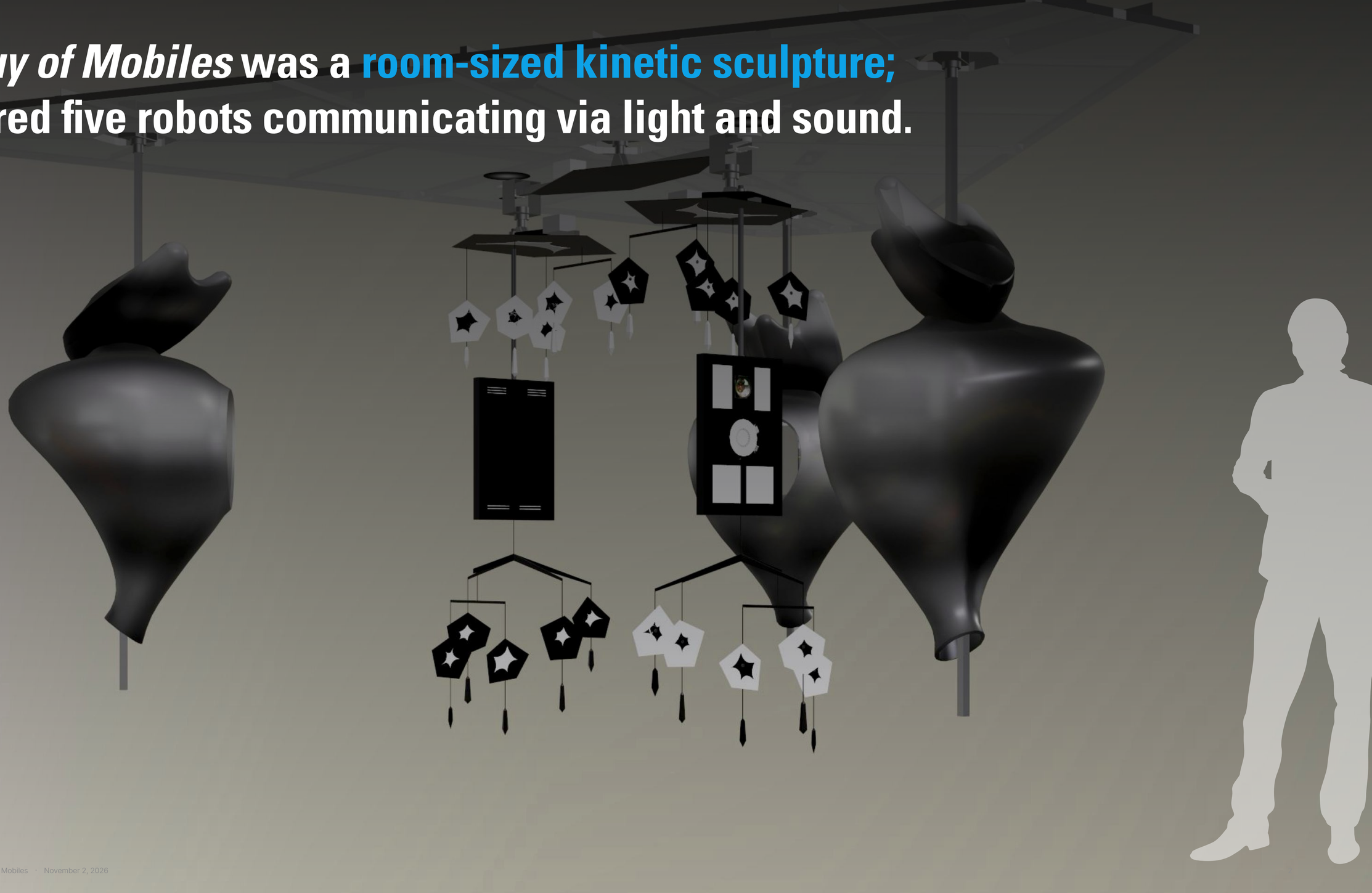
November 2, 2026

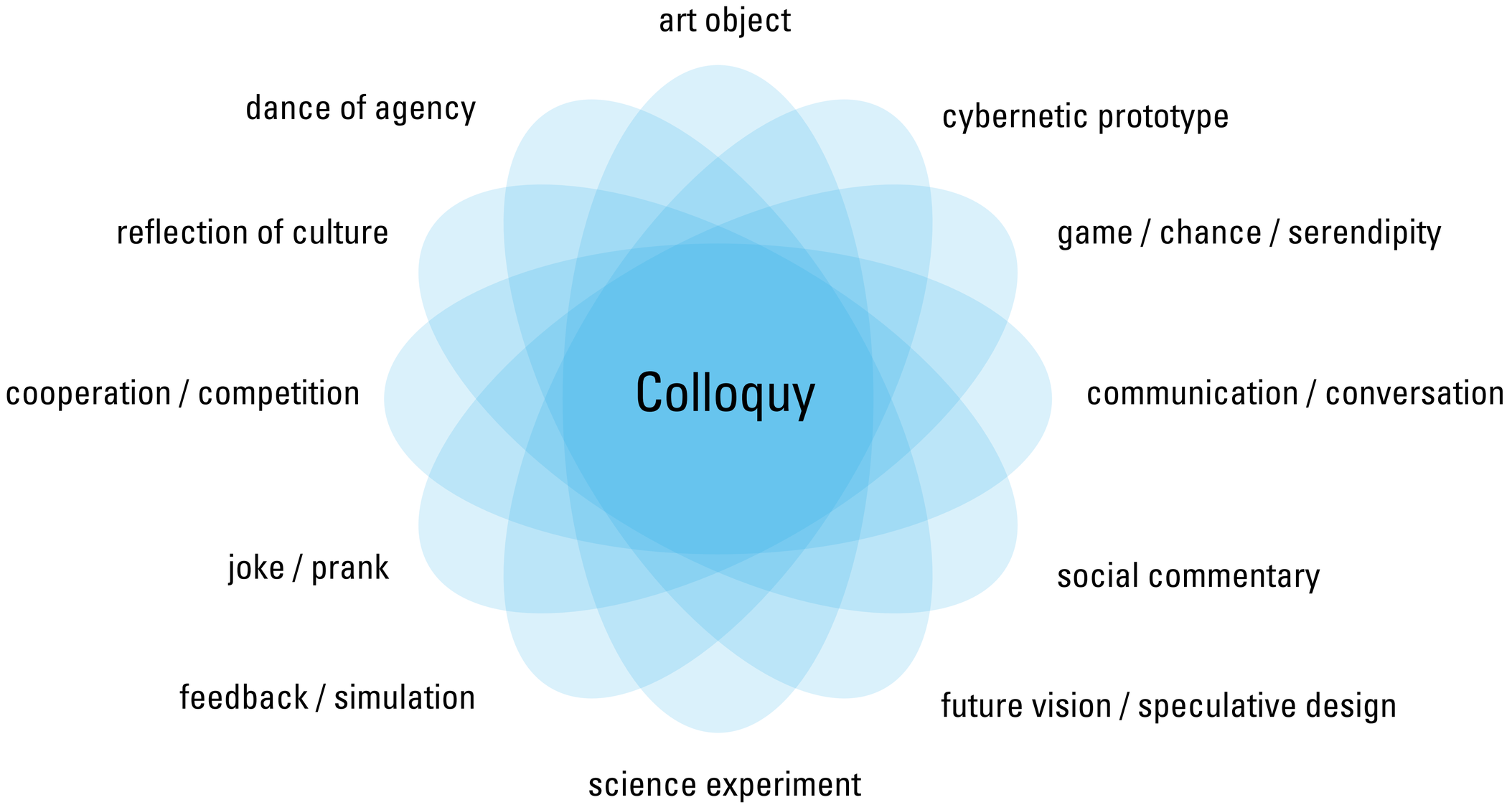
Colloquy of Mobiles
Autonomous agents simulating conversations at a party

Dubberly Design Office

Colloquy of Mobiles **was a room-sized kinetic sculpture; it featured five robots communicating via light and sound.**



Colloquy has a dozen facets or more. Simultaneously, it is ...



This presentation describes how ***Colloquy of Mobiles*** **used feedback** (a key concept from cybernetics)

to enable electro-mechanical robots ***(the mobiles)*** designed to be goal-seeking agents

to simulate a conversation ***(i.e., a colloquy)*** — **foreshadowing the rise of today's AI agents.**

Background

Colloquy was commissioned for the *Cybernetic Serendipity Exhibition* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London, 1968

Founded in 1946, the ICA provided a space for new ideas, outside the traditional confines of the Royal Academy of Arts.



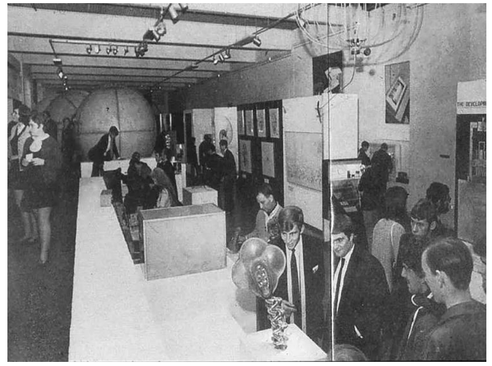
In 1968, ICA curator Jasia Reichardt produced an exhibition titled "Cybernetic Serendipity: The Computer and the Arts."

It featured work created with the assistance of computers —
including images, films, music, text, and sculpture —
from artists such as John Cage, Nam June Paik, and Jean Tinguely
and scientists such as Charles Csuri, Ken Knowlton, and Lionel Penrose.

It also included "cybernetic devices as works of art."
And a special section explained computing and cybernetics.







The exhibition title, “Cybernetic Serendipity,” suggests “the relationships between technology and creativity.”

Cybernetics refers to the science of feedback and control.

Serendipity refers to chance and happy accidents.

Their combination is an oxymoron — like “random control.”
It may also suggest the situation of a ”living system.”

