THE CONFLICT WITHIN:
BLAZO KOVACEVIC'S *PROBE*

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"He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes

responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play

spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in

which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his

own subjection".[1]

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[1] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 202

Artist Blazo Kovacevic is exploring causes and consequences of conflicting social phenomena. In project *Probe* particularly, artist is interested in security monitoring by the authorities and people's inclination to cooperate in this process. Kovacevic is carefully observing the whole process from the inside as an active participant where he is provoked rather then inspired with these events. Images, installations, webcasting and interactive performances based on surveillance methods are offering very compelling visual spectacle rich with contradictory connotations. In this abundant collection of captured data it is almost impossible to see behind the meanings apparent on the surface. Is he presenting mere beauty of the objects captured with this technology, or is he criticizing society engulfed in this demonstration of mutual distrust? It seems that both of these views are present in this work but none of them is satisfactorily or fully explaining the scope and depth of the engagement. Through audience participation Kovacevic is searching for the redemption of the conflict, as Walter Benjamin observed that being witness of the event makes you an expert and even part of the work of art.[2] Being part of the process both for the artist and for the audience, is the pivotal part of this project as subject matter is so painfully important and familiar to all involved. As this work is mechanically produced and reproduced, redistributed and appropriated by all involved, it is impossible to label interactions taking place anything but political practice.[3] This political engagement might just serve as a model of how shared experience could influence real processes in ever changing and transforming society.

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[2] Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproductions*, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn and ed. and intr. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 231

[3] Ibid., 224

The Origin

According to Kovacevic, his interest in security scanning processes and imagery started with him being constantly labeled as a potential threat by the different security authorities. This occurred during his travels abroad, just prior to boarding the plane. His Montenegrin origin (the Balkans region that was engulfed in civil wars for years) was marking him a prime suspect, and so called random searches that were frequently conducted proved not to be random at all. As with many processes of sorting out, this one had a specific stigma attached to it. Being labeled as potential perpetrator so many times makes you almost a one. Or you might think you are. Or you just think as one. Image generated during security scanning is never intended to be seen by the public, and especially not by the scanned person. The only proof of this event—scanned image is gone with the next in line. This branding procedure left some traces, some scars, that needed to be visible for all. But why and how?[4]

Singled out, violated and marked in these processes artist is seeking redemption from this experience. He is finding it in becoming both—the observer and the observed. The gaze of the security official become a gaze of the artist as he peeks over the shoulders of the officials while they are conducting other searches taking place next to him. Roles reversed.

Involved in this invasive process, Kovacevic starts to experience roles of the one who observes and the one who is being observed. He craves for the power of the sorter, of the

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[4] From the interview with the artist conducted by Savannah art critic Bertha Husband in 2009 and published in the *Power* issue of the *Drain* online magazine, http://drainmag.com/interview-with-blazo-kovacevic/ (accessed 2/11/2013)

official–the observer but he has the expertise of person being just observed. He envies and he pities both of these roles. He recognizes the humble innocence of the observed, his silent servitude of waiting in line for the approaching unpleasant. However, as an observer he feels empowered and lured into new reality of transparent nature. He can, almost as a super hero, peek under the random person's clothes and inside their personal possessions without explaining his intentions as they are by the rules of engagement legitimate and almost righteous by the quiet compliance of the observed. This powerful voyeuristic practice is feeding his curiosity and his artistic and human inquiry in the unique moment in life of the random person is satisfied. This moment in his mind is not erased as it would be by the official following the normal procedure or by the searched person who forgets it as something unpleasant soon to be put behind. No, this moment is an essence of the displeasing event, it is a peak of the experience and it has to be preserved. The observed and the observer have something in common. They both wish for their encounter to not be or at least to pass quickly without trace. They feel guilty and dirty taking part in this necessary ordeal. They want to destroy the evidence that this event ever took place. Scanned image-proof, the evidence that this moment did take place maybe shouldn't be destroyed. Maybe it should be preserved and easily accessible (figure 1). It is a testament of their interactions and a monument of their distrust. It existed, it was very important in its short life and even more important in its elimination. It caused so much discomfort for the observed and it was image of great importance for the observer. For observed it resembles everything private and hidden. For some brief time it brought the fear of discovery of something inappropriate or even dangerous, somehow

