

Diversions

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Review / Exhibit: Show Explores Life Under the Lens --- A German Exhibition Surveys the Consequences of Constantly Being Watched

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The German psyche is permeated with an uneasiness about surveillance that stems from Nazi times, was buttressed by the Stasi era and has been made stronger by the Internet age. Germany was the first European country to pass data-security laws meant to keep personal information from being misused by the government or marketing companies. Now, however, the country that learned the hard way about the ills of the ubiquitous state has made an about face. Late last year, Germany hurriedly passed laws that limit privacy in the name of fighting terror. The laws renew the use of computer profiling, expand the powers of the secret services and pave the way for biometric data to be used on identity cards.

All this has taken place while many German citizens are still reviewing their Stasi secret police files and confronting their informers.

It is ironic, then, that an exhibit exploring the idea of surveillance and its sociological consequences is running in the city of Karlsruhe, home to the German Supreme Court, which guaranteed the constitutional right to data privacy in the 1980s.

The interactive exhibit at the Center for Art and Media ZKM, a former munitions factory, is entitled "ctrl [space]" and was organized by American professor Thomas Levin. The exhibit allows viewers to experience what it is like to be constantly watched.

You will be observed as you walk through the exhibit. If you take a rest, you will leave a heat imprint on the seat. You can perform surveillance on yourself and your comrades, and, beware, even the restrooms are under the lens.

Curated before Sept. 11, "ctrl [space]" has taken on new relevance as nations around the world have rushed to enact laws that infringe on privacy under the guise of fighting terror.

Germany and Europe have quite advanced data-protection laws and experts here consider the U.S. a developing country in comparison, since private information is regularly sold in the U.S. as marketing material.

Given its history, Germany was the first country in the world to start federal-level checks and balances for privacy laws. Under the Datenschutzgesetz, or the data-protection law, it set up independent monitoring agencies in each state and in the federal government in the 1970s, according to Thilo Weichert, the deputy head of the oversight agency for a northern province.

The agencies are charged with monitoring how other government agencies and private companies use information about citizens. "In Germany, we believe in informational self-determination," Mr. Weichert said.

A trip through the exhibit saw this writer's blood pressure rise as viewers are reminded about the omnipresence of surveillance in our daily lives. Our trips to the cash machine, our drives through the tollbooth and our walks through subways are all subject to an electronic archive.

One particular work in the exhibit was a computer screen that shows each hidden camera in Manhattan. With a few clicks, the program will design a path for someone who wants to get from point A to point B without being photographed. It even shows the numerous cameras that surrounded the World Trade Center. (www.redsee.org)

Subtitled "Rhetorics of Surveillance, from Bentham to Big Brother," the exhibit explains the ideas of 18th century British philosopher Jeremy Bentham, who sought to reform behavior through surveillance.

Bentham's ideas were originally applied to prison design, but we are all too familiar with them today. He believed people would behave more correctly if they thought they were being watched.

When we hit the brakes in our cars at the sight of a radar gun or monitor the Web sites we visit at work, we are doing just as Bentham wanted. The watchful eye doesn't even have to be open to do its job.

Complete with original Stasi cameras, much of the exhibit at the Center for Art and Media ZKM covers how people are monitored in their daily lives. However, it also puts us on the other side of the lens, letting viewers examine their prejudices.

A piece entitled "Antlitze," which means countenance or face literally, by Juergen Klauke shows 96 masked and scarved faces photographed in black and white between 1972 and 2000. Many of the images would appear to fit the mold of terrorist, and viewers might catch themselves jumping to that conclusion. The artist seems to say that someone who covers his or her face isn't necessarily dangerous or hiding something.

The 96 masked men and women are just steps away from a 17 meter-long digital satellite photo taken of lower Manhattan on Sept. 15, 2001. Artist Laura Kurgan originally had planned to show a positive aspect of surveillance by capturing a satellite image of the Amazon rain forest. It is through such photos that clear cutting can be observed and possibly stopped.

Such positive and negative forms of surveillance characterize the modern life beginning when we are infants. Cautious parents set up two-way baby monitors with the belief that more oversight is better than less. Outside of the nursery, the surveillance continues but the eyes and ears behind the cameras and satellites belong to someone besides a cautious mother.

We are under such constant public surveillance that it is almost counterproductive to Bentham's ideas. Well-meaning citizens often forget to alter their behavior for the camera.

"We need to learn to read the languages of surveillance -- the visual and textual languages -- in order to understand how surveillance functions in contemporary society," said curator Mr. Levin. The Princeton University professor is considering touring the exhibit because of its new-found resonance.

The exhibit won't answer the question of how much surveillance is the proper dosage, given the need for more public safety. But it will give visitors a chance to raise some pressing questions.

Here is one to start with: Are those cameras in the bathroom really rigged?

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