

Surveillance, Performance, Self-Surveillance

Interview with Jill Magid

GEERT LOVINK

The Amsterdam-based American artist Jill Magid was a 'must-see' at the 2004 Liverpool Biennial. Her work fitted in with the Biennial's theme of the city and the 'engagement with place'. The installation, "Evidence Locker", shown at the Tate Gallery and the Foundation for Art and Creative Technology (FACT) Centre for new media and screen culture, is a seductive play with Liverpool's CCTV infrastructure. Instead of portraying citizens as victims of Big Brother, Magid's work opens up a new field of art and activism in which predictable forms of protest against the almighty eyes of power are turned into a dandy-like performance.

Early in 2004 Jill Magid spent 31 days in Liverpool – the length of time CCTV footage is stored, unless it is used as evidence of a crime. Wearing a red coat, she was followed by the CCTV cameras, and an intimate relationship between her and 'the Observer' developed. The installation consists of a variety of formats: from a printed daily exchange with the Observer, to audio files of Citywatch employees describing 'suspect' behaviour of individuals they follow, to Jill strolling through the inner city shopping zone.

There are two outstanding sections. In one, the Observer is guiding Jill, who has kept her eyes closed, through mobile phone contact, while she moves through parts of the city and from one camera to another. The second is a short piece, with Jill on the back of the Observer's motorbike: blurred images, switching quickly, until they drive outside CCTV reach. In the following interview, which was done via email, and in person at FACT in October 2004, we talked about the Liverpool Biennial project in relation to Magid's earlier work, and about the public response to this remarkable piece of urban techno-poetry.

"(...) I will fill in the gaps, the parts of my diary you are missing.
Since you can't follow me inside, I will record the inside for you.
I will mark the time carefully so you will never lose me.

Don't worry about finding me. I will help you. I will tell you
what I was wearing, where I was, the time of day...If there was anything
distinguishing about my look that day, I will make sure you know (...)"

- "Evidence Locker", Prologue

City of L. City Watch CCTV and the Data Protection Act 1998

SECTION 1

About Yourself

The information requested below is to help the Scheme

- (a) satisfy itself as to your identity and
- (b) find any data held about you.

PLEASE USE BLOCK LETTERS

Title (tick box as appropriate) Mr Mrs Miss Ms

Other title (e.g. Dr., Rev., etc.)

Surname/family name MAGID

First names JILL STEPHANIE

Maiden name/former names

Sex: Male Female

Height: 5' 3 1/2"

Date of Birth: 25/02/73

Place of Birth: BRIDGEPORT, CONNECTICUT, USA

Current Home Address (to which we will reply): *IF REPLY BEFORE MARCH 7TH:

JILL MAGID, EGELANHERSTRAAT 46-I, 1015 PN AMSTERDAM, NL.

* IF AFTER: c/o CHERI MAGID, [REDACTED] BROADWAY #3F, NEW YORK, NY, 10024

Postcode: (IN [REDACTED] JAN 01 - FEB 01 @ [REDACTED] RODNEY STREET 19AR L [REDACTED] USA.

A telephone number will be helpful in case you need to be contacted. Tel. No: in HOLLAND = +31(0) [REDACTED] IN NYC: 212 741 [REDACTED] (rainy cycle cc)

If you have lived at the above address for less than 10 years, please give your previous addresses for the period:

Previous address(es)

Dates of occupancy From:

AUG 94 - AUG 95
?# COLLEGE AVE, ITHACA, NY 14850 USA.

- JAN 03 → DEC 04
Egelanherstraat 46-I, 1015 PN Amsterdam, NL
- JAN 02 → DEC 03
Louis Ventstraat 83, Amsterdam, NL
- JAN 01 → DEC 02
Valkenierstraat 31 Amsterdam, NL
- AUG 00 → DEC 01
142 WEST 87th ST, #C 2
NEW YORK, NY, 10024 USA
- SEPT 99 → JULY '99
752 TREMONT STREET #8
BOSTON, MASS. 02118 USA
- SEPT 98 → AUG 99
222 R HAMILTON ST, CAMBRIDGE, MASS. 02139 USA
- AUG 95 → JULY '98
432 W. 47th St # 5W NY, NY 10036 USA

GL: The dominant presumption about surveillance is that it turns all civilians into victims. Instead of creating a feeling of security, CCTV systems treat each of us as potential suspects. At least, that's the common belief. How do you look at this widely shared set of ideas? It's funny that political activists, and also artists, I must add, have not yet transcended the surveillance ideology.

