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Hiding in Plain Sight

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2.14 / Review

Hiding in Plain Sight

By John Zarobell

March 21, 2011

These days surveillance gets a lot of play in San Francisco. Sandra Phillips' exhibition *Exposed: Voyeurism, Surveillance and the Camera Since 1870* surveys the history of photography and surveillance at SFMOMA. Trevor Paglen and Michael Wolfe's current shows at the Altman Siegel and Robert Koch galleries, respectively, both turn their attention to secret and not-so-secret manifestations of information gathering that monitor every aspect of contemporary life. But for street credibility, it's hard to beat getting detained at the airport and turned over to the FBI for six months of interrogation, as happened to artist Hasan Elahi in 2002. Since he was never charged with a crime, he could not be exonerated. Though he was required to phone the FBI every time he left the country, Elahi invented a chilling alternative. He wrote a bit of code that would allow his location to be constantly monitored (amazingly, he had to invent this for himself); then he set up a website that tracked his current whereabouts and fed a stream of photographs that recorded every meal he ate, every train he took, and every toilet he used. Since Elahi is a media artist, such a device could be taken as a work of art.

Of course, the artwork, *Tracking Transience* (2004–ongoing), is not only **the site itself**, but the manifestation of it in the gallery at Intersection 5M as *Hiding in Plain Sight*. Entering the darkened gallery, one is confronted with no less than one hundred miniature flat screen monitors showing photos from Elahi's daily life. A handful of taller flat screens on the far wall scroll through the artist's recent credit card purchases and a large wall projection indicates the location of the artist in real time mixed with photos (this appears to be a live feed from the website). It is a dizzying array of visual information—the strangest self-portrait I have ever seen. Like any other portrait, it exposes only certain aspects of the subject and obscures others. From this, viewers have no idea what Elahi looks like, and this lack of features indicates no hint of the character of the person (though the cheekiness of some of the photographs do indicate a sense of humor, apparently toying with viewers' curiosity). In fact, while the gallery presents thousands of relevant details about Elahi's life, it is not Elahi who is the subject, but transience itself, and the need to

monitor it. The question of who

needs to monitor



Hiding in Plain Sight, 2011; installation view, Intersection 5M, San Francisco. Image courtesy of the Artist and Intersection for the Arts, San Francisco.



Tracking Transience (detail), 2004–ongoing; multi-media; dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the Artist and Intersection for the Arts, San Francisco.

it points to the political subtext of the work, but let's face it, such is the condition of life in the twenty-first century. There are any number of social networking tools that exist to help us all monitor our own lives for Friend Brother.

The installation is replete with visual stimulation, but one has the sense of being in a control tower. Yet, the longer one looks, the more repetitive and banal the details become. Elahi seems not only aware of this, but bent upon demonstrating it in spectacular terms—and the project is without a doubt a success in this sense. Pictures of meals eaten at restaurants, beds slept in, airports transferred through, and urinals of all shapes and sizes eventually become a rhythmic visual drumbeat. Such a consolidation of facts cannot be denied, but it cannot provide the viewer with much empathy either. It is equally difficult to compose this material into a portrait of the artist as it is to imagine the significance of transience in contemporary life. The work is trance inducing, and one imagines just how boring the life of FBI agents—and members of other agencies that monitor human actions—must be.

The only break to the rhythm consists of two live feeds of the world just outside the gallery. One single screen is placed along the floor and shows the parking lot on the other side of Fifth Street and the other, a set of six screens featuring a single image of the world across Mission Street. So here *you* are—viewer. As one watches the other screens, one tries to find traces of Elahi; but watching these flat screen windows, one finds oneself—not being watched, but apparently seeing through the walls. This x-ray vision plants the viewer in space and time, and reminds her that most of these images flashing by are a spectacular kind of re-run. The camera informs and connects, but it also separates us into the worlds we inhabit, the viewer and the viewed.

Hiding in Plain Sight is on view at **Intersection 5M**, in San Francisco, through April 23, 2011.

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