

4. Violence

Violence can never be understood solely in terms of its physically—force, assault, or the infliction of pain—alone. Violence also includes assaults on the personhood, dignity, sense of worth or value of the victim. The social and cultural dimensions of violence are what gives violence its power and meaning.—NANCY SCHEPER-HUGHES AND PHILIPPE BOURGOIS, *Violence in War and Peace*

Visibility and violence are intimately connected, the former often acting as a condition for the latter. Those who are seen, who are present, who are deemed out of place or challenging authority frequently find themselves on the receiving end of aggressive corrections, whether on interpersonal or institutional levels. But violence, as Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois remind us, extends well beyond overt physical assault: it also propagates through economic and institutional mechanisms (structural violence) and seeps into the formation of subjectivities such that victims come to misrecognize their vulnerability as a *personal* failing or fault (symbolic violence).¹ Regimes of visibility provide the grammar, the unspoken rules and logics, of structural and symbolic violence. They enable the positioning of individuals within crisis-vision classificatory systems such that their abjection—or affluence—can be justified and managed through bureaucratic surveillance operations.² At the same time, visibility allows subjects to scrutinize and position themselves within social systems, reproducing tenacious cultural mythologies about warranted exclusion or inclusion, deficiency or entitlement.³

Critical surveillance art has also endeavored to visualize and contest structural and symbolic violence in society. The strength of violence as an artistic frame is in revealing the objectifying and exploitative dimensions

of crisis vision. Whether the focus is on the plight of refugees, prostitutes, precarious workers, or arrestees, most of these political art projects strive to uncover what is hidden from view, to shock privileged audiences into recognition of everyday abjection and the systems that support it. They seek to interrupt crisis vision by either humanizing targets of violence or pushing depictions of their dehumanization to the extreme. In the process, this frame facilitates critiques of media spectacle and bureaucratic surveillance, particularly those genres and systems that reproduce violent conditions and limit human agency, even when they are sometimes attempting the exact opposite.

However, a risk associated with this artistic frame is dehumanization itself, whether by objectifying abject bodies in the service of art, reproducing their nonrepresentation, or prioritizing universalist frameworks (such as human rights) that strip away difference or context in the service of progressive change. Dehumanization runs counter to opacity, forestalling its emergence within most of these works. Additionally, when artists or others adopt evidentiary techniques to document conditions of violence, as some of the projects do, this practice may reify discourses of realism and objectivity, which are the same discourses that animate racialized forms of institutional surveillance more broadly.

Adrift

Persistent refugee crises throughout the world epitomize structural violence. Whether fleeing ethnic genocide, political oppression, economic insecurity, or the effects of climate collapse, the circumstances of refugees are cruelly precarious. Refugees also frequently encounter dehumanizing treatment while they are in transit or when they arrive in host countries.⁴ With vicious mobilizations of crisis vision, they are often portrayed as criminals or terrorists, thrust into detention centers, separated from their family members, or deported, becoming human jetsam on global currents.⁵ If not ejected, refugees can face augmented surveillance in the form of compulsory biometric identification and data tracking or even remote electronic monitoring through ankle devices that pinpoint their whereabouts for law enforcement.⁶ When refugees are forbidden to work in host countries, this expands their insecurity and dependency;⁷ if they are permitted to work, however, this fuels tensions with resentful citizens who see them as unfairly taking scarce jobs and resources.⁸ These are some of

the many ways that crisis vision engenders racialized forms of interpellation to scapegoat and demonize the abject, typically in the service of white supremacy.

Clearly, the predicament of such outcasts, of people driven to relinquish one home without legal claim to another, is both dire and upsetting. The magnitude of refugee crises also defies comprehension, with approximately 25 million refugees worldwide and an additional 40 million people who are forcibly displaced within their countries.⁹ Although most people in Western countries may be vaguely aware of the problem, in large part because of media attention to drowning deaths in the Mediterranean Sea or genocide in countries such as Myanmar, the crisis continually fades from view as it becomes normalized and media outlets turn to other stories. Media can inure publics to violence either through continual representational presence or absence. Allen Feldman observes that “the quantitative and qualitative dissemination of objectivity increases the social capacity to inflict pain upon the Other . . . [and] to render the Other’s pain inadmissible to public discourse and culture.”¹⁰ Relative invisibility perpetuates structural violence by obscuring the causes and conditions of global economic inequality and persecution.¹¹ Therefore, artists dedicated to social justice strive to find ways to force visibility of structural violence and cultivate collective consciousness of it, agitating for what T. J. Demos calls an “aesthetics of migration” that reimagines citizenship as constituted by bodily displacement.¹²

One such work, Marco Poloni’s photography installation (and book) *Displacement Island*, presents an austere photographic exploration of the traces left by refugees and tourists on the idyllic Pelagian island Lampedusa.¹³ This Mediterranean island, which is Italy’s southernmost point, is a mere seventy miles from Tunisia, making it a target destination for North African migrants.¹⁴ Because of the island’s crystal-clear blue waters and stunning beaches, it also lures tourists as a popular vacation spot. Poloni’s photographs play upon representations of presence and absence as they suggest tense connections between these two groups. There are discarded cigarette boxes with Arabic script, orange life vests being overtaken by sand, nighttime photographs of the island’s immigrant detention center next to the airport, underwater images of snorkeling white tourists suspended in motionless poses within encompassing blue frames, and aerial shots of fishing boats and pleasure craft dotting shallow blue waters, with their smudged shadows following leisurely on the ocean floor below.

Throughout the work, Poloni also scatters images that play upon tropes of the region (the archer Odysseus), make unexpected allusions (orbiting space satellites or astronauts awaiting pickup as they float in the ocean), or reference racist narratives of invading migrants (black-and-white negatives of encroaching insects).

Rather than stage simple juxtapositions—of destitute refugees and affluent tourists—that could lead to facile interpretations of this work as being pedantically moralizing or judgmental, Poloni’s presentation of symbolic excess pushes the piece into a wider and more personal context. He suggests that the romance of the region derives from its location at a crossroads, that narratives of invasion infuse both heroic and racist myths, that geopolitical instability and inequality drive migration, that planetary-scale awareness (for example, via satellites) makes claims of ignorance untenable, and that personal biographies intersect with these elements, for we learn that many of *Displacement Island*’s images come from Poloni’s family album, presumably from time spent vacationing on Lampedusa.¹⁵ The artwork operates not through juxtaposition, then, but through *constellation*. As Tom Holert explains in his discussion of this piece, “A constellation, in this sense, obeys a strategy of de-densification. Meaning and knowledge are no longer concentrated, in all their complexity, within a single, allegorical image, but unfolded: the condensed visual information is spatially dispersed.”¹⁶ The abundant use of white space between images attests to this orientation, where patterns and links are established but causality remains elusive (see figure 4.1). The meaning of the work comes from situating bodies within those distinct elements, the photographs, such that partial perspectives emerge and might be shared.

