Before After (Revisited)
Before After, 16:17, HD Video, 2011
Michael Kugler
Daniel Terna

*Before After* explores South Williamsburg, Brooklyn through a series of filmed experiments in the mostly Latino and Jewish communities. The camera is considered as a compass that gives direction to a variety of inquiries. This compass guided interactions with the neighborhood, both in terms of physical space and its inhabitants, and consequently the method of approach was to experience the area much like a spacious urban playground.

The short sequences in this piece are the result of unexpected encounters with people, images, and local rituals. Objects were used as props to facilitate interventions with spaces and communications with people. The title, *Before After*, references a photography storefront sign along Lee Avenue in the heart of the Jewish neighborhood, and it reminds us that deciding when something is “over” or “finished” is easier said than “done.”
This Skype conversation took place on Tuesday, July 1, 2014. We decided to revisit Before After together at the same time, syncing up and speaking with each other while rewatching our project. Michael was in Weimar, Germany and Daniel was in Brooklyn, New York.

Daniel: Cool, all right, got that going. And I’m gonna watch full screen. So one…two…three…and play!

Michael: Play!

M: Oh no…it’s off.

D: You sure?

M: Yeah. Try again.

D: Ok hang on. Ok I stopped. I’m at the beginning. You ready?

M: K me too. Yeah. One…two…

D: Wait wait wait wait. Sorrysorrysorry. I’m starting at the beginning. So you do the call and tell me when to press.


D: K.

M: One…two…three…play!

D: Got it.
D: I love that shot…

M: Me too. And this one too. I like this.

D: I love this opening. This was the best one.

M: You know what’s funny about this shot? It always bothered me that the blue ball hits the paper in the background.

D: Yeah I know…well a little jankiness is always good right?

M: Yeah but I like that it’s already janky, so that element of jankiness…

M: Yeah that was perfect. It’s so cool how springy that bread is.
M: You know what’s funny? I would not have introduced the ball so early.

(time passes)

D: Cool.

M: Cooooool.

D: That was cool.
D: Ugh, this looks so good.

...

D: I always worried that this part looked too much like September 11th.
D: Whoops, that was too long...that was too long.

...

D: I guess they’re supposed to be long...It’s interesting that I thought the pacing should be faster, but now because it's slow, I get into it. You have to adjust your body clock to it from the previous vignette.

...

D: That’s a great one.

M: Yeah that’s a nice one. I just wish I had these slides.

D: They’re somewhere. What a great exercise.

M: Yeah it was. Something that was really exciting about this collaboration was that when we were together, we had a lot of really good moments, really productive moments together, where we were able to think and act together on the fly. And then I would say an equal number of failed moments and struggles. But I like that this also became part of the approach.

I like that we self-administered assignments, and then went off and did them, and then reconvened. And then we were able to mine them after the fact.

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D: Watching this was enjoyable. I forgot about this.
D: I was in such a bad mood when we shot this.
M: You were really pissed off.
D: I think I was tired and hungover.
M: You were tired and not enthusiastic about this.
D: I was sleeping.
M: This is really nice, these intro shots. This is mostly you…I remember I wanted those tracking shots really badly. And we did them a million times.

D: It’s still a great piece. A little vignette.

M: It has something doesn’t it?

D: It's great that [the Mr. Softee garage] just let us do whatever we wanted. They let us play with the bells and whistles. I heard there was a fire there. A fire in the building.
M: You know I never noticed that the storefront sign was damaged? The cracked and damaged old family photo? Holy shit.

D: That’s the whole point—that they fix the old photos.

M: I thought it was all about the colors! I thought it was about the irony!

D: It’s that colors fade equally in the sun.

M: Yeah I know, but I didn’t realize the “before” photo was damaged and cracked. I thought they were originally different only color-wise.

D: Exactly. Right.
D: Mike, I wish that it would go on. I wish that we did five more vignettes. It’s kind of sad that it’s at the end of the film already.

M: Yeah I know. It’s weird right?
M: I think this was hands down our best collaboration.

