

# SURVEILLING UTOPIA 2

## MULTI MEDIA INSTALLATIONS BY ANN STODDARD

CÉDRIC LAURANT

Exhibition at the District of Columbia Art Center, April 2004.

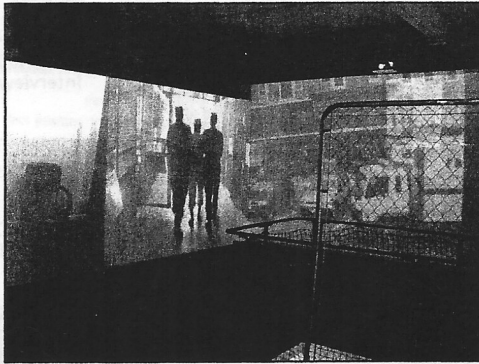
Ann Stoddard's recent interactive multimedia installation, *Surveilling Utopia 2* challenges the use that the U.S. government made of its new powers. Under the Patriot Act it can detain, profile and monitor people. In her exhibition, Stoddard also questions the government's increasing reliance on technology to respond to the threat of terrorism after September 11, 2001. She provokes the role that the visitor could have in this new context of surveillance.

*Surveilling Utopia 2* is the artist's fourth work in a series about surveillance that includes: "Random Subjects" (2003-04, Harmony Hall Art Gallery, Ft. Washington, MD), "Datapaint: Surveilling Utopia" (2003, Greenbelt Art Gallery, Greenbelt, MD), and "Application Center, Waiting Room" (2002, *Art-O-Matic* Exhibition, Washington, DC). In *Surveilling Utopia 2*, the artist is directly immersing the visitors into a flow of interactive images on the theme of surveillance. She uses the live-delayed images of video surveillance cameras to record the visitors in their peregrinations around the exhibit, and displays them on surrounding walls. The very first encounter that the viewers make with the exhibit starts as soon as they walk up the staircase of the D.C. Art Center into a waiting room. They soon realize that a video camera has just captured their images and is projecting them, with a 10-second delay, on a wall nearby. A doorway marked "Registration" then leads them into the chain link fenced Registration Area, which adjoins the projection space with the juxtaposed projections. The various installations lead the viewers through several distinct spaces: a "Waiting Room," a fenced "Registration Area," and a darkened projection space, three walls of which show juxtaposed projections of delayed video images of viewers, Guantanamo Bay Prison video, a video text composed of Homeland Security profiling questions - "Do you socialize with foreign nationals? . . . Do you read foreign newspapers? . . . Do you sympathize with any group? . . . Have you traveled outside the US since 9/11? . . ." - and live video images of the street downstairs in a multicultural neighborhood of Washington, D.C. Video cameras monitor what is happening in the Waiting Room, an INS-type room where immigrants wait to be interrogated, in a live-delayed fashion. The Registration Area

nearby hosts a computer displaying a registration system in which visitors are prompted to provide some of their personal information (name, address, race, nationality, social security number, and various profiling questions) while a small camera on top of the computer provides a live video image of the registrant. The Homeland Security questions were recorded from people subjected to questioning by government interrogators. The projection space features a succession of the now famous images of Guantanamo Bay cells, detainees, and guards, barbed wire fences, guard houses and observatory towers from Iraqi US military bases and headquarters. Other images display interrogation rooms and detention facilities used for the Muslim people arrested under immigration law charges and subsequently held for indefinite periods of time, right after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Through an intricate interplay of live-delayed and live images, recorded video and video text, one quickly realizes that it is one's picture that is now displayed inside that interrogation room, that military camp, or through those barbed wires. The purpose of the artist's installation becomes clearer: the images are intended to make one empathize with, or at least understand, what being targeted or profiled by the US government means in a post-9/11 world. By the subtle juxtaposition

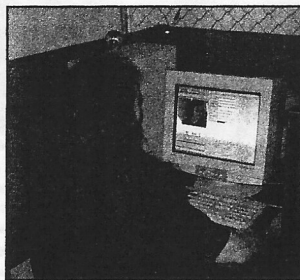
of images from the world of detainees combined with the videos shot of the visitors, Stoddard wants the latter to imagine what being on the other side of the fence means. Her intention is to make the viewers think beyond the typical state of mind generally created by TV images, and take steps away from beyond the Fox TV experience, an "us-them" representa-



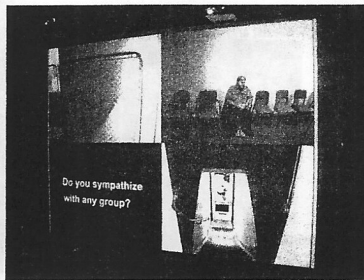
Surveilling Utopia 2, Video Projection, 2004

tion of reality in which the viewer is always on the "good" side, watching "The Other" being surveilled, profiled, interrogated, and detained by the government.