By consciously electing not to include images of refugees, Poloni eschews visual economies of surveillance wherein such images could contribute to the objectification of people in need.¹⁷ Instead, *Displacement Island* speaks in the register of technoscientific evidence. As with police crime dramas, images of evidence are affixed to a white wall, but the relative importance, validity, and connections between them have yet to be ascertained.¹⁸ The implied victims and the crimes must be read through these traces, but rather than seeking offenders per se, this work evokes humanity and pathos. The forlorn discards of transient migrants connote personal loss and perhaps death. Although representations of tourists and tourism generate dissonance within this constellation, as might be anticipated, the detention facilities hint at something worse: not the willfully

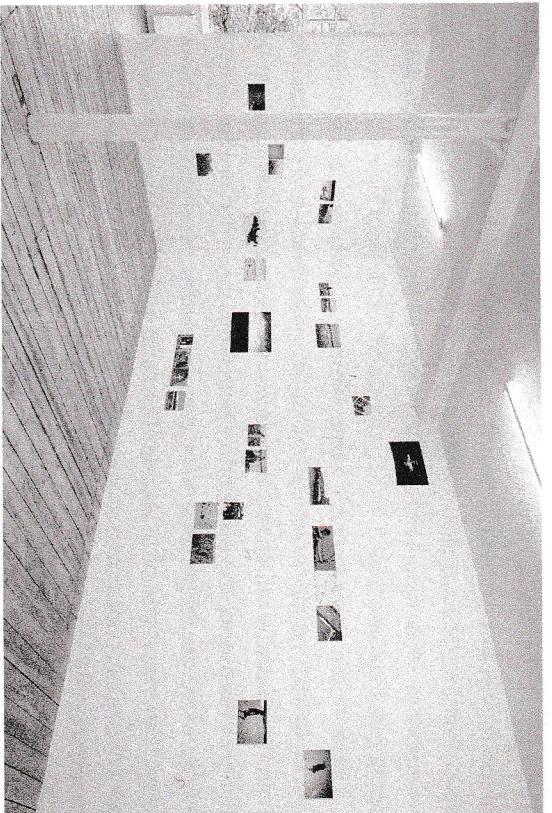


FIGURE 4.1. Marco Poloni, *Displacement Island* (installation view, 2016). Copyright Marco Poloni and Galerie Campagne Première Berlin. Photograph: Henning Moser.

ignorant revelry of the affluent but instead the cold intolerance of state policies and practices of detention and deportation. As Poloni recounts, while he was making this work, the island's only detention facility was located next to the airport, but an emergency decree in 2009 changed that by criminalizing undocumented outsiders, facilitating their rapid expulsion when found and prompting the erection of two new detention facilities in military zones—adjacent to a NATO base—on the island.¹⁹ The state masks its actions on this island paradise while, in the process, erasing ready-made juxtapositions of tourist entry points and refugee holding zones. The reference to preexisting military territory on Lampedusa undercuts narratives of island purity, drawing attention to the fact that militarization has long safeguarded conditions of national and ethnic privilege in this region and beyond.

Hanne Nielsen and Birgit Johnsen's video art project *Drifting* tackles the European refugee crisis from a different direction. This multiscreen installation centers on a solitary figure floating aboard a crude raft in an empty expanse of sea. Taking its inspiration from a true story of a castaway found by a Norwegian gas tanker in the Skagerrak Strait near Norway in 2006,²⁰ this project mixes genre and narrative conventions, weaving together doc-

umentary footage with fictional reenactment while using multiple screens to layer different perspectives out of temporal sequence. The nonlinearity of the piece simulates the jumble and confusion introduced by the actual man, who initially failed to cooperate with Swedish authorities who questioned him, not disclosing his name, nationality, or the circumstances that brought him to his precarious position.²¹ Thus, the figure reveals the centrality yet instability of legal systems dependent upon legible, unambiguous national identities. Without knowing who he was, it was unclear how to process him or where to send him; likewise, without knowing whether a crime was committed and where, state agents could not ascertain how to investigate or whom to prosecute. Although the man was eventually identified as a homeless Londoner who was tossed overboard from a British ship,²² as a metaphor he underscores the profound importance of proving belonging or worthiness in a globalized world that is still defined by hardened national borders, especially for the most destitute.

Nielsen and Johnsen's artwork taps into pervasive cultural mythologies of the lone hero struggling against a hostile world. Whether through wide shots that show an actor at the mercy of the sea, all alone on a makeshift raft under an ominous sky (see figure 4.2), or through extreme close-ups of his ruggedly handsome face and intense eyes scanning the horizon (see figure 4.3), the piece conjures the romance of the individual apart from society, where masculine triumph can be found even in death. The prevalence of



FIGURE 4.2. Hanne Nielsen and Birgit Johnsen, *Drifting* (2014). Courtesy of the artists.

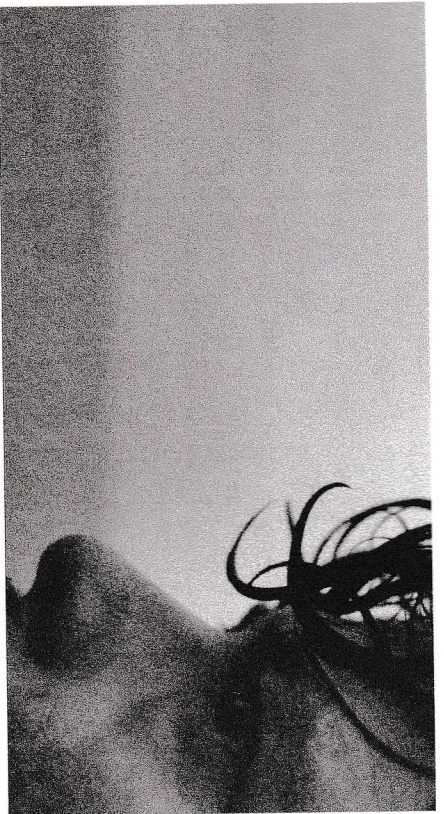


FIGURE 4.3. Hanne Nielsen and Birgit Johnsen, *Drifting* (2014). Courtesy of the artists.

such narratives in contemporary film and fiction makes them easily recognizable in works like *Drifting*. Once the drifting man is rescued, the piece folds into police crime genres, where state investigators struggle within bureaucracies to uncover the man's identity and the crimes perpetrated. Here, too, the outcast maintains heroic individualism by remaining enigmatic, by resisting interpellation into state systems that would delimit his potential: the potential of being anyone at all or no one.

