

room. It is from Paik's 1974 imagining of a "super highway" for telecommunication information that this show takes its name, and it is no accident that his installation is placed at the threshold of new and old, between art produced in the age of the internet and that which came before. Walking back in time through the show's reverse chronology, the pace slows, noise levels lower, colors fade. We are returned to a simpler, more utopian vision of our relationship with technology—from Paik's dream of new possibilities in 1994, right back to the final room's documentation of Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.)'s interdisciplinary events of 1966, and their manifesto's aspiration to "supply a foundation of new and experimental technology to artists" to create an "effective interaction" amounting to an "organic social revolution" (E.A.T. Aims, 1967).

Retracing my steps to wander backward through the show, and forward in time once more, it is clear that that idealized integration is never fully achieved. The body remains in tension with the machine—for better, and for worse.

For better, there is the precision and spare beauty of Vera Molnar's "plotter" printer vector drawings *Interruptions* (1969) and *Structure of Squares* (1974), or Manfred Mohr's algorithmic *P-26-Q* (1970) and *P-159* (1974). Exploiting the potential of the computer to be a new medium capable of automatic mark-making determined by rules rather than artistic intention, the careful logic here replaces the gestural excess of the artist's hand.

Laura Poitras: *Astro Noise*

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Astro Noise is the first solo exhibition worldwide of the work of documentary filmmaker and political activist Laura Poitras. It is her first attempt to translate her research about post-9/11 anxieties into the context of an installation in order to develop a more direct interaction with audiences.¹

Astro Noise is the name of the first encrypted file containing evidence of mass surveillance that former CIA employee and NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden shared with Poitras in 2013. It also refers to the muffled disturbance of leftover thermal radiation that is believed to have dispersed in the universe in the form of aimless microwaves after the Big Bang. The Snowden leaks had a similar retroactive effect, producing a leftover noise that is still echoing politically and socially. In this exhibition, Poitras attempts to construct a critical space to reflect on what happened, extending its ethical implications. The itinerary commences with the *ANARCHIST* series (2016), large-scale blown-up photographic images from the Snowden archive printed on huge aluminum sheets. At first sight they are merely beautiful images, but they

But for worse elsewhere, it is clear that our own era's dissatisfaction with the disembodied experience of a life lived increasingly online was already apparent in the explorations of early digitization—for example, in Allan Kaprow's four-minute film *Hello* from 1969, intended to critique television's inadequate mediation of relationships between people, and in Richard Serra and Nancy Holt's *Boomerang* from 1974, in which video technology is inflicted upon the self. As Holt appears on video, hearing the instant playback of her own voice in her own ears, we experience the minute delay between her articulation of the word and its mediated echo as it comes back to her—just too late. She stutters and stumbles, pauses in a futile attempt to allow herself to catch up. Caught up in the loop of what Holt attempts to articulate as the "double reflections and refractions" where meaning unravels, her self-mediation sets in motion a dislocation from the self—that uncanny dissociation when, as she puts it, "words become things." Disrupting any promise of authenticity, the video's digital dislocation of self and self-image, body and machine, foresees the increasing alienation from the embodied experience of the world of things, people, and sensual experience that this exhibition narrates—one that we can't escape as we step outside of the show, and back into real life, lived somewhere outside of ourselves.

HARRIET RICHES, PhD, is a writer and lecturer in London, UK.

are actually generated from signals from Israeli and Syrian drone feeds and radars intercepted by the British surveillance agency Government Communications Headquarters. The sheer scale and brilliance of the images is blinding and disorienting, so at first one barely registers the content. The real content of the images and their origin is not revealed until the visitor reads the wall labels. At this point, the images intercepted are no longer simply data collected from signals. They are pieces of a puzzle that can be put together in radically different manners. Data collection is the foundation on which governments create retrospective narratives based on specific political agendas. This retrospective manipulation of data, for Poitras, seems to convert objective data into malleable political narratives for "deep state" maneuvers.² For Poitras, *Astro Noise* functions as a "subversive countermapping"³ that uses visitors' knowledge of the historical narrative to clash directly with the data itself. She intends to strip the images, creating new possibilities of vision,⁴ but instead incites a move toward the spectacularization of horror by favoring aesthetic contemplation and experiential involvement over critical distancing.

