

## LIFE

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## THE MONTHLY REVIEW

## Your phone: a secret agent in your pocket

● The risks of opening our private lives to digital scrutiny in the name of public health make the pandemic just a little more frightening



MARK GEISSER

**How to Disappear** — group exhibition, Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg (Viewable online)

**The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for A Human Future at the Frontier of Power**, Shoshana Zuboff (Profile Books, 2019)

In late March, just days before we were compelled to disappear from public life due to the lockdown, the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg opened an exhibition that could not have been more poignantly named, or more eerily timed.

The gallery has now admirably rendered *How To Disappear* in three dimensions, and you can walk through it online. The works of the 11 participating artists function as warning bells and resistance acts, as evasion strategies and escape plans.

Curated by Amy Watson, they explore the implications of the surveillance that governs the digital world, and their work is both chilling and comforting as we grapple with the erasure that comes with keeping away from each other, and as we accept the erosion of our privacy rights in the name of public health.

Enter the main gallery, and you are confronted by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin's *Spirit is a Bone*, a grid of ghoulish images taken by the SA-British duo in Moscow in 2014. The artists used what was then a new surveillance technology developed to capture people from various angles on the streets and then shape these partial shots into three-dimensional portraits.

This innovation dramatically increased surveillance capacity from the old mugshots and is now the technology on which we iPhone users depend when we access our screens using facial recognition.

It may seem like a security measure, but through it we relinquish yet another version of our selves to a Big Database that can be mined for purposes beyond our control.

To capture the way we now carry a potential enemy agent around in our very pockets, Broomberg and Chanarin printed these 3D portraits onto reflective glass similar to that of the iPhone: something of a one-way mirror that represents what the US scholar Shoshana Zuboff calls "epistemic inequality: the fast-growing abyss between what we know and what is known about us".

Zuboff's prophetic book, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, examines the way companies such as Google and Facebook — and, now, our banks and insurers and retailers — mine data about us, sometimes without our knowledge but



**Ghoulish grid:** Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin's *Spirit is a Bone* (2013), Glass, paint, C-type print, string. / Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery

often with our full consent.

Though this is ostensibly in the name of product or service improvement, or our own wellbeing, Zuboff shows how the data is increasingly "traded in a new kind of marketplace" she calls "the behavioural futures market" in a new kind of capitalism that defines the 21st century. Our behaviour has become a commodity to be bought and sold, and modified, as happened with the information Cambridge Analytica harvested about US voters' personalities and habits, to help Donald Trump get elected.

Zuboff describes the "Faustian pact" that I know I make personally every time I accept cookies, post on Facebook, or search Google — "a psychic numbing" about the "aggressive extraction operations that mine the intimate depths of everyday life". She links this new form of capitalism to security surveillance by tracking the way Google boomed in the aftermath of 9/11, showing how internet companies escaped regulation: the US security apparatus understood how it could outsource intelligence-gathering to internet service providers if these operated beyond the bounds of terrestrial privacy laws.

If 9/11 created the first "state of exception" in which citizens of liberal democracies were compelled to cede their rights to privacy in the name of security, then the Covid-19 pandemic invites the next.

Even though we know so much more about digital surveillance today than we did in 2001, there is little outcry about this. As the journalist Glenn Greenwald puts it: if people are presented a choice "between having their government tap their phone calls, their text and e-mail messages, or drowning in their



**Vanishing face:** Ewa Nowak's *Incognito* (2018), polished brass and gold plated, 15 x 15 x 14 cm. / Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery

own lungs, they're going to choose the former without thinking".

Yuval Noah Harari lays out the implications starkly: not only might the pandemic "normalise the deployment of mass surveillance tools in countries that have so far rejected them", but it could usher in "a dramatic transition from 'over the skin' to 'under the skin' surveillance. Hitherto, when your finger touched the screen of your smartphone and clicked on a link, the government wanted to know what exactly your finger was clicking on. But with coronavirus, the focus of interest shifts.

"Now the government wants to know the temperature of your finger and the blood-pressure under its skin."

