

Special Works School

Bambitchell
January 13–February 24, 2018

This exhibition is produced with the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council as part of the research-creation project *Surveillant Subjectivities: Youth Cultures, Art, and Affect* directed by Dr. Dina Georgis (University of Toronto) and Dr. Sara Matthews (Wilfrid Laurier University).



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Bambitchell (Sharlene Bamboat and Alexis Mitchell) and Richy Carey in conversation with Dina Georgis

The titular “Special Works School” of Bambitchell’s exhibition at Gallery TPW was a British military unit of artists tasked with developing camouflage technology during the First World War; one node in the artist duo’s research on the intricately linked histories of state surveillance and artistic practice. Throughout the gallery, Sharlene Bamboat and Alexis Mitchell have produced sculpture and installation work that stages surveillance as an aesthetic experiment: metal stencils, theatre lighting, and oversized archival images generate new vantage points for imagining how surveillance can be felt in the body. Central to “Special Works School” is a new video made in collaboration with Glasgow-based composer Richy Carey. Narrated by three colours-as-characters—Sand, Cyan, and Purple—this video brings voice to Bambitchell’s expansive research on colour theory, human perception, and the multi-sensory experience of state power. What follows is a conversation between Bamboat, Mitchell, and Carey led by Dina Georgis.

Dina Georgis: “Special Works School” began two years ago when Sara Matthews and I, as co-researchers, invited you to create work that would open up the possibility of understanding the embodied and affective—yet

hard to articulate—experiences of surveillance. It was a challenging and, we hope, exciting provocation. In working with another collaborator, Richey Carey, your research process has allowed you to reach places you didn't expect. Believing that aesthetic methods can create the conditions for new discussions about surveillance, our grant-funded research undertaking, as you know, has grown into a multi-layered project that has involved training youth leaders to facilitate and engage young participants in an experience of your work. Our goal has been to explore how aesthetic interventions can incite unique learnings made from an encounter with creative objects.

Let's begin our discussion with your video installation, which seems to explore the practices and technologies that underlie surveillance. Deconstructing the raw materials of the visual technologies of surveillance, this work also seems to gesture to surveillance's non-visual methods in sensual experiences of touch and sound. Can you please elaborate on this?

Alexis Mitchell & Sharlene Bamboat: This work began with a desire to explore the sensations and embodiments of surveillance. We wanted to see if we could address the way surveillance feels, both to those surveilled and to those who surveil. We chose to address this through the realm of aesthetics, working with philosopher Susan Buck-Morss's definition of that which is "perceptive by feeling": "a sensory experience of perception, that belonging to corporeal, material nature."¹ Given this starting point,



Except where noted, all images Bambitchell, *Special Works School*, 2018. Courtesy of the artists.

we came at the project from two angles: the material and the sensorial. “Special Works School” looks closely at the material components of surveillance technologies and blends them with a history of surveillance that moves through each of the five senses, broadening an idea of perception from one based solely on sight to one that incorporates the other senses.

The show consists of a video piece, and several sculptures and installation works. The video, created in collaboration with composer Richy Carey, moves through a loose narrative organized around each of the five senses in order to create a corporeal experience. Employing colours as characters—Sand, Cyan, and Purple, along with an accompanying poly-vocal chorus—the piece engages with the ways each of the senses has been employed in the aesthetic research and implementation of surveillance technologies.

The sculpture and installation elements ask the audience to consider some of the material conditions of early surveillance technologies. They reference various experiments created by a group of artists hired by the British military for the invention of camouflage technologies during WWI—a group named by the army as the “Special Works School.”

By honing in on the aesthetic dimensions of surveillance—and its counterpoint, camouflage—we hope to foreground the ways “a sensory experience of perception” is useful

to unearthing the affects embedded in our contemporary surveillance society.

DG: The “aesthetic dimension of surveillance” might seem like a paradox to some. But I think you are giving us a taste of how surveillance is an aesthetically mediated experience. I’m struck and disturbed by the idea that a technology designed to control and manipulate people can play on our senses in compelling ways. Camouflage might be an interesting metaphor for this paradox. It is a defensive technology that works with, not against, our desire to understand what we see before our eyes. With camouflage, intentions are disguised or hidden. There might be no watchful lens of a surveillor. Or maybe the lens is disguised within the given setting. Would you say that in “Special Works School,” sound and music disguise reality in a similar manner?