Thus, whereas *Drifting* is a political work that problematizes the refugee crisis in Europe,²³ it does so by reproducing tropes of heroic, masculine individualism. Somewhat obliquely, the work invokes the story of mid-twentieth-century Norwegian adventurer Thor Heyerdahl, who, as Scott Magelssen recounts, sailed a primitive raft from Peru to Polynesia in an effort to prove that "the original inhabitants of Polynesia had been light-skinned, with blond, wavy hair, so similar to that of the Vikings they could be related to those most commanding of voyagers."²⁴ Likewise, *Drifting* proffers a form of daring individualism that is necessarily coded as white, in contradistinction to racialized portrayals of refugees. The strength of *Drifting*'s framing is that the refugee crisis can be distilled and inserted into a compelling story line, encouraging reflection on the overwhelming existential trauma of floating helplessly at sea. Instead of representations of dis-individuated masses clinging to rafts or crowded in detention facilities, *Drifting* humanizes refugees, as personified by the castaway (and the actor playing him), even if that person was not, in fact, a refugee. However, the

limitations of this framing are a loss of scale and complexity, including the complexity of intersectional violence and inequality. By casting a light-complexioned man in the role of the protagonist, Nielsen and Johnsen may more easily engender empathy from white European audiences (the piece was exhibited at Sørlandets Kunstmuseum in Norway), but in the process they recenter whiteness. Moreover, they elide issues of routine sexual violence against women and children refugees and racism, where the backlash against refugees, more generally, is tied to manifestations of intolerance in host countries.²⁵

Both *Displacement Island* and *Drifting* address the structural violence underlying the refugee crisis by personalizing it, whether through family vacation photographs or through depictions of a solitary figure with a hidden story. If, following Raymond Williams's observation that "the masses are always the others, whom we don't know, and can't know. . . . There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses,"²⁶ these artworks resist the impulse to reify "the masses" as a category. In the process they attempt to humanize those who are most vulnerable, to render them familiar and proximate, not as strange, unknowable others to be pitied or ignored. The most powerful contribution of these artworks may be that they provide glimpses into the bureaucratic apparatuses charged with managing refugees, thereby directing attention to the often-concealed violence of processing and containment, of assessing the merits of one's claims based on biography while also treating people as part of a dehumanized group. *Displacement Island* and *Drifting* call out state (in)visibility regimes as complicit in the larger systems—or constellations—of structural violence.²⁷

Recognizing that political art projects cannot do everything, it is important nonetheless to flag that the choices made by these artists limit their ability to confront human tragedy and state complicity under crisis vision. Representations of devastation, death, and loss are strangely absent in Poloni's photographic traces and Nielsen and Johnsen's mysterious castaway. Likewise, the former colonial projects of Italy (in North and East Africa) and Scandinavian nations (in West Africa) intertwine those states with the plight of populations facing displacement today, yet the bounded nature of these artworks makes those connections difficult to perceive. Ultimately, both pieces operate from a place of privilege, of creators and audiences processing the fact of the refugee crisis and what it means for them and their countries. Filtering the crisis through personal experience

or heroic scenes may make it more palatable, but perhaps at the expense of those truly adrift, whose humanity is momentarily sketched but then erased once more when the artist and viewer reclaim the center, the position of visual dominance.

Working (on) Bodies

Art critics have noted a shift in creative emphasis over the past few decades away from tangible artifacts and toward performative contexts, the likes of which could be generated through collaboration with others.²⁸ In response to the erosion of social safety nets precipitated by the neoliberal economic policies of the 1990s and beyond, particularly but not exclusively in Western countries, many politically engaged artists have sought to critique the larger conditions of structural violence and find ways to enroll those individuals most marginalized and disadvantaged by such conditions.²⁹ For example, Santiago Sierra staged performances in which day laborers or refugees sat within boxes in a museum space for hours at a time,³⁰ Artur Żmijewski re-tattooed identification numbers onto the arms of Nazi concentration camp survivors,³¹ and Francis Ali's mobilized hundreds of volunteers to shovel a sand dune in Peru, moving its geographical location by several inches.³²

Despite the social justice commitments of the artists conceptualizing such performances, critics have challenged the apparently exploitative and unethical arrangements and their potential to catalyze change. As Nina Möntmann writes, "The questionability of works in which social evils are not discussed but demonstrated, using living subjects treated as objects, is further heightened when most of the participants take part only because of their own deprivation, solely for the (small) fee being offered. Their own motivations and experiences play no role whatsoever; the participants merely perform, either actively or passively, in order to give an art audience the crassest possible sense of its own moral dilemmas by means of a form of shock treatment and the breaking of taboos."³³ Certainly, there might be possibilities for more empowering alternatives that foster opacity in the form of ethical connection and are directed by communities, such as projects enrolling nonartists in the creative design of public parks or children's centers.³⁴ These alternative works, to use Anthony Downey's term, seek an *ethics of engagement* that moves beyond provocation to reinscribe "the aesthetic as a form of sociopolitical praxis."³⁵ Setting these possibilities aside,

critical surveillance art also brings to the fore questions about the relationship between visibility and violence in participatory art projects, between their fabrication of surveillance-infused contexts and larger systems of social inequality. What then are the implications of artists appropriating elements of crisis vision in the service of critique?

As with many of his other works, Santiago Sierra's *160 cm Line Tattooed on Four People* produces a situation intended to distress viewers (see figure 4.4). In this performance piece, which was staged and recorded for spectators, he located four heroin-addicted female prostitutes in Spain and offered them the price of a shot of heroin (roughly \$67) to have a horizontal line tattooed across their backs.³⁶ The light-skinned women, who sit straddling wooden chairs and facing a white wall, strip off their shirts and lean forward to expose their bare backs. Two men in black coats extend a tape measure across their backs as another woman, the tattoo artist, marks the locations for the permanent line. Then the process commences. A couple of the women laugh and crane their necks to watch as their companions are tattooed, occasionally looking back at observers or the videographer, chatting animatedly with each other as if giddy about the absurdity of their situation. The woman who is last in line, conversely, appears to grimace as she surveys the tattooed mark on the person next to her, as if fearful of what will soon befall her. At the conclusion, the tattooist tapes white gauze to the women's backs before they pull their shirts on and get up to leave.³⁷

