

[1] In a panoptic view, all parts or elements are visible in one view. The panopticon was first theorized by Jeremy Bentham as an institutional structure designed allow all inmates of an institution to be observed by a single watchman without the inmates being able to tell whether or not they are being watched. Michel Foucault later theorized that the panopticon fuels a self-disciplined society (see Discipline and Punish).

[2] Daniel Tseghay, "C-51 and the history of Canada's repression of labour organizing," Rank and File. September 4, 2015. Online.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Susan Berfield, "How Walmart Keeps an Eye on Its Massive Workforce," Bloomberg. September 24, 2015. Online.

[5] Jonathan Crary, Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep (London/New York: Verso, 2014) 19.

[6] Kantor, Jodi and David Streitfeld, "Inside Amazon: Wrestling Big Ideas in a Bruising Workplace." Online.

[7] Crary, Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep, 42.

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Workers Arts & Heritage Centre

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Hours: Wednesday - Saturday, 10 am - 4 pm



Harvest, Sweep, Gather

Gail Bourgeois

Riaz Mehmood

Workers Arts & Heritage Centre

May 13 - August 20, 2016



Harvest, Sweep, Gather

In an era of constant image and data collection, both individual and societal expectations of privacy have been challenged. *Harvest, Sweep, Gather* brings together the work of two contemporary artists, Gail Bourgeois and Riaz Mehmood, who critically examine the politics of surveillance. Surveillance is often envisioned as a singular panoptic gaze [1], but in practice, surveillance consists of a multiplicity of overlapping and contrasting gazes from governments, the military, corporations, and other civilians. Who can see remains a deeply political question, as law and order is increasingly established through vision.

There is a troubling history within Canada of monitoring and quelling dissent through domestic surveillance. [2] With the advent of the Cold War, the McCarthy trials normalized informer systems, blacklisting, and other domestic surveillance methods. In the same period, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) emulated many of the same strategies, producing extensive files on 'subversive' Canadians. Today, surveillance powers have been largely transferred to intelligence services such as Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), leading to the rise of mass warrantless surveillance, whose scope was extended through Bill C-51. [3] In the workplace, electronic surveillance has increased the ability of corporations to keep tabs on workers. To stop a recent unionization drive by the Organization United for Respect at Walmart, for instance, Walmart increased surveillance on employees and activists prominent in the group, while hiring Lockheed Martin to conduct additional intelligence gathering. [4] Employees were encouraged to provide information on union organizing through a labour hotline, and stores were ranked according to the activity of organized labour. The continuation of cold war surveillance tactics in the contemporary workplace has a profound effect on the potential for political dissent.

A contemporary exploration of cold-war surveillance was produced by **Gail Bourgeois** during a residency at the Diefenbunker, Canada's Cold War Museum. Bourgeois' *Cold War Pieces* convey the paranoid nightmare subconscious of the atomic age. Bourgeois employs the complicating strategies of collage, fragmenting and juxtaposing the dominant visual tropes of the atomic age. The spectators are forced into the position of objectifying these intimate and closed worlds - implicating our own tendencies toward voyeurism and surveillance. The chaotic stream of pictures in Bourgeois' work mimics the inescapable barrage of images we consume, reflecting anxiety around the circulation of images. Bourgeois' superimposes eyes and ears on newsprint, reminding us that we are always being watched and heard - the increased circulation of our images are as much tools for surveillance as they are mementos. The potential for subversion is visualized in the motif of the jester, the only figure in European royal courts who could speak truth to the king. The jester, a

stand in for the artist, looks out of the frame, returning the voyeuristic gaze of the spectator and contesting a panoptic gaze.

The policing gaze of the state and corporations is further probed by **Riaz Mehmood**. Mehmood uses the drone as a touchstone for contemporary issues surrounding surveillance, privacy, and state power. Pakistani-born Mehmood takes the hyper-mobile, stealth technology of the US Army's Predator Drone and reimagines it as a monument. The drone is 'camouflaged' with the kaleidoscopic patterns of South Asian truck painting, a vernacular form of decoration. Mehmood appropriates the drone, rooting it in culture and history. In the process, Mehmood undermines the presumed authority of the surveillance state by dressing the drone in the whimsical and the everyday, a process of demystification.

The drone is a fitting symbol of a culture that art historian Jonathan Crary describes as *24/7*, a non-stop culture of production, self-management, and accelerating technology. [5] The potential to be surveilled at all times is deeply entwined with the imposition of social norms and expectations. While post-Fordist economies promise greater worker autonomy and empowerment, models of flexible work are often accompanied by increased precarity, heightening self-discipline. Within the workplace, overt systems of surveillance have been enhanced with structures intended to foster self-management, epitomized today by Amazon. [6] Harkening back to the informer system, a system of electronic peer review encourages employees to give feedback on coworkers, which is used to inform a ranking system where those who underperform are fired. The emphasis on competition, self-management and constant productivity leads to the internalization of workplace supervision, effectively making workers collaborators in their own surveillance. [7]

Accelerated technology has radically reshaped the ways in which we see, and are seen. *Harvest, Sweep, Gather* asks us to consider a series of questions: have we become compliant subjects in our own surveillance? What does it mean to hand over private information in the name of convenience? What are the political implications of giving corporations almost total access to our lives? Ultimately, both artists undermine the presumed authority of the surveillance state, providing a counter response to the basic premise and aims of surveillance - unambiguous differentiation and representation through a one-way gaze. So long as the jester has room in the frame, the tyranny of images will remain incomplete.

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