

## “Surveillance art” reassures us: It is better to be a little paranoid

Like the creators of the “Conversnitch” project, the artists of “surveillance art”<sup>1</sup> invite us to drive out the finks and other espionage technologies hidden in our daily lives. And allow us to see the voyeurs.

A \$25 microcomputer, an electroluminescent diode, a microphone and a pot of flowers: that is all required by two professors in New York to launch the “Conversnitch” Project<sup>2</sup> (a portmanteau that might be translated into French as “mouchard de conversations”). Obviously motivated by the debate about surveillance and respect for privacy, Kyle McDonald and Brian House have created a lamp whose particularity is that it can listen to the conversations of those who chat within its beams. The intercepted conversations are then transmitted via Wi Fi to Amazon’s “Mechanical Turk,”<sup>3</sup> a *crowdsourcing*<sup>4</sup> service that transcribes them to a dedicated Twitter account.<sup>5</sup> For legal reasons, these two performers do not indicate where they have used their device, but in one of their videos, one can identify a well-known *fast-food*<sup>6</sup> place and a bookstore.

Kyle McDonald, one of the two thieves, has attempted a digital beam before: in 2011, he received an aggressive visit from the Secret Service<sup>7</sup> after he’d installed a program on the computers at an Apple Store<sup>8</sup> that took photos of the faces of the clients and sent them via his

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<sup>1</sup> English in original.

<sup>2</sup> Author’s hypertext link: <http://vimeo.com/87564506>.

<sup>3</sup> English in original.

<sup>4</sup> English in original.

<sup>5</sup> Author’s hypertext link: <https://twitter.com/conversnitch>.

<sup>6</sup> English in original.

<sup>7</sup> Author’s hypertext link: <http://www.wired.com/2012/07/people-staring-at-computers/all/>

<sup>8</sup> English in original.

server. Mostly taken up in the United States, McDonald and House's initiative is in fact only the nth incarnation of what the Anglo-Saxons call "surveillance art": a collision between the FIAC<sup>9</sup> and the paranoia that seriously questions the current situation and prolongs the press's investigations.

### Before the Computers, the Cameras

Trevor Paglen<sup>10</sup> is one of the paragons of this civilized form of direct action. A geographer by training, this American has long surveyed the grey zones of his own country, mapping classified areas, photographing secret bases and shedding light on a world that prefers the shadows. His work is so journalistic that Paglen works with "The Intercept," the first satellite in the media galaxy that Pierre Omidyar, piloted by Glenn Greenwald (the source of Snowden's revelations). He has published previously unavailable photos of the NSA's headquarters taken at night from a helicopter.<sup>11</sup> "My intention is to expand the visual vocabulary we use to 'see' the U.S. intelligence community," he writes. "Although the organizing logic of our nation's surveillance apparatus is invisibility and secrecy, its operations occupy the physical world."<sup>12</sup>

Well anchored in the physical world, surveillance cameras, for their part, have not waited for big American ears to take a place at the Palais de Tokyo.<sup>13</sup> In 2008, Benjamin Males, a young British designer, completed SOLA<sup>14</sup> ("Statistic Obesity Logging and Apparatus"),<sup>15</sup> a system that determines the weights of individuals by scanning them in

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<sup>9</sup> *Fiore Internationale d'art contemporaine*, held every October in Paris.

<sup>10</sup> Author's hypertext link: <http://www.gaitelyrique.net/gaitelive/trevor-paglen-le-secret-dans-tous-ses-etats>

<sup>11</sup> Author's hypertext link:

<https://firstlook.org/theintercept/article/2014/02/10/new-photos-of-nsa-and-others/>

<sup>12</sup> Quoted from the original English.

<sup>13</sup> Art museum located in Paris.

<sup>14</sup> Author's hypertext link: <http://www.yankodesign.com/2008/09/16/stay-on-target-stay-on-target/>

<sup>15</sup> English in original.

the streets. It was so successful that some have believed that it was a real product<sup>16</sup> intended for commercialization. . . . Before them, in the 1990s, the Surveillance Camera Players<sup>17</sup> became precursors in another register: they performed “1984” and “Ubu Roi” with placards in front of the subway cameras in New York.<sup>18</sup>

## Lifeblogging

To show the link between the combat of the previous decade (video surveillance) and that of today (computer surveillance), one must lean upon the case of Hasan Ehahi, the bard<sup>19</sup> of sousveillance.<sup>20</sup> In 2007, this Bengali artist explained to *Wired*<sup>21</sup> how he had transformed his life into an open book after having been mistakenly placed on an FBI *watchlist*.<sup>22</sup> Beginning in 2002, as in an absolutist version of Instagram, he started documenting every part of his everyday life, going as far as posting bankcard receipts and geo-localizing the least one of his movements on his site.<sup>23</sup> “I’ve discovered that the best way to protect your privacy is to give it away,” he explained at the time. At the dawn of Google Glass, and while “lifeblogging”<sup>24</sup> (the archiving of one own’s

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<sup>16</sup> Author’s hypertext link: <http://www.trendhunter.com/trends/http-wwwbenjaminmalescom-projectshtml>.

<sup>17</sup> Author’s hypertext link: <http://www.notbored.org/the-scp.html>.

<sup>18</sup> The Surveillance Camera Players also made maps of the locations of surveillance cameras installed in public places and gave walking tours based upon them, and denounced the kind of art made by all the others written about in this piece on the grounds that it identifies itself and/or the viewer of the art with the detective, and not with the fleeing criminal. Cf. <http://www.notbored.org/playing-detective.html>. The group was active from 1996 to 2006.

<sup>19</sup> The word used here, *chantré*, can also mean champion, defender, eulogist and apologist

<sup>20</sup> Author’s hypertext link: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sousveillance>.

<sup>21</sup> Author’s hypertext link: [http://archive.wired.com/techbiz/people/magazine/15-06/ps\\_transparency](http://archive.wired.com/techbiz/people/magazine/15-06/ps_transparency)

<sup>22</sup> English in original.

<sup>23</sup> Author’s hypertext link: <http://trackingtransience.net/>

<sup>24</sup> English in original.

life) has become generalized, this radical point of view has almost become the norm.

(Written by Olivier Tesquet and published by Telerama.fr. on 25 April 2014. <http://www.telerama.fr/medias/le-surveillance-art-vous-rassure-c-est-mieux-d-etre-un-peu-parano,111578.php>. Translated from the French by Bill Brown on 6 May 2014. All footnotes by the translator, except where noted.)