This performance uses women's bodies as canvases to call attention to larger systems of structural violence. When receiving blowback for his mistreatment of people for his art, Sierra deflected by emphasizing the true target of his critique: "The tattoo is not the problem. The problem is the existence of social conditions that allow me to make this work. You could make this tattooed line a kilometer long, using thousands and thousands of willing people."³⁸ Yet the presence of social conditions that allow for artistic violence do not require it, any more than social inequalities more broadly compel the relatively well-off to demean and abuse the needy. The conceptual slippage apparently occurs in the translation of structural violence to directed bodily scarring, from using bodies as a means to an end while denying responsibility for violence perpetrated in the name of politically engaged art. In short, Sierra abdicates blame for precisely what makes this work so shocking: its intentional exploitation and permanent marking of others who willingly consent to be props for the artist. Instead, Sierra strives to implicate viewers, particularly "high-class" museumgoers



FIGURE 4.4. Santiago Sierra, *160 cm Line Tattooed on Four People* (2000). Courtesy of the artist.

who are enrolled in the performance by nature of being present and seeing an uncomfortable “portrait of themselves” as agents of dehumanization.³⁹

Visibility is key to these dynamics. The prostitutes were both legible as such and accessible to the artist: “What I did was to find the womens [sic] in the, in the places where they offered their body and to ask her for the piece [the artwork],” Sierra relates, “They accepted. . . . It was not difficult.” Through tattooed marks, one can watch the performance unfold and track its progress; moreover, the tattoos serve as lingering symbols of a shared experience that aims to scar—literally or figuratively—everyone involved. Videos and photographs document such violence and make it fluid, such that it continues to circulate across mediascapes and register upon other viewers, other bodies. Finally, the performance casts everyone as complicit witnesses, from the women watching one another, the tattooist watching them, the audiences watching the scene and one another, and the artist watching them all. It is telling that even as he directs the performance, Sierra maintains a space of privileged invisibility for himself within this assemblage of viewers, choosing not to reveal his face in interviews, for example, to ostensibly avoid fueling a cult of personality.⁴⁰ (Of course, one could posit that Sierra’s calculated shyness has the opposite effect—it

generates further mystery and allure about him as an auteur, even while blunting criticisms of his egocentrism.) Through this entire scene the visual lure of tattooed bodies obscures the structural and symbolic violence that would allow these women to respond to Sierra’s subjectifying hail and see themselves as resources for art. They are victims of external forces, the unequal social conditions identified by the artist, and of internal ones that facilitate their cooperation.⁴¹

Many other art projects mobilize similar forms of “delegated performance,”⁴² where artists hire nonprofessionals to engage in activities that produce situations, often in the service of social critique. For instance, for his piece *They Shoot Horses 2004*,⁴³ video artist Phil Collins recruited and paid nine teenagers from Ramallah in Palestine to dance to pop music for eight consecutive hours.⁴⁴ He divided the teens into two groups and filmed each group constantly as they performed with enthusiasm to many of the Western songs but eventually succumbed to fatigue, some of them sitting with backs against the pink background wall, leaning into each other, or resting their heads in each other’s laps (see figure 4.5). The two video feeds were synchronized and displayed on adjacent museum walls at the Tate Museum in London, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Toronto, and elsewhere.

Collins’s tactic is one of familiarization, where he seeks to illustrate the humanity and recognizable similarity of youths in Palestine to those in other parts of the world. By refusing simple narratives of Palestinian youths as either victims of crushing oppression or potential terrorists, Collins seeks to reorient the assumptions and focus of Western outsiders. He explains: “My question there is why is this [occupation and devastation] allowed to happen? People penned into what are effectively bantustans [racially separate areas], dying in ambulances waiting to cross checkpoints. Why, every day, when people die, in the large part children and teenagers, is there such a negligible public response? In the British press there exist entire seasons devoted to the subject of one death or a kidnap or a disappearance, reported salaciously as if they were picking over the bones.”⁴⁵ Thus, Collins is not only challenging the fusion of crisis vision with cultural prejudice, which is something that allows one to see some lives as less worthy than others; he is also highlighting the violence done—and made possible—by media practices that augment the value of the local and singular over the distant and multiple. Likewise, his appropriation of reality television formats in this and other works is an attempt to unveil the



FIGURE 4.5. Phil Collins, *They Shoot Horses 2004* (2004). © Phil Collins, courtesy Kerlin Gallery, Dublin. Digital photograph: Photo © Tate.

destructive politics of popular media genres, which distract viewers from social problems, and reroute them for social justice ends.

Collins is clearly not exploiting his subjects to the same degree as Sierra, or producing obvious lasting effects, yet he is nonetheless compelling them to do what they otherwise would not, whether because of payment or the appeal of participating in an art project. In a time that predated widespread adoption of social media, these teenagers exposed themselves in potentially embarrassing or vulnerable ways to strangers throughout the world. The artist commodified their expressions of personal identity, their movement, dance, and gesture, converting them into labor that could be materialized and circulated to other markets, generating symbolic and financial value for him and art institutions along the way. However, what complicates this appraisal is the relative degree of freedom these youths

have compared to the prostitutes in Sierra's work. They may be similarly enrolled in remunerative arrangements and approached as raw material to be molded by the artist, but the content of that artwork is open to negotiation and improvisation. *They Shoot Horses* does not demand debasement as a condition for participation, and as with other reality television or social media formats, it may foster limited forms of enfranchisement through visibility and the production of celebrity.⁴⁶

Extending these themes, James Coupe's video and architecture installation *Watchtower* (*A Machine for Living*) brings the problematics of labor exploitation and participatory performances to the digital present.⁴⁷ In this work, Coupe interrogates the effects of widespread employment precarity and monopolistic digital platforms upon contemporary labor relations and identities. Themes of surveillance, visibility, and automated labor figure prominently in *Watchtower*. Whereas humans may have occupied observational towers and outposts in the past and—metaphorically—have been in central positions from which to monitor and assess the actions of others, today's distributed automated systems increasingly orchestrate and capitalize upon human activity. Coupe explains: "It's not just about being watched. It's about us performing, almost, for these systems, and establishing routines and metadata—those things that feed back into the system so they learn more about us."⁴⁸ All interactions on digital platforms generate data that the systems amass and learn from, the more intimate the data the better, which is one major reason social media platforms afford personal disclosure. Although labor automation is a risk, these labor practices also generate additional metadata that become profitable surplus value (for example, in the form of consumer profiles) without any need, as of yet, to compensate workers or prosumers for that surplus.⁴⁹ Platform companies such as Amazon or Uber create entire markets to maintain profitable precarious labor relations while hiding the human costs behind narratives of individual freedom and flexibility or by hiding human labor altogether. In Coupe's words, "Workers remain isolated, invisible and anonymous, like proletarianized ghosts in the machine."⁵⁰