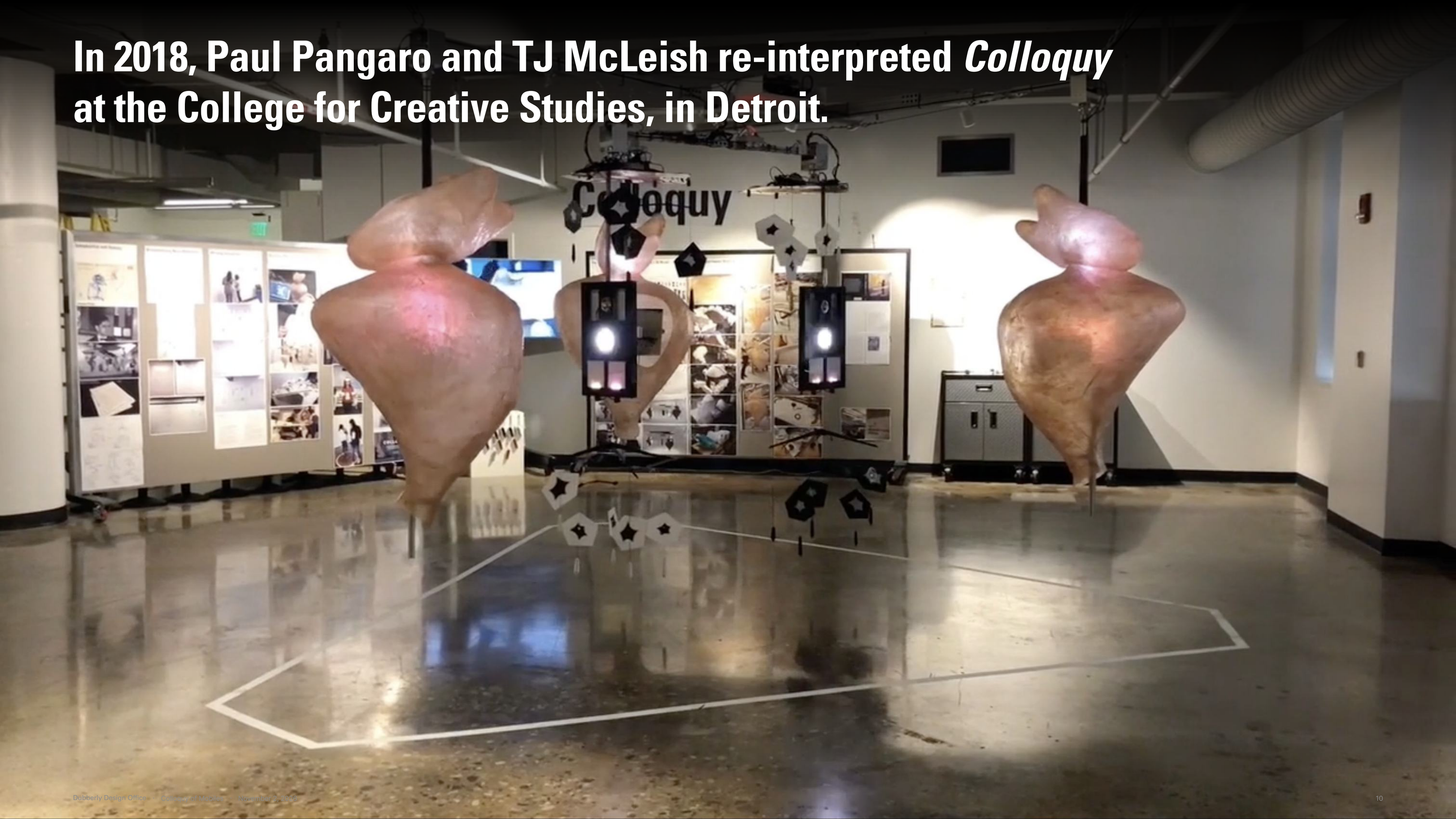




Jasia Reichardt invited cybernetician Gordon Pask to create a piece illustrating “emergence” — he offered *Colloquy of Mobiles.*



In 2018, Paul Pangaro and TJ McLeish re-interpreted *Colloquy* at the College for Creative Studies, in Detroit.



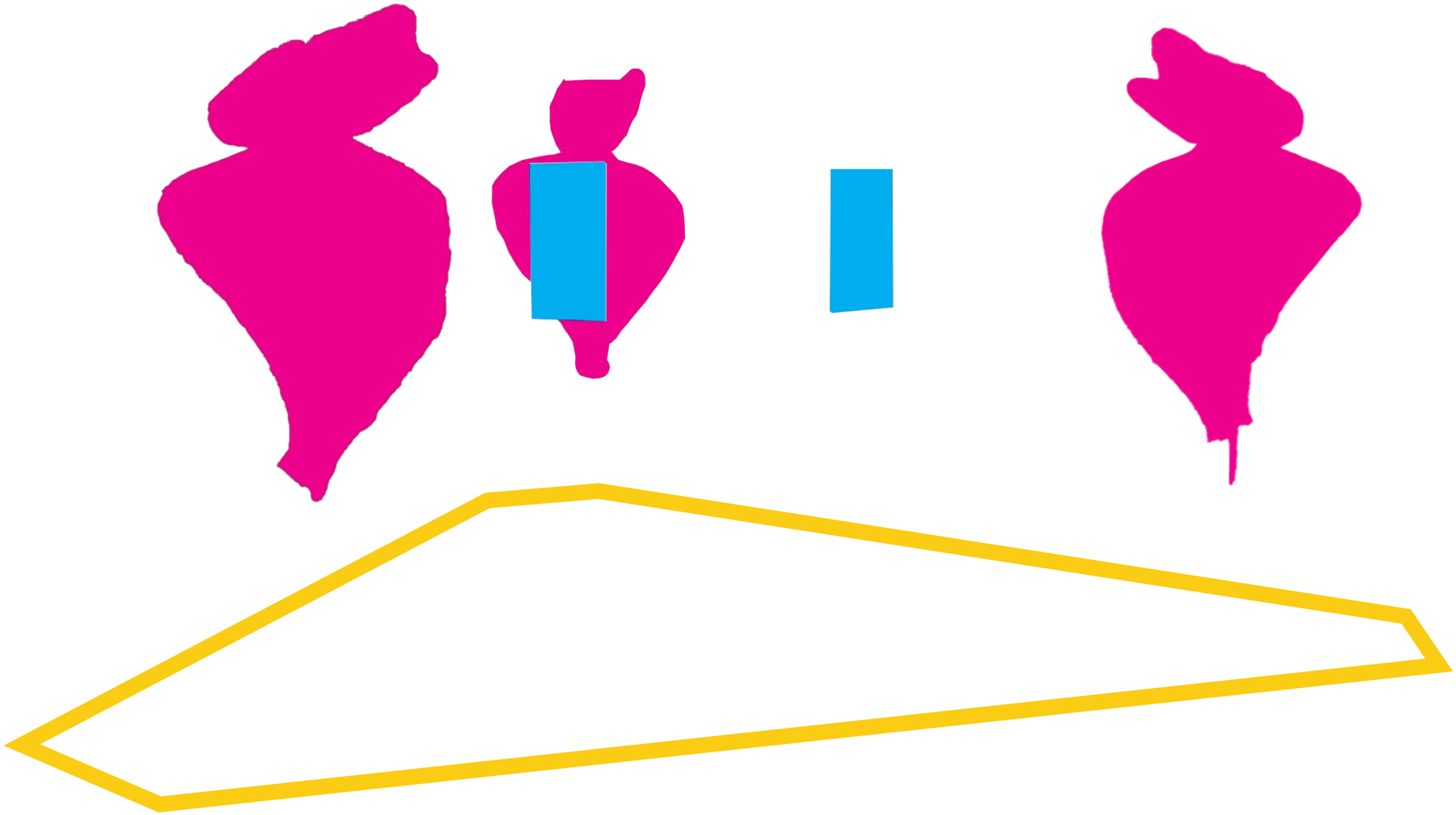
In 2026, McLeish created the *Virtual Colloquy of Mobiles,* a simulation of a simulation of a conversation.



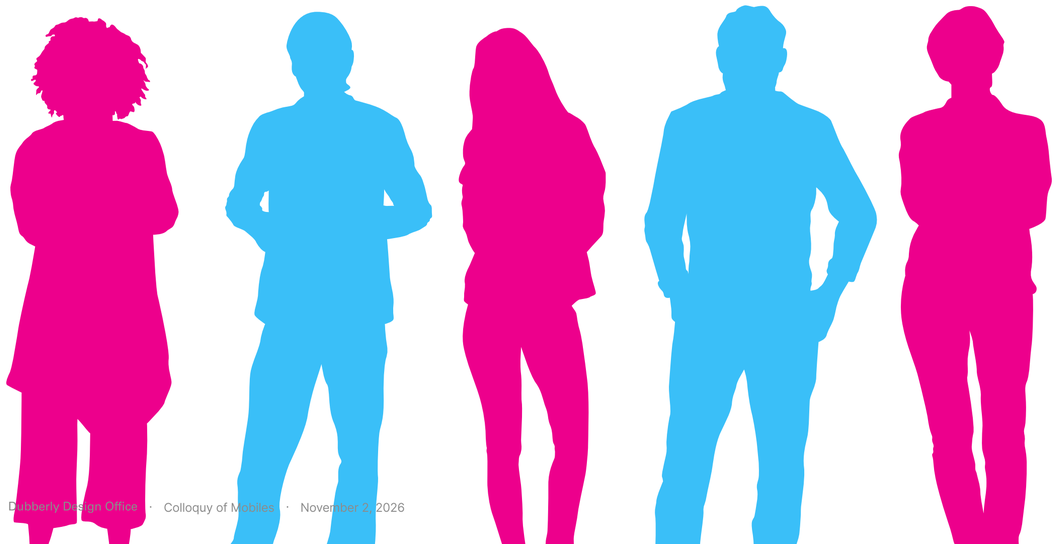
Colloquy is a kinetic sculpture, a large mobile hanging from the ceiling consisting of 5 figures:

