

Art in Security and Security in Art by Sara Raza

for the KISSS Project: Kinship International Strategy on Surveillance and
Suppression, Elastic residence, London

Issues pertaining to security, suppression and the demise of civil liberties are not entirely new statements being carried out by contemporary artists, evidence would point to much of the recently past 20th Century reflecting a highly critical critique of humanity's crimes against humanity. Take for example historical and pivotal models such as Hans Haake's sensational installation and public exposure of the, capitalist free for all, Shapolsky Real Estate scandal in New York in 1971, which led to the Guggenheim withdrawing the show and firing the curator. Or Barbara Krueger's epic billboards that decorated high rise buildings in New York to Ana Mendieta and Adrian Piper's attack on race and misogyny to the Guerrilla Girls' humorous and ironic hostage taking of the largely European and patriarchal art world, going from strength to strength as recently witnessed at the 51st Venice Biennale. Artists have always expressed the voice of a generation under siege, giving voice to the marginal through the emotional and intellectual discourse of visual art and culture. However, recently one bears witness to a drastic transformation in power issues that witness the clash between states of siege whereby the so-called foreign has collided head on with the domestic, peppered with a new taste for xenophobia.

Thus, marginal issues have turned full circle to reflect a colliding mainstream problem that has fast demanded full and undivided attention, both artistic and otherwise, such as the epic and tragic attacks in New York, Madrid, Beslam and London to the equal atrocities performed in Afghanistan and the ongoing war in Iraq in the name of the "War Against Terror." Through this collision the infiltration of constrained methods of suppression and surveillance that were once exercised in more subtle fashion have taken these "worldly" issues as perfect opportunities to upgrade their tactics, albeit, more aggressively. For instance, the restrictive enforcements imposed by America's Homeland Security, which post 9/11, has required that all Middle Eastern men living in the USA "voluntarily" comply with mandatory documentation in the form of photographing and finger printing. Across the Atlantic, Britain is seen to be lagging not too far behind the USA with the government's bid to introduce mandatory ID cards and a much more antagonistic approach towards "foreign nationals," which also included a similar stop and search policy, and further a more serious shoot to kill policy put into operation after the 7/7/05 attacks in London. Such measures, have largely forced artists and civilians alike to seriously deliberate over the question: whose security and freedom are we being asked to protect? The answer is of course self explanatory and highly disproportionate from all possible angles. The only beneficiaries are a privileged and elitist minority of share holders in wealth and power.

Consequently, artists across both sides of the Atlantic are being forced to reassess the dichotomy of security issues in opposition to personal freedom inspired by personal accounts of suppression or via the covert and overt rhetoric of the inhibition of countless others. What has become increasingly and acutely apparent are the ways in which artists are now re-appropriating the standard tools of suppression, utilising technology, interview and interrogation; to create highly performative and ironic works that suggest the ultimate form of performance art: The rehearsal of daily existence. In particular, these methods are being put forward by a new generation of younger artists involved in socially engaged practices in largely community and network based projects that connect with a wide range of multi-disciplinary practices such as theatre, surveillance, consumption and architecture.

International artists such as Bangladeshi-American Hasan Elahi and London based Portuguese artist paula roush have been pushing the boundaries between fixed definitions of technology and art by creating tracking/ tagging devices, that bear an uncanny resemblance to the mandatory “bracelets” worn by high risk criminals or those on parole so that law enforcement officers can keep track of their whereabouts. Whereas, American artists Fereshteh Toosi and Carolyn Lambert have been reevaluating American history in their restaging of the famous Boston Tea Party, toying with the idea of political consumption. Furthermore, New York based Kurdish-German artist Rey Akdogan and London based Iranian Maria Kheirkhah reflect on architecture, which is both literal and metaphorical, to address geographic and domestic issues.

In Elahi’s on-going research based project “Tracking Transience,” 2005 the artist has created a “bracelet” that accurately pinpoints his exact movements in real-time and is accompanied by photographs of every movement he has taken ranging from the last meal he ate to the last public urinal he visited. The project is largely intended to confuse borders between the private and the public and has been inspired by a life altering series of events involving the artist’s private life. In 2002 Elahi became the target of a rather thorough investigation instigated by the FBI after a tip from his storage unit owner that he was “an Arab with explosives who fled the US on September 12.” From then on he was met with regular meetings with FBI agents who trailed through every aspect of Elahi’s life, after six months and a polygraph test that was repeated nine times he was finally cleared of terrorist activity. Consequently, this experience inspired the artist to pan open his entire life for the public and interestingly the FBI were no longer the only ones that were privy to this information, it can be accessed by anyone at anytime on the artist’s website www.trackingtransience.com

