Materiality of Nothingness: Inspiration, Collaboration, and Craft in Devised Filmmaking

Alex Lichtenfels

> The image, alone capable of negating nothingness, is also the gaze of nothingness upon us.
> —Maurice Blanchot (1997, 40)

Context

Primary Films was set up by Teddy Powell, Joe Churchill, and me in 2011, although it had evolved from projects we had worked on since 2003. Together, we have made ten short to medium-length films (alongside *lots* more commercial work), and always with an agenda to experiment. Around the time Primary Films was formally constituted, we had come to an impasse in our filmmaking—to some extent, we had made aesthetically original work, and we were good at having a vision and realizing it because we knew our roles and how to execute them. But this wasn't what artmaking was supposed to be like. At the same time that our work became more "refined," we craved the thrill of learning on the job, of experimenting with new ways of working just to see what happened. There was a political dimension to our desire at this time as well. To borrow an adage from Jean-Luc Godard, "the point is not to make political films, but to make films politically" (Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin 1968, in McCabe 1980, 19). While the films we made were never ideologically mainstream, and the way we made them had a lo-fi element that necessitated a sense of community (cooking the food, creating a big focus on team spirit since we couldn't pay anyone), we were still using hierarchical role structures with directors, 1st ADs, and DOPs that have pervaded the film industry at least since their formalization under the Hollywood studio system.

There was a hopefulness in filmmaking when we started working together. As Bruce Mamer says of the feeling that pervaded in the late 1990s, "inexpensive digital cameras and desktop digital editing would spark an outpouring of digital features that would revolutionize not only the content and the delivery of the product but also the makeup of those who create the product" (2014, 86). We shared this feeling, but only when confronted with the idea that a revolution in filmmaking would mean making films politically did we start to understand the scale of realizing our hope. We could not make new kinds of films with nonstandard perspectives by using established and/or industrial filmmaking processes. We would need to let such aesthetics emerge from our development of new and radical processes.

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We made several attempts to start such development. In 2016, we conducted a filmmaking workshop at the University of Greenwich based on practices involving energy such as yoga or Lishi, a practice of Chinese physical culture.[1] We designed and enacted collaborative exercises, after which we tried to articulate what the actors and the camera were doing in terms of a vocabulary of energy. But neither the actors or we had a significant enough basis in the practices we were drawing on, and their pedagogies and vocabularies, to stop this descending into a vagueness that fell apart. Conscious not to repeat the same mistake, in 2017 we made the short film *Motherland*, where we co-wrote a script as a result of a series of exercises in narrative development using a round-robin format—but we slipped back into familiar roles on set due to a need to get the film done, and perhaps because we knew it would work in a conventional sense. While both useful experiences, these attempts were certainly filed under the "failures I learnt from" section of things we tried. They failed because we couldn't create a context to develop our crafts in new directions—the workshop opened craft onto a directionless plane where it couldn't be focused, and *Motherland* pushed craft back into industrial practice. But if they failed, at least they set up what I call the challenge to craft.

If the context in which craft finds itself is too vague or abstract, as in the energy workshop, then the cameraperson or actor will not have a context in which they can perform effectively, and their craft will not be able to operate. However, if the context is too known and defined, then craft will simply repeat its learned processes, as with *Motherland*. Craft's dilemma is that craft is necessary to artistic integrity but is also the basis of industrial process. The challenge is to create contexts where the artist uses their craft in new ways, augmenting that craft's practice by performing it in situations that encourage novelty and experimentation without collapsing into an "anything goes" fuzziness.

This is to provide a context for what follows, a documentation of the workshop that we participated in with seven other artists in May 2019[2] in and around Davis, California. It follows from a workshop conducted in London in 2018.[3] The aim of these workshops, from my perspective at least, was to create a collaborative context where the craft of filmmaking could develop. Cinema has been proclaimed dead more times than can be counted, but twenty years after the advent of cheaper means of production, it is still very much in its infancy and only starting to dip its toe into a sea of possibility.

Documentation

The documentation in this article is intended to be a snapshot of a filmmaking process used in a particular time and context—but, as such, it is fraught with danger. First, the workshop's methods have neither been refined nor codified as a practical System, and such codification is also not the point of this documentation. If our philosophy of practice is anything, it is that if we have something called a process, this process must never solidify. It must always change in response to its environment and its history; replication is death. In this sense, the process we are using is always itself in process. Indeed, this is the condition of a living artistic practice in the spirit of how Ian Watson describes Stanislavski's system as a dynamic and developing practice over many years (2009), rather than the way *An Actor Prepares* (Stanislavski 2013) has often been read, as a gospel determination of this system's rules. Second, a written article does not share a craft with the craft of filmmaking it documents, which forces it to reflect on its own value. As Gregory Sporton writes about academic writing on dance, "The challenge of explaining it [dance] faces both the inadequacy of words and their pointlessness" (2017, 123). If this article is a snapshot, its purpose cannot be to translate craft to what is still often called knowledge in academia—or articulation in academic

language—and thereby allow academic knowledge to claim authority over and determine a way forward for the craft. Such translation misses craft entirely in its reduction to the words of formal academic writing, and worse can start to be read as an instruction manual for practice. This observation by no mean discounts the idea that research can both be informed by and lead practice (see, for example, Dean and Smith 2009), but emphasizes that such research will need to account for how its knowledge might be communicated and used when it does not share a way of knowing with the craft of the practice it is informed by or trying to lead.