mysteriously packed among the personal belongings or pockets in the jacket for example. Scenario of such discovery goes lengths in the mind of the observed. Question: "What if they found something" is almost always answered with vivid, even horror pictures of repercussions that would follow such a discovery. All of a sudden observed starts feeling nervousness of the guilty party that is to be removed only by the steady approach of the next in line. There is no closure to this repetitive, almost mechanical procedure that bears resemblance to the slaughter house. Crowd control markings and corral-looking posts and fences of security check are all pointing in the direction of slaughter house environment that shares almost same mobiliary (figure 2). Here, like in the slaughter house, next in line should never suspect anything bad is going to happen although it most certainly will for some, and we can argue ultimately for all involved on some level or at least emotionally. Efficiency of this and similar controlled processes is the ultimate and determining factor in this procedure. Crowd is to be kept in order at all times while waiting for their turn to surrender their privacy. Now, the observer has his job or even duty to perform. He feels empowered with the task entrusted in him but also he is uneasy about the whole procedure. He starts to think what if he discovers something, what would he do and then even worse thoughts and questions populate his mind: "What if I miss something". This question and the responsibility entrusted in him make his role also a pitiful one. The whole process is degrading the human existence, and interaction is casting a shadow of mistrust. Observed and observer do not trust each other. Observed themselves do not trust each other either. Nobody trusts the next in line and next in line is just to enter this mutually distrustful group. Paradox of transparency is created. Instead of

providing the clear mutual trust, apparent transparency is in fact perpetuating concealing of intentions of all involved. The observed doesn't believe in good intentions of the authority and observer by his role cannot allow to trust the observed. Search for concealed contraband exposes in fact hidden mutual distrust. But artist is not part of this process anymore. He is now lifted above the ground (figure 3). He is looking down and he sees everything and everyone. He sees above all the meanings of the process or absence of the minings. He knows everything without knowing any particulars. He is not participating or directing the actions of others but he has an impression that he is. He is not observing or being observed anymore. He is just there and he understands the event, not its justification. Conflict is created. He is looking at it as an experiment conducted in the social studies (figure 4). He wants to learn more, explore possibilities, bring conclusions and present his finds. But he cannot. Nobody in that environment shares his elevated position. Nobody really cares. They just want to be over with it.

The Artwork

In his artwork, Kovacevic is using a specific coded visual language. This language is ambiguous, it doesn't clarify anything but rather thrives in the manifold meanings. This coded language is deceptive and attractive — it is a trap. It resembles the mechanisms present in predatory biological organisms. This might include presence of luring color and/or light, intricate pattern or even hypnotizing elements that assume some captivating movement. Imagery itself has similar characteristics. It is transparent,

showing at the same time abundance of visual data to observe. Everything in the x-ray image is in focus and therefore of equal importance. On film or on screen this nature is self-evident. There is no space, there is no depth, nothing comes first and nothing is brought forward. All elements are of equal importance with the exception of container (object that is containing all other objects and in normal conditions obscuring the view of the content inside). This container is setting the stage for the inside show. Regularly contour lines in the x-ray image are means of defining the object. We recognize the objects in it by their shape. However, in Kovacevic's images contour lines of the objects are digitally enhanced to show mass, to form the plasticity, to move from the flat space to very edges, showing the depth. Still, no depth is apparent as this new form is product of equally treated contours. In security x-ray technology image is enhanced with the colors that are specially designed to reveal the nature of the material. For example, metal objects in the real world would correspond to forms being colored blue (like in the children's color books). But color here doesn't help in showing the plasticity of the real objects; it is just trying to single out different preferences of the materials being scanned. All of this is part of making better contrast, so person monitoring these scans can observe elements that are not allowed to be in these containers. In Kovacevic's images color is used differently. It is not helping object detection process, but quite contrary it is creating deception by using expanded color scheme that would be appealing to the general population. Whole image is colored with single color, sometimes even the whole series of the artwork will be depicted in one color, for example pink. With color, artist is also trying to unify the concept of variety by focusing on the intricate details in the images