Coinciding with Elahi, roush has created a semi fictional alter-ego Marion Manesta Forrester, who first surfaced at London’s Bow Festival in 2004. Manesta Forrester was electronically tagged and was given a period of three days to earn her citizenship to Bowville. Bowville functioned as a fictional urban cityscape whose inhabitants were actively invited to partake in the

countdown by voting for or against the protagonist. The networked performance undoubtedly resembled the reality television show "Big Brother," which created quite an addictive storm in the UK, where 10 housemates lived in the same house and members of the public weekly eliminated a member until there was only one: the winner. Simultaneously, the piece also referred to the real and actual notion of elimination and in-voluntary deportation of immigrants, asylum seekers and political refugees. Furthermore, the fact that the performance was staged for an urban setting additionally gave voice to the city as a site of investigation, which is an on going theme interwoven into roush's practice whereby, she actively works with the dual concept of politics and public space. Incidentally, this practice is based on a long series of performative works that examine the notion of emergency, public time and space and is a continuation of the "Exercise SOS: OK (save our souls: zero killings)," 2004 an ongoing project that looks at decontamination and consumption as politically charged armaments against institutional power formations. Ultimately, roush's strategies re-appropriate the strategies of 1970s feminist artists, however, roush's version has traded the issue of housework with security work. Nonetheless, the body under siege remains a feature from which one is able to trace a lineage with roush's feminist predecessors.

Complimentary, to roush's policies Fereshteh Toosi and Carolyn Lambert perceive the issue of security or rather "Securitea" as an important and recurring focal point within their practice. On the run up to American presidential election in 2004 Toosi and Lambert restaged New England's famous Boston Tea Party and created a fictional political party whose motto was to "drink more tea." Aside from the humour the party had a more political recourse to demonstrate against the "see something, say something," campaign imposed after 9/11 also the stop and search policy that was proposed to be introduced on the trains in Boston. Toosi and Lambert created a series of happenings, such as, political rallies and street interviews which lasted for a duration of 6 weeks in total. The duo invited the city's inhabitants to take part in a mass tea party where they were invited to drink or rather consume cups of "SecuriTea," "CommuniTea," "MobiliTea" and regular "Tea" and wage their insecurities in the collective performance that debunked the daily American intake of fear and paranoia as promoted via the media and its satellites. The project was highly entertaining just as it was politically motivated and successfully managed to create a new spin on the original Boston Tea Party and its grounds.

In contrast to the notion of restaging real public happenings New York based artist Akdogan, is mainly preoccupied with building up the hype and fantasy of an architectural project that is improbable, impossible and problematic to build. Within her on-going research based project "Formula 1 Grand Prix Kurdistan," 2005 Akdogan is concerned with building up a fictional project with the aid of actual architects and engineers to construct a fantasy race-track along the Kurdish borderline, bordering Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. The project's fictional status toys boldly with the actual and worldly impacts that the creation of a possible Kurdish state would pose in light of the actuality that Kurdistan does not exist as a real state. However, the nature of the "game" of

high velocity that a Formula 1 race track alludes towards suggests the character of elitism as one of the most privileged and class orientated sports, which is maintained for the entertainment of a particular cohort. Similarly, the fate of an actual independent Kurdish State in the Middle East also resides in the hands of an elitist minority who are busying themselves playing another type of game.

In addition, Kheirkhah's performance photographs "In Love With a Red Wall," 2003 deal primarily with the internal architectural space that is at once a space of comfort as it is a space of stifling suppression. Within her performances one is able to witness the artist dressed in the compulsory Islamic garb imposed by Iran and other Muslim states of black veil whilst she lovingly muses over her beloved red wall within the tightly enclosed space. At times she is trying to embrace the wall at other times she is trying to read to it, whatever the action one thing remains the same the aspect of non-reciprocal exchange. "In Love With a Red Wall" echoes the containment of space and place in a biased relationship of oppression that suggests the façade of passion and admiration, but in actuality might suggest a mask for restriction and suffocation. Simultaneously, the piece also addresses the notion of agoraphobia a condition that has been aggravated by American and British governments' mass paranoia campaign. Take for example America's colour coded system, which determines the probability of a terror attack, the colour red, interestingly, determining a very probable threat. Whereas, further in Britain a recent mass leaflet dropping exercise was intended to create a similar affect of fear to confine the public with another walled existence of ignorance and xenophobia, which is both unnecessary and highly problematic.

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