D: We were literally working side by side. And we had two cameras.

M: And feeding off each other’s energy. That’s what I remember.

D: And the energy of God.

...

D: I don’t mean to sound offensive, but this ritual seems so rudimentary.

M: Who are you offending? I think it’s a valid comment...

...

M: Editing this somehow felt so organic. And it’s funny because we stumbled upon this. It was pure chance.

...

I love how the kids are turning their heads all the time, and the camera follows on the coattails of them turning their actions. That was part of the intention when we were editing, but I really like that their body movements gesture to the next cut. It was nice to edit that.
M: I just showed this to a friend and he brought up the burning of the plastic bags. It's funny you qualified your statement about them seeming rudimentary by saying “I don’t mean to sound offensive” because you wouldn’t have said that if you didn’t feel some distance from their community, in spite of being Jewish yourself.

D: The music is so light-hearted, but there’s this depressing finality to their actions. It’s an urban environment, but they’re doing this very rudimentary thing, not to mention that they’re burning garbage and breathing in things you probably shouldn’t. Building a fire is such an old method of gathering a group of people together. It’s like a center point for gathering.*

M: I wonder if it has to do with the fact that those items are sullied because they contained traces of bread?

D: I don’t know. The very last shot of the guy throwing in the plastic tubes, he’s throwing in the plastic tubes that contain the lulav (a palm frond used during the Sukot holiday).

M: But the lulav is also for Passover right?

D: No, it’s for Sukot. He’s getting rid of the old items from the previous holiday.

I remember when we finished this, we were definitely treading in ethnographic territory, outsiders looking in, this sort of ethno-tourism thing. I didn’t want to depict them as these people without an identity, as a mass of people, because I felt like that’s offensive and there’s way more complexity to their community.

M: I start to think about the music now and wonder if there’s anything pretentious about it, because it kind of papers over the piece with this pseudo-transcendence…or if it inadvertently stresses the religious nature of the whole event and places an unnecessary emphasis on that. And thereby doing the exact opposite of our intention, which was basically not to exoticize them. We have a unique perspective of being both insiders and outsiders, and I wonder how many people would have felt comfortable doing what we did. I wonder if I would have filmed them if we weren’t together. I might not have in spite of the event being really compelling.

I remember feeling that I wasn’t comfortable all the time, and some seemed not to welcome our presence. Most of them basically ignored us. A few people were interested in what we were doing, some were curious, and some were peeved that we had disturbed their ritual?

Still, we didn’t really have to go through any negotiation with

*It needs mentioning here that bread is burned in preparation for the wheat-free Passover holiday.
anyone. In some ways, it was easier than I expected given how insular the community is.

D: I don’t know if I would have done it without you either. It’s impossible to say because we were just running on so much adrenaline from the morning and the project in general—we just knew we had to do it.

I don’t think we were ever treated with any aggression. Occasionally we got stares and looks. We had been operating in the neighborhood for a couple of days anyway. The kids would ask us what we’re doing, and we would answer that we’re just filming for our own curiosity. And you saw how physically close we got to them.

M: I feel that we kept an appropriate distance. The kids were the ones that stuck around and marveled with this childish curiosity at what was going on, whereas the adults came, they davened (prayed), performed the ritual, and then they left.

That was really it. And that whole experience doesn’t come through so much in the video, but knowing that that happened emphasized the kind of mechanical nature of it all. The rote nature of prayer as just a ritual; that this is something we’ve been doing for years, this is how we’ve always done it, and we came, we saw, we conquered.

During the filming and later, in the editing process, we were interested in communicating the extemporized and very public nature of a time-old religious ritual taking place in a modern and urban context. It was the element of spectacle and urgency that piqued our curiosity and ultimately led us to begin filming. It wasn’t until later, watching it again as viewers, that we began to consider the piece in a broader cultural and political framework. While making the piece, I wasn’t exactly sure what it was about, which might explain some of my current doubts pertaining to the music and its implications.