No-one can challenge the value of this, from a public health perspective. But what are the implications for our privacy, and our autonomy? Google and Apple have buried the hatchet to work together to provide the means for such surveillance. They insist their prototype is

being developed in the interests of protecting their users' privacy. But "demanding privacy from surveillance capitalists," writes Zuboff, "is like asking Henry Ford to make each Model T by hand or asking a giraffe to shorten its neck. Such demands are existential threats. They violate the basic mechanisms and laws of motion that produce this market leviathan's concentrations of knowledge, power and wealth."

The *How To Disappear* exhibition suggests what it might mean to resist this new order, or find space within it for our humanity, or subjectivity.

Just beside *Spirit is a Bone* is a plinth displaying what seems to be a gorgeous piece of jewellery. Titled *Incognito*, this is crafted to be worn, like spectacles, to evade detection by surveillance cameras' algorithms, thanks to the way Ewa Nowak has placed two brass discs over the cheeks and a plume at the forehead. The Polish designer tested

her prototype against DeepFace, Facebook's facial recognition system, and saw that it disrupted the algorithm's ability to tag people.

"Cameras are able to recognise our age, mood, or sex, and precisely match us to the database," Nowak has said, explaining why she designed her facewear. "The concept of disappearing in the crowd ceases to exist."

In 2011, Europeans successfully won "the right to be forgotten" from Google. Another artist in the show, the African-American Ja Tovia Gary, asserts the right to disappear, in her film *The Ecstatic Experience*: not from the databases of the tech companies specifically, but from the state of bondage that has been the black American experience. *BLCKNWS*, the work of Khalil Joseph, another African-American, was the smash hit of 2019's Venice Biennale: in a nine-hour two-screen installation that is constantly updated, the artist asserts the right to represent oneself in the face of the way black people are objectified by the mainstream media.

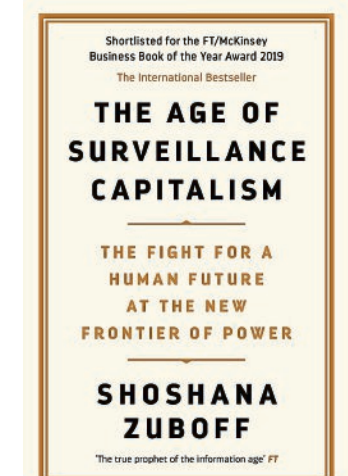
Both Gary and Joseph work with the concept of agency popularised by the Black Lives Matter movement. They remind us that we are surveillers and surveilled at the same time, particularly in this information era. As I looked at their work, I thought of the ways algorithms have been programmed to perform a sort of digital racial profiling, in the name of security, particularly after 9/11. Predictive capacity is what the securocrats and the surveillance capitalists strive for, and its power — and fallibility — is brilliantly revealed in another film in the show, Broomberg and Chanarin's *Anniversary of a Revolution (Parsed)*.

For this project, the artists took Dziga Vertov's iconic documentary of the Russian

Revolution, made in 1918, and fed it into a Chinese "pose-estimation" program formulated to predict threatening behaviour by the way people move. The technology renders human motion as a procession of jittery skeletons, like a neon "Day of the Dead", which Broomberg and Chanarin use to animate digital puppets representing various figures in the film: Lenin, Trotsky, a child soldier. But the program often malfunctions, sending human skeletons all over the Russian landscape where there are no people at all.

When Broomberg and I discussed this, I said I was chilled by the algorithm's ability to misread reality so profoundly: to see threats, as it were, where there are none. But in these "hiccups and hitches" he saw something more hopeful: "a moment of reprieve for the viewer. The algorithm's not infallible. It can't capture us."

In *Spirit is a Bone*, the surveillance technology the artists use was named "noncollaborative portraiture" by its developers, to describe the way it is made without the subjects' consent. The artists aptly describe the results as "death masks": without the human interaction that has defined portraiture to date, these



images fail to capture the soul, or spirit, of the "sitter", who is thus rendered a subject in the political sense of the word — a suspect, too, in fact.

For *Spirit is a Bone*, various Muscovites gave their consent to be photographed. And even in these "death masks" drawn by algorithms, "they cannot help being portraits of individuals", the scholar Eyal Weizman has said about the work, "struggling and often failing to negotiate a civil contract with state power".