Other artists have explored the question of data collection and governments' tendencies to interpret patterns within data in ways useful to their own interests. Hasan Elahi, for instance, has turned surveillance on himself 24/7 in his ongoing project *Tracking*

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Transience: The Orwell Project (2005–present). In this project, Elahi questions the efficacy of surveillance by making nearly everything about himself, including his exact location, continuously available to anyone with an internet connection, simultaneously saying everything and nothing. Instead of forcing an experiential countermapping like Poitras, Elahi distances the audience, making them think critically about the aporias and absurdities of compulsive data collection and interpretation.

After offering the starting coordinates of the post-Snowden moment, the timeline moves backward to begin with the immediate post-9/11 moment, at the origins of the "War on Terror" initiated by the United States government. In the first room, *O'Say Can You See* (2001/2016) is a large two-screen projection that captures the simultaneous development of post-9/11 events. The two screens hang in the middle of the room, placed back-to-back with a visible space in between, so that visitors can wander around them. The front screen shows slow-motion video images of visitors at Ground Zero shortly after the attacks, combined with audio of the national anthem performed at Yankee Stadium in 2001, while the back screen features a US military video of the interrogations of Said Boujaadia and Salim Hamdan in Afghanistan before they were transferred to Guantanamo Bay. Boujaadia is a Moroccan citizen accused of being associated with Al Wafa and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, and Hamdan was a driver for

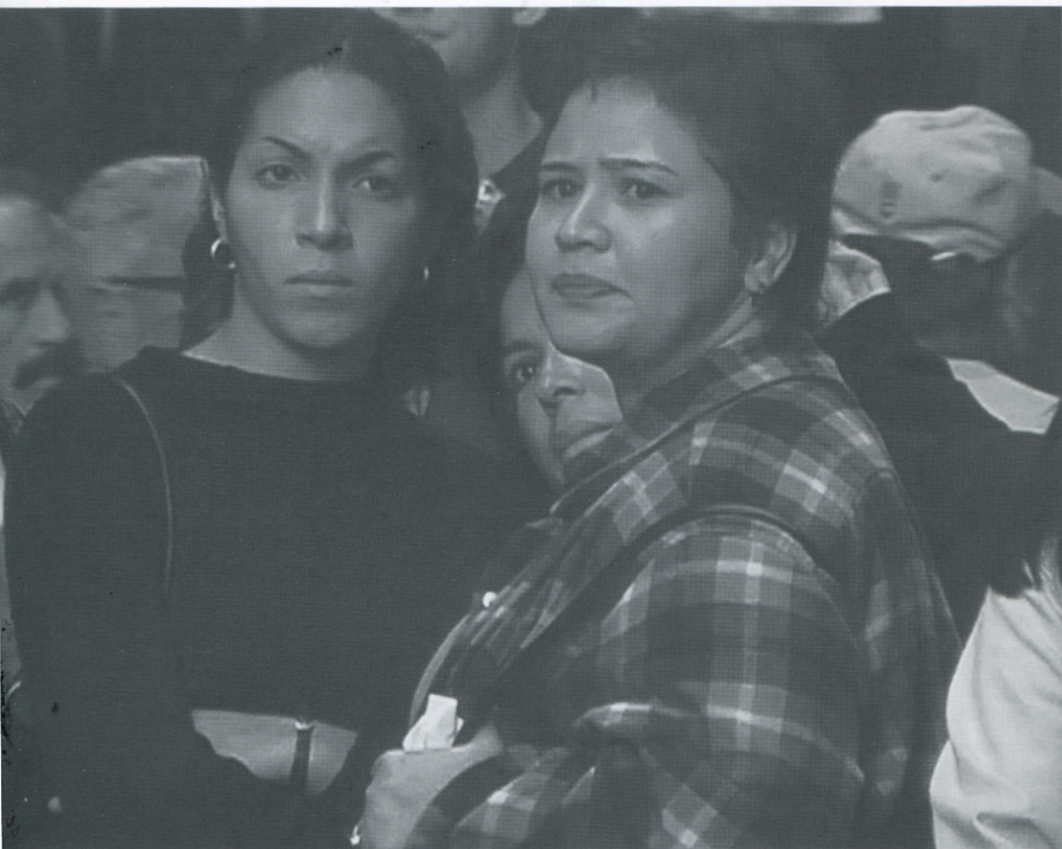
Osama bin Laden accused of providing "material support" to a terrorist organization, who became one of the subjects of Poitras's documentary *The Oath* (2010). The possibility of wandering around the screens promotes a dialectic encounter between two sides of the same coin. It shows how the same governmental activities produced both non-state terrorism and state-sponsored torture simultaneously, implying an ethical charge for the audience.

