

# *Up Front*

## CITIZEN SPECTATORS

*Tom Sellar, Miriam Felton-Dansky, and Jacob Gallagher-Ross*

Mass surveillance conducted by government agencies of their own citizens has turned into one of the twentieth-first century's darkest, if most predictable, realities. Given the long history of wiretaps, illegal searches, and spying by those in power—in democracies and dictatorships alike—no one should have been completely surprised by the 2013 revelations, made by then twenty-nine-year-old National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden, that supposedly democratic governments (including the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and others) engage in widespread spying on their own and foreign citizens using telephone and Internet. Snowden's disclosures prompted outrage in the international community and fallout along the political spectrum; they also exposed the dubiety of still-cherished myths about the Internet as a force for social progress and transparency. With Snowden's revelations, the networks we depend on now seem far larger, more totalizing, and less private than previously imagined.

Meanwhile, the ubiquity of mobile devices, the proliferation of social media, and the emergence of sophisticated data-mining techniques have made mass observation by nongovernment actors an inextricable part of the fabric of everyday life. Social media and apps crunching personal data encourage self-surveillance, prompting us to track our every movement and desire—and to passively submit this data to corporations for evermore targeted marketing campaigns—in exchange for sensations of digital connection and communion and new forms of self-knowledge. For some, the intensified scrutiny is productive, even beneficial, allowing us to track steps taken, movies viewed, calories consumed, minutes meditated, and to keep up with distant friends or pursue experiments in self-fashioning. But at other times, we find ourselves assenting to social contracts we don't yet fully understand. Even as we make more and more of ourselves available for others to see, we hide more and more of ourselves behind the delimited forms of communication enabled by digital interfaces. If we're always being watched, and often watching, we're always performing and often spectating—but we frequently



Hasan Elahi's  
*Sweepback*, San Jose  
Mineta International  
Airport, California,  
2009–16. Photo:  
Courtesy of the  
artist

don't know where one activity ends and the other begins. Foucault's panopticon no longer describes the dispersed power structures organizing surveillance culture. Watchful guards have been replaced by blind algorithms—and by ourselves. As theatermaker Annie Dorsen suggests in these pages, we now find ourselves recalibrating the scale of self, in relation to a digital sublime.

Artists have responded in kind: Hasan Elahi, for example, uses Google Street View to source images for large-scale mounting, alluding to the camera obscura and calling attention to tracking systems that are constantly data-mining the landscapes we live in. Elahi was one of a group of interdisciplinary artists who came together at Live Arts Bard in April 2017 to investigate aspects of surveillance in their projects. Beyond state abuses of technology, privacy, and search and seizure that violate America's Fourth Amendment, what other forms of surveillance have found their way into our lives—online and off? And how might theater and performance, art forms predicated on heightened experiences of viewing—help us to see them?

Bard's performance biennial, titled *We're Watching* and curated by Caleb Hammons and Gideon Lester, set out to answer these questions with a series of commissioned performances in dance, theater, installation, and performance, prefaced with a conference of scholars and artists. Selections from these events appear in this special edition of *Theater*, including essays and documentary traces of the performances. Choreographer Will Rawls and poet Claudia Rankine collaborated on *What Remains*, an exploration of blackness and the gaze. In *Opacity*, Big Art Group contemplates intimacy and queerness experienced through technological metrics and means. *Future St.*, Alexandro Segade's dramatic fantasia, hallucinates a dystopia where desire and gender are closely monitored, but also enhanced by digital connection. These artists are finding new performance languages that embody disparate experiences of pervasive, unbounded surveillance—the kind that transforms bodies and identities into data in real time, all the time. They are asking what it *feels* like to be aware of yourself as alternately (or at once) both a data set and a living body.

This is the final of three editions looking at theater in relation to emerging digital technologies. Like its predecessors—*Digital Dramaturgies* (*Theater* 42:2) and *Digital Feelings* (*Theater* 46:2)—this issue was coedited with contributing editors Miriam Felton-Dansky and Jacob Gallagher-Ross. The articles and projects gathered here help us to understand surveillance, and the impulses it reflects, not only as an anonymous system of digital control and suppression—as it sometimes seems—but more subtly and incisively, as a human behavior enacted by the individual self. Such understandings of the purpose and varieties of surveillance may help us to resist the pervasive spying to which we're fast becoming accustomed.