

# Katie Sims

Featuring videographer James Godwin

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*A report on an investigation of  
the mirror in Ancient Rome*

Visited 8<sup>th</sup> - 11<sup>th</sup> July

Gane Trust Scholarship 2017

Photograph is a still of performance at The Villa Borghese Garden



## What was the purpose of the study?

I wanted to mainly extend the context and discover the culture of my studio practice. Especially in the process transferring into a third-year student, the standards are increasingly high. The expectation to remain professional in work making, yet to keep trying new things in an experimental yet somewhat controlled manner.

The current theme of my studio practice revolves around the aesthetic of the mirror and the narcissistic assumptions around it, with a Western cultural approach. Certainly from a Fine Art and everyday angle, as feminist artists such as Joan Jonas dominantly 1960/1970's, all the way to the contemporary of today with Juno Calypso, are questioned upon if they are making solely narcissistic and meaningless art, with the participation of the self and the mirrored image in Performance Art.

As for the everyday side of narcissism, we are looking at ourselves every day. We wake up in the morning to look at ourselves. When we brush our teeth, brush our hair, complete our makeup. Conveniently, the act of looking into a mirror of oneself is to enhance the beauty of the self. Is this narcissistic, or is it mundane? So since mainly feminist artists produce performance art in the style of self-looking into mirrors, or using mirrors as a key tool, surely we cannot look at that with a narcissistic outlook?

These questions and debates are something I have been looking at with my work for a while now and wished to further as a performing artist from a feminist point of view. When I was introduced to The Gane Trust Award, I felt this could be an open door into following up my questions in a new and exciting way. By being able to investigate my practice elsewhere could really freshen up my style.

I became heavily interested in this topic of mirrors and narcissism because, at times, I question my own 'vanity' and 'self-love', for even if those are the correct terms, is what I want to investigate. I enjoy involving myself with performance art and I find using mirrors to enhance this is an aesthetic form of art making. From the interesting reflected angles which are



An example of one of my previous art performances involving mirrors and light, called 'Rapture', 2017, video still.

made by the mirror of my image, to how light reacts with mirrors, recreating my own aesthetic light. By being awarded the 2017 Gane Trust Scholarship of £1000 in Rome, Italy, this was my chance to challenge my practice in place which is the heart and invention of the glass mirror, by the Romans in first century AD.

## **Preparation**

Before planning when to go to Rome for the study trip, lots of preparation and planning was needed to locate places which will enhance my knowledge of Rome's history and a location to perform an art piece.

I kept a diary to record what occurred every day which benefited my practice and knowledge, as well as what was not achieved with an explanation. This way I was able to keep a record of what was completed, what was unexpectedly learnt and what can be done another day. (I recommend the diary to be read through fully).

Most of the work I produce is made in conjunction with my partner and videographer, James Godwin. Therefore, I decided it would benefit the tour of study with producing work and for safety reasons, that my partner would share the experience. From now on, we both mapped out our routes to certain landmarks I chose to benefit my practice. We planned what to do on each day and what was needed to be achieved each day. (Original day to day plan located at the beginning of the diary, with explanation of how it will benefit my practice).

## **Key equipment and material for study in Rome:**

- **DJI OSMO Gimbal** - a 360 degree stabilised hand held film camera. Smooth and high-quality footage at 4K (HD quality).
- **Go Pro HERO 5** - an action camera. Very small but robust, suitable for all conditions (the extreme heat), taking photographs and video in 4K (HD quality).
- **Olympus Trip 35 Camera** - a dated yet handy antique film camera, which develops vintage looking images, appropriate for maintaining the feeling of Ancient Rome.
- **Instax Polaroid Camera** - a modernised Polaroid camera but smaller. The images used were taken to highlight moment in Rome, located in chronological order via the daily diary.

- **12 mega pixel high-quality iPhone 7 Plus** – with a dual lens to achieve high-quality zoom images. (A professional camera would have been ideal, however, we had a lack of space to take in our hand luggage, therefore priority equipment were chosen).
- **Ancient handheld mirror** - over 100 years old, a perfect antique to suit the location and purpose of the performances.
- **Reflective mosaic pieces + body glue** – A form of reflective material which was very new to me. I was inspired by artist **Oleg Kulik**, who performed an art piece by covering himself with square reflective pieces and acting as a disco ball in a night club, rotating on a poll in the ceiling. The light he produced was incredible, in which I wanted to interpret this in my own style and experimentation.