And I really wonder about the music now. Especially because when I’m thinking about the other pieces, I’m thinking about sound.

D: I don’t think I would do it with music if we were to redo it today.

M: I think I would have changed that too.

I don’t know if this is what you meant before, but had we the opportunity, I think we could have done so many more of these vignettes. Because as I watch this, it could offer an even more complete picture in some ways.

We placed a lot of value on [the vignettes] after the fact, which is to say that we had this run and gun kind of style, improvising
on the fly, and led by whimsy and curiosity. I think that really worked for us. And then we cobbled everything together and made sense of it in the end, but I think we could have done even more and worried less about how the pieces fit together.

D: When I was looking at the raw footage again, it seemed like we only really started in May.

M: We had a lot of false starts and fits.

D: But it’s crazy to me that we did all this in basically a month or two.

M: That’s a good point.

D: We did so much work in the Jewish neighborhood.

M: Somehow we ended up more in the Jewish neighborhood than in with other communities. That’s a reason why I have a new appreciation for Fading Colors (Cyan). Maybe we should move the conversation there.

I thought quite a bit about sound throughout this viewing of Before After, and I thought about what I would have done differently with many of the pieces. The sound always played a secondary or peripheral role, and in general I stand by the images. I think they’re really nice and there’s not much I would cut.

I always viewed Cyan, which is more or less your piece, as almost explicitly a visual piece, and I thought it also spoke to your eye and your skill as a photographer more than anything else, because it’s technically the least dynamic of all the pieces. There’s very little movement and it’s much more conscious of light. It reminds me of a photo that changes over time. And the sound never struck me as much as the sound in the other pieces, probably because it was less edited and therefore less crafted in some way.

And now watching it three years later, it feels sonically like the most dynamic piece of all the vignettes to me. There’s something deeply ethnographic about it, but mostly from an aural perspective. The images speak for themselves—they’re strong images on their own, but I love that you have all the local accents from the neighborhood, I love that you see different kinds of people, which is really important, and you hear different kinds of people, which you don’t throughout the rest of [Before After], as a whole.

I love all the competing sounds: sounds coming from cars, coming from the deli, coming from the restaurant…I love the streetography of sound. It feels a bit like a time capsule, because it’s a throwback to when that Rihanna song was dope and it was on everybody’s radio. As far as sonic tapestry goes, that’s easily the most interesting vignette. I did a ton of work on the sound
of the *Ice Cream* piece, but it feels more calculated in some way. It feels less aleatoric.

D: That’s why I think this level of jankiness is something I always appreciate. It’s a combination of laziness and being able to use my laziness to an advantage in post-production. I don’t like getting caught up on audio recording, because then I’m focusing so much attention on audio, and I feel like the camera is what it is, you can make something impactful out of the mechanism’s limitations. When I watch *Cyan*, I feel my own presence there as this guy with a tripod walking around in the neighborhood...

M: I know what you mean, there’s a certain honesty to it, but I also think you’re speaking to a kind of artistic propensity that you have.

I guess there is something to be said for that also, because in conjunction with the way I perceive you and your work, when I look at your photos I see the guy behind the camera and I feel your presence as well. That seems like a certain kind of linchpin in the thread of your work. And I see it in *Cyan* for sure.

I’m thinking about it now, and I feel like I would have liked to see more people in general.

D: Well I think we tried to do a lot of stuff with people, and we were kind of fed up with having to do things with relationships. For instance, we did the thing with Che, we did the thing with Stuntman Bob, and we got a lot of aggression from people at the Off Track Betting parlors. We tried to interact with people. We would do the most ridiculous things with Che. Do you remember at one point we tried making some performance piece of her pushing my van while it was in neutral? Or at one point I went around asking people what they’re favorite color was?

We tried to work with people a lot, but in some cases it was easier to focus on just the architecture of the neighborhood. And so *Before After* has more of an emphasis on landscape than people. And even though we were picturing the Jews, we weren’t interacting with them. We were taking pictures of the Jews, but they were doing their thing while we did ours.

