



Jill Magid *Smoke At Nero's from Evidence Locker*  
2004, video still. Courtesy the artist.

# VISIBILITY

■ Jane Button

## a survey of major recent exhibitions and publications on surveillance art

It is not by chance that the last couple of years have produced so many exhibitions and texts concerned with self-scrutiny, the scrutiny of others and strategies of control in both the societal and personal senses of the word.

The concept of visibility through surveillance is contentious and politicised, and artists have always sought to subvert, alter and play with the ways we view the world around us. From the modernist sensibility of the hidden camera and the more explicit fetishism of its uses, to the deployment of found footage and re-articulation of archives and tracking and tracing of the mundane, artists continue to modulate

surveillance as a critical method. Through alternative modes of inspection, extending even to espionage in the case of Jill Magid, this creative process both challenges and welcomes associations between the panopticon and the gaze, interactivity and institutionalisation, self-articulation and resistance; all of which contribute to what T. Y. Levin et al called “an urgently needed surveillant literature”.<sup>1</sup>

ZKM's show *Ctrl [SPACE]: Rhetorics of surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother*, 2002, worked historically from the opening image of Daniel Chodowiecki's eighteenth century etching of the *Image of Providence* to the final image of Walid Raad's *I Only Wish I could Weep* (2001), demonstrating the

emergence and shifting uses of media-based surveillance technologies. Two clear curatorial premises were at work. One led into more fearful scenarios of repressive observation and invasion of privacy through the relentless logistics of data gathering and aggregation; the other into the seemingly new fascination with surveillance as a source of pleasure and entertainment manifested in webcam blogging, the proliferation of real time or live broadcasting and the global success of reality television.

Living up to its genealogical brief the exhibition's well-researched themes extended to the phenomenologies of surveillance, surveillance and punishment, politics of observation, surveillant pleasures, controlled space, tracking systems, control surveillance and everyday life and surveillant subversions, accompanied by astute essays from authors including Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, Paul Virilio and Beatriz Colomina.

Many of the female artists in this structurally strong and cohesive show dealt with voyeurism and the camera's gaze. The emergence of Jennifer Ringley's *JenniCam* in 1996 is a case in point. The phenomenon of projecting the self to millions of unknown viewers raised questions about what constitutes the gaze in such a setting, and also, as Victor Burgin so deftly notes, about the correlation between exhibitionism and Donald Winnicott's idea of the transitional object on the web.<sup>2</sup> Jenni's home page [www.boudoir.com](http://www.boudoir.com) lets viewers see uploaded images of her in her dorm room via a video camera linked to her computer. Uncensored and incorporating material from the mundane to the occasional 'show', Jenni is recognised, in turn, by hundreds of emails and responses. If her gaze is a gaze for the camera it is also for her to know that she is not alone.<sup>3</sup> Burgin quotes Jenni as saying "I'm inhabiting a virtual reality in which the camera feels like a buddy".<sup>4</sup> If such camera and web technologies have brought forth latent forms of exhibitionism in Jenni's personality Burgin argues (with the aid of Homi Bhabha), that Jenni has become the

transitional object herself between the 'inner psychic reality' and the external world.<sup>5</sup>

French artist Sophie Calle once said that her works "had involved me so much in the act of following that I wanted, in a certain way, to reverse these relationships".<sup>6</sup> *Shadow Detective* sought that exchange. Calle asked her mother to hire a private detective to follow her, without him knowing that she had personally arranged the scenario. The juxtaposition of Calle's own observations alongside the photographic 'evidence' supplied by the detective creates a playful work at one level and at another reveals a struggle for identity formation. Calle's face is never fully shown in any of the photos. Instead she becomes a shadow-like figure leading the photographer around her favourite and significant places in Paris. The work is full of meaning for the artist who has the camera turned upon herself, but is just a mere reporting of 'facts' for the private detective.

Cornelia Schleime's work *Here's to further fruitful co-operation No. 7284/85* also developed out of a highly personal experience. This time, however, Schleime was reversing the inspection after being spied upon without her consent by a totalitarian bureaucratic state apparatus.<sup>7</sup> In the early 1990s, still grappling with the fact that she had been secretly observed for years, Schleime got access to her file. The artist then used and enlarged these reports via a silkscreen process, gluing self-orchestrated photos into them. The *Ctrl [Space]* catalogue noted that the resulting work resembled "14 Dadaist like collages comprising selected files and photographs which comment on them."<sup>8</sup> Schleime's 'biographical reconstructions' transferred the deep feelings of humiliation she experienced by using irony. The introduction to the work thanks the GDR'S Ministry of State Security for their 'assistance'.

