

Surveillance—Then and Now

How Little We Know of Our Neighbors

Thursday, February 10 at 7 pm — San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

presented in collaboration with **SFMOMA**

in association with *Exposed: Voyeurism, Surveillance, and the Camera Since 1870*

Mass Observation was an astonishing long-term social research project founded in Great Britain in 1937 by a small collective of creative anthropologists, writers, photographers and filmmakers. Conceived as an innocent homegrown quasi-ethnographic experiment, Mass Observation eventually involved hundreds of citizen volunteers and amassed a huge archive of observation journals and surreptitious photography documenting the quotidian of life of mid-century Britain. The complete story of Mass Observation—including the crucial participation of the great British “surrealist documentarian” Humphrey Jennings—is told in Rebecca Baron’s fascinating 2005 film *How Little We Know of Our Neighbors*. Tracing the movement’s evolution from eccentric hobby to wartime domestic spy unit to its final manifestation as a market research firm, *How Little We Know...* reflects greatly on the present day condition of heightened security, public surveillance and voluntary market profiling. Also screening: *Photofinish Figures (Il finish delle figure)*, Paolo Gioli’s impressionistic array of faces in the metropolis and Scott Stark’s *Posers*, a documentation of photographic posturing, filmed on San Francisco’s Embarcadero. (*Steve Polta*)

Photofinish Figures (Il finish delle figure) (2009) by Paolo Gioli; 16mm, b&w, silent, 9 minutes, print from the maker

“Early cinema confronted the spectator like no other art, beckoning a reciprocal engagement and curiosity as both spectacle and document. Paolo Gioli returns to a tabula rasa with his handmade cameras and masks [over lenses], which allow him to exploit and fashion film’s reproductive means. The exhilarating *Il Finish delle figure* updates Muybridge and relays a sense of the contemporary, sensory overload of living in a metropolis.” (Toronto International Film Festival)

How Little We Know of Our Neighbours (2005) by Rebecca Baron; digital video, color, sound, 49 minutes, tape from Video Data Bank

Rebecca Baron: Surveillance imagery, which my new film deals with, is an extreme manifestation of this—the surveillance camera is on perpetually, and that changes the weight of the image. The very first shot in *How Little We Know...* is produced by a camera obscura, and it’s doing the same thing as a surveillance camera—it’s an image viewed remotely with a live feed. So even though it’s a pre-photographic apparatus, it very closely resembles contemporary surveillance’s perpetual flow. [...]

Janet Sarbanes: In *How Little We Know...* you track the way that technology fell into the hands of regular people. It makes a difference who is watching. It’s the same thing with the Rodney King video.

RB: The question is what role ordinary people will play when surveillance technology is now so widely available to them. There was a proposal shortly after September 11th to hire private citizens as surveillance monitors. They were to be paid on an hourly basis to work from home and monitor areas over the Internet and report on any unusual activity. Remember operation TIPS (Terrorism Information and Prevention System) proposed by the Department of Homeland Security? Workers such as postal carriers were to report on suspicious activities. The proposal was withdrawn after being denounced by the ACLU and other groups. Technology that could be used for surveillance is so widely available to ordinary citizens. The question is how will we use it? The same was true with photography. From the beginning the question was asked, well, what is it for?

JS: *The Mass Observation Project whose history you trace [...] didn't start out as a surveillance project—there was a kind of wonder to the early images and information gathering. When did that information gathering devolve into a project of mastery, and why? Is that inherent in the medium—the problem of “shooting,” in Susan Sontag’s sense, the violent freezing or “stilling” of the subject? Do you find a kind of innocence in the earlier Mass Observation images? [...]*

RB: One of the things that interested me in Mass Observation to begin with was that narrative. It was a progressive populist movement that used surveillance—which is to say, surreptitious photography—because they believed that if you could show people a picture of themselves as they really were, then they could make decisions and changes in their lives. And then when World War II broke out, Mass Observation participants were recruited by the Ministry of Information to act as civilian spies—although they didn't prove to be very effective! After the war, Mass Observation became a market research firm. But in doing more research I found out that it really was quite that direct (or poetic!) a fall. Because they were independent, they were constantly looking for funding, so they did occasional market research projects for hire even in the 1930s. And there wasn't much of a progressive political agenda as I wanted to believe—it was pretty haphazard and there was a classist element to the whole thing.

I initially became interested in Mass Observation by reading an interview conducted twenty years ago with Mass Observation's photographer, Humphrey Spender. Spender believed photography was only worthwhile as an information-gathering medium; he did not believe in photography as an art form—he said any idiot could take a picture. He actually abandoned photography in favor of painting. Another reason he gave for abandoning photography is that he felt the only good photos he could take were surreptitious ones—they were the truest images. And yet he was a very shy person and he felt that he was invading people's privacy—plus he recognized his own class privilege [...]. That fascinated me, that someone would become so skilled and such a beautiful photographer and then just abandon it completely, because he was appalled at the thing he did best.

[...] I'm personally very uncomfortable shooting people on the street and I've largely avoided that kind of photography. In *How Little We Know...*, I wanted to push myself to shoot that way and I can see the fear and discomfort in that footage. In preparation for this film, I interviewed several photographers who did street photography to ask them how they felt about shooting strangers in the street. How do you deal with the fact that the best images are often the ones where people are the most vulnerable and in which they might be the least willing to expose themselves? But none of the photographers wanted to take anything like that; they wanted the people to know they were being photographed. And that surprised me, because part of what's pleasurable about that genre of photography is knowing that it's surreptitious, as with Robert Frank's blind couple on a park bench or Walker Evans' subway series—I actually repeated what Evans did for this film with a tiny digital watch camera.

JS: *So do you think the desire for mastery is inherent in the medium?*

RB: I don't know. *How Little We Know...* takes on these multiple desires we have for photography—in the case of surveillance it is about control and mastery, information and knowledge, and identification and authentication. But there's also an erotics to it—a pleasure in looking. I wanted all of those things to be included so that the piece wasn't just coming to the conclusion “surveillance is bad,” but also that it's tremendously pleasurable to look and those two things coexist. It's not an attempt to rectify that fact, but just to acknowledge it. (“The Idea of Still: Rebecca Baron interviewed by Janet Sarbanes,” published in *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, Karen Beckman and Jean Ma, eds. 2008, Duke University Press.)

Posers (2000) by Scott Stark; video, color, sound, 12 minutes, tape from the maker

“A diverse stream of tourists and passers-by on San Francisco's waterfront casually superimpose themselves against a benign backdrop of U.S. military might. The video camera tries to replicate the invisible frame that the subjects create around themselves as they assume, for a heightened moment, the image of themselves they wish others to see. The notion of the off-screen action to which they are responding—the photographer taking their picture—is echoed in the shadow of the mammoth **war machine** behind them, whose actions are, for most of us, perpetually ‘**off-screen**.’” (Scott Stark)

[browse the Mass Observation Archive at www.massobs.org.uk]