AM & SB: It’s interesting that you would say that sound works as a disguise of sorts. Our initial intention for employing sound and music so aggressively was to have them work in the opposing manner: for sound to be the *most* apparent element, or at least most felt within the realm of the exhibition. In the video, each character’s vocal specificity reveals aspects of their position in the narrative, and the sound effects occasionally reach cacophonous levels. We did this precisely because we wanted to produce an environment in which what you’re listening to is directly related to what you’re feeling; the sound and music invoke feelings of fear or insecurity at times,



and at other moments feelings of melancholy or sadness. Sound, especially music, is often used to manipulate our emotions, and here we use sound to enliven the prose and theory being spoken, reinforcing the audience's relationship between mind and body as one that is intact yet sometimes in conflict. Perhaps this use of sound is disguising something, or presenting a false front, but what we're trying to get at through the work is that it's all rooted in the body, it plays on us in ways we don't always understand. Surveillance is not only an external approach or perspective; it's within us as well.

It's possible that the use of sound removes us (as the makers of the video) from the realm of perception. The work becomes so much about the audience and not at all about representing bodies that experience surveillance culture with varying degrees of severity. Like the character Sand in the film, who in order to see must become invisible, we too wanted to make ourselves disappear from the realm of perception in order to create something that could truly be housed within the bodies of those experiencing it. This is also why we're focusing on some of the early experiments by camouflage artists, who were concerned with making things disappear in order to amplify the position and power of the British Army's surveillance capabilities.

It also strikes us that so much of surveillance is about playing with or on our desires, even in literal terms. We know our smartphones and devices listen to what we're saying in order to market the appropriate items to us. Since

voice and sound are a primary means through which we are surveilled, you could say that sound sabotages disguise rather than promotes it.

Richy Carey: One of the writers who helps me consider how sound and image meet is the feminist science studies scholar Karen Barad. She makes a point that the apparatus we use for knowing has a material effect (in a quantum sense) upon that which is observed:

“The point is not merely that knowledge practices have material consequences but that *practices of knowing are specific material engagements that participate in (re)configuring the world.*”²

So, listening to something changes the thing that is listened to. Touching, smelling, tasting, observing has a material consequence not just on the observer but also on the observed, whether it is aware of its observation or not.

I think sound/image relationships, such as in film, really lay bare these sensorial connections that “Special Works School” points to. A film is a material/object twice surveilled, once through the camera/microphone and again through the screen/speakers. So it doesn’t disguise reality, but clarifies the mediation of it.

DG: Anyone who has listened to music knows how it can recalibrate your emotional disposition and alter how you might see or experience something. So I hear you when

you give sound and music a privileged status. But you're also suggesting that sound both clarifies and sabotages disguise. I find this a provocative claim. You work with music with a great deal of intention. You want it to play on us. But you also say that our experience of sound is not something we can fully understand. If I'm following you correctly, you're suggesting that sound is an experience that resists both truth and untruth. It challenges what we think we know and does not in turn settle it.

In the video, your research narrative is sung in an operatic style. Can you please explain this interesting choice? Perhaps you can also answer this question by describing the process that brought you to create a sound-focused exhibition. Arriving at sound from a call to create work on the topic of surveillance is curious. It is also fascinating to think about surveillance through the figure of Sand. In staging Sand and giving it a personality, it feels like you want us to attend to something that was exploited and discarded.

AM & SB: We don't want to speak too absolutely. Sound does have the capacity to conceal and reveal simultaneously—and what it reveals, it reveals with such impeccable acuity. Whereas we live in a world in which images don't hold this same power. We are used to re-narrating an image, or camouflaging from sight, but we aren't yet trained to listen or feel for manipulations in sound. The work of Lawrence Abu Hamdan is relevant here. He's an artist and researcher working at the intersection of sound and surveillance, and



he calls himself a “private ear.” He studies the sounds of gunshots in order to decipher the range at which they’ve been shot, or the footsteps in a Syrian prison in order to reconstruct an architecture no prisoner was ever able to witness with their eyes. We aren’t trying to argue for a primacy of one sense over another, but we think that a more expanded notion of surveillance situates it in the body, where it is most felt. Working with Richy has been incredibly instrumental to this process, as we knew we wanted to create physical sensations with the work and thought that foregrounding sound and music would help us do so.

