Artistic Presentation

Surveillance Aesthetics in Latin America: Work in Progress

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This [on-line exhibition](http://goo.gl/7FIWU) (<http://goo.gl/7FIWU>) presents a small selection of works by Latin American artists who incorporate in their creations technologies traditionally linked to surveillance and control processes.

By *Surveillance Aesthetics* we understand a compound of artistic practices, which include the appropriation of *dispositifs* such as closed circuit video, webcams, satellite images, algorithms and computer vision, among others, placing them within new visibility, attention and experience regimes (Bruno and Lins 2007; 2010).

The term referred to in the title of this exhibition is intended more as a vector of research than the determination of a field, as pointed out by Arlindo Machado under the term “surveillance culture” (Machado 1991). In this sense, a Latin America Surveillance Aesthetics exhibition is a way to propose a myriad of questions, starting from the works presented here. How and to what extent do the destinies of surveillance devices reverberate or are they subverted by market, security and media logics in our societies? If, in Europe and the USA, surveillance is a subject related to border control and the war against terror, what can be said about Latin America? What forces and conflicts are involved? How have artistic practices been creating and acting in relation to these forces and conflicts?

Successful panoramas of so-called *Surveillance Art* have already been taking place in Europe and North America for at least three decades, with the exhibition “Surveillance” at the Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions being one of the first initiatives in this domain (Machado 1993).¹ In 2010, a special S&S issue on “Surveillance, Performance and New Media Art” presented a series of articles discussing several topics related to art and surveillance, presenting different experiences and practices of what Andrea

¹ Fifteen years later, in 2001, the great exhibition “CTRL [SPACE]” at the ZKM in Germany would become a reference for surveillance art (<http://ctrlspace.zkm.de/e/>). More modest curatorships, some in on-line format – such as the one proposed by *Wired* magazine in 2007 (<http://goo.gl/9KjcH>) – contributed to the establishment of this artistic territory. The exhibition “Exposed” at the Tate Modern in London in 2010 can also be cited as the most recent in this field.

Brighenti (2010) would call “Artveillance”. But if Brighenti admits that in his analysis he pays less attention to an “aesthetic of surveillance”, as defined by Roland Schöny (2007 *apud* Brighenti 2010),² we will here assume aesthetics in its diversity as a key to understanding political and social contexts in the continent.

In Latin America, art produced in the context of surveillance devices and processes has been modestly analyzed by academics and curators. Our intention is to assemble a selection of works indicating the existence of a wider base of production that cannot be considered occasional and needs to be investigated.

The body of works that composes this exhibition is, therefore, a partial result of a composition of perspectives in a much more complex and broader territory than this small presentation offers. A first cutout describes a context – Latin America. However, although this context coincides with a relatively defined geographic space, there is no possible uniformity in the creative, aesthetic, social, political and cultural fields (Mariátegui 2004). The connections between art and surveillance in Latin America do not compose a unified design in our presentation. We perceive areas of contact and dialogue as well as contrasts among perspectives, languages and distinct provocations. A chronological limit unites them and thus creates a second cutout: all the works in the exhibition were elaborated in the first decade of the 21st century, a decade marked by the multiplication and diversification of surveillance technologies in both public and private daily life, border control, social dynamics, etc. Concentrating the works within this time frame indicates a desire to understand how these artistic practices appropriate or respond to the distributed presence of surveillance technologies in the “heat” of their moment. Inside this temporality our last cutout consists of a selection of only 11 works. An attempt is made to diversify the scope of the countries represented and the artistic proposals to the greatest extent possible in order to reach, albeit modestly, the Latin American plurality.

We hope that the works assembled here can point to “tactical indicators” (Foucault 2004: 5) in the terrain of force fields through which the present surveillance processes flow. How do such works perceive these force fields, their tensions and their obstacles, as well as their fractures, their failure zones and their margins of action? How do they manifest this perception? Which aesthetic, political, sensorial and cognitive circuits do they activate? To what extent do they produce fissures and interference in the control and spectacle circuits dominant in the present surveillance dynamics in the Latin American context?

