

# A CONVERSATION WITH MULTI MEDIA INSTALLATION ARTIST ANN STODDARD



Ann Stoddard as seen through the Data Collection Window "Datapoint, Surveilling Utopia" installation, 2003

### When did you begin to create installations?

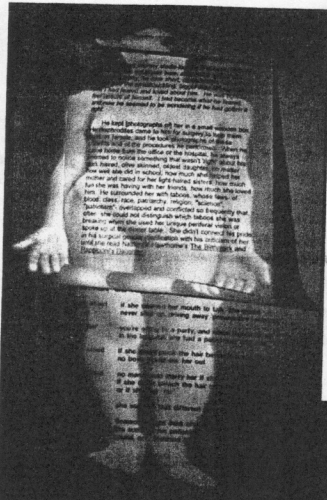
When I was 6 or 7 years old, the street and sidewalk were my gallery. I made installations to display on the front steps to share with everyone who passed by, though I kept the one with urine specimens to myself (my father was a physician). I had excellent peripheral vision (lazy eye syndrome) and was instructed to practice seeing with a prism, to synthesize the two distinct, and different visual fields. When I was twelve, I collaborated with my father, who was also a Civil War buff, on making a battlefield diorama. He would capture our family in 3-D with a stereo camera and in film. I picked up imaging techniques from him. I enjoyed the excitement and shared viewing experience associated with movies and slide shows. We would pass around a lighted stereo viewer to look at the 3-D slides, whose dramatic layered space suggested an actual depth that made printed photographs look flat, compressed. He taught me to shoot movies and edit in the camera, which gave me a heightened awareness of space and time as well as an affinity for photography and innovative approaches. When I was enlisted in setting up the shots for his movies and stereo slides, it felt like making installations to me.

Empty spaces have meaning for me. To me nothing is empty; gaps are stories. Space is full of stories of inclusion and exclusion. Things that are left out have always been important to me. The question I always ask is why.

I began making installations in the early '70s, as my shaped paintings extended into viewer space in a search for ways to eliminate the frame and illusion. I began making large geometric, sprayed lacquer corner pieces that existed in real space (the space of the viewer), involving the viewer in the process of visually deconstructing linear perspective (metonymic in my work for a default orthodox perspective, -Western science, - authority figure). The viewer's movements, reversed perspective,

and mirror finish suggested multiple contradictory interpretations, and contained a feminist subtext. Installation suggested a location to respond to the art historical bias against space, to the sexist, Western subtext privileging form over space (form - positive/male, space-negative /female). Lacking a male default point of view, installation could allow me to incorporate autobiographical material, develop a female subject position in real space where visual arts intersect with politics, science, technology, and life. Painting felt too well-behaved (like a box), sculpture seemed too fixed. Photography lets the viewer look through someone else's eyes. Installation was not default white male elitist art like painting and sculpture.

Interests in content, process, feminist art, conceptual art, and the role of the viewer,



Detail, "Ge/yNEOLOGY" installation, 2000.

brought me back to making installations after a decade of painting. In the early 1980s, working in a large studio in downtown Washington D.C., I began working

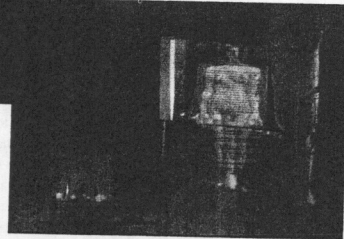
in real space with non-art materials, such as tar paper and screen. At the time, my paintings—as well as most of the art of museums—seemed too irrelevant, too class-based, too white. I was interested in power relations and public space, point of view and context, and searching for a tool for critiquing hierarchies, systems, orthodoxies, and scientific specialization. Installations put all boundaries into question, including public/private ones that silence minorities and women, and art/life

divisions that kept viewers at a distance. As presentation installation art makes boundary crossing into ritual transgression, I wanted to work in the space of the viewer, to make art that existed in the space between life and art, a shared space that included the viewer and time. Installations affirm connections and public space, and are less hierarchical and distancing than painting or sculpture.