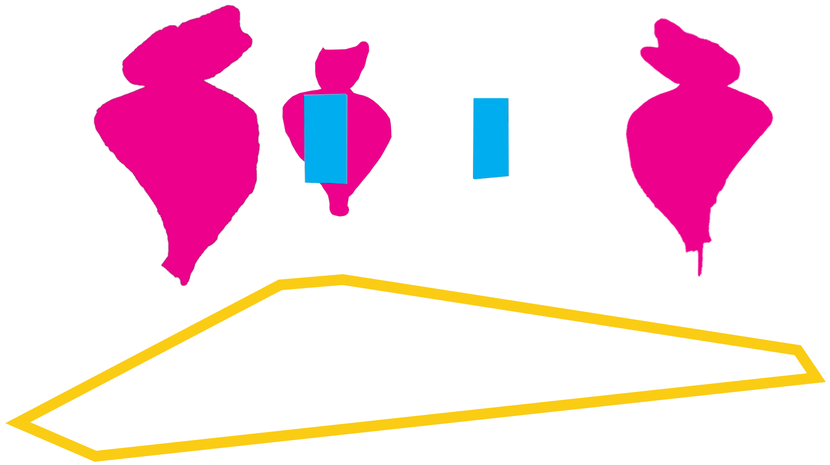


Pask labeled three figures “female” and two “male”.
(gender stereotypes of the time)

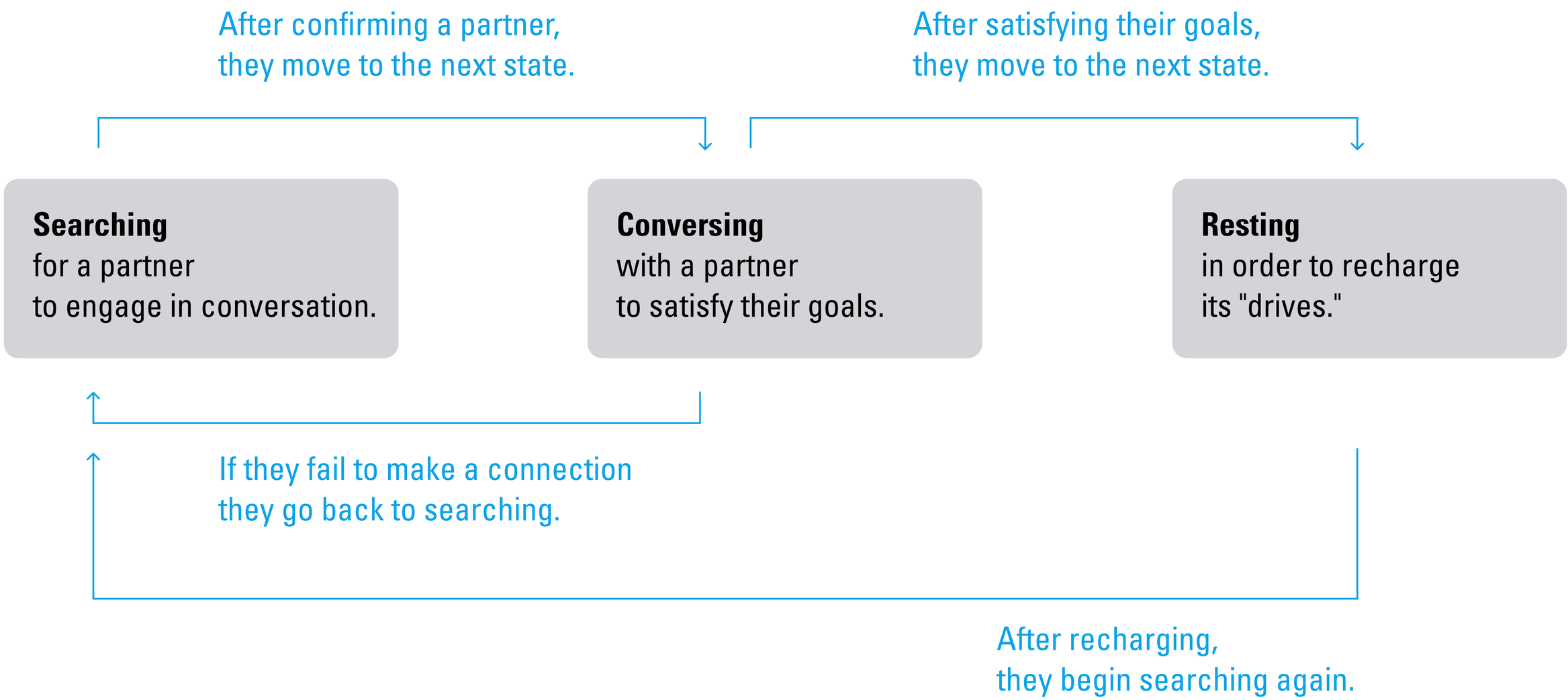


The sculpture can represent people interacting at a party. Their conversations have a beginning, middle, and end.





At any moment, each mobile is in one of three possible states:

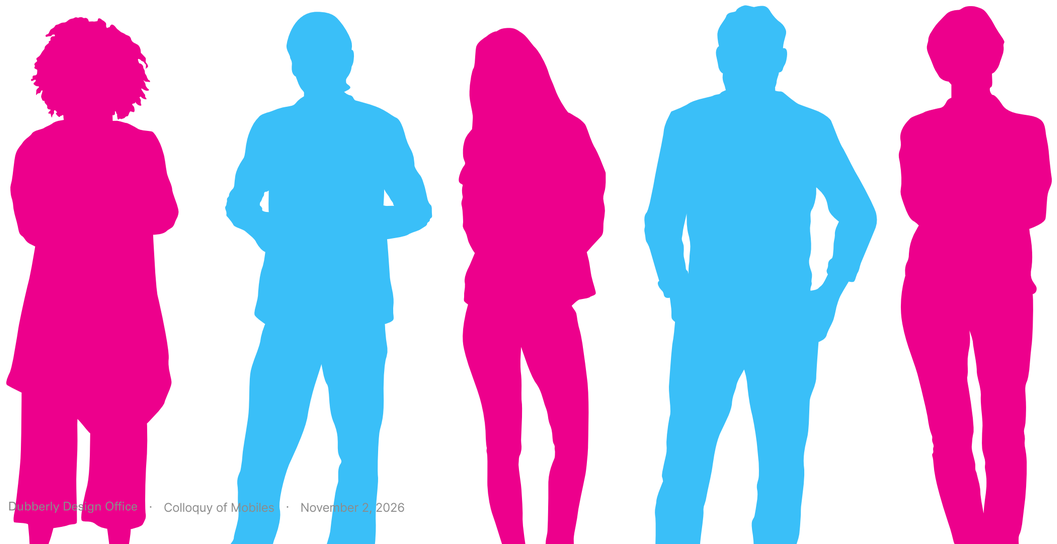


The sculpture can represent a party.

the party

A party has people

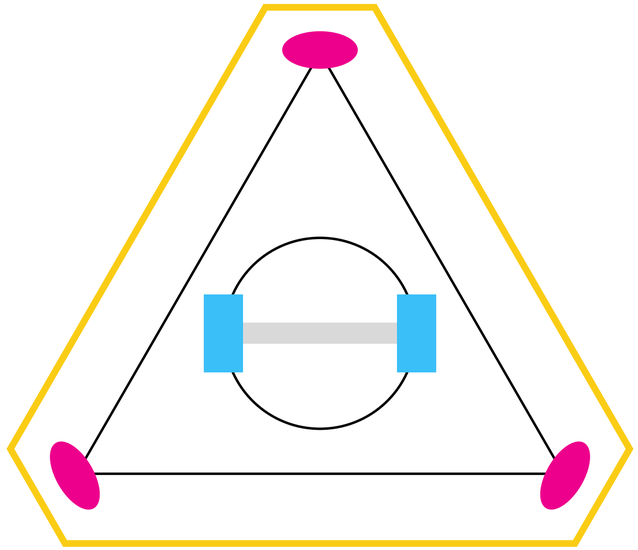
Guests show up, to mingle, eat, drink, and socialize



the machine

5 agents hang from the mobile

Each mobile can move independently, communicate, and affect others.



People and agents are driven by goals

the party

Guests arrive with interests

and a **increasing desire** to share them.

art, music, or sports

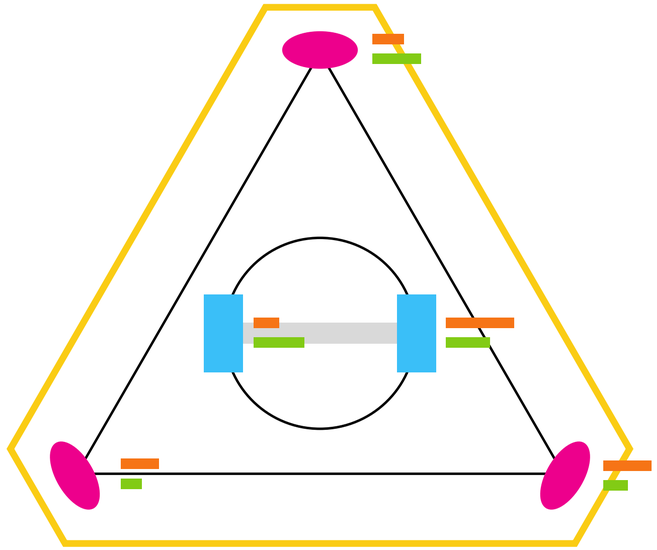


the machine

Every agent has 2 drive states

which increase over time

O orange or **P** puce (We use green for contrast.)



