

## **SPECIAL WORKS SCHOOL<sup>1</sup>**

**Nael Bhanji**

What is the effect of surveillance on the body? How can surveillance be felt in the body? How does surveillance feel to the surveilled and the surveyor?

These are some of the questions that Bambitchell explores through their provocative collaboration on the sensory experience of surveillance, and its counterpoint, camouflage.

Surveillance, as Bambitchell's installation illustrates, is an aesthetically-mediated experience but also a technology of intimacy. Indeed, as Mitchell and Bamboat explain, paradoxically invisible yet hypervisible, "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."

Surveillance, as they illustrate, is affective. It animates by acting upon our senses, and playing with/through our desires.

So what is it that "sand" or surveillance animates? Why are these mechanisms so deeply resonant at the level of the body? How does surveillance so skillfully manipulate or play with the senses?

When attending the installation, I was drawn by the theme of "play," not just in the historical aesthetic remapping of the body (in the ways through which the body's interiority has itself become militarized landscape) but also in the productive effects of this play. And some of these thoughts about play fed into my own interests in the circulation of hypervigilance, and by extension docility, in the afterlife of surveillance.

Turning briefly to my own observations of the curated lessons offered by Bambitchell's "Special works school," I argue that defensive technologies "play" with our senses through accessing discarded memories and eliciting new responses. What I'm pointing to, in other words, is a tenuous foray into making links between surveillance and childhood.

### **OBSERVATION 1**

#### **Sand:**

- Through Bambitchell's video installation, we're invited to listen to Sand tell us about how it shifts, disappears, or dissipates, only to turn up unexpectedly and elsewhere (much like sand that one tracks back from forays to the beach).

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<sup>1</sup> [The Canadian Network for Psychoanalysis and Culture](#) and Gallery TPW [hosted an event](#) on February 14, 2018. Three respondents – Nicole Charles, Nael Bhanji, and Dr. Silvia Tenenbaum – were invited to engage with the exhibit *Special Works School*, Bambitchell exhibited at Gallery TPW January 13 – February 24, 2018.

- Sand, we're told, can generate many forms: when watching the video, you see sand taking on the qualities of the figure of the trickster: sand dug up from vast pits in the earth, shifting, disappearing from the prison of truckbeds, only to resurface again— visible/invisible in the sand-coloured camouflage prints in desert combat, shifting again to the molten glass encasing our smartphone/computer screens that structure our understanding of the representational world; turning up again in the reflective windows from which we are surveilled as we walk down ordinary streets.
- Then again, think of our own responses to these mechanisms of Sand's surveillance: Surveillance breeds hypervigilance. We dutifully, if fruitlessly, clear our browser histories and avoid picking our teeth in the judgemental glare of those reflective windows.
- Surveillance, Bambitchell tells us, **amplifies its power through visible invisibility.**
- In order to see, sand must become invisible.
- I walked away from the screening and into the adjacent room to find a large box filled with sand; enclosed in its protective glass case—the case itself a progeny of its liquid ancestor, molten sand— the sand here takes on the innocence of a child's sand pit.
- A technology of surveillance, ubiquitous, and transparent, naturalized, and internalized in childhood's memories.

## OBSERVATION 2

### STENCIL:

- In that same room, a cardboard stencil, which looked a lot like a child's stencil of a rubber ducky, framed an opaque background.
- The apparatus of amusement and instruction: easily reproducible, stencils create the effect of form where there is emptiness.
- As Bambitchell illustrates through the stencil of the duck in the video element and installation, the outline of the duck invites the observer to partake in the conspiracy of governmentality's design: "Sand cuts out a stencil of the soldier, ship, cannon, or whatever figure sand wishes to conceal, and looks through this stencil from the viewpoint under consideration".
- We'll mark this observation and call it Schroedinger's duck for now: Stencils frame perception such that is/and is no duck there.
- What's important is how disciplinary power manipulates this lack of sense perception as an advantage to keep up a steady stream of energy.
  - A careful modulation and deliberate calibration of doses of stimulation that has been theorized by Susan Buck-Morss as conditioning survival in modernity as "the response to stimuli without thinking."
- Hypervigilance

## OBSERVATION 3

### COLOUR:

- For those who may not have had the opportunity to see the exhibition, there was a fair bit about colour.
- Colour structures our world from infancy.
  - Colour differentiation is one of the first things many children learn through play.
  - The link between the phenomenology of colour perception and emotionality and childhood development and colour has already been explored.
- That we begin to feel our way through the world through tactile mediation of colour sensorium, points to the primacy of primary colours, “so easily discarded or forgotten” but that structured and continues to structure the world around us.
  - Think of the mediation of our colour-coded present: Surgeons and nurses often wear gowns colored cyan, and operating rooms are often painted that color, because it is the complement of red and is thought to reduce the emotional response to the shock of red that occurs when doing surgery on internal organs.
  - Colour can modulate anxiety and control fear.
  - Or colour can provoke **fear**, encouraging hypervigilance and the docile acquiescence to increasingly invasive forms of surveillance.