The Exhibition

The works in this exhibition “address” the questions above in different ways, dealing with distinct surveillance aesthetics. We notice, however, a predominance of CCTV among the selected works. A video circuit is defined as a technical-visual complex where images are captured in a determined space and projected on a monitor or screen, usually in real time. This technology – which has been popularized in middle- and high-class apartment buildings as well as in favelas, or shantytowns, under the control of drug dealers in Latin American metropolises³ – has been used in contemporary art since the 60s.

As defined by Ricardo Basbaum when referring to his series *Sistema-cinema* (2001-2010) “a certain regime of the economy of the image and its functioning is implemented” with closed circuit video, “side by side with the limits and borders of the installation space” (Basbaum 2009: 263). Basbaum develops a work where he combines gallery and museum interventions, which the visitor can penetrate, cross and

² Cited by the author: “However my point is that we should not underestimate the diversity of moods that can be conveyed through the same aesthetic of surveillance” (Brighenti 2010).

³ In Brazil, the presence of video surveillance in *favelas* ranges from clandestine CCTV operated by *milicias*, or criminal organizations, to so-called security cameras recently installed by the *Unidades de Polícia Pacificadora* (UPPs) in Rio de Janeiro to monitor the occupied communities.

observe. In these works he installs cameras and monitors in closed circuit, allowing access/vision to points of view that the spectator/interactor could not experience with the “naked” eye and body. His intention is to “trigger at the installation site the presence of the mediation space, that is, to produce membranes on the spot, right there” (Basbaum 2010a: 69) and “to cultivate tools for building the contextual action in present time” (Basbaum 2010b: 51). Besides the addition of layers of space and time in the installation, *Sistema-Cinema* also operates a way of registering and archiving for future usage, thus attributing an additional potential temporality to the work.

The reflexive-participative dynamic introduced with the CCTV apprehends the spectator’s presence and turns him/her into part of the work/installation. This is also explored in different ways in the works of Gustavo Romano and Alfredo Marquez.

In *Pequeños mundos privados* (2001), Argentinian Gustavo Romano presents a prepared microscope where the viewing lens has been replaced with a sort of camera viewfinder. Once the visitor gets closer to examine, he/she is surprised by his/her own image looking through the microscope. The image is captured on a camera, which is behind the viewer, thus combining notions of scrutiny and imprisonment. In this closed circle there is no strict need to record the images and nothing to be seen aside from the fact of observation. The camera captures the spectator inspecting inside the microscope the image that the camera (macroscope) captures: tautology. It is the very act of observing oneself observing that is at stake, as are the limitations of such observing; this is all expressed in a vision of one’s own image, from the back, in the shadow of a stalking camera.

Peruvian artist Alfredo Marquez and *Coletivo Peru Fabrica* create with *(Des)instalacion Ecce Homo* (2000) an ambient of confrontation and confinement, where CCTV provokes tensions between the space that exhibits and that which imprisons, the act of seeing and that of being seen, the interior and the exterior. Two monitors, a computer connected to the internet and a red line with names of prisons in Peru are displayed in a dark room. One of the monitors shows a sequence of CCTV images from a room simulating a cell, where an actor performs restricted actions of everyday prison life – exercising, sleeping, eating. (The actor and Marquez were political prisoners in the same institution during the 90s, during the Fujimori regime). The second monitor shows images in real time of the exhibition visitors in the darkened room, duplicating their gaze in confrontation between their own image and that of others, between the installation space and prison space. Alongside the two monitors, a computer shows a website with documents from an ad hoc commission for prisoners unjustly confined in Peru. A webcam connected to this computer captures the image of the visitors analyzing the documents. The spectators see themselves once again in the position of seer/seen, but now before another kind of “space”: the informational flow of the internet, whose reticular and distributed architecture allows them to escape the hierarchic contentions of archives traditionally restricted to power circuits and their institutions.

