

An exhibitionist drive, the pathological rejection of the unknown and a pressing need of comfort meet at a bar on a corner under surveillance and someone far, far away is mesmerized by their pixelated image.

by Leandro Martinez Depietri

It is no news that after the WTC collapsed in 2001 the connection between surveillance systems and neoliberal development has increased. That collapse allowed for Federal intervention over the private lives of citizens, altering the city dwelling and modifying permanently the way major cities are perceived. Inevitably, resisting practices began to emerge from the arts, such as the ones by the NY-based Surveillance Camera Players collective, which found in performativity a political sign of opacity in the face of imposed absolute transparency.

This system of total visibility has become noticeably widespread in the local context. By the year 2013, there was an estimated amount of one surveillance camera for every one thousand residents in Buenos Aires, all of them monitored by the Federal or Metropolitan Police. That number has grown amid repeated citizen demands and the lack of policies committed to reduce social inequalities.

Those devices are perceived as yet another of man's prostheses in the construction of a fiction of safety. They encourage a social tendency to comfort at the mercy of unwilling wills. Like GPS and Street View, they contribute to the unfolding of a virtual mapping over the land, which reduces uncertainties and dangers as well as surprises and random findings. Extending the anthropocentric view of the Renaissance with its invention of perspective, they emerge as a hint of omniscience in a sort of Promethean defiance.

Nicolás Martella decides to build a visual archive based on the recordings of this spy technology. He is motivated by a concern related to the photographic medium, heir of that *bourgeois* conception of the gaze. Why go out to the streets to capture images when there is an arsenal of cameras at his disposal around the world that can be accessed directly from his computer? The action of Screen-Printing replaces the photographic shoot to approach a reality, which is now differed.

He sets out to rescue a production of images not to be stored or just doomed to the trash, carrying on with the utopian struggle of this medium against oblivion, updating the topic of *Tempus Fugit* from a political perspective. If journalism constantly resorts to this procedure to feed the Police Section of newspapers with images of hold-ups and various cruelties, Martella's search for a possible lyricism as a photographer should not be dismissed as a minor thing.

When we think of surveillance cameras, we tend to take for granted the hostility of high-angle shots, the strangeness of fish-eye shots, the bluish color and emotional detachment. Martella's images are thought provoking in that they reveal themselves banal instead. They are close images, pieces of urban and suburban life, as common to everyday life as free from any kind of sensationalism.

These images come from freely accessed cameras protected by law with no password, available on the web for anyone who wants to search them. Their excessive accessibility forces us to analyze them as warning and temptation, understanding that there is a clear wish that we approach them. They work as a key for us to sense that there is a more attractive material that is actually coded, a material that does require an access password. Through them we perceive how we can be watched better and more deeply, how everything can be observed although no one is capable of doing so individually. We then feel the burden of the contemporary panoptic.

In his *Postscript on the Societies of Control*, Deleuze defines the transformation of the times by means of the regulation through figures, the importance of signs in market manipulation. What used to be the rule in the disciplinary society described by Foucault is now the password in the society of control. It allows the access to a privileged world, to a belonging and a communication network that today goes from the ATM and email account to the VIP Club.

Private property is thus defined by an access regime, which is closely related to the scopic regime. Today, electronic images multiply infinitely and erect themselves as facilitators of ephemeral social experiences rather than fragments of a memory that becomes unfathomable in the excess.

In that frame, Nicolás Martella struggles to pull out a subjective imagery out of surveillance cameras. He approaches the device from an experience of use for which it was not designed. It is

a simple perversion of the machine, which becomes an invention for which Martella has had to adopt new habits, engaging his time in a long and difficult practice. He spent a whole year of extended observations, hunched in front of the monitor with a stiff neck, virtually stalking that fugitive instant.

This way, he was able to retrieve a set of images in which the surveillance device is revealed with some of its absurdities and appears as a terribly human product, losing that attempted hale of diabolic omniscience. In his photographs, all the limitations of the device are exposed as is the inherent beauty of any purposeless gesture. Specially, when the images highlight the colors of the sky, funny decorative or architectonic layouts, or the calm of dawn over a suburban landscape.

This set of images reinforces the idea that, in fact, every forgettable gesture might be captured by the machine. But the clear poetic-ludic intentionality observed in Martella's images creates a selection born out of a nostalgic gesture, which gives new life to the figure of the Street photographer. Goethe's "Stay a while, you are so beautiful", with its romanticism, poses the challenge to humanize that which presents itself as automatic and totalizing.

Thus, winks to classic photography appear as in the capture with a certain air of Josef Sudek's fogged window. This may even lead us to imagine something as ethereal and sensitive as an exhausted man's breath on a glass in the winter of his farm.

There also appears the presence of a possible anonymous artist who performs a piece as a homage to the artist of the great media. One of the captures gives away the existence of a fixed surveillance camera over Andrew Warhola's grave and exposes the eternal dream of that who made a 5-hour movie of poet John Giorno sleeping. We can imagine the underground smile of the creator of the 15-minute TV fame, now enjoying the spatial-temporal infinity provided by the web.

Postcard-like landscapes also emerge and, in some cases, the captures resemble amateur photographs or B or author movie stills. They also look like family album shots or the prints from a disposable camera. The subtlety of this archive is the result of a personal sensitivity, which is shown in every single selection and association, contrasting the very origin of the images.

The selection creates networks of subjective registers. Over the dehumanizing time of the electronic record, in this photographic procedure, Martella imposes a way of looking reconnected to the body and with historic awareness. Every shot turns against its own medium and texture, the result of an intentional misuse, in which an agencement of the machinic is performed to emphasize the humane. Out of a feeling of expressive exhaustion of Street photography appears this personal practice, with its subtleties, as a sensitive resistance to the paranoid construction of the surroundings.

Just as performativity as a mask was an artistic reaction to avoid the permanent exposition to surveillance cameras, the poetization of its imaginary reveals the inherent veillings of its representation mechanisms. The sense of accessibility is altered and the images turn into a mirror, aiming the question at the creator supposedly hidden in the transparency. It mirrors the collective eye and the daily blindness to question it. What are we exposing ourselves to?

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The Day is an Attack.

Nicolás Martella

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