M: Yes, exactly. That’s what made that piece more interesting.

D: Their neighborhood is interesting architecturally, but they are so actively navigating through their area that they sort of define the movement of the neighborhood.

M: We tried to do the character profile, and that just didn’t work for us. And it makes sense that it didn’t work for us because it takes a long time to nurture relationships and to build trust—an interesting documentary subject is one that you know intimately. That’s not something that happens overnight or over the course of a few months.
Let's call a spade a spade here and admit that we were not pleased with the limits that we were given. Or rather the parameters within which we were expected to create. In fact, for all intents and purposes we ignored them for a while and just did our own thing. We trusted ourselves and trusted our decisions. And this is not by any means to knock the [UnionDocs] program, or to somehow disparage anybody else. It's not that at all—it's just that we found the things that we found attractive, and that appealed to us, and that gave us impetus to work. And I like that we trusted those instincts. I think that was really important for us to go through.

We weren't looking for the cookie-cutter story, and we didn't expect to discover something that was completely untapped either. It was really just following pure curiosity and interest. That was what really excited me about the work we did together. We had an idea, and we just simply followed our curiosity. It gave us momentum and it really spurred us on.

Most of the time that we were working together, I felt really energetic. All of the logistics—they were always an afterthought. It wasn't like: “Oh if we could only get this interview then everything would be good.”

D: Working with what was at hand.

M: It was sort of performing a little bit of magic. Just making something out of nothing.

D: So many failed experiments.

M: Compromise can manifest itself in so many different ways. Sometimes I feel like we did things a little more your way, and that was the compromise because then sometimes I would take the liberty of editing the piece, or I spent more time editing a part of it, and then sometimes there were more explicit compromises having to do with the production process. Sometimes you and I would just strike a compromise on the “set” so to speak. I would be lying if I said that when I work alone I feel the same type of energy.

What it really comes down to is trust. When I feel I can establish trust, that's when I am at my most creative, my most clever, my most compassionate, my most thoughtful. I do think that it's applicable to all aspects of life for me. There are very few people in my life that I can establish trust with so quickly, but somehow, being thrown into the situation, you were one of them. I don't want to sound flippant by any means, but I imagine there are probably people who work really well with you, and people that probably couldn't work well with you at all.

But it was easy for me to work with you. You had very strong opinions, you didn't always speak before you spoke, and you had not only convictions, but genuine curiosity. That was the thing
I recognized in you the quickest. Curiosity seems to be easily for me one of the most attractive aspects in people. So that was what made it so simple to work with you. And that was what made the collaboration so fruitful.

That was cool how we got to this point. I’m glad we did this.

D: Yeah me too. Should we wind down?

M: Ok bubbeleh.

-July, 2014
Michael Kugler is a Brooklyn, NY native who graduated with a BA in Comparative Arts from Washington University in St. Louis (2007). He has worked as a media educator with organizations including the Tribeca Film Institute, the Museum of the Moving Image, the Jacob Burns Media Arts Lab, and Urban Arts Partnership. His films and audiovisual installations have been exhibited in the US and in Japan. Michael is currently pursuing an MA in Media Art in Design at the Bauhaus University in Weimar, Germany.
Daniel Terna is also a Brooklyn native working primarily in photography and video. His work questions when and why we choose to make pictures, and examines the relationship we have had with picture-making in the past and what it is today. Terna’s work has been exhibited in New York City at UnionDocs, Outpost Artist Resources, NurtureArt Gallery, the AC Institute, the Austrian Cultural Forum, Eyebeam, the Museum of the City of New York, and 321 Gallery. He has also screened at the Contemporary Arts Center (New Orleans), Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts (Cambridge, MA), Armory Center for the Arts (Pasadena, CA), and Gallery Tayuta (Tokyo). His work will be included in a group exhibition in the forthcoming BRIC Arts Media Brooklyn Biennial (Fall, 2014). Terna graduated with a BA in photography from Bard College and is a MFA candidate at the International Center of Photography-Bard College (expected 2015).
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