Locally, Mike Stubbs the curator of *Proof: The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* (2004) at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image located his exhibition in a militarised condition. We

Jill Magid *Crowd Alone* from *Evidence Locker* 2004, video still. Courtesy the artist.



need only think of the Tampa crisis in 2001 or the charges of bioterrorism against Critical Art Ensemble artist Steve Kurtz.<sup>9</sup> *Proof's* material content, drawn from the collections of ACMI and the Council for Adult Education, continually interrogated the age-old question of what constitutes 'truth' and the show pivoted around philosopher Jacques Ranciere's *dissensus* and the idea of how consensus is really formed.<sup>10</sup>

*Proof* explored the distinction between fictional and real, internal perceptions and external realities – the gamut of what may be called reality testing. For example, the work *The Dead Weight of a Quarrel Hangs* (1996-9) by Lebanese artist Walid Raad, analysed hysteria in relation to the symptomatic and the imagination. Raad labelled as 'fake' works his three short documentaries surrounding accounts by Lebanese historians and those who have witnessed war firsthand or indirectly. He claimed that the "tapes do not so much document what happened but what can be imagined, said, taken for granted, appear as rational or not, as thinkable or sayable about civil wars". They focus rather on such unexamined effects of civil wars as can be presented via photographic reproduction.<sup>11</sup>

American artist Coco Fusco's *Dolores from 10 to 10* (2001) analysed the violation of civil rights in relation to evidence and so called 'facts'. Accused of trying to set up a union in a Mexican plant Delfina Rodriguez was forced to resign from her position as a factory assembly line worker (a *maquiladora*) after having been locked in a room and deprived of food, water, a bathroom and phone for twelve hours – an act of coercion followed by the submission of her final resignation.<sup>12</sup> Rodriguez's co-workers were too scared to testify on her behalf. Whose truth then stands in the contest between a *maquiladora* and the plant? After meeting Rodriguez on a research trip in 1998, Fusco decided to interpret what surveillance cameras *would* or *must* have seen during the worker's detention, using the final ninety minute piece shown on three CCTV monitors, to provide a critical intervention on the worker's behalf.

Ross Gibson's work *Street X-Rays* (2004) re-used 1950s found footage of crime scene photographs in a five-screen display with interlacing soundscape. In a similar vein to Raad, Gibson observes that "no matter where you take your stand there is always a vital portion of experience that has to be imagined rather than directly perceived".<sup>13</sup> Haunted places. The artist sought to entice moods and affects in viewers as a way to consider new and different 'vantage points' on the past and the present – 'persistent little pulses of history'.<sup>14</sup>

Whilst these two artists' works explored the unconscious and unseen, others in the show turned to the uses of predictive technologies (John Hansen, *Senju-Kannon Bhuddha Bot No. 1*, 2004) the extension of the autonomy of human activism via an anonymous collective of engineers, designers and artists (Institute for Applied Autonomy, *isee*, 2001), to the deliberate obscuring of photographic recording (Jeff Riley, *Obstruction*, 2004) pointing to the challenges and potential dangers of gathering verification or 'proof'. The exhibition displayed a comprehensive and assorted range of artists, genders and nationalities with works relating to the times we live in, as pertinent now as it was in 2004.

The most recent blockbuster show to enter this scene was

the Tate Modern's *Exposed: Voyeurism, Surveillance and the Camera*, 2010 purporting to investigate photography's role in voyeuristic looking. Curator Sandra Phillips explained that it seemed an "appropriate moment to look again at these kinds of pictures, to learn from them and to better know ourselves".<sup>15</sup> Divided into five key themes – the unseen photographer, voyeurism and desire, celebrity and the gaze, witnessing violence, and surveillance – the exhibition seemed to pride itself more on an historical overview than dealing with contemporary issues such as the way increasing CCTV use (especially in England) now forms an overarching framework for the contemporary cityscape. American-centric, using widely known images, its strongest message seemed to resonate in the largest section, section four, which dealt with images of torture, suffering and violence. Destruction of human life featured prominently with the camera there on scene ready to both record and witness events. Images ranged from John Reeeke's *Incidents of the War: A Burial Party* (1865) showing skulls lined up in an unknown mass graveyard, to Harry Benson's *Ethel Pleads on Kennedy's Behalf* (1968), which clearly shuns the voyeuristic lens of the camera trained on a scene of personal distress, to Lucinda Devlin's *Lethal Injection Chamber from Family Witness Room* (1998).