themselves. The details, these dangerous details such as knives, guns, bombs etc. are also carefully planned and planted to produce state where you believe in the image's authenticity just to discard it as a false and then after longer deliberation to finally rule them as a mere possibility if nothing else. This possibility is actually embedded in the artwork as an essence of the notion of the fear of "what if" question is bringing. These images are illustrating "what if", they are the face of the *abjection* that would take place immediately after, as this act would constitute crossing of the border line of permissible. Question "what if" is now answered, consequences are pending. Imminence of the punitive action is in constant dialectic relationship to the beauty of the image. This is why this state is a trap and if that is true then the whole process and all involved are guilty by association. We are all experts in this game, where we are all guilty of crime before charged. Not just guilty. We do not believe anybody could be potentially innocent. How can we know that we didn't include something from the forbidden list of objects? Maybe our children put scissors or bottle of milk in our bag that we are not aware of. True, these incidents would be lenient but people's experience would definitely be blown out of proportions. Just the present anxiety will be enough to condition us to fear this process and many similar processes and ultimately to spread the distrust among people in community. Many lines and borders will be created in that community as a result. Crossing them will just become the way of life. Or at least entertainment. It will be posted on the Facebook:

> "I just smuggled my baby's bottle of milk through the airport security check."
>
> "Kudos!!! I will try it next time".

"Hey guys, you aren't going to believe this: I smuggled my boy's gun replica through the airport just two days ago".

You know what, I think I will try now to smuggle a real gun, they must be all blind over there".

Or tweeted:

gunlover

@John_Smith At the border crossing. Gun in the bag. Will let you know how it goes. http://GunLover.com

2 minutes ago via web in replay to John_Smith

For Kovacevic all of this is not yet enough. He is trying to catch the essence of developing conflicting scenario by using and simulating various established practices and norms. He opts for a 3D effects in order to add another level of ambiguity in his already packed strata of the folds. Unlike traditional 3D technologies where image is advancing towards the viewer in its dominating and almost threatening manner, Kovacevic's 3D effect is sinking further apart from the viewer in attempt to escape and conceal the exposed truth of itself. Image is sinking in the screen-like material constantly challenging our vision in its deceiving ritual of back and forth. This gaze is not easily established due to the difficulty in perception. But because of that difficult start this gaze is more powerful as if it is magnifying its properties through the phenomena inherited in the plastic material covered with parabolic lenses. Illusion plastic film is simulating the screen, making the image printed on it almost more "alive" then the one showing on the

regular screen. What is more tangible, what is simulated and what is discovered is now all packed in this visual code. Let us just focus on one of the Kovacevic's prints. In *Blue Violin Case* (figure 5) he is immediately telling us with the self-explanatory title that this is indeed an image of violin case and that it is blue. It is hard to disagree with this taxonomical approach. Immediately after or maybe even before we observe the violin case, or maybe at the same time, we see huge military grade knife placed inside the case, in place of the violin. This case is clearly designed for the specific curvilinear object and not the sharp pointy one such as knife. Instrument such as violin is designed with much attention for creating beautiful and pleasing sounds. Knife and especially this kind is made with same attention but for inflicting tremendous damage to human body. Dichotomy created by missing instrument of pleasure and creation and presence of the tool of pain and destruction is imbedded into this beautiful blue case. Here, case is telling us what is missing first rather then concealing the idea that something dangerous is hidden inside. Through digital enhancement Kovacevic is creating a fused body where some strange force is melting and binding together non-presence of the violin (represented with violin case) and presence of the knife. This hermaphrodite body has properties of male and female. This fusion is showing us that knife might be an even part of the violin — its bow maybe! They are both used in a similar fashion of drawing it across strings or vocal cords. Yet one is producing sounds while the other one is producing silence.

