

ALTERNATIVE METHODS AND HISTORIES

Instrument of Reflection: A Study in Smartphone Filming

Kevin B. Lee

In 2016, Kriss Ravetto and I conducted a video essay intervention with the Bill Viola *Martyrs* video installation at St. Paul's Cathedral in London. The video essay, accompanied by a statement authored by Kriss, was published the following year in the videographic journal *[in]Transition* (Lee and Ravetto 2017). As a complement to Kriss's account, I offer my own evaluation of the project, focusing specifically on the processes of working with an iPhone camera in the making of the video essay and the effects of using such technology in understanding the relationship between the parties involved in the video: the person filming (in this instance, myself), the site being filmed, others within the site, and the viewers of the resulting video essay. While Kriss's account provides a critical and theoretical framework that informs both our understanding of the installation and our interventionary project, I will give more of a practical account of how we attempted to express our critical intentions in a filmmaking context, and how the real-time experience of creating the work added further complexity and complication to our critical response to Viola's work and its installation within St. Paul's Cathedral.¹

The project was like none I had previously attempted. I had produced hundreds of video essays analyzing works of film and media through found footage. This was my first attempt to critically engage with a media work that was not accessible as found footage, but as a site-specific work that could only be accessed by visiting it. This raised a host of new questions for my own video essay practice: how would I perform a video essay analysis in a live three-dimensional space, requiring filming of original footage of the work, and in the midst of other visitors? Drew Morton acknowledges these challenges in his review of the video essay:

There are some obvious and inherent challenges that the critics took on to produce this piece. First, the creators needed to capture and repurpose their footage through second-hand means, using cameras instead of a direct rip from a digital source. Secondly, the effectiveness and uniqueness of Viola's works are not just defined by their audiovisual compositions, but by such pragmatic variables as a Museum's (or Cathedral's) space, lighting, benches, and the audience. The primary gift of "Martyrs for the Mass" is the weight it places on just how fragile and subjective the experience of watching installation videos can be—especially when so much of the meaning of a work like Viola's depends on the last painting, sculpture, illuminated manuscript, or stained glass work you encountered in close proximity. (Morton 2017)

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St. Paul's Cathedral had commissioned Bill Viola, with the cooperation of the Tate Modern in London, to create a large four-panel work titled *Martyrs*. This work does not refer to a specific religious event or narrative, but it carries strong religious and biblical references nonetheless. The installation presents four individuals, each of whom are isolated in an abstract background set within a vertically oriented video monitor. These four figures are being tortured in different ways that refer to each of the four elements of nature. From left to right, one is buried by earth poured over him; another is suspended by ropes and blown by a strong wind; a third is drenched in water; the fourth is seemingly burned alive. These acts of martyrdom run synchronously as an eight-minute loop: once the acts are consummated, the video fades to black and restarts. The monitors are positioned at least a metre above the ground, effectively elevating the figures in each screen so that the viewer must look up at them as they are being martyred.

We were curious about what it meant for a work like this to be exhibited in St Paul's Cathedral. St. Paul's, an iconic religious institution of London, also functions as a hub of London tourism, which sustains much of its financial upkeep (the entrance fee to the cathedral was £18 when we visited). In certain ways, the cathedral functions as much, if not more than, within the tourist industry as it does within its primary religious context—at least if one is to judge the number of tourists wandering the premises compared to those worshipping—and is using the tourist industry to maintain its religious functions. *Martyrs* is also commissioned by the Tate Museum of Modern Art, a major world art institution and one of London's major tourist attractions. We were thus interested in examining this work as an intersectional site of twenty-first-century religion, art, media, and commerce. We visited the cathedral intending to capture on video both the work itself and its effects on visitors, that we may reveal the economic and cultural substructures informing its presence.

One wrinkle to our plan was that filming of the installation was prohibited by St Paul's. This posed several questions: What rights and agency exist for someone occupying a role of critical or scholarly intervention when one is not granted permission to film or document a work or a site? To what extent can one work within the designated parameters and constraints of the apparatus, and to what extent must one circumvent, reject or oppose them? What creative possibilities and critical realizations do each of these options afford?