For *Watchtower*, Coupe erected a four-story wooden tower, modeled after watchtowers previously used to spot forest fires near the artist's home in Seattle (see figure 4.6). Instead of a human observer at the top, the watchtower room contains computer hardware managing labor tasks via Amazon's Mechanical Turk system, which is a digital platform that coordinates micro-tasks performed by humans for piecemeal fees, particularly

tasks that computer algorithms currently have a difficult time executing accurately (e.g., identifying captcha images, filling out surveys). The anonymous, outsourced laborers in Coupe's project are asked to create videos documenting or relating a range of potentially personal information, such as their dreams, the food they eat, the view from their windows, them exercising or praying, and so on. The workers are paid to record one full minute every hour for the span of a typical workday. The computer system then pipes these feeds to a set of video displays affixed to the wooden watchtower (itself located in a building near Amazon's Seattle headquarters) such that at punctuated intervals the videos play, offering a window into the lives of these workers.

As with the art projects of Sierra and Collins, Coupe draws heavily upon delegated performances to breathe life into his *Watchtower* piece. There are a few important differences, however. First, Coupe fashions a *direct* correspondence between his actors' performances and the focus of his critique. Unlike Sierra, who targets problematic situations that would allow exploitative labor arrangements, Coupe criticizes those very labor arrangements as produced by and reflected in his work. Second, he makes visible what would otherwise be present but hidden, for his actors in all likelihood were already completing Mechanical Turk tasks for others. By contrast, Sierra's performers were not being tattooed for money before his invitation; neither were Collins's teenagers dancing under such contrived or demanding circumstances as those dictated by the artist. In making current labor practices visible, Coupe simulates Amazon's profiteering move of skimming surplus value off the top of micro-exchanges that occur on its platform, except that he generates aesthetic value that lends impact to his work. Third, whereas the content of Sierra's and Collins's delegated performances matters significantly for the artists' play with crisis vision (enacting dehumanization of the abject, for Sierra, and humanization of the Other, for Collins), for Coupe the content suggested by the actors is less important than the overall opaque *structure* of mediated labor processes. As a result, Coupe grants his workers substantial latitude in their disclosures and does not police noncompliance. They are made visible in ways that they otherwise might make themselves visible on social media. This does not suggest an absence of exploitation but rather an acknowledgment of the relative autonomy of his actors to represent themselves and tell their stories, knowing full well that those partial portraits may be repurposed. By making structure his primary focus, whether with the imposing wood

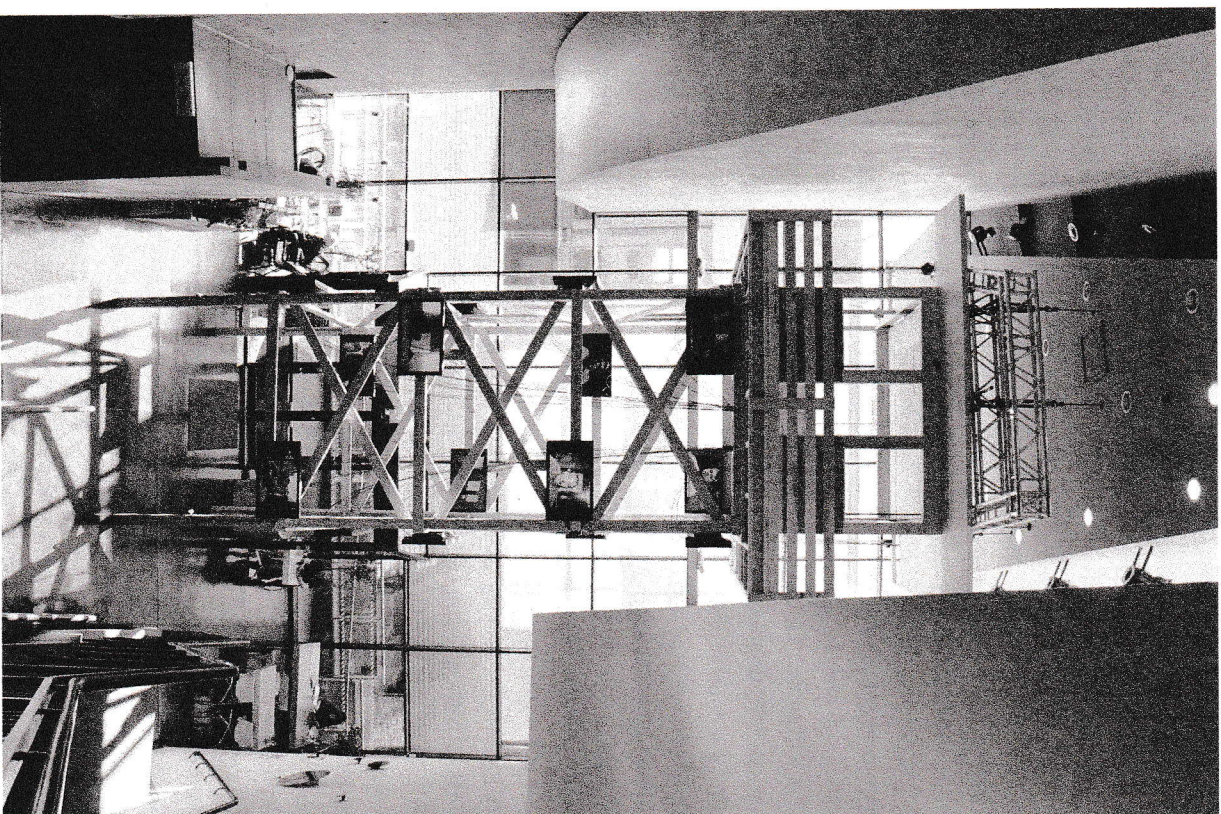


FIGURE 4.6. James Coupe, *Watchtower* (2017). Photograph: Louise Robson. Courtesy of the artist.

watchtower or the pervasive digital infrastructures, Coupe harnesses exploitative arrangements for his work without augmenting them for his subjects, which makes his work distinct from Sierra's and Collins's projects.