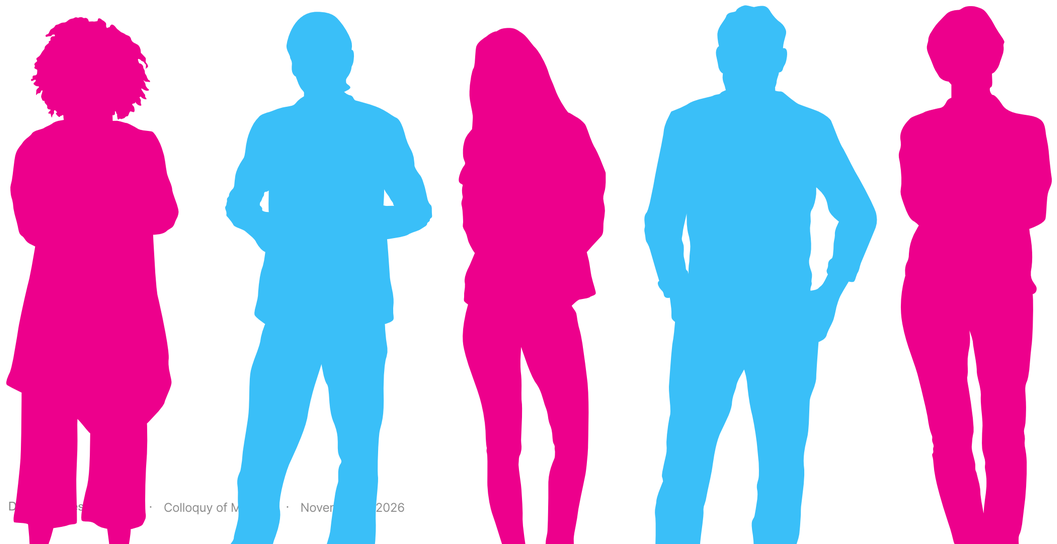
Parties may begin with an exploratory phase.

the party

At first, everyone mingles

working the room

putting yourself out there

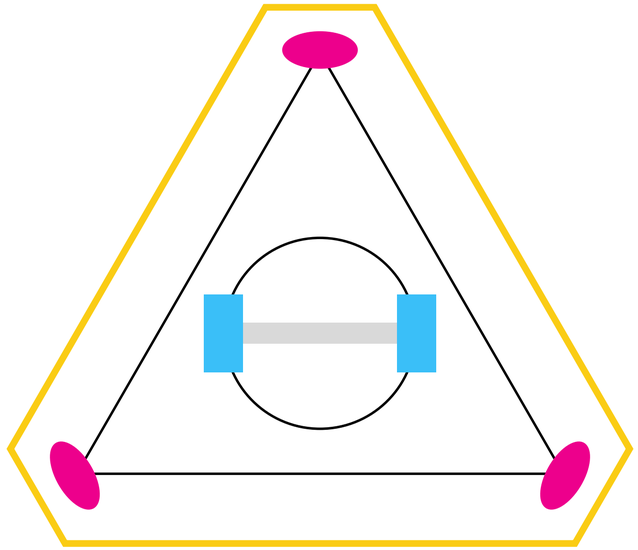


the machine

The agents are in searching phase

females and males **swivel** on their vertical axes,
and the beam rotates the males

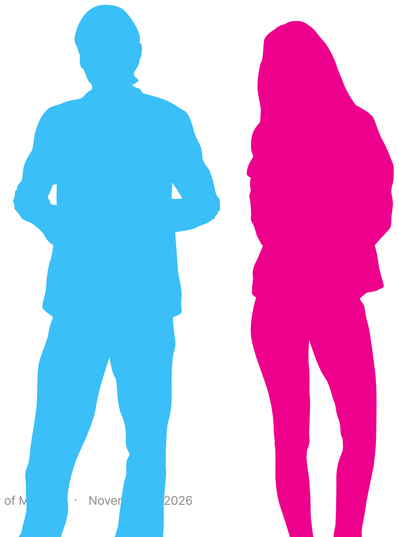
male **flashes**:
its name and its drive state using a visual code



As people get comfortable, individual conversations emerge

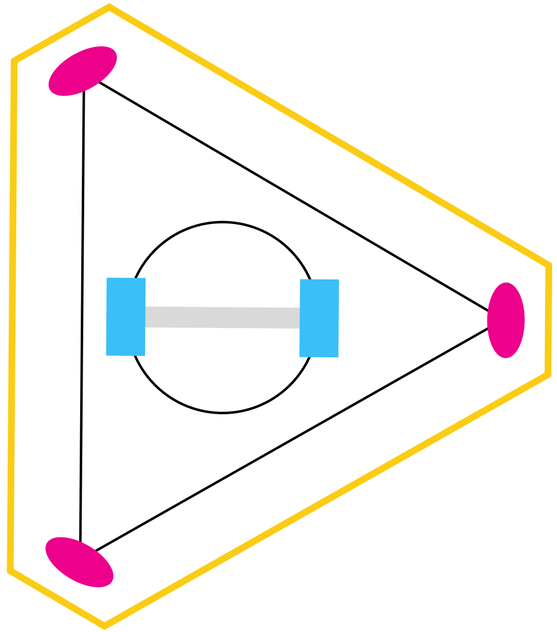
the party

Two guests catch each others eye



the machine

A signal is received and reciprocated



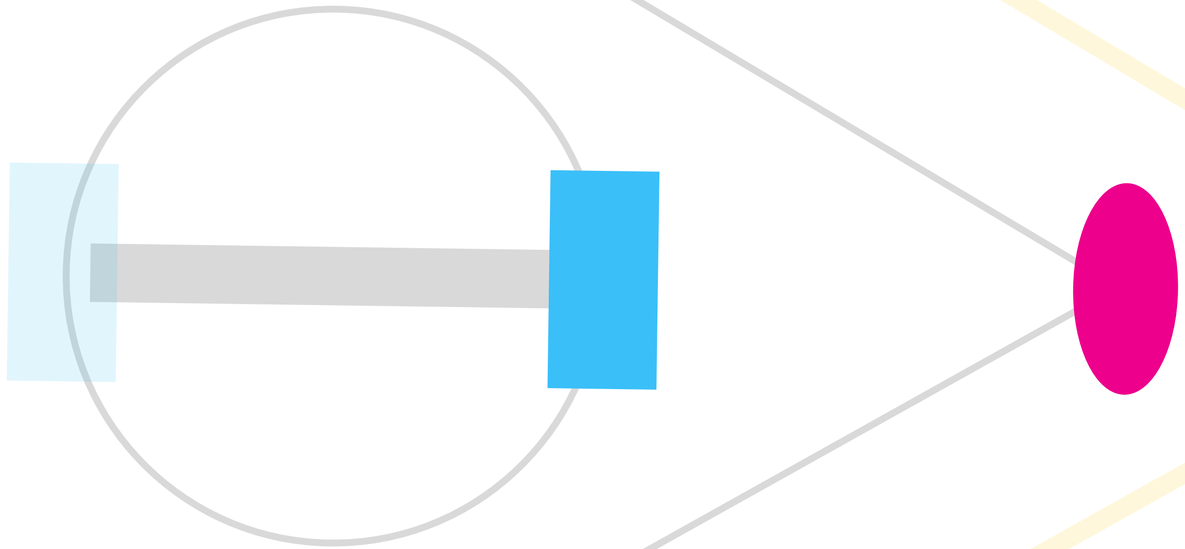
As people get comfortable, individual conversations emerge

the party

Two guests catch each others eye

the machine

A signal is received and reciprocated



As people get comfortable, individual conversations emerge

the party

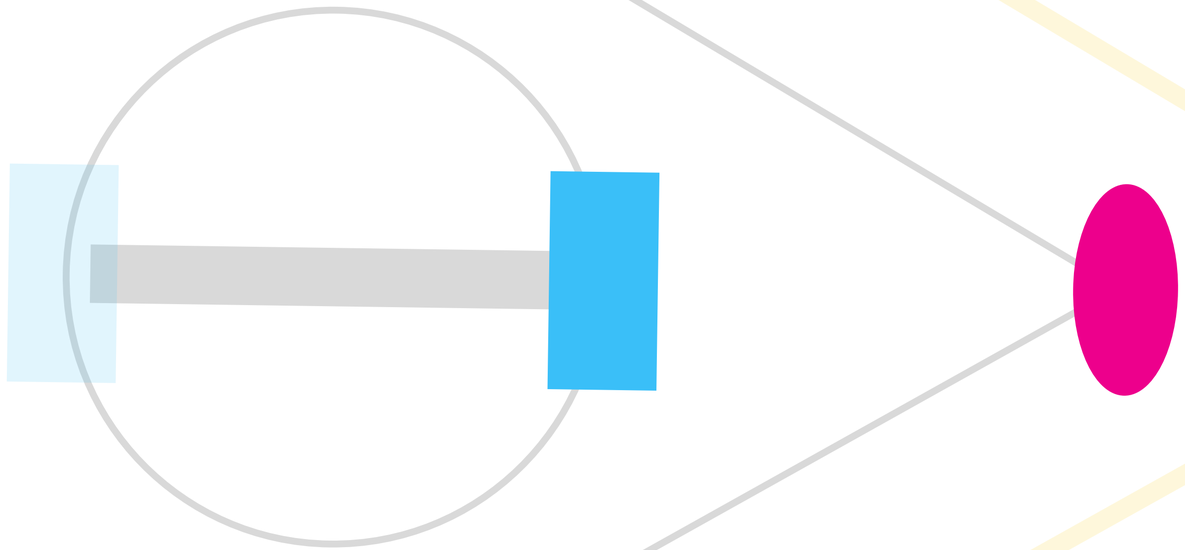
Two guests catch each others eye

two people make an introduction

the machine

A signal is received and reciprocated

flash falls on female’s receptor



As people get comfortable, individual conversations emerge

the party

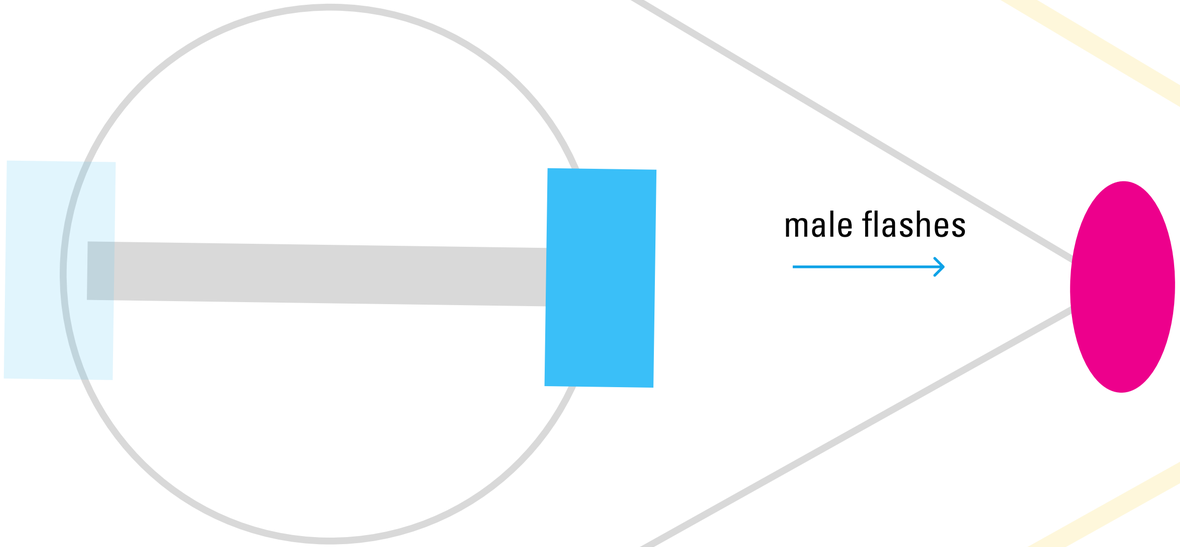
Two guests catch each others eye

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As people get comfortable, individual conversations emerge

