

ArtReview



Rick Lowe

The secrets of art as social engagement

Jill Magid

In works created over the past 15 years, the artist has immersed herself in systems that police, restrict and enforce society's public and private realms, 'dancing', 'flirting' and carving out space for herself while defining individual identity in the age of mass surveillance

by Aoife Rosenmeyer



I can burn your face, 2008, neon light, 31×97 cm

The use of CCTV in British public spaces exploded during the 1990s; between 1992 and 2002 it accounted for more than £250 million of public funds. By the time American artist Jill Magid's videos in the series *Evidence Locker* and the installation *Retrieval Room* (all 2004) were shown at the Liverpool Biennial that year, there were 242 CCTV cameras operating in the city. To make her works (which comprise five different narratives constructed from edited CCTV footage), Magid spent 31 days walking through Liverpool dressed in a bright-red coat; she alerted the staff operating the surveillance cameras to her whereabouts so that they could follow her remotely. For the 18-minute *Trust*, for example, she closed her eyes and asked the camera operators to guide her remotely with their voices through the streets. At the end of the 31 days, Magid applied to access the recordings of her, using the 'subject access request' forms that are available to anybody whose data is recorded or gathered by the UK authorities; these she completed in the intimate manner of a love letter to the 'Operator'.

The films and installation were shown across the venues of FACT and Tate Liverpool, and constituted Magid's first major European show. If there ever was a honeymoon period for surveillance as a form of control, a time when it was embraced by all the citizens it observed, it was shortlived. Yet in 2004 few of us were aware of how deeply surveillance would penetrate our lives. Magid found a concrete instance of this growing, observing behemoth and approached it directly. She forged a relationship with the system on her own terms, challenging its sole purpose as a crime-prevention/detection tool for enforcement agencies and making herself an active, conscious author and subject using it. A network of which we generally only think of in terms of a broad outline was fleshed out when the artist placed herself within it in order to generate her own stories. Back then, surveillance was not as charged a topic as it is today, but the works resonate still; a book and a video from the project will be included in this summer's Manifesta 11, in Zürich.

Magid's artistic method generally starts with something like fieldwork, albeit with no claim to objectivity, when she seeks ways to immerse herself as an observer in foreign systems. The systems or environments she chooses tend to be faceless, shadowy institutions – in Liverpool it was City Watch (Merseyside Police and Liverpool City Council) – that represent power in various forms. With her intimate approach to form-filling in the *Evidence Locker* project, Magid countered official bureaucracy with soft words of sentiment and emotion. Contrasts between her poetic, amorous language and actions – ensuring she was seen by the surveillance cameras and then appropriating the filmed material, for example – and the reserved, impersonal tone expected when an individual and an institution interact, occur repeatedly in the artist's work. Her strategies have been likened to flirtation: "I am dancing with the rules, finding different ways to interpret them. I am looking for a way to enter and understand the system, to have a dialogue with it," she tells me, when we talk via Skype. Magid's interactions with those powers provide the raw material or the stimuli for works in film, sculpture, installation, performance and book formats. Different

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media illustrate different facets of the boundaries she finds and tests within the organisational frameworks.

The Dutch secret service (the AIVD) made an ideal counterpart for Magid when it commissioned her to create a work for its headquarters in 2005. Her proposal was to create a human 'face' for this anonymous body; it would be generated by conversations (operating within a series of limitations set by the agency) with AIVD staff. Over three years Magid talked to 18 employees about their personal lives. As the work from these conversations developed (Magid gave the agency several pieces, including sculpture and neon works), the AIVD accepted that Magid would stage a related exhibition at Stroom Den Haag (*Article 12*, in 2008). No one was directly identified in the artworks, which included phrases in neon such as *I can burn your face* (2008, meaning 'I can reveal your identity'). Nevertheless, the agency felt it necessary to censor the exhibition. When she queried its action, a compromise with the AIVD was reached in which an uncut version of her novelistic account of the commission was displayed – in a glass case – in an exhibition (*Authority to Remove*, 2009, at Tate Modern) before being removed and confiscated by members of the AIVD. A heavily redacted version of the same report was published as *Becoming Tarden* in 2010; book and exhibition manifest the existence of secrets that may not be told.

In Magid's Dutch project, transparency on the part of the agency would have been highly unlikely; an attempt to render the workings of the AIVD simple in response to the commission would have generated an inadequate, inaccurate portrayal of the sophistication of their operation. "I am trying to find or make meaning with structures that seem intangible or closed," Magid tells me in an email. "Transparency alone does not always accommodate that or reveal the complexities within the system." Obfuscation and complication may indeed be more correct. When tasked by Laura Poitras to generate a glossary from the cache of information Edward Snowden gave Poitras about NSA surveillance in 2013 for the catalogue of the filmmaker's 2016 Whitney Museum exhibition, *Astro Noise*, Magid instead wrote an account that entangled emotion with the linguistic register of officialdom and intelligence. In response to the opacity of the terminology in the cache, she constructed an alternative narrative (also opaque) of an ultimately aborted search for an individual within the information. "The archive, which I had all too briefly entered, was vast and pregnant with secrets (S). I had wanted to penetrate it. Collecting NSA vocabulary was a job, not a mission, resulting in a glossary of terms that were defined but meaningless. I needed a target. He was my decryption key to the archive, and to all of the languages within it. Without him, I was left with an architecture without tenants, terms without actors, SIGINT without HUMINT (Human Intelligence)," writes Magid.