Dolores de 10 à 10 (2002) reassumes elements of Marquez’s work, such as re-enactment, confinement and political violence against bodies. However, in this video installation by Cuban artist Coco Fusco, the “prison” is the factory. This piece is the result of research by the artist in a “maquiladora”,⁴ known for disrespecting workers’ rights, located in Tijuana, Mexico. The city is on the border with the USA, a zone under strong surveillance, including video-monitoring. There are strict restrictions on the movement of Mexican citizens, but the same cannot be said about the industrial products assembled in the “maquiladoras”. In this installation Fusco invests in the reconstitution of CCTV footage, re-enacting facts that happened to Delfina Rodriguez, “a maquiladora worker who had been accused by her employer of trying to start a union in the plant. To coerce her into resigning, her manager had locked her in a room

⁴ “Maquiladora” is the name given by Mexicans to companies that import components for the assembly of products that the USA receives ready to commercialize. The whole operation is tax free.

without food, water, bathroom or phone for twelve hours”.⁵ She tried to sue her former employer for violating her civil rights, but she could not prove what she had been put through. In this context the artist recreates images that CCTV could have recorded. The installation thus produces a “fictional proof” of her internment, at the same time attesting to the fictional nature of any proof and subverting the visual hierarchy in which CCTV is usually included.

This sense of surveillance reversion, or shattering, when it is not even possible to say from and to where it is being exerted, is what we want to underline in the work of Lucas Bambozzi and Paloma de Oliveira. Also conceived as a reenactment of an event – the attacks that the criminal organization PCC ordered in São Paulo – *Do Sofá da sua casa* (2010) presents an installation consisting of a video-mapping in a domestic scenario, thematizing the production of images within a network and creating an experience of shared tension of “the day that São Paulo stopped”.⁶ The event that is the matrix of the work brings the elements of a shattered landscape, in that the actions coordinated around the city were orchestrated overall via phone calls originating from within the prisons. A place of surveillance, reclusion and control par excellence thus became the basis for communications and actions against Latin America’s largest city. Blatantly exposing the fragility of the Brazilian prison system, the episode casts shame on the promoters of mobile networks when it gains a visibility and a propagation that publicity campaigns could never produce. In addition to this, the media’s capitalization of panic – above all by television – amplified the chain of images and senses linked to the events. In this work the problem of the veracity of visual recordings in a context in which surveillance processes cannot be dissociated from the spreading of quotidian vision and recording technologies reappears. Instead of the emblematic CCTV, cell phones and media images compose networks which propagate images and discourses whose connections are at the same time of control and decontrol, power and anti-power, surveillance and “sousveillance”, entertainment and panic.

Marcela Moraga is also interested in the phenomena of spectacularization of reality and fear. Moraga integrates the group *Testigo Ocular*, a project created by Chilean artists to foment exchanges between Chile, Latin America and abroad. Living in Germany as an artist-in-residence, Moraga works with urban interventions and photography, proposing a critical look at the post-9/11 scenario. Her work *La vida es un gran cine* (2007) refers in an explicit way to a publicity slogan used by Chile Telecom company. If, on the one hand, it refers to a romantic ideal that compares life and film, on the other it is haunted by the idea of the continuous televising of places, suffocating the potential experience of anonymity in public space. Confronting a surveillance camera in a subway station with an amateur video camera, Moraga provokes a short in two different circuits and makes evident the intersecting spheres of surveillance and publicity in a photo where she registers the act of watching the watchers. In this intervention the artist adopts a silent strategy, setting an ephemeral scene protagonized not by actors or spectators, but by the *dispositifs*.

The intervention in public and semi-public spaces, provoking connections between the seduction of the spectacle and the paranoia of surveillance, resurfaces in the work of the Brazilian collective *mm não é confete*, *Performances Panopticasdas/ Surveillance Wireless Vj'ing Performance – work in progress* (2003-2006). A series of performances by the collective overlap the already noisy urban space of São Paulo with images and sounds in real time with the saturation of contemporary media and surveillance images. Images of interaction with the public are captured by a micro-camera attached to the wrist of the performer (whose makeup à la Blade Runner is like a bleak future *dejà vu*) and reworked live by VJs mixing pre-recorded images. The resulting live mix video is re-projected in real time in the performance

⁵ <http://www.thing.net/~cocofusco/video.htm>

⁶ The attacks by the prison-based PCC (*Primeiro Comando da Capital*) in the city of São Paulo took place on May 15, 2006 and consisted of the burning of many buses and armed attacks against the *Polícia Militar* throughout the whole city. Like a potent “flashmob”, the attacks resulted in the closure of most of the city’s commerce, created panic and caused the breakdown of mobile telecommunications.

space as well as on an LCD screen attached to the performer's chest. Added to this spiral of sounds and images is the "mantric" repetition of concepts that harness surveillance, spectacle and consumption (mm não é confete 2004), seeking to awaken attentional focus in the midst of the multimedia dispersion flooding the ambience. The interaction of the public, incited to dialogue with that which surrounds them, compose a performance manifesto, shuffling time, speech and media.

