

University of Michigan

The Space Between Seeing and Knowing

Interrogating Creative Practice

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I am beginning to realize that my creative practice is not simply a pursuit of answers.

For a long time, I struggled to find the thread connecting my obsession with the private lives of strangers, the swiftness of death, and the opaque logic of autonomous systems. Looking from the outside, these are disparate interests – or so I thought.

Beneath these three things lies a singular, driving question: How does my art explore what it means to be close to someone – or something – without ever truly being able to know or access them?

On the tube in London, a man across from me rubs his child's back as the train screams around a sharp corner of the tunnel. The gesture is small, and almost invisible, but *I* notice it. A woman gazes right past me and into the dark window, watching her reflection bobble on the glass as the tube gears up for another sharp turn. I start making up a story for her solemn gaze without meaning to. Breakup, grief, a fight she can't stop replaying. I do that a lot – build a narrative for people I'll never see again.

And that's the pattern: closeness without access. *A window I can look through, but can't open.*

Strangers.

The strange feeling of intimacy when you are near someone that you have never met, and will never meet. Wondering about their life and all of the stories that they could share.

I feel this the most in cities, but specifically New York City. Sometimes I will sit on my balcony, and stare for hours at all of the tiny windows with miniature people having their own laughs and

problems and arguments and tears. And suddenly, my own life feels so minute. I feel strangely alone in the mass. We share space and time with all of these people, but not understanding. I see motion in the windows, but I cannot understand; the windows scatter and bounce into thousands of separate stories.

There are other times, though, where I feel the polar opposite. The Knicks game was on a few months back, over Thanksgiving break, and I was watching it, but not through my own television. I looked out into the concrete jungle and saw all of these tiny windows reflecting the same blue and orange flicker: the same night, same game, same moment, united.

But the majority of the time, the televisions are flickering different colors and different stories are being made in those windows. And those are the times where my imagination leaps into play – I start inventing because I cannot actually *know*.

To understand my curiosity better, I was introduced to an astonishing piece by Sophie Calle named *The Address Book*. Basically, in 1983, Calle found a lost address book on the bus, photocopied it, and interviewed the contacts within to create a portrait of the owner, Pierre D.¹ Sophie and I would undoubtedly get along.



¹ Sophie Calle, *The Address Book* (Los Angeles: Siglio Press, 2012).

Calle used art to understand the gap, and though controversial, this system of interviews allowed her to not only peek through the window, but actually open and step inside of it.

She stresses the futility of the search. Even with all the data, the portrait of Pierre D. remained both fragmented and subjective. Though she stepped through the window, her work proves that even when we try to use tools to "know" someone, we are often just inventing stories to fill in what we cannot know – thoughts, emotions, stories.

But what happens when the window doesn't just stay closed, but is painted over entirely?

Death.

The most intense version of this possible – closeness without access – is death. Not in a dramatic way, but a realistic one. I mean, you scientifically can't speak to someone who is dead, and therefore, cannot know their answers to your questions.

Death takes someone who was reachable and makes them permanently unreachable, and it turns a person into a story told by people still alive.

I have experienced death before – my great grandmother, great aunt, and others – but there are two in particular that are branded in memory: both happening with no warning. Presence to absence, like a switch.

Alex.

Circa 2016, a weekday, I was on the phone with my friend Shannon, half-giggling about something unimportant – golf practice, a triple bogey, my class crush. I was laying on my childhood bed, atop a green comforter with pink flowers painted on – almost like one of those intricate rug-type patterns. The bed was propped against the wall, right next to the window. I lay happy, content, and ignorant.

I remember my window being open because it was summertime, and the outdoors smelled like it was a good day to ride my bike, maybe even go to Sylvan Park nearby; I remember everything so vividly.

And the scream was vivid too.

I told Shannon I had to go because I thought something was going on downstairs. Frankly, I assumed it was my parents laughing about something, or fighting about something. All I knew was that it was *loud*. As soon as I left my room and peeked over the railing, it was obvious this was neither laughter nor argument. My father was curled at the bottom of the stairs, his head in his hands, rocking back and forth.

I had never seen my father cry, never mind gasp as if he couldn't find oxygen in the air. I sprinted down the stairs and hugged him, begging him to tell me what happened. In one swift, vocal fry, he said, "Alex is dead."

Alex was my dad's best friend. A family friend. A man with a wife and a son. Someone I had been tossing a bouncy ball with days before, and now he was gone. Alex had taken his own life.

How could that happen? How can someone become unreachable so quickly?

What struck me later was not just Alex's death, but how efficiently the world continued without him. Time didn't care about his death or my dad's cries. It didn't care that I sat up at night, asking Alex where he was, and how he could do this to his family. The days continued, the years continued, and now, ten years later, Alex stayed gone.

And this morbid curiosity followed me to Bali.

Bali.

The second death was 2024, on Seminyak Beach. My dad wanted to go for a walk on the beach and I went with him. I don't remember what we spoke about – probably taxes or stocks or something dads tend to lecture you about. Somewhere between VOO and Vanguard, someone came sprinting past us, jumped into the water, and screamed for help. There was a rogue swimmer flailing their arms, bobbing up and down beyond the waves, and the current was inconceivably strong.

What followed was chaos: tourists and locals alike jumping in, then stopping as the waves proved too strong. A few brave men swam out, and the rest of us pointed from shore in an attempt to direct the swimmers to the drowning girl.

After thirty minutes, the swimmer was brought back – a petite young woman, twenty years old at most, and naturally relief washed over me. And right as I completed my sigh of relief, a different woman screamed.