Magid's major projects to date have engaged with public bodies that display varying degrees of openness, organisations all, nominally, working on citizens' behalf. Since 2013, however, she has been developing a body of work called *The Barragán Archives*, which investigates the legacy of Luis Barragán. Since the Mexican architect's death, his professional and personal archives – as they fell on either



Trust, 2004 (video still), DVD,
edited CCTV footage and audio, 18 min



Evidence Locker. Control Room, 2004 (video still), two-channel digital video, edited CCTV footage, 10 min, loop (no sound)

side of the door that partitioned the two activities that took place in the building in which he lived and worked – have been separated, to be owned and administered by different organisations. Today the house (Casa Luis Barragán) is a museum co-owned by the Fundación de Arquitectura Tapatía Luis Barragán (FATLB, who have the private archive) and the Government of the State of Jalisco; the work archive, meanwhile, has been transported to the headquarters of the Vitra furniture company in Birsfelden, Switzerland, where it is operated by the not-for-profit Barragan Foundation, itself in turn supported by Vitra. The architect's posthumous identity has been split and incorporated by several different players, each constructing different versions of a common history. These organisations all have a remit to safeguard an individual's legacy but are creating different versions of it. The Barragan Foundation is said to have been acquired by Rolf Fehlbaum, chairman of Vitra, as a wedding gift for his wife, Federica Zanco, the architect who now directs the foundation; one man became an object of exchange in other people's lives.

The first iteration of Magid's Barragán project was shown as part of Art Basel's Parcours section in 2013; the latest takes the form of a solo exhibition at the Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen this summer. The Basel work, situated in the centre of Basel, about 20km from the Birsfelden location, consisted of a model of a proposal by Magid that a version of a Barragán water trough for horses be realised on the Vitra campus, itself an extraordinary site dotted with constructions by Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid and the like. This initial approach was rebuffed by Vitra and the Barragan Foundation; since then Magid has traced a delicate choreography around the subject of the architect and his archivists, Zanco in particular. Legal constraints relating to copyright and reproduction have become formative tools in the project. After Magid was warned that reproduction of anything in Barragán's professional archive would result in prosecution, she investigated what reproduction specifically means. For an exhibition at Art in General in New York she could exhibit a chair inspired by his design under the 'fair use' doctrine, but the US legal loophole does not apply in France, so the same work was displayed under a blanket at Galerie Yvon Lambert in Paris. Barragán's ownership of several cheap reproductions of Josef Albers paintings triggered a separate exploration of how she might recreate Albers's works without infringing the laws governing intellectual property rights. Equally relating to themes of originality and



the legacy of a deceased artist, communication between Zanca and Magid inspired a performance that borrows from Samuel Beckett's television play *Quad* (1981), in which four figures, dressed in white, red, blue and yellow respectively, each with their own percussive leitmotif, silently pace a square set, never touching each other. Magid's performance, presented at the South London Gallery in 2014, replaced Beckett's actors with the absent figures of Artist, Architect, Archivist and Author, described by a voiceover.

Magid's approaches, her (mis)uses of channels of communication, for example, often seem absurd, even if she equally demonstrates absurdities within the organisations or regulations she encounters. Which begs questions of why certain behaviour is appropriate in

certain circumstances: why, for example, does it constitute a breach of decorum for her to engage emotionally and sensually with state organisations? Her actions are passionate, yet highly controlled, both in the doing and their reporting in various forms as artworks. When required by her strategy, Magid is committed, prepared to enter into a quid pro quo of personal revelation. Inserting a different, unexpected quality of information in dialogue with faceless organisations finds wiggle room within cool, administrative frameworks such as legal strictures. She contrasts the illusory notions that organisations should be transparent to serve us, or secretive to protect us, with more nuanced, embodied perspectives. She scrutinises a subject, not to achieve overview but to know it up close. As theorist Karen Barad has said, 'Knowing is a direct material engagement.' With her Barragán project, Magid has turned her attention from public bodies to the private sphere and organi-

sations that float somewhere between private and public, perhaps in an acknowledgement (even if subconscious) that corporations are ever more powerful in a global context. More than anything, she appears to be sounding out the definition and meaning of an individual identity – the personal – if legally owned by a clutch of organisations that blur institutional and corporate boundaries. And ultimately, work like Magid's, thanks to her insistence on her individuality, throws fresh light on private and public bodies, asserting control and promoting a kind of public space in the midst of their anonymity. **ar**

Jill Magid: *The Proposal* is at Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen through 21 August. Work by the artist can also be seen at Manifesta 11, in various venues around Zürich, from 11 June to 11 September



facing page and above *Der Trog* (installation views, Art Basel Parcours, 2013)
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