

Seen

In Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), entire lives and deaths are on display behind uncovered windows in anonymous cities, awaiting the observant eye of the voyeur, whose demonic power relies upon his own invisibility. He is strategically positioned in the dark core of the opposite building, with the mere presence of his gaze transforming the people into subjects to be watched, recorded, and analysed. Much like the characters in *Rear Window*, we too are subjected to the all-encompassing gaze of surveillance. Our personal technological devices mirror the function of the windows in Hitchcock's film, in that they render us as objects of information to be recorded and decoded. These windows of observation shift shape over time, from architectural windows to virtual windows, but their central function of providing a frame that allows the gaze to infiltrate private spaces persists. In today's modern society, however, one wonders what exactly constitutes the private sphere. Boundaries that once marked the divide between the private sphere and the public sphere have now become doors, accessible on command. Surveillance technologies have been adopted to nearly every sphere of contemporary life - medical, commerce, entertainment, national security, among others. CCTV cameras are perched on lamp posts and storefronts, drones are a regular sighting nowadays, smartphones relay an alarming amount of information about their owners, and sophisticated algorithms sift through large amounts of data, prompting social and ethical dilemmas. These widespread and diverse applications of surveillance technologies have transformed our environment into spectacle. In order to navigate the surveillant state of being, we ought to make visual its potentials and effects on our identities and how it alters our relationship to public and private space. While CCTV surveillance has become a normalized and accepted form of mass observation in urban space, citizens are beginning to question at what point should it be considered a threat to the state?

In times where political uncertainty and suspicion is heightened, notions of freedom, privacy, and democratic rights remerge as points of discussion amongst artists and activists. Within this intensifying and ambivalent society, we wanted to explore how a growing number of artists and activists have interrogated, questioned, or criticised contemporary practices of surveillance. From the overtly political, through the cynical, to the playful, a range of approaches were employed, some of which have *referred* to surveillance in their works, others have *appropriated* and *recontextualized* images and technologies of surveillance to make art. Many of the artists whose works are considered in this exhibition deal with issues of social visibility and invisibility, and some specifically question contemporary visibility regimes and their impact on urban space.

In approaching this theme, few artists, such as James Bridle, Ahmet Ögüt, and Ken Feinstein have decided to refer to the dissemination of CCTV in social sites to highlight and critique the intricate relationship between vision and power.

British artist James Bridle navigated in *Every CCTV Camera (London)* the degree of asymmetry between the act of looking and the act of being looked. Bridle initially attempted to document through photography the diffusion and the range of CCTVs around the periphery of London's congestion zone, but was soon stopped by the police and questioned repeatedly, forcing an end to his walk. The simple act of *returning* the gaze reflect the deep

asymmetry in visibilities. Visibility-as-control demands a separation between the viewer and the viewer, and in contemporary society to be visible is to be under control of an agency that looks at us, but makes looking back an inaccessible and questionable activity. Not only does Bridle's project highlight the tension that politics of looking back, of returning the gaze, but the visual outcomes of his walks understate huge questions about the real aim of surveillance, mainly what is surveillance for? And what type of a visual landscape has surveillance created?

The uncanny feeling of being observed by a machine is again explored in Ahmet Ögüt's *This area is under 23 hour video and audio surveillance*. The official-looking sign is positioned at the entrance of the gallery, on the one hand warning the viewer, on the other hand revealing how normalized citizens have become to the practice of constant surveillance. Because CCTV have become an everyday presence in contemporary urban space, the sign hung up by Ögüt does not stir any fear within the viewer. But it does, however, trigger curiosity regarding the missing hour, which may point out to the privacy or mischief that could take place in that one precious hour, whenever that might be.

In *It's not a vicious cycle, it's downward spiral*, Ken Feinstein engages with the content of CCTV to reveal the emotive reaction they trigger within viewers. The work is comprised of two video projections embedded in a wall, one is footage of military drones, the other is security camera footage of a terrorist attack in Paris. The viewers peep through a small crack in the center of the wall, where they are granted glimpse of the images, but have restricted access to the entire image. The presentation of the extracted footage in this form reveal our inner fears and desire in relation to the content of CCTV. Our emotive reaction to CCTV footage delineate between comfort and fright. At once, they fear and fascinate. However, tension persists in the desire to possess, yet not see their content, trusting that their sole presence is enough to police unsettling behavior in urban space.

Further approaches to negotiating surveillance saw two artists, Ivan Lam and Viktoria Binshtok, subvert in various guises the 'surveillant gaze' present throughout contemporary social sites.

In Viktoria Binshtok's *Suspicious Minds*, the focus centers on the watchmen and the surveillers -- men with stern-poker faces that lead a life in the periphery, inconspicuously blending into the background during state receptions, public announcements and speeches. They are encircled with an aura of absence, but in Binshtok's series, they extracted from their original context of the press image and made to be the focus of attention. Binshtok selects section, manipulates point of view and image formation to create compositions that highlight the watcher's suspicious gazes as expressions of power. Yet, a sense of irony permeates throughout the series, for those figures watching over others are also watched themselves by the cameras recording these events. Surveillance figures under surveillance begs the following questions:

Who watches the watchers?

Who guards the guardians?

Who polices the police?

Who protects the protectors?