A response to Reagonomics, *UnEmployment Division* (1983) was an interactive performance installation in which viewers waited in line, answered questions, filled out forms, as they went from office to office (installation to installations) en route to a national homeless shelter, the "Classified Ad Lounge" (installation). "Laundry Rites" (1985) explored related questions of gender hierarchy in art and life, e.g. why if male artists hung soft fabric it was called "soft sculpture," whereas if women artists did the same it was laundry. This concept show incorporated photography (Atlantic coast survey of laundry hung outdoors/found art), installations of used clothing, a motorized drying rack (kinetic sculpture), and fiberglass/clothing sculptures. Feminists were enthusiastic. A notable male curator said it was not feminist. Construction workers asked "Are the t-shirts (hanging on clotheslines in the gallery display window installation) for sale?"

### How did you become interested in "surveillance" and profiling issues?

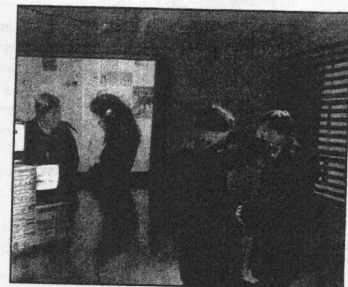
Cameras alter power relations: the lack of consent constitutes an invasion of privacy. Under the Bush administration, government networked i.d. profiling systems, in the name of



"Ge/yNEOLOGY", 2000.

preventative surveillance, make a mockery of First Amendment rights. When ATMs, convenience stores, and department stores installed security cameras, people didn't protest (/notice?) that they were being treated like suspects, and I was concerned. Profiling, the marking and scapegoating of individuals and groups, was practiced by the Nazis. When some of my students were stopped by police for driving "while black," I was outraged, ...and impressed by their self-control (/resigna-

tion?). After 9/11 when the Defense Department instituted widespread surveillance, preemptively detained Muslims, began networking personal data (library records, purchases), and compiling biometric i.d. profiles, I became really alarmed. In graduate school, I had a part-time research job to document that hundreds of black men in Milwaukee had been preemptively, unjustly jailed for rioting (though the study was published and praised, the damage has never been undone). Profiling reveals the profiler's assumptions about identity, stereotyping, etc., and I shortly



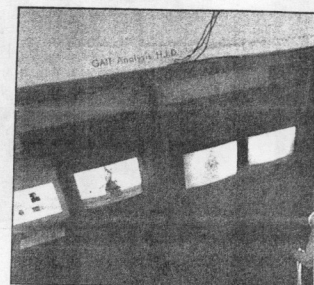
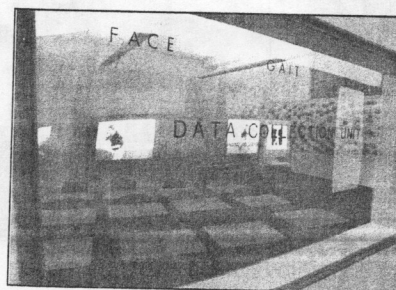
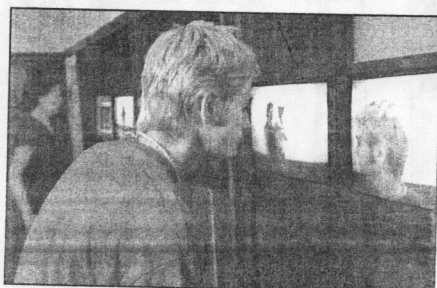
Viewers being profiled, "Random Subjects", 2003

discovered how it feels to be profiled. In a finalist phone interview for a teaching position at a major university, committee members expressed shocked dismay on learning I was female. Their assumptions about my large scale, minimalist work had convinced them that I was male. On another occasion, the only woman on the search committee member posed the illegal question, "do you have children?"

### What are your intentions concerning your work?

I work in various media including drawing, photography, video, and bookart, as well as multimedia installation. I will limit my answer to discussing my installations. My work in installation proposes that art is a tool of inquiry, that viewers can affect the larger political context, that we are all witnesses to events around us, that an us/them dichotomy is undemocratic, that Muslim Americans are as American as the rest of us, that government surveillance and cultural profiling are incompatible with our Constitution. I am interested in investigating the economic/ cultural/ social/ historic underpinnings of power from non-dominant perspectives and in revealing taboos and gaps—absences—hidden in plain sight because they have become default reality or truth. I am interested in the potential of the least likely tools (site, context, electronic toys) for making powerful artistic statements.