\*\* All of these pieces of equipment and some unusual items, predictably caused some questioning at the security check at the airports – however, after being checked, we were fine to enter into Rome and return home. \*\*

### **Key aims of the study in Rome:**

- **Take images of areas which hold dramatic and harsh lighting, as part of my aesthetic light series of images.**  
Professionals and armature photographers on TV competition programme ‘Masters Of Photography’ Season One, Episode One ‘The Beauty Of Rome’ 2016, state that Rome holds some of the harshest lightings, which can work for and against you in photography. As for my practice, by originally having the interest of mirrors producing new light, I wanted to capture the beauty of how light can rein form locations. All images of mine were taken on an Olympus Trip 35 film camera, to achieve and maintain the rustic feel of Rome. I achieved many unique images with this aim, which will help to stimulate future performances in Third Year.
- **Capture the self-portrait in everyday reflections, such as shop windows, mirror shops etc.**  
This was achieved on a couple of occasions, however not as many as expected. The capturing of self in the performance made at the Villa Borghese Gardens (screenshot of the video on title page), was much more successful than capturing the self in everyday sources. On the other hand, I did gain a lot more dramatic imagery (point above) to compensate this loss.

- **To perform in Rome to experimentally investigate the term ‘narcissism’, with mirrors and the self.**

This was one of the most successful pieces of work produced. A performance art piece, filmed with the OSMO Gimbal divide, achieving a smooth and well composed film, as well as a glorious setting with sparkling and reflective waters, setting in the background, as I perform my interaction with the ancient hand held mirror, with reflective pieces placed on the left hand side of the face. This caused the effect of a mirror in a mirror, a continuum, which would have worked even more successfully if more reflective pieces were applied to my face. On the other hand, with temperatures of 37 degrees, it was a challenge to prevent the pieces from dropping off as the glue was melting. This is a performance I will happily re-perform in more controlled conditions at University, to see how different conditions, location and light, affect the overall performance.

### **PLEASE READ DIARY BEFORE CONTINUING.**

#### **Day to day agenda + what I learnt (see diary PDF for select images and additional details)**

8 / 07 / 17

Arrival day. With my partner, I took images on the Olympus Trip 35 camera, to capture a rough idea in how the light hits and aesthetically effects Rome. What makes Rome beautiful. Apart from taking images of harsh light, as it was early evening by the time we had checked in and settled, the day was at an end and a long rest was needed, in order to fulfil the first full next day.

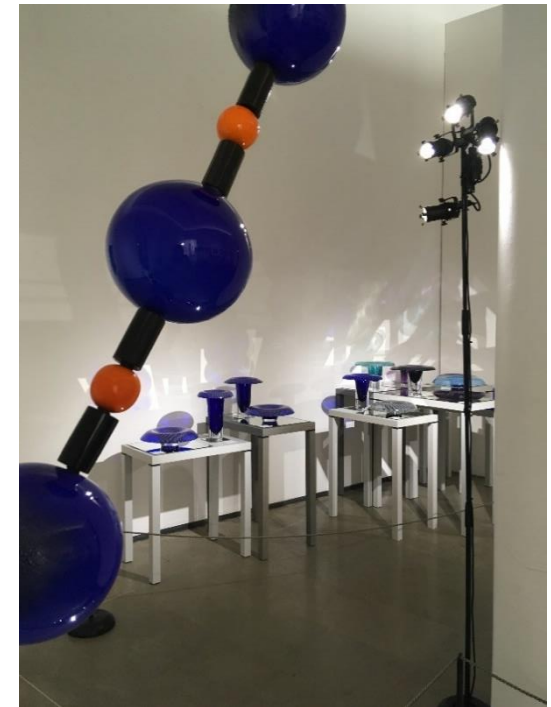
9 / 07 / 17

Early start, already burning hot, which was a challenge for the entirety of the trip to adjust to. Which did mean things had to be taken at a slow pace, in order for James and I to maintain our health throughout the trip.

Our target was to reach to the Vatican City, a half an hour walk through the heart of Rome, the perfect opportunity to witness Rome's beauty and capturing stunning images of how the light reacts to small allies (which were actually VERY tight roads...) of Rome. We arrived at the Vatican to capture its beauty and to view a reflective sphere they held which could have formed some interesting images for my practice, however, we were not prepared to pay a large sum of money to view one landmark.

