

In 1785 British polymath Jeremy Bentham proposed a radical new prison design in which prison guards could observe prisoners undetected. In such a system, discipline was enforced not by the physical presence of the law, but by its potential presence, or rather by its constant presence in the imaginations of the inmates. Two hundred years later, the celebrated French philosopher Michel Foucault used Bentham's "Panopticon" as a metaphor, to describe the evolution of monitoring and regulating society from the 18th century to the present. "Bentham laid down the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable."¹ This omnipotent force runs as a constant subterranean current in these early days of the new millennium. While the government has the public under constant surveillance for our "protection" from terrorists, we are also tracked and monitored by marketers as well as by each other through our use of communications technology. We become, in a sense, observers observed. The methods used for tracking our trajectories are both seen and unseen. Ironically, we are subjected to this system by our need to function within the system. This exhibition seeks to explore the work of artists who delve into these complex issues by challenging surveillance cameras, openly photographing strangers, shadowing strangers and who willingly play the part of the observer observed within the context of reality television and staged performances.

The Surveillance Camera Players directly confront and track the surveillance cameras that track society. Through public performances in front of existing surveillance cameras—in subways and at entrances to buildings, for example — they talk back to the anonymous eye of the lens through the use of signs and gestures. Thus, they raise our awareness about the issues concerning privacy and constant psychic pressure that are central to the ongoing debate about surveillance post September 11, 2001.

Edin Velez positions himself and his video camera in front of escalators and elevators. He points his lens into the tides of people coming and going between here and there. Velez captures authentic moments of expression and gesture as the streams of strangers slide by, simultaneously crowding and withdrawing from one another.

Madeline Djerejian conceals her intention of photographing museum visitors by focusing on their reflection in the glass that covers masterworks. The resulting images are studies where time and place, light and shadow merge to produce an intimate mosaic about public places as contemplative spaces.

Kate Drendel turns the camera on herself and assumes the role of someone who has left herself vulnerable to our gaze. The ghostly black and white image of a melancholy woman gazing out the window is reflected into an old television screen that is turned off. The image brings to mind Edward Hopper's paintings of solitary women. The use of the television screen to frame her image may bring to mind a subliminal desire to be seen within a larger context. However, because the television is off and she is looking the other way, one may conclude that she has made a choice to disconnect.

I Don't Know What You Are Talking About, a video by Hsuan Hsuan Wu, is staged in the middle of Times Square. Wu remains focused on her journal writing as her cameraman records the pedestrians who gawk and ignore her. A bystander steps into the camera frame and photographs the camera crew. The resulting image is that he appears to be pointing his camera at us, therefore reflecting Wu's camera crew capturing his actions.

Brad Robinson's independent feature, *Public Interest*, examines our need to observe and the desire to be observed. Reality TV lends itself to situations where conflict brings out the truth and often everything prior to the climax seems contrived. *Public Interest* is, "A biting satire on the American obsession with reality television. The film delves into the minds and actions of the people who put the program on the air, those who aspire to be on them, and ultimately the American culture that has become obsessed with them."

Futaba Suzuki's series "Everywhere and Nowhere" creates what she refers to as a "parallel reality." Suzuki constructs idealized homes and then places them under surveillance. The images that are pulled from her surveillance cameras are then projected onto the constructed home. This self-conscious examination and re-examination through the use of surveillance and projection leaves one with a sense of foreboding, anxiety and emptiness. This anxiousness haunts and opens the narrative to our collective phobias that cause us to constantly watch and monitor our lives as well as our possessions.

Charles Harlan uses the surveillance camera in a way that neutralizes its power. Misusing useful tools inverts the concept of usefulness. This in turn leads to new ways of understanding something outside of its prescribed function; "which in turn leads each individual to their temporary autonomous zone—a utopia in the now, rather than an ideal and ever distant future."

¹ Foucault, Michel *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (NY: Vintage Books 1995) p. 201