One of the rescuers – her husband – did not return to shore with the rest of the heroes, and after another thirty minutes, we could see him from shore – miles out, facedown, floating. I couldn't watch, because I knew he was dead.

I researched him obsessively afterward. I needed to know his story. He was a hero. He went in to save her, and while everyone was focused on *her* survival, nobody noticed *he* was gone.

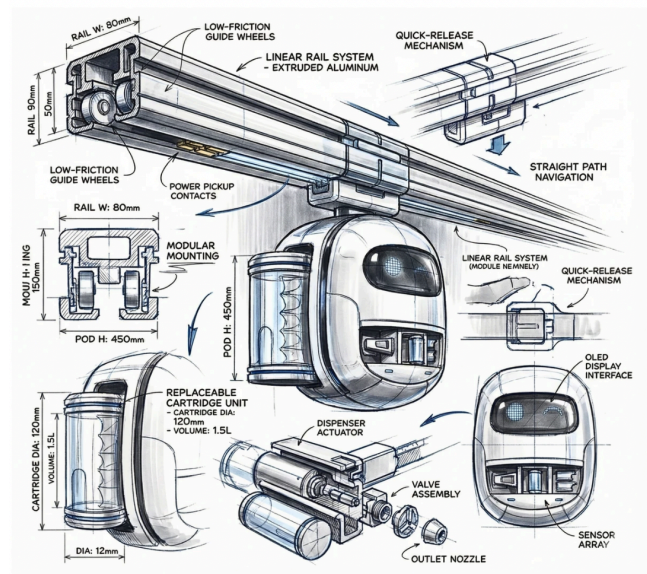
I could never find anything concrete about him, just rumors. A family left Bali, without their father that day. Time was as unforgiving as the ocean as it passed, and this person became a gap.

Both of these deaths did the same thing to my brain in making me hyper-aware of how fragile access is. When someone is gone, all you have is memory – but memory is messy and it blurs and memory cannot answer the endless questions you may have.

Systems.

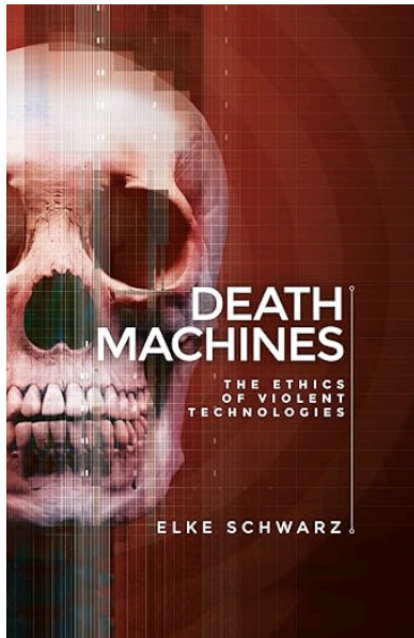
This brings me to my newest, and perhaps most misunderstood, element of my work: autonomous systems.

At first glance, a robotic flight attendant that I created or a self-operating drone in war seems quite far removed from grief and death or a New York apartment, but it maybe has a closer connection than you thought if you look a bit deeper.



These systems behave exactly like the strangers on the tube: they move without explanation and make decisions without transparency. The autonomous nature of the code simply mimics the autonomy of a stranger: we see the output (drone files, the algorithm sorts) but the internal “logic” is a black box that we cannot enter.

When I was studying abroad in London, I took a phenomenal course by Dr. Elke Schwarz, who helped me understand this connection.



Let's take a look at her research into Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS). She argues that these systems operate through a machine logic that renders the world not as human lives, but as a set of code: calculable data points. In her novel *Death Machines*, she discusses how this tech creates a “tele-technological abstraction” of the act of murder, creating a moral vacuum between the operator and the target². Think about it – does clicking a button thousands of miles away to operate a drone have a different emotional impact than pulling the trigger mere inches away from the target?

The abstraction she speaks of is exactly the distance I feel from my balcony. I feel unable to reach their humanity, unable to understand them, and therefore, they are simply flickers of blue light to my eyes, unless I provide them with a story.

In reflecting on what I have learned from Dr. Schwarz, a machine is a presence that we interact with, yet is fundamentally unreachable – a black box that mimics the opacity of a stranger's life and the finality of death.

² Elke Schwarz, *Death Machines: The Ethics of Violent Technologies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).

My work.

My project *Split Seconds* was my first physical attempt to hold this sensation still, even if I didn't exactly know it at the time.

I used dual realities – colored pencil for the outward presentation and graphite for the emotional feelings. I was trying to visualize this closeness without access. I was tussling with the idea that two realities can occupy one moment, yet only one we can see. Something is always visible (colored pencil), while much is hidden (graphite).

I could see the woman on the tube staring at the dark class, but not the thoughts that are causing such a stare. I could see hundreds of windows from my balcony in New York, but could not know the lives inside of them. I could see the impact of Alex's absence, but his final moments and where he is now remains sealed off from the living.

Split Seconds attempts to expose the hidden. Through this, I am beginning to understand that my work is not about solving the mystery of the unknown, but about learning how to sit with it. My art becomes a way to pause the moment between seeing and knowing – to pry that gap open long enough to examine it, and to draw it. I am not trying to *fully* access the stranger, the memory, or the system. Instead, my work is an attempt to give form to the invisible space between *presence* and *understanding*, and to suggest that perhaps the most intriguing part of a person, place, or thing may be the part we can never fully reach.

