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PRESS RELEASE

Museum für Fotografie

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The Field has Eyes. Images of the Surveillance Gaze

17 February – 2 July 2017

An exhibition by the Kunstbibliothek – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Surveillance is not only a current topic, but also a historic phenomenon. This exhibition turns to history and addresses the particular sense of unease that surveillance has always caused, whether it was religiously or politically motivated. The title of the exhibition is based on an anonymous woodcut from 1546. This image sends a warning message from the distant past, 'Beware, you are seen and heard!'

The exhibition brings together 75 prints, books, photographs and examples of optical apparatus to present a visual and cultural history of the controlling gaze from the 16th to the 20th century. Most of the objects are drawn from the Kunstbibliothek's multifaceted collections, enriched by loans from collections of Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and diverse libraries, archives as well as private collections.

Before the now-ubiquitous cameras, people were once controlled by other looks. In the age of the Enlightenment the all-seeing eye, which stood for the clear gaze of reason, symbolized the state and the law. This secular iconography drew on the religious symbol of the eye of God. This eye, a mystical, invisible entity with the power to observe a Christian's every thought and deed, had a powerful psychological effect on believers. Be it God, the state, or technology, in this genealogy the oppressive psychological power exercised by an entity that is itself not open to scrutiny remained constant.

God sees everything

The motive of the divine eye was spread throughout Europe with the Counter-Reformation, but its roots lie in the Antiquity. Augustine (354 – 430 AD) already described this religious idea on the psychological level when he wrote: And from Thee, O Lord, unto whose eyes the abyss of man's conscience is naked, what could be hidden in me though I would not confess it? (Confessiones X, 2) In this spirit nobody can conceal anything from God. His eye guards the Christians like a "good shepherd" day and night – not only the actions, but also the inner world of thoughts and emotions. Divine providence (Providentia) further comprises both the individual life as well as the future and past of collective history.

A thousand eyes are not enough

As early as 1600, the all-seeing eye stood for a controlling state. In the Age of Absolutism, the king was symbolized by a total look. This idea can be seen in architecture where all axes run together in a central perspective point: in the gardens of Versailles, this point marks the residence of

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the sovereign king. Later, in the centre of the industrial town of Chaux, it marked the residence of the administrator, and in the prison of Jeremy Bentham, the so-called Panopticon, the residence of the watchman. Such all-seeing eyes were generated in the context of the Enlightenment era. They are founded on a faith in the controlling rationality.

In the modern era, however, the divine gaze is shattered. A thousand new eyes undertake the function of the omnipresent vision: now it was the police or the state agents who started monitoring people. But a thousand eyes are not enough to replace the internalized eye of God. The modern surveillant gaze is worldly and in contrast to the divine eye, it can become tired; sometimes, it must even sleep as three pictures in this section make evident.

Technical eyes

Still before photography was used for police purposes in the late 19th century, optical devices were recommended for the supervision of people. With a camera obscura, an early form of the camera, for instance, a viewer was able to observe a happening without being seen. Modern surveillance cameras are also based on the principle that the observer remains invisible. The series of photographs presented here shows early pictures by surveillance cameras. You can see robberies taking place in American banks between 1950 and 1980. In these photographs, not only the look of the surveillant device becomes visible, but also everything the supervisors see.

“... the forest has ears”

With these words continues the proverb “The field has eyes...”. The similar and better known sentence “The walls have ears” goes back to a dictum by the French queen Catherine de Medici (1519 – 1589), who installed acoustical funnels into the walls of the Louvre in order to listen the conversations of her conspirators. About hundred years later, an etching showing similar acoustic funnels appeared in a treatise by the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher (1602 – 1680). Kircher recommended those to different European princes as a means of surveillance.

In fact, funnels were used as sound amplifiers and surveillance technology until the 20th century. The photographs the artist and collector Bogomir Ecker (born 1950) united in a series show funnels which were developed in the interwar era to detect enemy planes in sufficient time.

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