These eerie images raise questions both about how the camera informs and unsettles and the viewer's relationship to images of horror, suffering and massacre. As early as 1977 Susan Sontag was probing an ethics of seeing, writing in her influential work *On Photography* that photography turned people into "tourists of reality".<sup>16</sup>

The crux of Phillips' exhibition was the collapsing of borders between public and private and between viewing and voyeurism, and it is interesting to note a correlation between this theme as expressed in images of suffering, and the use of the camera in surveillance. Arthur Zmijewski's contentious film *Repetition* (2005) recreating the 1971 Stanford prison experiment comes to mind.<sup>17</sup> But, unlike the original experiment, Zmijewski's re-creation using unemployed Polish men instead of students in the roles of prisoners and guards was brought to a halt by the participants instead of the experimenters.<sup>18</sup> In the original experiment, footage from five camera operators plus an infrared surveillance camera shooting through a one-way window showed apparently normal participants internalising their roles to the extent of trauma on the one hand and sadism on the other.<sup>19</sup> We are left with questions about the role of the camera and the protagonist's consciousness in ethical and political forms of visual rhetoric, similar to those asked during the irruption of the human rights debate over practices at Abu Ghraib. As Anthony Downey notes in his essay *The Lives of Others*:

Is Zmijewski's film about free will and our apparent lack of it in the face of an ideological system of rules? And what role, crucially, does surveillance play here; that is, the very means by which we access the film and the very means by which Zmijewski controls events within the prison?<sup>20</sup>

Downey's critique of Zmijewski's experiment appears in the book *Conspiracy Dwellings: Surveillance in Contemporary Art* (2010) edited by Outi Remes and Pam Skelton. *Conspiracy Dwellings* makes an arc from the 1970s to the present, gathering a global selection of materials around its subject.



BOTH IMAGES: Rafael Lozano-Hemmer *Body Movies, Relational Architecture 6*, 2001. Museum of Art, Hong Kong, China. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Antimodular Research.



[RLH]



Coco Fusco Dolores from *10 to 10*, 2001, a 90 minute, three channel video (detail).  
Courtesy the artist.

The book's topics include the impact of surveillance on behaviour, architecture, urban space, citizenship, lived and personal experience, resistance, positionality, censorship, control, state power, civil liberties, human rights and ethics and the role of social life-blogging "in the surveillant-sousveillant"<sup>21</sup> space of web 2.0 culture. It is unique in spanning the subject of surveillance at such breadth from a variety of perspectives by both theorists and art practitioners. It covers artists and works including Gavin Jantjes' *Freedom Hunters* relating to the politicisation of resistance art; Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's installations including *Make Out* (2009), *Close Up* (2006) and *Body Movies* (2001) and his ability to relate the gaze to "questions of presence, control and reflexivity";<sup>22</sup> and Jill Magid's use of surveillance tools as an enabler in her practice, for example in her *Evidence Locker* (2004) which blurs the line between fictional and real in the heart of urban Britain.

The idea of the personal as political is not new, however, the different ways this is taken up and integrated into artists' practice is. The *Omega* show, curated by Tony Garifalakis for the Victorian College of the Arts' Margaret Lawrence Gallery sought to examine this question in relation to issues of power and authority in the twenty-first century. The artists Alain Declercq (France), Tony Garifalakis (Australia), Joaquin Segura (Mexico), Jeanne Susplugas (France), and Ewoud Van Rijn (Netherlands) sought to elicit personal responses to oppressive structures. The theme of risk clearly emerged in the work of Segura with respect to the body politic and "embodiments of the art work, to the bodies of the artists as well as to the spectators".<sup>23</sup> These bodies may act as sites of resistance, for example Tony Garifalakis' denim vest of the United Nations *Filthy Few* (2010) and engraved bullets with the slogan "no pain, no gain" in *Jane Fonda* (2008), but they are also sites of the imagination and an imaginative underworld. The amorphous world of Ewoud van Rijn's *Premature declaration of death* (2008) and his stalactite-like *Only Chaos is Real* (2006) engendered the surreal architecture of "alien-like playgrounds"<sup>24</sup> alongside the work of Jeanne Susplugas who explored the darker reality of illness in our culture in *Containers* (2010) and her outrage at the hyper-sexualisation of women in *Beauty bites* (2008). Alain Declercq examined conspiracy theories and how "easy it is to fan the flames of fear and mistrust in this day and age"<sup>25</sup> in *American Airlines* (2003) and in his photos taken with a hidden camera obscure of places in New York where photography is forbidden.