Facing Cruelty

Visibility can be an unwelcome condition thrust upon individuals. Especially when produced as an explicit form of punishment or social shaming, visibility penetrates symbolic violence by either constructing individuals as temporary outcasts from desirable social groups or involuntary members of undesirable ones. Visibility can serve as a catalyst for cruelty, which, as Marina Levina describes, is a material and affective manifestation of Othering, an "emotional force which acts upon the body . . . [and demonstrates] what power *feels* like."⁵¹ The increasing prevalence of shaming mechanisms in criminal justice systems exemplifies the ejecting modality, where individuals convicted of crimes have been required to publicize their guilt in various humiliating ways.⁵² For instance, people driving under the influence of alcohol have been forced to advertise that fact with bumper stickers on their vehicles, brightly colored bracelets on their arms, or their mugshots and names printed in local newspapers, each proclaiming their guilt (e.g., "D.U.I. CONVICT").⁵³ The second modality of involuntary inclusion seeks to interpellate individuals into dominant social or legal categories regardless of the fit or ramifications. This is the case, for example, with trans or gender-nonconforming individuals who are required to select "male" or "female" for government-issued documents or for security screening at airports, where the shame of being forced to perform state-imposed identities can be amplified by the sometimes very public nature of those performances.⁵⁴ In both of these modalities, whereas guilt connotes that one has made a mistake, shame suggests that the person is actually the mistake,⁵⁵ in large part because they do not fit or conform to expected social norms. Crisis vision animates both of these approaches, stigmatizing people as morality lessons or as flawed, and in the process it reaffirms a liberal social order predicated on cruelty and exclusion.⁵⁶

In the US context, public shaming has deep roots as a form of official punishment. In the colonial period, small, tightly knit Protestant communities made shaming particularly effective because offenders were well known, could not easily escape their locales, and likely shared a culture of strict religious moralism.⁵⁷ This era was renowned for stocks and pillories,

placing people in cruel contraptions on public display, branding, confessional letters, and other outward marks of guilt, such as the scarlet letter "A" signaling adultery in Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic novel.⁵⁸ The industrial period saw a reduction in these shame-based forms of punishment, at least for whites, perhaps because of the relative anonymity and mobility of individuals during this time. Forms of incarceration came to the fore instead as preferred modes of punishment, depriving people of liberty rather than reputation.⁵⁹ However, the past few decades have witnessed a return of shame-based punishments, as with the DUI sentences mentioned above, but also including sentences requiring individuals to wear in public large sandwich-board signs proclaiming their crime, such as "I stole mail. This is my punishment."⁶⁰ This has led some legal scholars to decry resurrected "public humiliation penalties" as dangerous anachronisms with unknown psychological effects.⁶¹ Especially with the spread of social media and internet-based repositories, shaming tactics gain renewed traction—if not efficacy at deterrence—as people can be embarrassed in their networks, subject to mob attacks and doxing, and face long-term consequences for any accusation, real or fabricated.⁶²

In his project *Obscurity*, artist Paolo Cirio engages this terrain of public shaming by addressing the violence inherent in the online publication and dissemination of police mugshots. In the United States, mugshot photographs are taken as part of the intake process for all arrestees, with those photographs legally considered as part of the public record, so most of those photographs can easily be found online on the websites of police departments, local media, or private companies. The circulation of these images, along with the person's name, age, charge, and arrest date, creates a persistent stigmatizing trace. Regardless of whether the charges are dropped or a person is convicted, the record remains, potentially damaging an individual's reputation and psychological well-being as well as their prospects for employment. Given that police display well-documented discriminatory practices, disproportionately arresting poor and racialized individuals,⁶³ it should not be surprising that the damaging effects of these records would accrue to the most marginalized members of society, adding another layer of what Oscar Gandy Jr. has termed "cumulative disadvantage."⁶⁴

Cirio intervenes in this process by targeting third-party websites that compile mugshots and arrest data and make it easy to search for a person by name. These sites, such as Mugshots.com and MugshotsOnline.com,

skim data from the sites of reporting agencies and make money through linked advertisements to reputation-management services or, in some cases, by charging individuals to have their records expunged.⁶⁵ In these ways, Clare Birchall explains, the mugshot industry capitalizes on a larger economy (and rationality) of data sharing by “aping, cynically and darkly, the work undertaken by datapreneurs to transform open data into profitable forms.”⁶⁶ Thus, the structural violence of economic inequality and institutional racism becomes a resource for sordid actors to exploit, such that they harness unwanted visibility as a form of “poverty capitalism,”⁶⁷ further debasing their targets and performing symbolic violence along the way. Cirio’s *Obscurity* project draws attention to and disrupts these extortion tactics by spoofing the most popular mugshot websites, realistically mirroring their design but modifying the content. He has programmed an algorithm to blur the images and shuffle the data so that arrest information remains (preserving the ostensible public service of sharing arrest data) but individuals cannot be linked to specific arrests (see figure 4.7).⁶⁸ This culture-jamming project then deploys search engine optimization techniques to outrank the spoofed original sites in Google, thereby obfuscating not only the data represented but also the route for accessing them.

Cirio is clearly committed to privacy and the right to be forgotten, where giving people a fresh start is key for maintaining dignity and sociality, as well as for fostering rehabilitation if necessary.⁶⁹ His work performs a compromise position, illustrating how, through an enabling form of opacity, the public’s right to know can harmonize with an individual’s right to be forgotten. However, the equation breaks down in the proposed next steps. Cirio envisions radical democratic decision making on the internet as the antidote to the shaming tactics of mugshot companies; rather than let such companies decide what personal data should be revealed, he turns to the crowd: “My proposal is extreme, pushing boundaries with art, as eventually the democratic process becomes a popular jury open to everyone, where the people can judge to condemn or give mercy to those who have been arrested, by making public their information or removing it.”⁷⁰ This proposal, a *Gladiator*-like scenario where the crowd can “condemn or give mercy,” expresses a somewhat naive faith in the possibility of mature, principled democratic governance in online environments. Ample evidence points to an opposite tendency, toward bullying, trolling, slut shaming, mob rule, and doxing in online spaces.⁷¹ *Obscurity* reveals, perhaps inadvertently,

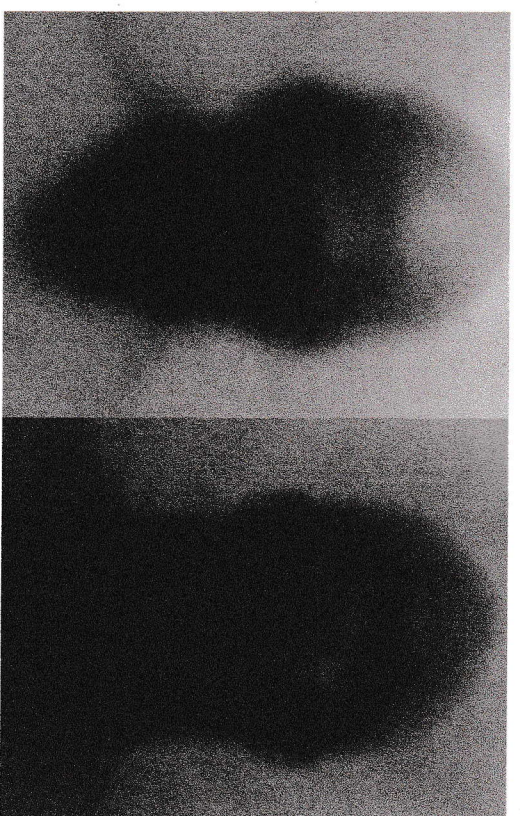


FIGURE 4.7. Paolo Cirio, *Obscurity* (2016). Courtesy of the artist.

the incommensurability between ideals of democratic governance and liberal personhood, on one hand, and crisis-vision cultures of racialized violence and cruelty, on the other. The problem is not solely technical or technocratic but cultural, where deep-seated racism and sexism infuse social practices online and off.