We have often worked with sound and audio throughout our practice, as a way of dealing with the relationship between technologies of the state and the bodies that come in contact with them. *Border Sounds* (2011–15) examined the politics of mobility through the use of dubstep music in a silent disco; *Silent Citizen* (2014) used the form of karaoke to tackle changing Canadian immigration policy. There is something about the ways that sound allows us to forge a relationship to the bodies experiencing the work that we find quite useful when trying to criticize or understand the ways these technologies of the state play on us.

The choral voice is employed in order to unpack the idea that the ultimate position of surveillance is one of invisibility. This notion has troubled us since we started our research: we’ve thought a lot about the psychic effects of making the self invisible, and what role this plays within



In Canada, rights come with responsibilities. These include: obeying the law, taking responsibility for oneself and one's family,

Above and below: Bambitchell, *Silent Citizen*, 2014. Images courtesy of the artists.

surveillance culture more broadly. Having all the voices join together as one is an aural device we use to make any semblance of individuality invisible. This is also why we developed the character Sand. Throughout the script, Sand's senses disappear one-by-one until the character becomes invisible.

We originally came up with the character of Sand because “desert sand” is the central colour used in certain forms of military camouflage print. The more we began to work on the project, the more fundamental sand became, as it is also a primary material in the making of glass, screens, buildings, and cities—all of which are central to the world of surveillance. We wanted these materials to also have primacy because while they are easily discarded or forgotten, they structure our relationship to the world around us. Working with Richy allowed us to play with what these materials sound like and how those sounds make us feel. We thought that accessing the materials in this manner would allow them to play on the body, to elicit sensations rather than explicit thoughts or ideas about what these materials mean or their specific histories. While there is a lot of research embedded in “Special Works School,” we tried to strip everything down to bare elements, to focus on the materiality of surveillance technologies and to let those materials, colours, and sounds “speak” for themselves.

RC: One of the reasons I was so excited to work with Alexis and Sharlene was to take on the challenge of sounding



the three colours: Sand, Purple, Cyan. My work tends to be based around sounding material sensation, or thinking about *the sound of the thingness of things*.

For example: Purple, while being laden with the semiotic qualities extolled in the script, also performed a specific role in the text, as a kind of omniscient, voice-of-God character. Purple is a non-spectral colour: it cannot be evoked by a single wavelength in the visible spectrum of colour. In colour theory, however, the line of purple is the edge of the chromaticity diagram, between violet and red. I tried to elicit these attributes in the film's sound by underscoring Purple's dialogue with a pure tone of 18 Hz, a frequency just beyond human hearing, but the one which is suggested to be the resonant frequency of the human eye. Often referred to as the ghost frequency, this tone has been purportedly been responsible for ghost sightings because it has a visceral effect on the eyes. This seemed

to make sense in thinking of Purple as a being that sits just at the edge of our apparatuses for knowing, of what we can see and hear.

Cyan seemed to have a kind of conspiratorial agenda. Written in the second person, it felt as though it was touching both Sand and the audience, a conduit between the two. The sight of Cyan on a body however, such as in cyanosis, a blueness at the body's extremities, points to a severe lack of oxygen in the blood supply. As such, it felt appropriate to sound Cyan as somewhere between breathless and whispering.

Sand is different: it is directly tied to a material substance in a way that Purple and Cyan are not. Psychologist Fritz Heider uses sand as an analogy for differentiating between a "medium" and a "thing," in that sand "can serve as a 'carrier' for different traces, but also generate different 'forms'": sand castles, sand jets, and the like.³ I feel there is something similar between sand as a medium/form and the phonemes that constitute the basis for a language. Distinct granules of sound that can come to mediate form, as well as being form themselves.

In sounding Sand I tried to convey this granularity, asking Alexis (who voiced Sand) to phonetically break down the text. At first this effect is used sparingly, but as Sand's senses begin to disappear, these disjunctions become more and more apparent.

There were also long moments of sound effects suggested by Sharlene and Alexis that tried to convey the haptic, and sometimes disorienting, qualities of sound. This evokes the intentional falsehood present in Foley techniques—used to replicate sound effects on screen—like crinkling cellophane that sounds like fire, oil in a frying pan that sounds like rain on a window, and the like.