Therefore, we decided to peruse our travels to the Villa Borghese Gardens, which possibly could be a place to hold an art performance. This garden is massive, 197.7 acres, the largest area of greenery closest to the centre of Rome. With this much space and scope, we felt there had to be something that would work for the performance. In research of the gardens, we discovered there is an 18<sup>th</sup> century 'Temple of Aesculapius' (completed in 1903), built surrounded by water as an aesthetic to the landscape, influenced by English gardens, but more conveniently by the lake and 'Temple of Florain' in Stourhead (completed 1745), Wiltshire, my home county. Therefore, this connection could not go unmissed. As we approached the gloriously lit lake, sparkling from the sun, with the Temple of Aesculapius located in the centre, as people in rowing boats circled it, we felt with certainty, this was the place to perform at purely to its beauty and relevance to home. Once we had completed the performance in one successful take, we moved on to the park and had discovered a discreet building, which was, in fact, an art gallery/musical performances, combined together, to make the most satisfying experience! What was more exciting for me though, was down stairs in the gallery was sculptures embracing the mirror, to reflect light and cause an illusion. The light held a mixture of artificial and natural, which caused interesting shadows and interpretation on the work, something which heavily inspired me and is very useful in my third-year practice.

Once fulfilling an accomplished day, the day came to an end.



Art work by artist Markku Piri, at Borghese Gallery and Museum.

10 / 07 / 17

Another early start, another sweltering day already. We began walking in the direction of the Colosseum, which took us to a street corner 'Largo Corrado' I had previously researched, which from the photograph, looked like a circular mirror propped on a building. However, once having a closer looking, it was in fact VERY thick dust layered over the top of a religious image. Although this was not what I was expecting to see, it still gave the effect of a mirror, reflecting what was across the road, more than displaying the image. This made me wonder, that in my work, perhaps attempt to use a non-obvious reflective source, just as a very reflective piece of glass, or proven here, a very dirty glass. This could be more interesting to use for more flexibility with light and colour, to shine on and through the glass. This somehow would eventually be shown through performance, after photography trials, and potentially my own crafting of glass/mirror through a new medium to me of sculpture.

The next visit to the Spanish Steps, a fair walk, in which along the way came good photo opportunities. This included for example shop displays and a mirror shop. The jewellery shop 'Swarovski' (see photo 10 in PDF diary) shows one of Rome's classic windows, filled with little reflective pieces, to create a radiant and exquisite display of light and beauty. Once again, this inspired me for my practice that beauty can be applied anywhere, anywhere where you least expect it, which in my eyes, makes it even more of a something. The mirror shop also was an exciting find, the walls filled with ancient (and expensive) mirrors. I attempted in taking an image of myself to add to my series (see photo 11 in PDF diary), however, something interesting happened. The image under-exposed, leaving a dark and dingy image, however, I love the reflective nature in the details of the mirror frames. This goes to show the unplanned and at first 'mistake', turns into something new.

Another landmark we visited was 'The Pantheon', the 'temple of gods', built in 120AD with a precarious looking hole in the top of the ceiling. Studies show that the purpose of the 30ft-wide hole in the roof was to direct a beam of light to illuminate the entrance at the exact moment the emperor entered the dome. Almost acting as a spot light for the important. Or a beam of light shining onto a character on stage, to pronounce presence. I felt this was a perfect place to hold some kind of performance/photo opportunities. This had to be discreet, however, as for some, this was a holy place, certainly for the ones who worked there to make that apparent. Therefore, only quick images were taken with a singular mirror and more successfully, a documentation photograph, taken of me photographing the beauty of light in the room (see photo 10 on PFD diary).

As the day was ending and the trip was drawing to a finish, we quickly visited The Colosseum and The Roman Forum, for some excellent contrast of light and shadow images. These will be useful for developing ideas for performances and sculpture in future.



The Colosseum, exposed to extreme changes of light, taken on Go Pro HERO 5.



The Roman Forum, showing the extreme levels of contrasting light, taken on iPhone 7 Plus.

11 / 07 / 17

Time to rest before our flight. Our bodies are exhausted and the journey has been completed.



### **What I learnt after the visit**

From this fulfilling and exciting trip, with my practical partner in creating works and taking in our surroundings, we have produced a number of performances and photography, which will either be pieces in their selves, feature in later performances or will help stimulate art work ideas as documentation/working images. We have enabled to work with different light and heat conditions, which helped to challenge the work. This experience has enabled for me to not always stick to the plan, as that way you will still see relevant things, they are just more of a surprise and feel very fulfilling. This study has vastly benefited my progression of my dissertation, investigating with my working title *'The 'selfie' is affecting our narcissistic behaviour. Do females in western society and performative art develop a higher level of narcissism through the appliance of the self-image?'* as I shall be adding pieces of work made on this project, to future expand my points and views on my chosen title.