JM: I have never looked at surveillance technology from the position of a civilian under its gaze. Or rather, I should say that when I have done so, it has been in response to a question such as this. I was drawn to surveillance technology for its potential as a tool that offered specific qualities and capabilities; CCTV systems enabled me to see and capture myself (and my body) in a form that I could not experience without it being employed. Surveillance cameras create stages, or fixed, monitored platforms. Under their gaze, there is a potential for me to act, and a potential to save this act as a recorded event. By watching an area rather than an individual, the camera in its static position seems to favour its context over the pedestrians passing through it. It seems to say: the city is permanent, the civilian ephemeral.

In a positive sense, this technology offers me a way to place myself, to become visible (and potentially permanent) within the city, through a medium bigger than myself. It is thus a creative field in which I choose to play. In terms of its political position (as maintaining security or, conversely, invading privacy) I see these positions as qualities of the technology itself: criteria of the tool that simply makes its use, in my way, more loaded. I have also looked at CCTV cameras as objects, or visual signs.

In my past project, "System Azure Security Ornamentation", I played with the camera's political ambivalence: between its position as a tool that protects public space as 'watched space', or as a *sign* of watched space. As a sign, the camera stands more as a reference to the body or institution that is watching rather than as a tool with the function of generating security. I wondered, are the cameras ornamental? If so, do they signify authority?

I approached Police Headquarters in Amsterdam and asked if I could cover the surveillance cameras on the building's façade with fake jewels, as an art project. They rejected my request and the idea of working with an artist. I remade myself into a company, System Azure, and again approached them with the same question, this time for a fee. After months of negotiations, I succeeded in officially covering four of the Headquarters' cameras in jewels, in colours with police-assigned meanings (see www.systemazure.com). Even here I do not feel I was taking sides politically, I was more interested in the camera as an image that triggered questions of meaning, even from those who controlled them.

GL: In your writings for the Liverpool "Evidence Locker" project, you talk about the city of "L". Everyone will understand that you mean Liverpool. Why have you chosen to use an abbreviation? Liverpool is not an average city. It's quite an extreme and exceptional case, in terms of its history, decline and attempts to revitalise urban life. What's special about the Liverpool surveillance culture?

JM: Using "L" was not really meant to mask the city's identity; it was rather a way to place this identity as secondary, or less important. This question reminds me of the first: in that both CCTV and Liverpool have their own histories and connotations so loaded with

preconceived images and critiques that those suppositions come before the story I want to put forth. When I speak of CCTV or surveillance in relation to this piece, or those previous, I try to use analogous terms that are slightly less recognisable: such as spelling it out as ‘closed circuit video’, or, as in the book that accompanied “Evidence Locker”, “the camera” or “you” to replace those watching through them.

I want to get beyond presumptions of the system, or the city, so that the qualities or details that get less attention – that, for me, truly make them up – can be foregrounded. What is special about Liverpool’s system is the criteria it is run by: the 31-day period of holding footage, the laws of the Data Protection Act 1998 (a British act), and the fact of it being so new (the system on this scale is one year old). Some activists based in Liverpool remark that the cameras are symbols of hygienic space, in which “unwants” are targeted and removed; or as marketing signs to businesses and consumers that the city is now watched and thus safer. While I may agree with these ideas, the debates around them run parallel to my own questions and desires. I was more concerned with the size of the system and how the presence of so many cameras turned the city into a movie set with 242 cameramen.

GL: For “Evidence Locker”, you have chosen to take up the role as the red-dressed heroine, the seductive female dandy who strolls through anonymous metropolitan areas. In this way the story of urban surveillance systems, so to speak, steps back and becomes an instrument in YOUR story. What does this reversal of functions mean to you, compared to what it might mean to the viewers of the installation?

