

The New York Times

ART REVIEW; Is It the N.S.A., Or an M.F.A.?

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO
Published: February 12, 2006

"SURVEILLANCE" is a pertinent and chilling exhibition at the Jersey City Museum. It not only presents artworks that wrestle with the Bush administration's authorization of the National Security Agency to eavesdrop without warrants, but some pieces feature "secretly recorded" audio and video material.

Quick, somebody call the A.C.L.U.

Of course, these artworks are hardly infringing on civil liberties. In the cases where the artists employ surveillance technology it is more to send up the government's domestic spying program than to further their own ends. One work, for instance, gathers acoustic communications on public frequencies and modifies them to create technolike music.

Kabir Carter made the above-mentioned piece. Titled "Shared Frequencies" (2006), it mixes real-time transmissions of conversations, tone codes, noise and other "radiophonic artifacts" (radio conversation fragments). I love it, if only because there is something poignantly disreputable in snatching information and sound from the air and jazzing it into art.

One of oddest works in the exhibition is by the artistic collective called Surveillance Camera Players, founded in New York in 1996. The piece, titled "1984," and performed in 1998, consists of an 8-minute video in which the collective's members enact a theatrical version of George Orwell's "1984" in front of a security camera in the subway station at Seventh Avenue and 14th Street, recording their performances off the M.T.A.'s own surveillance monitors.

These types of works were originally intended "as entertainment for the security personnel sitting at the other end of the camera," the wall label

tells us. But the stunts eventually became performances and artworks in their own right, replayed in museums.

Keeping with the subway theme, Justine Reyes presents large-scale photographs of objects that are now subject to random search in New York and other city subways. Called "The Usual Suspects" (2005), her photographs show pictures of backpacks, briefcases, boxes and bags. Naïvely or defiantly, they mock the notion that another terrorist attack may be prevented by random searches of bags in the subways.

At least one work here, by Mauro Altamura, a Jersey City artist, reminds us of what is at stake when elected officials act beyond their legislated powers.

The work, "Anonymous" (2000-6), consists of a wall-size grid of blown-up photographs of unidentified faces that appeared in the background in newspaper photographs. Blurry, faded, anonymous and impersonal, the black-and-white photographs bring to mind those chilling images of victims of politically motivated killings or "disappearances" published in newspapers through the years of right-wing military dictatorships in several Latin American countries.

Carlos Motta, a Colombian now living in New York, covers similar ground with several works about the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Ga., where Latin American soldiers train in counterinsurgency and military strategy. Over the years it has been the focus of various protests and accusations of human rights violations on the part of some of its graduates. The school is now known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation.

Mr. Motta's strongest artwork is an audio recording of a speech delivered at a graduation ceremony by the school's director, followed by some other minor speeches. The recordings have been modified (mostly by changing all pronouns from first to third person, and vice versa) and distorted, so that those speaking sound demonic. It is as if the artist is trying to tap a sinister subtext, or divine a hidden message.

In a way, warrantless wiretapping, the abuse of prisoners and indefinite detention for an "unlawful enemy combatant" are all regrettable, if perhaps understandable, measures in wartime. But who says when this war against an invisible, intangible enemy is over? Meanwhile, what is the social, political and moral price of such actions? There are no answers here, just troublesome, ferociously focused questions.