The Interactive

Kovacevic envisioned his exploration of the discovered mistrust and the conflict that arrises from it through carefully planned phases. In first stage titled *Probe 1.0* he is using digital prints and security check mobiliary (crowd control posts and tape) to stage the environment for the spectacle that is taking place. Audience movement and especially direction in the space is restricted and steered to the main event. This spectacle, this event is a webcast that is showing content of the video screens of the airport baggage screening monitors while the official search for contraband is conducted. Live footage unedited, with no montage is continuos although digital form. This video is not imposing anything on its viewers. Quite contrary viewers are those that impose their unauthorized gaze on this footage albeit with no affect on the situation development[5]. Video however, is still dominating in its seriousness and authority that produces unquestionable compliance[6].

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[5] Anecdotal story is shared within the artist's immediate circle of friends where Kovacevic is explaining how he obtained permission to show live footage from the airport terminal off limits to the public. In this story artist explained how he for years requested from the officials to grant him access to the screening facility and how he was constantly denied access until he has found connections that would vouch for his good moral character and artistic only intentions. This all worked fine until the day of exhibition when he got information that despite of previously granted access to the airport screening terminal emergency procedure activated at that time at the airport revoked all such permissions. Facing the failure and embarrassment he decided to ask his connection in the office of the President of the country to send artist's request on president memorandum letter via Fax to the airport security office asking for the special permission for access to the airport security terminal. His project was back on track. And the story goes on that in the next day issue of the local newspaper on the front cover there was a story that took place on the airport the day before. Apparently, a passenger during the flight overheard suspicious conversation suggesting weapons were present onboard the flight. This report immediately caused flight to be diverted back to the airport and thoroughly rescanned. It is now clear from this story that art audience was looking and searching for the contraband that had high probability to be found. In that same newspaper issue, on the back cover information about Kovacevic exhibition titled *Probe* was printed. (figure 6)

[6] Sean Cubitt, *Percepts for Digital Artwork,* intr. and ed. Janine Marchessault and Susan; Lord Fluid Screens, Expanded Cinema (Toronto [u.a.]: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 306

Oppression generated by the video is spreading everywhere. Audience in the gallery and not just in the gallery, in several galleries and on internet are observing bag after bag in passing, as if on the factory assembly line, packed with objects that are depicting intimate possessions of the random passenger. Although no identities of the passengers were known, nor they were aware that somebody was hacking into their consented limited relationship of being observed by the official only; observers in the gallery are building simulated version of reality and the identity of the random passenger. Tennis rackets, fishing poles, baby strollers, bottles of brandy, shoes, give enough data for imagining persons and their personalities never really drawing interest in the real ones. It seems that actual identity is as possible or impossible as the one created based on these artifacts. But process goes even further. We learn about people and their habits, occupations and hobbies based on their possessions as in the scientific study, archeological or even ethnological project or maybe in the forensic process that takes part after the crime has being conducted or at least suspected. The scientific approach goes together with taxonomical nature of the images/prints on the walls. Live search taking place via projector and prints depicting good examples in the educational sense of good detection skills for the official–the observer or bad examples of forbidden objects for the passengers–the observed, are creating the interactive game in which audience is trying to spot the forbidden objects, as shown on the walls, in the live webcast of actual search taking place somewhere in the airport in the world. This game doesn't offer a victory as audience is powerless, it can not influence actions taking place at the unknown location, unknown terminal, unknown airport. Audience is just a mute witness. Now we are back

to the idea of silence and muted voice as it was suggested in the *Blue Violin Case* (figure 5).

The Fun

Second stage titled *Probe 2.0* took place at the actual bank with existing security check point at the entrance. Visitors were enabled not just to witness this process but they were part of it. It was almost an educational experience. Everyone could have their possessions scanned and printed. And not only that, they could take with them the copy of the image. They could claim the forbidden image as their possession. With this image they reclaimed what was always theirs–possessions depicted. There is no body here, no reason for disturbance. There are only objects and all of this is plain fun.