JM: The desire to bring abstract concepts or technologies toward myself in order to understand them intimately is a constant within my work. Liverpool’s CCTV system is extensive, based on complicated legal structures and anonymous as *public* video surveillance. To come to know it, I needed to use it, to add myself into its equation. I recognised the system’s potential to extend beyond its prescribed intentions. For me, this potential was romantic: I could be embedded into the city’s memory for seven years; the city could be my stage; I could perform and be watched. If what I created was not my story, but someone else’s or that of an invented character, I would not have been able to feel it in the same way. Only by being watched, and influencing how I was watched, could I touch the system and become vulnerable to it.

I designed the two installations, “Evidence Locker” at the Tate and “Retrieval Room” at FACT, in a way to bring the viewer along my journey, along a loose narrative path. At Tate you enter a controlled space, like that of the secret CCTV station; and at FACT you ‘remember’ the experience through retrieved footage and my letters.

The viewer approaches the work as a ‘third party witness’: he or she watches me being watched. I imagine some viewers identify with the controller and some identify with me. I am *an individual* of the public under view, one who has been singled out. Some people find this position scary and others find it desirable. I found it to be the latter.

GL: Late in 2002, during the WorldInformation.org festival in Amsterdam, you had created a work that involved police security cameras. Was it really different working with the Amsterdam police department?

JM: It was very different, but this difference reflects my approach. With System Azure, I transformed myself from an artist to a businessperson in order to be seen by the police.

SECTION 5

DECLARATION. (to be signed by the applicant)

The information that I have supplied in this application is correct and I am the person to whom it relates.

Signed by: *Will Magist* Date: *February 24, 2007*

Warning – a person who impersonates or attempts to impersonate another may be guilty of an offence.

Before returning this form

- Have you completed ALL Sections in this form?
- Have you enclosed TWO identification documents?
- Have you signed and dated the form?
- Have you enclosed the £10.00 (ten pound) fee?

Further Information:

These notes are only a guide. The law is set out in the Data Protection Act, 1998.

Further information and advice may be obtained from:

The Information Commissioner,
 [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED]
 [REDACTED]
 Td. [REDACTED]

Please note that this application for access to information must be made direct to City of L. City Watch CCTV (address on Page 1) and NOT to the Data Protection Commissioner.

My intention in either case remained the same; this transformation was necessary for them to hear me. I was curious to explore how those in authority related to their cameras – as ornaments or as serious tools of security. Once we established the cameras' ability to act as architectural ornaments for the police building, the negotiating space and the project itself became more theatrical.

The deeper we got into the patterns and colours of the fake jewels, the farther we moved from the camera's so-called intended function. It was this slippage that intrigued me; I questioned the representation of power versus the activity of power.

Working with the Liverpool police was more collaborative. I did not clearly state my position in terms of career, but rather my interest in using the system. The work was not about representation, but about function. I wanted to expand the function of the system – a function that was latent within it – and I needed them to work with me.

GL: In Amsterdam your artistic strategy consisted of the 'beautification' of public security cameras: ornamentation of something that is essentially ugly and suspect. Did you try to make the cameras visible? Was the idea as simple as that? I found it interesting that you did this in the red light district.

JM: While the final product, the bejewelled camera, is simple, the story behind it is layered. This is true for a surveillance camera even before it is ornamented. Surveillance cameras are painted beige so as to not stand out too much; yet, as with the police cameras I used, they are often large and prominently placed. The police themselves, remarking on the tools' inherent contradiction, explained how the perception of the cameras depended on who was looking: invisible to the innocent civilian, yet a deterrent to the criminal. To be hidden and to simultaneously act as a signifier is quite an ambiguous position!

Attached to the police headquarters, the cameras announce their power: the power to look down on those walking by, from nine different positions. In this way the camera is both an ornament and a tool of power. A security camera on a police station is like a gargoyle on a castle.