Public viewing of mugshots online feeds into base, voyeuristic impulses of audiences to discreetly view and judge others, at best, or circulate information to publicly shame, mock, or harass individuals, at worst. Instead of being anomalous, trafficking in online mugshots aligns surprisingly well with a broader culture of recent shame-based punishments, including those used by criminal justice systems and parents. For instance, some parents have forced their children to stand in public holding or wearing signs confessing their guilt for things like selling drugs or “twerking at a school dance,” while other parents have hijacked their kids’ social media accounts to say things like “I do not know how to keep [my mouth] shut. I am no longer allowed on Facebook or my phone. *Please ask why.*”⁷²

Seen in this larger context, mugshot websites cannot be easily condemned as the product of disreputable actors seeking to profit from others’ misfortune; they are part of a pervasive cultural logic insisting that shame-based practices are in society’s best interests. Kumari Silva has called this

"love-cruelty," where declarations of love and affection become vehicles for cruelty in our time: "I see love as a necessary, even central, component of cruelty. Without love and its redemptive framings, we would recognize cruelty for what it is: a physical and/or emotional state of violence that produces a sense of precarity that is sustained by sociocultural and economic practices. Instead, we learn to rescue or redeem acts of cruelty by framing those transgressions and aggressions as love."⁷³ On the national level, love-cruelty manifested in the racist, anti-immigrant vitriol of President Trump and many of his supporters, providing a cover (love of nation) for cruel actions, such as separating immigrant children from their parents. On meso and micro levels, love-cruelty finds expression in the shaming tactics of the courts, parents, and online communities. In each case, crisis vision lends an assured morality to acts of love-cruelty. Actors assert dominance by mobilizing and amplifying conditions of structural and symbolic violence, demeaning vulnerable others while legitimizing their own actions behind discourses of love or care: acting, supposedly, in the interest of punished individuals or the greater public good.

Another artwork, Charlotte Haslund-Christensen's *Who's Next?*, confronts tacit rationalizations for cruelty by emphasizing the violence and partiality of legal classifications that valorize transparency. This project, whose title alludes to Martin Niemöller's famous poem about the failure of people to speak out against the roundup and extermination of groups in Nazi Germany,⁷⁴ appropriates the police mugshot genre to protest violence against LGBTQ+ people. The project endeavors to educate viewers about the persecution and criminalization of individuals in same-sex relationships throughout the world, where in at least seventy-six countries those relationships are outlawed explicitly and, in some countries, punishable by death. The artist used the basement of the Copenhagen Police Station as the staging area for producing mugshot photographs of forty-two self-identified LGBTQ+ individuals, one photograph made head-on and another in profile for each person (see figure 4.8). Unlike the smirks and smiles sometimes adopted by arrestees in police mugshots, the subjects in this project are serious and glum as they position themselves behind a black sign displaying the month, the year, and their identification number. The collection of photographs is then packaged as a commodity, placed in an elegant black box with a frontispiece of Niemöller's poem, the box's outside printed with "Who's Next?" on top and the author's name on the side. Proceeds from sales (\$170 each) are then used to pay for a different intervention: the

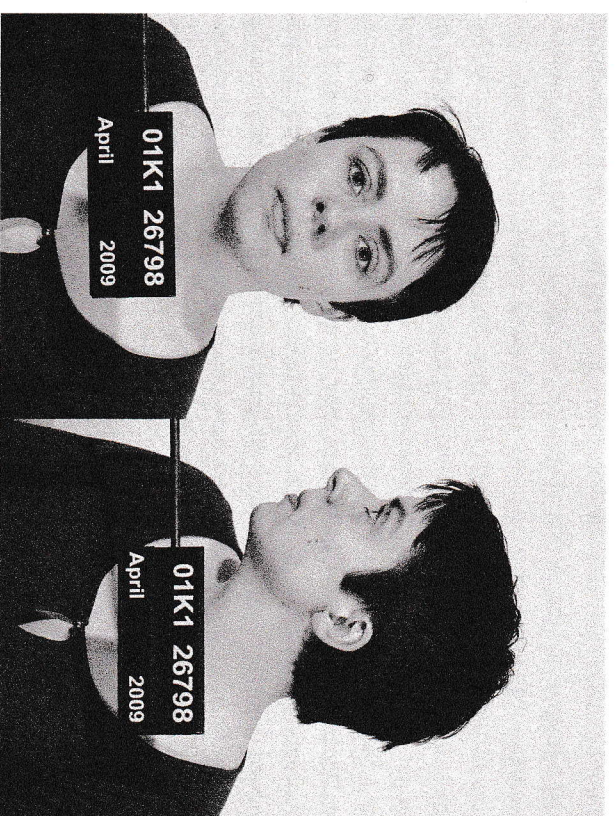


FIGURE 4.8. One of forty-two prints exhibited in original archival police sleeves from the project *Who's Next?* (2009) by artist Charlotte Haslund-Christensen. Courtesy of the artist.

smuggling of similar boxes into "regions where LGBTQ people are denied basic human rights."⁷⁵