The presence of the spectator as part of the work reappears in *Modular Solution for Corridor Reactive Installations* (2009) by the Colombian Andrés Burbano. This occurs, however, according to an algorithmic logic and from a corporal presence, taken above all in its motor-sensory dimension. It is an installation that uses a video circuit in real time as a source of "inputs", but the derived images from this inflow are projected using "computing optics" mixed with pre-programmed algorithms, position and distance sensors that scan the spectators' bodies in the space. What we see are forms and lines generated by these diverse filters that are added to the captured image. Even though this is not a reference or explicit preoccupation of the author, the system created by Burbano reminds us of the "newer" generation of video surveillance that couples algorithmic layers to the cameras, supposedly making them capable of detecting suspicious or threatening behavioral movement.

The relationship between the occupation of public space, bodies and monitoring technology is represented in *Sandbox* (2010), an interactive installation developed by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer for the *Glow Santa Monica* festival in California, USA. Installed on the beach like a large fairground attraction or open-air cinema, the work consists of two boxes of sand that allow the public to participate in three dimensions: a miniature projection, a human scale and an amplified projection on a huge scale. The images give feedback in a virtuous cycle: the smaller figures place themselves in a game with giant figures, producing a circularity of projections that captures and recaptures images. By creating what he calls "relational architecture", Lozano-Hemmer appropriates video-surveillance as an element capable of potentializing the sharing of space, transforming the asymmetrical relation between the watchers and the watched into the raw material for a new kind of shadow theater. As the artist himself describes, the equipment used in *Sandbox* refers to that which is used on the North American-Mexican border to track illegal immigrants, just as video circuits in shopping centers track adolescents. However by turning a space under surveillance into an area of play, performance and stage, Lozano-Hemmer reverts the *dispositif*, and creates an environment where people are connected, as opposed to a space of suspicion and segregation.

Anibal Lopez also executes his work in public spaces, but without the guidelines of festivals or official agendas. The Guatemalan artist – who signs his works with the inscription A-1 53167, a reference to his ID registration – carries out clandestine acts that disrupt order and place in order to question freedom of expression and the limits between art and activism. His work *30 de Junio, 2000* (2000) took place over only one day and combined urban intervention and photography. In a rapid nocturnal operation, A-1 53167 spread the contents of ten sacks of coal across the principal avenue in downtown Guatemala City, where a military procession was programmed to take place the following day. Despite the coal having been removed, a black stain remained on the road. The boots of the marching soldiers inadvertently spread the coal dust, and the resulting trail created by their footsteps was recorded on his camera. In this way the artist produced a work not involving actors or spectators, but the very military forces of Guatemala – responsible for repression and violence against the population during almost forty years of civil war. The choice of coal is not only due to the fact that it served as "ink" for the soles of the soldiers' boots. As the artist explains, coal can be found in mass graves and in the houses and on bodies burnt by death squads connected to the military. By introducing coal to the parade site, A-1 53167 produced a counter-surveillance action that reveals acts the state prefers to conceal.

The "vestige" of embarrassment, felt by those in confrontation with representatives of "authority", is subtly and acutely captured in the video *Teoria da Paisagem* (2005), by the Brazilian Roberto Bellini. The first images of the video – an airplane crossing the sky, the sun setting on the horizon, birds flying – do

not differ greatly from those that follow until the end. In voice off we hear dialogue from which we deduce that the artist is being confronted by a security guard and interrogated about his intentions and warned about the dangers of filming: “the police are very nervous about this sort of thing”. The involvement of the guard confers a dimension to the act of watching and filming that is absent from the innocent and contemplative landscape images of the video, yet very present in the quotidian of urban and media landscapes. Whereas the apparatuses of surveillance proliferate in public areas, legal restrictions are imposed on the cameras of artists, journalists and amateurs, who are placed under suspicion by current security policies. The artist, in turn, has the astuteness to make this unexpected disruption of his work part of the artistic presentation. “The dialogue has the force of something that does not happen twice, and the artist has the insight to maintain this in tension...This is the patience and intelligence of the work: allow the text to surpass communication and make vibrate a state of world” (Migliorin, n/d). Bellini sidesteps surveillance by producing a type of ellipse that documents it, causing within it a trace, a “proof”, that turns against that which created it, in a poetical-critical movement.