Communication between practice and writing about practice—whether the latter is expressed as documentation, research, or theory—needs to be a two-way street. If documentation is to have any value for practice, then this begins by acknowledging that it is not capturing practice in a form of objective knowledge but capturing it according to its own craft of documentation, which is simply a different way of knowing. While documentation inevitably misses the knowledge of the craft it captures because it does not take the form of that craft (in which that craft's way of knowing is embedded), where it acknowledges this it has the advantage of understanding that it can only hope to give a sense of craft's knowledge if its own form can be attuned to that craft in some way. One way to think of this attunement is as affect. While acknowledging the plurality of the uses of the word "affect," Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg write:

> Affect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces—visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing, vital forces beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world's apparent intractability. (2010, 1)

Affect is a force that when encountered challenges subjectivity—whether subjectivity is couched in terms of an ideological way of knowing, or emotion, which is "affect captured by a subject, or tamed and reduced to the extent that it becomes commensurate with that subject" (Shaviro 2010, 3). It challenges because it is experienced as a feeling that being has that exceeds being's sense of itself. Affect, then, can name the recognition of a way of knowing based in a craft that exceeds my subjectivity without reduction to my craft's way of knowing in documentation.

If the form of documentation of the practice of a craft—such as filmmaking—is attuned to affect, it can attempt to practise its own craft—here as writing—from the position of fidelity to this attunement.[4] That fidelity will change the craft's practice, since documentation's way of knowing is challenged by affect, and it will need to invent a new way of knowing in response. Documentation is therefore likely to become a self-conscious exercise that both documents affect and, by extension, requires an articulation of the way fidelity to affect demands its own process changes. This type of documentation is thus inevitably a metacommentary on its own making. But if it is a metacommentary, it is not (or is not supposed to be) of the sort that articulates its process in order to be the ultimate expression of the craft it both describes and claims to practise, where metacommentary attempts to hermetically seal its content by giving the final word on that content within that content. On the contrary, it is necessarily a metacommentary to open up documentation to another practice. Its self-reflection on its practice enters its documenting craft by attuning to the affect of another practice and may return to that other practice not as academic knowledge, but as embodied craft with its own affective force. If documentation has any influence over future practice, it is because the craft of documentation and articulation in language persists affectively in me as I

continue in my filmmaking so that in those moments where filmmaking craft is called upon to extend itself anew, I will be drawing on a set of practices I would not have had if I had not documented what I had done before. In this way, documentation is neither a reduction of practice to the knowledge of academic language nor an instruction manual for practice; it is its own practice, the affective potential of which may yet extend to other practices.

The documentation that follows thus weaves a description and analysis of our workshop with an articulation of nothingness as defined by Jean-Paul Sartre. The philosophical work is not intended to define what was "really" happening in the workshop but to sit as a counterpoint to the description and analysis that, in their resonance, can provide a method of attuning to any affective happening.

What We Did in California

The participants in the California workshop are Me, Joe, and Teddy; Heather Nolan, Kathy Hendrickson, Alvaro Hernández, Regina Gutierrez, and Lucy Roslyn, all actor-performers; Julian Gatto, a multimedia artist; and finally John Zibell, a filmmaker and actor we worked with at the London workshop. John deserves special mention as the workshop derived largely from his ideas and practices, which themselves come from a variety of traditions, but particularly the American improvisational theatre tradition started by Viola Spolin and continued by her son, Paul Sills (see Spolin 1999). We start by telling stories, each in turn—the brief is to choose a story from your life that you consider cinematic. Kathy disturbs us when she talks about the time she went to a party she probably wasn't old enough to be at. John captures an image of his son, Django, mucking about on the back of a bicycle—time suspended in his description as it was for him in this moment. I tell the story of the time I managed to phone myself, pick up, and start a conversation. The stories become a collection of raw material that we take forward into the work we are going to make. Over four days, we will repurpose them, mash them together, whisper snippets of text from them in the pieces that we make.

Then we make a diagram of what we think cinema is—not one that follows a textbook, but where we can contribute whatever words come to mind for us in that moment. We riff off one another, so that someone will say "time," then someone "performance," before someone else will throw in "camera"—the words can be abstract, concrete, impressionistic, technical, or aesthetic. Someone says "reality," and John writes it on the back of the board where no one can see it. This becomes a template for what will become our work—not in a linear sense where we each make a piece of work that explores a particular idea or concept that we have identified, but as something heightening our awareness of our tools, materials, and processes, and how they might interconnect to generate directions for what we are about to do.

