

## TOUCH, SAND AND THE "HARD TO ARTICULATENESS" OF SURVEILLANCE

Nicole Charles<sup>1</sup>

Before visiting the exhibit for the first time I Googled “Special Works School” to try to find some more information on what the Facebook invite for the event described as a codename used by the British War Office in WW1. Besides info on Bambitchell’s work, most of the results I found were Special Works programs run by St. Vincent de Paul in Toronto schools, working at the Toronto District School Board and Special Education at the Peel District School board, with pictures of playgrounds, classrooms, and colorful hallways populating the image search. It was only after a fair amount of concerted effort that I was able to find any more information about the elusive Special Works School and the experimentation with camouflage which its artists and engineers engaged in. Entering the exhibit in the wake of this frustrated search history, it was ironic that I was met once again with colourful walls, rainbow wheels, a sandbox, oversized images and a very playful, exhibit that functions indeed, like a school - with places to sit and listen and watch, objects to observe and discern, and places to play with stencils at heights for kids. I’d like to offer up a couple things for us to think alongside this evening, each based off my experiences with the exhibit on two separate occasions.

The first is this playful, pedagogical aspect of the exhibit which upon first thought to me, seemed at odds with the feel, the sound, the look, and perhaps most of all with, the intensity of surveillance. On my first encounter with and visit to the exhibit during its launch, I attended with a friend who had recently suffered a concussion. We read the notice on the outside of room 1 which states “this work contains sequences of bright flashing light and high-intensity sound.” We attempted to watch some of it, but she noted almost immediately that it was “too stimulating” for her and so, by default, we were made to engage differently with the space – not relying predominantly on the senses of sound. Interestingly, sound is what Bambitchell hoped would be the *most* apparent element within the exhibition, and sound, or rather ears, being that which sand in the video loses first. In any regard, in the conversation between Bambitchell, Dina and Richy Carey, Bambitchell notes that surveillance moves through each of the five senses. Unable to watch the video, the first way that I interacted with the space of learning was as a kinesthetic and tactile learner. My friend and I touched the stencils, took pictures of the stencils, touched the sandbox and stooped down to understand it as sand (at first I thought it was a linen sheet), moved around the grass carpet, and played with our shadows in the changing light. It is interesting both to engage with and to think about engaging with the space in this way.

Touch is the first sense we form inside the womb. Engaging with the space primarily through touch and movement, then, quite literally made me feel as if I had a hold on surveillance, as if I was the surveiller of the space and of its technologies. Catering to different learners and to senses, Bambitchell offers us different pedagogical styles, and I think, necessarily different ways of feeling and executing surveillance. The first provocation then, is: What does Special Works School’s

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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.

multiple pedagogical style teach us about the senses and about surveillance? More specifically, how might the sense of touch reconfigure our experience of surveillance, or empower us to believe that we are the surveiller or in charge of surveillance? Babmbitchell says that the optimal position of surveillance is one of invisibility – how might thinking with touch complicate this?

The second provocation I'd like to offer is regarding Sand. The hard to articulateness of surveillance and of power, for me, are so well captured by the figure of sand – the ontology of sand, and the power of the sand as an object. And this power wasn't made explicit, in fact, I believe Bambitchell said they didn't want to necessarily focus our attention on how materials and colours could wield power, because this is in fact rather subjective.

I came to think more about this on my second visit to the exhibit, this time, without my friend with the concussion. I began this visit by viewing the video which begins with the colour wheel. Sand, we quickly learn, originates as a colour in 1920 to resemble the desert, and what follows is a story about its devolution - the devolution of a microorganism that continues to unravel and lessen itself. To devolve is simultaneously to degenerate and to transfer power. One impression of the video is that sand's power is degenerating. We as the watchers, the surveillers, might feel a sense of power in this. But we might also consider devolution in the sense of the transfer of power, specifically the power that is transferred within and through the unravelling or disbursement of the micro-organism into smaller parts. Here I'm thinking of many of my experiences growing up in the Caribbean and sand's omnipresence.

At one point in the video the chorus announces, "anywhere there is development there is sand." But the opposite might also be also true. My first thought when I think of sand is not development, but lack thereof; long stretches of beach, no buildings, no technology, just sand and water. I also envision a mound of sand, something like a sandcastle or being broken up and I'm struck by the way unpacked or uncontained sand spreads and distributes itself with ease. In its very unravelling, the individual particles of sand might be understood to take on different forms of power. In my family whenever we would leave the beach, we would fill up empty glass bottles with water from the sea to try to wash off the sand off our feet that could not be dusted off. And sand lingers. Sand gets in the car, sand stays the seats, sand hides in the car mats, sand sticks to your toes, even when you don't want it there, sometimes, even when you can't see it, you can feel it, kind of like surveillance.

Purple talks of sand's softness, scalability, malleability and its easy transportation. For me, this is sand's power, its ability to last, its stickiness, grittiness, the ease with which its individual particles latch and attach to surfaces. When sand loses taste, Cyan says "sand used this lack as an advantage to keep up a steady stream of energy." How cunning and inventive sand is spoken of by both purple and cyan. How powerful, I think sand is, even and especially as it dissolves.

So I wanted to bring this subjective understanding of sand to the table. Despite its robotic sound, its loss of hearing, taste, touch and ultimately sight, might sand, in its devolution nonetheless hold the greatest position of power and surveillance through its perceived invisibility and inexistence?