the party

Two guests catch each others eye

two people make an introduction

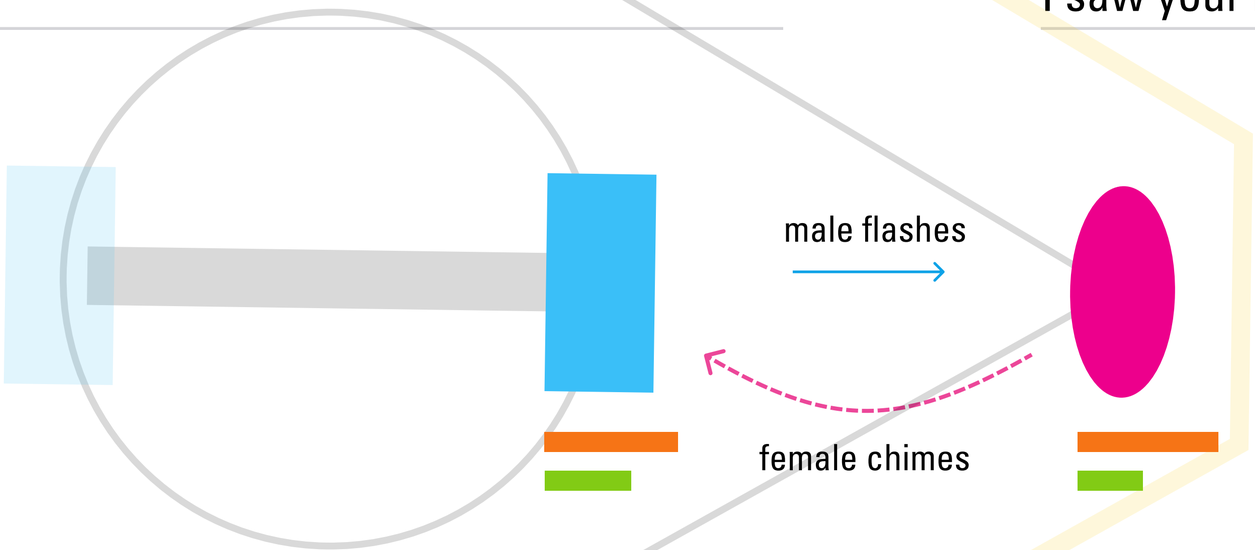
they find out they are compatible

the machine

A signal is received and reciprocated

flash falls on female’s receptor

female **chimes**:
I saw your flash + we have the same drive state



As people get comfortable, individual conversations emerge

the party

Two guests catch each others eye

two people make an introduction

they find out they are compatible

they attempt a conversation

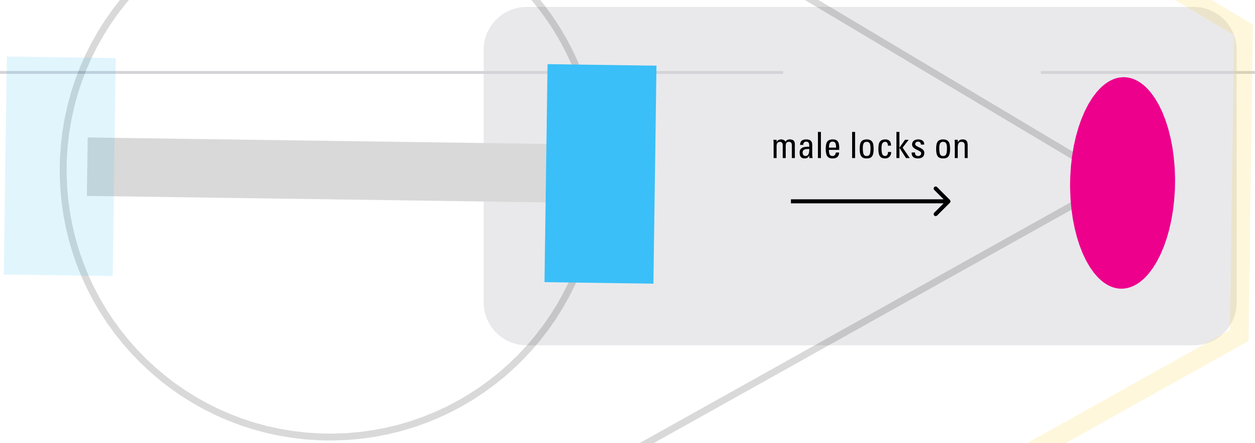
the machine

A signal is received and reciprocated

flash falls on female’s receptor

female **chimes**:
I saw your flash + we have the same drive state

male hears **chime**: locks on



Conversations can flow

the party

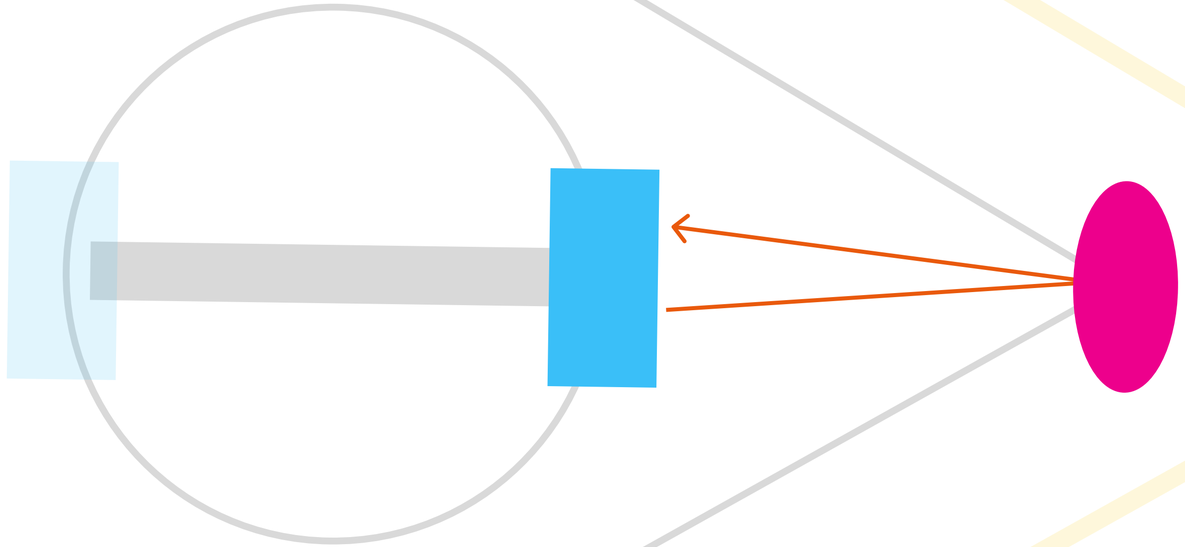
Sometimes you click

**A connection is made,
the conversation flows.**

the machine

Signals must be sent and received to trigger the conversing phase

The male emits **a beam**, the female **reflects it back** and **both drives drop, entering the resting phase**



Or they can fizzle out

the party

Sometimes you click
Sometimes you don’t.

A connection is made,
the conversation flows.

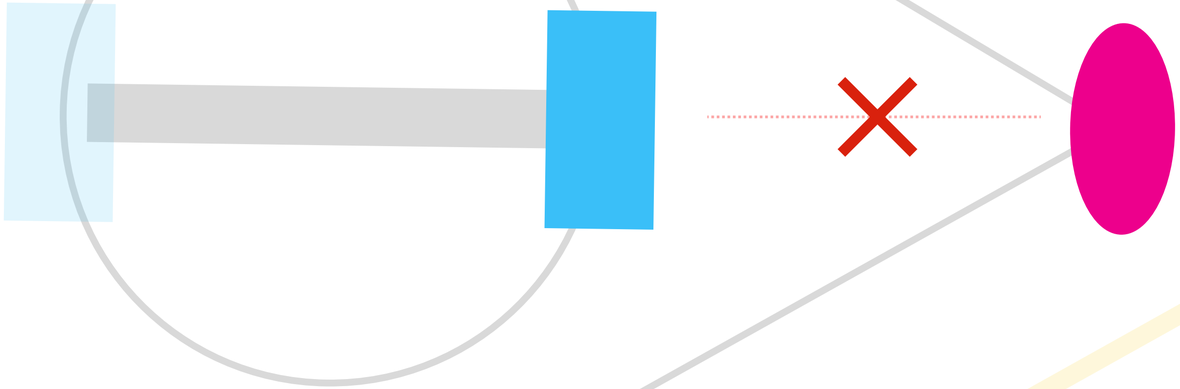
or not: “I’m going to grab a beer”
”My friend is calling me over”

the machine

Signals must be sent and received to trigger the conversing phase

The male emits **a beam**, the female **reflects it back** and **both drives drop, entering the resting phase**

beam is not reflected, time runs out,
and the male continues on its way



Or they can fizzle out

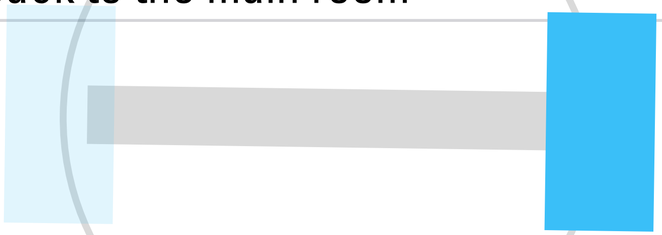
the party

Sometimes you click
Sometimes you don’t.