In three recent installations, Ann Stoddard had previously covered the topic of surveillance including an exhibit entitled *Datapaint: Surveilling Utopia*. In this latter exhibit, Stoddard built an interactive site-specific installation in which visitors' signature walking patterns (or "gaits" as they are called) were subjected to video surveillance profiling. Wall mounted remote security cameras recorded sequential images of a viewer's gait against a measured backdrop that could be seen a



A government watcher, Surveilling Utopia 2, 2004



Profiling questions, Surveilling Utopia 2, 2004

moment later - "viewers walking through monitors" [this is how viewers stated they interpreted the images of themselves]. The exhibit also featured other surveillance tools: remote video cameras, profile animation and delayed video surveillance, 1-way mirrors, fictional ID profiles, and gait analyses. One may consider gait recognition technology as a tool far beyond anyone's daily concerns, and whose use is probably restricted to military purposes and other high security and defense government projects. They should think twice: that technology was actually considered as part of a very extensive data mining and surveillance research project ("Total Information Awareness") that the Department of Defense started in 2002 but had to kill one year later due to high privacy concerns raised by the United States Congress and the public [http://www.epic.org/privacy/profiling/tia for more information]. Today, gait recognition, coupled with other motion tracking and face recording technologies may soon get funding from the government to be used on civilians. The implementation of those technologies has already started on an island in Maine. It will involve the use of ubiquitous cameras and biometric readers that, once backed by a central computer, will recognize faces and license plates. This will, in turn, enable government "watchers" to track individuals everywhere they go on the island, to allegedly detect anyone coming onto the island at any point and follow them if

they exhibit suspicious behaviors [See Mark Baard, "Big Brother to Watch Over Island", *Wired.com*, May 4, 2004, http://www.wired.com/news/privacy/0,1848,63316,00.html?tw=wn\_polihead].

With *Surveilling Utopia 2* Ann Stoddard provides visitors with a useful tool to push their reflections further on who could happen if they were detained on illegitimate ground: without the fundamental right to have counsel, or were held, as the Guantanamo Bay prisoners and many others have been, outside any U.S. or international legal framework to protect them from discretionary government decisions without meaningful and independent judicial oversight. One entry in the guest book by a Swiss German visitor reads that the show reminded him of "Nazi Germany," while for another one, the exhibit made him feel "like the US is Guantanamo Bay." Hopefully this exhibition will provide a renewed opportunity to question the legitimacy and appropriateness of the new anti-terrorist powers the government obtained after September 11 and its use of immigration laws to detain Muslim immigrants on an indefinite basis, both illegal procedures in the eyes of the international law's country helped define [Recent Human Rights First's reports or civil liberties after 9/11: http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/us\_law/publications/index.htm, and Amnesty International's recent 2004 report, available at http://www.amnestyusa.org/annualreport/index.html].

What many of Stoddard's exhibits also call to question is the use and usefulness of video surveillance techniques to monitor people in public spaces. Most of her multimedia installations rely on video cameras that display live-delayed images of her audience wandering around exhibited items, and watching themselves. Very quickly, many visitors incorporate the idea of constant surveillance by restraining some of their movement: to socially accepted behaviors. It then becomes clear that awareness of video surveillance has an impact on people's conduct in public spaces, leading visitors to wonder what other people may think of them once they see them on a wide screen. Sociologists and criminologists, studying the impact that video surveillance in public spaces may have on society, have showed that video cameras gradually encourage their targets to learn to change their behaviors in order to avoid suspicion and conform to social norms. People start fitting into what they think is good social behavior, and behavior and way of thinking that ultimately leads to increased discrimination against those that do not conform to those norms [http://www.scotcrim.u-net.com/researchc.htm].

Ann Stoddard's current multimedia installations introduce her audience to the growing use of surveillance techniques that governments expect, and allege to be useful against terrorist attacks. Her work suggests that the reliance on technology to prevent terrorist attacks is not only questionable in many instances, but that it also does not come without a high price for the whole society: these architectures of surveillance (e.g., tracking technologies and video surveillance systems), once put into place, are hardly likely to disappear once the reasons that motivated their installation become obsolete.

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