In contrast to this clearly delineated set of options, what we observed upon arriving at the site was a grayer space of intentions and actions. Many visitors were filming the installation, seemingly oblivious that they were violating the site's guidelines. These guidelines clearly were not being consistently enforced, whether because the cathedral did not have the staff capacity to constantly monitor the site, or because enforcement was not practical. Perhaps smartphone photography has become such a normalized function, particularly in tourism, that to discourage it within the space would be to discourage the touristic engagement with the work. This prohibition would thus undermine the industrial logic justifying the work in the first place, even as it logically upheld the aspects of the installation functioning as both a quasi-religious expression and a work of copyrighted media art, in either case commanding reverence and deference from the spectator. In this regard, the tourists were already doing the work of disrupting the logic of the space that we had set out to do through the mobilizing of one's own body and image-making technology that we had designated as our interventionist strategy.

However, this didn't mean that their activity was inherently critical; rather, their capturing images of the installation was further facilitating their consumer enjoyment of the space. We then had to ask ourselves: how could we use these same instruments to disrupt normative image consumption? This

essay posits these kinds of questions in the context of a discussion of the relationship between the body and the subject, the body and the camera, and what kind of relationships we see within our own act of being in a site. It thinks about how our act of filming or using the camera or any device for capture itself shapes the relationship, our way of seeing the dynamics that we are trying to capture, and also our role in the capturing. Here specifically, the use of a smartphone has particular effects on these dynamics.

In this light, it is productive to review the raw footage in chronological order to account for how Kriss and I proceeded to situate ourselves throughout our filming and move through a series of tactics we adopted for our intervention. These tactics came to us in the moment, as it was our first encounter with the installation, and we wanted to capture this first encounter spontaneously, intuitively, and honestly. How does the resulting footage document a series of moments that reflect a shifting relationship with the video installation and its surrounding space? How do our actions from one moment to the next reflect our evolving state of mind when we engage with any particular situation?

After we reviewed our resulting video essay, I went back to St. Paul's a year after the making of the first version to film footage we wished we had taken the first time. This additional re-shoot prompted me to think further about the learning that goes on directly through the use of the technology, which I will address at the end of the essay.

Analyzing a Chronology of Raw Footage

Reviewing the footage I captured, I can point to a range of patterns that give a sequential progression through the modes of “spontaneous” filming that I engaged in on that first visit.

June 23 2016 Site filming

69 video clips

<u>video file names</u>	<u>Type of shots</u>
4511-4515	establishing shots
4516-4523	interior initial orientation
4524-4528	incorporation of site visitors
4530-4537, 4541	slow motion tracking (round 1)
4537-4740	contextual shot
4543-4549	slow motion inserts
4550-4554	regular inserts
4556-4558	slow motion tracking (round 2)
4560-4561	distant shots
4562-4565	site visitors
4570-4574	slow motion tracking (round 3)
4575-4580	close ups of touch traces

II. Martyrs for the Mass video Viewing the work:

Movement 1 (0:00-0:41) reflective close ups	4 shots
Movement 1b (0:41-0:54) four panel re-composite	1 shot
Movement 2 (0:54-1:20) transitional montage	2 shots
Movement 3 (1:20-4:29) lateral slow motion tracking	3 shots
Movement 4 (4:30-6:06) double screen soft montage	2 shots
Movement 5 (6:06-6:16) voyeuristic observation	
Movement 6 (6:18-6:33) four panel re-composite	1 shot
Movement 7 (6:33-7:11) forensic close ups	4 shots

Shoot Notes

Strategies:

- Disruption
- Obfuscation
- Re-Interpretation

Tactics:

- Scan rate
- Reflection
- Recomposition (cropping / re-framing)
- Reconstitution
- Speed

Bodily actions:

- Static positioning
- Proximity (to the screen, to viewers)
- Lateral movement

Relations

- Voyeuristic / unobtrusive / non-invasive observing
- Conspicuous / obtrusive / invasive / observing

Visual effects

Difficulties

- Angles/positions
- Evaluation of strategies
- Editing of different approaches to achieve cohesion

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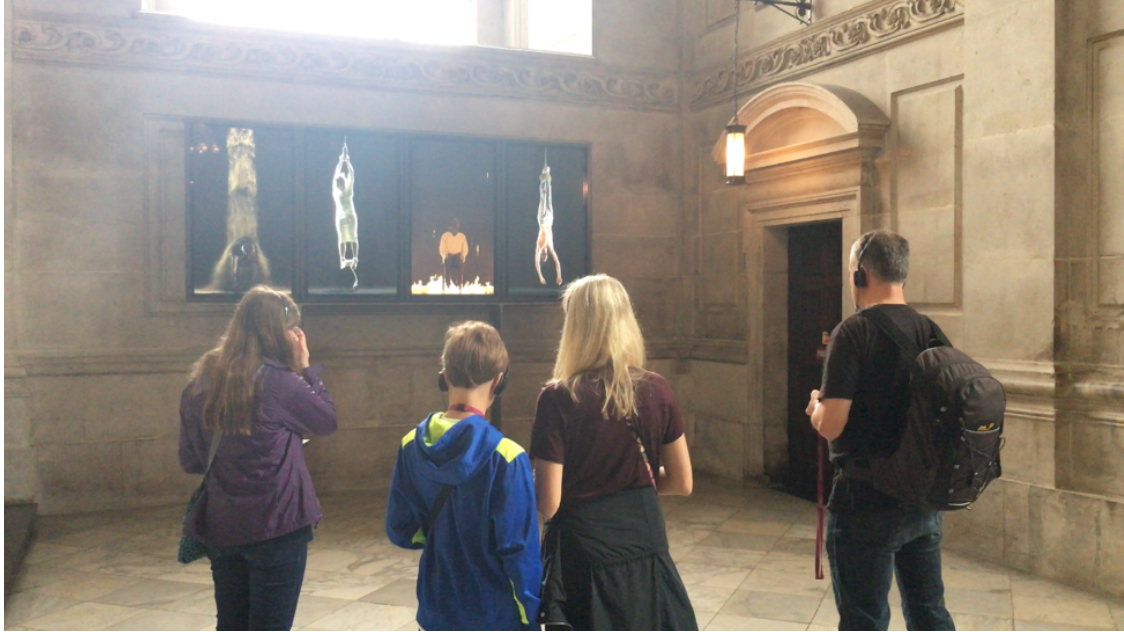
We arrived on June 23, 2016, at 10:00 a.m. at St. Paul's Cathedral. The first series of shots are rather standard establishing shots of the exteriors, except that they are filmed vertically in contrast to the horizontal orientation of most film and video works.



Establishing shots of the exteriors. Photo: Kevin B. Lee.

Already we were thinking about the properties of smartphone photography. We didn't bring a standard film or video camera, partly because that would have given us away to cathedral staff. We had to embrace the technology that a regular visitor to the site might have. I brought an iPhone 6S. This choice brought to mind the everyday modes of smartphone filming, distinguished from the more traditional cinematic modes. For me, this difference is most clearly marked by orientation: the horizontal paradigm of cinema versus the verticality of handheld smartphone framing. As we'll see, my approach alternated between the two as I am interested in investigating their respective aesthetic and ideological qualities, especially in relation to one another.

Next, we enter the actual installation in the back of the cathedral. The footage begins to capture the four-panel work itself, described above, with a glimpse of some of the spectators.



Shot from behind the spectators. Photo: Kevin B. Lee.

Here, I was working through the dilemma of wanting to show what this piece is doing for the spectators, trying to see its effects on them while not wanting to interfere with their experiences. To film them from the front in order to better capture their facial expressions would clearly disrupt those same expressions. This dilemma gives this initial footage a tentative quality.

