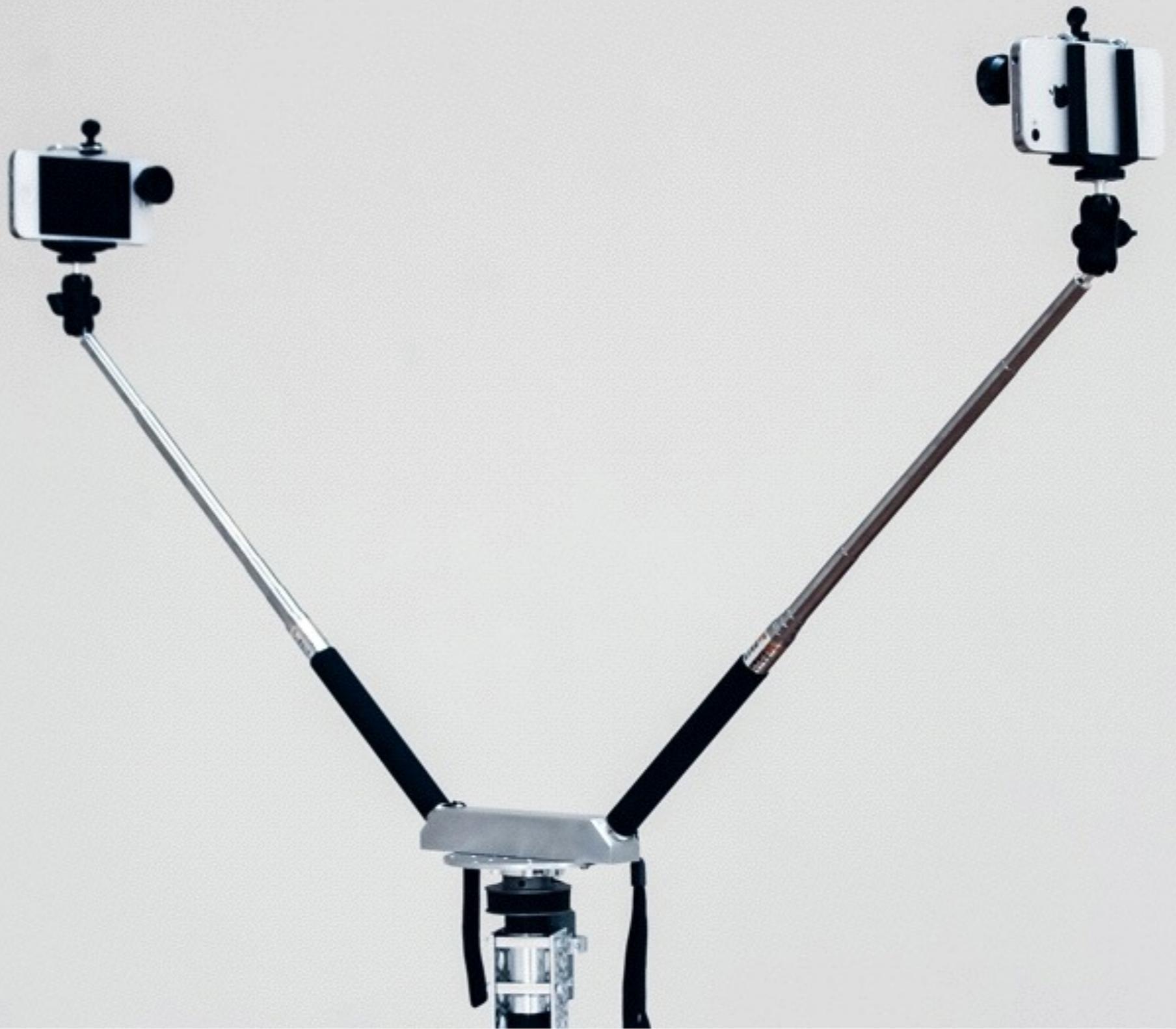
[Watch Gif](#)

This is the original movie scene that the previous GIF is imitating, the original movie scene the GIF morphed out of. Somehow, over many variations and individual contributions, we arrive at splicing *Conan The Barbarian* into the scene from *Titanic*. But this original scene from *Titanic* is in itself not particularly original: lovers dancing on the dance floor is a trope of romantic cinema! I see this particular scene as the “ultimate” remake of this *type* of scene, which appeared in many other movies. And this scene is so successful as an “ultimate remake” because it allows viewers to insert themselves into the scene through the POV cinematography, to both witness it as separate from oneself and to participate in it. It plays *as a copy* of our own personal/original experience of dancing in this way; it plays *as a copy* of our shared cultural notion of Romance.