DG: All this makes me think about how our senses work both for us and against us. By remaining invisible, we might dodge the gaze that surveils. Paradoxically, in the case of sand, its very disappearance—in the production of glass, or smartphones—is necessary for building the elements of surveillance. Similarly, the sound of a gunshot is terrifying and can make someone instantly hyperaware of their visibility and vulnerability in space; but by listening closely to the footsteps of a gun-bearing prison guard, a prisoner might be able to visualize and draw the space they occupy but can't see. I'm summarizing your comments here to say that your work attunes us to the multi-dimensionality of surveillance and gives us an unusual experience of its complexity. At first viewing, your audience might wonder where to identify power in your rendition of surveillance. This is not an obvious concern for you, but I think it's certainly implied.

AM & SB: It's true, we don't identify, name, or situate power within the work, though it's simultaneously present within the viewer as well as within the objects and materials we present. While we understand that these materials can

also potentially be emptied of their meaning until they are used or branded to wield power, something is always lost in the moment of recognition or representation of this power. So, rather than focus our attention on naming the ways these instruments, colours, materials, and sensations might be used to wield or identify power, violence, or control, we wanted to create an atmosphere where an understanding of how this happens relies on a deeply personal and sensorial experience of the work, and the world at large. The political and representational burden of surveillance, both as a tool and as a field of study, is massive. When we started working on this project, this burden was the focus of our attention. We were immediately caught by questions of how to represent this field, for whom, as experienced by whom, and where in the world. We tried to allow those experiencing the work to engage with how these histories, materials, and experiences make them feel. On the one hand, we are providing a materialist perspective on the study of surveillance; on the other, we are ensuring that this perspective is experienced and represented subjectively. Surveillance lives inside of all of us, to varying degrees, and is attached to varying levels of power or violence. But it's there, embedded in everyone, and felt at the level of the body, constantly. ■

¹ Buck-Morss, Susan. "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October* 62 (Fall 1992): 3–41.

² Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. (London and Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007): 91.

³ Quoted in Herzogenrath, Bernd, "Media|Matter: An Introduction." In: Bernd Herzogenrath, ed., *Media|Matter* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015): 1–16.

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Richy Carey is a sound artist and composer. He's currently doing AHRC-funded PhD research into the relationship between materiality, language, and film sound at Glasgow University. Recent works and collaborations include *Sonorous Objects*, with Lauren Gault and Mark Bleakley (Project Rooms, 2018); *Memo to Spring*, for Sarah Rose (Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, 2017); *Wondering Soul*, with Alexander Storey Gordon (live-to-air for Radiophreina, Glasgow, 2017); *Forms of Action for Asunción Motions Gordo* (CCA Glasgow, 2017); "You're saying exactly how I feel" with Tom Walker (TAP Gallery, 2016); *There's something happening somewhere*, with Carrie Skinner (Tron Theatre, Glasgow, 2016); and *INCONGRUOUS DIVA* for Cara Tolmie and Will Holder (British Art Show, John Hansard Gallery, Southampton, 2016).

Dina Georgis is an Associate Professor at the Women & Gender Studies Institute at the University of Toronto. Her work is situated in the fields of postcolonial studies and queer theory. She draws on psychoanalytic concepts to think through how expressive cultures are responses to the remains of the past. Her book *The Better Story: Queer Affects from the Middle East* (SUNY, 2013) considers the centrality of loss and its affects in the aesthetic representation of political struggle and survival. In collaboration with Dr. Sara Matthews (WLU) and artist duo Bambitchell (Toronto), she is presently working on a project supported by SSHRC Development Research Creation entitled "Surveillant Subjectivities: Youth Cultures, Art, and Affect."

Bambitchell is the artistic collaboration between Sharlene Bamboat and Alexis Mitchell. Working together since 2009, their projects have been exhibited at festivals and galleries such as Articule (Montreal), The Images Festival (Toronto), and The Art Gallery of Windsor and included in such publications as *C Magazine*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and the forthcoming Routledge publication *Contemporary Citizenship, Art, and Visual Culture*. The duo recently completed a residency at Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart, Germany (2015–17), and have an upcoming fellowship at The MacDowell Colony. “Special Works School” will make its European premiere as part of Forum Expanded, Berlinale 2018. bambitchell.com

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