I also wanted to document the installation itself. I was drawn to the light spillage from the windows of the cathedral, which bestowed a hallowed aura upon the video installation. This effect is even more intense in the video footage; the way the phone camera lens captures the light of the space seems to hang a halo over the installation.



Installation with apparent halo. Photo: Kevin B. Lee.

I find it remarkable that this effect is even more pronounced in the footage I captured than what I observed in person—as if this halo was specific to digital recording. Either way, I had barely entered the site and found myself already contending with an auratic effect that this space was generating. How does one find a critical position to interrupt that aura, or at least resist replicating the aura through their recording? This shot lasts thirty-six seconds—what does that duration tell about my experience of that aura? As I review this shot critically, I see how conflicted it was between three impulses, in descending order of intensity: to experience, to document, and to intervene.

I'd like to think I was predisposed to being critical; if I wasn't, I was just consuming the work like any other visitor. Being with Kriss Ravetto helped offset this normative impulse, while seeing other visitors wielding their smartphone cameras produced a doppelganger effect that could trigger the basis of my resistance. Another trigger occurred the first time a cathedral staff member had asked me not to film. After this interruption, none of the subsequent series of shots last more than thirty seconds. These shorter shots may be informed by a fear of further interruption by the staff. Thinking about the impact of the hidden forces embedded in the cultural experience, and the transgression of authoring an unauthorized version of the experience, the duration of shots becomes an indicator of bumping up against those forces. Now I wonder how this apprehension in occupying the space with a camera could have been more vividly conveyed in the final video essay. How much can one tell that footage is illegal just by watching it?

But from this point, the duration of a shot takes on the opposite meaning than when I first filmed the installation at length, absorbed by its aura. Now aware of the illegality of filming, extended duration becomes resistance to normative behaviour. And from this point, the possibility of non-normative filming practices, especially with innocuous everyday devices like smartphones, as an interventionist tactic, became more present in my mind.



Photo: Kevin B. Lee.

I wonder how much tension one perceives in this image; as its maker, I can recall much tension in its making. I am shooting at eye level with the spectators but also standing behind them, an interplay between proximity and distance, identification and disassociation between them and me. I don't know if they would have felt any of that tension. There are moments when a spectator does notice me, but they were probably less likely to assume I was filming them than the installation. Alongside the tension I felt in my filming, another quality in this footage is spectatorial stillness: everyone is frozen in their looking. We do not see their faces, so it is all conveyed through the way the camera captures their bodies.

At the same time, I noticed many of the spectators carrying iPhones and viewing the installation through them as they captured footage while also listening to audio guides rented from the cathedral that introduce the installation. An array of technology, both institutional and personal, mediates the visitors' experience of the site. One may wager that the visitors' plugged-in state makes my own filming activity less conspicuous. In this sense, their mediated engagement with the site mediates my own engagement: it gives me both material to document and a cover under which to conduct the documentation. Over the next several minutes, I settle in and become more comfortable and confident with my own presence in the site.

About ten minutes into my visit, I begin experimenting with the slow-motion function on the iPhone, an addition to the newer models' set of features. At the time, Apple was aggressively promoting this feature in television ads, with the effect of persuading consumers that the iPhone could achieve images with an unprecedented cinematic quality through high resolution slow motion. I certainly was susceptible to the dream of creating beautiful cinematic images with this project, and with just my phone—a DIY maker fantasy. At the same, I was driven by a somewhat contradictory impulse to making beautiful images: I thought this feature could work to disrupt a normative experience of the space by amplifying the hypnotic effect of viewing this work, a frozen state of spectatorship. At the same time, I wanted to move within that frozenness so that motion becomes a disruptive tactic, even a mode of commentary on the scene. If I reference *The Matrix*, when the scene freezes around Keanu Reeves, allowing him to move within his own privileged space-time, this movement is definitely an articulation of a certain kind of power relationship involving disruption of time and space. It is as if I can move within this state of hypnotizing spectacle while everyone else is still stuck in their hypnotized gaze, differentiating my own gaze as interrogatory.