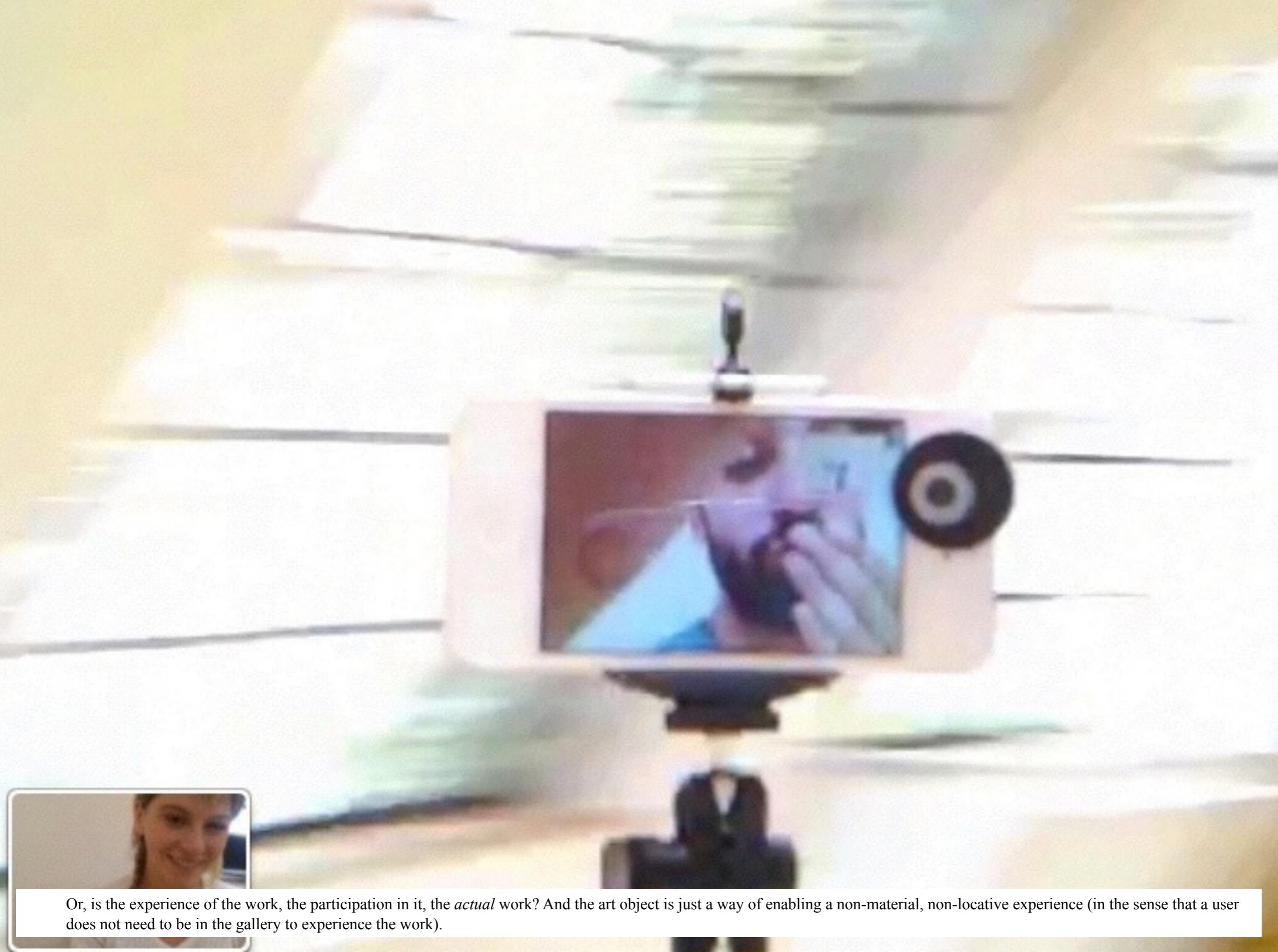
This intersection of original and copy (in which the copy is in itself an original variation) is uniquely related to and enabled by connectivity - it occurs through a community of connected people who each contribute their variation and build on one another until one of these variations is successful (meaning it goes viral).