This comment captures much of the energy in *How to Disappear*. Perhaps it is the reason that Watson, the curator, included the exquisite but seemingly incongruous works of South Korean painter Song Hyun-sook. These are minimalist renditions of banal objects partially hidden from view by light brushstrokes representing translucent cloth screens. They evoke a sense of partial revelation: "When I look at these paintings, I feel I am being held at arm's length about something," Watson told me. "There is always something beyond my reach."

This is the uncharted territory of the soul. We are unknowable. We hope.

Perhaps one of the reasons we are unknowable — or, perhaps, irretrievable — has to do with the limit of technology itself. This is explored by the Moroccan artist Mounir Fatmi. From a distance, *Black Screen* does seem to be a huge blank video screen; and as you get closer, you realise it is indeed dead technology. It is made up of hundreds of old VHS tapes, stacked back-to-front so their little white plastic dials stare out at you like so many dead eyes. Whatever was inside there has been consigned, forever, to the techno-dump of history, along with our stiffies and floppies.

Digitisation promises to

#### AS OTHER WORKS SUGGEST, THERE IS ALWAYS A TRACE IN THE ARCHIVE, A DIGITAL FOOTPRINT OR THE GHOST OF A MEMORY

solve this "problem" with the cloud. Whether we are archiving our activities, or the surveillance capitalists and the state are archiving our behaviour, we have bought into the notion of a digital forever.

As other works in the exhibition suggest, there is always a trace in the archive, a digital footprint or the ghost of a memory. People were there: as subjects, as viewers, as sorters. But we quest for more than a trace, or an analogue record: we seek digital immortality, and — writes Zuboff passionately in her book — we don't understand its consequences.

Zuboff likes to compare the current moment with exactly a century ago, when both liberal and communist societies were reckoning with the consequences of industrial capitalism.

"We are walking into the 21st century naked," she said in a

recent interview, and this is "like living through the 20th century without child labour legislation, without the right to bargain collectively, the rights to safe working conditions, the rights to fair pay, and to be not discriminated [against] in the workplace. If we tried to make our way through the 20th century without such rights ... we'd simply be societies of oligarchs and serfs," and this is "exactly where we are right now": we still live "without the laws, the regulatory paradigms, that make the digital safe for people [and] democracy", and that "re-establish the possibilities that digital technology is not inherently [about] surveillance".

She urges us to find our clothing quickly, and it is encouraging that there is some progress here, in SA. In an online discussion that was part of *How to Disappear's* public programming, the journalist Sam Sole spoke of his lawsuit over SA's Regulation of Interception of Communications and Provision of Communication-Related Information Act (Rica) legislation, which regulates communication intervention, and which he believes was used to violate his privacy rights.

The case is currently before the Constitutional Court, but however the court rules, it has already had a major impact, in the way Sole's arguments have informed the way the government can use cellphones for contact-tracing during the Covid-19 crisis.

In the online discussion, the media freedom expert Jane Duncan explained the "sunset clause" regulating the Covid-19 database: after a certain period of time in which contact-tracing takes place, the data must be de-identified and anonymised, under judicial supervision. Rather than being stored for some darker purpose, it can only be further used to understand the shape of the pandemic and help make future predictions.

Duncan also noted that the first draft of the regulations did not offer such protection, and were only changed after strong objections from civil society. Thus, as a result of civic and judicial activism, the SA pandemic regulations are among the best in the world. This is the kind of action Zuboff calls for.

When Zuboff published her book in 2019, she could not have predicted how quickly we would accelerate into the digital world, due to the pandemic. Here I am, reviewing an exhibition I can only experience online, writing these very words after having just said goodbye to my globally dispersed family on Zoom, not knowing when I will hug them again. Zuboff's insistence that we resist surveillance capitalism — and the securocratic logic that enables it — feels more urgent than ever: "If the digital future is to be our home, then we must make it so."

● You can visit *How to Disappear* and view several of the films and the panel discussion at <https://linktr.ee/HowToDisappear>