

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Julieta Cervantes

Internal Security Investigation #100-190707

by **Ellen Chenoweth**

Bard College recently hosted a “performance exhibition on surveillance,” which included performances and installations. Participating artist [Hasan Elahi](#) has conducted a long-running art project, [Tracking Transience](#), in which he self-reports his activities and location to the government at all times. In this spirit, and acknowledging the U.S. government’s history and continued practice of monitoring its own citizens, these three performance responses are written as if reporting for a government agency. (Thanks to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), some of the real reports on American citizens surveilled by intelligence agencies have been made publicly available and a small sampling of reports on public figures can be viewed [here](#).)

Report made at: Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, Bard College

Date: 04/29/17

Reporting Office: Philadelphia

Title of Case: WE'RE WATCHING: A performance exhibition on surveillance

Character of Case: INTERNAL SECURITY - MISCELLANEOUS

ANNIE DORSEN, THE GREAT OUTDOORS, 13:00

First performance witnessed was by ANNIE DORSEN. Audience of 45-50 people entered theater space. Inside theater space was an inflated black structure in the shape of an igloo. Before entering, audience was advised that it might get very hot inside, and received numerous warnings about not touching or leaning into the walls. Each audience member entered one by one so minimum amount of air escaped the black igloo. (Subject refers to igloo as planetarium in printed materials. Possible indirect reference to global climate change

through usage of igloo shape.)

(NOTE: Most audience members reclined onto their backs for better planetarium viewing, including video by RYAN HOLSOPPLE inside walls and ceiling of igloo. Agent stayed seated to maintain objectivity and wakefulness.)

Video projection surrounded audience members with a blue sky and suburban landscape. A woman's voice read words. Words became short phrases, then longer phrases and sentences. All text reportedly sourced from internet comments. The sky turned from day to night, with frequent shooting stars. Agent found that woman's voice was connected to physical woman sitting 6-8 feet away, performer KAIJA MATISS. Sky video was accompanied by stringed instruments and nature sounds; stringed instruments gradually became louder and more frantic. Video concluded with an image of a small disco ball that became a large, pixelated moon. (Agent reclined at this point to better be consumed with moon image.)

Mention of [PGP keys](#) in the concluding section, but no direct recommendation for stronger encryption practices.

Upon exiting the performance, audience members in earshot reported disorientation from the feeling of being in a dark box inside a dark box. Audience members also observed appreciating freely circulating air. Ideas possibly explored: Freedom vs. captivity. Internet comments as cosmic hell. Nature of reality.

Performance on 04/29/17 listed as preview performance; continued observation recommended.

MICHELLE ELLSWORTH, THE REHEARSAL ARTIST, 15:00

Before entering performance space of MICHELLE ELLSWORTH, audience members were asked to volunteer to give a cheek swab with saliva and DNA information. Cheek swab declined due to fears of undermining agent security. Non-volunteers were coerced into wearing items alternately called "hair aprons" or "knee aprons," consisting of a wig-like item attached over the pants at the knee. Explanation given for their purpose did not make sense.

Only eight (8) audience members were allowed at each viewing, and audience passed through maze-like wooden installation with peepholes. Viewers could observe performers completing tasks such as glazing a tower of ceramic donuts (approximation of activity). Performers wore costumes of red vintage swimwear, simultaneously bringing to mind both swimming and flying.

Viewers were then seated in front of a porthole aperture and ELLSWORTH's head appeared to deliver short speech. Subject presents as white, late thirties to mid-forties, and appeared nervous but charming, explaining that the audience would be activating mirror neurons; subject then exhorted the viewers to caress their faces in order to feel empathy with the test subject. (Agent complied in order to test reaction.) Passing reference to current "geopolitical situation" and pressing need for empathy.

There was a collaborator filming or taking photographs behind the audience, contributing to a sensation of being monitored.

A disembodied female head appeared in the aperture, and bruised arms placed various objects inside the head tank with her, such as kitchen furniture from a dollhouse. The head appeared to be speaking, but no sound was audible. Occasionally, there was the sound of an electric shock and the tank turned red. Overall sensation was deeply unpleasant, and a strong impression of sinister forces.

The audience was ushered behind the scenes of the tank set-up and could suddenly see the two bodies of the performers, rather than just the arms of one and the head of another. At first, agent was reminded of ANDREW SCHNEIDER (see file for [YOUARENOWHERE](#)), but further audience tricks and manipulations develop. Sensation turned into something more pleasant and sinister forces appeared less so. Mood became lighter.

Recommend ELLSWORTH for continued close monitoring and observation as her brain appears highly unusual and unpredictable.

WILL RAWLS, CLAUDIA RANKINE, WHAT REMAINS, 15:30

This performance was a collaboration between WILL RAWLS (see file on AMERICAN REALNESS for work from earlier this year, THE PLANET-EATERS), and decorated poet CLAUDIA RANKINE.

Performance space did not feel like a stage, but like a portion of a loading dock, with a heavy door rolled down to keep audience locked in. Grey cinder blocks surrounded audience members. WHAT REMAINS included three young female performers (TARA WILLIS, JESSICA PRETTY, and MARGUERITE HEMMINGS) and one young male performer (JEREMY TOUSSAINT-BAPTISTE). All appeared to be African-American. The majority of the time, the women were performing together and the man was creating a soundscore with unknown equipment in a corner.

The women were dressed in black garments that sometimes appeared red. (Recommend starting new files on costume designer ELEANOR O'CONNELL and production designer DAVID SZLASA as possible magicians.)

The women performed a variety of activities, often at the same time. They walked slowly towards the audience together, or strutted like runway models. Sometimes they wore robes with a cloud-like appearance; sometimes limbs expanded within the cloud. Sometimes they were jumping. Sometimes they were singing. Sometimes they were individuals, but often they were a small collective of three (3). Sometimes arms were rising. They were coaxing the earth or trying to escape. They were closely connected to each other. They were heaving or hurtling. Two carried one, her feet walking across the wall. They are in the moonlight or the light of a disco ball.

Many elements present at once in this show: gentle and rough. Meditative and raucous. Opacity and transparency. Sacred and profane. Day and night. Future and past. Agent's consciousness might need to expand to take it all in.

Agent has had several dreams featuring these performers since viewing; possible strong psychic energy activated during performance.

WE'RE WATCHING: A performance exhibition on surveillance, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, April 27 - 30, <http://fishercenter.bard.edu/werewatching/>

Photos: Julieta Cervantes, courtesy of Live Arts Bard

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