

A Surveillance Camera Player returns to Washington Square Park

Between 12:30 and 1:30 PM on Easter Sunday 2025, which happened to fall on April 20th (aka “420,” the day devoted to the pleasures of smoking marijuana), Bill Brown of the Surveillance Camera Players, working as a solo performer, presented an updated version of “Amnesia” in Washington Square Park, Manhattan. Based on and a tribute to Denis Beaubois’ classic performance-art piece “In case of amnesia, the city will recall” (1996), “Amnesia” had only been performed twice previously: once in Times Square in 2002, which was the year it was written, and in Montreal in 2009.

There were two performances in total: first in the southwest corner of the park, in front of a police surveillance camera, and then in front of the Arch, which sits at the center of the northern edge of the park and faces Fifth Avenue, where there are two sets of police cameras. For this occasion, the five original placards were brought out of storage and used without any modification, though Bill briefly did toy with the idea of adding new images or words to them, in order to bring the material up to date (a lot has changed in 23 years). Instead, his attempt to keep the material fresh focused on the presentation of those placards.

In each of the two locations, “Amnesia” was presented three times in a row: the first time while Bill was wearing a hat and a Covid 19-era medical mask, which completely obscured his face, as well as a large QR code attached to his back (when scanned, it directs the viewer to <https://www.notbored.org/the-scp.html>); the second time after he’d removed the hat and mask but kept the QR code in place; and the third time after removing the code and his overshirt, which revealed that, underneath, Bill was wearing a T-shirt that, on the front, showed a person imprisoned by the flag of the United States and that, on the back, had a prisoner’s identification number (the one currently assigned to Luigi Mangione) printed by hand. At the conclusion of each mini-performance, Bill turned around in an attempt to grab what was on his back (first the QR Code, then the prison ID number) and, failing to do that, turned round and round in circles, first counter-clockwise, then clockwise, like a dog or cat chasing its tail.

To begin each of the two performances of the play, Bill read aloud a statement that he’d written for the occasion.

Amnesia and Forgotten Facts

Do you remember your President Nixon?
Do you remember the bills you have to pay?
Or even yesterday?

David Bowie, “Young Americans” (1974)

In 1996, an Australian artist and performer named Denis Beaubois staged one of the world’s first performances in front of a publicly installed surveillance camera. Titled “In the event of amnesia, the city will recall,” Beaubois’ play was based on the idea that the performer himself has amnesia and

now asks the camera's watchers if they know who he is. "You know me, don't you? Move the camera up & down to agree."

Later that same year, in New York City, a handful of situationist-inspired agitators formed the Surveillance Camera Players (SCP). Interested in paying tribute to their precursors, the SCP eventually wrote and performed a version of Beaubois' groundbreaking play, which meanwhile had been forgotten. Titled "Amnesia," this tribute was only performed twice, once in Times Square in 2002 and once in Montreal in 2009.

In 1997, then Mayor Rudolph Giuliani – who'd apparently forgotten that, back in the early 1970s, the use of publicly installed surveillance cameras in Times Square did not have any impact on crime and so was abandoned – reintroduced such cameras to New York City. One of the first places the new cameras were installed was Washington Square Park (WSP). Operated by the Narcotics Division of the Sixth Precinct, these cameras were intended to help the police stop the sale, possession and smoking of marijuana in public.

Though marijuana is now legal in NYC, surveillance cameras are still used by the police in WSP. In fact, these cameras were upgraded about 10 years ago and are now high-powered wireless devices that can broadcast their images to locations anywhere there is a receiver and that can have these images scanned by face recognition software. It is no longer a matter of having a human being know (or guess at) the identity of the people whom he or she is watching: people are now identified (or misidentified) by computers.

In an attempt to remind people who visit and enjoy WSP of what has been forgotten, the SCP have returned to the park and now once again offer their version of Beaubois' "Amnesia." This comes at a time when America – which has long been "The United States of Amnesia," to quote both Robert Wyatt (1985) and Gore Vidal (2004) – has once again forgotten what it wants to be: a nation founded by and open to immigrants, the enemy of fascism, and the leader of the free world.

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<https://notbored.org/the-scp.html>

Videotaped by Camilo Salas, a Master of Fine Arts student in the Integrated Media Arts program at Hunter College (he was assisted by Hector, who acted as soundman), these performances faced an uphill battle. First and foremost, the wind was very strong that day, and those placards – each of which is three feet wide and four feet long – were very difficult to handle; they kept blowing all over the place. The smaller placard bearing the QR code just would not stay in place, which was rather frustrating. Secondly, things have changed a great deal since 2002: the widespread use of cellphone cameras and social media accounts (Tik-Tok videos, for example) has made public performances of "odd" actions and behavior quite commonplace. It seemed to Bill that the dramatic effect of those placards, which was so stunning 25 years ago, has diminished substantially. (Note well that Camilo and Hector say that they recorded several interesting responses, including an older gentleman who asked them if the performer was some

kind of paranoid schizophrenic.) Any future performances by the Surveillance Camera Players will have to take these developments into account.



Bill facing the camera.



The amnesiac points to the camera to which he's addressing himself.



The premise is stated: “I have amnesia.”

(All photos by Camilo Salas.)