The funniest thing about this GIF though, is that the person who made this final iteration of the GIF probably did not watch either of the original movies (respectively released in 1982 + 1997)! Meaning that in all probability, the creator's knowledge of these films doesn't come from the original films, but rather from a shared virtual cultural repository (called the internet), where we are sometimes no longer able to distinguish between the original and the virtual copy (like this stock image, try a google image search for the keywords "original" and "copy").

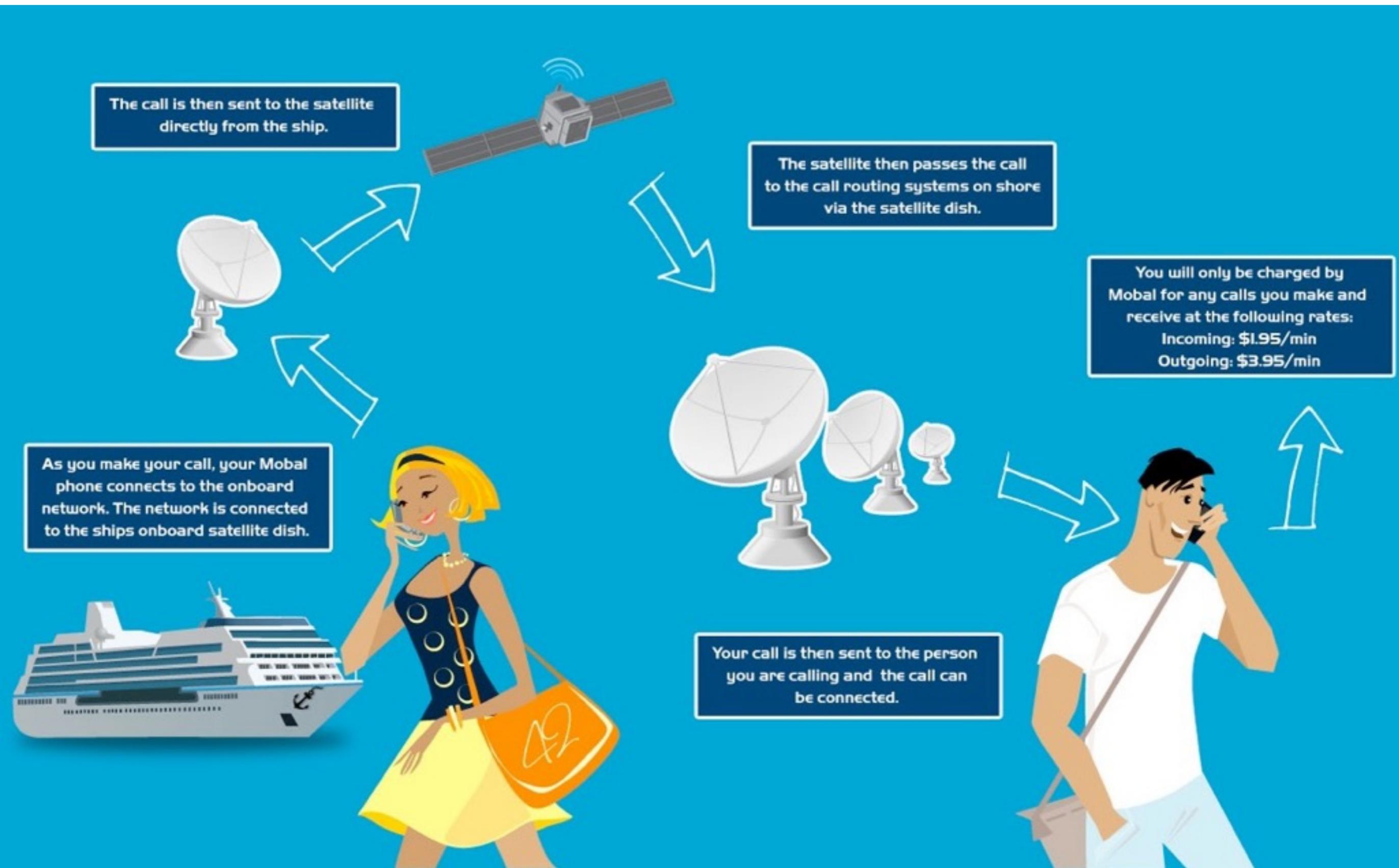