Then, we start to make machines. First in front of one another, later developing them in groups and presenting to everyone. To start a machine, you say, "I/We begin," to end it, you say "I/We end," and in between you do something. The one consistent element with the machines is to try to work with the materiality of everything involved in the machine—bodies, props, light, sounds—meaning as far as it is possible, to divorce the elements in the machine from their social and ideological functions, treating them as raw material. We start by standing in a circle and making machines with gestures. John extends his arm and brings it back in. That's it, the whole machine. Someone does a press-up, someone else does a squat. And then a second round, this time machines that involve the space. Lucy is eaten by a crash mat in the corner of the room. Regina dances with the portable

whiteboard. Then machines that use a sound. Then machines in pairs—Lucy and I use my spare inner tube to twirl around and get tangled and untangled. Regina, Alvaro, and Julian use the pole you can open the studio skylight with as a balance beam. Machines with cameras, machines with a frame, machines with light.

On day two, we go to UC Davis' McLaughlin Reserve, a portion of which was burnt by the 2018 California wildfires, to make more machines. In the morning, we get a lecture about the reserve from the coordinator, Cathy Koehler. There are lots of interesting facts about the local geology and ecology, and I learn what subduction is. This too becomes material for the machines. Machines in groups of three—Kathy, Teddy, and I create a maze where you have to avoid touching trees but stay in the camera frame. Individual machines—John dances with an ashen tree. Machines in the tall grass with a camera drone—Lucy and I put on blindfolds as Teddy operates the drone and directs us. Machines with tracking shots.

On day three, it's raining, but we keep going in the massive hangar next to our lodgings. Joe and Heather repeat "geology ecology" for what seems like an eternity. Alvaro performs Regina's story, and Regina watches it back on the monitor and cries. This is itself a machine created by Teddy and Regina; Regina is being filmed, and we all watch this back together. Someone screams something from the balcony.

On day four, we are back from the reserve in the studio. John and Alvaro sing at the piano. A dark corridor is given spotlights as the performers navigate it in different ways. The pipes from Teddy's story about the organ and the homeless people become reflections in the glass. Shadows of our crawling fingers gradually disappear in the fading light. Everyone is exhausted. We make dozens of machines per day, hundreds over the week. The philosophy is to get through as much as possible. We see what doesn't work and reject it. We see what works and reject it anyway to try something new, a relentless moving forward. The stories we told, the diagram we drew, the machines we started with create a context in which we are constantly forging connections between different practices, phrases, and concepts. Once a machine is made, it is over—it can be remade but never repeated. It feels like being inside a ball gathering momentum—at first, you aren't sure where it is going, later you still aren't sure, but you know the momentum is certainly taking it in a direction. The work gathers pace because whether we are in it or watching it, we are forging connections the work has given us.

What Is Inspiration?

I was thinking about nothingness because of what happened during our workshop, particularly in those moments of collective inspiration, where a person or a group would make a machine that would magically shake everyone in the room. When Lucy arrived at the door of a party and broke down for nine minutes because she was early and had forgotten the Shiraz and Pringles, and wasn't sure if she was meant to bring one bottle or two, and was getting eaten by her scarf, we were all in fits of laughter. But what we were laughing at was deeply disturbing as well as funny—who can't remember if they should have brought wine and Pringles, and who cares if it should have been one bottle or two, and who is so out of control that they get eaten by a scarf? In this way, the work had a deeply affective dimension, and neither performer nor audience seemed to know how to contain it within a structure of subjective emotion.

Moments like these make the whole process worthwhile. What is wondrous is that the moments don't come from specific planning of the moment or meticulous rehearsal of a precise action, but that they emerge from a process. Everyone inside the process knows they happen because of the process, but the wonder persists because the moments nevertheless emerge unexpectedly, from some inarticulable place—seemingly from nothing. In collaboration, the process doesn't belong to any individual; it may be designed by someone but takes on its own movement, structure, momentum, and possibility when everyone gets involved. This is perhaps why such process can be called collaborative, when it ceases to belong to an individual but is a collective force, and when this collective force strikes as affect it strikes at the core of the individual beings that comprise it, but of whom it is more than their sum. These individuals cannot perceive how the force that creates the moment is itself created; they perceive only the moment and are affected only by the force, the being of which testifies to its hidden origin. To them, the force must have an origin, but it seems to come from nothingness. If our work had value, it was in the way a collective momentum gathered to create such forces and affects.

It must be admitted that words like "being" and "nothingness" are used impressionistically in the previous paragraph, and why not—they are words capable of carrying quite the impression. Nevertheless, without reducing the affective force to philosophical concepts, by tracing the force in writing using such concepts, a new force might come about, not as affectively identical but arising from the practice of its description of the way collaborative practice might determine affect's origin.

