

# Exhibition: Panopticon – Surveillance explored

Jiyen Chae, Jai Clarke-Binns, France Ewen, and Stacey Matthews describe the impact of CCTV and the images used in a recent exhibition.

*To 'witness' suggests that there is something to be seen; an event of importance that requires other people's eyes as evidence it existed. What if we no longer require human eyes as a receptacle, but use instead mechanical and digital devices to replace bodies to watch these occurrences? This is the role of CCTV and the materialisation of the modern panopticon. 'Witness' was the term around which *Panopticon: Surveillance Explored* was developed after visiting *198 Contemporary Arts and Learning* to see Tahera Aziz's sound installation '[re]locate', a response to the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993.*



The concept of the panopticon was created by utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), as a model for the construction of 'prisons, work houses, poor houses, manufactories, mad houses, lazarettos, hospitals, and schools'. The architecture provided the opportunity for those in charge to view all without being seen, and those incarcerated to be on view at all times, yet without knowing whether they were being watched. The theory was that the possibility of being watched became a method of control, deterring those within the panopticon from disobedience and acting as a constant punishment.

The panopticon was never built, yet its own non-existence reinforces it as a reality, one where it becomes a symbol for the exertion of power over the many by the means of the few. This theory lends itself to many aspects of contemporary life: it can be applied to the internet – in particular social networking sites, CCTV control centres, or anywhere we place ourselves with the possibility of being seen, heard, or read.



Within *Panopticon – Surveillance explored* we aimed to confront the viewer with questions about the society they live in and human nature. Are our actions controlled by the possibility of being caught on camera? Does the prospect of being watched deter us from committing a crime, or deviating from the norm? Do CCTV cameras prevent crime or simply act as evidence for crime already committed? Does the presence of a CCTV camera reassure us? Does the presence of a middle-aged man with a compact camera alarm us? Are our posts on social networking sites for the benefit of ourselves or for the possible voyeurism of others? Are we simultaneously narcissists and exhibitionists when we post our own image and inner thoughts onto the Internet? Through the photography and installations in *Panopticon: Surveillance*



explored we hope that these questions, though maybe left unanswered, were at least contemplated, and contemporary life was not just taken for granted, but scrutinised.

Kate Williamson, Jenny Barrett, and Aditya Palsule created a photographic documentary of encounters with CCTV cameras throughout London. Whilst highlighting the omnipresence of surveillance, the photographs also provoked questions: what events have these cameras witnessed throughout their functioning lives? Do the cameras even work? Was the camera watching whilst itself being watched? The answer to the last question is a resounding 'yes', as one of the photographers was stopped and searched by five police officers whilst taking the photos. As the photographer said: 'They were obviously looking at me, but didn't like me looking back at them'.

*Confessional*, by Jayne O'Hanlon consisted of a small room, veiled from the outside by a curtain, containing cameras and screens and earphones to relay the images and sounds captured within it in an instant feedback. The installation was a place to be confronted by your own

image being 'surveilled', placing the person within into the privileged and paradoxical position of being simultaneously the viewer and the viewed. When confronted with a private place to watch and listen to ourselves, how do we react? Perhaps it is too private. Do we require an audience in order to be 'ourselves'?

*i See v.2* by Alexandra Valy was comprised of 41 domed CCTV cameras on the ceiling plus 41 crystal balls arranged on the floor, reflecting and distorting the image of the cameras directly above them. Valy said of the work:

*the piece 'I see' is a comment on the inherent uncertainty of life. We go through our daily lives being recorded; data about us is being compiled and analysed, used, and fed back to us in a different form. Information is no oracle and the knowledge of what we will become is always out of grasp. As we manoeuvre through the sea of information that is thrust upon us we find ourselves still grappling with (or avoiding) fundamental human questions.*



Images on monitors in the front gallery were a live feed from CCTV cameras within the back gallery. By exploring the exhibition within the back room the viewer also became the viewed and thus part of the exhibition. It was also a chance to put into practice Bentham's theory of the panopticon. A 'camera free zone' was marked out onto the floor, separating the areas of visibility and invisibility for the viewer's (inspector's) benefit, thus by seeing where another viewer (prisoner) is *not* located, it is known where he *is* located, where 'his very invisibility is a mark to note him by'. We become all seeing, where the gaze extends beyond the realms of the visible.

So are we living within the panopticon? At times it would seem so, with streets full of cameras waiting to be witnesses, anticipating that we will do something worth



witnessing. Social networking sites give strangers access to anything we wish to upload; our information and our image is there for the taking. Yet it is important to remember that CCTV exists for our supposed protection and social networking is voluntary and at times useful. Perhaps the Stephen Lawrence murder inquiry would have had a different outcome if CCTV cameras had been witness to the crime. ■

---

*Panopticon – Surveillance explored* was exhibited at the 198 Gallery and curated by **Jiyen Chae**, **Jai Clarke-Binns**, **France Ewen**, and **Stacey Matthews**, second year BA Criticism, Communication and Curation students at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, University of the Arts London.

---

For further information visit: [www.198.org.uk](http://www.198.org.uk)