It was the police who offered the colours, and the meaning attached to them. According to the authorities, the colour red, meaning *liefdevol*, 'full of love', represents 'police love'. What is that, and what does it mean? Love for whom and in what form? My proposal to ornament police cameras in the red light district in red jewels simply put that question out there. In this area of Amsterdam, red is the sign for prostitution; the colour signifies the place of consumption and the kind of services rendered. To use red on the police cameras adds this meaning of the colour with that of the police. What happens to their meaning then? Asking the police to cover their cameras in red jewels (and red hearts) is also a way of asking them to claim responsibility for their cameras.

GL: You mentioned that there are those who are exhibitionists, and those who are not.

JM: Some viewers who saw my work reacted to me in a kind of horrified way, saying how scary they found my 'watched' position to be. Others told me they wished it had been them. One man said that he wanted to be "the girl in the red coat on the back of the motorcycle", in reference to my video entitled *Final Tour*. I have also been told that there seems to be a large group of young women who are drawn to the work as a kind of escapist fantasy. I did experience this to be true when I returned for our talk at FACT. I am not surprised by the two opposing reactions, as many of my projects in which I have placed myself before the camera have elicited similar contradictory responses.

I did a project called "Lobby 7" at MIT, in which I hijacked the lobby's informational monitor to broadcast my own transmission. This transmission was a real-time exploration of my body beneath my clothes via a pinhole surveillance camera that I held in my hand. While the experience of exposing myself in this lobby was terrifying, it was also exhilarating. I created a new relationship with my body, as well as to the lobby and the people in it, via this technology. It left me stronger and yet more vulnerable. I don't assume that everyone wants to feel this, or would feel this way from the same performance. We all choose the kind of relationships we like, and the roles we like to play.

GL: How would you describe the audience responses to the piece? It certainly raises a lot of questions, in particular about your role as a performer and artist.

JM: During the performance I was not aware of the audience response; I did not take my eyes from the monitor. I watched myself while the audience appeared and aggregated in the lobby behind me. You might call them witnesses. I could hear comments of those people who watched closely behind me, and others as they passed.

I could hear one couple close by for at least half the piece; they discussed the

composition of my body on the monitor and how my skin related to the surrounding architecture. Two men, looking like professors, passed and one asked the other, "What is on the monitor?" His response was, "I think it's one of those videos about a baby being born". I was told seven police officers came in and asked people if they knew who had put the "sex tape" into the system. These reactions say a lot about how images of the (female) body, in general as well as in the academic environment of MIT, can be perceived, and also the assumptions that come with those perceptions.

In the days after the performance, at least five women came to me; each one said she wished it had been her on the tape. Other women I did not recognise gave me nods, smiles, or angry looks around campus. Both men and women seemed to look at me longer.

In the documentation video (I had people hiding in the balconies above, filming) it was clear that the image was not readily legible; the viewer would look at the monitor in confusion, and then his/her face would betray recognition. Some looked around to try and find out who was doing the self-surveillance, but many just stared at the screen. Viewers often changed the way they stood: pulling baseball caps lower, or crossing their arms before their chests. Others put their hands in their pockets.

The best reaction I got was from a professor of mine named Ed Levine. He told me that after he had seen the performance, he could never look at the lobby monitor again without seeing the image of my body on the screen.

GL: At MIT you studied with Krzysztof Wodiczko. Is it through him that you got involved in this type of performance?

JM: Not directly. Krzysztof was part of a team of professors, along with Dennis Adams, Julia Escher, Ed Levine and, later, Joan Jonas. I chose to go to MIT because I was no longer satisfied with my studio-based work. I lived in New York and felt a need to engage with the city directly. I was making architectural models that I wanted to build within the city, which would exist as pockets of silent or intimate space. The professors asked me if I had experienced these spaces I imagined, and suggested that until I was offered the millions of dollars it would take to build them, I should find a way to test my designs. I scaled the models down to wearable objects and clothing. The only way to test them was to use them in the urban environment. I guess you could call this the beginning of my performances.

GL: You have been trying to extract a film script out of the rich Liverpool material. Are you really thinking about a feature film? Would you use the original footage from the security cameras? Would it be fiction or something in-between, like a hyper-real fictionalised documentary?