But I bring up these three “observations” in order to explore how perhaps childhood play or playing on childhood is what is necessary, not just for building the elements of surveillance, but also for structuring hypervigilance in modernity.

Of particular interest to me is collective modulation of sense perception, and the cultivation of national vigilance, in response to technologies of surveillance. I’m interested in the political cultivation of reactions through bypassing the rationality of explicit thoughts or ideas. But this does not mean that the reactions are irrational. Rather, there is a structured rationality to eliciting irrational responses that bypass consciousness. So this brief response traces a link between the disciplinary power structuring childhood, the surveillant gaze of governmentality, and safety promised by hypervigilance’s turn to nationalism?

In *Ordinary Affects*, Kathleen Stewart writes that the turn of the century, with its technological advancements and modern warfare, means that the “hard, resilient, need to react has become a charged habit” and a habitual function of state power (Stewart 16). This plugged-in, jacked-up buzz of hypervigilance is a hallmark of modernity, a “battlefield experience” of shock that shapes our present as one in which “things are [always](potentially) happening” (Stewart 36). Certainly, several scholars have already drawn upon Foucauldian analyses of fear as an instrument of governmentality and the legitimation of state surveillance.

But an overarching theme in all of these works is the role of insecurity in mobilizing collective hypervigilance against a threatening object, regardless of whether that particular object is removed from the actual source of fear. The hypervigilance is a state of (extra?) ordinary crisis that cannot be maintained indefinitely. Rather, in order to be effective, a politics of “everyday fear” must be continuously exposed to the traumatic event to which it is attached. Or, to follow Sara Ahmed’s formulation of the utility of ‘fear’ in *Affective Economies*, the fantasy of the “imagined community” of the nation is dependent upon the “perpetual re-staging” of another

kind of fantasy altogether— the fantasy of violation (Anderson 48; Ahmed, *Affective Economies* 118). Hypervigilance— takes shape through surveillance, fear and traumatic repetition— and in doing so, “surfaces,” or creates the effect, of the nation’s boundaries and its subjects. These necessary fantasies of imminent violation depend upon the constant re-enactment of trauma and, here, I’d like to turn to 9/11 briefly.

Rogue affects. Calibrated emotionality: Brian Massumi calls these affects the weapons of a contemporary form of governance, a “mode of power,” whose meaning solidifies— however temporarily— after the fact. A belated education: In the wake of 9/11, Massumi explains, we saw how fear was *harnessed* to justify government intervention.

COLOUR CODED TERROR ALERTS: A fair bit has already been written about how 9/11 provided a “perceptual focal point for the spontaneous mass coordination of affect” in the service of socio-political intervention.

- The imminence of ‘threat’ addressed the individual body at an embodied affective level, effectively reterritorializing the singular under the sign of collective docility.
- This chromatic calibration of ordinary affects manipulated the “central nervous system” of the masses by simultaneously inciting fear and hyper-vigilance whilst encouraging “capital-time.”

As with what I’ve affectionately dubbed “Schroedinger’s Duck” in Bambitchell’s installation, the after-the-fact-ness of meaning during 9/11 was a political operator that allowed fear to circulate and stick to the stencilled outline of “whatever-enemy” and “whatever-object” Sand wishes. But, I argue that the simplistic model provided by the Department of Homeland Security also did something else: it addressed the body from the dispositional angle of the helpless figure of the **child**.

- Reduced to childhood’s palette of bright reds, oranges, yellows, blues, and greens, the colour chart strategically eschewed the obligatory niceties of providing the public with any information beyond what was necessary to trigger the public response.
- Under this rubric, the colour red simply indicated the severity of threat’s immanency. Thus, the colour-coded system evoked a primal paternalism that directly activated disparate bodies, commanding the American public to “stop” with the insistent appeal of a red traffic light.

Triggered in this way, the imminence of the unspecified threat shaped the contours of *indeterminate* fear (Massumi).