A connection is made,
the conversation flows.

or not: “I’m going to grab a beer”
”My friend is calling me over”

guests drift back to the main room



the machine

Signals must be sent and received to trigger the conversing phase

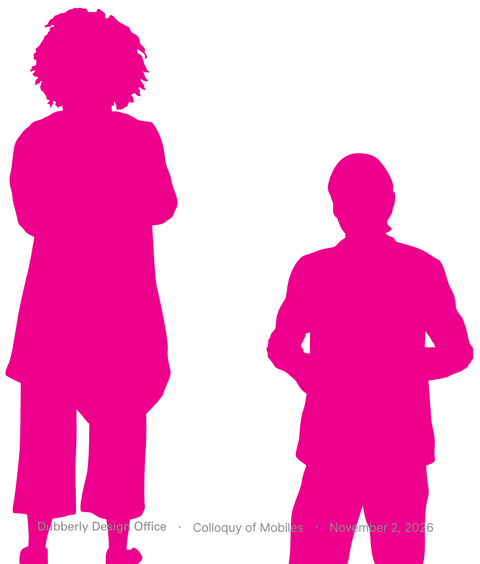
The male emits **a beam**, the female **reflects it back**
and **both drives drop, entering the resting phase**

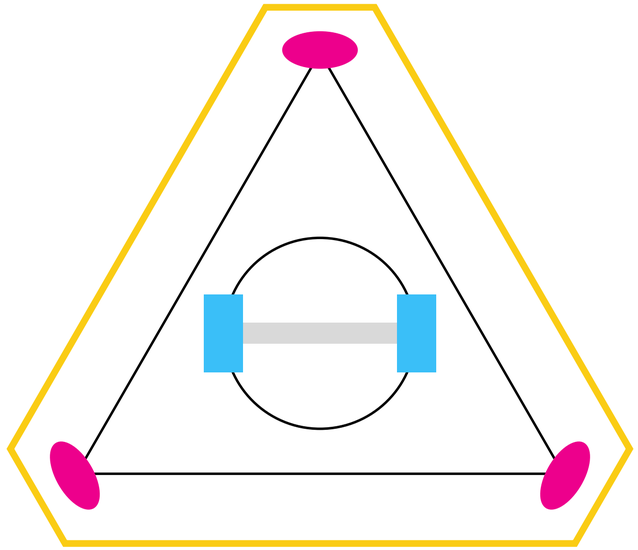
times runs out, beam is not reflected,
an agent is dragged away

agents **return to search**



The mobiles continue this dance,
rotating,
sending signals,
and shifting between paired-off conversations and the main party
just like a real party



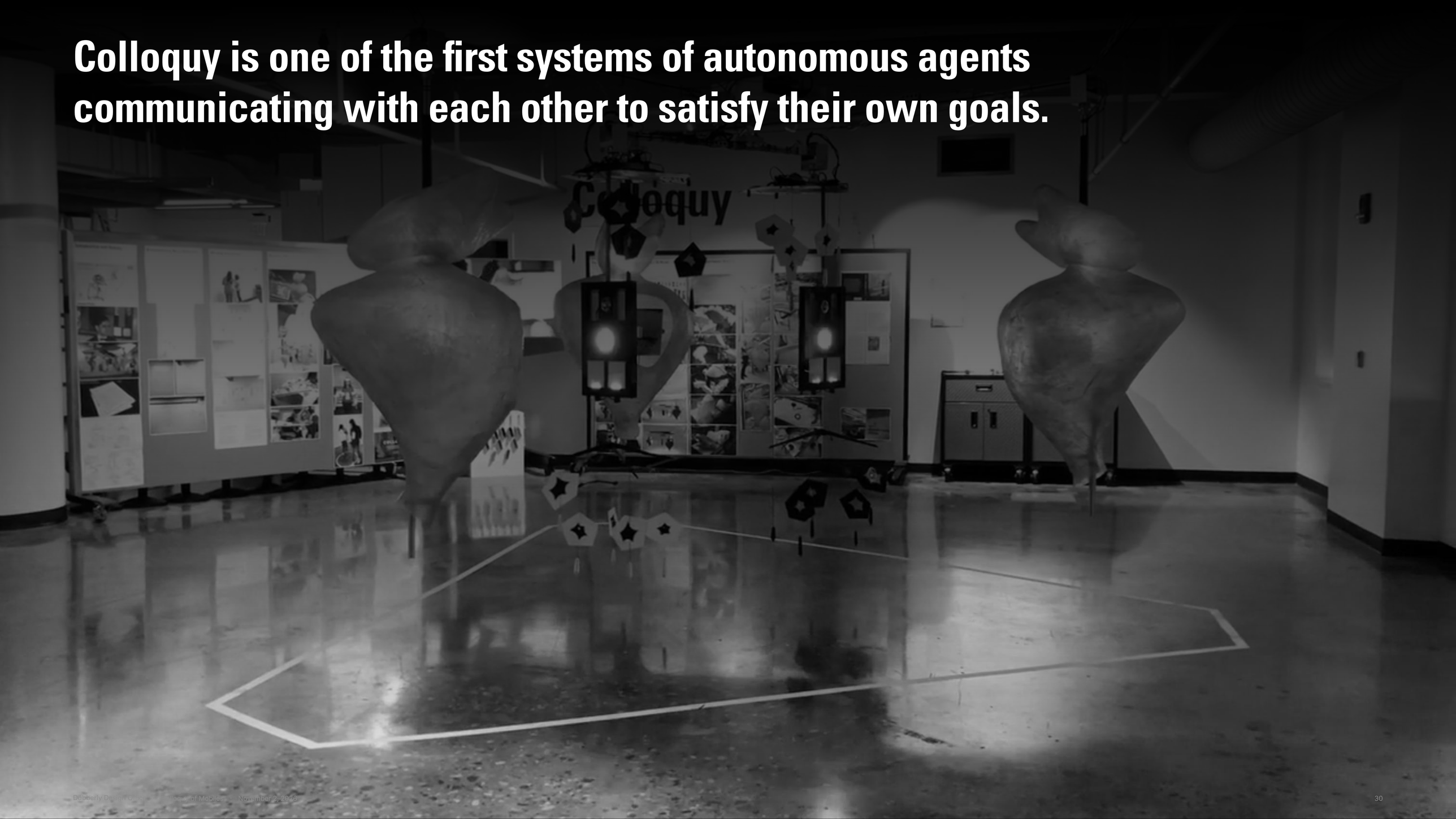




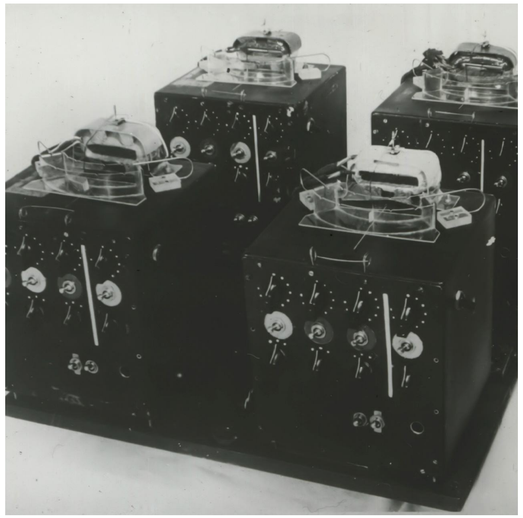
PART TWO

Why is *Colloquy* important?
An early experiment in agentic systems

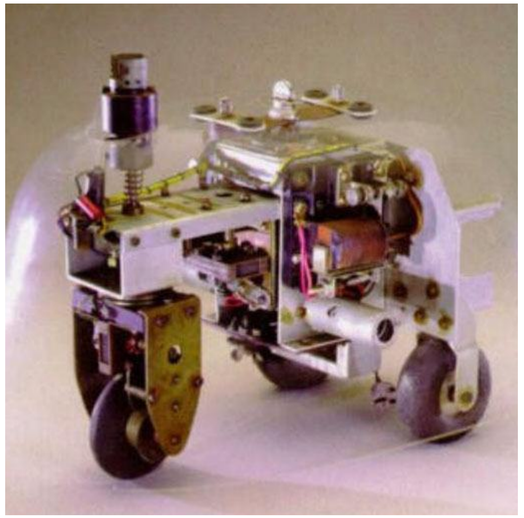
Colloquy is one of the first systems of autonomous agents communicating with each other to satisfy their own goals.



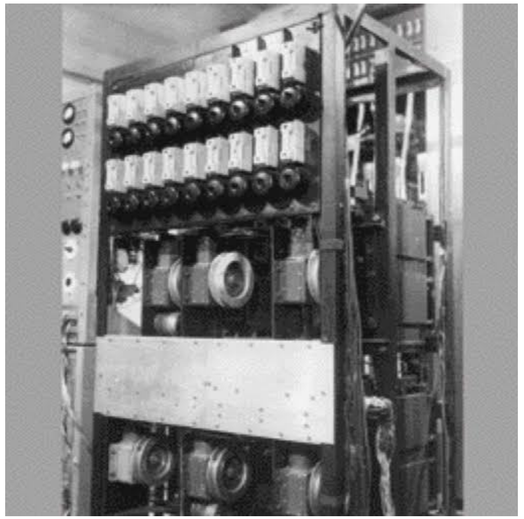
It is part of a tradition in British cybernetics that also includes:



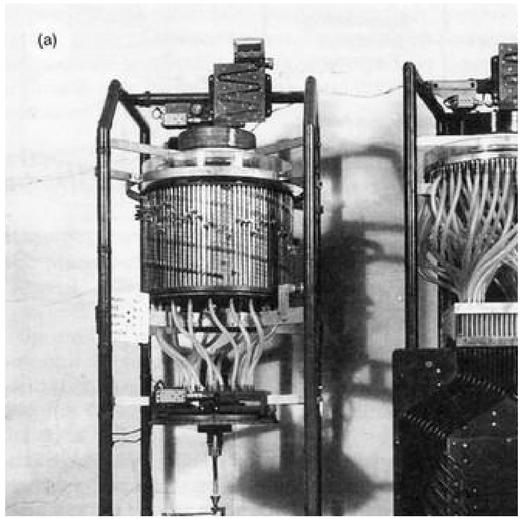
Ross Ashby's
Homeostat (1948)



Gray Walter's
Turtles (1949)