Sartre's definition of nothingness is attractive because nothingness is both at the heart of intentional being and gives being the possibility of its freedom. Both an elucidation of intention and freedom are key to the problem of understanding the origin of affective force in our practice. Our intention—the way we set about our process—may lead to the production of affective force, but only in an indirect way, since a direct method of producing affective force is a contradiction in terms. If we knew how to produce affective force, it could become a mechanized process that is replicable and can be assimilated into market structures, whereas affective force is precisely what evades reduction to our knowledge and those structures. Sartre's understanding of the relationship between intention and nothingness will help to illustrate the connection between our process and the hidden origin of affective force without reducing our process to a method that manufactures that origin in a knowable way. Key to this relationship is freedom, in the sense that freedom can name what happens when intention morphs into inspiration, and the artist becomes free to act as not intended as the affective force takes root in them.

Sartre locates nothingness in the being for itself, a conscious being who questions. This being is opposed to the being in itself, a concrete and bounded being, which is also an abstraction since these bounds cut it off from the world, whereas our conscious experience is always of being in the world (Sartre 2003). In asking a question, being presupposes nothingness, since the response can always be negative. In looking for his friend Pierre in a café, Sartre questions whether he is there or not, but the question itself already gives to intuition the possibility that he is not there, a possibility that then nihilates the café in his looking for Pierre into what Sartre calls "ground," the absence of something specific: "In fact Pierre is absent from the whole café; his absence fixes the café in its evanescence; the café remains *ground*; it persists in offering itself as an undifferentiated totality to my only marginal attention; it slips into the background; it pursues its nihilation" (Sartre 2003, 34). This idea of nothingness is attractive because it locates nothingness at the heart of being. On the one hand, nothingness does not constitute a purely subjective function of being, since when the room is nihilated as I look for Pierre, the possibility of a negative assumed in the question "Is Pierre here?" is

not produced by the experience of the room as ground—on the contrary, nothingness gives that experience its possibility. On the other hand, neither is nothingness a transcendence pre-existing being, an ether that gives being its possibility. Nothingness is being's nothingness; it is only on the basis of the possibility of the being for itself questioning that nothingness can exist—its existence does not precede this possibility.

> Nothingness if it is supported by being, vanishes *qua nothingness*, and we fall back upon being. Nothingness can be nihilated only on the foundation of being; if nothingness can be given, it is neither before nor after being, nor in a general way outside of being. Nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being—like a worm. (Sartre 2003, 45)

This model resonates with our practice because it is clear that the affective force generated by collaborative process *is* generated by that process; it does not pre-exist it. Yet, it is only generated by collaborative process because its origin already lies at the heart of collaborative process in the possibility of its emergence as something that happens that is not directly intended.

While an intention decided on as a collective or by an individual in the context of collaboration never aims directly at the production of the affective force, collaborative processes cannot be mystical. They must be intentional and practical. Do an exercise based on this score, move your arm over there; this is how craft can be utilized without the context becoming too vague. Even though intention is not directed at the production of affective force, it is only through intention that it becomes possible for something like affective force to happen. Yet it can also only happen when practitioners are open to deviating from intention—to doing what is not intended. It is in this way that Sartre's nothingness provides a good analogy for the origin of affective force—at the heart of artistic intention is the possibility that what is intended will not happen and that an affective force may emerge.

However, even if nothingness gives the potential for the intended not to happen, the artist(s) will still need to know how to act when it doesn't happen in order to allow the affective force to emerge. Here the possibility of freedom in Sartrean nothingness allows an exploration of what the artist can do when confronted with such a situation. For Sartre, freedom is a part of consciousness and can be identified in consciousness' break between its present and its past:

> Pierre's absence, in order to be established or realized, requires a negative moment by which consciousness in the absence of all prior determination, constitutes itself as negation. If in terms of my perceptions of the room, I conceive of the former inhabitant who is no longer in the room, I am of necessity forced to produce an act of thought which no prior state can determine nor motivate, in short to effect in myself a break in being. (2003, 51)

Consciousness must disengage itself from being in order to posit the hypothetical—since being is concrete and not hypothetical—and in order to question. But consciousness is a part of being and thus being breaks with itself. But this break is not marked temporally. There is no distance between the prior and present state: "we see suddenly and evidently that *nothing* has just slipped in between that state and the present state" (Sartre 2003, 51). This ability to disengage, to posit the hypothetical, is freedom: "Freedom is the human being putting his past out of play by secreting his own nothingness" (52).

Again, this description of freedom resonates with artistic practice, because the idea of breaking with one's own being, with nothing separating one from that being, allows the artist to open themselves to the freedom to act not as intended yet while retaining being's craft. Being is not separate from the prior self in practice—it retains all of its training and embodied craft as actor or cameraperson; otherwise, practice would slip into vagueness. But what they will do must nevertheless be undetermined, a free artistic choice. It is in this sense that artistic being is capable of openness to the possibility of inspiration, surprise, and novelty that are essential components of art while retaining the craft to respond to this possibility affectively.