JM: The original idea was to use the police footage I have, and to adapt the Subject Access Request forms (the letters) I wrote into a script. I hoped to make it a feature length film with a narrative structure closer to fiction than to documentary. From the beginning of the project I had wanted to treat the system as a film crew making cinema. Beginning this process of adapting the footage into a feature in Los Angeles this summer taught me a lot; the approach I used to make the videos for the art installation did not easily translate to a cinema space, and I am still considering how this can be done. There is surely a Hollywood story here; the question is how to do it. I am also curious to see if someone within the film industry takes this challenge on. I love the idea of police surveillance footage inspiring a

SECTION 2

Proof of Identity.

To help establish your identity your application must be accompanied by TWO official documents that clearly show your name, date of birth and current address.

For example: a birth/adoption certificate, driving licence, medical card, passport or other official document that shows your name and address.

A recent, full face photograph of yourself.

Failure to provide proof of identity may delay your application.

Document One : BIRTH CERTIFICATE

Document Two : PASSPORT

Photograph attached Yes No

SECTION 3

Supply of Information.

You have a right, subject to certain exceptions, to receive a copy of the information in a permanent form. Do you wish to:

- (a) View the information and receive a permanent copy?
- (b) Only view the information?

Hollywood film; of the project coming full circle. Surprisingly, I found that what I was faced with, adapting the footage for a feature, was closer to the process faced by reality TV editors, rather than the one faced by film directors.

GL: Why do you create narratives? They seem to drive your artwork.

JM: I don't often feel in control of the narratives that happen in my work. When a narrative does happen, I am usually riding along with it, to a place I am unsure of until I am there. I also would not say that narrative is consistent within my work. The work I do with mirrors is more of an action. With the mirror tools and videos, I cut small mirrors to fit the shape of my hand or to fit the object I want to catch or hold within them. For example, if I want to hold a skyscraper, I cut a small mirror the size of a pen. In this, I catch the Empire State Building. Through the video lens, I drag it across the skyline.

The narrative of "Evidence Locker" grew from a process, or a series of actions. My intention upon arriving to Liverpool was to use the CCTV system as a film crew, to act as the protagonist, and to be saved to the evidence locker forever; or at least for seven years. I planned to use the Subject Access Request forms as my diary in the city. I don't think most

of us imagine our diaries as a story, but of course it reads as a kind of narrative. The (love) story grew from the relationship that the controllers and I formed through the camera, especially with one of them.

As for the general occurrence of narrative, I would refer again to my desire to bring abstract concepts closer to me. A way to do this is to re-write or reconstruct myself into them. This process is a kind of storytelling to myself. It is this story I present.

GL: Could you tell us more about the difference you make between private and public spaces?

JM: To describe private space, I often speak of bubbles. Inside the bubble is private, outside is public. The boundaries are subtle, possibly invisible. The inside is softer, quieter, and time runs more slowly. Like Foucault's notion of heterotopias, this bubble is a mirror of its surroundings. *In the mirror I see where I am not.* A bubble can appear inside of other spaces, while everything outside its boundaries continues on as it was. In my example above, I use a small mirror to hold the Empire State Building in my hand. By using the mirror, I have managed to create a bubble for the tower and myself. Inside the bubble, I can hold the tower.

GL: What is self-surveillance, in your opinion? Is it self-examination, or rather an urge to control your own image and reach a stage of super self-awareness? Do you think that the presence of so many cameras means that we are 'internalising' technology? Is it really 'invading' our bodies and minds, or do you see ways to ignore it?

JM: Self-surveillance is a way of seeing myself, via technology, in a way I could not otherwise. In self-surveillance, I use a system or a technology as my mirror. The type of reflection I face is specific to the tool I am using.

Who I appear to be in that reflection is unfamiliar. The process of coming to recognise myself as I appear there is what I call my work.

Jill Magid is an Amsterdam-based artist who works with surveillance technologies. Her recent work was exhibited at WorldInformation.Org (Amsterdam, 2002), the Liverpool Biennale (2004) and Gallery de Appel (Amsterdam, 2005).

LINKS

Liverpool Biennial: www.biennial.com

Liverpool Biennial project: www.evidencelocker.net

Security Ornamentation website: www.systemazure.com