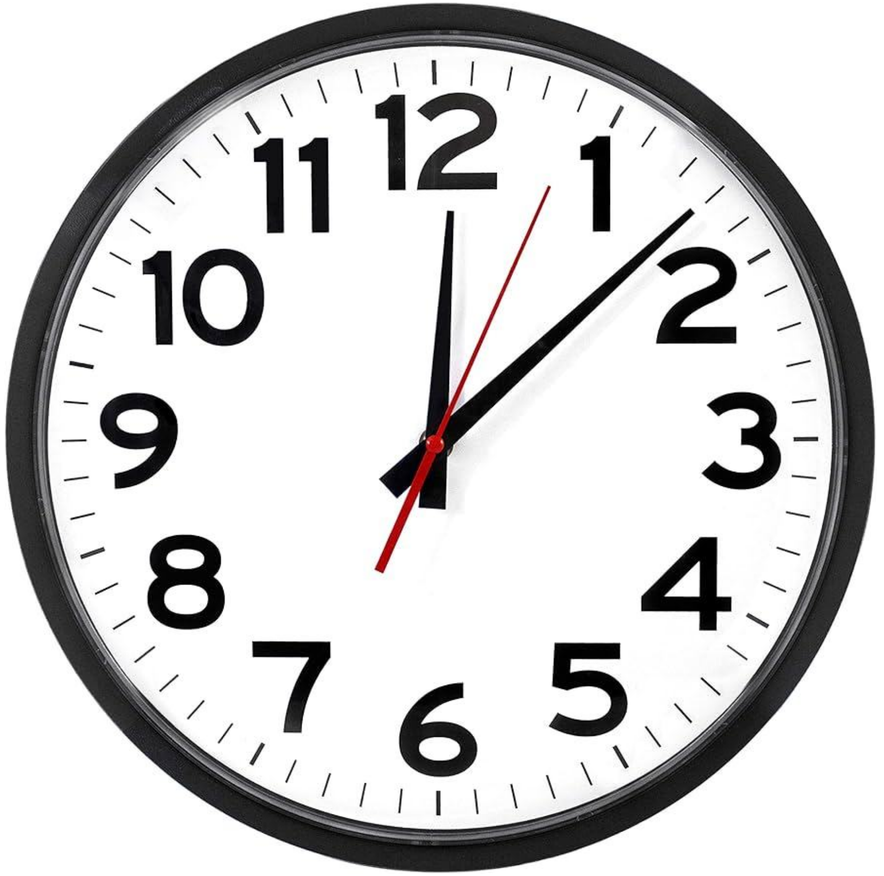


Gordon Pask's
Musicolour (1953)



Stafford Beer's
SAM: Stochastic Analogue (1968)
SAM also appeared in
Cybernetic Serendipity.

Machines before were largely deterministic.
Like a clock.

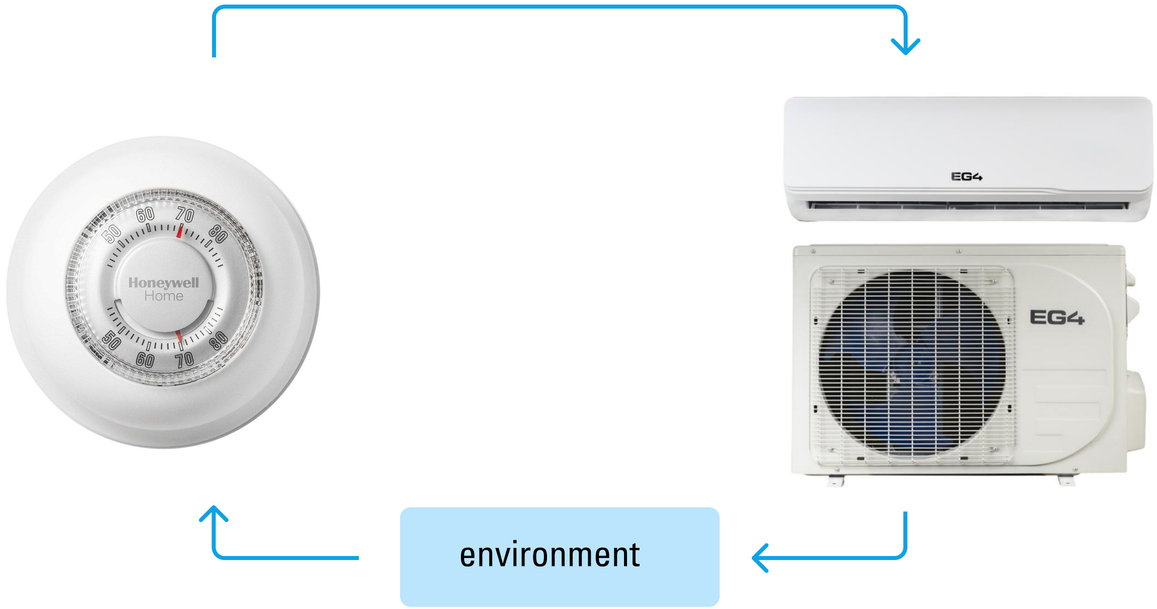


More complex machines can set a goal and read inputs. Like a thermostat.



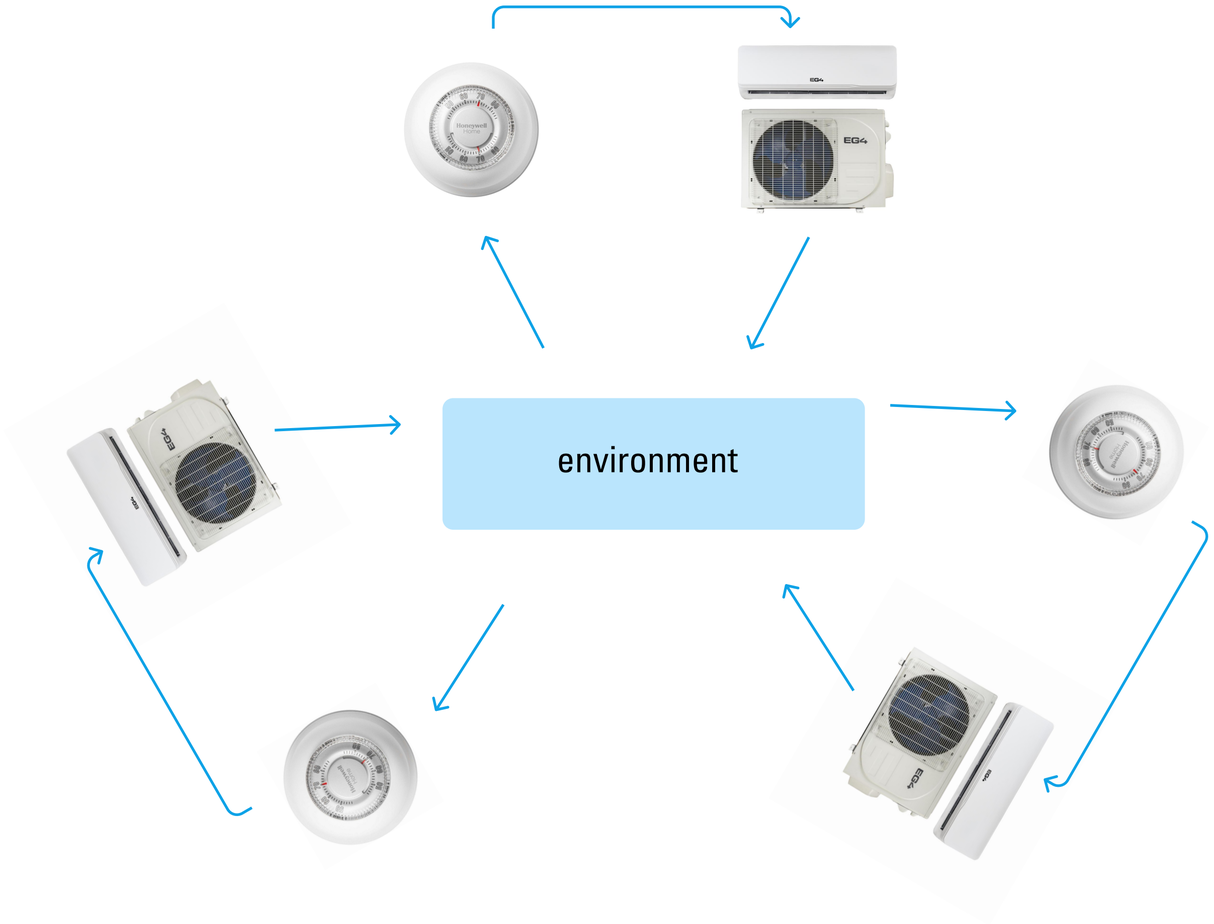
Thermostats and HVAC units form a feedback loop.
Reading sensor input, comparing to goal, and acting to correct error, i.e., switching on (or off), heating or cooling—to change the room temperature.

Which is again read by sensors in an iterative processs



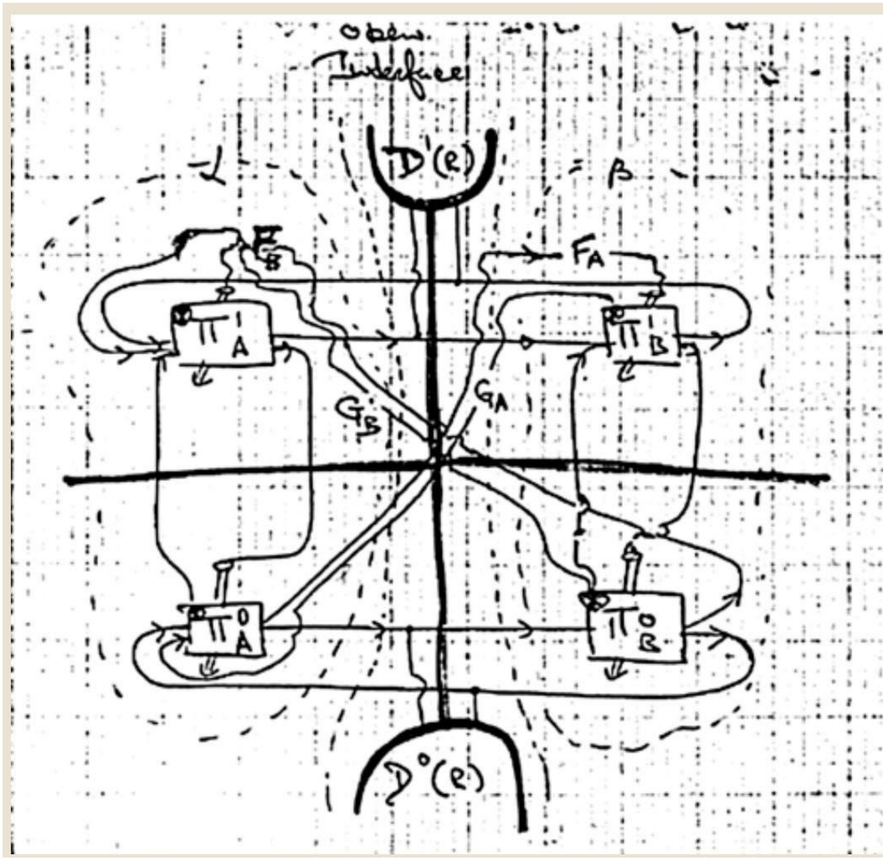
Colloquy is a system of feedback loops.