The Machine That Breaks Itself

Pick two people in the room. You must walk around the room and try to form an equilateral triangle with them at all times, without letting them know that you have picked them. Everyone does this. At first, chaos—just a mess of bodies trying to achieve the goal. Then people start moving faster, trying to keep up. And then finally everyone is running in a circle, but everyone must go faster because no one can keep up. And then collapse. This is a machine that breaks itself—a score aligned to an intention that is impossible to fulfil, and that confronts the intention with its failure. In the score, there is a simple intention—stay two metres from everyone else in the room. Anyone who can judge distance and move relatively flexibly can take part in this game. But at some point, things fall apart—the word "intention" always implies the possibility of failure, but it is precisely in failure that liberty is given to the artist, the liberty of "What am I supposed to do now?" When intention fails, craft has to do something—no longer is craft trying to achieve something that it aims its intention at, it simply needs to deal with a set of circumstances that it does not know how to act within, but on occasion can navigate. This capacity is artistic freedom, and its inauguration is the moment when nothingness is secreted, when craft that was bounded by intention can become what it is not.

Day two on the McLaughlin Reserve—evening. We find a field. The theme of the day is environment. We are making machines with our surroundings. We find an old log, and Lucy, Regina, Heather, and I jump onto it. At one end of the log, we place the camera on a mini tripod. The machine's score is simple—we have to walk from one end of the log to the other, and each trip must be made faster than the last. We're going to have to pass each other on the log, of course, and the rule here is "no using your hands"; passing each other should be done by handless negotiation and balance. If you fall off, there's a getting back on point at the end of the log. We start, and it's hard because you're going slowly. Keeping your balance is difficult without momentum. As we speed it up, the movements find a rhythm and balance, and the task becomes easier. Then we have to go faster still, and this is harder because our movements are less precise. Then we have to go faster than we can, and the machine breaks as we fall off the log. The tension comes between order and improvisation—you are ordered to follow a straight line back and forth but need to find a different way to get by someone each time, and eventually, the machine will break, and you will fall off the log.

We do it again, this time with me, Heather, Kathy, and Joe. The camera wasn't so involved the first time, but this time we have three. One camera is positioned frontally to the side of the log, the top of the log forming a horizontal line near the bottom of the screen. One is at one end of the log looking toward the other, so the performers are walking toward and away from the camera. A final camera is on a drone looking down on the performers in a top shot. It's as if the action is taking place in a cube, and we have a camera attached to three of the faces, so the centre points of the

shots will intersect. To me, it's an obvious set-up—to bring something of the extreme formality of the back and forth score by thinking of the cameras in these geometric terms, set up at ninety-degree angles. Watching this iteration back, the cold removes of the angles create a tension in juxtaposition with the passing and falling, bodies being forced to do something different as the speed changes, or as they got tired, or as they were a little worried about pushing off another body and hurting them, or about being pushed. But the falling off is still in the machine, as is the passing—it's safe in the sense that one is never confronted with the moment of "What on earth do I do now?" It is a machine that has its own failure built into it, but at the moment of failure ended.

The log machine filmed from three perpendicular angles. Photos: The Performative Camera Workshop.

The next day it's raining, and Lucy and I are in the big hangar. We decide to do this again, just the two of us, along a crack in the floor instead of a log. No drone this time—health and safety. We remember the stories we told on day one—snippets and lines here and there, and we will incorporate them into the machine, improvising a dialogue made from the snippets. We start—the exercise is much harder on a crack because the stakes are so low. If you lose your balance, you just step on the floor next to the crack, so my self-preservation instincts don't kick in to aid the action. I have to concentrate much harder on staying on the crack and passing Lucy. I'm in a Machiavellian mood, so I decide to try to take down Lucy with my snippets. We go back and forth—I don't know if it's successful, but I'm enjoying myself. I use the subduction lecture and Teddy's story about the homeless people in the church with the organ: "Are you trying to subduct me?" pass on the crack, "You're just an organ without a body," pass on the crack. Then we pass again, and as we do it, I fling my arms in the air, and I know I'm going to lose my balance. I'm in that moment where you know the thing is going to end and there's nothing you can do about it. I'm annoyed with myself because if I fall, the machine will be over—no getting back onto the crack in this machine—and I

was enjoying it. Then she grabs me to restore my balance, pulls me toward her quickly and hugs me tightly and tenderly. It works because I've just been being mean to her. It works because it deliberately breaks the machine, not to break it, but to prevent it collapsing. It works because the tenderness of a hug interrupts the cold argument that has been going on and because Lucy could make that gesture in that moment. If I had to describe it, I would say I felt both comforted, terrified, and overwhelmed, which in its ceasing to make sense testifies to some kind of affective force. My only regret is that we ended it after the hug. To continue when that had happened would have forced new choices on both of us and given a completely new context to any attempt to continue in the same vein.

I lose my balance on the crack, just before Lucy hugs me. Photo: The Performative Camera Workshop.