This line of thought finds its origins in the work the Roman poet Juvenal, in his *Satires* (Satire VI, lines 347-348) is the phrase *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*

Who will guard the guards themselves?

Malaysian artist Ivan Lam takes this question as a point of departure, and like Binschtok, subjects the surveillers convex mirrors, the quiet structure of the MACC (Malaysian Anti Corruption Commission) lurks in the background. The function of Lam's series is make visible surveillant structures whose inner workings are largely invisible to the gaze. Lam's approach relies on subtle interpretations. In the series of landscape photographs laminated on convex mirrors, in the process, Lam creates a visual vocabulary that anchors the otherwise ambiguous and abstract notion of surveillant state.

Whereas some artists *referred to, subverted, and commented* on notions of surveillance, other have addressed lived experiences dealing with complex issues such as censorship, resistance, control and state power, civil liberties and human rights.

Wrestling with these complex issues, Öğüt's *The Missing T* documents a group of recently dismissed police officers of Tulum, Mexico, who lost their jobs after protesting against their corrupt government and its ties to cartels. Öğüt sews the story in a surreal manner from things which can be observed from the daily socio-political life of the community, like the abandoned sign of the name of the town -- the missing T -- and details on how the fired policemen protested for forty five days to gain basic rights for their own safety. The 10 minute video sees the officers in masks, using the Mayan language as a coded tool to discuss how they started the strike, details of how their own safety was at risk, how they were not paid and how they had to resort to buying their own equipment and uniforms. There is a poetic twist to the work in that after the story is told, the original letter T is found by the artist and put back in place. What the *The Missing T* proves is that surveillance and censorship are two sides of the same coin, each thrives because of the presence of the other, and when surveillance permeates any society, self-censorship begins to take root.

In another the hybrid art and social justice project, Italian artist Paolo Cirio deploys strategies that are oriented to problem-solving as a form on Internet social art practice. *Obscurity* engages with law, individuals, corrupt business practices, and invites public opinion to critically explore the provocations against the mugshot industry and the consequent emotional underpinning attached to unflattering personal information exposed on the internet. *Obscurity* addresses a minor industry of websites that publishes and disseminates mugshots and monetizes them by charging a picture removal fee, regardless of the crime, time spent, or if the chargers were later dropped. While some mugshots may profile serial killers, other are related to minor offences, such as driving without a license. In an attempt to highlight this industry, Cirio clones major mugshot websites, shuffles their databases and blurs both the images and the information of 15 million individuals arrested in the United States over the last 20 years. The project also evokes discomfort and explores our inherent prejudices and biases by allowing the public to face the paradox of judging and forgiving individuals while possessing minimal information on the socio-economic context in which they have been accused of a crime. On many levels, the socio-critical internet project initiates a discourse regarding control and access to information, the right to privacy, mass surveillance and profiling, calls for a system of participation within social dynamics and

questions the legal frameworks surrounding public policies on privacy and profiling of citizens.

This form of art making initiates a practical discourse that engages with the aesthetics, functions, and ethics of surveillance that resonate within and beyond the contemporary art dialogue. A similar, critical approach to exploring surveillance is implemented in *Stranger Visions* by American artist Heather Dewey-Hagborg. The 3D portraits are created based on the DNA collected by the artist from various discarded materials, such as hair, cigarettes, gum, and fingernails found in the detritus of the New York City landscape. The sculptures hang on the walls of the gallery, underneath them are boxes documenting the materials, places, and results of the analysis of these materials. The sculptures project an ambivalent gaze, they are strangers formed by the genetic materials they shed unknowingly without awareness as to what it could produce. The rapid development of technological devices, surveillance tactics and machines enable the approaching wave of genetic surveillance.

The show draws two works that juxtapose one another, each occupying the opposite ends of the gallery space. The first work is by Malaysian artist Anurendra Jegadeva. In *Portrait of Julia* and *Winston and Julia Say Goodbye*, Jegadeva conveys a sense of the saddest narratives of our time, the dystopian displacement of people, who upon arriving in a new land in prospect of seeking refuge, immediately become the targets of the surveillance gaze. As viewers, we look at them from a position of privilege, seeing them as the most fragile targets. Yet, on the other end of the gallery space, H.H Lim's *Target* featuring a silhouetted figure with a target sign on a mirror that reflects the space behind the viewer, remind the viewer that the surveillant gaze targets all. As the viewer stands before the work, he occupies the space of the silhouetted figure and instantly becomes the target of the surveillant gaze. The juxtaposition of the works serve to showcase how every individual, regardless of their status or circumstance, is bound to be the target of the surveillant gaze.

Seen comes to a close with two photographs from the series *Asylum of the Birds* by Roger Ballen. *Lurking* and *Intruder* display a myriad of gazes, some visible, other subtle. Each photograph speaks of the presence of an intruder's gaze and again hints at a gaze that lurks in the background -- a muted metaphor for the surveilled state of being.

Canetti wrote:

'*There is nothing that man fears most than the touch of the unknown.*' In contemporary society, sight has substituted touch. The individual is seen by the unseen -- a visible target of the invisible gaze.

The function of *Seen* was to reveal the deep relationship between power and vision and remind the audience that the act of observing and being observed is always a political act. We hope that the curated exhibition has contributed to the contemporary aesthetic discourse of surveillance that continue to challenge and critique the future of surveillance practices in society.

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