



Greige Room 01

"Surveillance: Necessary Evil/Necessarily Evil"
critique of *Spyglass* (2013) by Mary Dahlman Begley

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Surveillance:

Necessary Evil/Necessarily Evil

a critique of Spyglass (2013) by Mary Dahlman Begley, by Mary Dahlman Begley

In November 2013 I created the site-specific installation *Spyglass*. I sat behind reflective glass for 10 hours over two days and took photos of passerby looking at their own reflections in the building. This is a reflection on the project, through the lens of Paul Weibel's 1978 project *The Guard as Bandit*.



SURVEILLANCE IMAGES (SELECTED)



ARTIST STATEMENT (2013)

The split-second decision to look in the reflective glass of the Concert Hall as you walk by is one every passerby must make. The decision to check out that nice new hairdo, or act like you don't see your reflection, is affected by one's perception of visibility: am I alone or not?

You are never really alone.



The desire to capture the pure instant of perceived privacy within a public space inspired us to create Spyglass. The photographer hid behind the reflective glass to steal the private moment of the subject examining his or herself from a displaced vantage point, disrupting the subject's perceptual navigation of the environment.

We discovered that nearly everybody takes a peek at his or her reflection when they think no one is watching, or without what Jacques Lacan described as "the anxious state that comes with the awareness that one can be viewed." Photographing the self-reflexive gaze without the presence of this anxious state is the conceptual basis of Spyglass. We were able to capture the unassuming subject in their purest, most natural state.

By displaying these prints we mean you no embarrassment, nor do we hope to deter you from self-examination in these windows. We would like to show you the purity in the unselfconscious gaze.

If you or someone you know is the subject of a portrait and they have concerns about their image on display, please have them contact begley@carleton.edu

INSTALLATION AND REACTION



REACTION (2018)

I waited again behind the glass to see people seeing the project, seeing themselves look at themselves. Students laughed, some looked shocked. Online, reactions split along the same lines. On my Facebook wall they called me brilliant, but on their own timelines (with privacy settings unchecked, irony of irony) they called me a phony, posing as artist, trying to be provocative. They weren't exactly wrong. In hindsight I edited (watered down, really) the artist statement to be about beauty, fearing accusation of spying or transgression.



I did not anticipate the nature of all criticisms. I knew people would be shocked. I thought I might get in trouble for vandalizing the Concert Hall. In the publically posted 'private' feed of a student, the project was criticized as racist. "Surveillance most negatively affects people of color, and the artist is a white woman enacting a police state on our campus." Elsewhere in the thread, I was criticized for violating the privacy of students. A string of comments debated public vs. private, the pre-law students arguing loudly that the space is public and I violated no law - until OP deleted the post.

THE GUARD AS BANDIT

A monitor connects to video camera trained on surveillance camera at the entrance of a bank. The monitor displays surveillance camera, magnifying its object and placing it under surveillance. "The organ that observes You is itself being observed. You become aware of being constantly supervised, watched." Within the context of Spyglass, the first statement is no longer true. I, the organ that is observing, was never observed in the process of observing. I was obscured, no camera trained on me. I made the observed aware that they were being constantly supervised, in attempt to - what - control?

Weibel's monitor is the overseer with punitive power, punishing the surveillance camera by revealing it. Weibel himself is never revealed to observed. He is the orchestrator of it all, the one with real punitive power, showing the observed that which they should fear and removing the power to strike fear from the surveillance camera.



Weibel owns up to his action: “What also becomes evident is that this video system, which is supposed to warn against violence, itself has inherent aspects of violence.” He put a stocking cap on the monitor to tie it more directly to crime, a bandit’s stocking cap.

But does this reversal, observing the observer, revealing the concealed, remove violence from the exchange? Weibel calls it “a basic principle of democracy”...

It’s unclear if Weibel means this to neuter the violent aspect of surveillance, or instead hint at his own cleverness. What he has constructed is a cipher of democracy as it works, not as it was intended. Weibel is the politician, behind the scenes, constructing an illusion of participation. The observed enters the polling place, sees that they are seen, and exits - with a sticker and a new sense of patriotism. The monitor, however, is connected only to a lens - no recording of the interaction is left.

Weibel is walking back the controversial nature of his project by calling it democratic, much like I watered down the initial menacing tone of the project. Both projects are attempts to reveal the true and nefarious nature of surveillance: always there, aim locked in, observer unseen.