Two big theoretical problems remain if Sartre's model of being and nothingness is to be a viable metaphor for practice. First, how can we think of artistic practice as consciousness? Consciousness is vital to the validity of Sartre's notions of nothingness, intention, and freedom. But artists have often decried consciousness, or certainly conscious thought as anathema to artistic process, and however much we may disagree with this and admire intellectual artists, it would be churlish to invoke consciousness as the ultimate limit on artistic possibility, whereas it is a limit on the possibility of Sartrean nothingness, intention, and freedom. The second problem is how the notion of collaboration might be brought to bear on Sartre's model. While Being is identified with person in the world in Sartre, we are talking about quite a different situation in collaborative practice, one in which the being that produces the work is not easy to identify, and indeed may not exist at all as a quantifiable individual.

Consciousness

Sartre is very clear that consciousness is a key part of the "for itself" that allows nothingness to be nihilated: "The Being by which nothingness arrives in the world is a being such that in its Being, the Nothingness of its Being is in question" (2003, 47). Because consciousness is what questions,

consciousness is required in order for nothingness to be nihilated, which is problematic for the idea of the freedom of artistic practice following a Sartrean model of freedom. But what does Sartre actually mean by questioning? In the example he gives with Pierre in the café, he writes:

> I have an appointment with Pierre at four o'clock. I arrive at the café a quarter of an hour late. Pierre is always punctual. Will he have waited for me? I look at the room, the patrons, and I say, "He is not here." Is there an intuition of Pierre's absence[?] (2003, 33)

It is important to ask if the questioner articulates both the question "Will he have waited for me?" and the conclusion "He is not here" in the same way as Sartre expresses them in a written sentence. While Sartre doesn't give a direct answer here, his wording suggests that the structure of consciousness does not match the structure of its articulation in his philosophy. Above all, this is evidenced by his use of the word intuition. If you articulate a question and then answer it, this is a logical process of thought that draws a conclusion and thus not really an intuition at all, which has associations of knowing without being articulated. In this case, the question becomes: in what sense can a question be a question if it is not articulated?

An articulated question may be a metaphor for intuition, but for me, a more accurate way to describe "intuition" would be a state of intended craft. The word "intend" implies possibility in that intending does not guarantee that the intended outcome occurs; it can occur or not occur. When articulated, an intention can take the form of a question—will the intended thing occur—but articulation does not have to be the experienced state of intention. Indeed, Sartre acknowledges this in an example where he distinguishes an articulated question from expectation: "to be exact, I myself expected to see Pierre, and my expectation has caused the absence of Pierre to *happen* as a real event concerning this café" (2003, 34). The distinction here is important, because when we think of an articulated question, we often think of it as something that minds do, they articulate in language, whereas intention in craft avoids the Cartesian mind/body distinction. Even the word "expectation" conveys a somatic apprehension and tension. The athlete about to start a race may intellectually think, "I intend to win," but they may not. It doesn't alter the fact that, on the start line, their whole body is attuned to this intention, alert but relaxed, ready to explode as the starting gun is fired. And it is in this sense of craft that intention can nihilate nothingness in artistic practice because it opens up possibility. Intention should not imply that the articulated thought "I'm going to make something really good" is sufficient to intend to do that. In its unarticulated sense, intention requires craft to intend, requires the actor to know in their body how to be present, or the cameraperson to anticipate an event in symbiosis with the camera.

When I chose to film the log from three sides of a box, I didn't consciously think about its effect. I relied on an embodied craft of filmmaking to intend to film in this way but without consciously articulating why. Indeed, when we watched the footage together as a large group, it surprised me how people less familiar with cameras hadn't realized how the shots would turn out—whereas I knew how to previsualize them because of my filmmaking craft. Thinking of consciousness as an intending of craft rather than thought, or an articulation of questions, is a way of integrating Sartre's consciousness into a description of a model of artistic practice.

Collaboration

We see Lucy standing behind a glass door. In the glass of the door, we see Heather's face reflected. Joe films this so that we see both their heads in close-up—Lucy's through the glass and Heather's reflected in the glass. Initially, the door is closed so that their heads are on opposite sides of the frame. The machine's score is for Heather to tell the story to Lucy of how she tried to phone her sister but ended up phoning herself. As the door opens, the tone of the conversation is to be happy, and as it closes sad. But as the door opens, the changing angle of the glass also changes the position of Heather's head in the frame, so that it is now superimposed on Lucy's.

The piece starts as a conversation between two friends. Although neither Lucy nor Heather hold phones, Heather holds her hand to her ear. The framing makes this seem like a phone conversation as well, with the reflection detaching the actors in space, but retaining a close-up on them and using opposite sides of the frame, which is very much how we are accustomed to seeing phone conversations on screen. As the conversation starts, the scene plays as a confession of one's stupidity to a close friend. Lucy seems to be indulging her, playing along but disconcerted by her friend's stupidity—when she is happy, she seems to be putting it on. All of a sudden, we wonder if Heather is calling herself on the phone, and we are witnessing the conversation that she had with herself. This sense is created when their heads merge in a super-imposition. It is amplified because Heather is driving the conversation but is also the ephemeral reflection that we never really grasp, and the reflection itself reminds us of a mirror. The happy and sad instruction also plays into this. When Heather is happy, Lucy is happy as well, and vice versa. Even Lucy's more "put on" happiness seems to testify to Heather sublating the stupidity of her action into a narrative of kooky klutziness. It can be read both ways, and this is what makes it interesting, in that it opens onto its audience the possibilities of a story surrounding this moment. Joe, who is on the camera, makes choices as well, reacting to the conversation, to the moments when this is two people, and the moments it could be one. When the conversation ends, Heather tells Lucy that after she called herself, she called her sister for real. Lucy asks, "Did she pick up?" and they laugh. The door closes, and Heather deadpans, "No." The machine ends with them blowing on the door and making kisses in the foggy glass to each other. Kisses to a friend, or a tragic need to blow kisses to oneself? As a self-contained piece, it's probably the most successful machine we make, a moment of genuine collaboration between two actors and a camera/person. But how is its affective force generated collaboratively?

