

*Tell: A Response*

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*Tell* by Kevin Roy is a two-channel video installation that explores a dynamic between filmmaker and model, camera and subject, female and male. The maker invites the audience to create a story as it happens, without instruction, guidance, or direction. Presented as a “browsable” diptych, the viewer themselves is responsible for scrolling to move the images and the narrative—forwards and backwards—with each video screen individually manipulated by a hand-controllable multimedia wheel.

The installation constantly resets notions of beginning, middle, and end—as each individual is left to discover the potential interchange of imagery for themselves. Regardless of the entry point, there is an identifiable male subject on the left side and a female filmmaker on the right. But what kind of “story” each individual viewer creates is dictated by where the image is when the user begins (i.e., however the last person left it), and any assumptions of narrative that are drawn are likely influenced by text on the right screen (presumably from the voice of the filmmaker/female character).

In discussion with the artist, Mr. Roy stated that he revised the title to *Tell* with the idea that, “I wanted to explore and depict a power relationship between model and artist, with the intent to empower a female perspective. Of course this raises even more questions potentially about how that dynamic was influenced by the fact that it's my piece...and on and on.” As the artist suggests, the piece is both a rejection and an exploration of the notion of gaze—overtly flipped from Mulvey (who is referenced on screen in a thought of the filmmaker character). The filmmaker is filming a male model, nude, and is actively seeking, in her words, to “cover (their) body with the lens.” In fact, there are multiple times when this point is driven home, as that line and a few others are repeated at different points, thus increasing (but not guaranteeing) the likelihood of each viewer being exposed to that idea.

As I dug deeper into the work, a few aspects revealed themselves that were not apparent upon first impression. On the left screen, there is an occasional shift in framing, going from a full frame portrait view to a black and white 16x9 image in the middle of the screen. The shift draws your attention and is even be a bit jarring. In practice, it felt natural to pause and rewind back on those images after they had captured my attention. This shift tends to create a feeling of intentionality to those shots—perhaps as if those were the “filmed” images that we see the filmmaker producing in the depictions of her with camera on the opposite side.

The technology employed in the installation is both complex and elegant. The imagery itself is coded in Javascript, and can alternatively be viewed on the web when not installed as it was in this iteration. For this installation, instead of relying on mouse and keyboard, the artist utilizes recent-but-no-longer-current tech via Griffin USB multimedia controllers, giving us a comfortably familiar yet unique way to navigate the work. The controllers are programmed to be sensitive to natural touch, simple to learn and with plenty of opportunity for play.

Since the artist guides us to control each side individually, the distinctions between the two screens became evident both in form and content. As previously stated, the left screen is largely (but not exclusively) focused on the subject, an unnamed male model. The subject, mostly nude, largely passive, has brought his baby to the shoot (as indicated by hand-written text in the voice of the filmmaker, displayed on the opposite screen). Aesthetically, this screen features fragments of moments, shifts of focus, glimpses, pixelated frames and washes of color (employed via antiquated video technology), and as previously cited, a distinct split between 16x9 black and white frames interspersed within the 'default' full portrait frame color images. The color/portrait perspective is both intimate and unclear, employing a soft focus along with heavily pixelated imagery. There is no strong sense of beginning or end as one scrolls through the imagery on this screen.

Conversely, the right side presents from the perspective of the filmmaker herself, in a sense a female gaze onto the objectified male. In the proverbial earlier frames (if one is scrolling linearly from beginning to end), the filmmaker is waiting for a model to show up for a photo/film shoot—and the text on screen, in a hand-written font, reveals some of her thoughts as the scenario develops. Some key lines of text that I found noteworthy also suggest larger themes. After referencing Mulvey anecdotally, we read “Can you be nude now?” and “I want to cover your body with the lens” as well as, “He thought I was attracted to him. I was.” Along the way, color images of the her/maker/observer/filmmaker contrast with full frame black and white frames of the male subject as he looks directly into camera.

As the piece asks the audience to perform the edit for themselves, without knowing the intention nor given guidance, the 'filmmaker' states, “Film and then write everything in the edit. Then let the audience control the temporal form” and “There's no intention to tell any kind of a story.” These meta reflections on process continue with texts hinting and perhaps complaining about the process of filming in 16mm, “Now I know the terrible infant of the cinema.” At some key lines, the image freezes—providing yet another opportunity for the browsing viewer to be drawn into particular frames. Like the left side, the artist effectively uses abstractions of pixelated color on this side as well. Moving further along the linear timeline, the filmmaker's voice again reflects upon her process and the nature of narrative itself with the lines, “The film is another dissonant

artifact without a story” and “If you find it let me know.” Finally, it is a line of text that repeats multiple times that conveys both the artistic urgency and ensures that many viewers will reckon with the reversal of the gaze within the work when we read, “We’re losing the light and you’re late so we need to shoot. Can you be nude now?”

In summation, *Tell* is a highly effective work that elegantly uses code and image to outline and invite us into a media experience—without dictating how we should experience it. By seamlessly (and without instruction) inviting us in to play and explore, the artist keeps their intention quiet while including enough carrots for us to find our way. In the context of the review panel for this work at the UFVA conference, there was considerable discussion about the choice to include the text—as well as potential alternative approaches. Many thoughtful points were raised, but for this viewer, it was those textual elements that did much to inform the piece. So while how and to what degree the text was employed is certainly a worthwhile discussion, for me, those elements served as very effective guideposts the deeper I dove into the work.

With this work, Kevin Roy accomplished something rare—an elegant blend of advanced technology and simple intent. As complex as the programming behind the scenes may have been, the piece itself is received with the subtlety and playfulness that I believe the artist intended. This approach is noteworthy in a field far-too-often caught up in technology for technology’s sake. However complex the code may be, the complete work is not hindered by its complexity. Rather, it is presented simply as an invitation to play, to explore, to think, and to wonder.