I'm going through all of this, because part of *A Truly Magical Moment* functions through the notion of the work itself (or the experience of the work) being a virtual copy of this shared cultural/personal romantic moment.

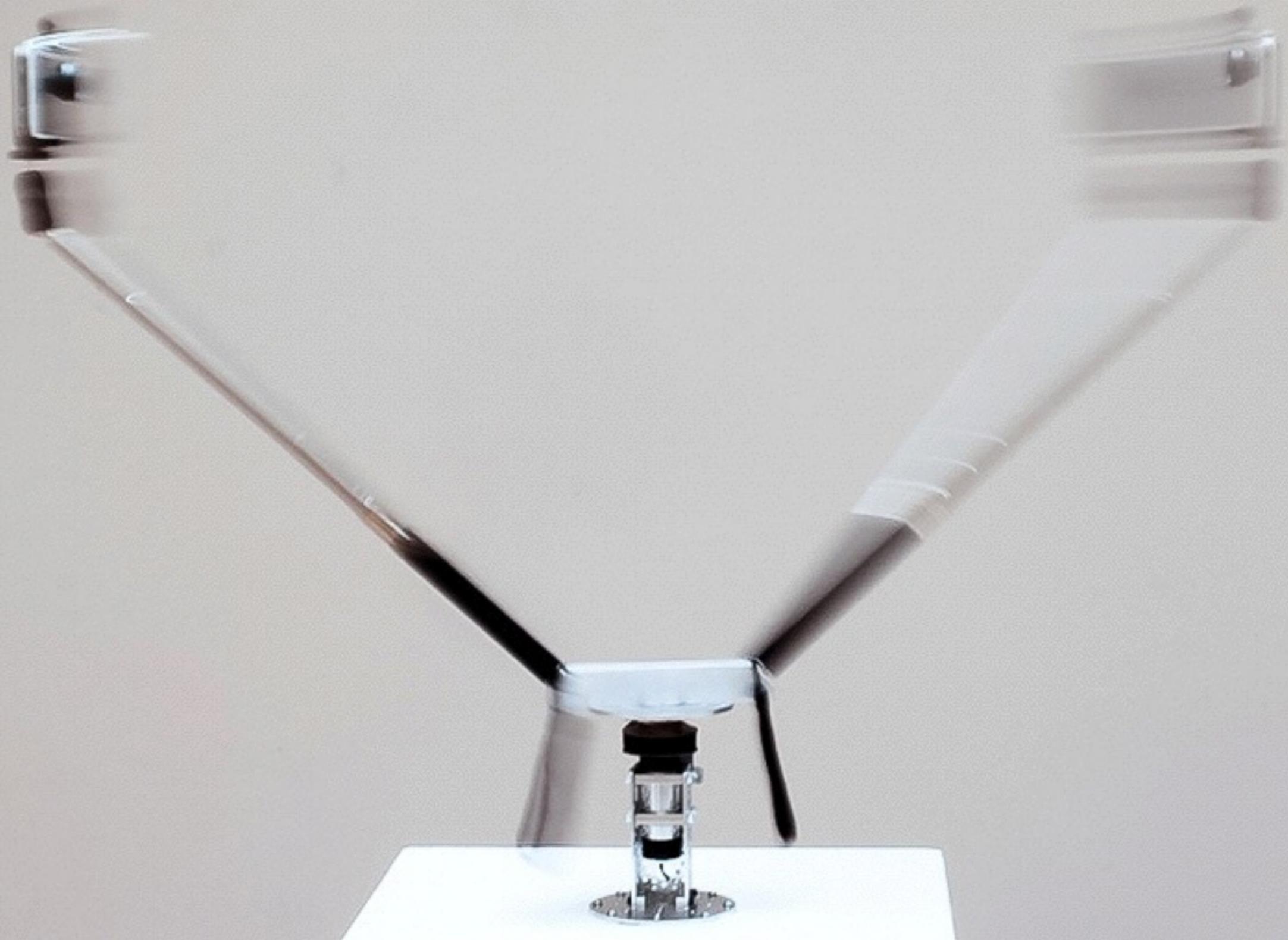
And the relationship between its "realness" and "virtual-ness" (or originality and copy) seeps in to the operation of the work itself. The question "Where is the work, where is it physically 'located'?" is a difficult one to answer. Of course, the work is a sculpture (in itself an assemblage of different readymade objects) located in a gallery space. But this is unlike other sculptures in that we can ask is the artwork really *complete* without the internet? without "users" experiencing it?