Heather speaks to Lucy as reflection. Photo: The Performative Camera Workshop.

Take a cameraperson and an actor collaborating. Each can be defined as an individual in the classical sense of a person. But the force emerging is not individual. From either's perspective, their consciousness, or craft intention, is focused toward the other, but their freedom is doubled in this moment. As has been established, they have freedom of action, which is close to what Sartre describes. It is a freedom in which conscious being secretes nothingness as the past breaks with the present to give craft unlimited possibility. What I am contending is that they are here also free to be acted upon, which appears to be a contradiction, since freedom implies a being's choice but to be acted upon appears to mean to be the passive recipient of another's choice. And yet, if consciousness is a giving over of my being to a break with my being, from the "in itself" to the "for itself," then the nothingness secreted by being renders being vulnerable not only to its own being's change on the basis of free action but also to external forces. This appears to be impossible; since nothing separates me from my being, there appears to be no location in me for an external force to affect me. However, an analysis of Sartre's distinction between fear and anguish reveals how the inauguration of freedom can collapse the internal/external distinction, such that nothing separates being not only from itself but also from external forces.

For Sartre, "fear is fear of beings in the world whereas anguish is anguish before myself. Vertigo is anguish to the extent that I am afraid not of falling over the precipice, but of throwing myself over. A situation provokes fear if there is a possibility of my life being changed from without" (2003, 53). But if I am for myself with nothingness coiled at the heart of my being, then I am what I am not, so I cannot know what I am (since I am not it). Since I am what I am not, how can I distinguish between a possibility in me that derives from conscious freedom and a possibility that is given to me, which may nevertheless be experienced as freedom? In fear, I can bracket off something external to me of which I am afraid—the boulder teetering on the cliff above my head that I see, or as Sartre puts it, "unreflective apprehension of the transcendent" (2003, 54). But in this positing of a transcendent to me, I immediately render myself as a being "in itself," as a bounded being outside

the bounds of which at a minimum lies this transcendent. Sartrean fear is dependent on apprehension by a being "in itself."

In contrast, the "for itself" cannot meet the external with fear because this would announce a retreat to the "in itself." But it can nevertheless be stricken by the external. Not as when the boulder falls on my head without me noticing. If I am lucky enough to have survived this misfortune, then I will likely posit the boulder as something external to me. I will bracket it from me as an object I want nothing to do with as the cause of my pain. But what if I am standing underneath the boulder, reflecting in anguish that I am free to move or stay, and then it falls? A second question will help us to answer this one. Why would anyone do that? What gives Vertigo its possibility? What allows people to stand under the boulder at all? Sartre's answer is that fear leads to being becoming aware of its own possibilities in freedom. When confronted with the cliff edge, I become aware of the actions I can take as possibilities in this situation: "At the very moment when I apprehend my being as *horror* of the precipice, I am conscious of that horror as *not determinant* in relation to my possible conduct" (Sartre 2003, 55). Anguish, then, "is precisely my consciousness of being my own future, in the mode of not being" (56). Therefore, as far as "anguish is anguish before myself," the myself that this anguish is before is not self-identical in the sense of an "in itself." Anguish is the "for itself" fearing an "in itself" that it is not yet, and yet fear cannot be an adequate word since although consciousness posits an external future being, nothing separates its being from this future being. But, correlate to the "for itself's" fear of being "in itself," the "for itself" also therefore desires to "not be itself." There is an aspect of being "for itself" that, when confronted with the cliff edge, thinks not only "I could," but "I want," or to be pithy, the being "for itself" is also always being "for not itself."

So I am standing underneath the boulder, anguished, desiring it to fall on me and not fall on me, unable to decide what to do, when it falls. Now, I can no longer bracket its action off completely from myself—I have desired its falling as one of *my* possibilities. Or rather, if I do bracket its action, I must also bracket off the being "for itself" that desired this, a moment of madness that the "in itself" articulates, and that was not really me. I use the example of the boulder in order to illustrate that things can happen *to* the "for itself" in the freedom that anguish brings. But they only happen *to* the for itself when the for itself is theoretically separated from the external force that acts upon it. Strictly, from the position of the "for itself," this did not happen to it, since its happening was a possibility that belonged to the "for itself." This happening to it is different to a decisive act, to choosing to stay under the boulder or to move, because I have taken no decision to act. But just as it is in my possibility without decision that I am free to act, it is also in this state that I am free to be acted upon. In this latter case, whatever happens to me is my possibility and yet requires action that is not mine. Further, because it is my possibility, *nothing* separates me from the origin of this action.