The Uncomfortable

Third stage titled *Probe 3.0* never took place. In this installment there is no exhibition, no installation and no glimpses of what is taking place. Empty exhibition space is waiting for its premiere. This is a space similar to morgue before the big disaster. Soon it will be populated with inanimate bodies of all of the people present, of the audience. Checkpoint equipped with the body scanner will generate images of the visitors as they are passing it and entering the exhibition. Checkpoint is entered, border is formed, and line is crossed. This sample of community, formed as many times before by the random selection, is going to witness their images, their bodies, their personal scans

exhibited in the scientific way on the walls of the exhibition space. This time game is for adults only. It presents apocalyptic images of destruction and terror where everybody is searching not for their souls, as if they were departing this world in death, but for their own body as if they were searching for closest relatives lost in some terrible event. This body, this image is (their) death mask once visible only by surviving party. No, this mask is acceptable to its rightful owners that are still alive and present but maybe missing something. What is missing before the powerful (mirror) image such as that? Concealment, mystery, assumption are missing in this demystified spectacle. In it everybody is searching and finding its image. Ashamed or proud of it, it is there exposed to gazes of all of us. Gallery of bodies, our bodies created just a minutes ago this time not for others but for us (figure 7). But such an indecent exposure couldn't be allowed to go for long. These images have to go back to seclusion. But how, we might ask? By being returned back to the legitimate owners, still alive after this near-death experience.

The Merger

Kovacevic started with the artwork that was actually trap. He wanted to visually invite us to experience something colorful and appealing just to serve us with conceal tools of destruction and horror. He showed us in our secure locations all the drama of the security screening. He offered us to see this process as a witness and as close as possible but never close enough to have any impact on the procedure. Terror and pleasant voyeuristic game of the first installment allowed for the passivity of the audience. In the

second installment, audience was dragged into this process with game that they can play and win. This time they are allowed to see and experience this invasive and fascinating technology. They are able to take with them the image–proof of their victory. But this is a childish game where we are all victors. We are all awarded a first prize.

In the third installment game is serious. It requires us to sacrifice something very close to us – image of our concealed body. In *Probe 1.0* similar image was put in center of the stage. This was a scan image of the young woman caught smuggling drugs in her vagina. Audience was directed to go around like in the mourning ceremony where mourners give respect to the deceased. But that body was not ours. Here in *Probe 3.0* this one appears as such. But what is it, what kind of body is this? Let's see what it is not. This is not an ordinary nude figure, gentrified through art and popular culture. Nor is it the medical imaging capable of penetrating through skin and organs. This image depicts a mass and shows image of the body as no other could. This must be then an essence of the human figure where everything deemed unimportant is striped off just to make the ultimate sculptural form. This body is clearly showing gender, but at the same time it has a very rare quality of alien surface, one that is not skin, not human in its plasticity and simulated texture. We are capable of recognizing it, we are familiar with it but it is not ours. It looks scientific but it is not. What is it? It must be a hermaphrodite, the intersex where one of the sexes is dominating but despite of it, still presents itself as ambiguous. This body exist in all of us (figure 8). It is hidden and kept as something precious that could upon exposure defeat us in the instant. We are proud of it and also ashamed of it. It is exoskeleton born by replacing human endoskeleton that is now exposed and fragile. It

exists on the screen only. Its strength is going to be tested in coming years. People will name it intimacy, privacy etc. Even before it was presented for the first time on the screens and monitors it had its private space around it. It had cover too. It was thick and strong. It endured many attacks for many years. Now it is exposed and degraded through efficiency (of the screening process) and the (personal) space around it is shrinking.