Each agent reads its environment, and send out signals to be read by others.

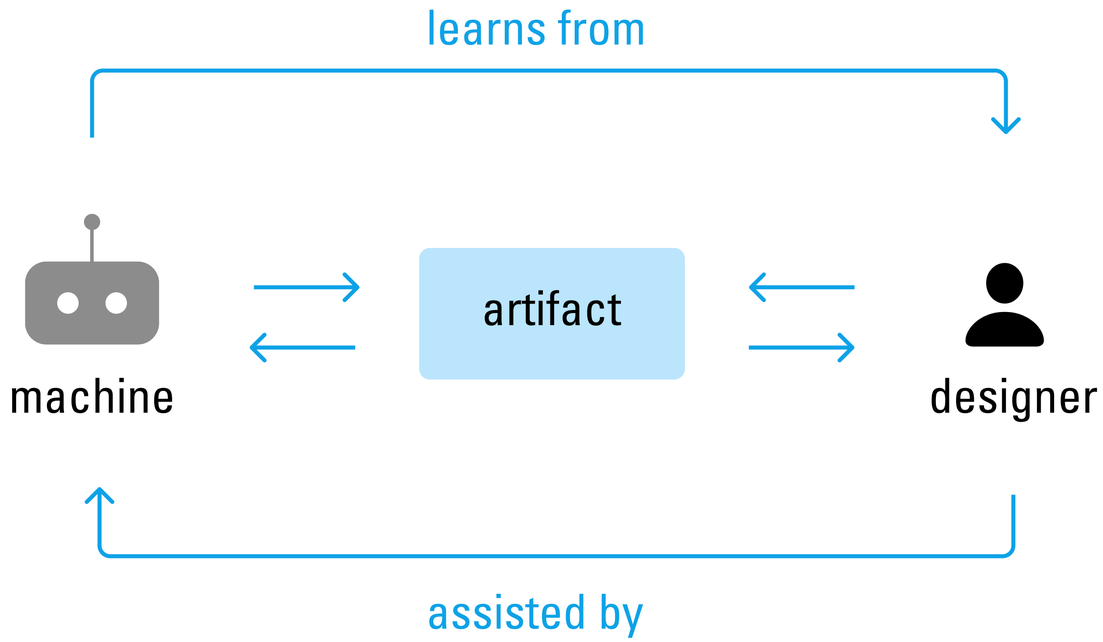


Nicholas Negroponte includes an entire chapter from Pask in his 1970 book, *Soft Architecture Machines.*





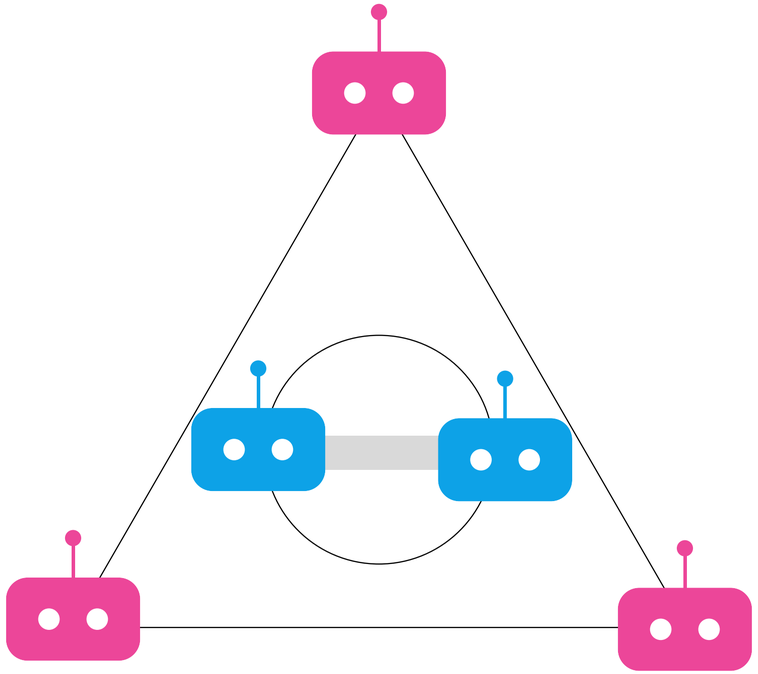
In it, Negroponte expands on the goal-seeking concept, and imagines a designer collaborating with an intelligent learning computer.



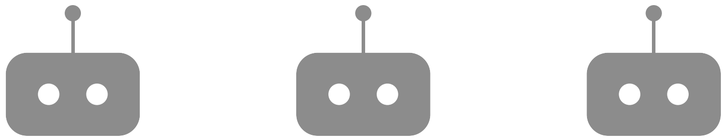
One can refer to Pask’s mobiles and Negroponte’s machine as agents



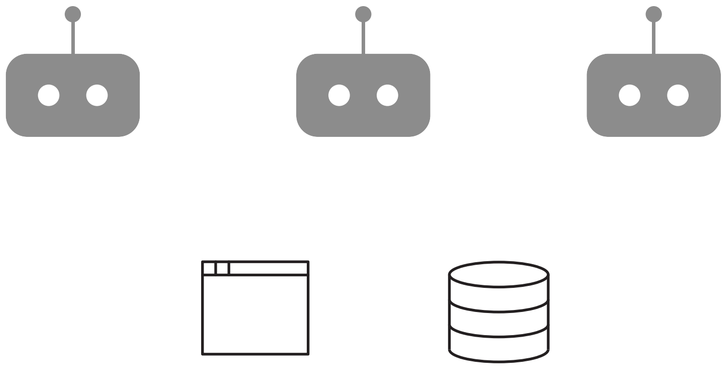
Pask's agents simulate a party.



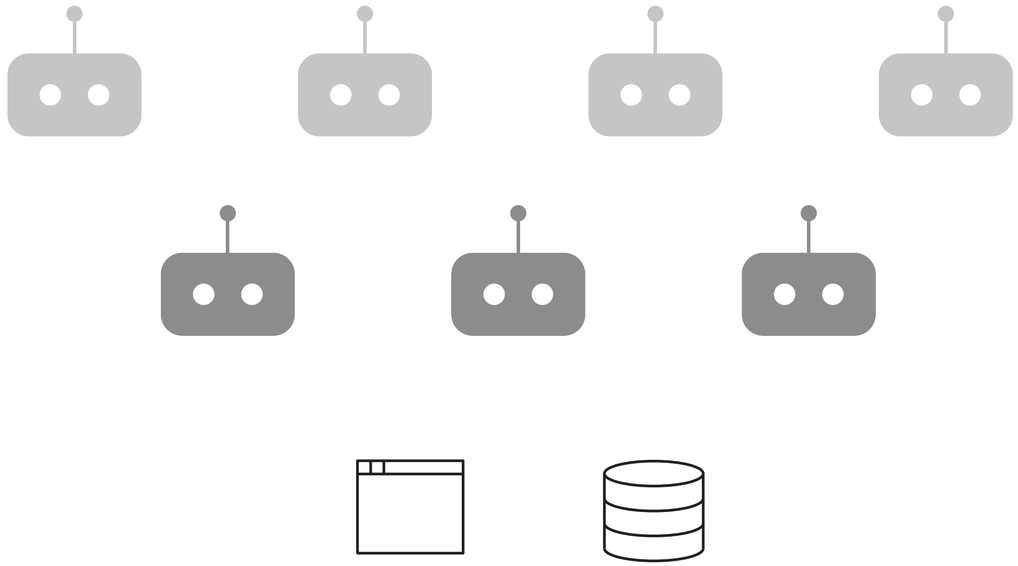
As Negroponte predicted, agents might also simulate a workplace.



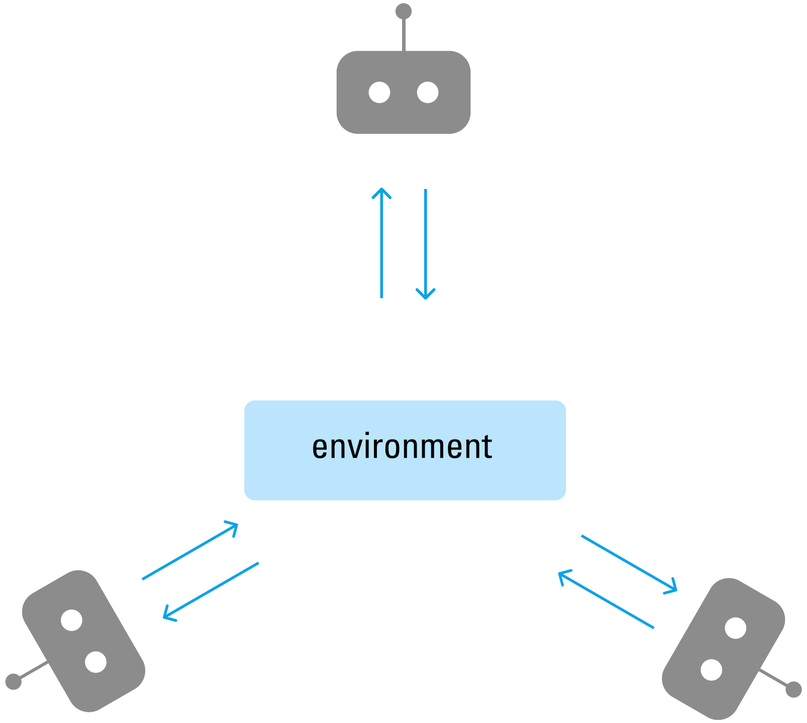
An engineering team.



An entire office.



Increasingly, systems of agents read input from their environment, and produce output that is read by other agents.



Pask created goal-driven entities, Negroponte imagined collaborating with them, and today agents do work in the real world.