Haslund-Christensen's mugshot project performs through the creation of visual tension. The bulk of her subjects present as white, neatly dressed, and well coiffed, not the stereotypical images associated with racialized police mugshots, perhaps not even in a country like Denmark, which is often portrayed as being ethnically homogeneous. The tension comes from placing these subjects in a mugshot frame, complete with identification numbers. The effect reinforces Niemöller's sentiment that the authorities could be coming for anyone, even for those who do not fit expected criminal profiles, that even legal guilt is a mutable category contingent on place, time, and person. Additionally, the work communicates the corrosive invisibility of legally sanctioned and legally perpetrated violence against LGBTQ+ people in other regions throughout the world. The unstated implication is that although the law might be socially constructed, there is nonetheless a crisis-vision spectrum of civilized and less civilized countries, where people in ostensibly more civilized countries like Denmark

should make it their concern—and perhaps their responsibility—to bring about progressive change elsewhere. The smuggling of boxes of the project's photographs into supposedly less enlightened countries illustrates this commitment; it suggests not only that one should intervene but also that the project will somehow be visually and culturally legible elsewhere, as an act of solidarity, perhaps, or an emblem of hope for the future. That said, by unreflexively assuming the civility and open-mindedness of people in Denmark, Haslund-Christensen may be unintentionally exposing her photographed subjects to attack or retaliation, as she has effectively catalogued them for ready targeting by those who might find them threatening. Certainly, in a US context, where hate crimes against LGBTQ+ individuals abound, the notion of a box of such photographs labeled "Who's Next?" could have terrifying consequences.⁷⁶

As provocative as Cirio's and Haslund-Christensen's mugshot-based projects are, they both rely on implied cross-cultural comparisons that position the artists' Western European reference points as the aspirational ideal. With Cirio, the "right to be forgotten" legislation of the European Union could offer an important corrective to the shame produced by the public circulation of mugshot photographs and information in the United States. For Haslund-Christensen, countries more tolerant of LGBTQ+ individuals could serve as a model for those less tolerant. Both artists admirably advance projects that problematize and publicize the largely hidden violence of legal regimes that support stigmatization of the marginalized. By vilifying either third-party mugshot companies or countries that allow for the legal persecution of LGBTQ+ individuals, however, the artists deflect reflexivity about pervasive cultures of cruelty and intolerance that plague even the most idealized countries and their legal systems. Put differently, they sidestep direct confrontation with crisis vision's racializing and hierarchy-building effects in and between national contexts. As Mia Fischer reminds us in her work on state surveillance of transgender populations, "It does not suffice to focus on representational politics alone or even primarily if we are to account for the multifaceted operations of state power and its dispersal of violence . . . [including how] the law's alleged impartiality and colorblindness continue to protect and advance white supremacy."⁷⁷ To advance opacity as ethical relations, crisis-vision politics must be reckoned with and defused in all cultural contexts, not shunted off to other groups or places.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored artistic efforts to problematize the structural and symbolic violence of crisis vision, making it accessible for contemplation and, perhaps, intervention. Whether in addressing the displacement of refugees, the objectifying labor of the precarious, or the cruel shaming of arrestees, queer, or gender-nonconforming individuals, each of the artworks discussed here embraces evidentiary modes to document acts or artifacts of violence. They frame evidence of the dehumanizing toll of economic and social inequalities upon bodies as powerful representations of ethical failings that should be readily discernible to viewers. In so doing, however, most of these works center viewing subjects while largely obscuring the nonneutral politics of evidence collection, presentation, and interpretation.

To the extent that artworks and photographs act discursively as forms of evidence, they depend upon an aura of realism, most prominently achieved through mechanical means and indexical allusions to concrete events.⁷⁸ All of this subtly masks the artists' mobilization of overt artifice (installation, staging, presentation) so that constructed truths can appear self-evident and pure, where even in Sierra's and Collins's spectacle-centered performances, the "fact" of dehumanizing sociopolitical conditions emerges as unadulterated and oddly decontextualized.⁷⁹ In the process, this artistic frame threatens to reify crisis-vision truth regimes that bolster the very conditions critiqued by the artists: those regimes that could posit some bodies as worthy and others as worthless, some as valuable and others expendable. "Art doesn't turn us into rebels by shoving repulsive facts into our faces, nor does it mobilize us because it has gone after us outside the museum," Néstor García Canclini cautions. Rather, "its critique, and not merely its indignation, might infect us if the art itself would let go of forms of language [and representation] that are complicit in maintaining the social order."⁸⁰

Whereas the artistic frame of violence is ideally suited to uncover, and confront viewers with, the destructive, racializing effects of crisis vision, the frame also symbolically leans upon the promise of liberal systems of governance to live up to their mythology of equality, fairness, and justice when the evidence, as it were, illustrates how misguided those efforts can be.⁸¹ For instance, the projects dealing with refugee crises and stigmatized identities notably refract those problems through the cultural and legal

lenses of Western European countries, suggesting that if the espoused universal human rights of those states were consistently upheld, especially in less enlightened contexts, resolution would be achievable. By contrast, some of the projects on structural violence and labor exploitation are more cynical about these prospects and therefore concentrate instead on the dehumanizing and unequal effects of capitalist systems. Because discourses of liberal personhood and governance often provide a smokescreen for plunder and racism,⁸² a focus on complicity—as modeled by the work of Sierra and Coupe—might be a more productive pressure point for artists, even if that approach risks offending audiences or exploiting their subjects. For example, delineating linkages among colonial legacies, racial prejudice, and structural and symbolic violence could begin to agitate viewers and undermine the presumed purity and superiority of Western states and political artists. The challenge for this artistic or activist frame, in particular, is to acknowledge the contributory violence of actors' orientations and approaches, even when individuals are driven by social justice concerns.

5. Disruption

Surveillance depends upon looking, whether literally or figuratively. Through various forms of measuring, calculating, and sizing up, surveillance strives to assert dominance over a field and the bodies within it.¹ It is about fixing subjects in place and rendering them compliant to the dictates or whims of others, regardless of the legitimacy of those who are assuming positions of dominance.² Through institutionalization (in the state, church, family, algorithm), surveillance evacuates possibilities for contesting the terms of assessment because those terms bracket context and protocol in advance, the ground upon which one could gain leverage for change.³ In this respect, surveillance is a scientific, patriarchal practice that generates *unmarked* knowledge and disowns its particularistic investments in the regimes it produces.⁴

Surveillance-based exercises of visual power infuse crisis vision, but they are never entirely stable or disembodied. Indeed, the threat of “eyeballing” the person in a position of assumed authority—and the predictable violent reactions to such insubordination—illustrates the ultimate fragility and interpersonal intimacy of these racialized control dynamics.⁵ In this sense, insubordination directly undermines racial, class, gender, or other hierarchies that glue repressive systems in place; it is literally rejecting one's assigned status as subordinate to the other, which is why such challenges unleash some of the worst retaliatory abuse. The gaze of surveillance, especially in intimate, person-to-person encounters, seeks to arrest subjects in their places, freezing both them and the status quo. It is a performance of crisis vision that affirms the racial order of things by consolidating white supremacy and placing black and brown bodies under erasure with the threat of silence, punishment, or death.