Project *Probe* is ultimately mimetic digital art form executed on the spot, communicated and networked across wast global nodes. It tells the story of the particular moment that is instantly replaced with the next one. Only the resemblance of the past moment is present in the new. It is inherently incomplete. Sean Cubitt observes this nature of the digital art in his essay *Percepts for Digital Artwork:*

> "As process, not object, the digital artwork must inhabit the present as a moment of becoming, a moment whose reception is therefore always deferred into a future which has not yet become."[7]

It is apparent that Kovacevic is using beauty of his imagery as a tool that would ultimately attract if not deceive people to engage in this discourse. Although his image is shocking, and inherently violent, it is as Roland Barthes noticed in the age of Photography (and we shall treat x-rays that Kovacevic produces as comparable) affecting the creation of the new social value: private being public and consumed publicly.[8] In

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[7] Ibid., 308

[8] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 98

Probe this is self-evident. Scope of spontaneous and guided interaction between artist and the public, including the segment that is not aware of being observed in the project and active participants, is manifold. On one pole it offers the trills associated with voyeuristic pleasures of observing others while on the other end it unavoidably leads to unpleasantness of being observed at the same time. We realize by being part of this endeavor that indeed anyway you look at this: "Visibility is a trap." [9] Kovacevic's *Probe* is valid addition to the ever active processes of society dominated by material production, in which he creates superficial environment where person could be both observed and observer simultaneously. It gives glimpses of the social environment where mutual trust would be a natural occurrence and not the subject of domination by any class, structure or authority. This society will not be based on the omnipresent and overreaching Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon. Marx saw these accomplishments as a possible outcome of the long and painful development of society, one that would be marked by its emancipated citizens.[10] Kovacevic witnessed some effects of painful development of society in his coutry. His inability to produce third and final phase of the *Probe* project due to the lack of understanding from the authorities also serves as a testament that society hasn't yet reached this level of awareness. *Probe* remains incomplete as it should be. Or, given the nature of the digital work *Probe* is complete at least for now. It stays ever active in the

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[9] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 200

[10] Karl Marx, *The Process of Capitalist Production,* vol.1 of *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy,* trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling and ed. Frederick Engels (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1906), 92

title: *Probe.* And the conflict, yes, the beginning of all of this, is also staying active and

brewing in us.

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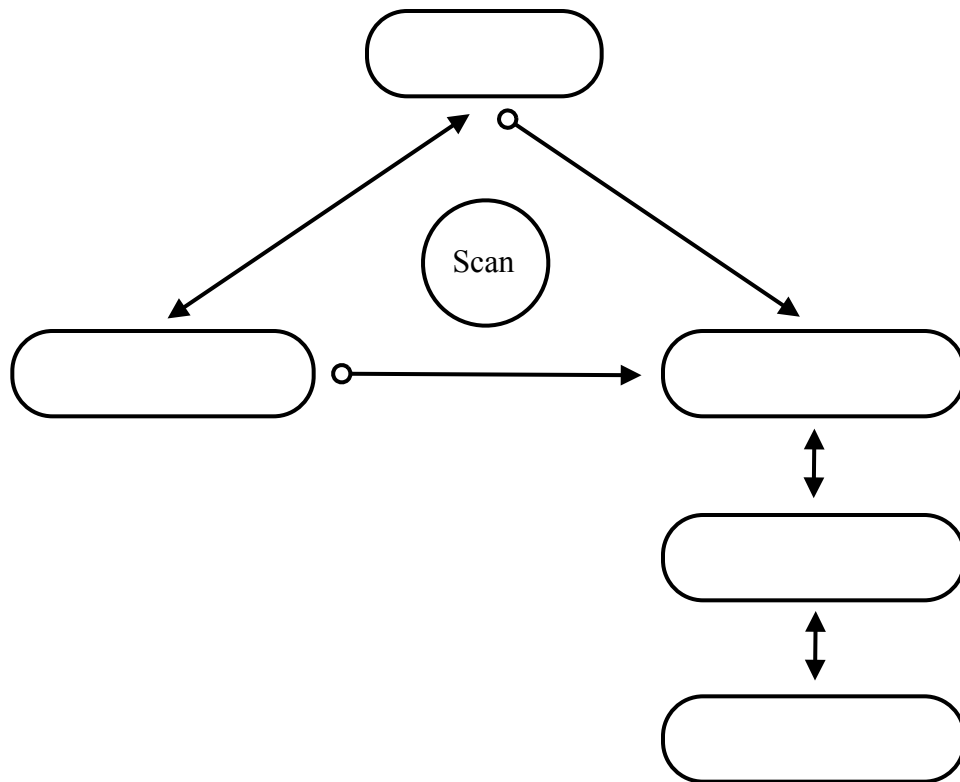Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1906