I have enhanced my cultural view by learning the history of Rome, their landmarks and specific features of Rome, which will benefit me and my art practice. I feel enlightened and inspired heavily from the trip and cannot feel blessed enough to have this fantastic opportunity!

Word Count: 2,699

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CAMERA.**

DEVELOPED ON 4 X 6CM  
GLOSSY PHOTO PAPER.

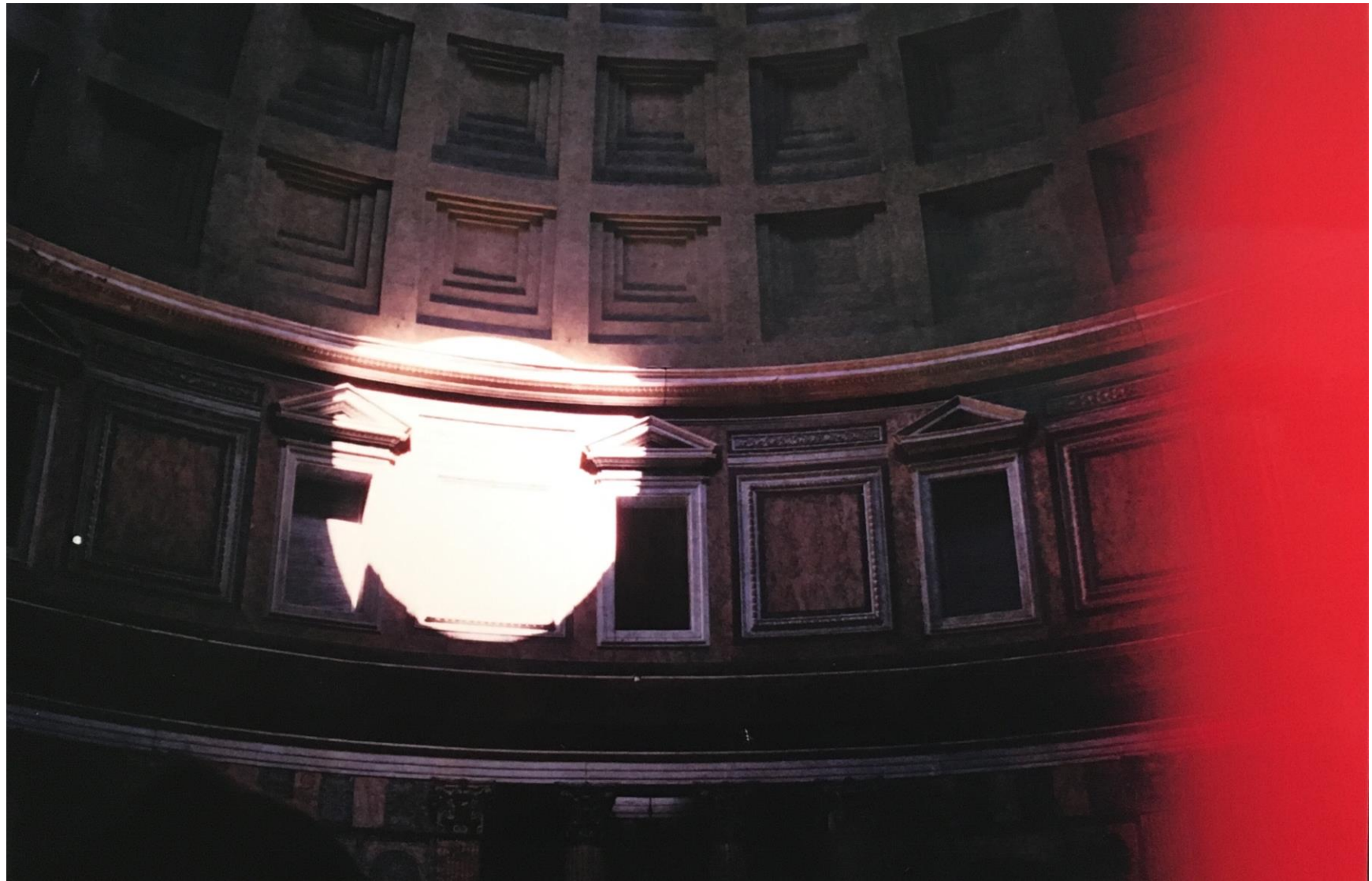
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EFFECT OF LIGHT AND  
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PHOTOS TO BE ADDED TO  
AN ONGOING SERIES.



