The works presented here in many ways update processes and aspects regarding surveillance mechanisms in contemporary societies. Such processes quite certainly have global dimensions, but they also echo particularities of the Latin American context. While some works recover the marks that still remain from the authoritarian regimes that governed the region in the second half of the 20th century, with historical themes of surveillance and violence such as prisons and military forces, others present more recent dynamics of the Latin American scenario, especially dynamics related to security and spectacle. In Latin America, the insertion of surveillance technologies in everyday life is linked to security policies, public as well as private, which expanded markedly as of the 90s and gained new breath in the first decade of the 21st century. These policies go hand in hand with the rise in crime rates and the feeling of insecurity in urban centers, making the security rational a principle of social life order (Botello 2009). In this scenario, the state apparatus usually takes on the role of fighting crime and controlling populations deemed dangerous. In the Latin American context these populations coincides with lower income groups living in urban areas marked by different precarious conditions: sanitary, educational, social, etc. In the private sphere, the demand for property and individual security feeds a whole apparatus that includes the real estate market, security industry and urban gentrification processes (Kanashiro 2008). This apparatus is dedicated to protecting middle and upper-class populations considered potential victims of urban crime by equipping neighborhoods, condominiums and residential buildings where these populations live with surveillance and security systems. CCTV systems, very evident in the works of art presented here, flooded Latin America by means of the private security industry that protected private and/or commercial areas against the threat of populations deemed dangerous. As Marta Kanashiro (2008) points out, considering the Brazilian historical context: “surveillance cameras in Brazil passed through some reconfigurations of meaning, during which security began to be seen as a commodity and as something to be provided privately (...) Cameras are seen as part of a process of urban transformation characterized by social exclusion” (Kanashiro 2008: 9).

One can thus observe that such devices are tied to a context of inequality, violence and social segregation expressed in some of the works presented in this exhibition. Another face of the Latin American culture of surveillance that is also present in the works presented consists in the strong impression television culture has on the everyday life of several Latin American countries. In news broadcasts as well as in entertainment programs, video surveillance images are recurrent and appear either as an index of what is “real” or as a narrative resource that lends an authenticity to television’s worn-out credibility and “restores” the viewer’s attention. The presence of video-surveillance images in Latin America’s mediatic rhetoric contributes to the trivialization of these devices in social life as well as increases its value in the (in)security market.

While this scenario is more explicitly present in some of the works of art, others attempt to explore aesthetic, emotional and sensorial processes that enhance, subvert and contort the senses and habitual social uses of security devices. In any case, if the securitarian or spectacularized logic of surveillance saturates our perception and regimes of vision and registration under control, the works presented here point to fissures and virtualities that problematize the limits within this logic. We hope that the reflexive, sensorial and participative processes incited by such works can dialogue with the academic research present in this issue, thus broadening the margins of contact between aesthetics, thought and politics.

This exhibition began from a mapping proposed by *Manifesto 21* in the beginning of 2010,⁷ with the aim of relating the production of Latin American artists and activists. This mapping, coordinated by Brazilian researchers and artists Milena Szafir and Paola Barreto, includes approximately 30 artists and is still in progress.⁸ The section presented here is the result of a connection between this initiative and the research of Fernanda Bruno, Ph.D., about surveillance aesthetics, developed since 2006.⁹ We would like to thank all the artists and collaborators.¹⁰

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⁷ After the second Symposium organized by the Latin America Surveillance Technology and Society Studies Network in Toluca, Mexico.

⁸ A call for artists and activists - originally sent by e-mails and spread by twitters - can be accessed at <http://blog.manifesto21.com.br/>

⁹ This research has been developed in cooperation with Consuelo Lins, Ph.D., within the line of Communications Technology and Aesthetics research in the graduate program in Communication and Culture at UFRJ (<http://www.pos.eco.ufrj.br/>).

¹⁰ We would like to acknowledge David Cole and Leonardo Teatini for their assistance in the translation of this article.