In the surveillance series I explore relationships between government surveillance, art as public space, and the role of the viewer in a post-9/11 context in which profiling has become routine. The surveillance series uses interactive multimedia installation to engage



viewers in considering how the contemporary political context is altering our relationships with each other, ourselves, and the world. I aim to involve viewers in exploring the incompatibility between First Amendment rights and government sponsored surveillance/ profiling (Homeland Security, DARPA, ...). Contemporary tools of power such as surveillance technology, cultural profiling assumptions, are appropriated to critique the government's use of these tools to silence people who may be Muslim or of Arab, or African descent. In "Application Center, Waiting Room," a former government office becomes a video profiling center and viewers become applicant- subjects (*ART-O-MATIC* 2002, Washington, DC). Following 9/11 and the passage of the Patriot Act, the Defense Department's EPIC-TIA (Total Information Awareness) is currently funding university and corporate research teams to create algorithms for human identification at a distance (H.I.D.)- e.g. gait analysis, shape analysis, iris scan, fingerprint scan, etc. ... This involves M.I.T., the University of Maryland, and Georgia Tech, among others.

In "Datapoint, Surveilling Utopia", a former government office becomes a video profiling center and viewers become applicant- subjects. A gallery/ former classroom is reframed as a Defense Research Lab on gait recognition i.d., and viewers become profiling research subjects (Greenbelt Art Gallery, MD, June-July 2003). Near the entrance, wall mounted security cameras record a viewer's gait along a measured course of this Gait Analysis Corridor, which (walk) can be seen a moment later on 6 monitors, along with the artist's gait research, in the Data Collection Area (oak cloak room area, back wall). Wall partitions (temporary) with door and window (1 way mirrored) enclose a classroom in the center that features children's art that corresponds to the research (motion studies, handprint mural, portraits). Tools of surveillance and tools of art (remote video cameras, fingerprinting/painting overlap, as delayed video surveillance, profile animation, 1- way mirror, fictional i.d. profiles, and gait analyses) blur distinctions between art and security. "Random Subjects" explored relationships between surveillance, art as public space, and the role of the viewer in a post-9/11 context in which profiling is anything but random (Harmony Hall Art Gallery November 24, 2003- January 17, 2004.). Multimedia technology and conceptual reinscription transform a gallery of video art into a video surveillance profiling point, and viewers into profiling subjects. Arabic text backdrops suggest we are all "them" in the eyes of remote CCTV cameras. In "Random Subjects", live/ delayed/ DVD images of viewers and interviewees appear in large-scale projections and on scattered TV monitors. At the entrance, viewers encounter an Arab American 'agent' (projection) requesting "name, address, race, ss#, ..." as well as a computerized registration form. The Arabic singing led viewers to a large-scale projection on American flags of Raef Haggag singing Azaan. Elsewhere, monitors displayed Arab-Americans speaking about identity, race, profiling (DVD).

In the Genealogy Installations series (1990s), I explored intersections of memory, identities, narratives, public space, and the politics of display in the construction of meaning, reinscribing social, geographical, and historical landscapes with missing points of view and contexts, restoring contradictions and foregrounding the viewer's role in constructing artistic meaning. In these works, I wanted to reveal gaps and taboo points of view that are hidden in plain sight, masked by authority and traditional historical assumptions. "The Political Economy of Side Chairs" recontextualizes a pair of Queen Anne side chairs with economic statistics -tobacco, land, slaves, and red clay (1999). In "Ge/yNEOLOGY" (1998) (© 2000), montage layering (projection, text), mixed media, and first person narrative asserted female sexual self-determination and exposed the taboos- patriarchal, familial, religious, scientific, and social that enforce conformity to stereotypes and tradition. To read the layered, montaged text, viewers had to walk between symbols of religious devotion and of sexual maturity, i.e. on the left

side, a sea of votive candles, and on the right side, urine specimen jars, i.e. pregnancy tests. An outdoor public art installation, "Genealogy of Towers" reinscribes the Washington Monument with transparent signage (screen printed acrylic) and site/sight lines (viewer created montage signage, an archival