The next piece, *Bed Down Location* (2016), is named after military terminology used to identify where targeted individuals sleep. The installation invites the visitor to lie down on a platform and observe a ceiling projection of the night skies over Yemen, Somalia, and Pakistan where the US military perpetrates killings using drones and footage from the Creech Air Force Base in Nevada, one of the six Unmanned Aircraft Systems test site locations in the US.⁵ These images are paired with audio of drones flying, pilots' terrified voices, and sound recordings from the edge of the universe. The installation seems intended to evoke a terrified feeling of being targeted, but within the walls of the overcrowded Whitney, this is almost impossible.

By asking the visitors to lie down, Poitras attempts to integrate visitors' bodies, exposing their ethical relationship with "deep state" movements, and foregrounding questions surrounding data visualization and political narrative construction. *Disposition Matrix* (2016) invites visitors to observe intimately more raw data and adopt a position on the matter. The "raw data"

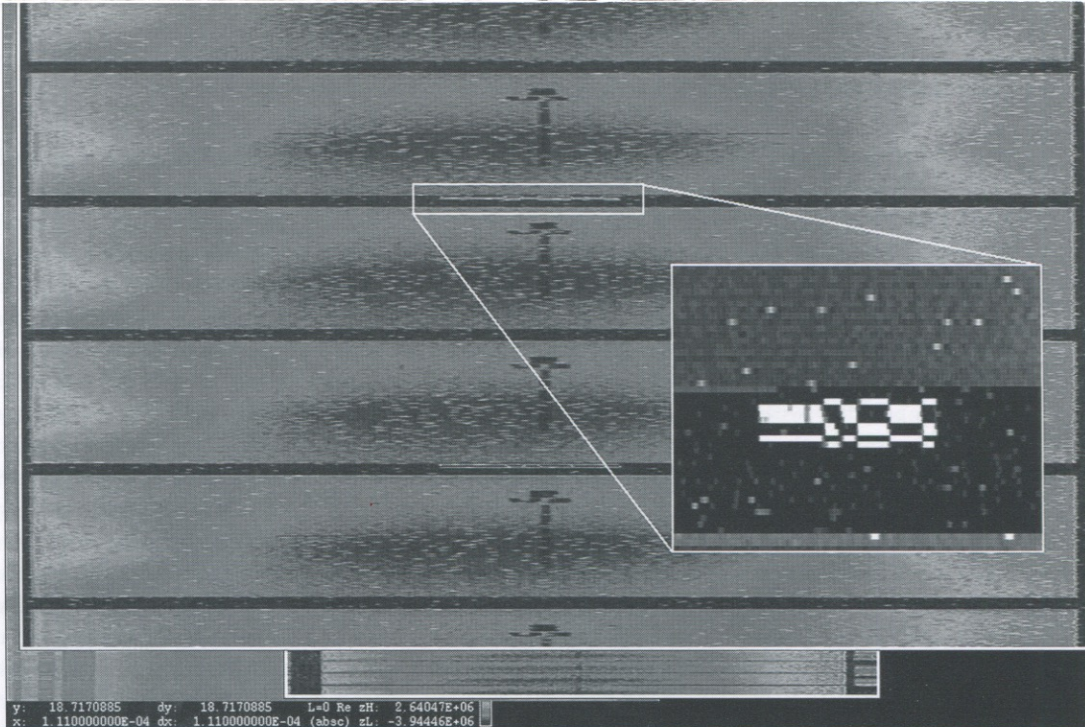
is displayed along an L-shaped corridor with twenty small window-like slits at different heights. Following the physical involvement and change of perspective of the previous piece, *Disposition Matrix* creates a single viewer situation requiring physical effort. Each of the slits is a peephole that offers a partially obscured view of various materials, including copies of classified documentation, interviews shot by Poitras, video files shot by collaborating artists, and screenshots and animated images from intercepted drone feeds from Snowden's archive. Poitras frames the official narrative with the work's title, which is the military code word for a database created by American intelligence to target suspects deemed potential threats to the government. Poitras, through the use of military terminology, contrasts the overdetermination of the government's "deep state" organization narrative with new narrative possibilities created by the visitor.