The point is that something can happen to the anguished being at the moment of freedom and indecision before a choice to act is made, and what happens at this point is quite different to what happens to the being "in itself" bracketed off from the world. If I am simultaneously for myself and for not myself, then what happens to me in this suspended moment becomes indiscernible from me and from not me if I do not retreat from this force into an "in itself." And what is this if not a description of affective force? Of another's craft which strikes at the heart of my being, and yet is not me. This is what I mean by the double freedom that nothingness brings, both to act and be acted upon. It is also in this way that affect is mine but cannot belong to me, that it must have been in some way made collaboratively, as my freedom acts upon another's freedom to be acted upon or vice versa.

In this scenario, I change, but I cannot identify the origin of my change because the origin is precisely between a me and not me separated by nothing, where my possibility is not separated from another's action, or my action from another's possibility. It is in this nothing that a force of change takes root, and yet under observation, this force's origin is indiscernible from this nothing, since to discern it would be to make nothing something. The affective force is thus like a photon in that it acquires the materiality of mass with speed, but when halted so that it can be observed in consciousness lacks any materiality whatsoever. This is the materiality of nothingness and can be the basis for collaborative artmaking.

Let's go back to our example of the actor and cameraperson confronted with each other. In this moment of practice, let's say that each is "for itself" (and thus also "for not itself"). Something happens. One uses their craft toward the other, and the materiality of nothingness is felt. The actor and cameraperson experience this as an affective force that is both of their being and not of their being—indeed, the audience can be included in this as well if it too is "for itself." And this is what is meant by collective energy, that sense of something happening in the room. That every being "for itself's" nothingness is materially infused but that this infusion is still by necessity articulated by every being as emanating from nothing. That doesn't mean we all feel the same thing as practitioners—a mystical collective energy that overtakes us all—but that our nothingness is indiscernible to us from that which affects it, infused with materiality by the force of our collaborators.

Conclusion

I don't know how our workshop translates into an end product, but writing this piece has made me aware of some of the necessities of the next stage of the process. I think there is a "you-had-to-be-there-ness" about these machines, in a real sense that if you were there, the pieces were sometimes successful as performances. But cameras have the quality of being where information is stored as well as taking on an active role in these performances. In this sense, when you see a camera live, actively engaged in a performance, there is no guarantee that what it records will reflect the affective particularity of that moment as it occurred to the artists and/or audiences present. Additionally, we are working with materials that have been collectively generated over a week, stories, things that happened, places, moments, machines, and phrases. The machines often work because the performance resonates—a call back to an earlier moment informs the current one. Perhaps the machines described and analyzed here work anyway, outside of the current context. But I can't help thinking that this is more likely if you know the story of how I phoned myself. Or if you've seen the footage of the log, and heard the lecture on subduction before watching Lucy and me on the crack. You can't bring that moment of performance back for an audience, but you can attempt to contextualize it by creating a presentation context that will allow it to resonate anew. This attempt suggests a form of montage—it is about creating a context between machines that allows the audience to experience the breaking of them. This next stage brings its own practical questions. Filmmaking is done in groups, so the actual act of filming lent itself to a collaborative dynamic—there was always plenty for everyone to do. However, editing is done alone traditionally, or maybe with an assistant or director present, so a key question is, "How can collaboration work in an editing context?"

And yet simply articulating in language that this might be the next stage is insufficient as an instruction. Through the practice of theory, I also hope to allow these moments to resonate a little

here. By putting an adaptation of Sartre beside a description and analysis of an artistic practice, I can practice a form of montage where the reader will have to seek out the connections to allow the two elements to harmonize. In its own practice, then, this article attempts to perform a research role where knowledge is generated through theory and criticism not as an articulation of practice, but as an attunement to affect, a part of practice unknown to practice that becomes embodied. As theory, it does not affect practice on its own terms—in the next workshop, I will still just do my craft. But I hope that lurking as material in the nothingness of my practice will be theory all the same.

Notes

1. "Film and Energy" Workshop. 2016. Primary Films and the University of Greenwich.

2. "Co-presence with the Camera" Workshop. 2019. Workshop 4, Davis Humanities Institute Research Workshop Series "The Performative Camera." McLaughlin Reserve, May 2019, University of California Davis.

3. "Victim Capital Workshop. 2018. Primary Films and the University of Greenwich.

4. I borrow the term fidelity here from Alain Badiou's fidelity to the event, which he articulates in *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (2012). While not identical to affect, for Badiou, the event similarly challenges the person; it is "something extra, something that happens in situations that they and the usual way of behaving in them cannot account for" (2012, 41). For Badiou, the ethical act maintains a fidelity to the logic of such an event.

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