1 Blazo Kovacevic, *Probe I*, 2010, Digital prints on Lexan, Installation view. Atelier Dado, Montenegrin National Museum, Cetinje, Montenegro (photo © Dusko Miljanic 2010)
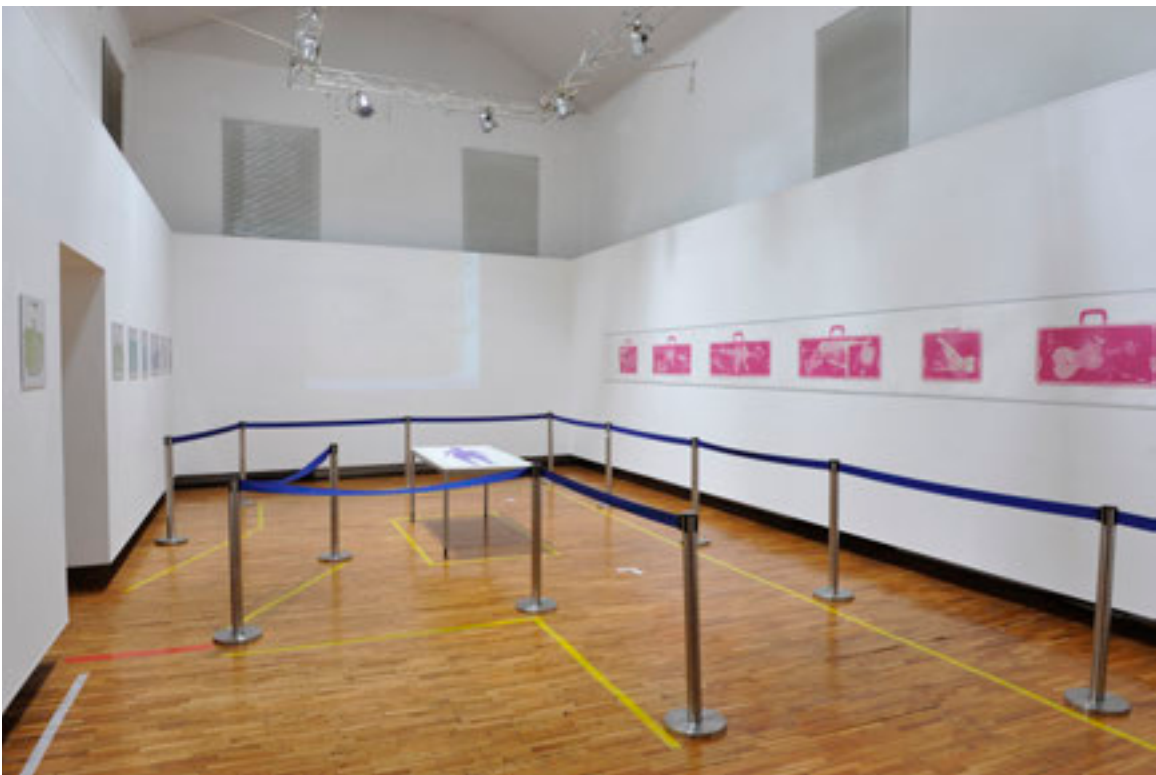
2 Blazo Kovacevic, *Probe I,* 2010, Streaming video, digital prints on Lexan, crowd controlling posts, tape, Installation view. Atelier Dado, Montenegrin National Museum, Cetinje, Montenegro (photo © Lazar Pejovic 2010)

