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PRESS RELEASE
Museum für Fotografie
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Watching You, Watching Me.
A Photographic Response to Surveillance
17 February – 2 July 2017
An exhibition by the Kunstbibliothek – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, in co-operation with the Open Society Foundations – New York

What right do governments, corporations, and individuals have to collect and retain information on your daily communications? What tools – both today and in the past – have been used to monitor your activities? What are the immediate and far-reaching effects? As governments and corporations around the world expand their efforts to track the communications and activities of millions of people, this not only threatens our right to privacy, but also opens the door for information to be collected and used in ways that are repressive, discriminatory, and chill freedom of speech and expression.

It is in this context of massive information gathering that *Watching You, Watching Me* – the 22nd installment of the Open Society Foundations – explores how photography can be both an instrument of surveillance and a tool to expose and challenge its negative impact. In tackling the inherent difficulty of visualizing something that is meant to be both omnipresent and covert, the artists in this exhibition employ a dynamic range of approaches.

Working for the Wall Street Journal in August 2011, Edu Bayer photographed the abandoned interiors of Colonel Muammar al-Qaddafi's internet surveillance center and intelligence headquarters in Tripoli. Within the disordered stillness of these empty rooms and corridors, Bayer found remnants of Libya's security apparatus scattered among rummaged file drawers and piles documents.

Simon Menner and Josh Begley also draw attention to the surveillance of citizens by state powers, but from the perspective of the surveillant. Menner presents images he uncovered in the vast archives of the former East Germany's Ministry for State Security – commonly known as the Stasi. Ranging from chilling to absurd, these images were used to train Stasi spies, conduct secret home searches, and monitor daily activity.

Similarly, Josh Begley culls photographs, maps, and text from Associated Press-released documents produced by the New York City Police Department's secret Demographics Unit (later the Zone Assessment Unit). This unit systematically spied on Muslims until it was disbanded in 2014 after public outcry. By pulling apart and re-contextualizing this material in two floor-to-ceiling installations, Begley paints an unsettling picture of the mundane and ambiguous nature of the "evidence" collected.

While Menner and Begley use found imagery, Julian Roeder adopts the visual language of advertising to draw attention to the people and machinery behind the border surveillance system EUROSUR, which connects all border control systems in the European Union allowing them to share and exchange information.

Likewise, Mari Bastashevski looks at the role of technology, but from the perspective of the industry that profits from the interception and surveillance of mass communications. Working with the NGO Privacy International, Bastashevski combines her own photographs with promotional materials and corporate documentation from the industry, to highlight how these companies brand their products and sell them to global law enforcement or intelligence agencies. She contrasts this sanitized corporate aesthetic with chilling testimony form an Uzbek human rights advocate who has been subjected to the kinds of surveillance that these technologies enable.

Tomas van Houtryve and Andrew Hammerand coopt surveillance technologies for use in their own creative process. Using a camera attached to a drone that he purchased, Van Houtryve photographs locations and gatherings in the United States that reference American drone use – both domestically and abroad – to reflect on privacy and contemporary warfare. Hammerand accesses an unsecured, publicly networked CCTV camera in an anonymous Midwestern American town to highlight an invasion of privacy that is already underway.

Paolo Cirio and Mishka Henner, on the other hand, use Google imagery as raw material for their work. Cirio's street installations reinsert people captured by Google Street View back into the public space. Henner highlights the Dutch government's attempts to intervene in the visual landscape of Google Earth and appropriates censored images of significant political, economic, and military locations that the Dutch authorities have concealed with a stylized array of multi-colored polygons.

Hasan Elahi, too, performs his own form of digital camouflage with a project started after he was mistakenly placed on an FBI watch list. Since 2002, Elahi has photographed over 70.000 mundane details from his daily life, and has sent these images to the FBI. Initially started as a way to be transparent about his whereabouts, this ongoing project serves as a reminder of – and a challenge to – the overwhelmingly vast amounts of information and data that we share and that is collected about us.

Together, these 10 artists provide a satellite-to-street view of the ways in which surveillance culture blurs the boundaries between the private and public realm. As technological advancements enhance the ability to monitor our daily interactions, these projects raise important and provocative questions about the role of privacy in preserving our basic freedoms and rights.

Curated by Stuart Alexander, Susan Meiselas and Yukiko Yamagata.

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