Similarly Tim Burns draws upon themes of plotting and subterfuge. His 2010 show *against the grain / tim burns / survey* at the Australian Experimental Art Foundation prominently featured (re)used archival material from news media and film (super-8 and low-budget 16mm) alongside live

performance installation. Burns draws upon surveillance and the camera's intrusion into private/public space as one mode in his politically engaged practice considering the 'war on terror' possibilities of terrorist machinations taking place here in Australia.

Many of the artists reviewed here have framed their work around the constant vigilance of the State and its monitoring of 'outsiders' both inside and outside its shores. The use of found or archival images, the role of creeping subconscious elements in the psyche, observation of the self and fascination with self-image are central to many an artistic strategy, but it is notable that while there are women working in surveillance art their visibility is still an issue particularly in the smaller rather than 'blockbuster' shows. Even in the bigger shows there remains an imbalance of female to male artists and it is interesting to consider how the presence of more women working with themes and tropes of visibility, invisibility and surveillance might alter the way we think about them. ■

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1 Remes & P. Skelton eds, 'Editorial', *Conspiracy Dwellings: Surveillance in Contemporary Art*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2010.

2 See Victor Burgin's essay 'Jenni's Room: Exhibitionism and Solitude' in *Ctrl [Space]. Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother*, ZKM & The MIT Press, Cambridge Mass. 2002, pp228–236.

3 Ibid p231.

4 Ibid p234.

5 Ibid p235.

6 Sophie Calle, <http://www.iniva.org/dare/themes/space/calle.html>, (accessed Saturday 22 June, 2011).

7 Hoffmann, 'ctrl [Space] [text]', Cornelia Schleime <http://hosting.zkm.de/ctrlspace/d/texts/47/> (accessed Friday 20 May, 2011).

8 Ibid

9 In 2002 Kurtz was indicted for bio-terrorism and later wire-fraud after police found bacteria and biological laboratory equipment in his home, though in 2008 all charges against him were dismissed.

10 See Jacques Ranciere *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, tr. Gabriel Rockhill, Continuum, 2004.

11 W. Raad 'Artist Statement' in *Proof: The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes*, Mike Stubbs (ed.), Australian Centre for the Moving Image, 2004, p85.

12 This information is lifted from Fusco's artist's statement in *Proof* (op cit) p69.

13 R. Gibson 'Artist Statement' in *Proof: The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes*, 2004, p71.

14 Ibid.

15 S. Phillips *Exposed: Voyeurism, Surveillance and the Camera since 1870*, Yale University Press, 2010 p15.

16 S. Sontag *On Photography*, Penguin Books, London, 1977, p110.

17 Psychologist Phillip Zimbardo conducted the original Stanford experiment in 1971.

18 A. Downer, 'The Lives of Others: Arthur Zmijewski's *Repetition*', The Stanford Prison Experiment, and the Ethics of Surveillance' in *Conspiracy Dwellings: Surveillance in Contemporary Art*, p68.

19 op. cit. p68.

20 op. cit. p74.

21 See 'From Webcamming to Social Life-logging: Intimate Performance in the Surveillant-Sousveillant Space', op. cit. pp113-129

22 M. Ozoj, 'Surveilling the Surveillance Society', op. cit. p96.

23 G. Jauraegui, 'Risky Business: The Work of Joaquin Segura', Artist Catalogue, *Omega*, curated by Tony Garifalakis, March 25 – April 24, 2010, Margaret Lawrence Gallery, Faculty of the VCA & Music.

24 Ibid, Daniel van der Velden, 'Overproducing the Ghost'.

25 N. Folkersma, 'Alain Declercq: Embedded versus Wildcat, excerpted from *Vox Contemporary Image* [http://www.voxphoto.com/english/expositions/declercq\\_alain/declercq\\_alain.html](http://www.voxphoto.com/english/expositions/declercq_alain/declercq_alain.html) (accessed August 7, 2011).