Or, is the experience of the work, the participation in it, the *actual* work? And the art object is just a way of enabling a non-material, non-locative experience (in the sense that a user does not need to be in the gallery to experience the work).



If we agree at least partially with the latter, then we need to include many other elements in the work. For instance, the connecting network and its particularities (bandwidth etc.). Or the physical and temporal distances between the two iPhones, the satellite, and the phone of the user. I think it's interesting to consider these (supposedly immaterial) elements as an extension of the sculptural form of the physical sculpture, manifesting in the form of transmission.



The ambiguity regarding what constitutes the work and where it is located is seen in discussion of spectatorship. There are several “roles” one can play in the work:

- 1) the person experiencing the work and witnessing their own virtual experience
- 2) the person in the gallery watching the sculpture rotate without “participating”
- 3) (And this last one you can occasionally see in openings or when there is a large crowd) the persons taking pictures (with *their* phones) of the people who are on their phones participating in the piece.

All these roles can be occupied simultaneously by one person.

A Truly Magical Moment?



Now, if it wasn't clear at this point, this piece is very much an elaborate joke: a complicated way of doing something simple as stupidly as possible. As you could see from the video, the "Magical Moment" itself - as a virtual experience, a virtual copy - isn't nearly as "Truly Magical" as the real experience. Just as telepresence and video chatting is amazing and allows/adds so many possibilities in terms of communication, it is still not the "real thing." It is not the same as a real dance, nor real intimacy.



But all that said, that doesn't mean there isn't a bit of sincerity in the title.

Although the work enables a virtual connectivity, this enabling actually relies on a very physical connectivity for its operation - a connectivity on a global scale. And this physical, economic connectivity is always present when we use these consumer technologies.

So I go to the Apple store and buy an iPhone, but where does the iPhone come from? How many people were connected in that process of having the iPhone arrive at my hand so that I can use it as an elaborate joke in an art piece?



The people working at this copper mine, the largest in the world.