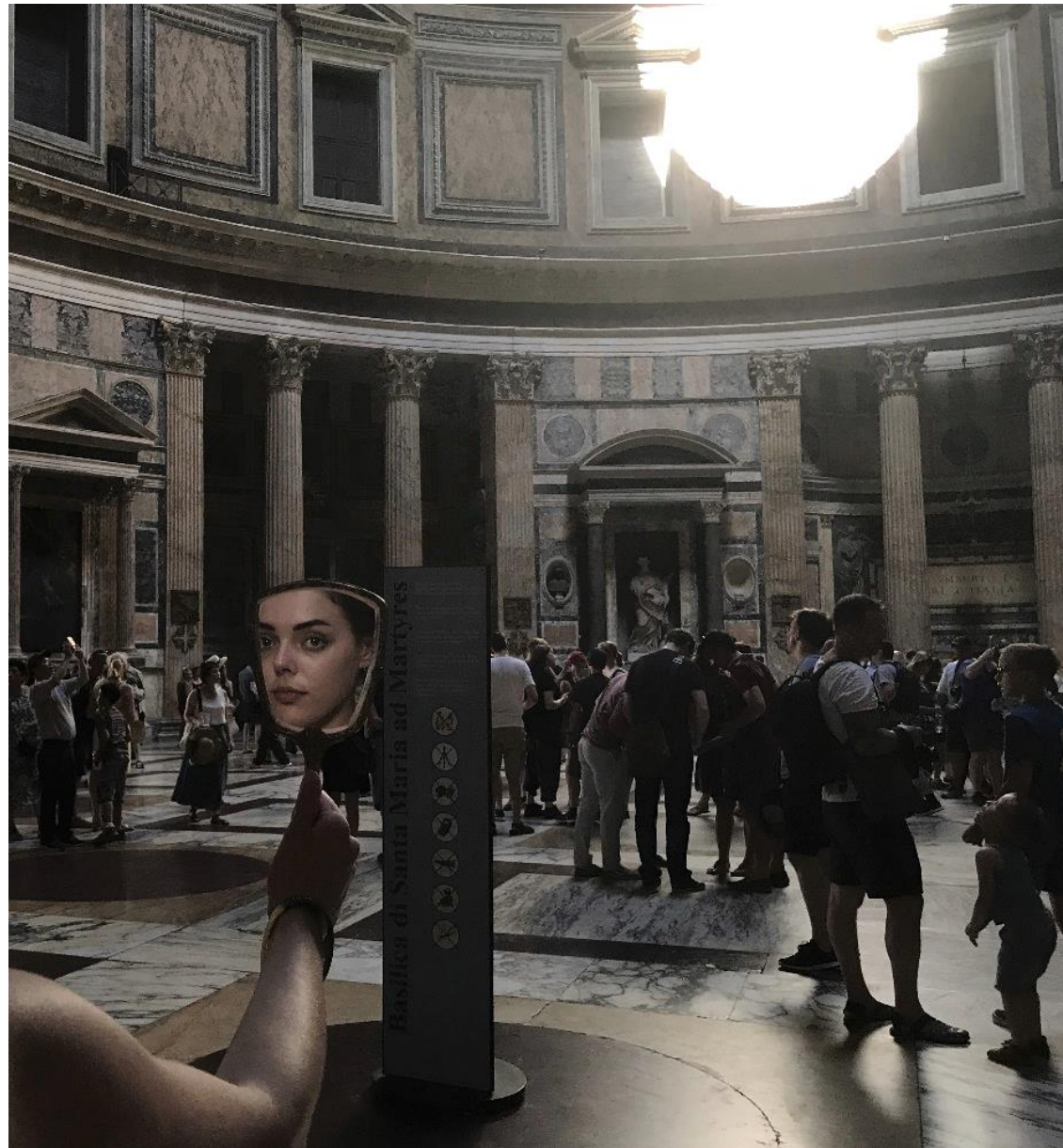




## LIVE PERFORMANCES

RECORDED VIA IMAGES,  
ON IPHONE 7 PLUS

EXPANDING ON THE  
APPLICATION OF THE  
MIRROR THROUGH  
MEANS OF NARCISSISM  
IN AESTHETIC  
LOCATIONS.



Pantheon Performance still



SEE THE VIDEOS OF  
PERFORMANCES  
ATTACHED AS  
SEPARATE FILES.



The after event of first performance in Villa Borghese Gardens, removal of reflective mosaic pieces, leaving 'scars' of self-love and narcissism.

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Gane Trust Award 2017

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