

# Gaze, Interrupted

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In October 2017, a 64-year-old man who lived in a retirement community 80 miles north-east of Las Vegas perpetrated the US's deadliest mass shooting, killing 60 and injuring 867 through bullet wounds and the subsequent crush to reach safety. He had fired more than 1000 bullets into a crowd of festival-goers off the Las Vegas Strip from his hotel bedroom on the 32nd floor of the Mandalay Bay Hotel before turning a gun on himself.

Renowned for its garish bright lights, hedonistic parties, casinos and stage shows, Las Vegas is a city which has for many decades been seen to 'proclaim the spirit of a culture in which all public discourse increasingly takes the form of entertainment.'<sup>1</sup> The result of which, according to the media theorist Neil Postman, was that 'we are people on the verge of amusing ourselves to death.'<sup>2</sup> The overlapping of the entertainment and military industries is perhaps most clearly visible in this desert landscape where the public was actively encouraged to come to watch spectacles of nuclear bomb tests, and from where the US Military currently pilots their remote drone missions.

Rather than entertainment, the city's biggest business is in fact hosting trade fairs. The largest arms fair in the world is held there annually, showcasing the latest technological developments in weaponry, firearms, ammo, optics and other tactical gear. Amongst the exhibitors is Teledyne FLIR, producers of military-grade thermal imaging systems, self-proclaimed as the World's Sixth Sense. In promotional movies they extol the virtues of their technology for a variety of uses from firefighting to border patrol, to domestic security. But the images the technology generates serve to reinforce a position of power - a gaze lifted from the world of games and simulations, top-down drone and surveillance footage that maintain an alienating distance between the observer and the observed.

For Emmanuel Van der Auwera, these perspectives are 'the most foreign to the human eye'<sup>3</sup>, and his works seek to interrogate not only the technologies that produce them but the position of the viewer consuming them.

In his 2019 work, *VideoSculpture XX (the World's Sixth Sense)*, the installation uses footage presented at the fair to demonstrate the accuracy and tracking capabilities of the FLIR system when zoomed into tourists and citizens enjoying themselves on the Las Vegas Strip. The scenes of individuals going about their business, unaware of being observed from on high with targeted precision, yet disappearing in and out of view of the installation's polarized filters, creates a creeping sense of menace. Who's watching: military drone, police surveillance or lone gunman? Playing off the technology's own branding and the late 90s thriller *The Sixth Sense*, the bleached-out colour palette adds a ghostly uncanniness to the footage.

In her acclaimed text *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag observes that 'Warmaking and picture taking are congruent activities.'<sup>4</sup> For Van der Auwera, it is hardly surprising to see military tools deployed by the surveillance state on its own people. It builds on the experience of the clinical execution of violence from drone strikes or the collateral murders from warfare that were made public on WikiLeaks that formed the basis of previous *VideoSculpture* works. As an artist who grew up with the War on Terror, much of his work addresses the impacts of this military industrial machinery on visual culture and the information technologies that shape our understanding of the world.

The ubiquity of the screen - television, laptop, tablet, phone - and its function as a portal to an endless stream of images through which to see the world and receive information, as well as a physical barrier that allows us to consume these passively, is physically deconstructed in Van der Auwera's *VideoSculpture* installations. He has developed a technique which strips LCD screens down to their component surfaces - an illuminated screen emitting a cool white light, and polarised filters angled so that they refract the light to reveal an image. As such, the *VideoSculpture* series envelop the viewer in a seemingly opaque white light, with fragments of filters placed on tripods revealing glimpses of the image. The works force audiences to actively move and seek out the image, bringing it into a physical relationship with the viewer's body, using the elusive form of the work to implicate the viewer as they consume its content. The series reflects on the power relations implicit in the technologies of seeing. The use of collaged together found footage sourced from the Internet in installations that require active participation, pulls the image out of perpetual circulation, encouraging viewers to look at it with a new critical gaze.

Van der Auwera's deconstruction of the technologies of seeing stems from his investigations into the ethics of the gaze. A turning point in his practice, in 2012 he started to make works that responded to what he saw as 'a shift in paradigm' that was being fuelled by the growth of social media and to interrogate the relationship between the currency of the image and the 'currency of emotions within the image'.<sup>5</sup> In this new visual economy, the spectator has also become the spectacle, trading on the authenticity of their experience and our sublime fascination with things that terrify, disgust or enrapture us. While presenting works that reflect on controversial and often shocking material within the white cube of an art gallery isolates it from its original context, it also offers it up to audiences for a more critical engagement, as there are limited other distractions within that space. Yet this process of creating an engaging visual experience, that pulls the viewer out of their passivity, risks further transforming reality into a simulation.

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1. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves To Death* (Methuen, 1987): 4.

2. *ibid.*

3. From a conversation with the artist, 18 July 2022.

4. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Penguin Books, 2004): 60.

5. From a conversation with the artist, 18 July 2022.

Following Sontag, these representations 'are a means of making 'real' (or 'more real') matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore.'<sup>6</sup> Van der Auwera's work reflects upon these chains of production and consumption and the responsibility inherent in the act of seeing.

In his more recent video work *The Death of K9 Cigo*, 2019, Van der Auwera presents a montage of mobile phone video clips, scalped from the live broadcast site Periscope, shot by individuals in and around Miami in the months following the Parkland school shooting in 2018. The carefully edited assemblage takes on the character of citizen journalism, the contrasting self-presentations and documentation of local events from the outpouring of grief at the funeral of the police dog shot in the line of duty, to the energetic protests of young people at an anti-gun rally; Van der Auwera producing a portrait of a disparate community as it comes to terms, or not, with a sense of being perpetually surrounded by violence and grief. As Sontag proposes, 'For the photography of atrocity, people want the weight of witnessing without the taint of artistry, which is equated with insincerity or mere contrivance.'<sup>7</sup> The well-composed images of photojournalists and the conventions of good taste maintained by mainstream news broadcasters 'drains attention from the sobering subject and turns it toward the medium itself'.<sup>8</sup> Social media has become the tool through which individuals both reflect on the world and are in turn seen – a near endless *mise en abyme*.