3 Blazo Kovacevic, *Probe I,* 2010, Streaming video, digital prints on Lexan, table, crowd controlling posts, tape, Installation view. Atelier Dado, Montenegrin National Museum, Cetinje, Montenegro (photo © Blazo Kovacevic 2010)

4 Scheme showing the interaction between people involved in the security inspection procedure

one directional engage line

bidirectional engage line
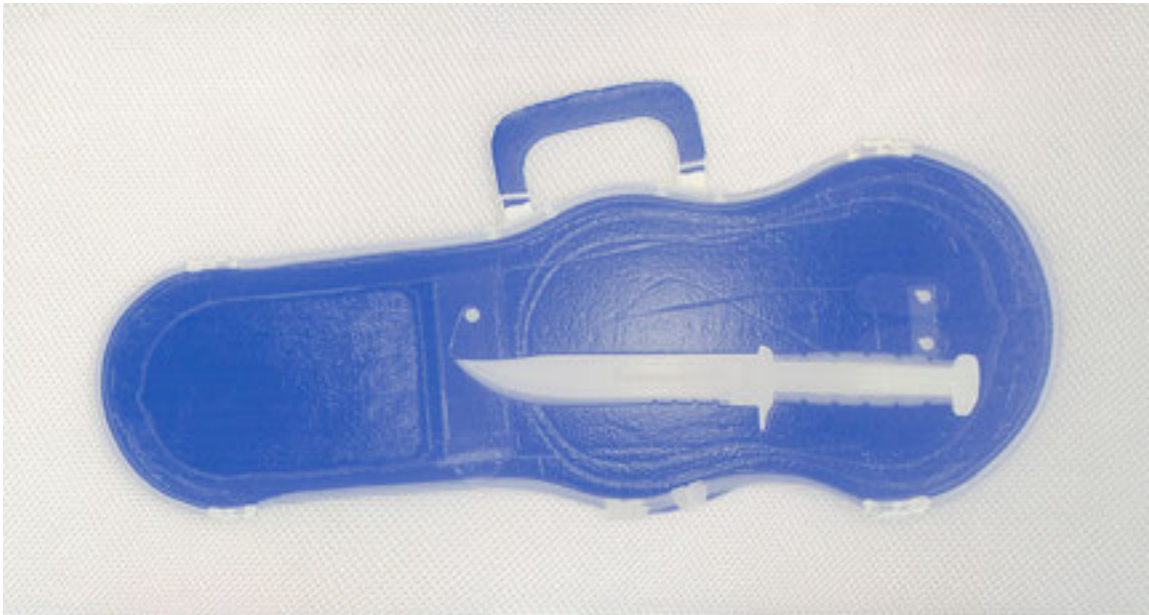
5 Blazo Kovacevic, *Blue Violin Case*, 2010, 25" x 47", Digital print on Illusion film, (photo © Blazo Kovacevic 2011)

6 Local newspaper scan showing front and back cover of the September 6th 2010 issue.

7 Artist's visual interpretation of the room full of images generated with the body scanner

8 Backscatter x-ray image of TSA Security Laboratory Director
Susan Hallowell (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Full_body_scanner)

Arguments

• Strong formal and esthetic qualities of *Probe* project combined with shocking imagery are used as a deceptive tool mimicking the language and technology of culture industry and making the whole concept more approachable and familiar to the majority of the people.

• Through several phases project *Probe* is exploring social and political discourses of the privacy, security, surveillance in the age of the mechanical reproduction in attempt to offer different microcosmos within the art space.

• In his *Probe* Kovacevic is actively engaging his audience making them at the same time his subject matter, active participants and observers, ultimately empowering them through the process of becoming the experts.

• Kovacevic work has a distinctive political agenda aimed towards the emancipation of the audience through unexpected art form that starts with the audience, creates for them and offers them as final art product—mirror (stage) copy of themselves.