**ing, the impact of your work on them?**

I am very interested in who comes to see my work, and what they think, and often visit shows to see how viewers are responding. Assessing audiences is especially challenging when the art deals with surveillance and profiling. I don't want to be confused with a Homeland Security agent. The largest and most diverse audiences I have had are in Washington D.C., located on Constitution Avenue across from the Washington Monument. Thousands of people have seen "Genealogy of Towers" since it was installed in 1997 in the Art Museum of the America's Sculpture Garden. "Application Center, Waiting Room" was seen by thousands of people that looked like a cross-section of D.C. in 2002 at *ART-O-MATIC*, a huge group show. An urban-suburban, youngish audience of contemporary art lovers came to the downtown shows at DCAC and at Baltimore's School 33, while most of the viewers of "Datapoint, Surveilling Utopia" were residents of Greenbelt, MD. Audience members often volunteer that my exhibitions make them question pervasive government surveillance; several viewers of "Random Subjects" expressed feelings of shame, outrage at the post 9/11 treatment of Muslims, while others told me of their experiences with immigration officials and Homeland Security. Some Muslims and persons born outside the U.S. thank me for my work, say they are afraid, in some cases too fearful, to tell me about their own experiences with Homeland Security.

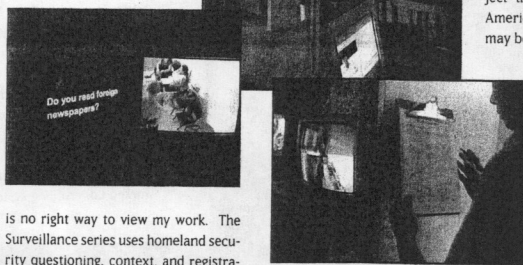


Raef Haggag singing Azaan, from "Random Subjects", 2003

image of a slave "tower" quarter, text) that relate to the surrounding buildings (Organization of American States, The White House, DAR headquarters), the earth, and its history (1997). "Genealogy of a Floor and Table" metaphorically reinscribes a (vacant) TV production studio/control room as a site of social control (1999).

**As some of your work is meant to be didactic, or at least expects to trigger some sort of a response from its audience, what do you think viewers learn from the experience?**

While my work aims to encourage viewer activism by raising controversial issues in a public way, there



is no right way to view my work. The Surveillance series uses homeland security questioning, context, and registration protocols to simulate a real-life situation and prompt feelings of empathy for people that are targets of government profiling. While most viewers say delayed surveillance video makes them feel as though they are being followed and recorded, others just wanted to see themselves on TV or interact with the delay (video). Viewers often said they lost their sense of invulnerability upon discovering they were being surveilled. To me this represents a step in the right direction. Viewers of "Random Subjects" said they were moved by listening to individual 1st-person videotaped narratives by Muslim -Americans. I wanted "Surveilling Utopia 2" to give viewers a heightened awareness of the threats posed by government surveillance and cultural profiling. The relationship between the work and First Amendment rights and multicultural democracy was epitomized by the Adams Morgan Gallery's location. Some viewers said that the show made them nervous, that it was sinister in a real life way, that the Homeland Security questions made them ashamed of our government.

**Have you ever assessed the type of audiences you were reach-**

**Next project?**

I am interested in exploring the use of time, randomness and am already working at these. As long as it seems relevant and I have something to say, I will continue making art that explores the implications of surveillance and cultural profiling. A continuing related project is videotaping interviews with people who have experienced cultural and racial profiling since 9/11, caught up in the broad biometric project that includes Muslim Americans, African Americans, Latin Americans. These interviews may be presented as a videotape document, in a projection installation, or within a larger multi-media installation. I want to make multimedia installations that suggest borderlessness and a global sensibility. I am also working on videos that use time and a feminist point of view. I am very interested in exhibiting outdoor, site-based work. One of my proposals is under consideration for an historic site in Washington, DC.

**Upcoming Shows:**

"home.land.security" (new installation) will be exhibited this fall in the Society for Photographic Education's 2004 *DIALOGUE* exhibition at Montpelier Arts Center (MD) and documentation will be available in the web-based show, curated by Sonya Lawyer. In 2005, my work will be included in the *Accelerating Sequences* exhibition at MOCA GA.

For further information visit [www.annstoddard.net](http://www.annstoddard.net)

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BRUNO CHALIFOUR

Center images: Scenes from "Application Center, Waiting Room"

Bottom left: Scenes from *Surveilling Utopia 1*

Bottom right: Scenes from *Surveilling Utopia 2*