That there were three rounds of slow motion, as indicated in the chronology listed above, shows how intent I was on using slow motion on the iPhone, invested in its possibilities and just trying to work it over and over to reach its potential. I had not had much experience filming slow motion with the phone before, but with each round of filming, I felt more familiar and competent with the technique. At the same time, it yielded results that had no bearing on my acquired skill. One unexpected effect of the slow motion function was that its frame rate differed radically from that of the video monitors in Viola's installation. This resulted in a strong flicker effect appearing in the recorded monitors. I considered this another effect to disrupt the experience of Viola's installation, breaking the spell of his languidly moving high resolution images and transforming them literally into a visual transmission. But looking at this footage, another dilemma emerges: to what extent do these effects of slow motion and glitch disruption amount to their own kind of spectacle? If slow-motion has an inherent hypnotic power, to what extent is it working against Viola's aesthetic hypnosis, or replicating it by way of reconstitution?

The question of true disruption also bears upon the act of filming. So far in the video, every shot is taken by me while standing behind the spectators, who are all positioned in a row before the installation. I kept wishing that I could film from the opposite direction with a frontal view of the spectators, capturing their expressions as they watched the installation. But I didn't dare to attempt that, assuming that the spectators would no longer be looking at the installation, but at me. Still, it is worth considering what such a disruptive approach might achieve, what situation that may have produced, necessitating more of an interaction between the spectators and me. It changes the nature of the project from one of detached critical observation to activism: an on-site intervention. In contrast, a video essay can at best hope to function as an intervention after the event.

There were moments when people who moved away from the monitors did become aware of my filming. These moments give a sense of the camera as an interloper, getting into people's intimate experience with the work and on the cusp of interrupting it. This moment of cognitive shifting from one state to another is what I now like about these shots.



Photo: Kevin B. Lee. Photo altered to protect spectator anonymity.

What I like less is how much they reveal of the installation. I have been thinking of digitally masking the monitors from these shots so that there is more emphasis on the spectators, making the act of intervention and critical redirection of attention more explicit.

The desire to find ways to visually contextualize the site led a shot of people looking at a didactic sign introducing the installation. This is a classic observational documentary approach, and it shows that, despite the desire to adopt disruptive filming techniques to create disruptive images, I eventually capitulated to more conventional documentary techniques, with rather banal wide shots taking in the scene.

Meanwhile, Kriss's attention was drawn in a diametrically opposite vector. Drawing as near as possible to the video monitors, she noticed smudges on their surfaces, which indicated that some

people had actually touched the installation screens. Taking my cue from her observation, I concluded our filming with close-ups of the panels. What does it mean that these images affected someone so much that they tried to touch them? When I went back a year later to take more footage, those smudges were still there. The staff hadn't bothered to clean them; perhaps they did not even notice them.



Photo: Kevin B. Lee.

Capturing those smudges on the highly reflective surface of the screens tested the limits of the iPhone camera; the autofocus flips back and forth, trying to determine what should be focused on. I want to focus on fingerprints, but the camera is having trouble gauging depth because of this reflective surface, so it keeps focusing on the lights reflected on the surface. Even drawing nearer to the screen creates a vertigo effect, as the focus keeps shifting to something other than what I want to capture. There's a paradox at play in that these shots, more than any of the others, are seeking to grasp the material dimension of the installation—the composition of the screen, the pixels of the monitors. And yet the instrument being used for this purpose betrays its limitations. One technology for image capturing is having trouble seeing another for image transmission. I wonder about how this predicament could be accounted for in the video essay without requiring explanatory narration. Perhaps this is also part of the intuitive process of filming, responding to the technology when it is doing something you don't expect or cannot control, and treating that as material for further inquiry.