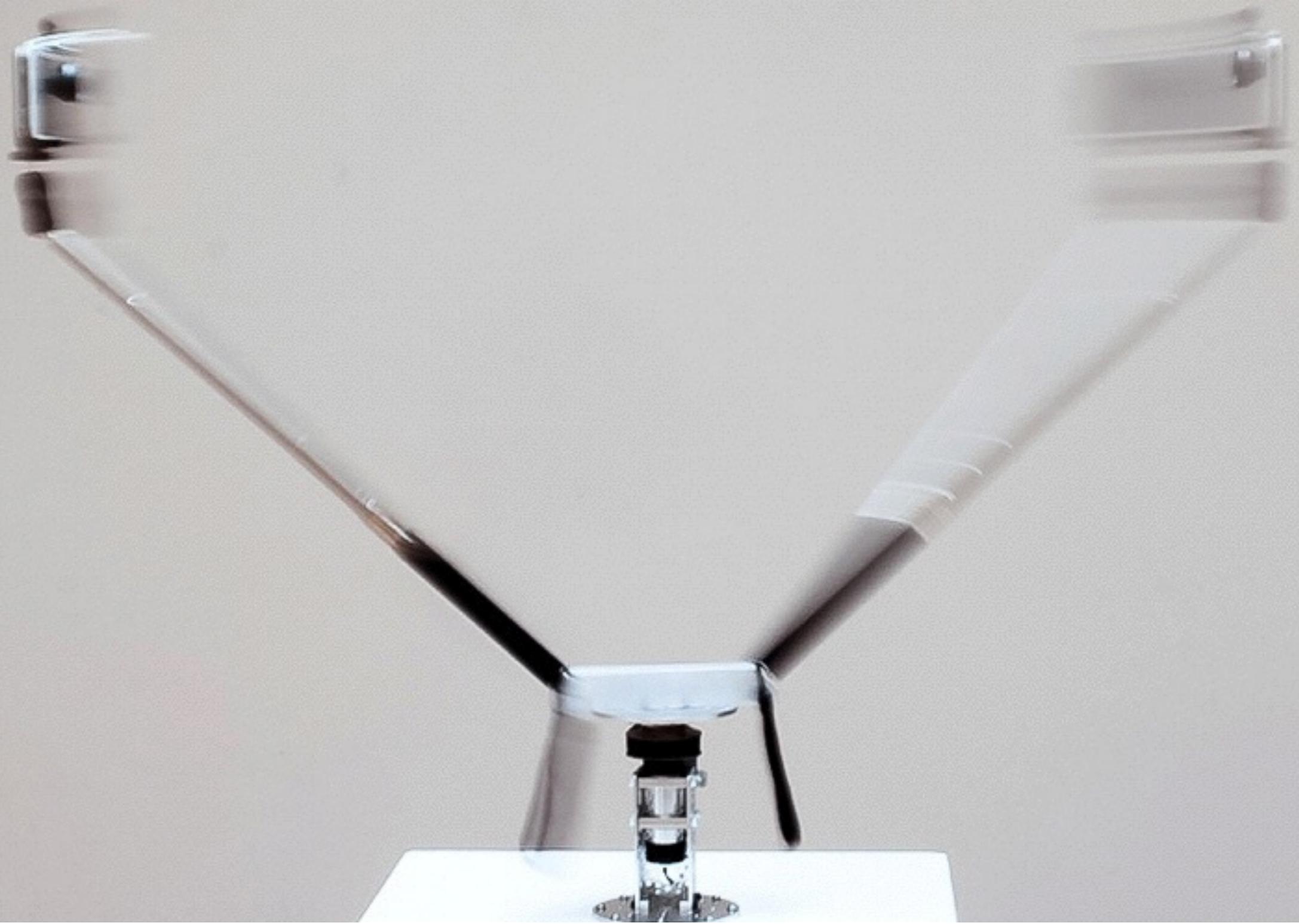
The people mining Tantalum, a chemical used as a non-corrosive element.



Assembly workers, transportation services, international trade boards.



In a sense, my iPhone, having taken this very elaborate pathway from the copper mine to my hand, a very complicated process to create a very complicated object - that is, after all this journey, still affordable to me - is actually Magical! Magical in the sense that it defies belief or explanation, in the sense that its both uplifting and disturbing.



So in a way, at its very core, this piece is not really about “re-enacting the dance scene from *Titanic*.” Rather, at its core, the work centers on a delicious, sad, and slightly convoluted bit of irony. That on the one hand this piece provides a virtual connectivity (an amazing technological achievement) which does not live up to “real connectivity, while on the other hand the work is a manifestation of a global connectivity that as a user I rarely think about or actively ignore. And if this global connectivity was not so exploitative to people, the environment etc, it really would be an amazing human achievement.