Still from *O'Say Can You See* (2001/2016) by Laura Poitras; courtesy the artist



The exercise of countermapping ends with two pieces that incorporate both the subject and Poitras's suggestive narrative. *November 20, 2004* (2016) shows how Poitras has been a subject of surveillance, put on a secret government watchlist, and subsequently interrogated over fifty times. The piece includes documents from her own FBI files obtained via a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit, a video she filmed in Iraq in 2004 that led to her being placed on the watchlist, and a voice narration by the filmmaker about her situation. *Last Seen* (2016) reveals the surveillance experience that the visitor was subject to in *Bed Down Location*, projecting a live infrared feed of everyone who is lying down in the other room. It also includes a readable stream of decoded data from visitors' personal devices intercepted by a wireless sniffer analyzer. Once again, Poitras makes visible the other side of the coin: those who are being watched are those who were looking at the sky and listening to the sound of drones in the other room, directly connecting US drone technology with the technology used on and against US civilians at home and reminding us that Google Earth, Twitter, and Facebook use software that incorporates surveillance into the everyday routine of almost everyone on the planet. Yet Poitras's intended reflexive move is difficult to accomplish, partly due to the interaction of some of the visitors, who take pictures of their friends and family on the screen of the infrared feed. This photographic action works against the possibility of critique, converting the piece into an entertainment tool. Instead of critically engaging with the piece, the photographic interaction promotes a superfluous relationship with it, more interested in self-promotion and affirming the cultural status of the visitor ("I was in New York City, I was at the Whitney and I had a great time while watching images of tortured Middle Easterners").

All of which raises questions about the difference between the kind of surveillance performed by drones and what a program such as the wireless sniffer does. There are clearly more differences than similarities between the surveillance and state violence suffered by someone like Said Boujaadia and that of a visitor to the Whitney exhibition. Other artists have explored the experiential aspect of surveillance by returning agency to the subject instead of the viewer. An example of such an approach is the work of CAMP collective. In films such as *Al Jaar Qabla Al Daar* (2011), the collective hands over the surveillance camera to Palestinian families in Jerusalem, who then film their occupied homes in Israeli territory and give their impressions over the recorded images. This



Israeli Drone Feed (Intercepted February 24, 2009) from the series *ANARCHIST* (2016) by Laura Poitras; courtesy the artist

democratizes the process of imagemaking while offering a critical space for the audience. By contrast, *Bed Down Location* and *Last Seen* produce an element of spectacle in an attempt to engage viewers emotionally, similar to the "immersive" installations often experienced in science and natural history museums—and increasingly also in art museums. The production of a surveillance experience among the audience paralleled with the aestheticization of surveillance materials manifests within itself an ethical dilemma.

Poitras's work makes visible the ways in which the government deploys surveillance technology within everyday life. Her documentaries tackle the question of state violence more effectively because they create a critical space between audience and image. *Astro Noise*, by contrast, involves the viewer physically and emotionally, impeding opportunities for critical or intellectual involvement. The secrets exposed on the walls of the Whitney ultimately aestheticize the horror of those who truly live under the constant surveillance of drones, encouraging passive contemplation and vague experiential engagement, without really tackling the complicity of the audience in the development of state violence. Poitras attempts to create a critical space within the fissures of the exhibition and the pieces themselves. But her countermap seems to follow a specific direction toward spectacle that inhibits criticism.

ALMUDENA ESCOBAR LÓPEZ is a PhD student in the Program in Visual and Cultural Studies at the University of Rochester.

NOTES 1. See "Laura Poitras: Astro Noise," February, 2016, <http://whitney.org/Press/PressImagesAndVideo/LauraPoitras>. 2. The term "deep state" is similar to the notion of a "state within a state" and refers to the direct association of governments—in this case that of the US—and financial and industrial elites, who effectively govern without being elected by the people, blocking attempts at progressive change. 3. Hito Steyerl and Laura Poitras, "Techniques of the Observer: Hito Steyerl and Laura Poitras in Conversation," *Artforum International* 53, no. 9 (May 2015): 307–17. 4. *Ibid.* 5. "FAA Announces Six UAS Test Sites," Federal Aviation Administration, last modified August 4, 2015, www.faa.gov/uas/legislative_programs/test_sites.