The technologies of conventional media - newspapers, television - are designed to introduce a distance and a sense of impersonality through their lack of reciprocity. Physicist and technology theorist Ursula Franklin defined reciprocity as 'some manner of interactive give and take, a genuine communication among interacting parties'<sup>9</sup> rather than feedback which is a means for improving something but not affecting a change in the medium itself. For her, these technologies precipitate a loss of human agency and in turn allows for a normalisation of violence and cruelty reducing these experiences to banality. It is perhaps this combination of over-aestheticisation and no capacity for meaningful exchange that encourages individuals to seek out the 'authentic' and the 'real' in the 'uncensored' channels of the internet, and a broader erosion of trust in previously dominant institutions.

In his *Memento* series, Van der Auwera uses the techniques of newspaper image reproduction, repurposing their mass-production offset plates to produce unique colour fields that recall the scale and iconography of history paintings. Through processes of exposing the plates to light, he is able to generate an almost holographic effect, whereby the image reveals itself only by active inspection as different areas catch the light. Van der Auwera focused initially on images of collective grief that regularly featured in the spreads of the newspaper. This later evolved into representations of crowds that have become symbolic markers of large-scale events: the joyful and the catastrophic. Van der Auwera is interested in examining the conventions that dictate the aesthetics of these moments of heightened emotion. As viewers, we are confronted with a shifting image that represents a collective reaction to something we cannot see or know. Taken out of context, even when we may think we recognise the event, we start to question the authenticity of the gestures of the individuals and the emotional veracity, turning the subject into a performance.

This substitution of reality for a stereotyped choreography of it, has fuelled conspiracy theories that allow people to dismiss anything that seems to contradict their own world view as staged for the camera. In particular, crisis actor conspiracies often purport that those photographed at such moments of tragedy such as school shootings, and who do not appear to conform to the archetypal representations of those moments must be paid actors brought into foment sympathy towards an opposing cause.

His recent works in this series Van der Auwera has made use of press images that became the story, rather than representations of a moment. The violent skirmishes that took place on the US – Mexico border in 2018 and more recently the attack on a hospital in Mariupol during the current Ukraine conflict generated iconic press images that were dismissed as staged hoaxes.

The Reuters photograph of a Honduran woman with her two barefoot children running away from tear gas quickly became an annotated meme deconstructing the scene, identifying the central figures as crisis actors and the background figures as part of the broader crew of actors and cameramen involved in this elaborate spectacle. The image sparked a slew of memes, tactics to intimidate victims, migrants and opponents of the online commentators, while galvanising allies, rapidly leaving the fringes of the internet where such conspiracies often live and die to becoming the subject of rabid social media speculation.

The second image taken by an Associated Press photographer captured a heavily pregnant young woman, wrapped in a duvet, covered in dirt and with lacerations on her forehead. The young woman's identity as a social media influencer before the conflict was seized upon not only by Russian social and mainstream media, but was presented by the Russian ambassador to the UN as evidence that she was a crisis actor and that the whole scene and the alleged bombing of the hospital in Mariupol was Ukrainian propaganda and disinformation.

While the crisis actor false flags serve to dehumanise the victims and diminish the severity of real tragedies, Van der Auwera's choice to present these photographs as *Mementos* forces viewers to alter their perspective to really see the image. What is striking perhaps is the extent to which the compositions of these images recall art historical tropes of the Madonna, or Holy Family - the positions of the Honduran family ironically recalling the classic World War 2 'Refugees Welcome' sign of three silhouetted figures running holding hands. Van der Auwera seems to be holding up to inspection the aesthetics of journalistic photography as much as the counter-factual narratives that dismiss their evidentiary potential.

6. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Penguin Books, 2004): 6.

7. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Penguin Books, 2004): 23.

8. *ibid*: 68.

9. Ursula Franklin, *The Real World of Technology* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2004), chapter 2, ePub.

As Hannah Arendt has stated, 'Factual truths are never compellingly true... Lies are often much more plausible, more appealing to reason, than reality, since the liar has the great advantage of knowing beforehand what the audience wishes or expects to hear. He has prepared his story for public consumption with a careful eye to making it credible, whereas reality has the disconcerting habit of confronting us with the unexpected, for which we are not prepared.'<sup>10</sup>

In our ocularcentric culture, seeing is no longer believing, not because we have only just realised that images do not always represent reality, but because our trust in the institutions that purvey reality has been utterly eroded. Anything can be declared a fake and as we move into an era where deep fakes enter the endless slipstream of images, our access to the real will disappear; we will only exist in a society of spectacle. As Van der Auwera reflects, 'when all trust is gone, there's just entertainment. ... Everything becomes a parody of itself. Maybe that is why, without thinking about it, I went to the representation of tragedy because that is where its most obvious that it has become entertainment.'<sup>11</sup>

Emmanuel Van der Auwera's strikingly minimal installations try to reconcile the relationship between the formal mechanics of how we see with the emotional currency and psychology of what we see. In producing works that demand the active participation of the viewer, he also challenges us to think critically about the act of looking and the actions we take in response.

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10. Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (Harcourt Brace & Company, 1972): 6.

11. From a conversation with the artist, 18 July 2022.