My own filming approach flips between deliberation and intuition. At the time, I thought I was filming spontaneously, without much premeditation. In dialogue with others, such as the editors of this volume, I became aware that there are different types of spontaneity informing the situation. On the one hand, there is a spontaneity of filmic practices so established and normalized over decades of industrial film language that they manifest in one's filming behaviours without thinking. By this, I am thinking of establishing shots, close-ups, inserts, etc. This is a kind of visual vocabulary as normal as common speech, habituated into spontaneous expression. Then there is a spontaneity that exists outside these habituated expressions, which one might call truly "free."

Post-Publication Review

After editing the video and publishing it on *[in]Transition*, we thought about how we could further develop it. I have since reconsidered several creative choices in the published video, starting with the use of split screen to present multiple images at once. The first use of split screen reconstitutes the four panels of the Viola installation, substituting details from each panel filmed in close-up.



Photo: Kevin B. Lee.

Looking at that edit, I realize I do not like that it adopts a more literal approach, attempting to reconstitute the original work. This reconstitution risks cancelling the defamiliarization effects of the preceding shots. Later instances of split screen also commit what might be called a sin of wanting to see too much at once. These strategies risk producing new modes of visual hyper-consumption of the scene in place of critique. If we took away the parameters of the screens, the site would become stranger and more abstracted, placing more emphasis on how people situate themselves in relation to it. Sometimes you have got to put the blinders on for the viewers of the video essay so that they are more focused on alternatives. Right now, I find certain details too distracting and offering more information than is necessary.

Another technique that had a lot of potential for the reworked video essay was the capturing of reflections. Kriss and I are interested in layers, though in different ways. My original approach to the filming considered layers as generating spatial depth of field, like the rows of people standing in front of the screens. Kriss is interested in layers of reflectiveness and layers of images overlaid on top of each other. She was more fascinated by the reflections in the screen that imposed the architecture and spectators onto Viola's images. I was focused on making clean, cinematic tracking shots, while she was more interested in the messiness and commingling of images in the reflections within the four panels, where one can occasionally see people walking across the installation and

people looking at the images. It is worth unpacking these reflective surfaces as spaces for further exploration.

As we zeroed in on the reflections, Kriss and I asked how we could make these reflections into images as visually compelling as how we found them in person.



Photo: Kevin B. Lee.

With this image, I was working with vertical framing of the reflections to see how it could draw attention to the architecture of the cathedral as well as the spectators. The reflections of the spectators captured by the video highlighted the question of how much the spectators were aware of their own reflections in the glass. It also makes me wonder whether Viola intended those reflections to be noticeable to the spectators and thus a part of his work. I don't think the spectators were aware of the reflections when they were looking at the installation, but the footage certainly brings them out, so for the viewer of the video essay, it disrupts their direct access to Viola's images. For some of these images, you can't even tell if these reflections are actually reflections; the imaging technology of the phone seems to flatten everything, putting it all in one plane. Take this shot, where the body of one of the martyrs seems to be lying inside the cathedral.



Photo: Kevin B. Lee.

I tried to capture as many of these reflections as I could, but I kept running into the issue of the screens being positioned so high I couldn't get the angle I wanted. For a visitor to see themselves reflected on the image-screen, they would have to get so close up that you actually lose the view of the work itself. One has to give up something in order to see one's reflection.

This leads to the question of how close a spectator is meant to get to the screens. At the site, I observed how visitors settled into a general average distance, alongside the didactic sign. The sign provides an implied vantage point to the work, since it is where one reads about the work. However, visitors may be influenced by the positions of others. At one point, I was blocking the sightline of others to one of the screens, but I was probably appearing to them as a spectator so enraptured by the work that I drew nearer to it. This had the effect of drawing others nearer as well. It was interesting to witness the collapsing of distance generated by my body: how people who were initially standing far from and somewhat intimidated by the disturbing images being displayed on the panels were now encouraged to step closer due to my own proximity to the screens. The point at which I was as close as I could be to the images was when others were also as close as I'd seen them during my visit. This may have been the closest to an act of intervention we performed within the site, breaking the demarcation line of viewing from a respectful distance. The insertion of my body into the space made critical intervention successful for that group of people. At the same time, the existing smudges on the screens meant that others had been doing it before me.

I should comment on the audio dimension of the video essay, which I would have liked to have spent more time working on had time and resources allowed. There is a voiceover track offering a narrative element to the video, about which I am ambivalent: how much voiceover is necessary, and what sort of voiceover narration can really add alternatives to ways of seeing the installation? We have also thought about using onscreen text but have not figured out what that text would be. Is it factual text, is it para-fictional text, is it critical interpretive text—or all of the above? We would need to think through what we are doing with the image before bringing text into it.

The audio track of the version online mostly consists of voiceover found in the cathedral audio guide, spoken by the docent. At one point, he says, “We really wanted to work with Bill Viola because we wanted to work with cinema. We wanted to acknowledge cinema’s role in our culture, but also it’s been typically used as a medium for mass control and so what Bill Viola is doing here is he’s turning it against that.” As if religion is not about mass control at all! We also include sound bites of Bill Viola and his partner Kira Perov talking about how this work is not a representation of martyrdom, but an experience: the audience experiences martyrdom. The installation really is a self-aggrandizing rhetoric of absorption and having this unmediated experience of the ecstatic, made possible by art and spirituality through a corporate partnership of their respective institutions. I suppose what I felt was not quite successful in the video essay was our incorporation of these statements without indicating our critical position toward them, at least as explicitly as I am stating now.

Refilming and Reconsidering the Vulnerable Spectator

In March 2017, nine months after the first filming, I went back to capture more footage, particularly to address some of the inhibitions that kept me from filming certain types of shots. I was thinking more about martyrdom in relation to the look—the looking of the spectators. I wanted to explore how these looks relate to the idea of martyrdom, what it means to be a witness to martyrdom and especially in this technologically and commercially constructed context. I also wanted to have a potential reverse shot for those slow-motion tracking shots I had done before, because this, the frontal shots of people looking, felt like the thing I was most reluctant to shoot.

A question remains: how to capture someone’s look without interfering with it? I realized that the iPhone has cameras on both sides that can shoot both toward and away from the one holding it. And so I pretended to film selfies while actually filming what was in front of me.



Photo: Kevin B. Lee. Photo altered to protect spectator anonymity.

Here we have the equivalent to a reverse shot of the backs of those heads I captured from the first filming (as shown in the image shot from behind the spectators). To be honest, I am more attracted to the backs of those heads because you have to imagine what the expressions of their faces are. A frontal shot like this seems too profane in its explicitness. And it preys on naïve, unaware, unselfconscious looks. Throughout my filming, I have been trying to be respectful but still have a critical position to state in terms of analyzing what is happening with this installation. Here I feel I am exerting a power relation that I do not feel comfortable with: collecting faces for affects in an ethically questionable way. Although I am interested in capturing that conflict in the way that the film emerges from the technology, what it does is suggest a limitation or a complication with the intervention I am trying to stage. I am not innocent either in this, and if this is to be an intervention, the ethical conflict needs to be performed. In a way, it points back to the Viola installation, which is also preying on these unaware, unselfconscious, naïve looks.

I am left thinking about my relationship to the inherent vulnerability of the spectator. There was already an implicit assumption in my initial proposition with this project that tourists are in a vulnerable position of being exploited, and this situation is what must be confronted: one in which the church, the museum, and the artist produce an environment that capitalizes on spectatorial vulnerability. If the installation promises a direct, unmediated, intensely intimate experience of martyrdom, our video essay was intervening in those illusions. In doing so, we discerned the border that divides criticality from complicity, exploration from exploitation. Once that border is delineated, it puts me in a position to decide which side of the border I am on.

On the other hand, this essay has also been like describing a hall of mirrors. How can one possibly describe a border within a hall of mirrors?

Note

1. This text is largely based upon a transcript from a presentation given by Kevin Lee to members of the Co-presence with a Camera project on September 30, 2017, in Davis, California. It has been edited for clarity.

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